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# CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY IN ACTION: VIEWS FROM INDONESIA AND THE UNITED STATES

by Tabitha Kidwell and Luis Javier Pentón Herrera

## Abstract

*What do a rural elementary school in Indonesia and a suburban high school in Maryland have in common? The authors share vignettes and describe culturally sustaining practices in these contrasting teaching contexts.*

**Key words:** *cross-cultural/multicultural education, elementary education, international/comparative education, junior/middle school education, secondary education*

fering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

CSP builds on traditions that affirm students’ cultural identity by addressing existing social, racial, and economic inequalities in schools (see Cochran-Smith, 1995; Conklin, 2008; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, Moll & Gonzáles, 1994). Culturally sustaining pedagogies are those that see the experiences and prior knowledge of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds as resources rather than deficits. In addition, CSP seeks to disrupt pervasive anti-indigeneity, anti-Blackness, and anti-Brownness practices present in American schools and many other colonial nation-states (Paris & Alim, 2017) with the vision of creating a welcoming and safe environment for all learners.

In this article, we draw on data sets from two qualitative studies to explore the potential of CSP in contexts that we believe will be unfamiliar to readers of the *Kappa Delta Pi Record*. First, we share an example from Indonesia, a nation consisting of 240 million people and 15,000 islands that stretches 3,000 miles across the equator in Southeast Asia, but which is largely unfamiliar to educators in the United States. Second, in an example from an American school, we discuss the experience of an Ixil student, a member of an indigenous linguistic and ethnic group from Guatemala, which constitutes an invisible minority that may also be unknown to American educators despite the presence of Ixil students in their classrooms.

**M**ore than half of the K–12 students registered at American schools in 2013 were from minority ethnic groups; this number is expected to increase by 2025 (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Given these demographic trends and the persistence of the achievement gap between White students and students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Toledo-López & Pentón Herrera, 2015), it is essential that educators interrogate culturally dominant practices in schools and advocate for cultural pluralism. In recent years, scholars have recommended that teachers draw on culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) to “support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously of-

We draw on these vignettes to offer context as we share three foundational practices that are essential to the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy in K–12 classroom settings. We hope the shifts in perspective offered in this article will allow readers to see CSP in a new light. Furthermore, we hope the proposed practices prove effective and help equip educators with the necessary knowledge to apply it to their immediate instructional context.

### A Vignette From Indonesia

Dita (all names are pseudonyms) is a first-year English teacher at a public elementary school in a small town in a Muslim area in rural Central Java. Students dressed neatly in the elementary school uniform—red shorts and white shirts—play energetically in front of the rice fields surrounding her school. When the school bell rings, 15 third graders enter their classroom and sit at bulky wooden desks arranged in a U shape. Pictures of the president and vice president of Indonesia are displayed above the whiteboard, and chains of handmade paper cranes hang in the open windows.

Dita enters the classroom and leads the students in reciting the *Bismillah*, a traditional Muslim prayer. She reviews the vocabulary she taught last session by singing a traditional Javanese song whose lyrics have been changed to English words for various hobbies. Students smile and join in, belting out, “hiking, biking, badminton! Fishing, swimming, playing guitar!” Dita quizzes students by acting out the vocabulary, then asks each student, “What is your hobby?” Students practice using this vocabulary by writing sentences about pictures in their textbook that show red-and-white-clad children playing soccer, singing, and cooking.

One reason why Dita’s classroom is culturally sustaining is that the national curriculum strongly emphasizes the transmission of Indonesian cultural values. Textbooks align with that curriculum by portraying life in Indonesia. Dita also makes instructional decisions that show students that she values the local culture, such as practicing the vocabulary through a favorite well-known song. Dita explained why she chose to use the local tune with translated lyrics:

Because I’d like to discuss and to protect Indonesian culture. Sometimes I’ll use English [songs] but I like to switch—how to say it—to alternate. Sometimes [I’ll use] regional songs, sometimes foreign songs. So that the students won’t forget about the Indonesian culture. [All participant quotations are translated from Bahasa Indonesia and Spanish by the authors.]

