Creative Failures in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Using narrative analysis, we explore the stories of five language arts teachers who tried to enact a culturally sustaining lesson that failed in some way.

Today’s schools are becoming increasingly diverse—culturally and linguistically. By 2024, 29 percent of all students will identify as Latinx, 6 percent as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 15 percent as African American. Today, 9.2 percent are classified as English learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). However, rather than building upon students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds, schools often “subtract” these rich resources from students’ learning experiences. In some cases, this happens because mainstream teachers, who are predominantly White females, lack the understanding of why or how to do this (Valenzuela, 1999). The language and literacy practices of students’ homes are oftentimes left out of the curriculum in favor of English-language texts and materials that reflect mainstream cultural values and norms. The end result is the eradication of the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices that culturally and linguistically diverse students bring from home (Paris, 2012).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is teaching that helps ethnically and linguistically diverse students develop and maintain cultural competence, academic success, and a critical consciousness (Au, 2011; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012).¹ These scholars argue that education has to move beyond the tolerance and “othering” of historically marginalized groups. “Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). While most teachers want to teach in culturally sustaining ways, some need more guidance around what such pedagogy looks like with real students. Here, our goal is to present and discuss the challenges that practicing teachers face while implementing culturally sustaining instruction. In particular, we asked teachers to share a moment when they tried to enact a culturally sustaining lesson, but it failed in some way. At a fundamental level, we believe that mistakes and failures are honest opportunities for growth and change. In these “creative failures,” each teacher learned valuable lessons about her students and how to support and sustain students’ cultures. Our hope is that these narratives will inspire reflection, debate, and dialogue about how to incorporate and respond to students’ cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds.

Literature Review

The concept of culturally sustaining instruction is complex. In part, this is because educators have radically different visions of high-quality instruction. Likewise, culture is an elusive concept because it is both stable and dynamic. Some cultural values and practices are maintained across generations, while others change as people adapt in response to dynamic conditions, including new settings, technologies, and times.

One common misconception is thinking that classrooms must match or duplicate students’ home environments. Some teachers feel they simply cannot get to know each and every student’s background in order to teach in culturally sustaining ways. Because many US classrooms are multiethnic...
and multilingual, this misconception must be addressed. Instead of viewing culturally sustaining instruction as “matching” classrooms to home practices, teachers might consider deliberately drawing from contrasting worldviews (Au, 2011). In other words, rather than addressing the issue with an “either/or” approach, teachers can incorporate both “mainstream” and “diverse” worldviews (p. 63). Au also suggests that a critical element of culturally sustaining teaching is the importance of establishing positive relationships with students, families, and communities.

Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that culturally sustaining pedagogy is teaching that helps students achieve academic success, maintain cultural competence, and develop “a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (p. 160). Instruction should be empowering for the whole group, not just focused on the individual (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In a study of eight teachers who were identified as highly effective with African American students, Ladson-Billings (1994) found that they built fluid and equitable relationships with their students and encouraged students to act as teachers, while being willing to put themselves in the role of the learner. Moreover, these teachers often lived in the community, attended community events, and used community services.

Some concrete ways that teachers can enact culturally sustaining pedagogy are to honor and incorporate students’ histories and language practices in the classroom. In particular, teachers can use texts that include diverse, inclusive, and emic perspectives of students’ cultures. For example, teachers can read bilingual books in students’ heritage language (Ernst-Slavit, 1997). Second, teachers can help students interpret texts using their social discourse practices, such as signifying (Lee, 1993). Or, teachers can support students to collaboratively translate English texts into their heritage language (Puzio, Keyes, & Jiménez, 2016). All of these instructional practices have the potential to sustain students’ cultures while supporting their literacy development.

Although there is widespread support for culturally sustaining instruction, there is a lack of understanding about the challenges that teachers face while trying to do this. Fundamentally, our investigation seeks to explore these challenges by discussing and analyzing specific instructional moments.

**Research Methods**

In order to understand teachers’ experiences with trying to enact culturally sustaining pedagogy, we utilized a narrative inquiry. This approach focuses on how stories help us make sense of experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain it this way:

> Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researchers and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. . . . Simply stated . . . narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (p. 20).

