



Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom

Lisa Delpit , Herbert R. Kohl (Afterword)

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Winner of an American Educational Studies Association Critics' Choice Award and Choice Magazine's Outstanding Academic Book Award, and voted one of Teacher Magazine's "great books," *Other People's Children* has sold over 150,000 copies since its original hardcover publication. This anniversary paperback edition features a new introduction by Delpit as well as new framing essays by Herbert Kohl and Charles Payne.

In a radical analysis of contemporary classrooms, MacArthur Award-winning author Lisa Delpit develops ideas about ways teachers can be better "cultural transmitters" in the classroom, where prejudice, stereotypes, and cultural assumptions breed ineffective education. Delpit suggests that many academic problems attributed to children of color are actually the result of miscommunication, as primarily white teachers and "other people's children" struggle with the imbalance of power and the dynamics plaguing our system.

A new classic among educators, *Other People's Children* is a must-read for teachers, administrators, and parents striving to improve the quality of America's education system.

Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom Details

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From Reader Review Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom for online ebook

Trevor says

This book is based on a series of research papers written by Delpit and she makes it clear that the first two chapters have proven controversial over the years. This is interesting, because it is likely that these chapters remain just as controversial today.

There is a really useful divide in the theory involving teaching children to read, with right-wing types likely to stress the importance of skills-based methods of instruction, while left-wing types are likely to stress the reader's construction of meaning as the best way to learn to read. This often comes down to what is referred to as either whole-language or phonics. Delpit presents an interesting twist on this. Her point is that when many well-meaning people are trying to teach young black children to read, ideology can get in the way – whether right or left-wing ideology – while what is actually needed is a focus on what works.

Now, the problem with trying to simplify her ideas is that I've immediately gone too far. This isn't at all just a 'let's see what works and do that' sort of book. Her work is based on theory - but her point remains - simpleminded applications of ideology do not help children of colour learn how to read.

The theory she proposes is similar to Freire's idea of teach the world as you teach the word to me. It is not that you can get away with not teaching the 'word' if you teach the world - rather, you need to teach both and to do so at the same time.

This brings us to what might be understood as the other 'problem' with her theory – one that I think many people would probably get upset with her over. For a long time people on the left have been concerned with what are called 'deficit models of education' for disadvantaged groups. One of the standard versions of this relates to Bernstein's theories, particularly around his ideas of linguistic codes. The short version is that Bernstein did research in the 1960's looking into how the speech acts of middle and working class children differed. He found that the middle class kids spoke like 'books', while you really had to be standing beside the working class kids to understand what they were talking about. The middle class kids had two linguistic codes they could rely on - a concrete one (just as the working class kids had) for when they were talking with those immediately around them - and a more universal one for when they were talking to the teacher or when they need to speak to people in authority. This second code is particularly prized at school and it therefore gives middle class children an advantage over their working class peers, particularly in the classroom.

The solution seemed simple. All you needed to do, to make the world a more equal place, was to give working class the same access to this universal linguistic code they lacked. That is, the working class kids have a deficit and so if overcome that deficit everything will be great. Bernstein never actually said this, as far as I can tell, but many of his followers certainly acted as if he had.

The problem is that this type of deficit idea seems to imply that black or working class children are stupid - and that was certainly never Bernstein's belief. This often meant that programs were developed to teach the children lacking these skills as if they really were stupid. One of the great things about people is that they really do know when they are being patronised. Which means that too often when people are trying to teach people the 'language of power' what actually happens is that the people being taught feel as if they are being made fun of – or disrespected at least – and that does as much to stop them from learning as anything else you can think of.

Delpit's point is that you need to not only teach the highly prized language - but to do so in ways that respect their linguistic codes at the same time. There is a lovely bit here where a teacher comes into a room only to find her students impersonating her language. That is, doing exactly what she had been trying to teach them to do, although, without the irony, but to which they had been actively resisting for months.

This is also true of second language learning. If you can rely on the resources you have from your first language and to then build on that, then learning a second language is much easier. But if you have never been allowed to consolidate your first language, then learning a second one is almost impossible. And yet, this is exactly what we do in schools all of the time. In the USA, for instance, children whose first language is Spanish are not taught Spanish in schools. Rather, they are taught in English, often a language they do not understand. But the tragedy of this is that it means that they don't know enough of Spanish to help them learn English. With two languages known imperfectly, they have no resources to help them learn.

