Final Paper

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# Themes and Ideas across Semester

Culture as a “shared and negotiated system of meaning informed by knowledge” (Lassiter, 2009, p. 38) that is practiced and interpreted by people through their experiences and practiced behavior is a lens through which humans view the world. Because the humans are complex, ubiquitous, and chaotic, their cultures become their reflection (p. 53). The complexity of the concept of culture lies in that lens, as the human view of the world is colored by distinct sets of beliefs and behaviors particular to their established culture. As Lassiter points out, culture gives meaning to the artifacts or behaviors produced by humans. That meaning is not born overnight and remains fluid as the cultures evolve throughout the years. Culture is not only tied to a country or a continent. Within a country, there is a multitude of cultures that get interwoven into the quilt of diversity. Humans become a part of some cultures while staying distant from others. The shared beliefs and values of certain groups still constitute culture even though others might not accept them. American schools encompass a multitude of cultures in their buildings and serve as a tool of helping students become a part of the mainstream culture. However, in this process, students lose their cultural, gender, or linguistic individuality. Multicultural education is first and foremost an educator awareness of differences students bring to the educational table and the subsequent respect for those differences that constitute the salad bowl of American culture.

Banks (2009) notes that multicultural education is based on at least three things: a concept, and educational reform movement, and a process (p.3). The concept of multicultural education promotes the idea that education should be equal for all: girls and boys, U.S.-born and immigrant children, gays and straight, with the list going on. During the early grades, the achievement of girls and boys as well as students of color is relatively equal to the one of their counterparts. However, as the students proceed with their schooling career, the institutional characteristics of schools deny them the opportunity to succeed equally. An example that Banks uses is the achievement of girls and boys in mathematics and science. Achieving equally in early grades, the girls start lagging behind boys in achievement scores considerably as they grow older. Girls are less likely to be encouraged than boys to participate in math or science classroom discussions, with their confidence in sciences dwindling down. However, the treatment of girls is not always stifling to their educational achievement. Boys are less likely to be disciplined than girls and they are more likely to be classified as learning disabled (Banks, 2009, p. 3). Teacher perceptions of acceptable behavior and acceptable gender achievement in certain content areas stifle the achievement of students who fall outside the accepted norm.

Students of color do not fare any better than representatives of gender. Banks (2009) asserts that the longer the students of color remain in school, the more their achievement lags behind their White counterparts. Angela Valenzuela (1999) identified the schooling structures as a framework for subtractive schooling. Valenzuela asserts that American schools reproduce immigrant youth as a “monolingual, English-speaking, ethnic minority” trapped between their Mexican identity and the pressure to function competently in American mainstream (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 3). The schooling structures that are supposed to help youth develop skills “for the attainment of the American dream” instead become subtractive and strip away important cultural and social resources from students (p. 3). In her work, Valenzuela distinguishes between students who just recently immigrated and the students who are second or third generation U.S.-born Mexicans. This distinction is very important to note, as generational status plays an important rule in individual schooling experiences of the youth, ethnical identities students take, and their criticism or appreciation for educational opportunities.

Ellis (2008) also promotes similar themes in his book “To Change Them Forever”, one of the most prominent ones reflecting the use of education as a way to assimilate the Indians into the mainstream society. On a larger scale, the issue of education as a cultural assimilation vehicle within the framework of the melting pot American environment emerges. In comparison to extermination or forced submission of the native peoples, the federal government viewed education as a peaceful tool for incorporating diverse nationalities into the mainstream Anglo-Saxon society. This “peaceful” tool bears great significance and is even more destructive to the individuality of each culture and its traditions and customs. This aspect of schooling fits within the framework of subtractive assimilation into the mainstream society, stripping vital cultural and linguistic resources from students.