Narrative inquiry is based on the idea that life is a series of “lived stories” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 44) and that telling those stories is a natural way for people to think about and understand their lives.

Narrative inquirers begin by engaging with participants who tell their stories or by joining participants as they live out those stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). In other words, they invite and listen to stories or observe and describe them. In this case, we solicited stories from our colleagues and students and asked them to write their stories down. We asked each teacher to think of a time when they tried to teach a culturally sustaining lesson that didn’t go as planned, that didn’t work, or had failed in some way. Either Kelly Puzio or Sarah Newcomer spoke to each teacher individually. After discussing multiple teaching experiences that each teacher perceived as a failure, we agreed on one narrative and asked each participant to describe that experience in writing. These stories became our field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 92). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, unlike typical data collection, these field texts were not found or discovered; they were created collaboratively.

We analyzed these narratives by reading them multiple times and by looking for patterns and themes. We discussed multiple themes and reported the themes that would have the most practical benefit for educators. Clandinin and Connelly (2000)
point out that, “In narrative inquiry, it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self-deceptive) as researchers to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self” (p. 62). We do not seek to present a kind of “perfect, idealized, or moralizing” perspective of these stories of creative failures, but acknowledge our connections to them through our own stories, feelings, and reflections as we read them. We point to how these experiences represent valuable stories precisely because they depict imperfect, messy, and real learning spaces. In our minds, these creative failures are important because missteps and errors are an important tool for learning. By studying our individual experiences in the world, narrative inquiry allows us to “seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for [our]selves and others” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006, p. 42). We offer these stories as a way to invite our readers to reflect on the meaning these stories hold for them and as a means of transforming mistakes into wisdom.

Each of the five participating teachers comes from a different personal and professional background. The educator names used in this manuscript are real (not pseudonyms), and each participant is also a coauthor. As may be seen in Table 1, the educators came from various parts of the country, are at different points in their careers, and teach in different contexts. All of the teachers, previously known through university coursework, were contacted by the first or second author by email and were willing to share an experience about our central topic. Each narrative offers the opportunity for reflection about what it means to teach in culturally sustaining ways.

Table 1. Teacher participants

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Background (Language)</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Years of K–12 Teaching</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Middle</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>White, Bilingual (Spanish/English)</td>
<td>Elem., Middle, Secondary</td>
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<td>Doctoral Candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Elementary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Masters in Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>Elementary and Middle</td>
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<td>PhD in Curriculum and Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>White, English-speaking</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Pursuing Masters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While we do not suggest that only mainstream teachers need to practice culturally sustaining pedagogy, it is especially important for teachers who represent the dominant social group to consider how their own backgrounds influence their teaching and to adopt teaching practices that are responsive to the rich diversity of the students with whom they work. This is especially true given that while most US teachers are White women (approximately 84 percent), many students are not (Feistritzer, 2011).

Narratives of Teaching

Kate, South Central Alaska

I began my teaching career in a small Alaskan village on the Prince William Sound in South Central Alaska. A native corporation owned the village and only native community members could own property there. Out of a population of 80, there were only 9 White people, including myself. The school was very well kept and had many of the resources of any other public school in America. The elders and community members were incredibly invested in the school and its teachers.

The village was not accessible by road, only by boat and plane. Most people went to Anchorage by plane, although many people had small skiffs that could travel to Valdez relatively easily if the weather was good. The native people had almost boundless access to natural resources such as hunting and fishing. I was never invited on any hunting or fishing trips because I was not a member of the native corporation and because I was female (no local women were allowed to fish or hunt).

I quickly realized that my background growing up in a small rural town in Virginia would be
The students were interested in reading the native legends and Just So Stories and discussing them. For most, this was the first time they had heard these legends because they were from other tribes and communities; some said they had heard them when they were small. We had long discussions about why Kipling would write in such a “weird way” and how different the lives of the characters in the legends were from our lives today. Each student picked a legend and rewrote its major plot elements in a Kipling style. During the lesson, I felt successful because the unit incorporated their cultural backgrounds, native literatures, and important literacy standards.

