

It's Not the Culture of Poverty, It's the Poverty of Culture: The Problem with Teacher Education

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The preparation of novice teachers is dominated by psychological notions almost to the exclusion of other social science paradigms. The perspective that is least likely to be evident in teacher preparation is that of anthropology. However, prospective and novice teachers regularly and loosely use the word “culture” as an explanation for student patterns of behavior they cannot explain. This discussion focuses on the ways prospective and novice teachers construct culture simultaneously as both the problem and the answer to their struggles with students different from themselves. [culture of poverty, self-esteem, teacher education]

I am one of those rare teacher educators who was trained in anthropology and education. I benefited from the wisdom and expertise of George and Louise Spindler, Robert Textor, and cultural anthropologists such as James Lowell Gibbs, Jane Collins, and Renato Rosaldo. With those kinds of credentials you would think people would be jumping up and down to include me in a teacher education program and to pick my brain for ways to reconceptualize and redesign the preparation of teachers. I do not want to leave the impression that my colleagues do not appreciate me. What I am up against is much larger than the politics of my campus. My battle is with teacher education writ large and the stubborn insistence on suturing the field to psychology to the exclusion of every other social science.

The typical preservice teacher takes a series of foundations courses in the history, philosophy, and sociology of education. However, there is a strong concentration in psychology that includes courses in child or adolescent development, cognition and learning, and exceptionality (i.e., students with special needs). To understand teaching in the United States is to understand a wholly “psychologized” field. Anthropology of education rarely appears in preservice teacher education.

But the problem of culture in teaching is not merely one of exclusion. It is also one of overdetermination. What I mean by this is that culture is randomly and regularly used to explain everything. So at the same moment teacher education students learn nothing about culture, they use it with authority as one of the primary explanations for everything from school failure to problems with behavior management and discipline.

In this article I use “critical incidents” from a series of interviews, student journals, and electronic portfolios I have collected over the years that describe preservice and novice teachers’ understandings of their work. What I share here represents composite statements that do not identify individual students. I want to be clear that the students’ responses are not so much reflections on them as teachers as much as they are

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reflections on their training. I can say this because of the consistency of their responses.

I have called the problem I see with teacher education “the poverty of culture.” Typically we hear our students appropriate Michael Harrington’s (1997) often quoted phrase, “the culture of poverty.” They use this phrase to describe what they see as a pathology of poor students and hide behind child poverty as an excuse for why they cannot be successful with some students.

The Self-Esteem Problem

One of the questions I consistently ask students at the end of their field experiences is to tell me about one child that they felt was difficult for them to handle. I purposely do not specify what I mean by “difficult.” I want the students to be free to determine what they see as difficult. Overwhelmingly, the students choose a student who is unlike them in racial, ethnic, and gender categories. Over and over students tell me about their problems dealing with African American boys. Another thing I like to do is ask preservice and novice teachers to describe the school environment in which they are working. If they are in schools whose population is primarily students of color, they describe it as a “diverse” setting. I once had a student who was working in a school with a 100 percent African American population. She described it as a “diverse” school setting. I corrected her and said, “No, you’re in an all-black school.” Below are two examples of the kinds of responses that are typical of the two perspectives on self-esteem and culture:

Critical Incident 1

I worked hard to get to know D’Andre. He is a bright boy but he has so many problems. Chief among them is his low self-esteem. I try to do things that will help him feel better about himself. I feel that if he had higher self-esteem he could experience more success in the classroom. [self-esteem]

Critical Incident 2

My students are so surprised that I am 25 years old and don’t have any children of my own. I try to explain that I am not married but they say, “You don’t have to be married to have children.” I know that having children out of wedlock is a part of their culture. [culture]

So many of the teachers’ interviews and writings identify the so-called self-esteem problem that it has become a commonsense way of speaking and thinking about students who experience academic or discipline problems in schools. The question that this pattern of speaking about students provoked in my mind was how it is that so many teachers have come to make a psychological diagnosis about students who are struggling in schools.

Additionally, a growing number of teachers have begun to dump all manner of behavior into a catchall they call “culture.” Whenever students seem not to be able to explain or identify with students, they point to students’ culture as the culprit. How might we, who understand and appreciate the significance of culture in education, help our colleagues and students in teacher education make better use of culture as a construct? How do we find a balance between total erasure of culture on the one hand and overdetermination on the other?