These two examples from the readings raise a question about the relationships between educators and students, with overcoming ethnocentrism playing an important role. Teachers need to become more open to understanding the culture and practices of others. The conceptual tool or cultural relativity plays an important role here. Cultural relativity helps people view the culture of others through the lens of those who “create, maintain, and experience it” (Lassiter, 2009, p. 61). Ethnologists strive to develop their cultural relativity and immerse in the communities of their study in order to understand their culture. Lassiter uses Bourgeois’ work with inner-city drug dealers as an example of developing cultural relativity and overcoming the temptation of judging the culture of selling crack. However, in their quest of developing cultural relativity and not being judgmental, people can end up on the extreme side of cultural relativity in not judging or taking a stance on certain practices that infringe on the rights of women, minorities, or humanity as a whole. Lassiter in his work cites various cases of genocide that show violent behavior in humans towards their peers as a quite common phenomenon throughout the history of the mankind. Global community would view not taking action against genocide unacceptable. Even though ethnological studies of genocidal cultural practices shield light on the belief systems of the members of these cultures, it becomes very important to negotiate the morality and acceptable moral practices on a global scale. Lassiter’s example of forums such as the World Court at The Hague provides insight into how different peoples come together to identify what is considered wrong and right. Some might consider slavery as a natural order of human experience while others deem it unacceptable. The fourth article of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares, “[no] one should be held in slavery or servitude” (as quoted in Lassiter, 2009, p. 62). However, slavery still exists in places around the world, which is a testament of ingrained cultural practices that view slavery as acceptable, despite its international condemnation. The cultural relativity is a very important conceptual tool to be developed not only by ethnologists but also all human beings, including educators, as we move to the understanding of the world as a global village, with technology affecting changes in communication, travel, religious beliefs, or even family structure. This cultural relativity contributes to the development of the multicultural education as an ongoing process, not just a compilation of actions (Banks, 2009).

Education serves as a tool for student achievement. More importantly, however, it contributes to the student development of citizenship and social justice skills. Beyond numeracy and literacy competencies, students need to develop skills, values, and knowledge that will help them make informed decisions when interacting with representatives from different racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious entities (Banks, 2009, p. 5).

The need to help students become informed, tolerant, and diversely educated citizens is more acute as ever, with the world becoming a smaller place by the day. In the United States, the schooling and adaptation to the mainstream society have always faced complex challenges of incorporating immigrant groups and fostering their achievement. Banks (2009) dwells upon the history of multicultural education as a reform movement noting that multicultural education stemmed from the Civil Rights Movement, with the major goal of eliminating discrimination in public housing, employment, and education. The reformers called for a more diverse school faculty and the development of programs related to cultural and ethnic diversity. However, the programs resulted in electives that were mostly chosen by the members of the groups who were the subject of the courses.

With the topic of curriculum and multicultural education at schools comes a topic of policy development in the United States in regard to immigrant and Native American groups in Ellis’s work (2008). The topic of Indian schooling is a great example of a continuous ambiguity in policy implementation in the United States. Even though the Peace Policy and the Office of Indian Affairs propagated the creation and development of schools for the Indians. However, the reality of the implementation was drastically different. Schools like Rainy Mountain lacked basic resources, with the funding being scarce despite numerous pleas by the superintendent to get repairs, supplies, or just clean water for the students. This theme also flows into the issues of inequity that are a part of public school system nowadays as well. Schools that serve marginalized populations still lack resources that are readily available to the schools in more affluent districts. Students living in poverty or coming from immigrant backgrounds usually have less access to efficient teachers (certified and experienced, in this case), well-maintained buildings, and a plethora of extracurricular activities after school. However, the policy makers continuously call for the no child left behind and equity in access to rigorous curriculum. And the reality continuously shows the opposite.