Later that winter, during a district professional development, I realized that I had done something incredibly offensive. Our professor was a native of the area and mentioned a project almost identical to mine in her list of ways that teachers go wrong when trying to be culturally sustaining. I had asked my students to rewrite legends about their culture—to invent, create, and make them up. Unintentionally, I was telling my students that these legends were fiction and could be made up by anyone. It was the equivalent of someone asking me to invent and compose a new miracle performed by Jesus.

I was mortified and desperate to right this wrong. In the professional development, the native professor had each teacher (including myself) create a culturally sustaining unit and pilot it with one student. While still focusing on the same theme, I invited the student to rewrite an original native legend from a different character’s point of view. This supported the standards without degrading the integrity of the legend.

Kristen, Arizona

Although I grew up in rural Wyoming, I attended college in the Seattle area. As an undergraduate Education and Spanish major with a minor in teaching English as an additional language, I had high hopes of changing the world and felt that I was culturally sensitive and conscientious.

Shortly after graduation, I moved to Arizona and began teaching. As I drove into Tucson, I was incredibly useful for my life in this native village. Everyone was related; everyone had secrets; everyone gossiped; and everyone loved one another. Before school started, I was eager to get to know everyone and ask them all types of questions about their village, culture, and history. The veteran teacher, who had been living there for 10 years, cautioned me that I should not do that. She said that the native people were very proud of their history and culture, but they would find it rude of me to just ask them about it directly. She advised that I should watch and learn rather than ask, which they would see as being nosy or snooping. I soon found that I learned a lot about them from just watching and listening. My students would always come to my apartment when something was happening in the village that they thought would interest me. The students invited, I participated, and the Elders explained.

Later that winter, during a district professional development, I realized that I had done something incredibly offensive. (Kate)

One of my first language arts units was an honest and deliberate attempt to be culturally sustaining. One of the reading standards was to read works from an author with a particular style. One of the writing standards was to write in a specific style of their own. I found a book of legends compiled from their area and Rudyard Kipling’s Just So Stories (1902). I found legends that had similar themes as the Just So Stories, and we read and discussed them together as an entire class. My understanding was that the native community neither treated these legends like a religion, nor did they equate them to a tall tale; they were part of their cultural history, the stories their Elders had passed down through oral tradition throughout the years until they were written down and published. Afterward, I invited students to invent their own legends using a style similar to Kipling’s.
greeted by a brown, dry landscape and harsh, spiny cacti. Before seeing my new house, I drove past the school where I would be teaching. A tall metal fence with two padlocked entrances enclosed the school. As I peered through the bars, I saw a one-story brick building with large windows, a worn-down swing set, a blacktop basketball court with faded lines and chain nets, and an old, faded jungle gym. I would come to see all of this differently over time—as beautiful, special, and hopeful—but these were my first impressions.

In my first year, I was a fifth-grade Sheltered English Instruction (SEI) teacher, and I also taught the fourth- and fifth-grade English as an Additional Language literacy class during our Success for All (SFA) reading block. I taught the emergent bilingual students who were new to the United States, students who spoke languages other than English at home, and those who were two or more levels below their grade in reading based on Title I testing. In November of 2000, nine months prior to my arrival, Proposition 203, which prohibited bilingual education, had passed, and administrators made it clear that English-only instruction was expected.

Before school began, I excitedly prepared my classroom with posters, bulletin boards, and books. Everything, literally everything, on my walls, in my library, and on the board was in English—only English. Even though my students and I could speak and write in both Spanish and English, nothing in my classroom reflected that. During the first few months of teaching, I taught every lesson and read every book in English only, as did other teachers in my building.

My first hint that maybe there was another way occurred during our reading buddies time with a second-grade EL class. Upon entering Mrs. M’s room in November, I noticed that her walls were full of Spanish and English, and her classroom library had both Spanish and English books. My students’ faces lit up when they were able to read books with their buddies in Spanish and talk about what the text meant in both Spanish and English. After that experience, I began bringing Spanish books into my library and putting up Spanish words on my walls. However, all of my communication with my students remained only in English. It was the law after all, right?

