

How Cultural Dynamics and Teacher Preparation Affect the Educational Opportunities of Minority Students

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Abstract

The academic achievement of minority students in this country has been an issue of debate for educators and policy makers since the origins of education in America. Education reform has failed to offer a permanent solution that does not blame the students for their failure. America's "color-blind" attitude and its refusal to accept the effects of cultural differences in the learning process will lead to a continued increase in the academic achievement "gap" in our classrooms. In this paper I address the historical contributions of America's "biased" and self-protecting mechanisms that still plague the education system today, the effects of culture on learning, how school culture can affect learning, teacher preparation for minority students, the overcrowding of special education, and the effects of No Child Left Behind.

The Problem

It amazes me that the American education system spends so much time and money blaming the academic failure of minority children on environmental, social, or genetic factors, instead of placing the responsibility where it rightly belongs, which is the lack of cultural knowledge, acceptance, and preparation of educators of minority students. Researchers like Hernstein and Murray (1994) spend valuable time arguing that genetic differences between blacks and whites account for unequal outcomes in academic performance in *The Bell Curve*. This explanation sounds very much like the original Puritanistic American education system in the North and the Anglican education system in the South or better yet the rhetoric of one eminent psychologist of the 20th century, Raymond Cattell. Cattell believed that race is a unit of evolutionary progress and that any mixing of races, especially with African Americans would result in the intelligent American culture being replaced by lower intelligences (Cattell as cited in Tucker, 2005). He also stated in his 1933 publication of *Psychology and Social Progress* (as cited in Tucker, 2005)

In a pure race, adapted to its conditions by long ages of selection, the inheritance of impulses in each individual is bound to be well balanced. The innate forces which are the innate material of character building must have reached a certain mutual compatibility and potential power of good integration. If two such races interbreed, the resulting reshuffling of impulses and psychic forces throws together in each individual a number of items which may or may not be compatible and capable of being organized into a stable unit. (p.151)

Each one of the mentioned views was dedicated to educating a certain class of individuals with the intent of protecting the social-religious dogma and the agenda of the dominant class. Anyone who disagreed with their views was labeled a liberal heretic. In these views, economic factors seem to be completely ignored. However what compromise these views, especially the genetic views, is that low-income whites have a college graduation rate below the national average of blacks (“Low College Graduation,” 2005). Even further dispelling the notion of genetic inferiority is the fact that “foreign” born African American males achieve college degrees at a rate approaching that of whites in this country (“Educational Success in the United States,” 2005). However, the American society has continued their biased assumptions about differences between African American and White children, as opposed to searching for valid explanations for these differences (Durodoye & Hildreth, 1995). What does this say about the American education system?

The historical malignation of the African American student by the American educational system (Durodoye & Hildreth, 1995) has resulted in an education system that has been labeling minority children since before the monumental 1960’s civil rights movement. The terms “disadvantaged,” “at-risk,” and “culturally deprived” are words that were and today still are used to identify minority students. These particular deep-rooted labels and others like it are blinders on the American education system that prevent it from seeing and acknowledging the cultural individuality of minority students. In attempts to eliminate “risky” factors, education systems try to create environments that facilitate learning by “throwing” money at the problem in the form of compensatory education, school voucher programs, and busing minority students to more resourceful schools. However, Jencks and Phillips (1988) as well as Spencer (2000) note that even when socio economic factors are controlled for, African American, Latino and Native American students still typically lag behind White and Asian students. Why? Because there has to be an overhaul of this education system that was formed to protect the American values that were being challenged by Irish immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans in the nineteenth-century (Spring, 2005). This is illustrated by a study of the Chicago schools conducted by Allensworth (as cited in Barton, 2006, p. 14-18) that showed differences in high school graduation rates broken down by gender. The results were among boys, only 39 percent of black students graduated by age 19, compared with 51 percent of Latino students and 58 percent of white students. Although fairing better, the results for the girls were similar in that 57 percent of black girls graduated by the age of 19, compared with 65 percent for Latino students, and 71 percent for white students. Again with economic factors being controlled for, the same patterns are present among Black and Latino students who attend well-financed, integrated schools (Jencks & Phillips, 1988).

Defining Culture

Discussions of “culture” are essential to understanding how minority students learn. If considerable strides are to be made with these students then America’s descriptions of these students need to change to reflect and include their individual culture in the education process.

