

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in English Language Arts

with a Focus on How to Make American Literature Culturally Sustaining and Relevant to Students of Color

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Abstract

This project analyzes the literature that is usually chosen in an English III classroom, which focuses on American literature, and specifically how these choices affect a classroom in a rural area. The literature that is chosen tends to lean towards authors that are white, middle-aged, and middle-class. This lens that teachers are using is limited to students with those experiences and those that can relate to being white, middle-aged, or middle-class. Rural areas often do not relate to this lens, and thus cannot relate to the literature that is provided in their English classrooms.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, which is a new theory in classroom management, encourages teachers to engage student's backgrounds and cultures that they bring into the classroom. When using it to look specifically at English, this means that teachers must move past the white, middle-aged, middle-class lens they've been picking literature with and rather push to provide literature that relates to their students, especially when their students are students of color and/or are from a lower economic class.

Using the theory of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, this project looks at how providing literature with a lens that differs from the students that are reading it could be limiting to the student's abilities to engage with the class and maintain literacy in the long run. This project then offers different authors that could replace the literature that has been currently chosen, and how to approach the more culturally appropriate literature in the classroom.

Introduction

What is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy?

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (or CSP) is a classroom management style that was first introduced by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings in her essay "Towards a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" written in 1995. It was then picked up by Dr. Django Paris in his book *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy* which was published in 2017. The theory is an approach to teaching where students' backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures are honored and actively engaged in the classroom, rather than just acknowledged. This theory also encourages teachers to step away from society's patriarchal, cisheteronormative, English-monolingual, Judeo-Christian gaze and focus more on the lens in which their students look at the world and cater the curriculum to that lens in order to make the classroom more relevant to its students.

Problem

America's Literacy Crisis

Throughout the years, there has been a slow, but continuous increase in the distance between where students should be in their literacy and where they are. It has gotten to the point that many students who are in twelfth grade end up only actually having a ninth or even eighth grade level of reading and wiring. Another example of this are ninth grade students who end up only having the literacy of fifth-graders.

There are many reasons why this gap began and has been growing exponentially throughout the years. There is certainly not a single fix to the issue, however Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, specifically when looking at the literature brought into the classroom, can prove to help close this gap for students.

When the books and prompts that students have to read and write about are relevant to the students' backgrounds or issues that the students' care about, they are more likely to engage with and work through literature. This effort then helps build students' vocabulary and their comfort with reading, which can help close the gap in literacy for students

Rural versus Suburban Schools

Rural School: Nacogdoches High School, Nacogdoches, Texas

- 43.1% Hispanic Students
- 28.2% African American Students
- 24.8% White Students

Suburban School: Coppell High School, Coppell, Texas

- 48.9% Asian Students
- 30.2% White Students
- 13.5% Hispanic Students
- 4.5% African American Students
- Both schools together have an average of 79.5% of their teachers being White

These demographics show that no two classrooms are alike and that teachers, a majority of who are white, need to make an effort to adjust their curriculum to their classroom and the students that make it up. Teachers must actively step away from the lens that they look at the world from and adjust to the lens that their students may be looking through.

Our Literature

Because the teacher's who make up most of the population are white, they tend to learn towards literature that they have been taught to see as classics and literature that they are comfortable with because they have been exposed to it the most.

Classics such as this include:

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald
Into the Wild and *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer
Civil Disobedience and other works by Henry David Thoreau
"Nature," "Self-Reliance," and "The Poet" by Ralph Waldo Emerson
Of Mice and Men by Jon Steinbeck
Animal Farm and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell

However, these classics follow the cisheteronormative, patriarchal, English-monolingual Judeo-Christian lens and relate very little to the diversity that is not present in many classrooms. There are, of course, classrooms that these classics would fit perfectly into. However, a teacher who is conscious of their lens, their students' lens, and wants to implement CSP into their classroom will push themselves to reach for different authors, even more contemporary ones, such as:

House Made of Dawn and his collection of poetry *Angle of Geese* by N. Scott Momaday
The House on Mango Street and *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou
Beloved, *Paradise*, and "Recitatif" by Toni Morrison
Challenger Deep by Neal Shusterman
The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas

With CSP in the classroom, there is a push for students to be truly represented in the literature that is brought into the classroom. Students should be the intended audience, the main characters, the authors. Students and their experiences should not be side characters in the literature that is brought into the classroom.

In the Classroom

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) in any classroom can be used as a great tool. In an English Language Arts classroom, there are several aspects of the classroom that are enhanced when CSP is applied.

Firstly, student engagement is increased when the curriculum is created with the student in mind. Students will want to engage with activities and assessments that they feel pertain to them and their experiences and they will work harder because they are able to talk about things that directly influence them or the people they love.

Second, the culture of the classroom is shifted when CSP is utilized. By bringing in topics and themes that are relevant to students, the students will be able to talk about their own personal experiences and be more vulnerable in the classroom with their peers. From this vulnerability, students will grow greater empathy and understanding for their peers, which will then create a more collaborative, social, and respectful classroom community overall.

Finally, the relationship between teacher and student will become stronger through mutual respect and understanding. One of the largest aspects of classroom management is how the teacher and students interact. With CSP, the teacher is showing the students that they don't just care about them as students, but as human beings that have their own experiences and opinions to bring into the classroom. When the student sees this effort being put in by the teacher, they are more willing to engage in that class because they feel valued in that class. The teacher will also gain a greater understanding of their students and their personal struggles, which will only better the relationship between the two.

Resources

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies. Teachers College Press, edited by Django Paris and H. Samy Alim, 2017.

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