The same goes for working class children or children of colour. Because their linguistic codes are totally devalued by the schools they attend, so much so that they are effectively taught to shun their own linguistic codes, they are taught that what is most central to them as humans, their ability to communicate, is flawed. But without their own linguistic code being prized in the classroom, they effectively have nothing to use to help them learn the highly prized code.

And it gets worse everyone they love speaks the linguistic code that the school is telling them is worthless. If you ever needed a reason to reject learning – then being told you and everyone you love is worthless would be as good a reason to reject that education as I can think of.

Delpit is certainly not saying that we should not teach the highly prized 'language of power'. Quite the opposite. She is also not saying that children of black or working class parents can get by with their own 'quaint' linguistic codes. Gaining access to the language of power gives access to power itself. But that does not have to come at the price of the rejection of the value of your own language. Just as Spanish speaking children should not have to lose their first language so as to be able to speak English and that in fact they will learn English better and more quickly the better their Spanish, so too with working class children.

This isn't deficit learning. It is learning. To learn any new language necessarily means having to learn the skills associated with that language. But if learning is to occur it needs to happen in a way that leaves the child with their self and community respect intact.

Kb says

This book isn't so much an indictment of teachers and their practices as teacher education programs. This was published before *The Skin that we Speak*, so having read these two books in reverse order, it appears as if Delpit's ideas are becoming less refined, which of course isn't the case. In twenty years, I'm not sure if teaching programs are all that different from what Delpit describes in this book. One of her biggest critiques is the deficit mentality that is developed by increasingly White students in teacher educating programs. We are bombarded with information about underperformance of poor minorities and their lack of cultural capital to the point where it is so internalized that when we enter the classroom, we teach less because our expectations have been lowered so much. The irony of it all is that we should be doing the opposite because these students need more from schools than anyone.

One major question I have for Delpit regarding both this and *Skin that we Speak* is how to approach older

students. Most, if not all, of her examples come from the grade school level, which is arguably a more formative period as far as developing academic expectations and habits. At the secondary level, after years of practice at failure or close to it, what can one do to right the ship?

Crystal says

Some things of note from this book:

"That, I believe, is what we need to bring to our schools: experiences that are so full of the wonder of life, so full of connectedness, so embedded in the context of our communities, so brilliant in the insights that we develop and the analysis that we devise, that all of us, teachers and students alike, can learn to live lives that leave us truly satisfied." p104

What can teachers do? p 163-165

1. Acknowledge and validate students' home language without using it to limit students' potential.
2. Recognize conflict between students' home discourses and the discourse of school.
3. Acknowledge the unfair "discourse-stacking" that our society engages in.

And importantly, it seemed that she was saying that to teach all students well, we must know them and if possible, know and utilize their families as resources - valuing their input.

Janae says

This is an excellent book to read if you're White and teaching in an urban school (or if you're Black and are searching for validation for beliefs that have met opposition). Here are some quotes/tidbits to give the gist of the book:

In response to whether or not students should be taught Standard English, many parents share these sentiments: "My kids know how to be black - you all teach them how to be successful in the white mans' world."

"Teachers do students no service to suggest, even implicitly, that 'product' is not important. In this country, students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it."

"The teacher cannot be the only expert in the classroom. To deny students their own expert knowledge is to disempower them."

"We must keep the perspective that people are experts on their own lives." Therefore, before you say, "These parents just don't know how to parent" ask them where they are coming from. Seek to understand. It will make a lot more sense.

Stephanie Folarin says

In her collection of essays, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, MacArthur Award-winning author Dr. Lisa Delpit examines how everyday interactions in classrooms are laden with assumptions about the competencies, aptitudes and basic capabilities of low-income students and students of color. Through excerpts of conversations with educators, students and parents, Delpit explores ways in which educators can be better "cultural transmitters." She proposes that many academic and behavioral problems attributed to low-income students and students of color are actually the consequence of miscommunication between the mainly white educators and "other people's children." Delpit asserts that being an educator who is an efficient and effective cultural transmitter is important in the classroom because classrooms are where prejudice, stereotypes, and cultural assumptions lead to ineffective education. But Delpit also believes that cultural sensitivity, and valuing students' language and culture alone is not enough; educators of "other people's children" have a responsibility to give students the tools of the majority culture, even as they discuss openly with their students the reasons why they are doing so.