What is culture? Culture, as defined by Webster's Dictionary, is the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought. Soriano (1995, p.67) defines cultural competence as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and values that . . . enable [people] to work effectively in a cross-cultural situation." So it realistically can be assumed that culture should have a significant affect on how ethnic children learn. However, instead of being recognized as having distinct cultures, "it is presumed that minority children are exactly like white children but just need a little help" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.9). Implicit cultural assumptions of Americans are often opposed to and imposed on those of other cultures. It was believed that the African American community was deficient because many of the values, beliefs, and behaviors exhibited were dissimilar to those of the White culture (Durodoye & Hildreth, 1995). The impositioning of the American culture on other cultures was also demonstrated in the acquiring of Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898 with the attempt to replace Spanish with English as the language of instruction on the island (Tatum, 1997) and demonstrated again when the English colonists declared their superiority over Native American cultures (Spring, 2005, p. 3). Therefore, this attitude is not surprising, seeing that the founders of education in America viewed anything outside of their culture as "wrong" or "evil" and any deviation from that way of life was met with strict disapproval and discipline.

Student Culture and School Environment

Why are schools that are successful in producing academically achieving middle-class white students cannot do the same when it comes to minority students? One contributing factor could be the attitude of some educators who believe that some minority students suffer from an inescapable cultural deficit. It also could be because the majority of strategies that are used are those that originated and have been proven on middle class white children. The strategies that work for that set of students are inherently based on the Euro-American culture of communication and the research that supports the cultural etiquettes, which regulate the appropriate expressions. The same holds true for other cultures. When these cultural etiquettes cross into an unfamiliar range, miscommunications occur and unless resolved through understanding, labeling results. I would venture to say that most of the time the strategies that work for White students are not likely to reach the majority of minority students who are not masters of the dual cultural etiquettes and those who have a "heavy" investment in their own culture. Additionally, the educational culture we operate in today is one that judges student potential (and sometimes worth) by tests. This is demonstrated in classrooms where educators "teach to the test." Rendering the labeling even more significant and justified in some teachers' eyes because he or she has "taught" the test. The "test" is seen as "judge and jury." And for those students (mostly minority) who are not prepared for this "court-date," the punishment is a life sentence of being labeled and sometimes a life spent in the special education track. I agree that assessment is important to determine level of learning, but various means (portfolio, oral etc...) can be used that are less intimidating and seen less as punishment. Furthermore, our government has adopted this process. As long as school districts perform according to the pre-set test standards, they

are eligible for federal funding. Dewey argued that education was the fundamental method of social progress and reform, and that all reforms that rested only upon the law of fear of punishment were transitory and futile.

Additionally, the culture of the school and faculty itself can deter from learning by indirectly fostering an environment of isolation toward students who are failing academically by not providing a means of recovery and by not utilizing cultural tools to assist in the learning process of some minority students. For example, in a *familistic* ethnicity such as the Hispanics, Tatum (1997) referenced a Latino program that took familism into account when designing instruction by infusing instruction with a sense of caring and support, and family-like relationships between teachers, administrators, and students. This is likely to increase academic achievement with this group of minorities as well as attitude changes about education. Also, this includes having avenues that allow “struggling” students to receive academic assistance from either a teacher or a tutor. An environment that celebrates only high achievement and not “simple progress” can also devalue students’ efforts and diminish motivation. This type of environment could also foster social isolation of students who do not highly achieve. This, in turn, could create a system of rebellion among progressing students and, worse, a separation within the community of “progressing only” students. “School environments that foster achievement, inclusion, and acceptance inherently remove many obstacles” (Carter, 2001, p.17) that include lack of parental support. Where academic success is the norm, parental presence is also. A school that uses counselors the way they should be used, as guidance for students, would create a culture of assistance and achievement. Schools that have counselors are free to tackle the influential social dynamics that are often associated with minority students and be more successful at pre-empting the pre-dropout behaviors as stated by Barton (2006) like frequent absenteeism, course failure, and negative attitudes. Some school systems restructure failing schools with an all minority faculty and staff to no avail. Although I advocate this intervention strategy in my own writings, it will only work if it is coupled with efforts to identify and understand students’ cultural influences on education and learning.

