# Culturally Relevant and Culturally Sustaining Practices in English Language Arts Classrooms

## Melina Lesus

Historically, the classroom is a site where dominant cultural norms that center whiteness are taught and reinforced, in particular where "the racial violence that unfolds in various communities seeps into English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms" (Johnson, et al., 2017). This is to the detriment of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students who are too often pathologized for enacting their own cultural norms, rather than assimilating to whiteness (Baker-Bell, 2019). Indeed, even informal interactions, such as mundane conversations, are more likely to be policed in an ELA classroom where "the 'appropriate' way to speak (and behave) in academic and professional settings aligns with the practices of white, middle class speakers" (Seltzer, 2019, p.147). Reviewing the literature on how instruction in ELA classrooms is relevant to, and sustaining of, students' cultures, then, has important implications for practitioners and how we can work towards making our classrooms sites where students are free to learn in the comfort of their own skin.

---

**Theoretical Framing**

In order to examine ELA classrooms in relation to students' cultures, this review will frame them through the lenses of Culturally Relevant Pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2014), which both center the ways in which teachers relate to their students. The ways that we teach matter, and if we, as teachers, view our classrooms through these lenses we are much more likely to create spaces that are humanizing and just, especially for our BIPOC students.

The findings that led to the conceptualization of Culturally Relevant Pedagogies (CRP) began with Ladson-Billings' (1995a) desire to theorize around the successful teaching of African American students. Her eventual theory was based in field observations of teachers who she recognized as uncharacteristically successful in advancing their African American students academically. In order to truly understand what was going on in these classrooms and how these teachers were able to facilitate their students' successes, Ladson-Billings (1995b) engaged in "a paradigmatic shift toward looking in the classrooms of excellent teachers, *through* the reality of those teachers" (p. 472).

As a result of this work, Ladson-Billings (1995a) was able to isolate and tangibly identify some criteria of culturally relevant pedagogy: "an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (p. 160). While this concrete identification is surely a breath of fresh air to practitioner-readers, Ladson-Billings is careful to point out that engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy cannot be reduced to simply ticking off a checklist. To that end, Ladson-Billings (1995b) proposed that focusing exclusively on student outcomes is limiting progress. Instead, focus should be on implementing

---

*Melina Lesus is a National Board Certified ELA teacher who has served the public school students of Chicago for 13 years. She is a doctoral candidate in the University of Illinois at Chicago's Language, Literacy & Culture program researching teacher professional development and culturally sustaining literacy practices in secondary settings.*

instructional practices that allow students "to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (p. 496). A teacher who adopts this as a model for their instructional practice will be enacting CRP.

Not surprisingly, Ladson-Billings' works around CRP have become germinal texts in education. Paris (2012) was inspired and sought to extend the work of Ladson-Billings, which he acknowledges often:

> "Recently, however, I have begun to question if the terms 'relevant' and 'responsive' are really descriptive of much of the teaching and research founded upon them, and, more importantly, if they go far enough in their orientation to the languages and literacies and other cultural practices of communities marginalized by systemic inequalities to ensure the valuing and maintenance of our multiethnic and multilingual society" (p. 93).

The questions were and are appropriate because, as Paris (2012) points out, since 1995 the country has evolved to be increasingly more multicultural in many multi-faceted ways. In making the transition from a pedagogy that is relevant to a single group to one that is sustaining to more and varied cultures, Paris writes of the requirement to "support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant and cultural competence." (p. 94) In other words, this requires a shift from the past in that the end goal is not seeking to erase students' home cultures in favor of mainstream norms. Instead, BIPOC students should be learning about and using their cultural competencies even as they are gaining access to mainstream literacies, such as historically valued dialects of English.

