



# Demystifying

*Culturally Responsive Teaching*

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Beginning  
was . . .  
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**Dwayne D. Williams**

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## About the Author

Dwayne D. Williams is a school psychologist, interventionist, and educational consultant. As a consultant, Dwayne helps organizations design and redesign educational practices. Specifically, he helps teams create culturally sustaining, inclusive, and equitable programming that integrates instruction with the cultural assets and lived experiences of students. Additionally, Dwayne provides training to school districts on how to design problem-solving models, multitiered systems of support, restorative practices, social emotional learning, and trauma-informed groups—all from a culturally sustaining lens.

Dwayne is the CEO of the consulting firm *Begin with Their Culture*, an organization that helps districts redesign educational practices in ways that pair issues of race, culture, and equity with instruction. He is the author of the book *An RTI Guide to Improving Performance of African American Students*. He has used his curriculum, *Like Music to My Ears: A Hip-Hop Approach to Addressing Social Emotional Learning and Trauma in Schools*, with hundreds of students, and he coaches practitioners through the process of designing activities that integrate SEL, cognitive behavioral therapeutic practices, and hip-hop cultural elements as methods of employing culturally sustaining practices for students who embrace the arts.

Dwayne is currently a PhD student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he studies curriculum and instruction. His scholarship focuses on redesigning educational programming in ways that consider the cultural assets and lived experiences of culturally diverse learners. Dwayne lived in housing projects as a child, in Springfield, Illinois, and often speaks on the need to connect with students, parents, and community leaders from underrepresented backgrounds in order to improve educational conditions for underrepresented groups.

Dwayne is married to Toni Williams, and together they have two children: Dwayne D. Williams II and Noni D. Williams.





# Demystifying

## *Culturally Responsive Teaching*

Decades of research document the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching (CRT). However, a major concern is that, while educators have expressed interest in designing culturally responsive programming, many are unfamiliar with CRT theories, which makes it challenging for them to create culturally responsive practices. Even more, educators who are knowledgeable about CRT have admitted that, while they've read books, articles, and attended in-service trainings on the topic, they do not know where to start with applying CRT theories in the classroom. Specifically, they've stated that they are unsure how to design social emotional learning (SEL) supports, multitiered system of supports, restorative justice practices, special education programming, and educational models in general from a culturally responsive lens. Their feedback makes it seem as though CRT is an enigma in K-12 education.

The goal of this magazine is to demystify CRT by shedding light on its history and practice in the United States. I describe three popular frameworks within the

culturally responsive education (CRE) literature—including culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). Practitioners and school leaders who plan to implement CRT in their classrooms and buildings may benefit from determining which framework will best guide their practices. As a special bonus of this month's magazine, I describe how educators can create culturally sustaining virtual spaces in order to build community and to create opportunities for student expression; I provide specific online resources and links to help them do it. The major benefit of this magazine is that it offers practitioners activities they can employ in both traditional classrooms and virtual spaces. This magazine contributes to educational practice in that it helps practitioners understand CRT from a historical vantage point and it unpacks CRT principles.

### **History:**

The philosophical principle known as “historicity” guides this magazine (Engestrom, 2001, p. 136), which states that, in order to understand a current problem, it is necessary to start from its history. From this view, in order to perceive CRT through an educational equity lens, it is necessary to first examine the contested history of educating culturally diverse learners (CDLs) in the United States. School-based practitioners can trace the history of CRT by examining the social, cultural, and historical context that inspired it. As practitioners and administrators read this resource, my hope is that they will make time to reflect on and process CRT concepts and that they will connect with educational teams and departments to discuss how to proceed with CRT and equitable practices, given the information within this text. Sleeter (2012) argues, “There is a need to educate parents, teachers, and education leaders about what culturally responsive pedagogy means and looks like in the classroom” (p. 578). This magazine is a response to her call.

### **Objective:**

By the end of this magazine, you will

- recognize the social, cultural, and historical context that inspired CRT scholarship
- recognize the definitions of culturally *relevant*, culturally *responsive*, and culturally *sustaining* practices
- identify how to design culturally sustaining practices in classrooms and virtual spaces
- list at least 3 culturally sustaining activities you can employ in either traditional classrooms or in virtual spaces

### **In the Beginning was . . . Racism**

On January 8, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson and his administration declared war on poverty. Although an array of sociopolitical conditions of the time inspired the war, it led

to policies that addressed racial discrimination, including policies that shed light on educational practices. The war on poverty and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made discrimination among groups in America a political issue. Johnson declared, “Let me make one principle of this administration abundantly clear: All of these increased opportunities—in employment, in education, in housing, and in every field—must be open to Americans of every color” (as cited in Bailey & Danziger, 2013, p. 8).

Johnson made it clear that it would be impossible

to eliminate poverty if all Americans, including people of color, did not have access to the workforce, education, and civil rights. Johnson argued that Americans could not contribute to the nation if they could not read and write. The war on poverty and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 shed light on the academic underachievement of students of color. Politicians, scholars, and educational leaders began to question why students of color and students from impoverished socioeconomic conditions underachieved at alarming rates. The underachievement of students of color and



students from impoverished backgrounds caused a storm of debates among racist and antiracist scholars, who provided reasons why students underachieved in the first place. These debates led to racist and antiracist theories concerning students of color and their academic abilities. Antiracist scholars articulated CRT theories to reject racist beliefs and to frame the cultures, heritages, languages, and literacies of students of color and students from impoverished backgrounds in a positive light.

