

BARRIERS TO DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

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BARRIERS TO DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

Potential barriers to democratic education (as defined in this paper) for African American children: A discussion of various general aspects of African American culture and experiences; and, the critical concerns of African American teachers about progressive forms of education

This appendix intends to review 5 possible general areas/factors that this paper argues inhibit or do not encourage African Americans to embrace democratic education practices with respect to their children and their public schools.

1. Lack of democratic experiences (J. Rosario, personal communication, May 2, 2007)

The poor/disenfranchised are typically not the recipients of democratic practice, especially at work where they must follow orders. They tend to be manipulated by others and treat each other in an authoritarian way. Power is what counts, and the more power you have the more you can manipulate the other.

Child rearing practices (J. Rosario, personal communication, May 2, 2007)

The conservatism typically tied to child rearing practices among the poor/disenfranchised is based on the belief that children's role in the family is mostly to listen, do what they are told, and respect their elders. Having been raised that way, parents tend to do likewise--choosing more authoritarian approaches.

2. Democracy and the Black church

How democratic is the institution of the church? Does this influence family/school practices? How much power do/should members have in church decisions? How much does the Bible (i.e., "Spare the rod, spoil the child") play in the child-rearing practices? What about the gender politics of the church? Do both men and women proscribe to the subordination of women in the household and so the body of the church?

When do the sheep lead the shepherd? (Lewis, 2007)

The pastor answers to the will of God, not the opinions of church members. Ephesians 4:11 explains church protocols/order of influence: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and then teachers. Bishops, elders, deacons are elected/ ordained by council of apostles/prophets who are instructed directly by the Holy Ghost (Acts 6:1-8). Congregational involvement (voting/ deliberating misconduct of a pastor, church decisions) is not necessary since the oversight of officers, by a properly established protocol, does this.

Democracy in the church (Perry, 2007)

There is a history of top-down decision making in the black church. "Dictator pastors" run their church as a personal enterprise. Although deacons/trustees have Biblical power, it has been scaled back by "rubberstamp cliques" with personal loyalty to pastor. Churches need "New England town meetings" where congregations would have a say in all major decisions.

3. General conjectures from black educators

In June of 2007, Dr. Eugene White, superintendent of the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) and supported by a majority of the IPS school board, mandated that all students (K-12) wear school uniforms (Gammill, 2007) and enforced the requirement with a zero tolerance policy enforced by the creation of 21 alternative

schools (Tailoring teaching sites, 2007) for the refugees of the policy. Some of the reasons (Hendricks & Loflin, 2007) for the policies were:

- Urban minority children lack discipline, self-control, self-respect, and regard for others.
- Many come from one parent families and have little supervision. The atmosphere at home is not strict enough. There are either no guidelines or children/youth do not follow the ones set up for them.
- Today's "Hip Hop" generation have never been told, "No!" They have been given too much freedom—freedom to fail, do wrong, or ruin their lives. Thus, it is up to the school to provide the "missing" structure students need, and even cry out for.
- Also, the school/classroom control, sternness, serious, zero tolerance/no nonsense approach is necessary to show children/youth/families and the world how serious they (the IPS school leaders) are about education
- The more strict relations with children associated with control and discipline at school are necessary to insure the safety of all concerned.

Although some educators disagree (Mercogliano, 1998; Mintz, 2000; Meegan, 2003), *this orientation implies a fear that a democratic classroom/school climate, especially during the early grades and in an urban setting, is too permissive, and would be nothing but chaos.* Also review Appendix A, p. 98.

4. "...there is risk involved in exercising our freedom..."

According to most African Americans, they must be conscious of being black and of whites at all times. Social activist Stephanie Patterson (S. Patterson, personal communication, May 11, 2007) notes, "African American parents know their kids are not free, white and 21. Regardless, you are still Black in the US. We do not have resources and power to protect ourselves if we fail. We can't 'afford' free schools. The consequences of failing are devastating."

"We're still black, a minority still at-risk; we can't be as 'creative' as whites. We can't fall back on 'the majority Eurocentric system' as well as white children do if their time at a free school is unproductive. 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 minorities, who may never catch up to their white peers, if they don't get the basics."

5. Democratic education from an African American cultural-political perspective

The aspects of democratic education concerning "Democratic processes, classroom/school governance, civic education" as well as "Freedom to choose, learning without compulsion" (See definitions of Democratic Education, p. 16) can be interpreted/viewed differently depending on culture, political-economic power, and/or minority status.

Discussions over the last 20 years inspired by Dr. Lisa Delpit (1995) have been critical of the more liberal educational concepts of holistic education. Democratic climates where student rights, choices, and power over "what, when, how, where, and with whom they learn," along with the "freedom to fail" are not seen as

empowering, but that which have the potential to hamper or prevent the success of black children In public schools.