This hard conversation about power imbalances in our society and its effect on students is typically avoided in schools. However, through Burgundy Farm Country Day School's new Learning Community Group Professional Development system, some teachers were able to come together this summer and read this collection of essays. We began our discussion of these ideas at the Cove (our West Virginia campus) this fall, and now hope to share with the community what we've learned. This article is step one in that process. We hoped that it inspires you to read this book, and to join in our discussion about culture, language and power in schools.

Christina says

An eye-opener. A collection of essays by Delpit and others looking at the classroom from the minority (minority in many senses) perspectives.

Through tales of Native Alaskan tribes, urban blacks, and minority student teachers, Delpit reminds teachers, parents, administrators, and students themselves about diverse upbringings and differences in linguistic cultural traditions that can easily be misunderstood in a school environment that is run by and which teaches the (white, professional) culture in power way of speaking/writing/learning/relating.

Shook me up a little when she points out the flaws in the Graves & Co. writing workshop instructional methods when used as a blanket curriculum (because I had not yet taken a truly critical eye to it or any of my readings up til now). Writing workshop intentions are good, and it works for many, but probably not all. Some students who may already have the fluency and creativity of language still need the keys to the explicit grammar skills which are the keys for entering the culture of power.

In the chapter where she discusses teacher education, some disheartening stories of potential teachers who gave up because they weren't being heard or felt they couldn't make a difference in a system where the prejudices are embedded, below the surface, and largely unacknowledged.

Key is to listen (to really listen and understand, not just to hear, not just to gloss over their opinions, not just to refute with attitude) to and form relationships with the community, the parents, the people of color who understand the children and the students we are trying to reach.

Abbi Dion says

Focused, honest, insightful and challenging. I took the time to type a few standout moments:

We have given up the rich meaningful education of our children in favor of narrow, decontextualized, meaningless procedures that leave unopened hearts, unformed character, and unchallenged minds. xiv

The reductionism spawned has created settings in which teachers and students are treated as nonthinking objects to be manipulated and “managed.” xv

Were we focused on our children as inheritors of the future, perhaps we could be more deliberate in teaching them the traits they need to become protectors of the earth and all of its inhabitants. xvi

Poor people and people of color are clearly in trouble in this country. And this means that we as a country are in trouble. Our “trouble” cannot be resolved by the creation and administration of standardized tests. Our “trouble” cannot be resolved by “teacher-proof” curricula. The troubles of our country – indeed, the troubles of our world – can be addressed only if we help ourselves and our children touch the deep humanity of our collective spirit and regain the deep respect for the earth that spawned us. xviii

But we cannot blame the schools alone. We live in a society that nurtures and maintains stereotypes: we are all bombarded daily, for instance, with the portrayal of the young black male as monster. xxiii

What should we be doing? The answers, I believe, lie not in a proliferation of new reform programs but in some basic understandings of who we are and how we are connected to and disconnected from one another. xxv

The worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as the only reality, while the worldviews of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential. Indeed, in the educational institutions of this country, the possibilities for poor people and for people of color to define themselves, to determine the self each should be, involve a power that lies outside of the self. It is others who determine how they should act, how they are to be judged. xxv

Which I hope will interest people concerned with the improvement of education for those least well served by the public education system in this country. xxvii

Liberation for poor kids and linguistic minorities starts with accepting their culture and language and helping them to build on it. page 9

I also learned that people learn to write not by being taught “skills” and grammar, but by “writing in meaningful contexts.” Page 12

It is time to look closely at elements of our educational system, particularly those elements we consider progressive; time to see whether there is minority involvement and support, and if not, to ask why; time to reassess what we are doing in public schools and universities to include other voices, other experiences; time to seek the diversity in our educational movements that we talk about seeking in our classrooms. Page 20

Those with power are frequently least aware – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. Page 24

This meant that the child who did not come to school already primed with what was to be presented would be labeled as needing “remedial” instruction from day one; indeed, this determination would be made before he or she was ever taught. Page 30

The authoritative teacher can control the class through exhibition of personal power; establishes meaningful interpersonal relationships that garner student respect; exhibits a strong belief that all students can learn; establishes a standard of achievement and “pushes” the students to achieve that standard; and holds the attention of the students by incorporating interactional features of black communicative style in his or her teaching. Page 35-36

I also do not believe we should teach students to passively adopt an alternate code. They must be encouraged

to understand the value of the code they already possess as well as to understand the power realities in this country. Page 40

