Leadership for School Improvement

Leading the Transition Toward Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Schools



Edited by

Kristy Cooper Stein

Leading the Transition Toward Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Schools

Leadership for School Improvement

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Leading the Transition Toward Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Schools

Edited by

Kristy Cooper Stein

Michigan State University, USA



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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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Mary-Louise Leger is a Doctoral Candidate in the Urban Schooling program at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her current research interests center on the educational infrastructures for improving urban schools and districts. This includes the collaborative arrangements, educational leadership, and organizational assets that support and sustain school improvement. Prior to UCLA, Mary-Louise served as a policy fellow, a nonprofit director, and a middle school teacher. She has experience as a research consultant for schools, districts, and philanthropic foundations across the country. She holds a BA in International Development from McGill University, a Master's in Instruction, and a Master's in Education Policy from the University of Pennsylvania.

Liyah Matari is a dedicated community leader and organizer who excels at creating systems and structures that amplify the voices of the most impacted community members within organizations. She has a diverse background in higher education, corporate DEI consulting, K-12 program and project management, and strategy consulting. As a proud Palestinian, Leah brings a unique perspective to her work, particularly in K-12 education, where she prioritizes the student voice. She is committed to ensuring that those often silenced by power are heard and centered.

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Katherine Nitka earned her EdD at the University of Utah in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy where she was the recipient of the 2020–2021 Milton Bennion Scholarship. She also holds a Master's in Education from University of Colorado at Boulder with an emphasis in curriculum and instruction and a Bachelor of Arts from University of

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR RESEARCH ON SCHOOLS BECOMING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE AND SUSTAINING

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ABSTRACT

This introductory chapter establishes the foundational rationale for studying how schools become culturally responsive and sustaining. Drawing on decades of scholarship, the authors define culture as dynamic and multifaceted, shaped by individual and communal experiences. They outline the principles of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies, emphasizing their transformative potential for student learning, identity affirmation, and social justice. The chapter explores the roles of teachers, school leaders, and district administrators in fostering inclusive, affirming environments and highlights systemic barriers—such as policy constraints, educator capacity, and sociopolitical resistance—that hinder widespread implementation.

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The authors argue that while the vision for culturally responsive-sustaining schools is well-articulated, the field lacks a clear, actionable pathway for achieving this vision in real-world contexts. The chapter introduces the book's purpose: to illuminate that pathway through research and practitioner narratives that reveal both the promise and complexity of leading culturally responsive change. These stories aim to inspire and inform future efforts to create equitable, student-centered schools that honor and sustain diverse cultures and communities.

Keywords: Equity; leadership; transformation; belonging; change; diversity

Culturally responsive-sustaining schools create learning environments that support students in maintaining and developing their cultural identities while acquiring new knowledge and thriving as individuals and collectives both within and outside their schools (NYSED, 2019). Such education is considered "responsive" because educators tailor what they do to include, benefit, and be relevant to all students, even though students represent a variety of backgrounds, cultures, personalities, and interests (Gay, 2002a; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Such education is "sustaining" in that it honors and cherishes the identities students bring to school, seeking to support both the continuation and further development of students' identities, cultures, and communities (Ladson-Billings et al., 2024; Paris, 2012). This attention to both responding to and sustaining who students are as individual cultural beings and as representatives of various cultural communities results in engaging, affirming, student-centered learning environments. Schools that meet these goals promote student well-being in multiple forms—helping students to see the value in their culture and the cultures of others, supporting students in recognizing their own and their community's worth and strengths, and enabling all students to reach academic heights that open doors to a variety of opportunities. Culturally responsive-sustaining schools also fight for societal well-being by helping students understand and fight against oppressive systems and forces rooted in power, privilege, racism, and inequity (Ladson-Billings et al., 2024). All told, culturally responsive-sustaining schools and school systems strive to create a better world for their students, families, communities, and our broader society. They are not only effective; they are transformative.