In addition to using a familiar song, the new content—vocabulary for hobbies—is presented to students in a familiar context throughout the lesson. The images and examples they see match their daily reality. They have opportunities to connect the new knowledge to their personal experiences. In this classroom, English is not the language of foreigners living in faraway lands; rather, it is a language that students can use to express themselves and discuss their own lives. Because Dita’s students are encouraged to see English not only as a “foreign” language but also as a local language that reflects their own experiences, they are able to build their linguistic skills while sustaining their own cultural traditions.

### A Vignette From the United States

As soon as the bell rings at 7:45 a.m., students enter their Language of Science classroom and sit down. The class is large in size—40 students—and there is little space to walk without bumping into a student desk or a bookshelf. Diosdado, a third-year student at a suburban high school in Maryland, sits in the last row next to the wall. As soon as all students sit down, the teacher instructs them to copy the warm-up activity and be ready to discuss it in 5 minutes. Diosdado copies the information into his notebook, but does not participate in the oral discussion. He remains quiet throughout most of the class and occasionally uses his phone to play video games. When he is called to participate, he politely replies with “no, Ms.” and shifts his focus back to his notebook. In



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# Culturally Sustaining Practices

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the classroom, Diosdado does not engage in oral communication—not even with his classmates—and often disappears into his thoughts amidst the loud background of teacher and students’ voices.

For Diosdado, adapting to formal school culture, socializing with his classmates, and learning English have proven especially challenging. Diosdado is Ixil, a marginalized indigenous population in Guatemala for whom literacy and language continue to act as barriers to academic, personal, and professional emancipation due a calamitous history of oppression (Pentón Herrera, 2017, 2018). Due to Diosdado’s unique life experiences and limited formal education, traditional learning is a new and developing concept. As Diosdado’s Language of Science teacher learned more about his background, she began to spark interest by incorporating innovative activities that merge with her students’ cultural backgrounds and personal experiences.

In Diosdado’s case, he used to work in the maize fields, where he was always surrounded by nature. Knowing this, and hoping to get Diosdado more actively involved, his teacher decided to take her class outside to collect different types of rocks to use in a project in future classes. As soon as Diosdado learned of this activity, his eyes opened wide and he jumped out of his chair. During the activity, he was very engaged and even smiled a few times when looking at the different rocks in the parking lot and school surroundings. When we asked Diosdado if he enjoyed going outside, he answered, “I liked that activity because we were outside looking for rocks and [I could hear the birds] I saw the trees and there was nature. I loved it!”

This activity effectively engaged diverse students with unique backgrounds—students who may not otherwise connect to the traditional curriculum. Diosdado is a naturalistic learner who prefers to be surrounded by nature as a means to improve his learning experience. Andronache, Bocos, Stanciu, & Raluca (2011) defined *naturalistic intelligence* as “the ability to solve problems

and develop products using taxonomies and environmental representations” and identified *naturalistic learners* as “those who demonstrate experience in recognition and classification of plants and animals” (p. 22). Diosdado’s teacher cannot change the curriculum, but through a CSP lens, she can incorporate and modify activities to maintain, expand, and use her students’ cultural resources.

Using CSP gave Diosdado’s teacher the opportunity to level the playing field through differentiated assessments, to improve participation through scaffolded activities, and to keep his interest, motivation, and resilience levels high enough to continue to be engaged in class. An important aspect of the CSP approach Diosdado’s teacher used was focusing on his learning abilities and preferences rather than on factual information about culture. CSP is often misunderstood as integrating the students’ native languages and cultures within the content. Though doing so is important, CSP also calls on teachers to implement instructional practices that draw on students’ conceptual understandings and preferred ways of learning.