To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. Page 46-47

Teachers are in an ideal position to play this role, to attempt to get all of the issues on the table in order to initiate true dialogue. This can only be done, however, by seeking out those whose perspectives may differ most, by learning to give their words complete attention, by understanding one's own power, even if that power stems merely from being in the majority, by being unafraid to raise questions about discrimination and voicelessness with people of color, and to listen, no, to hear what they say. I suggest that the results of such interactions may be the most powerful and empowering coalescence yet seen in the educational realm – for all teachers and for all the students they teach. Page 47

Forcing speakers to monitor their language for rules while speaking, typically produces silence. Page 51
Teachers need to support the language that students bring to school, provide them input from an additional code, and give them the opportunity to use the new code in a nonthreatening, real communicative context. Page 53

Robert Berdan's Atlantis Experiment. Page 60

Some youngsters may become more engaged in school tasks when the language of those tasks is posed in real-life contexts than when they are viewed as merely decontextualized problem completion. Since our long-term goal is producing young people who are able to think critically and creatively in real problem-solving contexts, the instructional –and linguistic – implications should be evident. Page 66

One of the most difficult tasks we face as human beings is communicating meaning across our individual differences, a task confounded immeasurably when we attempt to communicate across social lines, racial lines, cultural lines, or lines of unequal power. Yet, all U.S. demographic data points to a society becoming increasingly diverse, and that diversity is nowhere more evident than in our schools [...] We can continue to view diversity as a problem [...] Or we can recognize that diversity of thought, language, and worldview in our classrooms cannot only provide an exciting educational setting, but can also prepare our children for the richness of living in an increasingly diverse national community. Page 66-67

My experiences in these geographically diverse settings were some of the most important of my life. I was very much the "other": I had no opportunity to see myself reflected in those around me. Under such circumstances, one learns to see much more clearly the assumptions one makes about the world, and to see that they are just that – assumptions. Some people in similar circumstances, I have discovered, hold on to their worldview with great tenacity, insisting that all of the others are wrong, peculiar, undeveloped, heathen, or uncivilized. I found that my survival depended on my being willing and able to learn from my new acquaintances and my new setting, to see the world through other eyes. Page 74

The worldviews of many in our society exist in protected cocoons [...] their public lives and the institutions they have encountered merely reflect a "reality" these individuals have been schooled in since birth. When these privileged individuals – and they are privileged, whether they realize it or not – see others who operate from a different worldview, they can often comprehend them only as deviants, pathologically inferior, certainly in need of "fixing." Even when individuals believe themselves to have good intentions, their own biases blind them from seeing the real people before them. Those who have been on the receiving end of such biases understand them well [...] Listening to the stories of these women and men has made me even more sensitive to the ways in which most institutions in our society are created to reflect the realities of a particular cultural group – mainly the white, academically oriented middle class. Their stories have

contributed, as well, to molding my views about what is needed to expand our educational vision to embrace the diversity that is this country's reality. Page 74-75

"It is important to teach our children to read and write, but it is more important to teach them to be proud of themselves, and of us." – Letter from a Parent. Page 89

Academic education was fine and to be desired, but what really concerned them was social and moral education – the education that trains youngsters to become good people, who care about, participate in, and are proud of their communities. Page 89

There is never a guarantee that a particular language or educational policy will "work," but when that policy reflects the goals of the people it is to affect rather than those of either foreign missionaries or a colonial government, and when it reaffirms rather than negates a people's knowledge of its culture and heritage, then there is no better prospect for its success. Page 90

Traditional bastions of academe distance people from one another as they create power relationships whereby one group maintains the power to "name" the other. They decontextualize people as their research subjects are scrutinized and analyzed outside of their own lives. Page 91

I realize that I am an organic part of all that is, and learn to adopt a receptive, connected stance, then I need not take an active, dominant role to understand; the universe will, in essence, include me in understanding. Page 92

We children in our segregated schools were constantly admonished about being proper "representatives of the race." The white population saw us as one undifferentiated mass, and so, perhaps, we learned to see each other that way as well. Page 93

In education, we set about solving problems as if they exist in a vacuum. We isolate the problem and seek a technical solution. Page 93

The CON (meaning, "with,") in context [...] The "modern consciousness," [...] inevitably moves us toward a focus on "text" rather than on "context," on words rather than on all the phenomena surrounding the words. Page 96-97