### Genetic and Cultural Deficiency Theories

During the early 60s, scholars provided racist theories and perspectives to explain the academic underachievement of culturally diverse learners, stating that students struggled because they did not have the genetic makeup needed to perform at a high level in the classroom. During the mid 60s, scholars argued that students underachieved because of cultural deficits; they contended that Black and Brown students did not have the cultural capital needed to succeed in school. A popular intervention was to assimilate students to Eurocentric values, while encouraging them to reject their own languages and literacies. The cultural deficiency theory gave birth to deficit thinking, which is embraced by many educators of today.



Deficit thinking theories suggest that CDLs underachieve because of deficit factors. According to Dudley-Marling (2015), deficit thinking “situates school failure in the minds, bodies, communities and culture of students [and] dominates schooling practices” (p. 1). Dudley-Marling (2015) contends that the solution to school failure, according to deficit perspectives, is to “fix students, their families, culture or language” (p. 1). While racist scholars of the 60s and 70s recommended assimilation as an effective intervention for Black and Brown students, educators today tend to recommend SEL Tier 2 groups for students who demonstrate “behavior problems” in schools, with the

hope that SEL competencies will fix kids and help them become self-aware of their own problems. To be sure, SEL recommendations, school counseling groups, and when necessary, trauma-informed supports, are warranted; the problem arises when practitioners recommend these supports without ever questioning the cultural context in which students learn and without interrogating racist policies, norms, and practices that occur in classrooms in particular and schools in general—practices that inhibit student engagement among CDLs. Essentially, deficit theories blame students and their parents for underachievement, absolving racist and inequitable policies and practices that prevent students from learning at a high level.



### Cultural Difference Theories

During the 70s and 80s, antiracist scholars rebutted deficit-thinking theories and postulated *cultural difference theories*. Cultural difference theories contended that students of color and students from low SES backgrounds were not culturally deficient but that they came from cultures that were *different* from mainstream culture. Culturally different scholars contended that schools contributed to the underachievement of CDLs by ignoring the cultural values, assets, and literacies that CDLs brought to school. These scholars maintained that, instead of seeking to assimilate CDLs to Eurocentric values, school leaders should use the cultures of students and their ways of being as bridges to teach content in the classroom. While culturally different scholars argued for mixing the cultural values of students with instruction—and although they provided research that demonstrated the effectiveness of integrating cultural values within the classroom—they did not provide culturally meaningful teaching pedagogies that educators could employ to enhance academic outcomes.

### Culturally Responsive Teaching Theories

During the 90s and 2000s, a second generation of cultur-



ally different scholars conducted studies rooted in cultural difference scholarship and devised *culturally responsive teaching* (CRT) theories (Gay, 2018). CRT theories—also known as culturally responsive pedagogies—contend that CDLs experience cultural discontinuities in the classroom, indicating that their home and community cultures are dissimilar to the school culture, which contributes to their underachievement. CRT theories then, are frameworks that guide educators through the process of mixing the cultural values, assets, and lived experiences of CDLs with instruction. CRT is an umbrella term that describes an array of practices that integrate the cultures and literacies of students with instruction. It is important to note that there are many different perspectives and ways of providing CRT in the classroom; to this end, CRT theories and principles have been “remixed,” or shared among scholars. Borrowing or sharing CRT principles makes it possible for culturally different scholars to strengthen and reframe CRT theories based on contemporary, societal concerns, rather than drawing from theories of the past that might be obsolete.

### **Culturally Responsive Education**

While coaching practitioners and leaders on CRT principles, I have heard many describe culturally responsive teaching as a “new initiative.” Many have stated this out of frustration and deemed it as “This year’s new thing.” Tracing the contested history of educating students of color in US schools reveals that using the cultural values of students to drive instruction is certainly not new. For example, terms such as culturally appropriate (Au & Jordan, 1981), culturally congruent (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), and culturally

compatible (Jordan, 1985), among many others, are names that scholars used to describe the practice of bridging the home/community cultures of students with school culture. Scholars commonly refer to this body of research as culturally responsive education (CRE) (Harmon, 2012). Aronson and Laughter (2016) contend that two primary strands of culturally meaningful practices have emerged from CRE scholarship: (1) culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and (2) culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018). Considering the goal of this magazine is to provide a brief overview of concepts concerning CRT, I will not go into detail concerning each strand; rather, I will reference key principles and assumptions of the theories, with the hope that you and your team members will use the concepts as references to learn more about the frameworks. To this end, I encourage you to refer to the reference section of this magazine to identify additional articles on CRT.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) spent three years studying the instructional practices of teachers who were effective at boosting engagement among African American students. In her words, “Instead of asking what was wrong with African American learners, I dared to ask what was right with these students and what happened in the classrooms of teachers who seemed to experience pedagogical success with them” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 74). She found that, rather than rely on prescriptive, prepackaged programs, or step-by-step curricula, teachers in her study perceived teaching as an art and used the cultural values and lived experiences of students to drive instruction. She termed the practices of

teachers in her study “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). CRP, according to Ladson-Billings (1995), rests on three important criteria. These include (1) academic success, (2) cultural competence, and (3) sociopolitical consciousness.

1. *Academic Success*: refers to the idea that students must experience meaningful academic progress in the classroom. Ladson-Billings contended that educators should not measure success strictly on the basis of standardized testing.
2. *Cultural Competence*: refers to the notion that teachers must help students “recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 36).
3. *Sociopolitical Consciousness*: refers to the idea that culturally relevant educators are obligated to help students “recognize, understand, and critique current and social inequalities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476).