Public schools deal with a multitude of cultures, representing a complex relationship of microcultures operating within the framework of a macroculture (Banks, 2009). Students inadvertently belong to social group that represents certain culture. Banks (2009) states that groups exert a strong influence on the individual behavior patterns that are developed as a part of individual adaptation to the social, emotional, and metaphysical environments (p. 13). Knowledge of a student’s group affiliation can help teachers identify what kind of behavior is probable. However, the works identified for reading in class show that teachers are usually unaware of certain student group affiliations or do not know what behavior is associated with a cultural group. They often view student behavior through their own cultural lens, welcoming the behavior that fits their own perceptions of acceptable actions while rejecting the behavior that deviates from their own cultural norm. Valenzuela’s “Subtractive Schooling” provides a multitude of examples of differences in perceptions between students and teachers and the subsequent rise in tension and conflict. Seguin’s teachers believe that students do not sufficiently care about their education. The students, on the other hand, see teachers as the ones not caring for them. Therefore, the objects of caring are different between these two groups. Valenzuela’s observations are supported by Nel Noddings’s thoughts on caring. Noddings states that for teachers to deeply understand students’ subjective reality, they need to be engrossed in their students’ welfare and emotional displacement (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 61). Caring comes from this understanding and is largely absent in Seguin’s staff member attitude toward students. Most of the high school’s teachers do not live or participate in student’s community life. The school also experiences high attrition rates, which further contributes to social distance and aggravates already strained relationships between students and staff members. The existing culture at school unfavorably views the efforts of caring teachers to get to know their students better and to participate in their lives. Therefore, it is not surprising that the school’s dropout rates are astronomic, and the burden of responsibility for education is placed first with the students and their families, not with the school.

The theme of caring accompanies the concept of multicultural education. In Valenzuela’s work (1999), the theme of caring constitutes a major undercurrent to the whole book. Valenzuela asserts that school subtracts resources from students in two ways: by dismissing their definition of education that is premised on the concept of caring and relationships; and by adopting assimilationist policies and practices geared towards stripping Mexican students of their culture and language (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21). Therefore, the author’s optimal definition of caring within the educational framework consists of caring theory originated by Noddings; the concept of *educacion* prominent in Mexican education, and the concept of social capital (p. 21). These three elements of the framework of caring emphasize the need for trust and solidarity among all stakeholders in the public school system to help immigrant youth succeed. These concepts of caring and assimilation serve as a basis for understanding immigrant youth as capable, resistant, critically thinking individuals rather than “hapless, disengaged individuals” who act their way out through school (p. 32).

This understanding of youth as resilient and capable individuals is also promoted by Linda Spatig in her book “Thinking Outside the Girl Box” (2014). Spatig defines resilience as “innate strengths and natural abilities” that can be used to help the youth to overcome challenges, become stronger, and succeed (Spatig and Amerikaner, 2014, p. 34). The author notes that the young people are very capable. The focus on their strengths should be the basis of the youth development work philosophy. However, many youth resiliency programs treat youth as victims or “problems in need of fixing”, taking issues such as teen pregnancy, drug abuse, etc., as a basis for interventions (p. 34). The attitude towards youth in the society perpetuates this focus of the youth resiliency programs, combining the perceptions of youth as victims as well as societal ambivalence in the depiction of adolescents. Hadar Dubowsky Ma’ayan (cited in Spatig and Amerikaner, p. 35) poignantly notes, “In popular culture, adolescents are typically either demonized, trivialized as dangerous, lazy, unpredictable, defiant, and irresponsible.” The teenage stereotypes encompass a wide strata of adolescent imagery, ranging from rich, dumb white girl, black boy from the “hood”, and a poor, white, country girl (we can blame “Honey Boo Boo” for the perpetuation of that image!). Additionally, cultural perceptions about adolescent girls perpetuate the ambivalence and confusion in regard what the society tells the girls to be “bold and timid, voracious and slight, sexual and demure” (Simmons, as cited in Spatig and Amerikaner, p. 53). Therefore, the work of youth development programs in rural Appalachia is riddled with challenges of addressing not only the Appalachian stereotypes and perceptions towards an individual, but also complex societal attitudes towards girls.

Student resilience also shows through the maintenance of their native culture, language, and customs. In Ellis’s book “To Change Them Forever” (2008), this theme is especially poignant. Ellis comments on the Kiowas maintaining their traditions, language, and ways of life despite the schooling practices that banned the use of the native language in the classroom and incorporated hygiene and vocational training practices into student daily routines. The identity of a group is a complex notion that can either disappear or grow stronger despite the peaceful or forced assimilation. Kiowas were able to retain their identity despite the cultural encounter of their education. However, how many other nations perished in the mainstream population? The issue of education as a vehicle of change becomes a somber reminder about the power of schooling in silencing one’s identity. Kiowas, however, were able to adapt schooling to their culture and use it as their vehicle for adaptation and survival.