Over the last 40 years, many scholars have devoted entire careers to framing and furthering the pursuit of culturally responsive-sustaining education. They have blazed trails to provide theories, frameworks, and rich examples of inspiring educators who have brought culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies and leadership practices to life. These narratives of individual teachers, leaders, and community

members have illustrated what it means to respond to students' home cultures, to believe in the capacity of all children, to identify and use students' strengths as assets for learning, to create schools that are inclusive and equitable, and to integrate family and community members and values into classrooms and schools. For many educational practitioners reading this literature in teacher and principal preparation programs, in doctoral programs, and in *how-to* books, these culturally responsive and sustaining narratives are emblematic of the types of educators they strive to be. The goals are so worthy, the stories so uplifting, the examples so rich. It all seems so possible. And then they return to their jobs—to the organizational inertia of schools and school systems, to the competing values of educational decision-making, to the emotions of trying to teach and lead, to the exhaustion and disenfranchisement of long work days and endless challenges, and to the structural barriers that impede efforts to do better. What we have gained as a field in the last 40 years is the worthy, seemingly tangible goal of creating culturally responsive-sustaining schools for all students. We know what they look like. We know what they feel like. We know that we want them.

What we still need is a pathway to get there—a clear understanding of how educators, individually and collectively, can navigate the real-world conditions of an inequitable and overloaded educational system to lead change toward culturally responsive-sustaining schools. Only when we know how to get there, can educators, students, and families across communities relish in the positive and worthy outcomes of culturally responsive and sustaining learning environments and experiences.

The goal of this book is to take concerted steps down the path toward a stronger understanding of how schools become culturally responsive and sustaining by sharing and examining stories of individuals and groups who have tried to lead the way. This book focuses on educational practitioners and their partners (researchers, consultants, community leaders) who have tried their hand at leading efforts to pursue culturally responsive and equitable schools and school systems. In this volume, they share their stories—their personal motivations, the theories of change they pursued, the steps they took, the challenges they faced, the outcomes they achieved, and the outcomes that eluded them—to inform the field and the efforts of others who pursue the same goals. We know this book does not and cannot present *the path* for leading the transition toward culturally responsive-sustaining schools, as that path is still not clear and will ultimately differ for every educational organization seeking to travel it. But, in sharing these stories, we offer glimpses into ways forward, and we identify lessons to help other scholars and practitioners move the field and individual educational organizations closer to the ideal of culturally responsive-sustaining schools.

In this chapter, we set the stage for these narratives. First, we define culture. Then, we lay out the characteristics and goals of culturally responsive-sustaining schools—at the classroom and school levels and for school and district leaders. We then assert why we need culturally responsive-sustaining schools—noting the benefits for students, teachers, communities, and society. Then, we examine barriers to creating culturally responsive-sustaining schools and assess why such schools are not more prevalent in our society. Next, we establish what we know from prior research about how to lead the transition toward culturally responsive-sustaining schools, laying a foundation upon which the chapters in this book can build. We conclude by introducing the next eight chapters, in which educational practitioners and researchers share their stories of pursuing culturally responsive-sustaining schools amidst the real-world challenges of educational leadership and change.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

In the broadest and most observable sense, culture consists of the traditions and customs of a particular group of people. In more subtle and less observable ways, culture plays out in many facets of how people live their lives and how people raised in different communities relate to themselves, one another, the physical world, and the spiritual world (Carter Andrews, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Scholars who study culture in educational settings have identified many cultural dynamics that differ in ways that are relevant to how classrooms and schools function—including, for example, different ways of participating in shared spaces (Philips, 1972), of understanding relationships between adults and children (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), of telling and using stories (Au & Jordan, 1981), of asking and answering questions (Heath, 1988), of responding when someone is speaking (Cazden et al., 1985), of thinking about and enacting knowledge (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009), of passing knowledge from one generation to the next (San Pedro, 2021), and so forth. Scholars also remind us that culture happens at the individual level, as each person develops and grows in ways that reflect their own cultural and personal experiences within and outside their communities (San Pedro, 2017; Sleeter, 2012). Scholars also assert that culture is current, fluid, dynamic, and ever-changing as individuals have different experiences and respond to different influences in their lives (Paris & Alim, 2014). Encompassing all these dynamics, we define culture as an individual's way of viewing, experiencing, and understanding their life and the world around them that is grounded in the beliefs and values of the various communities to which they belong.

WHAT ARE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE-SUSTAINING SCHOOLS?