Practitioners who espouse CRT, using Ladson-Billings (1995) framework, would emphasize the three criteria above when working with students in the classroom. Specifically, drawing from the cultural values and lived experiences of CDLs, practitioners would ensure the academic success of all students; practitioners would employ instruction that affirms the cultures of CDLs in the classroom; and practitioners would employ instructional materials and activities that make students aware of social inequalities and create opportunities for students to challenge injustice.



## Culturally Responsive Teaching

While culturally relevant pedagogy is associated with Ladson-Billings (1994/1995) research, culturally responsive teaching is associated with Geneva Gay's (2018) work. Gay defines CRT as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 36). Gay (2018) maintains that CRT is rooted in the works and ideas of an array of scholars, and she argues that CRT comprises eight distinguishing qualities or traits, including the following:

1. *CRT is validating.* It validates and legitimizes the cultures and lived experiences of ethnically diverse students.
2. *CRT is comprehensive and inclusive.* It includes the ways of being and cultural values of ethnically diverse students, rather than excluding their experiences and group accomplishments.
3. *CRT is multidimensional.* It "encompasses curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, classroom management, and performance assessments" (p. 39).
4. *CRT is empowering.* It builds the academic competence and confidence of ethnically diverse students.
5. *CRT is transformative.* It critiques and challenges traditional ways of teaching CDLs.
6. *CRT is emancipatory.* It liberates students from traditional, "mainstream canons of knowledge and ways of knowing" (p. 42).
7. *CRT is humanistic.* It is concerned with human welfare and lived experiences.
8. *CRT is normative and ethical.* It is concerned with normalizing the cultures, heritages, and lived experiences of ethnically diverse students, rather than perceiving CDLs through Eurocentric lenses and measuring their literacies based on Eurocentric values.

While culturally *relevant* and *responsive* pedagogies are the most cited within CRE literature, culturally *sustaining* pedagogy is a third framework with which practitioners should become familiar.

## Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

To be sure, culturally different scholars—scholars who propose culturally responsive pedagogies—have been building upon and borrowing ideas from each other since the 80s. Ladson-Billings (2014, p. 74) calls this borrowing process "remixing" theories, by which contemporary theories—such as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994/1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018)—incorporate ideas, perspectives, and practices of

prior theories. To this end, Django Paris's (2012) *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (CSP) remixes culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies in ways that acknowledge the cultural literacies and languages of youth of color; he encourages practitioners to not only incorporate the ethnic heritages of students of color, but also to employ and maintain youth cultural literacies through instructional activities.

In his article, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice*, Paris (2012) acknowledges that he has been inspired by Ladson-Billings (1995b) article, *Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*, and that he—along with teachers, university researchers, and professors—have benefited from the traditions of culturally responsive scholarship. While he has benefited from the scholarship, he states, "I have begun to question if [culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies] go far enough in their orientation to the languages and literacies and other cultural practices of students and communities to ensure maintenance of our increasingly multiethnic and multilingual society" (p. 94). To this point, he introduced "culturally sustaining pedagogy" (CSP) as an alternative approach to culturally relevant and culturally responsive practices (Paris, 2012, p. 93).

Paris and Alim (2014) argue that "culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic social change" (p. 85). They identify hip-hop as an example of a cultural and community practice that pedagogies and practitioners should seek to sustain in youth, including the ability to improvise, free-style, dance, and create; they contend that culturally sustaining activities should also critique community practices—including hip-hop cultural practices—to ensure that such practices do not perpetuate social injustice and oppression. They argue, "Our goal is to find ways to support and sustain what we know are remarkable verbal improvisational skills while at the same time open up spaces for students themselves to critique the ways that they might be, intentionally or not, reproducing discourses that marginalize members of our communities" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 94). Therefore, CSP introduces two important tenets to the field of CRE, tenets that culturally *relevant* and culturally *responsive* pedagogies do not emphasize. These include (1) "a focus on the plural and evolving nature of youth identity and cultural practices and a commitment to embracing youth culture's counterhegemonic potential while (2) maintaining a clear-eyed critique of the ways in which youth culture can also reproduce systemic inequalities" (p. 85).

Considering the many theories within CRE, practitioners must become familiar with the names of, and practices associated with, each theory. I make this point because I have heard practitioners advocate for "culturally sustaining practices" after returning from an in-service.

The problem, however, was that the practitioners did not acknowledge youth cultural elements and community literacies when describing CSP; rather, they highlighted Ladson-Billings (1994/1995) three criteria of culturally relevant pedagogy. I was confused. I was unsure if the practitioners thought it was meaningful to design CRT practices associated with Ladson-Billings (1994/1995) work, or Paris's (2012) principles—or both. Aligning the names, theories, and practices is essential when practitioners plan for culturally meaningful programming in order to avoid confusion among team members who will employ culturally relevant, responsive, or sustaining practices.



## Which CRT Theory Will You Adopt to Guide Your Practices?

Educators who are considering CRT must answer the following questions:

Will you and your teams consider culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive (Gay, 2018), or culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) principles to guide your programming?

- How will you decide which framework you will adopt?
- What factors will determine your decision?