Culture itself denotes a belonging to a community. Schools need to promote a sense of community in their environment as well, welcoming students into their structures while respecting individual differences. The theme of community and home is prevalent throughout “Thinking Outside the Girl Box” (2014), as it plays an important role in helping the girls develop relationships with the staff and establishing the concept of self within complex and ambivalent societal stereotypes about adolescence, femaleness, and Appalachian culture. The role of Girls’ Resiliency Program (GRP) is powerful in building the community that concentrated on girls and staff doing particular things together with a focus on the development of girls’ voice, self-expression, and sense of belonging to a home base. The concept of “home” is closely linked to the girls’ sense of community and their adolescent value of self. Research conducted by Hirsch and Roffman (2000, as noted by Spatig and Amerikaner, p. 45) underscores the importance of incorporating the concepts of community and home-place into successful youth development programs, and GRP environment provides girls with that sense of belonging and home.

# Ethnographic Knowledge versus Ethnological Knowledge

Within the public school framework, two multicultural aspects emerge: diverse student body and the curriculum framework. Banks (2009) talks at length about the dimensions of multicultural education noting that teachers struggle to see how their content is related to cultural issues and therefore contend that multicultural education is not relevant to their subject area. As educators implement multicultural education, they need to consider the following dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowerment of school and social structures (Banks, 2009, p. 20). Banks (2009) states that textbooks and curricula have been historically dominated by men, with other gender or ethnic groups remaining invisible. History textbooks promoted the history where men were major participants, with family or ordinary labor history largely ignored by the publishers. Marginalized groups have remained marginalized in the public school curriculum, and the following examples promote that notion.

In her book, Valenzuela (1999) touches upon the issues of curriculum with the dominant class dictating the content and the side of the story told in the curriculum. This concern does not only extend to the curriculum in terms of its depiction of Hispanics and their contributions in history. The same issues develop in terms of dealing with female influence on the development of history or the rights of homosexuals. Curriculum at schools depicts the Anglo-American, male perspective and mostly goes unnoticed in terms of a reform to meet the needs of the diverse youth. Such issues as hiring bilingual counselors or creating computerized schedules are visible and tangible. However, the issues of curriculum and teacher attitudes toward somebody different are not easily addressed and in most cases remain on the fringes of the reform, conveniently engrossment into the subjective reality of students, and provision of culturally sensitive curriculum, pushed back for later review (which seldom happens). In terms of curriculum reform, teachers also lack social capital to knowledgeably address the issues in order to meet diverse needs of multicultural student population. Schooling for students needs to change into education, with its notions of caring,

 Ellis (2008) also talks at length about the importance of curriculum. In his case, the Rainy Mountain curriculum used as a tool for the Indian assimilation into the mainstream society, consisted of courses targeting student trade skills, social acceptance norms, and the dominant language, English. Students were not allowed to speak Kiowa, even though they have managed to break this mandate and still retain their native customs, language, and traditions. Immigrant and U.S.-born youth in Valenzuela’s work also face the attitude of discrimination toward their language and culture. The students are told to speak English and are asked to go back to their native country if they cannot speak English. These practices show that multicultural practices in school’s curriculum merge with the teacher perceptions toward behavior they find culturally acceptable.

 Banks (2009) also believes that multicultural education cannot take place if the stakeholders do not view schools as a part of the social system. To reform multicultural practices at schools, the following reforms are to occur: change in power relationships, verbal interactions between students and teachers, testing programs, and grouping practices (p. 23). These changes stem from the existence of school’s hidden or latent curriculum, a concept that Jackson (1992, as cited in Banks, 2009, p. 23) calls “the untaught lesson.” Banks asserts that some students are better equipped than others to learn this untaught lesson. In the majority of cases, student social and economic background play a major role in their understanding of the rules of the school’s hidden curriculum. Students from underprivileged backgrounds seldom possess the skill to navigate a complex world of schooling. Girls in the Lincoln County’s resiliency program (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014) often find themselves struggling with coursework, meeting graduation requirements, and relationships with meaningful adults at school.