Literacy as a part of a larger political entity

Delpit's critical concern with democratic practices (as defined in the paper on p. 16) is based on her view of literacy which she sees as much more than reading and writing, but a part of a larger political entity or "discourse." All discourses are not equal in status, she notes, some are more socially dominate, carrying with them social power and access to economic success.

Primary discourses are learned at home. Secondary discourses, learned at school, are attached to institutions or groups outside the home.

Due to the culture of those who have power in America, the culture of the public school system is based on the culture and discourse of the upper and middle classes. There are codes or rules for participating in the culture of power around concepts relating to linguistic forms and communicative strategies such as ways of talking, writing, dressing, and interacting.

Both middle-class white and working-class black homes teach (a) culture to their children. The issue with Delpit is that the culture middle-class homes teach happens to be the same as the school's culture, which is the culture of power (book smarts) and its language (standard English) reinforced by teachers who are themselves middle-class.

The culture black children learn is not only their home culture and its language, (i.e. Black English) but that which is needed to survive in their community (street smarts). Neither is reinforced at school by middle-class teachers.

Consequently, certain children do well in school automatically because they grow up with the culture of power. Black children do perfectly well in learning their home culture, but may have problems, (for various reasons which will be discussed) with the school's culture that carries the codes or rules of power.

It is better to be illiterate and white than illiterate and black

For these reasons Delpit is concerned with public schools which are not able to teach minorities how to read, write and cipher. And, she is especially critical of progressive methods that, through giving students choices over learning options, can set black children up for failure. Following Stephanie Patterson's concerns (see above), African Americans cannot afford to have the liberty to fail because of the devastating consequences associated with not having the language of power. It is common knowledge that many prison inmates are illiterate or have no high school diploma.

Delpit argues that popular "progressive" and "child-centered" methods, unintended or not, seem to leave some children of color unable to read/write--not acquiring the "codes of power" of the mainstream which are necessary for economic success in this society. She implies the following characteristics of progressive education may be detrimental to African Americans:

- “Unstructured” open classrooms with too much freedom
- Children, not teachers, in control of their own learning
- Waiting for children to read when they are ready
- Holistic processes emphasizing expression and not correctness, which tend to postpone teaching black students the basics of communication

Well-meaning, but misguided liberalism: Literacy as a political necessity for African Americans

Part of Lisa Delpit’s rationale for being wary of giving black children “freedom” is the concept of liberalism which she defines as beliefs that include striving for a society based on maximum individual freedom and autonomy. Although it is not with these beliefs per se that she is concerned, it is their application in the classroom: Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal of education is to become autonomous, to develop fully who we are in the classroom setting without arbitrary, outside standards forced on students.

Child-centered classrooms are needed, progressives maintain, in order to allow a democratic state of free, autonomous, empowered adults who--by practicing choice/responsibility in school--are prepared for American-style self-government.

Of course, Delpit says, this is a reasonable goal for people whose children are already participants in the culture of power, who have already internalized its codes and bring this “cultural capital” to school assuring their success.

The view of black students and white teachers toward power and authority in the classroom

According to Dr. Delpit, black children expect an authority figure to act with authority. When teachers act like “chums” the message is sent that this adult has no authority and children act accordingly.

Authority is earned by personal efforts and exhibited by personal characteristics. The “authoritative” person gets to be a teacher because they are authoritative. Thus teachers must consistently prove the characteristics that give them authority. African American teachers who are strict do well in “controlling” urban students and students are proud of their teacher’s “meanness” Delpit says.

On the other hand, many middle-class, in particular, white teachers expect respect/compliance simply because they are teachers; it comes with the role. They view a display of power or authority, or exhibiting one’s personal power as an expert source is disempowering students. To make any rules or expectations explicit is to act against liberal principles and thus limiting the freedom and autonomy of students.

Does this imply urban students will view teachers who ask, “What do you think?” “What shall we do?” or “Let’s vote on it!” as “weak” and without the authority they need respect? What does this imply?

Classroom cultural misunderstandings hurt everyone, especially black males students in special education

To Delpit, this creates a situation where asking students their opinion or having them decide/vote an issue or curricular question may be seen as a weakness. As well, if teachers give directions without an authoritative stance and voice, Black students may not obey. These students are deemed uncooperative or

rebellious and may suffer labeling or put in special education. In this scenario, both the teacher and the student can suffer.

Considering teaching Standard English and involving urban Black students in democratic processes: Threats to traditional family hierarchy?

To the extent that the language taught at school (Standard English) is different from and may challenge the language black working class families/students (Black English) use at home, to the same extent the language of democracy may challenge the traditional more authoritarian child-rearing practices or parent/child relations of these same working-class families.