These questions are meaningful as the traditions of CRT have different assumptions and philosophies that guide educational practices. It is important to note that, while CRT theories differ in various ways, they all stem from research that articulates the importance of mixing the cultural values, assets, and lived experiences of students with instruction. Ladson-Billings (2014) advises us to draw from and embrace culturally sustaining pedagogies, considering CSP is the remix of both culturally relevant and culturally responsive theories and practices (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Gay, 2018).

## Summary—The History of CRT

Culture and its impact on student engagement, learning, and achievement in schools has a long and contested history in the United States (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). CRT theories were postulated in response to the underachievement of students of color and students from impoverished conditions. Genetic deficiency theories of the 60s argued that students did not have the genetic makeup to achieve in the classroom; cultural deficiency theories of the 70s attributed poor performance of CDLs to cultural deficits. Cultural difference theories of the 80s rebutted genetic and cultural deficit theories and argued that CDLs come from rich cultures and heritages. Second generation cultural difference theorists (Gay, 2018) conducted studies based on cultural difference scholarship and formulated culturally responsive teaching theories and practices. While there is an array of theories that call for mixing the cultural values, assets, and lived experiences of students with instruction, culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive (2018) theories are the most cited within the CRE literature. Ladson-Billings (2014) advises practitioners to adopt culturally sustaining pedagogy as a remix of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy. As a remix, CSP scholars agree that practitioners should mix the cultural heritages and values of CDLs with instruction, but they also argue that practitioners should integrate youth cultural literacies and community practices with educational programming. Most importantly, culturally sustaining pedagogy contends that the schooling process

should seek to not only create relevant and responsive activities for students, but that educational programming should *sustain* the cultures, literacies, languages, and racial-ethnic identities of CDLs. The question, then, is “How are we *sustaining* the cultures, literacies, languages, and identities of CDLs with instruction?” Sustaining the literacies of students is in contrast to ignoring them, or, even worse, eradicating them.

### **Why Consider the History of CRT?**

It is vital that you are aware of the history of CRT in order to understand the racist roots of deficit thinking and to reject deficit-based explanations of student underachievement when interacting in problem-solving meetings.

### **Redesign—My Approach to CRT**

Educators often ask my approach to CRT. Considering I have been researching and implementing CRT practices for over a decade, I have employed principles from both Ladson-Billings’ (1995) and Gay’s (2018) work. While I continue to draw from their notions of culturally responsive pedagogy, I currently employ Paris’s (2012) notions of CSP as a guiding framework, because I too believe that school leaders should seek to perpetuate and sustain the cultures, literacies, languages, and identities of students of color. This is in contrast to creating culturally relevant and responsive activities for the sole purpose of engaging students in the classroom or “using” their cultural values and literacies to entice them to complete some academic task or to attend intervention groups.

As a researcher-practitioner, my perspective on CRT might be a bit nuanced from scholars who write about CRT but are now removed from K-12 classrooms; in addition, my perspectives on the subject may be different from consultants and authors who have been school-based practitioners in their early careers, but now provide consultation full time. As a school psychologist and interventionist who works directly with students of color at the ground level, and as a researcher-practitioner who trains teachers on CRT, I hear and see the frustration of educators who attempt to implement CRT principles in their classrooms. I have coached practitioners who have read popular books on CRT and who have attended in-service trainings on CRT principles, but have been unsuccessful at generalizing theories and frameworks from books and in-services to the classroom. In addition, I have been a part of problem-solving meetings where practitioners discussed the need to implement CRT practices across multitiered systems but were unable to, because they did not know where to start in the process.

Based on my experiences working directly with colleagues in K-12 schools and my experiences as a consultant and researcher-practitioner, my research interest focuses on identifying ways educators can apply CRT in

schools when designing

- multitiered system of supports,
- academic instruction at the Tier 1 level,
- Tier 1 and Tier 2 SEL interventions,
- trauma-informed supports,
- restorative practices,
- special education programming,
- school-based counseling/social work supports—and more.

My research involves coaching educators through the process of identifying and resolving tensions and challenges that interfere with designing culturally sustaining and equitable programming building-wide.

### **Want More Free Resources?**

If you are reading this magazine, you probably have already subscribed to our newsletters. If someone has shared this resource with you, be sure to subscribe to our newsletter in order to receive free booklets, magazines, and other resources on how to design and redesign educational practices in ways that are culturally sustaining, inclusive, and antiracist. You can subscribe by clicking [here](#).

### **Facebook**

If you have a Facebook account, be sure to join our *Redesign* private Facebook group to join other educators who are currently designing culturally sustaining programming. The purpose of the group is to connect with other educators who are currently working at the ground level and who are currently redesigning their practices. A second purpose of the private group is to process concepts from my new book, *REDESIGN: An SEL Toolkit to Designing Culturally Sustaining and Antiracist Practices*. Contact us at [info@tier1education.com](mailto:info@tier1education.com) if you are interested in purchasing this book. As a *Redesign* Facebook group member, you will receive free virtual coaching, booklets, and magazines on how to design culturally sustaining and antiracist programming.

*If you are reading an electronic version of this booklet, join us [here](#).* I look forward to learning with you.

### **Special Bonus!**

For all readers who have received training on my approach to CRT, I have included in the space below virtual activities that you can consider, based on the cultural themes and cultural elements that I discussed during my sessions. I call this a “special bonus” considering you have already received training, which means that I will not revisit the content that we discussed, and I will not redefine cultural values and themes that we addressed. One thing that I often mention, however, during my training sessions, is that one reason teachers struggle to design culturally responsive and

sustaining programming is because they lack knowledge of the cultural values and lived experiences of their students. Following this, I often discuss “research-based cultural themes and elements” that have been shown to boost engagement among CDLs. I argue that, while it is important to have knowledge of these cultural elements and themes, and while it is important to mix cultural elements with instruction, it is imperative that we do not assume that race and culture are synonymous; it is important that we debunk the idea that students will embrace cultural themes simply on the basis of their race. As Boykin and Noguera (2011) acknowledge, we cannot tell the cultural book by the racial color.