Student social capital plays an important role in adjusting to the school system as a social system. Valenzuela (1999) is especially concerned with the issue of student social capital in her work. In Valenzuela’s narrative, the reader meets different groups of students (Immigrant and U.S.-born) and explores their attitudes toward schooling through the lens of social capital, academic competence, and the centrality of females in supporting academic-related behaviors. In her discussions with immigrant youth, Valenzuela continuously notes their appreciation for Mexican curriculum that the youth have been exposed to before immigrating to the USA, their familial and friendship supports for schooling and education, as well as the separateness from their U.S.-born counterparts. Female support and provision of social capital for academic achievement undergirds the functioning of both groups (immigrant clicks and U.S.-born friendship groups). However, the topics for conversations in immigrant groups tend to focus on academics, while topics discussed in U.S.-born groups are mostly non-school related and non-academic (p. 149). Additionally, U.S.-born groups exhibited lack of understanding of the relationship between the coursework and their aspired jobs or careers, which, once again, showed the adult abdication of the social and academic support for the youths in their pursuit of future careers.

Banks (2009) identifies multiple challenges facing multicultural education lie in helping students mediate between their home and community cultures and the school culture. In addition to their ability to transition between home and school environments, students also need to be able to function within the framework of the national and world macroculture. All assigned readings address the student ability (or lack thereof) of navigating complex cultural worlds. Valenzuela (1999) asserts that American schools reproduce immigrant youth as a “monolingual, English-speaking, ethnic minority” trapped between their Mexican identity and the pressure to function competently in American mainstream (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 3). The schooling structures that are supposed to help youth develop skills “for the attainment of the American dream” instead become subtractive and strip away important cultural and social resources from students (p. 3). In her work, Valenzuela distinguishes between students who just recently immigrated and the students who are second or third generation U.S.-born Mexicans. This distinction is very important to note, as generational status plays an important rule in individual schooling experiences of the youth, ethnical identities students take, and their criticism or appreciation for educational opportunities.

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# Conclusion

Multicultural education has always been an elusive concept to me. In some schools, multicultural activities consisted of eating tacos and listening to Latino music. In other schools, focus on bullying prevention and relationship development was in place. After reading the assigned works, I have developed a more comprehensive and concrete understanding of the notion of multicultural education. Facing diverse student groups, schools have to engage all stakeholders in recognizing, supporting, teaching, and developing multicultural environment at schools. When educators work with students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, understanding and caring for children who might act or accept things different from the mainstream norms. This acceptance requires knowledge of other cultures and what they find acceptable. Even though I have not been exposed to many cultures throughout my teaching career, I could draw many parallels between the readings and my own experiences. Working with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds has made me become more open to different backgrounds and perspectives. However, the subconscious changes I have made to start understanding student perceptions about education and success in order to reach them have become apparent to me as I was reading Ellis’s, Spatig’s, and Valenzuela’s books. These readings have helped me examine my own background and its influence on my drive, concept of success, and the need for education. By learning more about myself, I was able to examine my culture and its influence on my work with students. When I started working in McDowell County schools, I believed that my views on education and success were the only right ones. After all, I was the epitome of success due to my perseverance, hard work, and resiliency! However, even though I grew up in poverty and lived in the community that was negatively stereotyped by the rest of the country, I did enjoy the benefits of growing up in the family that valued education and pushed me to leave home and get a degree and be successful. My childhood spent in situational poverty was supported by the values drastically different from those espoused by the families living in rural Appalachia, most often experiencing life in generational poverty. The chidlren in rural Appalachia have to deal not only with the community perceptions. They also get conflicted support from their family members who want them to do better in life but at the same time don’t want them to leave home to pursue options other than homemaking. The readings have allowed me to draw a more comprehensive picture of culture, its diverse forms, and the impact of significant adults on the lives of adolescents.

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