Paris (2012) acknowledges research that embodies CSP well before he introduced the term. He is also quick to acknowledge that CSP is not a cure-all and that it still needs to be refined and problematized in order to truly carry out the work that is intended (Paris, 2012). For example, Paris and Alim (2014) offered up three "loving critiques" of past scholarship, including their own, acknowledging that "we are implicated in all three of our loving critiques, as some of our own

research and teaching has uncritically taken up and built on previous notions of asset pedagogies, has at times reified traditional relationships between race/ethnicity and cultural practice, and has not directly and generatively enough taken up problematic elements of youth culture" (p. 86). Paris and Alim (2014) acknowledge that much of the previous cultural work in education has focused on language practices, or heritage or traditional practices of BIPOC students. This is problematic as it becomes an oversimplification that has the potential to create a roadblock for truly studying and utilizing the multifaceted ways that BIPOC students can and do use their cultural practices in the classroom. Paris and Alim (2014) reiterate throughout their piece that CSP "must be open to sustaining [languages and cultures] in both the traditional and evolving ways they are lived and used by young people" (p. 91).

Ladson-Billings (2014) weighed in on CSP. In 2014 she was a part of a symposium with Paris and Alim, and published a reflective article in regards to CRP and its relationship to CSP. Her opinion can be inferred from the title of the article, *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0 a.k.a. the Remix*. She writes, "Scholarship, like culture, is fluid, and the title of this essay, 'Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix,' is intended to reflect this fluidity. The notion of a remix means that there was an original version and that there may be more versions to come, taking previously developed ideas and synthesizing them to create new and exciting forms." (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p.76). She fully sanctions Paris and Alim as they nudge teachers not only to create relevant curriculum, but to create an environment that truly sustains their students. In a sense, CSP drives at and furthers the third tenet of CRP – developing a sociopolitical or critical consciousness – that is often forgotten (Olson & Rao, 2016).

Though even the "newer" conceptualization of CSP is now nearly a decade old, the work continues to matter. Indeed, these pedagogies are central to new frameworks that are practitioner-friendly such as The Historically Responsive Literacy Framework (Muhammad, 2020) and The Textured Teaching Framework (Germán, 2021). As a practitioner, I can attest to the fact that only within the past couple of years has CRP become something of a norm in

conversations among teachers at my school and at district-level professional developments and meetings I attend; CSP, then, is still not something that many mainstream practitioners are familiar with. Currently, parent and administrative scrutiny of text selections and a growing debate over Critical Race Theory is playing out across the country. In light of this, as well as unprecedented shifts in education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, prescribed curricula are re-emerging in more and more schools. If we are looking at the ways we teach through the lenses of CRP and CSP, ELA teachers can contend with these current contextual obstacles and see that:

> "A prescribed text list is not an unassailable constraint for teachers who strive to privilege students' needs and ways of knowing. Teachers can encourage students to be critical consumers of texts, and make space for interpretations that grow from students' multiple identities— including their cultural groups. Every text teachers present is an opportunity for students to question, relate, criticize, and debate. And all students deserve the opportunity to analyze literature in a manner that allows them to seek to understand their identities, and how those identities will affect their exchanges with others" (Ervin, 2021).

**Purpose**

Reviewing the ways that ELA educators are enacting CRP and CSP in their classrooms can provide a guide for teachers by using the work of Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2014) and Paris & Alim (2014) to provide tangible implications.

ELA teachers, in particular, have a responsibility to enact CSP because, unfortunately, "[t]he teaching of English Language Arts can be, at its worst an enforcement of Whiteness, a staunch insistence that all students comply and bend their affiliations to a culture not their own" (Bomer, 2017, p.12).

**Methodology**

This literature review seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How are both culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy models already being used in ELA classrooms?
2. What are the implications of the literature on changes that ELA teachers can make in order to make their classroom culturally relevant and/or culturally sustaining?

In order to locate articles relevant to this literature review, I utilized EBSCOhost, an online reference system that allows researchers to search various databases at once. Using EBSCOhost, I searched the following databases: Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, and ERIC. Combined these databases search more that 10,000 periodicals and journals.