Unlike middle-class homes, both black and white, which may be more naturally democratic, having students from black working-class homes control their learning can represent a clash of cultures/climates with respect to attitudes toward adult authority (Turnball, 2007).

One of Delpit's issues with liberals: Learning to read at grade level by the end of the 3rd grade

The progressive idea of letting children learn to read when they are ready scares many African Americans. The fact that the policy state officials use to forecast the number of beds needed in future prisons is based on the number of children who cannot read at grade level at the end of the 3rd grade (Barr and Parrett, 2001) concerns everyone.

Black children reading at grade level becomes a political necessity for black Americans

Delpit wants to ensure that public schools provide black children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that allow them to succeed in the "white man's" larger society. What may be more important, minorities can not affect the change which allows them to truly progress without the skills which enable a critique of the status quo in the mainstream's own terms and worldview. *Delpit's points make sense.*

Conclusion: Rationale for adult authority in the classroom

If African American families and educators decline/resist having their children practice certain aspects of democratic education (as defined in this paper, p. 16), it would not be a critique of Civics/citizenship education or even traditional student councils/government, where only particular students are involved. It does imply a concern over the direct input of black children into rules of conduct, curriculum, and assessing.

This view of black urban children, due to the reason listed above (unstructured home life, personal discipline) maintains they may lack the qualities to handle freedom. This implies black children will choose the easy way out or innocently disregard the importance of education, to their own detriment, if given the opportunity, because they do not realize what is at stake. This provides the reason for traditional strict guidance and direction from adults whose role/responsibility is seen as one that gives direction/guidance, sometimes through the use of rewards/punishments, to children whose role/responsibility it is to do as they are told. Is this the rationale behind the disciplinary climate at the various KIPP schools? See www.kipp.org.

Recommendations

1. Expand the language of power to include the language of democracy

Delpit's point that African Americans must have the language of power to access the culture of power and that progressive school climates may be a barrier to the acquiring this language and other key characteristics is solid. Yet, there may be aspects of progressive democratic education ideas--namely, schools exposing black children and youth, as future citizens, to experiences addressing the democratic habits of mind which expand the language of power to include skills and abilities regarding "how the American political system (of power) works" and "how to work the system."

Aspects of democratic education that involve shared decision-making regarding classroom/school as a community can model for students what happens in the larger community outside of school. This prepares them for the democratic life after graduation, using the civic engagement skills honed in school (Beatty, 2004) to make sure they are treated fairly and get equal opportunities (Cooks & Epstein, 2000).

Public schools seem the logical place to acquire the aspects of both the language and the politics of (mainstream) power. This discussion begs many questions and compels obvious answers concerning American democratic society:

- Need schools take into account the less democratic home culture of minorities and working-class students when being student centered or democratic?
- Can democratic schools motivate black children to learn Standard English, the language of power?
- How do we fight the class bias some educators might have to not provide students with the empowering experiences of democracy?
- How do we separate the well-meaning, but potentially disempowering educational experiences of student controlled learning experiences from those that have the potential to help these same students learn the language of power and what this paper argues, includes the language of democracy—the democratic habits of mind, a willingness to deliberate, an attitude of mutual respect (McDermott, 1999)?
- So, when and how do public schools provide democratic experiences for children with more collectivist (see p. 67) cultures?
 - What is the balance?
 - What does a culturally competent democratic classroom and school look like?

2. Challenge Delpit's worldview: Re-thinking living and learning in a global era

A lot has happened since Prof. Delpit's 1995 book, *Other People's Children*. The explosion of the Internet and the democratic (open to anyone) global youth-oriented culture of You Tube, Face Book, and My Space are profoundly challenging the status quo . Global hip-hop culture (McBride, 2007; Ogbur, 2007) with a global co-identity, language, and economy hark to a non-traditional future. The world has virtual "Google" classrooms where children in Guatemalan or Nigerian villages can turn on their little green plastic self-powered laptops to learn about most anything or establish E-mail correspondence with local or world-class

experts. The point is, due to the *possible ramifications* of 6 plus billion people who are connected instantly via a very democratic Internet “culture” have not only challenged the *status quo*, but these ramifications are actually competing with the traditional hegemony of Delpit’s American “culture (and language) of power.”

Not only are there challenges to the hegemony of Standard English (Mahiri, 2004), but due to current global culture even the power of the written word itself is being questioned as the only way of communicating. What is called “New Literacy Studies” (DeBose, 2007) and the idea of media literacy seek to complement and supplement “text-centric” communications (Loflin, 2005).

For example, Delpit’s warns, “To imply that it doesn’t matter how you talk or how you write is to ensure ultimate failure” would be legitimate if African Americans were “stuck” in America—but they are not. They are world citizens in/of a global cyber world.