First, I think we have to pay attention to the “self-esteem” problem in American culture. What I mean here is the way that American culture maintains a narrative of

the individual. Although we are a nation of over 200 million people, we still give primacy to the individual. Despite the way group membership shapes and defines much of our lives, we focus on the individual. Our national narrative suggests that "every individual has the opportunity to be president." But the empirical evidence suggests that people whose net worth is less than \$1 million, who are of other than European descent, who are female, and who are not college educated are unlikely to sit in the Oval Office.

However, the individual narrative is so strong in American culture that we can apply metaphors of self to understanding the nation. Thus, America has a self-esteem problem. We constantly understand ourselves through the mirror of other nations. We say our schools are failing because we score lower than Singapore and Finland on some standard measure. We say our nation is not productive enough by comparing ourselves to the Chinese or the Germans. We say we are living up to democratic principles by comparing ourselves to totalitarian regimes.

Our supreme reliance on individuals means that we look at students as individually responsible for their success in school. We lack complex understandings of how individual, family, community, school, and societal factors interact to create school failure for some students. It is much easier to explain students' failure by looking at something internal to the students than endemic in this thing we call school culture. Self-esteem is liberally sprinkled throughout American English. Every talk show host, every talk show guest has uttered the word. "I overate because I had low self-esteem." "I allowed my partner to abuse me because I had low self-esteem." I eagerly await the day when someone says, "I overeat because I am surrounded by food ads and fast-food outlets that sell nothing but high-fat, unhealthy food, and as a poor person it is more difficult to buy fresh fruits and vegetables and take time to prepare them." Or, "I was abused by my partner because he's a jerk who has decided to work through his own shortcomings by taking advantage of me. The society says he should make a certain amount of money to take care of his family. He doesn't make it and I am a constant reminder of his failure but I'm an okay person."

The Culture Answer

Although I have talked about the *problem* of self-esteem, it is equally important to talk about the way "culture" has become the answer to every question. Of course "culture" is only the answer if the students in question are not white, not English-speaking, and not native-born U.S. citizens. In a discussion with students who were completing their fourth field experience in our program, I listened as they described their students' misbehavior in terms of culture. "The black kids just talk so loud and don't listen," said one teacher education student. I asked her why she thought they spoke so loudly. "I don't know; I just guess it's cultural." I then asked if she thought they were talking loudly because they were black or because they were kids. She paused a moment and then said, "I guess I've never thought about that." This is an interesting response since so much of this student's teacher preparation includes a focus on development. Why don't more of our students say things like, "Since my students are eight years old I expect that they will behave in this particular way"?

One reason that students use culture as a catchall phrase is that it is often a proxy for race. The elephant in the teacher education parlor (along with America's parlor) is race. As novelist Toni Morrison (1992:63) has argued:

Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological “race” ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before.

I do not believe my teacher education students are unusual in their tendency to suture race to culture and then struggle to disentangle the two. Culture is regularly used as a code word for difference and perhaps deviance in the world of teacher education. First, most of my students are white, middle-class, monolingual Midwesterners. They are surrounded by people who look, talk, and perhaps think as they do. When I try to get them to think about their culture, they are stymied. They describe themselves as having “no culture” or being “just regular” or “just normal.” When I point out the semantic challenge with their characterizations—by default people unlike them are “irregular” or “abnormal”—they fumble to correct that impression (my students are nothing if not polite).

Not understanding culture and its role in shaping our thoughts and behavior is not limited to teacher education students. Most members of the dominant society rarely acknowledge themselves as cultural beings. They have no reason to. Culture is that exotic element possessed by “minorities.” It is what it means to be nonwhite. It is also the convenient explanation for why some students cannot achieve success in the classroom.

Critical Incident 3

Several students in my practicum do not participate in our Special Day program. Both happen to be African Americans. For “Special Day” each child is supposed to bring some things from home like toys, pets, or photos that are special to them. They also are supposed to bring a treat to share with the other students. One of the African American children did not bring anything on her special day. A few weeks later when the other African American child had his special day he did not come to school. I wonder if there is something cultural going on here. [journal entry]

In this journal entry, the practicum student neglects to include information about the social context of the school. This school is located in one of the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods. The two African American students are bused to this school from one of the poorest communities in the city. Special Day has become a parade of “who has the most Beanie Babies” followed by lavish homemade brownies, bars, or cookies. The two African American students come to school by themselves on the bus. Many of their first-grade classmates come accompanied by parents who regularly volunteer in the classroom. The issue here is not about culture but rather about socioeconomic status. It never occurred to the student teacher that she and her cooperating teacher could restructure the activity to ensure that it would be more inclusive. Instead, the omnibus explanation of “it’s culture” was used to explain their limited understanding of the students’ nonparticipation.

