



**Making K-12 Literacy Instruction Culturally Sustaining: Examples That Bridge the Theory to Practice Divide**

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**Abstract**

Heeding the call toward Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP) put forward by Django Paris (2012) more than ten years ago, *Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogies: Honoring Students' Heritages, Literacies, and Languages* seeks to address the lack of robust pedagogical examples of what CSP looks like specifically during literacy instruction in K-12 educational spaces. Chapter authors present real-world examples across elementary, middle, and high school US contexts. These examples not only highlight diverse and creative approaches to culturally sustaining literacy pedagogies (CSLP) situated within the practical constraints of K-12 schooling but also showcase how chapter authors acknowledge, discuss, and account for their own positionality within CSLP work. The overall aim of the book is broad – to envision classrooms in which students' heritages, literacies, and languages are honored. The chapters presented herein are accessible and highly engaging to the reader, though some may wish for more nuanced detail and a more explicit focus on honoring language(s) within the examples presented. However, this book is meant to serve as an impetus toward further, deeper, and more nuanced pedagogical conversations across K-12 spaces regarding what CSP can look like when enacted in the daily and diverse lived realities of literacy instruction.

**Cantrell, Susan Chambers, Walker-Dalhouse, Doris, & Lazar, Althier M. (Eds.). (2022). *Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogies: Honoring Students' Heritages, Literacies, and Languages*. Teachers College Press. Pp. ISBN 9780807767023**

*Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogies: Honoring Students' Heritages, Literacies, and Languages*, edited by Susan Chambers Cantrell, Doris Walker-Dalhouse, and Althier M. Lazar, heeds the call toward Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP) put forward by Django Paris (2012) more than ten years ago. Paris's vision of CSP "seeks to perpetuate and foster - to sustain - linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 95). Though there has been increased scholarly theoretical attention to CSP in the years since Paris's initial work, Cantrell and colleagues argue that robust pedagogical examples are lacking. This is the gap they seek to address with this book.

As organizers of a Literacy Research Association (LRA) group convened to explore how CSP might become a reality in K-12 literacy classrooms and teacher education programs, the editors have curated a range of chapters that highlight US-based classroom examples of culturally sustaining *literacy* pedagogies (CSLP). Notably, across all chapters the selected authors specifically attend to their positionality within the educational space being presented. It is necessary to acknowledge that many of the chapter authors identify as White. This is particularly relevant given that White teachers are the vast majority of the US teacher workforce (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). By emphasizing their own positionality and demonstrating their engagement in ongoing critical self-reflection, the chapter authors demonstrate that CSLP is the work of *all* teachers, not solely the responsibility of those who identify as teachers of color.

Acknowledging the overwhelming pressures of high stakes testing across K-12 contexts, the chapter authors situate their work within such realities and present their pedagogical examples through various means: describing exploratory case studies, discussing mini lessons and classroom discussions, detailing inquiry unit outlines, and presenting workshop models, to name but a few. These are presented across three main sections. Part 1 presents enactments of CSLP in elementary classrooms followed by models of CSLP in classrooms for adolescents and youth in Part 2. To conclude, Part 3 discusses considerations, details practices, and gives a strong call to action.

In Part 1, "Writing their stories" (Murphy et al., 2022) focuses on the use of culturally sustaining multimodal composing practices to encourage cultural and linguistic dexterity during writing workshops in the intermediate grades. In other words, a writing workshop, a common feature within classrooms across the US, can become a liberatory space where students' heritages, languages, and cultural practices are encouraged and sustained. This can be done regardless of if the teacher speaks the home languages of their students. This point is noteworthy because teachers may be hesitant to allow students such linguistic freedom during a writing workshop simply because they themselves do not speak the home language(s) of their students. Though Murphy and colleagues touch upon the linguistic freedom afforded to students, they do not provide robust examples of how students utilized their linguistic repertoires nor how the teacher navigated linguistic pluralism in the process and products of their writing workshops. Readers hoping to further explore linguistic pluralism in more depth during a writing workshop model may benefit from reading Smith and colleagues' (2017) multimodal codemeshing study with adolescents and Cárdenas Curiel and Ponzio's (2021) exploration of multimodal and translanguaging opportunities in writing assignments in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade dual-language classroom.