The final awakening for me as a teacher came in the late spring of that first school year. I was meeting with a parent because her son was struggling. The meeting included the Title I teacher, the interpreter, my student, his mom, and myself. I asked for an interpreter out of my own linguistic insecurity with Spanish. As I listened to the interpreter partially interpret my words and also lecture my student’s mother using language and a tone that I never said, I had an epiphany. What am I doing? Why am I allowing an interpreter to misrepresent what I am trying to build here instead of communicating with parents myself? Why am I insisting on only English in my classroom and only adhering to SFA protocol? Am I teaching for my own professional security or to do what’s best for the students?

That afternoon, I decided that things needed to change. I thought about how much richer our literacy sessions would be if students read, wrote, listened, and spoke using both English and Spanish. I petitioned my Title I director, my principal, and the school board to implement what today we would call a Daily 5 model in my classroom in lieu of SFA. I was granted permission to try it on a temporary basis. From that point forward, students were encouraged to use their full linguistic repertoire. I stopped giving ludicrous commands such as, “English only please.” Along with enjoying the processes of teaching and learning, the students’ academic achievement skyrocketed. They had significant growth in our literacy classes, and we were granted permission to use our literacy model from that year forward.

Michelle, Kennewick, Washington

It was the week before we had a holiday from school for Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Naturally, I felt it was necessary to teach this group of first graders about the history behind the holiday. To open the lesson, I read aloud a children’s picturebook that carefully depicted the life of King as a child and the many experiences in his life that compelled him
to stand for human rights. A class discussion followed about segregation and tolerance. The purpose of the discussion was to compare how our rights have changed over time and how we now celebrate diversity. The students discussed how appalling and ridiculous it sounded to be separate from their friends because of race and skin color.

After the read-aloud and initial reaction, we watched a video clip of Martin Luther King Jr. giving his “I have a dream” speech. Rich discussions of the importance of sharing our unique human differences ensued and students in the class from Hispanic, African American, Bosnian, Peruvian, Mexican, and Caucasian backgrounds all wanted to raise their hand and share stories of their families and how they were all different. “Martin Luther King’s dream came true!” one student exclaimed. I felt that I had succeeded in my cultural awareness lesson, and my students were proud to be themselves and have friends of many backgrounds.

Later on in the day, however, a response occurred that I hadn’t thought of as an outcome to my lesson. A girl came up to me privately and asked, “So . . . am I Black?” She looked down at the skin on her forearm and proceeded to say, “My skin is more of a brown, so why do they say Black?” Many questions began flying through my head as I searched for the right answer. What does she think Black means? Is this really a yes or no question? How can I explain this so she will understand? Did I just teach her that she is different from others in a way that made her feel ashamed? I ended up fumbling over an answer about how her ethnicity is African American but the people who wanted segregation called people “White” and “Black” to show difference, even though no one really has pure black or white skin color. She didn’t seem to understand and asked again, “So, they call me Black?”

She decided to share this discussion and feeling with an African American boy in our class who seemed to feel proud of his heritage and who, as it turned out, helped her understand better than I could. The rest of the year, the two bonded more while playing at recess, break dancing, conversing loudly, and laughing together. They always wanted to be partners in class after that and always asked to sit next to each other. They shared something special, but I also wondered if they were separating themselves rather than feeling included. Had my lesson caused this change? I also asked myself if I caused this girl to believe she was different from other children in our class in a way that she didn’t see before.

Sarah, Phoenix, Arizona
As a first-year dual language teacher, I decided to read Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone by J. K. Rowling (1998) aloud to my fourth graders. Nearly all of my students were from Mexico or had parents from Mexico and spoke only Spanish at home. I thought it would be more enjoyable and meaningful to them if I read the book aloud in Spanish.