Critical Incident 4

A principal proudly displays her “restitution room” where children who misbehave are sent for anywhere from 30 minutes to an entire day. As I look in the room I see desks

arranged in rows and the eight occupants are all African American boys from about age seven to ten. Each of the boys is sitting silently at a desk with his hands folded. When I ask the principal what the students are learning in this setting, she replies, "Well, these students need structure. They have to have it before they can learn anything."

The reference to "these students" is not lost on me. Something about who the boys are is enough to signal to the school—both teachers and administrators—that the students need a different kind of educational experience. The issue is not their development since they span a range of ages. Because "structure" is not the typical prescription for "low self-esteem," we are again left with "culture" as the explanation.

Critical Incident 5

Teachers from a suburban school invite me to talk with them about a "problem" they are experiencing. They cannot get the African American and Hmong parents to come to school. I arrive at the meeting and begin with this question: "Suppose you arrive at school tomorrow morning and every African American and Hmong parent in this school is here. What would you have them do?" The teachers sit in stunned silence. I have not given them some handy tips or a pat explanation about the cultures of the students and their parents.

In this incident I recognize that the teachers want to reach out to the parents of students who are not experiencing success in the school. However, the teachers have presumed that having the parents come to the school will yield the same results as having middle-class parents come. The complexity of this incident is that it melds socioeconomic status with culture in an interesting way. The teachers have not considered that their own cultural patterns may not be the only patterns of interaction that parents can have with the school. Later in our discussion I asked questions about what efforts the school has made to be a presence in the community from which the students come. How many school personnel have attended functions in the Hmong or African American community? Which teachers had attended a church service in these communities? Which teachers had attended a New Year's event in the Hmong community? No one could say that they had done any of those things. They explained how busy they were and how hard they worked—things that I certainly would not deny. But no one acknowledged that they had *cultural* expectations that the parents did not meet. Instead they cloaked their cultural understandings as correct behavior without acknowledging those of the students and their parents.

What We Need to Do

I have focused on examples of the shortcomings of teacher education concerning culture. Now it is important to look toward what we might do to correct what we are doing. The first thing we need to do is give prospective teachers an opportunity to interact with children and adolescents in nonschool settings; preservice teachers need the chance to see students in places where they are likely to be experiencing success—community and neighborhood centers, clubs, teams, and after-school activities. Doing this reminds me of my own experience as a graduate student when my advisers in education indicated that I could not go to the field because I had no proposal and my advisers in anthropology indicated that I could not have a proposal because I had not been to the field. In teacher education, the education way—writing the proposal and then going to the field—wins out.

We fill our teacher education students with theories and ideas about what students will be like and then we send them to the field where they make their charges fit those notions. If we are serious about students learning about culture, we need to help them first become careful observers of culture, both in the communities in which they will teach and in themselves. Far too many prospective teachers believe that they are without culture. They assume their participation in the dominant culture makes them immune to culture.

It is indeed a challenge for prospective teachers to recognize themselves as cultural beings. Thus, teacher educators need to structure experiences and activities so that our students can take a close look at their cultural systems and recognize them for what they are—learned behavior that has been normalized and regularized. As they begin to recognize the cultural underpinnings of their own beliefs, attitudes, and practices, they may become more open to the power of culture to shape the learning and experiences of the students they will teach.

Third, it is increasingly important for teacher education to take more global dimensions. Although many of our campuses offer study-abroad possibilities, the demands of teacher education may thwart prospective teachers' efforts to participate in such programs. If, however, culture is going to be more seamlessly integrated into teacher education, then our students need a chance to see more of the world, and specifically schooling in other parts of the world. These experiences may help prospective teachers see the commonalities in human learning coupled with the specifics of culture in various settings.

Ultimately, our students will have to learn to be more discerning about culture and its role in education so that they will not contribute to either the culture of poverty or the poverty of culture.

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Note

1. Gloria Ladson-Billings is the 2004 recipient of the George and Louise Spindler Award given annually to one individual by the Council on Anthropology and Education (CAE) in recognition of lifetime contributions to the field of educational anthropology. Dr. Ladson-Billings presented an earlier version of this lecture the year following her receipt of the award, at the 2005 CAE Business Meeting held in conjunction with the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C.—*Ed.*

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