The context of a message is at least as important as, and often more important than the text of the message. Page 97

What's interesting to me is the frequency with which the Anglo teacher's words do not match his actions: he frequently directs the children to do something while he is physically engaged in a completely different task himself. For example, he says, "copy the words from the board" while he is away from the blackboard looking through his desk for something or other. The Native teacher, by contrast, almost always matched her words with her actions: if she says, "copy the words," she is at the blackboard pointing. The Anglo teacher asks that children attend to what he says, not what he does; the Native American teacher, on the other hand, supports her words in a related physical context. What gets done is at least as important as what gets said. [...] in truth he may well be unconsciously preparing children for their future schooling where they will be expected to attend to the words and not the surrounding context. Page 99

GREAT teacher example. Page 99

The Scollons discuss how much of what just seems ordinary to academically oriented parents is really training children to respond to the world in very specific ways. While these modes may be reinforced in school, they are foreign to many children growing up in families not part of an academic culture. Page 100

When children who have been brought up to trust their own observations enter school, they confront teachers, who, in their estimation, act as unbelievable tyrants. From the child's perspective, their teachers attempt to coerce behavior [...] Despite the rhetoric of American education, it does not teach children to be independent, but rather to be dependent on external sources for direction, for truth, for meaning. It trains children both to seek meaning solely from the text and to seek truth outside of their own good sense. Page 101-102

Era of Doublespeak. Page 102

Learning solely through the decontextualized word, particularly learning something that was so much a part

of their home culture, was simply too foreign for the children to grasp without careful instruction about how to make the transition. Page 103

I have carried around the question of that child and that teacher for many years. Why do we have such a hard time making school a happy place for poor children and children of color? Page 104

Negative attitudes in the university appear to be expressed in two ways: directly toward the student, and/or more generally toward the student's cultural group. This bias can be classified, according to Benokraitis and Feagin's scheme of discrimination, as "overt," (most blatant) "covert" (clandestine, maliciously motivated), and "subtle" (unequal treatment that is visible but so internalized as to be considered routine in bureaucratized settings). Page 113

"I guess that is one way for a dominant culture to maintain dominance – not to recognize any of the strengths of another group." Page 114-115

Racial discrimination in present-day America is less likely to be the overt, blatant bigotry of the past. [...] Despite change in the stated beliefs of the white population, recent studies depict their actions as reflecting other values. Researchers have found that the reactions of whites to people of color display subtle discriminatory behavior: less assistance, greater aggression, overt friendliness coupled with covert rejection, avoidance, and assessment inconsistent with actual work performance. Furthermore, whites are seldom conscious of this "modern prejudice," even as they practice it. Page 115

"Consequently many whites remain unconvinced of the reality of subtle prejudice and discrimination, and come to think of their black coworkers as "terribly touchy" and "overly sensitive" to the issue." Page 116

Good Teachers. Page 118

Teaching is all about telling a story. You have to get to know kids so you'll know how to tell the story, you can't tell it just one way. You can tell if you're on the right track by watching the kids. Page 120

John Dewey advocated such a stance in 1904. In an article on the relationship between theory and practice in teacher education, he asserts that the "greatest asset in the student's possession – the greatest, moreover that ever will be in his possession – [is] his own direct and personal experience." Page 124

Dewey further advises that failure to allow students to explore their past experiences in light of theoretical constructs will produce only a mindless imitation of others' practice rather than a reflection on teaching as an interactive process. Page 125

It is vitally important that connections be examined, that the education professor highlight the narratives of the students of color and ask them to serve as resources for bringing to the fore differences in worldview, learning style, social organization, language, and so forth. Page 126

The students of color may find their experiences both admissible and valued in the classroom, which, along with the increased opportunity for interaction, may help to reduce their feelings of isolation from the university and their white classmates and professors. Page 126

If we are to succeed in this quest, we must recognize and address the power differentials that exist in our society between schools and communities, between teachers and parents, between poor and well-to-do, between whites and people of color. Further, we must understand that our view of the world is but one of many, that others see things in other ways. Page 133

We all interpret behaviors, information, and situations through our own cultural lenses; these lenses operate involuntarily, below the level of conscious awareness, making it seem that our own view is simply "the way it is." [...] Engaging in the hard work of seeing the world as others see it must be a fundamental goal. Page 151

Knowledge about culture is but one tool that educators may make use of when devising solutions for a school's difficulty in educating diverse children. Page 167