Culturally responsive-sustaining schools enact culturally responsive-sustaining practices at all levels of the organization in ways that are integrated and sustained. Below, we describe how this ethos plays out in classrooms with teachers who possess culturally responsive dispositions and enact culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies. We also examine how a culturally responsive-sustaining school climate creates a schoolwide culture of care that fosters feelings of belonging and connection for students. We then consider the types of school leadership that enable and support culturally responsive-sustaining classrooms and schools, and we extend this analysis to consider what must be happening at the district level to create the conditions for this work. Across this section, our goal is to use existing scholarship to illustrate what culturally responsive-sustaining schools are so that readers can share the ideal vision held by contributors to this book.

In the Classrooms—Culturally Relevant, Responsive, and Sustaining Pedagogies

Since the 1970s, scholars have touted the importance of culturally centered, asset-based pedagogies that reflect and center students' cultures and strengths in teaching and learning. Early ethnographic research in this area challenged the notion of a "universal child" who could be taught without attention to how culture shaped their learning (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981, p. 106). Instead, cultural anthropologists used frameworks of cultural congruency and compatibility to identify how alignment between home and school cultures supported student learning and how teachers could use students' home cultures to teach students from different cultural groups, including Native Hawaiian students (Au & Jordan, 1981; Jordan, 1985) and Native American students (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981; Philips, 1972). Building on this work, prominent studies of teachers who effectively fostered learning and engagement among Black students revealed the critical roles of African American and African Canadian culture in how teachers connected with and conveyed academic content to students (e.g., Henry, 1996; Irvine, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). Around the same time, scholars studying effective instruction for Latine students also examined how teachers drew on students' home cultures and funds of knowledge to support teaching and learning (e.g., Gutierrez & Garcia, 1989; Moll et al., 1992).

Within these efforts to elucidate effective instructional practices for various racial and cultural groups, scholars were clear that they sought to

dispel any beliefs that students' academic failures were due to deficits within the students, their families, or their communities. On the contrary, they asserted, students come to school with tremendous assets and strengths garnered from their families and communities, and it was up to educators to identify and build upon those assets and strengths as tools for learning (e.g., Gutierrez & Garcia, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992; Paris, 2012). As this scholarship evolved, it launched decades of attention to preparing culturally responsive teachers with strategies for learning about their students' home cultures and using those insights to scaffold student learning and engagement (e.g., Carter Andrews, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Sleeter, 2012).

From among this academic tradition, three frameworks evolved as the most influential on educational thought and practice. The first is Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1994, 1995) concept of *culturally relevant pedagogy*, which offers a model aimed at supporting high levels of student achievement, helping students affirm their cultural identities, and fostering students' abilities to critically analyze and challenge inequitable social systems. Drawing on data from her 3-year ethnographic study of eight effective teachers of African American children, Ladson-Billings (1995) shared examples of specific pedagogical moves and lessons these teachers used to achieve the three aims of culturally relevant pedagogy. However, Ladson-Billings (1995, 2011) emphasizes that culturally relevant pedagogy is not a prescription for teachers to *do* particular things in their teaching; rather, the pedagogy stems from an ethos situated in teachers' *dispositions* toward students and teaching. She asserts that culturally relevant teachers believe that all students are capable of succeeding academically regardless of race or culture or disability, that they as teachers are part of the local community, that teaching is about pulling out knowledge from students, that student-teacher relationships must be fluid, that students learn best in a community of learners, that students must be mutually responsible for one another, that knowledge is shared and mutually created, that teachers and students must critically examine curriculum and societal structures, that teachers are responsible for facilitating student learning, and that assessment must provide multiple means for students to illustrate their excellence (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2011). Culturally relevant teachers employ these dispositions in the instructional decisions they make and the ways they enact those decisions. In this sense, culturally relevant pedagogues are a certain type of teacher with a particular orientation toward the work, and the goal of preservice and in-service teacher professional learning must be to support teachers in developing these dispositions and the skills to enact them in practice.