EBSCOhost allows a Boolean search simultaneously across databases. I began by searching the terms "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy" and "English Language Arts" and "High School." This search proved too narrow as it only yielded two results. Omitting "High School" only yielded one additional result. Variations of "Literature," "Writing," and "Text Selection" were substituted for "English Language Arts" with and without the third term, "High School." Still the results were quite narrow. The articles cited in this paper come from the results of the Boolean search, and from the reference pages of those articles as the search results were less than bountiful. Additionally, several of the chapters from the anthology entitled *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*, co-edited by Paris & Alim, are included in this review.

---

*Though even the "newer" conceptualization of CSP is now nearly a decade old, the work continues to matter. [...] As a practitioner, I can attest to the fact that only within the past couple of years has CRP become something of a norm in conversations among teachers at my school and at district-level professional developments and meetings I attend; CSP, then, is still not something that many mainstream practitioners are familiar with.*

---

## Practitioners in their Classrooms

     This section will focus on how ELA practitioners use CSP in their classrooms. Because the purpose of this literature review is to provide implications for practitioners, showcasing CRP practices is appropriate and useful. Similarly, shortcomings can teach practitioners just as well as exemplary practices can, so a range of experiences with CRP and CSP will be represented. Although some of the examples given may seem shallow, generic, or too vague, they are meant to begin a line of thinking that a practitioner could personalize to their own students, as would be necessary in moving towards a culturally sustaining classroom. Implications will be written in the third person plural as I am an ELA teacher also learning from the literature to better serve my own students.

     ELA is a content area that is not necessarily well-defined (Bailey & Bizarro, 2017; Fisher, 2018) and so looking at findings in terms of three subsections of ELA: reading or literature instruction, writing instruction, and language ideologies can help to define it. These categorizations are also in line with how practitioners may be familiar with thinking about the field because education standards often fall into the categories of reading, writing, and speaking/listening. Despite the discrete categorizations offered by the Common Core, these areas are inextricably linked and do not have finite boundaries. For example, focusing only on reading or literature instruction would discount that a significant amount of writing instruction has to do with assignments that are based in literature, and the very ways in which we speak and *allow* students to speak in the classroom set the tone for the literature instruction that is taking place and so it is important for practitioners to think about and see examples from all of these aspects of the ELA classroom.

## Speaking: Findings

     While it may be common or easy to think of how to enact CSP for "minority" students who make up the majority of U.S. public school classrooms, other factors, such as immigration status, should also be taken into account. Lee and Walsh (2017) feature a network of schools that specifically serve students who have recently immigrated to the United States. They observed that in addition to being presented with a rigorous curriculum with social justice materials serving as content, students were encouraged to retain the cultural identities of their homelands and incorporate them into their academic endeavors (Lee & Walsh, 2017). It was not uncommon for students to speak in their native languages in the hallways and they would even be asked to write key concepts on the board in these languages. The result was student ownership and huge strides towards, "[e]quipping immigrant youth with accurate historical knowledge and critical lenses with which to analyze current events and their reporting by the conservative and liberal media…" (Lee & Walsh, 2017, p. 256).

     Of course, being truly consistent in valuing all the languages that students bring into the classroom with them can be difficult. Metz (2018) designed a study in which he spent time in five different ELA classrooms of practitioners who each expressed explicit goals about approaching language in a way that is asset-based for their students who speak dialects other than Standard American English (SAE). Even so, only one of the five teachers was consistent in rejecting SAE as *better than* other dialects of English after an average of almost 11 hours in each teacher's classroom (Metz, 2018). In one instance a teacher admonished a student who asked if they should be "correcting" the excerpts written in Southern U.S. dialect used by African American characters, only to ask students how they "fixed" these same excerpts later in the same lesson (Metz, 2018, p. 470). He also found that, although these teachers were selected for the study based on the high importance they placed on language and honoring student language, they only spent between 3.1% and 13.5% of the observed lessons teaching and talking about language variation (Metz, 2018, p. 464). Unintentionally and unknowingly these teachers are perpetuating the "inescapable agenda in traditional English Language Arts [classrooms] to replace students' language patterns, aesthetic tastes, literacy practices, and composing practices with those of a dominating culture (Bomer, 2017, p.12).