Finally, because school culture is often associated with White America, young minority students, who would otherwise succeed, are developing a destructive bias towards education. Academic achievement has come to be stigmatized and sometimes labeled as “acting White.” Increasingly young minority students, especially African American, are isolating their academically successful peers and labeling them as “sell outs.” However, this is not only prevalent in the African American community-other minority groups are conforming to “anti-intellectualism.” These are accomplished students of varied ethnicities who recognize the bias in education and it’s content. They also recognize the segregating effect it has against the “have and have-nots.” These students rebel against a system that shuts them out rather than recognizing and developing their potential (Cushman, 2006). Their peers do not view students who succeed at navigating these inherent obstacles as pioneers. Instead, they are viewed as selling out or conforming to the dominant culture. Behavior that falls within a perceived white cultural frame of reference is “acting white” and negatively sanctioned (Fordham & Ogbu as cited in Tatum, 1997). These are minority students who have high IQ’s and in

the past have demonstrated academic excellence in school as well as on standardized exams. Those who value their culture through awareness of its contributions to society and those who have had negative encounters with regards to cultural prejudices manifest their displeasure with the education system through low grades, low standardized exam scores, and an “in your face” cultural expressionism. They take on what Tatum (1997) calls an oppositional identity. It is this population that also demands an education system that recognizes the importance of cultural dynamics in learning. It is a cry for relevant material and skills to be developed by educators that can be used to improve their communities and decrease isolation of their culture by addressing ignorance of their culture.

The Effect of Culture on Learning

Educators/Administrators who are not culturally aware of African American children define their behavior or mannerisms as deviant and defiant and therefore do not know how to respond to them. Frequent office visits and suspensions occur translating into a loss in education time and increases in dropout rates. Children of color are subjected to far more suspensions and expulsions than their White counterparts (“Zero Tolerance,” 2006). According to the Department of Education, African-American children made up only 17% of public enrollment nationwide in 1998-99, but 32% of suspensions. White students made up 63% of enrollment and represented only 50% of suspensions and 50% of expulsions. “Excessive student mobility harms stable students as well by slowing down the pace of curriculum and creating emotional disturbances stemming from the often-sudden disappearance of classmates and friends” (Hartman, 2006, p. 21). Once the teachers become more sensitive to their ethnic students specific learning and communication styles and the impact they have on their ability to learn new information, they can adapt the implementation of the curriculum and their discipline techniques more to the students to ensure full access to equal education. Culturally deprived students are deprived because their learning experiences have been limited and compared to the dominant culture experiences. However, if learning is to occur, any additional learning experiences must expand and elaborate their own cultural experiences, not start new and independent patterns (Kephart, 1960, 1971). Such additional experiences must, therefore, be related carefully to what has been experienced before so that they will expand the existing generalizations rather than constitute a new and separate body of information. Educators then can use those experiences to create an individualized strategy for the student who is struggling (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006). For example, African Americans tend to be more effective within collaborative environments. Slavin (1977) has shown that African American academic achievement levels are higher when allowed to learn in cooperative groups. These elements can be attributed to the cultural norms and socialization influences of minority culture. The same can be inferred for Hispanics and Native Americans who place particular importance on the cultural value of familism. Familism (Marin and Marin as cited by Tatum 1997)

is the importance of the extended family as a reference group and as providers of social support, has been identified as a characteristic shared by most Hispanics

and Native Americans independent of their national background, birthplace, dominant language, or any other sociodemographic characteristic.

Additionally, unlike the American culture of directness in communication, African-American students, while conversing, may engage in other activities, such as head nodding and making responses to indicate listening (Randall-Davis, 1989). The communication style is more affective, emotional, and interpersonal (Sue & Sue, 1990) for African-Americans. Communication styles vary from one ethnicity to another to include language semantics and non-verbal cues.

Teacher Preparation

The other part of the problem lies with the educators and in the curricula of many of the teacher preparation programs around the country. Teacher training is central to the effectiveness of schools that service low-income students. However, because of the lack of institutionalized educational support for the varied approaches ethnic students may take to learning (Durodoye & Hildreth, 1995), and the inadequacy of current certification requirements of teacher training programs in training teachers for low-income students (Carter, 2001), the disparity between the academic achievement of ethnic and non-ethnic children is substantial. In preparing teachers to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population, teacher-trainer programs and local systems in services should include information on different cultures, learning styles, and how to teach using methods that recognize multicultural learners (Willis, 1993). According to Ladson-Billings (1994, p.15), “the pedagogical instruction that many teachers of minority students receive from their teacher education programs, from their administrators and from “conventional wisdom” have led to the intellectual death of these students.” This intellectual death results in school dropout early in the education process (Hale, 2001). This is validated by the current high rate of school drop out in middle school years.