The second influential framework situated in culture is Geneva Gay's (2000, 2002a, 2018) advocacy for *culturally responsive teaching*, in which she

pulls together theory, research, and practical examples from scholars and practitioners to illustrate strategies for using students' cultures as "conduits" for effective teaching (Gay, 2002a, p. 106). Building on multicultural education research, Gay (2002a) isolates five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching. First, she asserts that teachers must have strong knowledge of culture and cultural diversity, including in-depth knowledge of characteristics and particularities of different cultural groups and of how members of different cultural groups have contributed to the content areas they teach. Second, teachers must design culturally responsive curricula by critiquing and modifying formal curricula to include not only diverse peoples but also topics that are controversial and that support students in learning about and grappling with issues like racism, power, and media in ways that attend to values, feelings, individual experiences, and ethics. Third, Gay argues that culturally responsive teachers demonstrate cultural caring for students, which comes through in high expectations, cultural scaffolding, and strong relationships with students, while also helping students build productive peer learning communities centered on freedom, equality, and justice. Fourth, teachers must be effective cross-cultural communicators whose understanding of communication patterns in different cultures—such as how speakers and listeners typically interact in a given culture, or the extent to which ideas are conveyed in more sequential or circular storytelling—allows them to connect with, understand, and teach their students. Finally, Gay asserts that teachers must employ cultural congruity with students' home cultures by modifying instruction to account for ways of learning that align with students' ethnicities and by using multicultural examples and perspectives as "pedagogical bridges" to help students understand new content (p. 113). In contrast to Ladson-Billings' (1995) emphasis on how culturally relevant teachers *think*, Gay's framework attends more directly to what culturally responsive teachers *do* to utilize cultures as pathways to learning. However, this framework is less concerned with creating societal change, as compared with Ladson-Billings' model, and focuses more explicitly on supporting student learning.

The third influential framework is Django Paris's (2012) concept of *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, which asserts that schools must perpetuate and extend students' existing cultures and identities to forge a pluralistic society that is rich with multiple languages, literacies, and cultures. Paris argues that educators must resist forces that promote a monocultural society or that simply use culture to help students from marginalized communities succeed in school without recognizing and reinforcing the inherent value in their cultures of origin. Rather, Paris (2012) and Paris and Alim (2014, 2017) call for teaching practices that maintain and further develop students' heritage and contemporary cultures and linguistic practices in the interest of creating a pluralistic, multilingual, multicultural, and democratic society

that challenges White middle-class norms. As one example, Kinloch (2017) recounts her experiences teaching high school writing and collaborating with students to foster different types of literacies, validate students' identities, and center students' perspectives in a humanizing classroom space that celebrates culturally and personally authentic student writing. As another example, San Pedro (2017) shares how students in a high school Native American Literature class created a "sacred truth space" (p. 101) by sharing their personal stories through art and writing in ways that humanized and validated their own cultures and languages. Key themes in culturally sustaining pedagogy include humanizing educational spaces; honoring and strengthening the voices and literacies of children and youth; centering local community, culture, and knowledge; and challenging dominant paradigms through critical curriculum and pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). Compared to the culturally relevant and responsive frameworks, culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasizes and seeks to sustain the inherent values of students' cultures.

Taken together, culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies are recognized by many scholars and practitioners as ideal means of supporting learning and well-being among all students, while also enabling students to forge a more just and humane society in which all people and cultures are valued and honored. Following the lead of the Culturally Responsive-sustaining Education Framework developed through collaboration by leading scholars and educational practitioners in New York State (NYSED, 2019), we refer to these pedagogies collectively as *culturally responsive and sustaining*.

Throughout the Building—A Culture of Care

A strong throughline in the research on culturally responsive and sustaining education is the notion that schools must be places of caring, in which students experience feelings of belonging and connection with others, an idea reflected in decades of research on the importance of positive, caring student-teacher relationships and interpersonal connection for student engagement, motivation, and learning (e.g., Cooper & Miness, 2014; Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Goodenow, 1993; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Mayeroff, 1971; Noblit, 1993; Schussler & Collins, 2006). In her seminal book, Noddings (1992, 2005) cemented the notion of caring as central to effective schooling and positive educational outcomes for students, illustrating that teachers' demonstration of care for their students is the foundation for trusting interactions that support learning and development. Noddings also noted that carers must know and adopt the point of view of those they care for. In other words, for educators to be caring toward students in ways