**Speaking: Implications**

Simply put, ELA teachers should be setting up their classrooms as places where SAE is one dialect that is available to students along with the various dialects in which they are already fluent. While students, especially those who are English Language Learners, may have experienced "English-only" biases in their lives, the English classroom should be a refuge where students are fostered to become better communicators by making effective choices that can include choosing not to use SAE. We may not realize that we are susceptible to the societal indoctrination that SAE is "correct," implying that other dialects are "incorrect" and therefore "less than," but we must be conscious of how we speak about language at all times so that we do not present microaggressions as truths in our classrooms.

The ways we speak, our languages, are entwined with our identities, with who we are. If teachers can find ways for students' languages to be celebrated in classroom settings, it will be one more step towards ending the barrage of "metaphorical bullets" that Johnson, et al. (2017) warn us that "educators can intentionally and unintentionally shoot" (p.61). "Correcting" students' languages in an effort to steer them towards SAE should be seen as "shots fired" and we should not only permit students to speak in their own languages when inside the classroom, but even when they are being assessed in speaking and listening skills, such as during Socratic seminars and other speaking-based assessments. Our criteria should focus on communication and the expression of ideas during oral assessments and not on grammar and conventions. This paradigm-shift can affirm a very important truth that is often negated in ELA classrooms: that the languages students bring to classrooms are expressive, beautiful, and worthy of being valued in academic spaces.

**Writing: Findings**

Writing cannot be separated from spoken language, or as Woodard, Vaughan, and Machado (2017) put it, "We take the stance that reading, writing, and talk are intimately connected in the writing curriculum…" (p.216). Similar to Metz, Woodard et al. were interested in language, though their focus was on how writing teachers "(1) made space for explicit discussions of language, culture and power in the writing curriculum and (2) problematized dominant culture" (p. 216). They found that teachers enacted various strategies during their writing instruction that were culturally relevant and began moving toward the spectrum towards becoming culturally sustaining. They identified the following strategies: fostering metalinguistic awareness, encouraging linguistic plurality, acknowledging that language is not neutral, valuing communication over performance of Dominant American English, using texts by authors of students' cultural background, use of nontraditional texts, recognizing nondominant forms of cultural capital, and pushing back on official curricula (Woodard et al., 2017, pp. 221-222).

These strategies can be seen in different ways in different classrooms. For example, Machado, Vaughan, Coppola, & Woodard (2017) document a Chicago teacher who designed a poetry unit based in the tradition of spoken word or slam poetry. By modeling the poetry unit in the tradition of out-of-school spaces, in this case slam poetry teams, students were more likely to be centered since the norms of slam poetry typically include students writing and feedback on self-selected topics. The teacher positioned urban student poets alongside the likes of Carl Sandburg and William Carlos Williams as mentor poets that students could look to as they created their own poems (Machado et al., 2017). He also used a documentary as an anchor text for the unit that featured student-poets from Chicago and the surrounding suburbs. In doing so, he reinforced the idea of student expertise and placed value in youth culture. A spoken word unit also drew upon "cultural and linguistic capital" that schools do not typically value (Machado, et al., 2017, p. 379).

Similarly, Johnson and Eubanks (2015) analyze a writing assignment, the "anthem essay" in a "summer bridge" program that "attempts to interrupt traditional writing assignments, illuminate student choice and voice, and celebrate the cultural and linguistic diversity within the classroom" (Johnson & Eubanks, 2015). In preparing to write the essay, students analyzed anthems, including The Star-Spangled Banner and, similar to the poetry slam unit, popular songs. Because the instructor designed the lesson and the classroom

in a culturally relevant way, students felt comfortable critiquing the National Anthem and deciding if songs that they are likely to have heard fall into the same category as anthems.