The multifaceted nature of the American education system highlights the need for educators and administrators to be aware of cultural differences as they relate to learning (Durodoye & Hildreth, 1995). Empirical investigations that measure critical outcomes associated with pedagogy are needed in minority classrooms. Studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of instructional strategies considerate of minority cultural dynamics are the true “carriers” of the solution of academic achievement. In today’s teacher education programs, teachers are to inundated in theory. Instead of learning how to teach, teachers are taught how children learn. As it turns out, in the classroom, this developmental psychology is not much of an asset in the everyday task of teaching (Carter, 2001). There is very little experimentation with instructional strategies that produce results for varied students. Most of the time, scenarios are created using one strategy will an ideal audience. However, when these teachers walk into a “live” classroom full of students who do not look like or respond like those in their teacher education classroom two things happen. First the teacher panics and loses control of the class for the year and the student’s educational opportunities are compromised in that class because of the limited teaching skills of the classroom teacher. Additionally, there is very little reliable literature on preparing teachers for diversity (Grant & Secada, 1990) so this compounds

the problem for minority students. Madhere (1989) proposes that preferential treatment given to the differences between the African American and White intellects has negatively influenced information in the areas of learning styles and cognitive behavior because of its traditionally mono-dimensional focus that excludes the areas of significance to ethnic minority cultures. Consequently, little data exists on teacher preparation specifically for African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). I will continue Dr. Ladson-Billings observations and state that the same is true for Latino and Native American students. Consequently, teachers go into classrooms treating all their students the same way, thinking they are being fair. On the contrary, teachers who do this are failing to recognize the individuality of their students' culture and learning styles and are not instructing each student with equality. Durodoye and Hildreth (1995) defines learning style as the composite of characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment. Additionally, it is influenced and molded by home, school, and society. A student's learning style is the "address" to his cognitive promoters in the realm of learning. Not taking into consideration a student's learning style when planning instruction, delivery method, and experiences with the new material is like delivering a shut off notice to the wrong address. You can't expect the bill to be paid, at least not on time. So often American trained educators negate to identify their students learning styles and by default teach according to their preferred learning style. If a teacher is a visual learner and used that style of learning to acquire, understand, and interact with information, the tendency is to manifest that style of learning in teaching methods and especially delivery methods. Consequently, students who are not visual learners suffer both from the lack of understanding and relevancy. As it relates to minority students, Anderson (1988) contends that as the cultures of ethnically distinct communities vary, so do the differences in their learning styles.

The Implications of Poor Teaching Strategies

Poor and misdirected teaching and learning conditions often convince students that they cannot learn. The inadequate training of teachers is the single most debilitating force at work in American classrooms today (Carter, 2001). Therefore, teachers must assess each student's learning style and prepare their instruction accordingly. The "blanket" or "one style covers all" teaching that is prevalent in urban schools does not address the individuality of students, and failures are inevitable. In addition, the field independent style of American education that views part of the whole, use analytical tasks, is self-directed, and impersonal is in direct contrast to the field dependent learning styles of some minority students whose strengths are based on cultural dynamics like socialism, cooperative learning, and familiar tactile and visual stimuli. I will acknowledge here the attempts at using cooperative learning, but it's success varies not because of a deficiency in the strategies themselves but because teachers apply them shallowly (Lasley & Matczynski as cited by Tomlinson, 1999). Furthermore, minority students tend to perform in accordance with an authority figure's indications of confidence or doubt in their abilities and react better to material that is relational (Anderson, 1988; Castaneda & Gray, 1974; Hernandez, 1989). The omissions of these factors in the classroom can serve as a "two-headed devil." One head is the educator who

defines the worth and future students by their inability to perform using avenues that are not developed (their strength). Conflicts often arise when students are required to perform in a manner or in an arena that is not facilitative to their styles of learning (Durodoye & Hildreth, 1995). The other hand is the student who adopts an attitude of inferiority that leads to academic failure, cultural denial, and low self-esteem with devastating long-term effects. Translated into the classroom, the African American student may find his or her views in direct conflict with those of the school (Anderson, 1988; Bennett, 1990; Cohen, 1976; Shade, 1982 as cited in Durodoye & Hildreth, 1995). Translated into societal implications, minority children of all ethnicities are being educated in schools that deliver the girls to public assistance and the boys to unemployment and incarceration (Hale, 2001). Let me say here that in no way am I “grouping” all minority students in any one category. I am only stating that, according to my experience and research, these are the dominant cognitive processes.

For many years, a number of researchers have recognized the significance of the link between identity and academic performance (Noguero, 2001). The subjective positioning of students has been found to have bearing on motivation and persistence (Newman 1992), relationships with peer groups and teachers (Stienberg 1996; Phelan et al 1998), and overall self-esteem (Williams, 1996). Additionally, the “if” teaching style that is prevalent in urban and rural schools does not address minority students. Some examples are “if they had this” or “if they lived here” or “if their parents did this.” Too often teachers find excuses for not believing in the capabilities of all students and for not structuring a demanding class for them (Landsman, 2006). Landsman continues by stating that minority students need creative teachers who will find paths around the obstacles that prevent economically disadvantaged students from getting a rich, varied education.