Simply put, there are other “languages” as well as cultures of power—namely Indian or Chinese—which are challenging American dominance. As well there are, due to the opportunity via the Internet, multiple, multiple ways to make a living or being of influence without “an education” and limited only by one’s imagination and initiative.

The global availability of other skills, experiences, ideas, and worldviews allow conceiving, perhaps for the first time in human history, a self-created life/community on its own terms, thus an expansion of non-traditional definitions and/or ways of success. From an opportunity to (a) self-publish a story, book, melody, album, movie, idea, or (b) maintain a blog professing a whole new global philosophy to (c) marketing a homemade fruitcake to over 4,000,000,000 potential customers* (all without the need of permission from a gatekeeper) simply neutralizes the power of traditional American gatekeeper criteria Delpit fears. *(All one needs is .000025% of 4 billion to have 100,000 possible responses. The world population is 6.60222 billion.)

It may no longer matter *how* you talk or *how* you write, but that you act

In a global village, it may no longer matter *how* you talk or *how* you write, but that you *act* (be a player). Inaction, not a failure to assimilate and learn protocol, will ensure ultimate failure. It can be as easy as turning on a computer at home and connecting to the world...wide web where there is a world of choices; *this is freedom*.

This is not to disrespect the American culture/language of power (after all, English is the language of global commerce), but it is to assert that this culture/language is no longer the “acquire or else” endgame that Delpit so dreads—a situation that sets up the socio-economic suicide for African Americans who reject traditional public schooling.

Perhaps the 20th century world that Delpit inherited (1900-1940) and experienced (1940-1995) and was so concerned with, where being “uneducated” limited access to status and economic rewards, is not longer the only world, the only gateway. African Americans can simply go over or around, or through enhancing the present by building a globally-linked community on their terms; *this is self-determination*.

A democratic school is one that above all, tries to enable people to create their own world collectively rather than to fit into one that is created for them.

-- Michael Engel

This is why it may now be “assuring ultimate failure” to assimilate and accept things the way they are. In fact, if and when African Americans, or any minority, face traditional barriers, they may now meet these challenges by creating alternatives (both local and global) or find others (global minorities) who have established new paradigms and seek collaboration or co-opt these new forms.

Globalization oriented and education professor Dr. Suarez-Orozco (2005, p. 211) puts it this way:

Children growing up today are more likely than in any other generation to face a life of working, networking, loving, and living with others from various national, linguistic, religious, and racial background.

The Tensta classroom (a multi-class/multi-national student school in Sweden) is a microcosm of tomorrow. Students are challenged to engage and work through competing and contrasting cultural models and social practices, adjusting to and accommodating differences in such areas as kinship, gender, language, and the complicated interrelationship of race, ethnicity, and inequality. Trans-cultural communication, understanding, empathy, collaboration are no longer ideals.

It is not as simple as the one-way assimilation accommodation of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious minorities learning the codes of the majority society in order to get along and get ahead. (Italics mine)

3. Challenge teachers/policy makers to support a group’s right to maintain its own language style

Delpit wants to influence many gatekeepers to open their doors, pushing for a variety of codes. Consequently, Delpit argues the liberation of poor students and linguistic minorities starts with accepting their culture and language and helping them to build on it. Educators must view Black English not as a vernacular, or a sub-English, not a dialect, slang, or ungrammatical, but a variety of English—a systematic rule-governed variety of English (DeBose, 2007). As well, Alim (2007) suggests educators use hip-hop “language” and culture to teach regular cannons.

4. Challenge progressives to take seriously that African American educators see child-centered and holistic approaches as excuses for not teaching any skills, setting up for minorities for failure

With respect to what is defined in this paper as an aspect of democratic education--student controlled learning choices about what, where, when, how, and with whom they learn--the possible negative social-political consequences to black children Delpit points out have the potential to discourage this type of democratic climate in public schools. This is also based on the historical distrust of the public schools to misuse the education of American blacks (Kunjufu, 1985; Woodson, 1990; Watkins, 2001) and concerns about recent graduation rates.

For example, according to the Schott Foundation, the 2004 graduation rate for black males was 42%. (The Indianapolis Public Schools rate was an astonishing 21%--a national low!) Blacks make up 17% of students, yet they are 41% of special education placements, 85% of which are males (Holzman, 2006).

5. Contemplate the 3 real issues: How to communicate across cultures, the fundamentals of power, and whose voice gets heard in determining what is best for children of color (Delpit, 1995)

As America's public schools and classrooms become more democratic, America's democratic promise will demand that the issues of cross-cultural communication, power, and whose voice(s) gets heard be faced openly and fairly. Public schools must honestly look at the implications of Dr. Delpit's concerns.

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