## Culturally Sustaining Classroom Practices

The school where Dita teaches is remarkably different from the school Diosdado attends. Though their schools are separated by more than 10,000 miles, and by differences of language, culture, and socioeconomic status, some similar themes cut across both contexts. Dita helps her students acquire English, the language associated with global cultural dominance (Pennycook, 2010), by connecting to students’ own cultural experiences. Diosdado struggles in a school culture that conforms to the dominant culture of the United States, but finds success when he is given the opportunity to connect to his own interests and experiences. In both contexts, teachers are able to engage their students more effectively through the use of culturally sustaining pedagogies. We

draw on these two very different contexts as we discuss three foundational practices that will help teachers in any context teach in more culturally sustaining ways.

### *Practice 1: Learn About Students*

A Native Alaskan teacher said, “In order to teach you, I must know you” (cited in Delpit, 2006, p. 183). Students come to school with culturally based background knowledge and experiences, but they are also individuals within those cultures. To effectively engage students, teachers need to know about their families, communities, interests, and lives outside of school. Teachers who know their students as individuals will be able to address each student’s learning needs more effectively. Knowledge about students’ backgrounds allows educators to build positive relationships with each of them, and those relationships provide the foundation for future learning.

Dita, who came from the same rural community and shared her students’ cultural background, matched her instruction to what she knew about students’ lives, but also offered opportunities for students to use their emergent language abilities to tell her more about their likes, dislikes, and hobbies. Diosdado, who was an outsider in his school, struggled until his teacher learned more about him and found the opportunity to connect to his background knowledge. In both cases, learning was more successful once teachers and students took advantage of opportunities to get to know one another and build relationships.

Here are some ways teachers can learn about their students, build meaningful relationships, and build a strong foundation for culturally sustaining practices:

- At the beginning of the year, have students complete a survey about their free time activities, their favorite movies, music, and so on. Then, make a list of one thing to talk to each student about. Taking the time to have

personal conversations with each student helps them see that you care about them as individuals.

- Learn about youth culture and pop culture. Ask students about the music they listen to, the TV shows they watch, the social media they use, and so on. Go see the popular new movie or check out the latest viral video. Chat with students about your interests, too.
- Spend time with students outside of class. Attend after-school activities, community events, or celebrations. If students participate in sports, music, or drama, support them by attending their games or performances. If students have part-time jobs, try to shop or eat at the places they work. Going the extra mile to show your students that they are important to you as individuals, not only as students, helps in establishing and maintaining a relationship of mutual respect and appreciation.
- Provide and create opportunities for your students to share their stories. Incorporate activities in your classroom that enable students to feel safe sharing personal events with you and their classmates. This is particularly important if your students are language learners. Dita’s students came alive when she asked them to talk about themselves; conversely, Diosdado remained silent until he saw connections between schooling and his own experiences. Beyond the classroom, schoolwide activities such as international night or other events where your students’ cultures and lived experiences are celebrated can make them feel visible and welcomed.

### *Practice 2: Integrate Students’ Cultures*

If students see no versions of their lives reflected in schooling, it makes them feel invisible and unimportant. In highly multicultural and multilingual spaces like Diosdado’s school, where cultural diversity among teachers and students is highly visible, it is important for teachers to

# Culturally Sustaining Practices

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validate and make connections to the varied cultures students bring to the classroom. In schools like Dita's, differences may be less easily identified because students and teachers share many features of their cultural background; in these settings, it is essential to connect to local languages and cultures while also widening students' global perspectives through the study of other languages and cultures.

A note of caution: Teachers need to build a rich understanding of students' lives in order to purposefully integrate students' cultural experiences. A quick mention of enchiladas or tacos will not mean much to students whose families prepare tamales and empanadas. Similarly, making references to Spanish may not be useful with indigenous Hispanic ESOL students, like Diosdado, who speak other languages at home. Once teachers have deepened their knowledge about students' lives outside of school, the next step is to integrate that knowledge in the classroom.