The importance of centering often devalued texts, such as popular songs and student-created poetry, can be seen in Paris & Alim's anthology of practitioner's experiences with CSP. Kinloch (2017), for example, centers her work around student identity-as-writer throughout her work in two Midwest high schools. Kinloch (2017) presented the cases of two students who enacted *performances of resistance* as responses to feelings of alienation and disillusionment in a school system that does not value them as African American students. Although in different ways, both students expressed to Kinloch that they simply were not writers. By meeting with the students individually and allowing them to celebrate aspects of their writing rather than simply judging the writing and pointing out any deficits, Kinloch helped to create a space where students were less resistant to writing than in their previous academic experiences. A key element that facilitated this process was the emergence of a personal narrative that included potential for success with writing and that was valued, even if it contained traditionally undervalued characteristics, such as the use of a dialect other than SAE.

In addition to valuing the various dialects that students code-switch between as they fulfill their various responsibilities, teachers must recognize and leverage the fact that modern students are digital natives and are often literate in digital tools that are not valued in school settings. Haddix and Sealy-Ruiz (2012) advocate for the use of "composing processes using digital and online tools, literacies that were ever present in the everyday, out-of-school lives of these… students" (p. 189). They argue against the notion that allowing students to use such tools would "dumb-down" curriculum. On the contrary, valuing this literacy that students are comfortable with empowers them and sustains an aspect of their culture that is often criminalized in school settings, as evidenced when students are punished for texting their friends when that display of literacy practice should be leveraged as a tool that students can bring to their writing (Haddix &

Sealey-Ruiz, 2012, pp.190-191).

**Implications**

Woodard et al. (2017) identified key strategies for reading, writing, and speaking/listening that can be enacted in culturally relevant and culturally sustaining ways. This list of strategies and the subsequent examples, though immensely useful, cannot be treated as a checklist, though. Instead teachers should use them as inspiration when personalizing the curriculum for the students who are in front of them on a daily basis. For example, a use of a non-traditional text such as a particular song cannot be used year after year with different students, or even at different schools with different student bodies. Instead, it is up to us, the teachers, to find different songs or even to choose a different form of a non-traditional text from year to year. Machado et al. (2017), show that instructors should design writing tasks that allow for students to use linguistic and cultural repertoires that they possess expertise in to be valued in a classroom setting. Including mentor texts that are written by peers is another way to value student expertise. Johnson and Eubanks (2015) illustrate how texts found in students' cultures, such as popular songs, should not be dismissed as unworthy of analysis. Furthermore, students are given opportunities to discuss their ideas before writing, even if those ideas may contrast with societal expectations.

Another way to value what students bring to the classroom is to allow their own personal narratives to emerge and to value those narratives even if certain aspects of them are not traditionally celebrated in schools. This is what Kinloch (2017) did in her ethnographic study of student's self-identity as writers. We must remember that our BIPOC students enter high school potentially having been told in so many ways that some aspects of their identities are not "right." This can include the way they carry themselves as Kinloch (2017) found, or even the ways that they communicate and write outside of school (Haddix and Sealy-Ruiz, 2012). Affirming those very same aspects in something as sacred as their writing, has the potential to make huge strides towards affirming and sustaining their cultures in an arena that usually does the opposite.

Introducing students to and not only allowing but encouraging them to use code-meshing (Young, 2009) rather than constantly requiring that they code-switch to SAE as they write their narratives and other assignments is one concrete way that students can see this affirmation. We must not only allow students to tell their own stories in their own language, but also allow them a choice of medium(s) as they do so (Haddix and Sealy-Ruiz, 2012; Woodard et al. 2017).