### **CRT in the Virtual Space**

A key aspect of CRT is creating classroom environments that are conducive for learning. Practitioners can apply the activities that I list below across subjects and between classroom and virtual spaces. I focus on “community building” activities in this magazine because they build relationships among students and teachers, and they create communalistic spaces, where students learn to appreciate each other, no matter their racial or cultural backgrounds. Practitioners can use the activities and online resources to create communalistic and vibrant environments for students who require them. Additionally, consistent with culturally sustaining practices, the activities below create opportunities for students to engage with youth cultural literacies such as the arts—including hip-hop—as recommended by Ladson-Billings (2014) and Paris and Alim (2017). Creating spaces where students can embrace youth cultural identities also creates opportunities for students to interrogate youth cultural practices in order to determine if such practices perpetuate oppression and or systemic racism, which is a key element of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

When considering CRT practices, it is important to remember that implementing “step-by-step” or prepackaged intervention programs with CDLs contradicts culturally responsive principles; rather than implement prescriptive, prepackaged programs, it is best that practitioners first collect data on students to identify their cultural values, interests, and assets. Following the guidance of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017), practitioners can begin this process by collecting data on youth cultural preferences that pertain to the arts.

**NOTE:** When collecting data to identify cultural interests and values of students, remember to refrain from “using” the cultural interests, values, and literacies of students for engagement purposes only. For example, from your data collection, if you find that many of your students rap, sing, write poetry, draw, dance, create beats, or are creatives in general, do not use their cultural literacies and creativity

solely for the sake of engaging them during your class periods. Rather, seek to sustain and strengthen their identities as artists and creatives; help them identify how they can enhance their artistry. The following includes data collection activities and ideas that you can employ to create community building activities and culturally sustaining spaces. Questionnaire items below address youth cultural interests and assets. In addition, questions may reveal information regarding cultural preferences relating to communalism, movement, and verve—cultural themes you might have heard during my PD trainings. The questionnaire is in response to my feedback that many educators are unfamiliar with the cultural values, interests, and literacies of CDLs.



#### **1. Data Collection**

Create an interest/value questionnaire for your students. Don’t assume that you know what your students’ cultural interests are; collect data and find out for sure. You can do this by creating a questionnaire to identify their cultural literacies and interests; you can use Google Forms to collect data on youth cultural values or any other method you find useful. You may want to include questions such as the following:

- What genres of music do you listen to (I often say, “What kind/category of music do you listen to,” because in my experiences, some students didn’t know what “genre” meant)?
- How often do you listen to music throughout the day?
- How important is it to you to have music playing in the background when you are studying?
- How important is it for you to be around family and friends throughout the week?
- How important is it for you to be around friends throughout the day?
- How important is it to have a lively or fun classroom when learning?

- Do you write music (lyrics/songs) or poetry?
- Do you enjoy singing, rapping, performing poetry, or dancing?

While the above questions have not undergone any real psychometric measure, they will give you an example of collecting data on your students' cultural interests, values, and assets. Note that the questions pertain to youth cultural interests, as well as cultural themes that you may have heard me address in my training.

You can view an example of a questionnaire that I use when working with students of my own and when visiting students in various classrooms. I use this questionnaire to collect data on their interests, and then I use their interests to design community building activities. **Click here** to see an example of the questionnaire that I use. To be sure, I use the questionnaire to collect data on student interests, then I work with them to mix their values with instruction.

## 2. Consider Student Responses Within the Context of Communalism, Movement Expressiveness, and Verve (based on the cultural themes we addressed during my PD)

Align your students' interests with the cultural themes that we discussed in our PD session. One recommendation is to consider cultural themes as falling on a continuum rather than as dichotomous characteristics.

## 3. Culturally Sustaining Community Building Activities

Rather than making instruction “relevant” or “responsive” to the cultural values, interests, and assets of students, find ways to create culturally “sustaining” activities, which seek to sustain, perpetuate, or strengthen the identities and literacies of students. Remember, while culturally sustaining activities are relevant and responsive to students' cultural interests and needs, they also seek to perpetuate their literacies and identities. For example, if students are artists, then culturally sustaining educators would seek to enhance their interest and identities as artists. Additional effective, culturally sustaining ideas I have used are:

- Create opportunities for your students to co-design community building activities.
- Create opportunities for students to lead or co-lead community building activities.
- Create opportunities for daily, weekly, or monthly *proactive “circles”*—or community building circles—where students have an opportunity to build community by sharing and engaging with their cultural values, interests, and assets.

While it is obvious that students cannot “circle up” in virtu-

al spaces, I included the “proactive circles” and “community building circles” activities so that you will have knowledge of practices that you can Google and get additional ideas (just google “community building circles”). You could also call these “check-in activities.”

Community circles are commonly associated with restorative justice, but you can engage with community building circle activities even if you do not know a lot about restorative justice.

## Music Playlists

Have students submit the names of artists they listen to, along with a few songs from those artists. Use those names and songs to create an “instrumental” playlist (a playlist of the instrumental beat without the words). Work with students to identify when might be the most appropriate times to play background music (i.e., during independent work time, during community circles, and so on).

