

## ***Why are there no democratic schools created by African Americans? Synopsis of 2008 discussion with recommendations for IDEC***

I presented on the topic of how particular progressive educators, in this case African American, believe there are limitations and drawbacks to democratic education (as defined by the majority of those attending the conference) with respect to African American children and families.

I explained that Blacks can't politically and educationally "afford" free schools. To be Black in America is to be conscious of being Black and of Whites at all times. Black people do not have resources and power to protect themselves if they fail. There is risk involved in allowing Black children to exercise their freedom (choosing what to learn) in school. The consequences of the "experimenting" turning out poorly are devastating.

Blacks, a minority still at-risk, can not be as "creative" as Whites. They can not fall back on "the majority Eurocentric system" as well as White children can if their time at a free school is unproductive.

Another way of looking at the situation is that White children are advantaged from the start and can well be more "free" or leisurely with learning and schooling, thus taking more chances. They won't pay as high a price as Black children, who may never catch up to their White peers, if they do not get the basics.

**Most of the debate concerning the possibilities of democratic education for African American students concerns the definition of liberal: Those whose beliefs include striving for a society based on maximum individual freedom and autonomy. Both traditional and current democratic schools center on the White middle-class value of individual self-validation through self-reliance, autonomy, and achievement. These values can go against the more collective (less individualistic) value system of African American and Latino cultures where learning, in many instances, has no value apart from transforming societal relations and confronting other social/economic justice issues that affect their community.**

Using *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition* (Payne & Strickland, 2008) I showed progressive liberal democratic education orientations, "predicated on an optimistic view of America's racial future" (p. 65), presuppose "an elastic, democratic social order in which there are no artificial barriers against the social mobility of the individual. In such a society classes are assumed to be highly fluid and there can be no such thing as caste" (p. 92). Since this is not the case for students of color in America, the more collectivist values do not stress individual achievement and independence from others, but encourage/enable individual achievement toward *social change for the benefit of the group—education/learning for liberation in order to change the current power structure and liberate those oppressed by it*. Generally, free/democratic schools in America are a White middle-class phenomenon, thus students have no stake, per se, in social justice issues because they do not suffer from these injustices.

I suggested if IDEC is to branch out to a variety of families to share the intent and potential of democratic education, "members" must make sure their schools have a realistic understanding of the limitations of liberal orientations/values (individual self-validation through self-reliance, autonomy, and achievement) for citizenship in a global society.

Using the arguments of one Black progressive educator, Dr. Lisa Delpit (*Other people's children*, 1995), I asserted popular progressive "child-centered" or "holistic" ideas supported by many IDEC

members can leave some children of color unable to read/write—without the “codes/language of power” necessary for success in American society. Most free schoolers come from middle-class families and acquire the language of power (Standard English) naturally at home. Students of color, most of whom are not middle class and whose home language is Black English--a variety of Standard English (Alim, *Talkin Black Talk*, 2007)--may not learn to read, write or speak Standard English without teacher-centered direct instruction.

As well, I explained Delpit’s concerns over what she sees as the narrowness of progressive’s beliefs about democratic education: students are at the center of determining learning. She claims discussions among progressives in the 70s and 80s left Black progressive educators out. Their White peers did not listen--hear the voice of Blacks who wanted to be involved in creating progressive initiatives--especially with respect to reading. Thus, African American teachers retreated from progressive educational settings, feeling obligated to critique such concepts as open classrooms and whole language.

On the whole, White progressives must realize that although they believe in their ideas and that they work for many, there is another voice, another reality.

Finally, I used Lisa Delpit’s arguments to show that progressive educators of either culture are in a unique position to create what she calls, “A collaboration that will be the most powerful yet in education” and insists it is the White progressives who must reach out and negotiate a collaboration which will:

- put all issues on the table, creating a dialogue with each side seeking to understand those perspectives that may differ most from theirs;
- bring an understanding of one’s own power (or assumed privilege due to being in the majority);
- encourage Whites to not be afraid to raise questions about discrimination and voicelessness with people of color and to listen to (not hear) what they say.

This will, Delpit says, help each teachers and each child.

To help such collaboration, I discussed what both Dr. Delpit and IDEC have in common:

- drugs for ADHD/ADD: Families of color, if shown otherwise, will denounce drugging children so they fit into the tiny square of the “sit still, be quiet, and listen” classroom;
- particular families of color, if shown otherwise, will want to provide a free school atmosphere for their child;
- as well as the language of power, students of color must know/be able to use the language of democracy—the democratic habits of mind for success in the mainstream;
- both Delpit and IDEC believe there is no one best way to learn (Delpit, p.132);
- both seek a variety of sound progressive methods in teaching reading;
- both emphasize the lives of students outside of school so as to recognize strengths and respect their home culture;
- both see the need for critiquing public schools: politics, curriculum, methods, modes of assessment, and definitions of intelligence. IDEC educators, like progressive Black educators, tend to uses/promote internal sources of knowledge where students reflect on their own experiences/own ability to asses and create ideas (Delpit, p. 117); and
- both are open to influencing the many gatekeepers to open their doors, pushing for a variety of codes.

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