## Literature:  Findings

In her Florida classroom, Houchen (2013) enacted CRP when helping her students become more proficient readers through the lens of critical literacy, while also using culture to create community within her classroom. She sought to design her units based on student feedback and make instruction relevant to students' real-world contexts. In terms of text selection, she sought to "move beyond a narrow canon of literature often conceptualized as traditional or standard, and shift the focus into content that students find meaningful and relevant to their lives" (Houchen, 2013, p.96). She designed her first unit around creating culture and cultivating her knowledge-of-student. She used this expertise in the individuals in front of her to inform and personalize subsequent unit planning in a cycle that consisted of, "planning, action, assessment reflection, and re-planning" (Houchen, 2013, p.98). While the formal findings of Houchen's action research were social-emotional in nature, they are based in critical literacy and strategy-based pedagogy enacted with the three tenets of CRP as a foundation.

Wong and Peña (2017) explore a California classroom where the tenet of building critical capacity is at the center of the school's mission. As such, teachers are encouraged to use social justice materials as content in their classrooms as evidenced by the, "inclusion of texts that explore dynamic views of culture and language" (Wong & Peña, 2017, p. 169). The example highlighted was the use of *Zoot Suit*, a play by Luis Valdez, in a predominantly Latinx classroom. Students identified culturally with the characters in the play and also socially as they read with a focus on oppression of people of color. Making sure that students are able to identify with the texts may mean that teachers

will have to look in unlikely places for instructional content. Guerra (2012) explored the reading instruction of perhaps the most at-risk population, incarcerated students. She advocates for the use of "Urban Fiction," though she is sure to point out that she is not necessarily advocating that the whole of the genre should be used in classrooms, but rather that teachers can find titles that merit instructional time in this often overlooked genre (Guerra, 2012). While the teacher did not explicitly use Urban Fiction, the culminating research project allowed students to choose their own reading materials, so they certainly might have sought out undervalued genres. It is worth noting that this opportunity for self-selection led some students to college level material (Wong & Peña, 2017, p. 170).

In the previous example, the teacher set the stage so that students felt comfortable enough to seek out rigorous texts. Rigor is key, as many programs that have a majority of ELL students or remedial students (in which students of color are overrepresented) water down material as a means of helping students to succeed. Gifted students are a population of students who are not often thought of when discussing CRP and CSP, though they should be. Newell (2017) asserts that CRP should be enacted with gifted students because, "[e]xposure to and comprehensive analysis of literature by diverse authors will help prepare [gifted] students for the world they stand to inherit and will open their minds to the faulty systems that work to their advantage" (p. 96). Newell (2017) bravely admits that even as she had the above realization, the subsequent changes she made in her classroom made it culturally *responsive* rather than truly culturally relevant. Still she shares certain triumphs that have definite implications for practice with all populations of students. For example, she incorporated supplementary readings into her curriculum and has committed to making further revisions to her curriculum to include works by "writers, scientists, artists, philosophers, characters, and leaders from a variety of dynamic backgrounds" and "modern thinkers" (Newell, 2017, p. 99). In doing so, she hopes to move toward a social action approach, which would move her further along the spectrum towards CSP.

It is, unfortunately, too often true that teachers are forced into reading canonical texts with their

students. This could be because of required common curriculum or even because those texts are simply what is available and the school does not have the budget to purchase other texts. One British Literature teacher found himself in the position of being forced to teach what is often seen as the epitome of all canonical materials: William Shakespeare. The teacher was chosen as a participant in the study because "his initial interview revealed a sophisticated understanding and application of culturally responsive pedagogy in his canonical literature classroom" (Dyches, 2017, p.305). Though the teacher was frustrated with the curricular requirements imposed upon him, Dyches (2017) observed that he, "buttressed by his dialogic classroom community, [he] delivered a canonical counter-curriculum that cultivated students' sociopolitical consciousness and provided them with multimodal opportunities to restory themselves into and against required British Literature texts" (p.300).

The teacher discussed here credits the relationships he has formed with his students for his success in enacting CRP even while being forced to teach a curriculum that he disagrees with (p.314). This includes his relationships with the students as well as their relationships with one another. Allowing students to collaborate as they worked to master the content that came along with the canonical texts was essential. Allowing the canonical texts to foreground and lead into discussions about salient issues in student lives was another key. For example, Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" was paired with an article and led to a discussion about Rape Culture while the poetry of William Blake led to a discussion of child labor and even a subsequent project about sociopolitical movements such as Black Lives Matter. Dyches (2017) notes that, "While British literature was the foundation of these conversations, Sam, like teachers in other restrictive environments (Chapman 2008), subverted his required curriculum by using it to develop students' sociopolitical consciousness…" (p. 316).