School systems that are successful with minority students are causing students to develop a positive link between identity and academic performance. Every single one of them believes that children of all races and income levels can meet high academic standards. They put the voices and experiences of their students at the center of instruction and allow the students, who many times have very little control over their lives, to feel what it is like to be in control. When students feel that they have a say in their education and that education is not something “done to them,” they become engaged (Landsman, 2006). According to Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch (2006, p.8), to develop effective strategies to address the needs of struggling students, educators need opportunities to work together. The faculty should work together to transform students with little history of school success into young scholars who are engaged in doing academic work (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006, p.8) that is engaging, challenging, and relevant to their lives. The point is for the students of all minority cultures to learn that it feels better to succeed than to fail. There is no “dumbing-down” of the material and curriculum. Often times it is very complex, but there is compassion, patience and quality assistance for them.

The Disparity in Special Education

I'm not one of those researchers who base my statements on generalized observations about minority culture, but one who realizes that there are cultural dynamics that impede the acceptance of a traditional Euro-American system of education. Because educators and education leaders are deeming this factor insignificant, minority children are being over-represented in special education classes and placed in low ability tracks. When cultures clash, no matter what the cause, things will sooner or later evolve into a 'them' and 'us' environment. The Office of Special Education reported in the 2000-2001 school year that African-American students age 6 to 21 account for 20.2 percent of the special education population, yet they only account for 14.8 percent of the general population. I am predicting this trend will continue with Latino students. They are the second largest and the fastest growing minority in the United States population. Hopefully this disparity will change because of the updates being made to IDEA. The merger of NCLB (No Child Left Behind) and IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act) have made it illegal for educators to label students as having a Learning Disability (LD) without first providing substantial empirically based reading methodologies in a regular classroom. Incidentally, the number one reason for referrals to special education is reading and the number two reason is discipline. My experiences in the classroom tell me that they go "hand-in-hand." Often students and especially African American students will mask this reading problem with behavior problems. The African American culture teaches children to never appear defeated. So the students would rather be dismissed from class for a behavior issue that may be "cool" in front of his peers than to be "teased" as having a reading problem. The pressures of NCLB caused an overcrowding of special education with students that hindered schools efforts to meet AYP. Before the revisions, educators who could not improve students' academic success in the classroom referred them to special education without using exhaustive and varied intervention strategies. Maybe the only intervention that was needed was an adjustment in the delivery method of the information to match the preferred learning style of the student. Furthermore, the formula used to diagnose students for special education was flawed. If you refer a high school student to special education who had been identified as having a reading deficiency, the comparison of an IQ test with an achievement exam to yield the two standard deviation qualifier would be an unfair tool to use since the student probably had trouble reading the qualifying tools. I support these new changes in the law because, as Thaddeus Lott, E.D stated, "the research supports that using a direct systematic approach, students are able to move from grade to grade on the same level as their counterparts, no matter what their socioeconomic status."

The NCLB Bus

Finally, imagine the education system as a school bus that's meant for all but is currently running late to meet the President at the White House. The people on the bus have an interest in keeping the bus moving. The people trying to board the bus, not aware of the tardiness, have an interest in slowing and stopping the bus so they can board. The people on the bus state that under normal circumstances, they would love to stop and pick up the people who want to board. However doing so may cause them even greater

tardiness. However, if the door of the bus is opened and you can somehow get on without being killed, you can go meet the President also. The people on the bus are white students, educators, administrators, parents and policy makers. The people wanting to get on the bus and those risking their lives to get on the bus are minority students, educators, administrators, parents and policy makers. Those who are able to board the bus through creative means are still behind the ones on the bus who have had time to relax, ponder their agenda, and cement their place on the bus. What's the solution? The solution is obvious: Stop the bus! However, political and personal agendas prevent the stopping of the bus for fear of those boarding the bus may interfere with their objectives. The catch, however, in this illustration is that under the philosophy of No Child Left Behind, the President will not speak to anyone unless all who want to come are present. In order for progression in the American education system to proceed, there must be representation of all cultures and people at the event. The arrival of only certain classes and ethnicities is not enough to keep American students and people competitive with other nations in the future. There has to be an environment of seamless connection of agendas of all cultures that contain "built-in" mechanisms of cultural inclusiveness and tolerance.

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