"Learning from Alina" (Wissman, 2022), unfortunately the only other book chapter on CSLP in the elementary grades, describes a reading interventionist's work with 1st graders through culturally affirming picture books and ongoing family engagement activities and communication. The author discusses the inherent tensions between asset-based liberatory CSLP and deficit-based

Response to Intervention (RTI) models so prevalent in the early years of elementary schooling. The chapter demonstrates this tension quite effectively in the reflections and observed pedagogical practices of the reading interventionist. The student, Alina, that Wissman discusses is a compelling case in how a learner's funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), manifested through CSLP, supports the aims of RTI by making space for cultural practices within the reading intervention classroom. Very likely, readers who are teachers and/or teacher educators in elementary contexts will wish the book provided additional windows into the enactment of CSLP with these age groups.

Part 2 of the book contains three chapters focused on youth and adolescents. In "Disciplinary literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogies," Kane and Savitz (2022) argue that the foundation of CSLP and also of disciplinary literacy is that literacy must be understood within its contexts and purposes. Such meaningful contexts and purposes of literacy are also emphasized in "Making arij chaj n en tres idiomas," where Newcomer and Cowin (2022) show how a teacher intentionally created a classroom context where specific languages, literacies, and cultural practices of minoritized students were encouraged. Then in "Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Amplifying youth critical consciousness in classrooms," Hendrix-Soto and colleagues (2022) discuss teachers and students co-developing inquiry units focused on critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987) to foster critical consciousness. The focus within these inquiry units on questions relevant to the youth serves as additional examples, in similar stride with the previous chapters, on the salient role that purposes and contexts play within literacy classrooms and for literacy instruction.

Part 3 of the book contains three chapters with a range of foci. In "Collective diamond mining," Rushek and Seylar (2022) walk the reader through critical curriculum excavation, a process of examining a curricular artifact, such as a curricular unit, and interrogating it together with a trusted colleague using CSLP tenets. This process supports ongoing teacher critical self-reflection, which is particularly urgent given the demographic differences between the US teacher workforce, as previously noted, and the K-12 student population. Though both pre-service and in-service teachers may find this type of critical engagement with their work uncomfortable, the authors argue that embracing a "pedagogy of discomfort" (Boler, 1999) allows teachers the opportunity to grow through the tensions and ambiguities so salient in curriculum and instruction. Rushek and Seylar's (2022) curricular excavation, alongside the "Five frames" that Bennet and colleagues (2022) develop in the next chapter, provide structures and guidance that can support teachers as they enact CSLP in their unique and specific classroom contexts. In this way, the reader is given critical reflective guidance and a framework for envisioning and imagining CSLP in their instructional practice.

Cantrell and colleagues (2022) conclude with "Enacting culturally sustaining literacy practices," a strong call to action, urging educators and teacher educators to interrogate "their own identities, beliefs, and behaviors before they can examine and adjust their curricular and instructional practices to sustain the cultures of their students" (pp. 160-161). This includes how White Eurocentrism is entrenched within conceptions of literacy and literate practices, and in particular "the meritocratic myth that simply teaching students linguistic codes of power will solve systemic racism" (p. 169). This entrenchment of White supremacy within literacy instruction is a fundamental understanding that must be centered within teacher education and professional development if CSLP is to take root in K-12 educational spaces. The authors call upon literacy professional organizations, teacher educators, and researchers to reinvigorate their support of educators to enact CSLP in their classrooms. In many ways, the tone of this final chapter is a contrast to the more subtle references to teacher positionality and race throughout the previous chapters. This perhaps points to the emergent nature of pedagogical conversations about CSLP at present and in classrooms where there so frequently is a mismatch between the heritages, literacies, and languages of teachers and that of their students. It is important for the reader to recognize the

editors as scholar leaders supporting the advancement of CSLP in practice, as such their call to action must necessarily be stronger than the scholarship that is presently demonstrated to push forward the urgency of more CSLP scholarship rooted in pedagogical realities.

Though this present work seeks to begin to address the gaps between scholarship and practice, the editors acknowledge that the examples provided are only a starting point. The editors put forth this work in the hopes that it will inspire more in-depth and nuanced pedagogical conversations about what CSLP looks like enacted in the daily and diverse lived realities of K-12 classrooms. The aim is broad – to envision classrooms in which students’ heritages, literacies and languages are honored. The chapters they present herein are accessible and highly engaging to the reader, though some may wish for more nuanced detail and a more explicit focus on honoring language(s) in the classroom. Still, literacy teachers, the teacher educators who support them, and the researchers who work alongside them will find *Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogies: Honoring Students’ Heritages, Literacies, and Languages* a helpful tool for envisioning possibilities and inspiring pedagogical creativity.

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