**Implications**

Houchen (2013) reminds us that knowledge of students is important even with high school students who are nearly adults. Educators cannot plan their instruction to be relevant and can definitely not sustain a students' cultures if they know nothing about them. Students are experts in themselves and are often given little or no ethos within the institution of schooling. Allowing them to be themselves can help a teacher not only in choosing relevant texts as Houchen (2013) did, but can also help instructors to relate more traditional texts to students. For example, knowing that a student writes poetry rife with wordplay can most definitely be used in a close reading of Katarina and Petruchio's first one-on-one interaction in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, as it is laden with word play such as puns and double entendre. A student can then be challenged to use this interaction as a mentor text for their own poetry. This is one very brief example of reading a canonical or traditional text while still maintaining relevance to students' lives.

Wong & Peña (2017) show, through one California classroom, that students who are presented with texts that they can identify with on multiple levels will challenge themselves by choosing to read challenging texts that they deem as similarly relevant and genuinely important. It is up to ELA teachers then to design their instruction to include opportunities for students to seek out their own texts. Of course, they should also design a curriculum that includes characters and authors that students can identify with. This does not mean, however, that there is no place for canonical literature at all. Instead, the implication is that it is the job of the ELA teacher to help students to see connections and comradery with characters when it is not as apparent, as seen in Wong & Peña (2017). For example, time should be made when reading *The Great Gatsby* to think about Jay Gatsby's motivations for becoming *the great* Gatsby. Surely adolescent students can identify with a sense of not belonging, of wanting to recreate oneself and have the ability to, for example, transcend their own socioeconomic class. ELA teachers need to plan for class discussions, as the teacher did in Dyches (2017), and present students with a line of questioning that allows them to see themselves in the books they read even if they deal with a seemingly opposite context.

Canonical plays and poetry were also paired with modern articles and is suggested by many scholars

(eg Muhammad, 2020; Ervin, 2021). Pairing texts is a strategy that can help teachers to make these nuanced connections explicit. This strategy would also help to bring more diverse voices into the classroom as Newell (2017) urges, while not omitting the canon completely. In my own 10th grade classroom, I frame a unit with the anchor text of *Night* by Elie Wiesel with Chimamanda Ngozi Adieche's *The Danger of a Single Story.* As my students and I read the canonical work, we think about how we as Americans have learned about WWII and seek out the stories of perspectives that have been forgotten in history. In this manner we value diverse perspectives as we read the canon. A modern, female African author informs the way we think about American and world history through an unlikely text pairing.

## Concluding Thoughts

There is no one right way for ELA teachers to enact CSP in their classrooms, and it certainly cannot be reduced to a checklist. Instead, teachers must trust the expertise of their students and allow them to co-construct the learning taking place. In no way are culturally sustaining practices mutually exclusive to rigorous academic practices; on the contrary in order to be able to critique and change the power structures that work against them, our traditionally underserved BIPOC students need to be presented with a challenging and rigorous curriculum that is authentic to their lives. This in no way implicates the complete removal of, for example, canonical texts or grammar instruction from ELA classrooms. Instead, the impetus is on the teacher to design instruction so that all instruction is relevant to students and used to sustain their cultures.

## References

Bailey, C., & Bizzaro, P. (2017). Research in creative writing: Theory into practice. *Research in the Teaching of English, 52*(1), 77-97.

Baker-Bell, A. (2020) Dismantling anti-black linguistic racism in English language arts classrooms: Toward an anti-racist black language pedagogy, Theory Into Practice, 59:1, 8-21.

Bomer, R. (2017). What would it mean for English Language Arts to become more culturally responsive and sustaining? *Voices From the Middle, 24*(3), 11–15.