Over the next week or so, I began to realize that there might be a few problems with my plan. The translation had been done in Spain and was written in Castilian Spanish; therefore, it had a lot of language not typically used in Mexico. For example, in Spain, the word gafas is typically used for eye-glasses. However, in Mexico, lentes is more common. Sometimes words were used that can have a double meaning in Mexico, such as coger, which literally means, “to grab.” In Spain, one can coger el autobús or coger el teléfono, which would translate to “catch the bus” or “answer the phone,” but in Mexico, coger has a second meaning—it can also refer to having sex. The students were very surprised to hear me use this word.

Another problem with the translation was the fact that in Spain, the vosotros or plural form of the casual “you” (i.e., “you all”) is used when addressing more than one person you are familiar with, whereas in Mexico, it is not. In Mexico, the plural form of the more formal “you” or ustedes is always used, whether speaking to people one knows well or not, in formal or informal situations. The use of the vosotros verb tense was very problematic as I continued with the read-aloud, since none of us were accustomed to using the vosotros form, and it tended to disrupt the flow of our reading.

There were other linguistic challenges, such as a multitude of new words to discuss: made-up
words like “Muggles”; antiquated words like parchment (rollo de pergamino), quill (gran pluma), wax seal (sello de lacre), coat of arms (escudo de armas), and suit of armor (traje de armadura). All of this vocabulary was not only difficult for my fourth graders, but also very challenging for me, as a non-native speaker. With all of these new words, it was difficult for me to read the book aloud and put the inflection in the right place and change my voice appropriately for the characters because I was so busy trying to make meaning of the text myself.

In addition to the vocabulary we didn’t understand, there was a lot of unfamiliar content. For example, in the chapter where Harry caught the Hogwarts Express on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, many students were confused. Some had never been inside a train station and were not even sure what a platform was or why that numbering was strange. They were also very curious about boarding schools. This is not to say that the students couldn’t understand the story, or that they needed to go to England, stay in a boarding school, and play chess to enjoy and appreciate the book. Indeed, one of the reasons for reading is to gain new perspectives and inhabit others’ worlds that we may not otherwise have the opportunity to experience. Moreover, there were experiences that the students could relate to—for example, how Harry is bullied by his cousin Dudley and never quite seems to fit in with his aunt and uncle’s family, or the friendship between Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

In the end, we gave up on the book and went to the movie instead. The movie gave a much-needed visual context that the translation into Castilian Spanish had not provided for my students or me. Many details came to life that had been lost in translation, such as Hagrid’s endearing Welsh accent (which was left out of the Spanish version), the mysterious, magical school of Hogwarts, and the very exciting game of Quidditch. Simply reading something in students’ heritage language doesn’t automatically make it culturally appropriate or relevant to students. This is not to say that teachers shouldn’t read books or provide students with books in their home language; it just means that reading books in students’ home languages can bring new challenges and difficulties.

Samantha, Pacific Northwest
I was born, raised, and educated in Burns, Oregon. It is an isolated, cattle-ranching community with a predominantly White population. When I moved to a large community in the Pacific Northwest, I became really involved and realized that I wanted to help other people become lifelong learners.

The following experience occurred during a 10-week practicum where, as a preservice teacher, I was partnered with a second-grade mentor teacher in a high-poverty school. On a daily basis, I was amazed at students’ compassion, kindness, and resilience. They were always energetic and eager to learn. Yet, in my classroom, students regularly said that they were hungry. Each Friday, five students took home a government-funded bag of food to eat over the weekend. A few students spoke about how their parents are (or were) in jail due to criminal charges.

During my practicum, I typically supported my mentor teacher’s instruction by teaching a couple of lessons each day. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, I prepared a writing lesson to honor and recognize Dr. King’s contributions to society. Minutes before my lesson was about to begin, my mentor teacher suggested that I add a different starter. She said that we should begin with an activity to help students relive segregation. She suggested that I withhold snacks from the three darker-skinned students in our class to demonstrate the impact of racism and segregation. I told her I did not feel comfortable with this activity.

