On the Consistency of Catholic Schools and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

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A long held tradition in education, dating back to John Dewey (1902, 1916) seeks to know and uphold students' cultural lives, communities, and heritage ways. Over the years, these approaches have taken on names like Culturally-Relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), Culturally-Responsive (Gay, 2000), Culturally-Engaging (Morrell, 2009), and most recently, Culturally Sustaining (Paris, 2012) Pedagogy and have sought to counteract the deficit approaches to American educational practices that aimed to "eradicate the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices many students of color brought from their homes and communities" (Paris, 2012, p. 93). The argument across these culturally-sustaining approaches is that students' cultural and community backgrounds, first languages, and literacy practices (i.e., ways of being, speaking feeling, and doing in the world) are sources of knowledge and strength in student learning. Thus, culturally sustaining pedagogy is a stance that acknowledges these strengths as assets and positions educators as valuing and upholding them. As part of this effort, educators have been called upon to bring these facets of students' lives *into* the classroom as resources (as opposed to deficits) to be harnessed for academic access and success. Students' lives, in other words, are sources *of* and *for* learning. Through these methods, education can foster, perpetuate, and sustain "linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 93) and positively promote a multiethnic and multilingual society.

In one of the earliest instances of this practice, Smitherman (1977) argued for Black English as a legitimate form of speech (and thus, as a specific type of language and literacy) that was distinct from Dominant American English. This research led to a field of scholarship that continues to examine how students' cultural lives and home languages may influence and be influenced by classrooms, arguing that students benefit from seeing their personal culture, community, and language (Cummings, 2000) represented in classroom texts, images, and examples. For example, hip-hop pedagogy (i.e., Hill, 2009) has become a well-established educational field of research, study, and practice. Similarly, scholars and educators have called for the inclusion of students' digital and multimedia practices in classrooms (i.e., Lankshear & Knobel, 2008), positioning those practices as literacies that help them engage with the world in meaningful and expressive ways. Scholarship has also examined how schooling may look different in urban (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) and rural contexts (Eckert & Petrone, 2013) depending on those specific geographic and cultural contexts. The point here is that what

counts as "culture" is vast, changes with time, and indexes students' unique ways of being and doing in the world and in their own (geographic, racial, linguistic, faith, gendered, ethnic, etc.) contexts. Indeed, part of what counts as culture are those aspects or markers with which students *self-identify* as significant to their identity. Thus, assumptions cannot be made for or on behalf of students, nor should one assume that black students in Chicago are culturally similar to those in Atlanta or New Orleans; that Latino students in New York are culturally similar to Latino students on the border; and so on.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy as understood within the Alliance for Catholic Education

The core identity of Catholic schooling, following in the tradition of Christ the teacher, is to value, uphold, and respond to the individual student and seek practices that include all learners and endorse their ways of being in the world. One of ACE's Root Beliefs (see the M.Ed. Handbook) states, "ACE believes that every child is made in the image and likeness of God and that Catholic schools have the important responsibility and unique capacity to contribute to student formation in meeting their diverse needs" (Root Belief 5). This belief, grounded in Catholic social teaching, not only articulates the uniqueness of each individual student as a child of God, but also references the privilege of the school and the educator in coming to know, value, and cultivate the diverse lives, needs, and perspectives and experiences of their students. The idea of "needs" should not be complicated by language that compartmentalizes or catalogs what a student may "lack" or "need" from a disciplinary perspective (though this is an important responsibility for the individual teacher); rather, considering "diverse learning needs" holistically and lovingly can position the student as a human individual and can open possibilities for compassion and justice in the classroom by helping students to better know themselves and to understand others. In this sense, "learning is a complex endeavor that occurs in a variety of ways" (Root Belief 3) beyond traditional methods of pencil-to-paper pedagogy.

In acknowledging the student as an individual, it is important to remember that these students, of course, do not exist in a vacuum. Many of their diverse linguistic and cultural ways of being in the world are formed by the communities of which they are a part. To that end, "ACE believes that educators are called to serve the common good and should be prepared to meet the academic, emotional, communal, and spiritual needs of students working collaboratively with families and other professionals" (Root Belief 2). In this sense, ACE sees communities as examples of faith, hope, and love in action – teaching is never divorced from the community, and it would be a mistake to think that "practice" can exist outside of culture and context. As evidence of this belief, ACE identifies "community" as one of its three pillars, acknowledging that "Community" not only indicates the community of ACE peers, but also the community in which ACE educators are placed along the community of the universal Church. ACE educators are not seen as place-holders, but as active and indelible members of the community they serve. Knowing the community, and thus knowing students and students' community/ies, is the first step of successful teaching; the professional act of teaching stems

from community and the active interest in sustaining that community – including learning from it and participating in it.

Because culture and context are always changing, there is no "toolkit" or "list of best practices" that defines a Catholic, culturally-sustaining stance. Thus, no one is poised to offer, give, or provide a list of strategies that will work across time and place – such a list would undercut the very philosophy behind culturally-sustaining movements. Rather we offer the following guidelines that may help you to cultivate more inclusive practices in your classroom that may sustain your students' cultural lives and ways of being.

1. Adopt an open mindset, recognizing that there is no one right way to learning, education, parenting, or cultural ways of being.

   How you were taught, how you learned, how you expressed yourself and your identity in and out of school, and how you define success have likely changed and/or are likely different for the students you teach. Take a stance of being a beginner and a learner in your new cultural community. Consider learning from and partnering with local resources (e.g., libraries, museums, people, even coffee shops and the like) to learn more about the communities in which you serve. A large part of this stance involves self-reflection and thinking about your own culture, practices, and experiences. What is "normal" to you, may not be someone else's normal.

2. Get to know your students and families.

   Attempt to understand where they come from, how they understand the communities in which they participate, and the ways in which they communicate or express themselves with different social groups (family, friends, authority figures, etc.). This involves a constant commitment to active listening (in order to learn). Approach differences with an additive mindset and explore how language and culture can enrich your instruction. Consider student surveys as a means to facilitate this learning as well as ways to invite students' families to be a part of your classroom (literally and figuratively). As you begin to learn more about your students, find ways to bring their experiences into the classroom.

3. Maintain high standards and expectations for *all* students.

   In the process of sustaining cultures and equity in your classroom, maintain rigorous, academic standards that do not penalize students for their cultural and linguistic ways of being but also do not allow them to use culture as an excuse for not engaging in learning opportunities. Teacher support, along with planning, knowledge of standards, and the use of higher-order pedagogies and curricula can support educational access and learning opportunities attentive to students' diverse perspectives, learning needs, and cultural

identities. Remember, also, that parents and guardians are the first educators of their child. Be respectful of what families value in terms of education and educational goals for their child.

4. Find ways for interdisciplinary, cross-curricular opportunities that engage students in challenging ideas that hone academic literacies and skills but also cultivate compassionate, well-rounded students attuned to life and human dignity.

   Partnering with other teachers in your school may help to foster goals and assignments grounded in students' lived worlds, communities, and Catholic social teaching.

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