Dyches, J. (2017). Shaking Off Shakespeare: A White Teacher, Urban Students, and the Mediating Powers of a Canonical Counter-Curriculum. *Urban Review, 49*(2), 300–325.

Ervin, J. (2021). Critically Reading the Canon: Culturally Sustaining Approaches to a Prescribed Literature Curriculum. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 0*(0), 1–9.

Fisher, R. (2018). Reconciling disciplinary literacy perspectives with genre-oriented activity theory: Toward a fuller synthesis of traditions. *Reading Research Quarterly, 54*(2), 237-251.

Freire, P., & trans. Ramos, M. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 50th anniversary edition*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Germán, L. E. (2021). *Textured teaching: A framework for culturally sustaining practices.* Heinemann.

Guerra, S. F. (2012). Using urban fiction to engage at-risk and incarcerated youths in literacy instruction. Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 55(5), 385–394.

Haddix, M., & Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2012). Cultivating Digital and Popular Literacies as Empowering and Emancipatory Acts Among Urban Youth. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 56*(3), 189–192.

Houchen, D. (2013). "Stakes Is High": Culturally Relevant Practitioner Inquiry With African American Students Struggling to Pass Secondary Reading Exit Exams. *Urban Education, 48*(1), 92–115.

Johnson, L., Jackson, J., Stovall, D., & Baszile, D. T. (2017). "Loving Blackness to Death": (Re)Imagining ELA Classrooms in a Time of Racial Chaos. *English Journal, 106*(4), 60.

Johnson, L. P., & Eubanks, E. (2015). Anthem or nah? Culturally relevant writing instruction and community. *Voices from the Middle, 23*(2), 31–36.

Kinloch, V. (2017). "You Ain't Making Me Write": Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies and Black Youths' Performances of Resistance. In Paris, D. & Alim, H.S. *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (pp. 25-42). Teachers College Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995a). But That 's Just Good Teaching ! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice, 34*(3), 159–165.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995b). Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465–491.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*(1), 74–84.

Lee, S. J., & Walsh, D. (2017). Socially Just, CulturallySustaining Pedagogy for Diverse Immigrant Youth. In Paris, D. & Alim, H.S. *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (pp. 191-206). Teachers College Press.

Machado, E., Vaughan, A., Coppola, R., & Woodard, R. (2017). "Lived life through a colored lens:" Culturally sustaining poetry in an urban literacy classroom. *Language Arts, 94*(6), 367–381.

Metz, M. (2018). Challenges of Confronting Dominant Language Ideologies in the High School English Classroom. *Research in the Teaching of English, 52*(4), 455–478.

Muhammad, G.E. (2020). Cultivating genius:An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive teaching. Scholastic Inc.

Newell, S. (2017). Check Your Privilege. *Gifted Child Today, 40*(2), 96–102.

Olson, J. D., & Rao, A. B. R. (2016). Becoming a Culturally Responsive Teacher: The Impact of Clinical Experiences in Urban Schools. *Journal of Urban Learning Teaching and Research, 12,* 133–141.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy. Educational Researcher, 41(3), 93–97.

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What Are We Seeking to Sustain Through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy? A Loving Critique Forward. *Harvard Educational Review, 84(1)*, 85–100.

Seltzer, K. (2019). Performing Ideologies: Fostering Raciolinguistic Literacies Through Role-Play in a High School English Classroom. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 63(2)*, 147–155.

Wong, C., & Peña, c. (2017). Policing and Performing Culture: Rethinking "Culture" and the Role of the Arts in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies. In Paris, D. & Alim, H.S. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: *Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (pp. 117-138). Teachers College Press.

Woodard, R., Vaughan, A., & Machado, E. (2017). Exploring Culturally Sustaining Writing Pedagogy in Urban Classrooms. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice, 66*, 215-231.

Young, V. (2016). " Nah , We Straight ": An Argument Against Code Switching. *JAC, 29*(1), 49–76.