Children who may be gifted in real-life settings are often at a loss when asked to exhibit knowledge solely through decontextualized paper-and-pencil exercises. Page 173

If we do not have some knowledge of children's lives outside of the realms of paper-and-pencil work, and even outside of their classrooms, then we cannot know their strengths. Not knowing students' strengths leads to our "teaching down" to children from communities that are culturally different from that of the teachers in the school. Page 173

If we plan to survive as a species on this planet we must certainly create multicultural curricula that educate our children to the differing perspectives of our diverse population. Page 177

Were that not the case, these children would not talk about doing well in school as "acting white." Our children of color need to see the brilliance of their legacy, too. Page 177

If we are to successfully educate all of our children, we must work to remove the blinders built of stereotypes, monocultural instructional methodologies, ignorance, social distance, biased research, and racism. We must work to destroy those blinders so that it is possible to really see, to really know the students we must teach. Page 182

REFLECTIONS

"One of the educational conversations I always dream of having: no ego, no contest, just a consideration of schooling and how it affects children's lives, combined with a lot of storytelling." Herbert Kohl

"I expect tears, arguments, denials, excuses, confessions, accusations, and whole range of displays of vulnerability, revenge, and strength [...] Upon first reading *OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN* many white teachers take it as an attack on their capacity to teach students of color. [...] Others believe their problems teaching African American students stem directly from the children's families, neighborhoods, peers, and cultural environments. [...] Most of all [Delpit] provides us with an occasion to reflect on ourselves as educators and as citizens living and working within a context where racism is pervasive and where, for many, hope is fading." Herbert Kohl

"They somehow go through \$160K worth of schooling without learning to think self-reflexively, without learning to think of themselves as part of the problem. They have been taught to think of themselves as the objective analysts and other people as the problem." Charles Payne

"One of the privileges of being white in this country is that it largely insulates one from critical discussion." Charles Payne

"After a workshop on poverty and some honest reflection ..." Patricia Lesesne

"Through this communication, I realized that I was operating from a middle-class ethos with all of its trappings [...] Instead of asking why a behavior exists and when it will stop, I began to ask how I could create a classroom setting that allows these students to thrive in a society run according to middle-class values while respecting their home cultures. [...] Delpit challenges me to know myself and my limitations, know my students and their needs, and – through close, honest relationships rooted in mutual respect – come to know the values of the adults in the communities from which my students come to me." Patricia Lesesne

Amy says

This book would be pretty dry for most people since it is a grad school book that one of the teachers I work with lent me. The main point of the book is that different cultures have different linguistic styles that often create a barrier between teachers and students, especially since the amount of "minority" children in city schools are growing while the amount of "minority" teachers is shrinking.

The other main point is that minority children should learn how to read and write academically, or basically "white." While many well-intentioned liberal white teachers fear being "oppressive" or hindering a student's voice, what they don't realize is that they are preventing students from acquiring the skills they need to make it in the "white world" or to essentially "play the game." A successful teacher would be able to give

affirmation to any given culture and its practices while simultaneously equipping students with appropriate skills to function in a larger discourse than just their home community or village.

While this book practically hits you over the head with these philosophies, and can be a little heavy-handed at times, I still appreciated the insight that it offers into the realm of multicultural education.

Toriamae says

I wasn't sure how I would feel about this book when I first started reading it. It seemed the author was way into race issues in a way that would make me feel guilty as a white woman who has chosen to work with ethnic and linguistic minority communities.

But Delpit's message is not one of hate or hopelessness. The bottom line is that everyone can learn, bias exists and that thoughtful teachers should go to whatever means necessary to educate their students, teaching them to be successful in mainstream America. She advocates neither rejecting home language or dialect nor teaching it exclusively. Rather, she asserts, students must learn the tools and skills that are necessary for success in modern America, namely standard English.

Teaching standard English and language skills requires different things for different students. Teachers should not be surprised if those who do not already have skills in standard English require more than a self-discovery or process approach to learning.

I for one appreciate Delpit's perspective and the high expectations she sets for all students.

Donna Davis says

I first ran across this wonderful research when I was working on my Master of Arts degree (I read an earlier edition). I was examining stereotypes regarding teachers' expectations and the Model Minority, based on the 1960's coverage in national US magazines proclaiming first-wave immigrants--i.e., Japanese- and Chinese-second and third generation Americans--to be people who had pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps without government aid. (The articles, published when the Civil Rights movement was at a fevered pitch, was a back-handed compliment, because it inferred that African-Americans who were looking for affirmative action programs ought to do whatever it was that the Asian folks had done, and do it without government programs to help them do it).