- Modify the activity, *Name that song*: Play instrumental music and use one of the online resources below to allow students to guess the name of the song and the artist. Click the [hyperlink](#) above to view the classroom activity. If you are teaching virtually, you will have to modify the activity. I've used *Kahoot* to play variations of this activity virtually. You'll need students to create a list of songs that they listen to, then you'll use the instrumental beats of those songs to organize the activity.
- Introduce the *Praise Report* activity to students, and share “praise reports” during circles. Learn more about *Praise Reports* in the paragraph below.
- Introduce the activity, *Name that Artist* to students, and play the game during circles. See *Name that Artist* instructions below.
- Create opportunities for students to share cultural literacies during virtual spaces.
- If students are scheduled to share their art during your virtual session, create a breakout room to allow them to practice, prior to engaging with the group.
- Use breakout rooms to allow students to construct ideas and activities you all can engage with, based on the data collection feedback.
- Invite guest artists to your virtual space. Be sure to include artists that associate with the genre of music your students listen to (based on your data collection).

## Praise Reports Instruction:

The *Praise Reports* activity builds community and has been effective at establishing relationships among community members. “Praise Reports” is a time when community members share something positive about themselves or about other community members (class members). The

“report” can be as simple as,

- “I uploaded a video to TikTok yesterday.”
- “I just bought 2K21 basketball game.”
- “I helped one of my friends who was dealing with a problem last week.”
- “I helped my mother bring groceries in the house last night.”
- “I attended two of my virtual courses on time yesterday.”
- “I am still passing all of my classes.”

A “report” can be something as simple as, “I’m alive.”

Here is an example of how you might engage with the activity:

1. Introduce the activity.
2. Tell students that you will give them some time to think about anything that they have done within the week that is positive, anything that is praiseworthy.
3. Teachers might model the activity by sharing their praise report first.
4. Teachers can then state, “Okay, go ahead and type your praise report in the chat box now—and again, we are sharing anything positive about ourselves that we have done or about someone in this class.”
5. Teacher should read the praise reports (that appear in the chat box) out loud.
6. After each praise report, the entire community should “clap it up” or “praise” the person who is acknowledged. “Clap it up” simply means to literally clap for the person who received the praise.

You can also allow students to share their reports vocally.

### **Name that Artist**

*Name that artist* is similar to *Name that Song*. I typically use *Kahoot* and *Padlet* for this activity. Here is how I engage with this activity:

1. I use Padlet to allow students to list at least 3 artists they listen to throughout the week.
2. Once students jot down their 3 artists on their padlets, I then take pictures of the padlets (take a picture of my screen).
3. I then find images of the list of artists that students identify. I use *Yahoo Images/Google Images* to get pictures of the artists. I then download and insert these images into Kahoot.

For example, at the top of the Kahoot screen, I add the question, “Who is this?” and I include the image of the artist below the question. Students then use *Kahoot* to share

their responses.

You will have to share your screen so that students can see the image of the artists; students should then respond, using their computers or phones.

The above practices are a few data collection and community building ideas. It is critical that practitioners create space for students to build community and engage with youth culturally meaningful activities. Some students and teachers are dealing with stress and trauma in response to racial violence and COVID-19. Students also complain about being “bored” during virtual classrooms. Spice up your sessions by engaging in student-centered activities. Creating opportunities for students to engage with culturally meaningful activities is not only best practice, but it will also create opportunities for them to engage with self-care activities, by having fun interacting within virtual communities.

### **Engaging, Online Resources That You Can Use During Virtual Learning:**

When I work with students, the first thing that I do—prior to facilitating lessons with them—is collect data on their music interests. Considering the majority of my students embrace hip-hop and have identities associated with hip-hop cultural elements, I use hip-hop activities to build community in the classroom and via virtual spaces. The following are my top five online resources that I use to engage students with hip-hop activities. Click on the resource name to access the link.

1. Google Forms ([Click here to view my questionnaire](#))
2. [Padlet](#)
3. [Kahoot!](#)
4. [Slido](#)
5. [PBS Learning Media](#)

You can use these online resources both in traditional classrooms and in virtual spaces. While I use the resources to engage my students with hip-hop, you can use them with any genre of music and with a variety of activities. I also use the resources with SEL activities. These are excellent resources, and you can design amazing lessons with them. I will say that, while I use all of the above resources, I am particularly impressed with *PBS Learning Media*. Okay, let me be honest—“I love, love” this resource! You have to check it out. When I access the site, I use the search space and type “hip-hop,” then press enter. I then access the many resources to sustain the identities of my students who identify with hip-hop culture. While *PBS Learning Media* has a wealth of resources on hip-hop, I particularly love the documentaries on the history of hip-hop. These documentaries align with my hip-hop curriculum *Like Music to My*

*Ears: A Hip-Hop Approach to Social Emotional Learning and Trauma in Schools.*

Good luck with using these activities to build community in your virtual spaces and classrooms, and be sure to reach out to me if you have questions.

### **Want More Activities?**

Connect with our private Facebook group *Redesign: An SEL Toolkit to Designing Antiracist Education* to learn more community building activities along with academic-related culturally sustaining practices.

Please contact us at [info@tier1education.com](mailto:info@tier1education.com) to share questions or concerns about this magazine. Also, contact us if you want specific training around the concepts that I've addressed or want our consultants to provide explicit instructional examples of culturally sustaining activities. Training and engaging in mock circles will best prepare you to implement the activities prior to using them with students.