In response, she said that maybe we could use eye color instead. Although I didn’t really know what we were going to do, I agreed to co-teach this activity with her. I was very nervous. After the class had finished their morning math, I called all of the students with brown eyes—6 out of 30 students—by name to sit up front on the carpet for the beginning of the lesson. I gave them each a handful of goldfish crackers. My mentor teacher directed the rest of the students to sit on the hard floor in the back.
of the classroom near the sink. They did not get snacks, but they continued to watch me attentively as I began the lesson. I asked the students what they knew about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. During my lesson, I called only on brown-eyed students who were sitting on the carpet. The students on the carpet looked back several times at their classmates and had concerned looks on their faces. A few students in the back of the room tried to ask my mentor teacher if they would get goldfish, too, but they were shushed before they could finish asking.

The activity went on for about five minutes before we asked the students in the back to join us on the carpet. As students slowly walked over, two of them were crying. Another student’s face was flushed with anger and his arms were crossed. The rest of the students looked confused and sad. My mentor teacher asked the students how it felt when they had to sit in the back. The angry student said, “It’s not fair!” as he turned his head toward the wall. One of the crying students asked, “But why don’t we get snacks?” My mentor teacher explained that the purpose of the activity was to reenact what it was like during the time of US segregation. At that point, I passed out goldfish to the rest of the class. Their shoulders were slumped and a few held out limp hands as they received their snack. The students who had not received snacks initially were quiet and subdued for the rest of the lesson.

I felt incredibly wrong and uncomfortable during and after this activity. Above all, I always want students to know that I love and care for each of them. This activity seemed to violate that care and trust on some fundamental level. To this day, I feel uneasy about it, and I just want to take it all back.

**Analysis of Narratives**

While these narratives communicate many things, we would like to emphasize some commonalities. First, these narratives reflect various myths and misconceptions about culturally sustaining pedagogy. Second, teachers were sometimes prevented from providing culturally sustaining pedagogy by their sense of obligation to local authority figures and policies. Third, these teachers received valuable awareness and help from community insiders.

The first commonality—the central assumption held by many educators that culturally sustaining pedagogy means simply incorporating diverse stories, language, or food into the classroom—is far from true. Kate’s use of native legends was respectful until she asked students to treat these legends as if they were any other fictional story. Sarah’s use of the Spanish version of *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1998) might have been culturally sustaining, but the Spanish dialect used in the translation was not accessible to her students. Last, two of the teachers (Michelle and Samantha) obliquely reflected the misconception that we can promote multicultural awareness by reading literature to our students around important cultural holidays, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Collectively, these narratives show that culturally sustaining pedagogy is how educators use cultural artifacts and practices, not just what they use.

The second commonality—that teachers are sometimes prevented from providing culturally sustaining pedagogy by their sense of obligation to local authority figures and policies—is exemplified by at least two of these narratives. Although Kristen previously studied bilingual education, she felt obligated to follow the state’s mandate and teach in English only, even though it contradicted some of her beliefs. She taught this way for almost a year before realizing that it was wrong and seeking an alternative. Although Samantha felt uncomfortable about teaching segregation by withholding food, she felt obligated to follow her mentor teacher’s wishes. While teachers may possess values and beliefs aligned with culturally sustaining pedagogy, teaching is an institutional and hierarchical practice. As such, educators may find themselves teaching against their personal beliefs in conformity with local policies and authority figures. It takes tremendous courage to be different.

The third, and perhaps most important, commonality is that these teachers received valuable awareness and help about what culturally sustaining pedagogy was from community insiders. These
insiders were sometimes colleagues and sometimes students. Interestingly enough, most teachers did not think that they were making mistakes during their instruction. Instead, their awareness developed over time by interacting and socializing with these community insiders. For example, Kate didn’t realize until later, during a district professional development course provided by a local native, that her attempts at being culturally sustaining were culturally offensive. Likewise, Kristen reported increased awareness after visiting a colleague’s classroom; then, later, during a parent-teacher conference, she had her final “aha” moment and realized the absurdity of leaving Spanish out of the classroom. Sarah also had several moments of reflection over time—as reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (Rowling, 1998) progressed—and she slowly realized the students could not understand much of what was being communicated. For Michelle, her realization didn’t come until later, through her eye-opening conversation with one student. Finally, for Samantha, while she felt uncomfortable with the planned activity from the start, it was after observing the students and seeing their reactions that she knew, undeniably, that their lesson had failed. These stories show how students, parents, and other community members represent an invaluable source of insight, knowledge, and support for teachers wishing to teach in culturally sustaining ways.