Using a variety of diverse texts, themes, and teaching methods brings the added benefit of exposing all students to different ways of being in the world. Here are some ways teachers can bring students' cultures into their classrooms:

- When working with traditionally underserved ESOL populations such as indigenous, low-literacy, and refugee students, seek out non-traditional texts and print. These vulnerable populations arrive at American classrooms with a wealth of cultural and linguistic backgrounds that are often unknown to other non-indigenous students. Ask students to share stories, legends, or fables from their culture and engage in conversations about diverse values present in their customs and traditions. For more information about incorporating culture and supporting vulnerable and low-literacy English learner populations in the classroom, see Custodio & O'Loughlin (2017), especially Chapter 4.
- Use texts, images, and visuals that reflect diverse cultures, including (but not limited to)

the students' cultures. Dita's visuals and materials all reflected the students' local culture, which served to send the important message that their experiences mattered, and that the lesson content related to those experiences. When their own culture is referenced in the classroom, students feel welcomed and safe. At the same time, by not exposing students to other cultural traditions, particularly of other cultures that use English, Dita missed a valuable opportunity to expose students to new perspectives. Teachers who incorporate multicultural texts and images encourage students to be curious about the world. It is important to find an appropriate balance between foreign cultures and local cultures, between the new and the familiar.

- Weave together culture and content. The picture on page 60 shows an example of how culture and content can be intertwined in the classroom. One of the authors' students shared with the class his passion for dream catchers and their relevance in his indigenous culture. In our classroom, we were learning and practicing the phrase "going to." In an attempt to weave culture and content, students were asked to write 10 sentences beginning with "I am going to" and hang these sentences from a dream catcher. At the end of this activity, the classroom was adorned with dream catchers floating from the ceiling, the indigenous students' culture had been celebrated, and the grammatical use of the phrase "going to" had been reinforced.

## *Practice 3: Examine Your Own Assumptions*

Teachers will struggle to teach in a culturally sustaining manner if they continue to view difference as a deficit. For this reason, it is essential that teachers examine and question their own assumptions. Teachers need to be aware of their own cultural perspective and to understand themselves as cultural beings. This awareness

allows teachers to move away from normative perspectives that endorse one way of seeing the world and allows them to accept and support others who approach the world in a different way. Here are some ways teachers can examine their own assumptions:

- Take time to reflect about your culture. How have your background and experiences shaped the way you see the world? What privileges have you enjoyed, and what struggles have you encountered because of your racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic background? Consider how your life would be different if any of these factors changed.
- Seek out cross-cultural experiences. Teachers who have entered a new culture and engaged with people different from themselves will understand how challenging and intimidating it is to do so. Having cross-cultural experiences will allow you to better understand the experiences of students who enter culturally unfamiliar situations.
- Use a funds of knowledge approach to understand your students' strengths and identify opportunities for your own growth as an educator. Funds of knowledge are commonly defined as out-of-school life experiences that students have and that shape who they are as individuals and learners (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Your students' experiences may sometimes manifest themselves as nontraditional styles of learning, such as Diosdado's naturalistic preference. As an educator, it is fundamental to break from our standardized mindset and give students a voice. Ask them to share their funds of knowledge with the class and use their preferences as an asset in your curriculum and practices. Concurrently, as you are learning from your students' funds of knowledge, challenge your own views and preferences and push yourself outside of your comfort zone of teaching and learning.

## Concluding Thoughts

It should be noted that these practices do not offer "quick fixes." These are not easily implemented "teaching tips." Rather, teachers must *practice* these *practices* every day in order to create culturally sustaining learning environments where every student can sustain his or her own cultural background and build on his or her cultural assets as a foundation for future learning. Implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy involves examining the paradigms that shape teachers' and students' understandings of difference. Though this examination may be challenging, it is an essential step toward more equitable classrooms where all students meet high expectations while sustaining their own cultures. ■

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