### **Designing Culturally Sustaining Practices Require More**

Designing culturally sustaining programming and antiracist education requires more than creating activities that are relevant and responsive to the cultures and lived experiences of students; it requires more than identifying ways to sustain the cultural literacies and community practices of students. To be sure, designing equitable practices requires practitioners to interrogate their beliefs and attitudes concerning culturally sustaining practices, antiracist education, students of color, and social justice. In my new book, *Redesign: An SEL Toolkit to Designing Culturally Sustaining and Antiracist Practices*, I argue that it is possible to design highly engaging culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining activities, yet maintain racist ideologies and perspectives around students of color, their families, and their communities.

Our organization is currently offering a discount to our newsletter subscribers and Facebook group members who are interested in my new book. If you have not signed up to receive our newsletters and are not a member of our *Redesign* Facebook private group, be sure to sign up to both—the [newsletter](#) and [Facebook group](#)—and receive a discount on the book, along with additional free materials.

Once you sign up for our newsletters and become a member of the new *Redesign* group, contact us at [info@tier1education.com](mailto:info@tier1education.com) to receive a discount on your book. Simply include “Discount” in the subject line. Following is a synopsis of the book, just in case you are curious.

## **REDESIGN**

*An SEL Toolkit to Designing Culturally Sustaining and Antiracist Practices*

In this highly anticipated work, Dwayne D. Williams argues that schools often rush to make surface-level changes that don't address the racist beliefs and practices that result in inequity. Specifically, he contends that educators sidestep the hard conversations that address racist perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes concerning students of color, their heritages, languages, literacies, and ways of being. Williams contends that educators must engage in surgical work of the mind by interrogating and rejecting racist, deficit-based thinking concerning culturally diverse learners, which Williams describes as the “prep work” that precedes designing antiracist and culturally sustaining programming.

Williams employs CASEL's five SEL competencies as both a framework and a toolkit to interrogate beliefs and attitudes, and then to prepare for antiracist and culturally sustaining teaching. Using SEL competencies as tools, *Redesign* offers a host of “prep work” activities that will prepare educators for antiracist and culturally sustaining work redesign. For example, educators will:

- construct a racial-cultural journey map of their lived experiences with race and culture (self-awareness activity)—and use their racial maps with subsequent activities.
- examine their journey maps in order to identify lived experiences and racialized events that have shaped their mindsets concerning race, culture, and students of color (social awareness).
- design a culturally sustaining self-care plan to prepare for antiracist and culturally sustaining work (self-management).
- construct a “relationship directory” for the purpose of establishing accountability partners and affinity groups while engaging with antiracist and culturally sustaining work (relationship skills).
- work in solidarity with allies to resolve challenges, (responsible decision making)—and more!

*Redesign* includes a host of practical activities that educators can engage with individually, as well as within problem-solving teams and department meetings, to prepare for antiracist and culturally sustaining work.

## REDESIGN Blurbs from Educational Leaders

“The murder of George Floyd has challenged Americans to look in the mirror. What they see is rampant systemic racism, whether it’s in the boardroom, in the classroom or in the courtroom. Brother Williams’s Redesign is the educational resource needed to thoughtfully navigate renegotiating how administrators and teachers can do right by students of color. The project’s focus on using SEL practices to heal the achievement gap’s ‘wound of inequity’ is needed now more than ever. Allow Redesign to guide you on this journey.”

~**Michael M. Smith**, Assistant Principal  
Township High School District 211

“Dwayne D. Williams illustrates how trauma associated with the Black American experience derives from a systemic tradition of anti-Blackness. The impact of this trauma on the teaching and learning for students and educators of color necessitates the redesigning of educational practices grounded in social emotional learning. If educational institutions and individual practitioners are authentic in the call for antiracism, Redesign positions organizations to do the adaptive and technical work that leads to equitable student outcomes.”

~**LeVar J. Ammons**, Ed.D, Executive Director of Equity and Student Success  
Oak Park and River Forest High School

“Redesign is a necessary resource for all teachers, whether new to the profession or experienced in the classroom. As a teacher, I crave opportunities to serve all my students better. As a White teacher I need to reflect on my own thoughts and understandings of race and culture by using the theoretical frameworks and best practices in Redesign’s activity section.”

~**Sue Howard**, Teacher  
Hinsdale South High School

“Fortunately for educators and stakeholders, Dwayne’s work outlines succinct measures in ensuring educational environments where culturally and linguistically diverse learners can be seen and supported from a strengths-based approach. This is the exact disposition that is necessary in combating anti-Black racism. This timely and timeless body of work will translate into improved educational attainment for students from underserved communities. This is the moment.”

~**April Wells**, Gifted Coordinator  
School District U-46  
Author of the book *Achieving Equity in Gifted Programming:  
Dismantling Barriers and Tapping Potential*

“I too am tired. As an educator who has worked with Black and Brown students for over two decades—mostly under federal consent decrees because we continue to fail our children—I applaud Dwayne D. Williams for writing a book that is long overdue. Redesign is amazing, practical, and written by a fellow colleague who remains in the trenches doing the work. Much needed and appreciated!”