**Discussion**

Because of the cultural disconnect between some teachers and their students, culturally sustaining pedagogy is likely to involve many mistakes. Yet, in these creative failures, we see teachers honestly and deliberately trying to care for and support their students’ language, culture, and history. Learning how to enact culturally sustaining pedagogy takes time, reflection, and, above all, being deeply attuned to our students. It cannot and should not be done alone; instead, it should be done in collaboration with our students, their families, and the community.

Stories help us make sense of our personal history. In part, this is because the meaning of human life is found in and through stories. Through the stories that we tell and live by, we author our own lives—to ourselves and to the world. While sharing a story, we relive that moment, in all of its pride and shame, and simultaneously create the future. This is similar to Dewey’s (1938) notion that our experiences grow out of one another, and our future grows out of our past. Likewise, the vision of culturally sustaining pedagogy is a way of honoring and respecting students’ cultural and linguistic histories.

These stories show how students, parents, and other community members represent an invaluable source of insight, knowledge, and support for teachers wishing to teach in culturally sustaining ways.

While it is easy to share accomplishments and achievements, it takes more courage and humility to share mistakes and failures. While it will be difficult, we hope that educators and teacher educators will share and discuss their own missteps and failures. Rather than remaining fixed as mistakes, we invite readers to consider how these stories, and their own, can create new understandings and new possibilities. Perhaps the difference between a failure and a creative failure is whether we dismiss the experience outright or return to and share it, in order to inform our future actions.

**Endnote**

1. We purposefully connect culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) with the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), Gay (2000), and Au (2011), who have historically advocated for culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and cultural congruence. While each term has slightly different connotations, all of these instructional approaches intentionally resist monocultural and monolingual ideologies by explicitly enacting classroom practices that promote a more pluralistic and democratic society for all students.
References


Children’s Literature Cited


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“Making Personal and Cultural Connections” is intended to help students experience both “efferent” (reading for information) and “aesthetic” (reading as a personal, emotional experience) responses to the story *A Girl Named Disaster* by Nancy Farmer. Students work as a whole class and with partners to explore the main character, Nhamo, as she struggles to survive in her extended family and on her many travels alone. Suggestions are given for a wide array of interactions and activities to help your students develop a rich transaction with this text.


There are lots of sayings about names, and most of them are only partially true at best. In “Investigating Names to Explore Personal History and Cultural Traditions,” students explore the meanings and origins of their names in order to establish their own personal histories and to explore the cultural significance of naming traditions. Students begin by writing down everything they know about their own names; then the teacher shares details about his or her own name story. Next, students use an online tool to research their own or someone else’s name and share their findings with the class. Finally, students write about their own names, using a passage from Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* as a model.

http://bit.ly/2ahWQTk

Inspire students’ creativity, collaboration, and community in this lesson using the bilingual children’s book *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza. After a read-aloud and analysis of this book about a Mexican American family, students write descriptions of the book’s pictures and discuss what family traditions are. They then create a class book, which includes their artwork, information about their ancestral countries, descriptions of their own unique family traditions, and family recipes. The final community-building activity is a class potluck where students share both a special food and the class book with their families and peers.

http://bit.ly/1zdHlnQ

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**Call for Nominations: Donald H. Graves Writing Award**

The Donald H. Graves Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Writing annually recognizes teachers in grades K–6 who, through the teaching of writing, demonstrate an understanding of student improvement in writing. The NCTE Elementary Section Steering Committee selects an award recipient from the portfolios and essays submitted during the year. Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at www.ncte.org/awards/graves and must be submitted by **June 15, 2017**. Results will be announced in September, and the award will be presented at the Elementary Get-Together during the 2017 NCTE Annual Convention in St. Louis, Missouri.