Delpit does a great job of breaking apart stereotypes. My favorite anecdote she relays is one in which an Asian child, a quiet little girl in a Montessori-type program, stands off to the side, away from the social chaos created by children who were sometimes off-task, and the teacher tells Delpit that this child is her "best student". Delpit moves back behind the child and observes her. The child has a variety of materials that she is supposed to sort to match the numbers on cards. Carefully, she pulls out her blocks, sticks, whatever, and sorts them each onto the cards.

And almost all of the materials she sorts fail to match the numbers on the cards, but no one else sees that.

Teachers tend to value studious behavior, and students who are not successful academically but also not

noisy attention-magnets sometimes fall between the educational cracks.

Daniel S says

“We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different. We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the worlds of others when we don’t even know that they exist? Indeed, many of us don’t even realize that our own worlds exist only in our heads and in the cultural institutions we have built to support them.” [p.xxiv]

“understanding other worlds, journeys that involved learning to see, albeit dimly, through the haze of my cultural lenses. In that blurred view, I have come to understand that power plays a critical role in our society and in our educational system. The worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as the only reality, while the worldviews of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential. Indeed, in the educational institutions of this country, the possibilities for poor people and for people of color to define themselves, to determine the self each should be, involve a power that lies outside of the self.” It is others who determine how they should act, how they are to be judged.” [p.xxv]

“when implicit codes are attempted across cultures, communication frequently breaks down. Each cultural group is left saying, “Why don’t those people say what they mean?” [p.25]

“What the school personnel fail to understand is that if the parents were members of the culture of power and live by its rules and codes, then they would transmit those to their children. In fact, they transmit another culture that children must learn at home in order to survive in their communities.” [p.30]

In this country, students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it. And that product, based as it is on the specific codes of a particular culture, is more readily produced when the directives of how to produce it are made explicit.” [p.31]

“The teacher cannot be the only expert in the classroom. To deny students their own expert knowledge is to disempower them.” [p.32]

“there are different attitudes in different cultural groups about which characteristics make for a good teacher. Thus, it is impossible to create a model for the good teacher without taking issues of culture and community context into account.” [p.37]

“Now you may have inferred that I believe that because there is a culture of power, everyone should learn the codes to participate in it, and that is how the world should be. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. I believe in a diversity of style, and I believe the world will be diminished if cultural diversity is ever obliterated...each cultural group should have the right to maintain its own language style. When I speak, therefore, of the culture of power, I don’t speak of how I wish things to be but of how they are.” [p.39]

“to summarize, I suggest that students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors; that they must be allowed the resource of the teacher’s expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own “expertness” as well; and the even while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent.” [p.45]

“Educators must open themselves to, and allow themselves to be affected by, these alternative voices.” [p.46]

“They understand the need for both approaches, the need to help students establish their own voices, and to coach those voices to produce notes that will be heard clearly in the larger society.” [p.46]

“To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment- and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another’s gaze.” [p.46]

“Teachers are in an ideal position to play this role, to attempt to get all of the issues on the table in order to initiate true dialogue. This can only be done, however, by seeking out those whose perspective may differ most, by learning to give their words complete attention, by understanding one’s own power, even if that power stems merely from being in the majority, by being unafraid to raise questions about discrimination and voicelessness with people of color, and to listen, no, to hear what they say.” [p.47]

Thus, if teachers hope to avoid negatively stereotyping the language patterns of their students, it is important that they be encouraged to interact with, and willingly learn from, knowledgeable members of their students’ cultural groups. This can perhaps best become a reality if teacher education programs include diverse parents, community members, and faculty among those who prepare future teachers, and take seriously the need to develop in those teachers the humility required for learning from the surrounding context when entering a culturally different setting.” [p.56]

“learning to see rather than merely look, to feel rather than touch, to hear rather than listen: to learn, in short about the world by being still and opening myself to experiencing it.” [p.92]

Nancy says

This would never be a book that I would consider recommending for gaining deeper insights into teaching children of color. I hoped to feel I had an edge to share with my teachers in dealing with and teaching children who come from culturally diverse backgrounds. Instead, I felt scolded and preached to and was unconvinced that even the author has ideas of how to best help, teach and reach our disadvantaged minorities. I concur with her last essay, that we need to value and celebrate the heritage of all children. However, beyond that, she offers little to help us close the achievement gap and improve the classroom management that plagues our schools nationwide.