~**Dr. Tiffany Gholson**, LCSW, Director of Parent and Student Support Services  
East Saint Louis School District #189

“Dwayne D. Williams has filled a gap within the literature by providing practitioners with a toolkit to deeply examine our own experiences with race as a first step to addressing and developing antiracist programming and culturally sustaining practices. As practitioners at the ground level doing the work, we need this toolkit now more than ever. This book is an essential read for school-based professionals who desire to establish practices that are culturally sustaining and antiracist.”

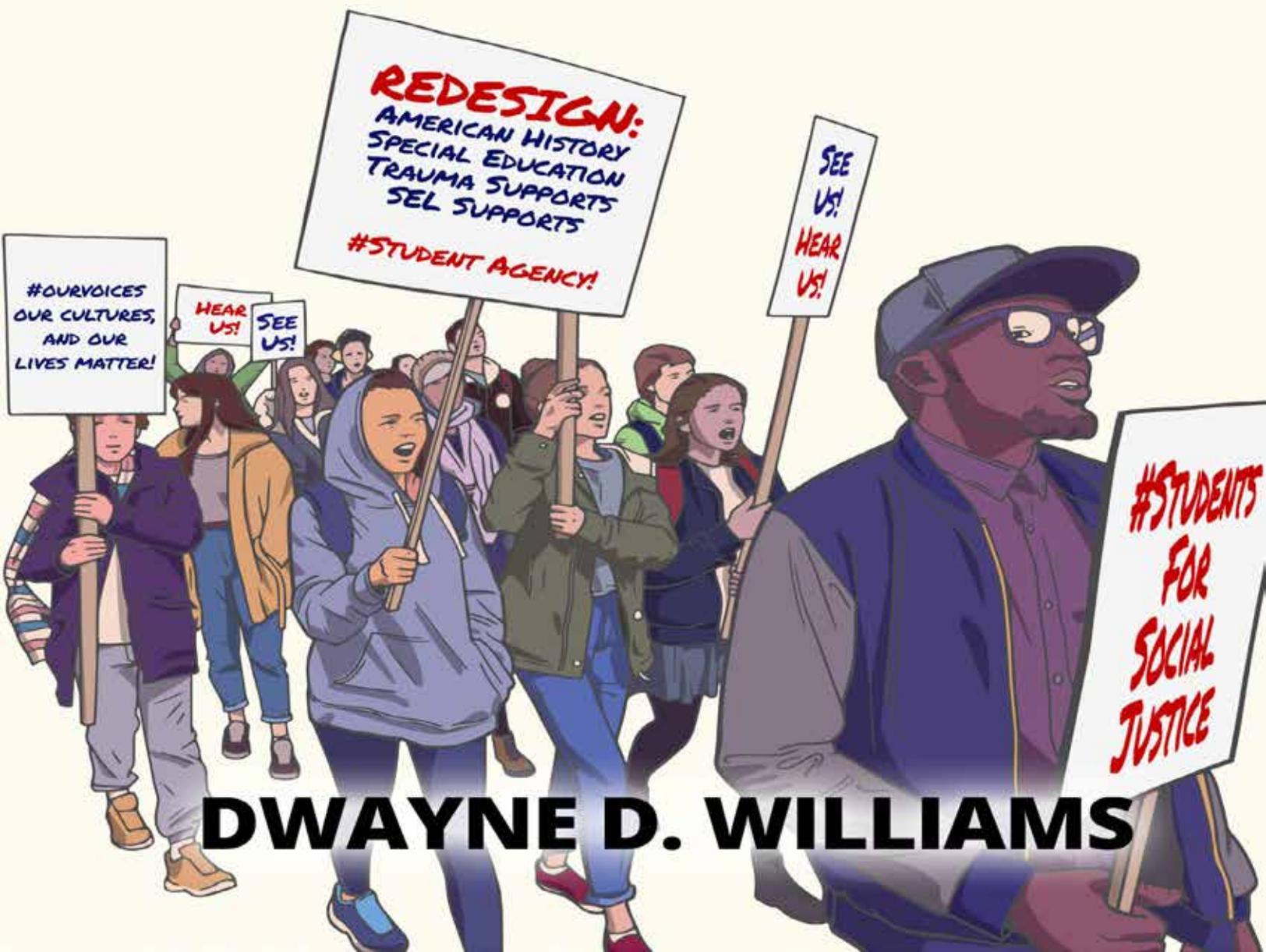
~**Miguel Salinas**, Certified Bilingual School Psychologist  
CEO of Salinas Educational Services

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# REDESIGN

An **SEL** Toolkit to Designing  
Culturally Sustaining and Antiracist Practices



**DWAYNE D. WILLIAMS**

# Are **You** Social?

Connect with us via social media and continue the conversation!

*Click here to*



Connect with other *Redesign* educators who are currently redesigning their practices in our FB group.

**Want to publish a magazine or booklet?** We encourage members to write papers on how they have implemented/will implement Dwayne D' Williams' work, and our organization will create a magazine or booklet, showcasing your practices in the classroom!

*Click here to*



Subscribe to Dwayne D. Williams's YouTube channel to learn how to enhance your practices in the classroom. Dwayne creates short videos on the cultural frameworks that he uses to design culturally sustaining and anti-racist practices.

*Click here to*



Sign-up for Dwayne's newsletters and receive free magazines and booklets on the topic of culturally sustaining and culturally sustaining practices. Subscribers will also have the opportunity to write newsletters, articles, and booklets, on how they employ Dwayne's work with culturally diverse learners

*Click here to Connect!*



Connect with Dwayne via LinkedIn to read articles that he publishes with educational leaders within the linkedIn community. Connect with him and learn how you can partner with our organization

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