Jenny GB says

This is a good book for all educators to read, regardless of race. It really was an education to see the teaching styles and cultural styles of interaction that occur in different groups of people. While I resented that she claims that all white teachers don't really teach, but just stand there and expect students do the work I could get over that to learn from how other teachers work with minorities with directness and clear discipline. I know that showing emotion in the classroom and having very clear discipline are difficult things for me to

use, but I should consider that when I am teaching in a majority minority student school. She says many things that are in common with all teachers in all places such as our desire to help children and form personal connections with them. As in her more recent book, she really hammers on the point that students must be taught skills, but that they should have a context in which to use the skills and the skills should be useful ones. That is a shift that I am currently seeing in education. There is a desire for more problem solving and critical thinking to occur in the classrooms. I did not find Delpit's book racist or an attack on my race or culture. She seems to sincerely want changes made so that everyone is better educated, included, and understood. I wonder if I really have been less than honest when I claim that teaching is starting to make me colorblind, but this book and others help push me to continue to try to become a better teacher for my students.

Joey says

I despised this book. It's a bitter, vitriolic, insensitive, racist, unsourced, and highly paranoid attack on liberal white educators. The book is literally a practice in reverse prejudice. Incredibly, Delpit's argument is one I agree with: that students should be taught Standard English (as opposed to African American Vernacular English) because the gatekeepers who are likely to decide students' futures (such as employers, interviewers, college admissions boards, and the like) tend to hold variant English dialects against would-be applicants.

However, Delpit delivers the point in such a way that it turns me off almost immediately. I was variously enraged and disgusted by reading this book. Delpit makes some incredibly ridiculous claims, such as 'black people do not trust statistics,' and her main argument seems to be "white educators should trust my anecdotes over decades of scientific study, because I am black."

It must be noted that Delpit grew up in a very volatile time-period; I assume she attended school under the black cloud of racist opposition to desegregation, and so it makes perfect sense that she (and a cadre of black educators like her) are still stuck in the anti-majoritarian mindset of that time period.

However, she does herself no favors with her blatant and unfair attacks against all Caucasian educators. Repeatedly she suggests that white liberals are too scared to use authority in the classroom, and that they are too wimpy to properly teach African American children (who Delpit treats as if they are a species apart, and so require different teaching methods as compared to all other racial groups). She encourages her students to distrust and be suspicious of white Americans, and argues very early in the book that teachers who disagree with her (that is, those that permit the use of AAVE in speech and writing, as long as a proper point is communicated) likely only feel this way as a means to protect high-status jobs. She literally says, though the use of an anonymous teacher source's ruminations, that white teachers want their own kids to have all the good jobs, and so they actively work to keep black kids in the gutter. It's bombastic and absurd.

She also attacks statistics, research, and science repeatedly throughout the work; but even so, countless times she makes statements like 'studies have shown,' followed by a completely outlandish belief. Every time she does this, it lacks a reference or any details about the study. All information as to where she got her "facts" is absent from the text.

In short, I hated this book, and found it absolutely useless. I'd rather read the Bible.

Kristin says

What does it mean to be a culturally competent teacher? How do issues of power in society show up in schools? In a collection of academic articles, Lisa Delpit explores how issues such as asserting authority, what makes a good teacher, appropriate language, and the importance of human connection and context vary across cultures. She advocates for teachers teaching 'standard English' and the unspoken rules of the dominant culture while encouraging students to think critically about power dynamics in society. She emphasizes how everyone should realize how our culture subconsciously influences how we see the world and the importance of white people listening to students and parents of color instead of assuming they know what is best for everyone. Finally, she suggests reforming teacher education to include students' personal experience in classrooms, examples of schools where low-income students and students of color have succeeded instead of focusing on research linking achievement to income, and the historical accomplishments of people of color. As a white educator working with predominantly students of color, I need to learn and think more about these issues. I'm glad I read this book and I learned a lot, even if I'm not as motivated to read dense academic writing and it took me multiple summers to finish it ;-). I would be interested to know if Dr. Delpit thinks anything has changed in the 15 years since she wrote this book.
