Culture and the Production of School Inequality

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Contents

Abstract

In the first section, the chapter discusses the emergence of "culture" as a social scientific notion, including discussion of the affordances as well as limitations of the classic view of culture in social science. The section continues by reviewing new conceptions of culture as well as the development of deficit views of culture by which differing cultural practices are compared invidiously. The next section provides narrative examples of culture in schools, as it manifests in the routine conduct of classroom instruction. The examples show how cultural difference can become grounds for the production of inequality and "othering" in schools. The final section reviews alternatives to conventional school practices – approaches to "culturally responsive" and "culturally sustaining" pedagogy. Particular emphasis is placed on "co-membership" – the identification of commonalities among teachers and students – as a means of preventing "othering" across lines of culture difference.

Keywords

Culture · New conceptions of culture · Invisible culture · Cultural deprivation · "Othering" · Culturally responsive pedagogy · Culturally sustaining pedagogy · Co-membership

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The "What" of Culture

Definitions of basic terms. "Culture" is a term that contrasts with "nature" – it refers to things of nature acted upon by humans, as in agriculture, soil management and the production of plant crops, or viniculture – the tending of grapevines for making wine. The social scientific notion of culture points to humans cultivating themselves. Actions taken by humans constitute *culturing*, with consequences for the formation of patterned ways of life, i.e., repeated human actions, as habit, produce further human action. A classic definition that was formulated by the late nineteenth century English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor invokes the habitual character of culture: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871, p. 1).

Culture, in its social scientific sense, was initially seen as intergenerationally transmitted. This understanding was emphasized by the early twentieth century by the American anthropologist Franz Boas in constructing an argument against the prevailing conventional wisdom of the time that human patterns of behavior were genetically inherited and that some human groups (races) were genetically superior while others were genetically inferior (Boas, 1917, 1940). In criticizing the established ideology of racial superiority and inferiority (it is not entirely coincidental that Boas was an immigrant – German and Jewish – with an "outsider" perspective), he asserted that patterns in human ways of acting were the result of learning rather than genetic programming. Moreover, differing human ways of acting were neither inherently superior or inferior, just different. Like Tylor, Boas and his followers assumed that the habit patterns of humans formed whole systems of complementary parts (Tylor's "that complex whole") whose patterns persisted across generations. Change in any single part of the overall system would result in change to the whole system.

Problems with classic definitions and assumptions. There is usefulness in the early twentieth-century understanding of culture, especially as an argument against literal racism. But there are problems, as well. One is with the assumption that large-scale human groups are culturally uniform. Nations, language communities, social classes, religions, ethnic and racial groups, and professional/occupational groups do not all have members who are culturally identical. There may be some overall cultural differences across nations, Americans in contrast to Britons, or across occupational categories, surgeons in contrast to pediatricians and high school teachers in contrast to elementary school teachers. But not all citizens of the United States or of the United Kingdom are culturally similar, nor are all surgeons similar, or elementary school teachers similar, in terms of the their professional cultural practices and beliefs. Across the twentieth century and early twenty-first century, it has become more and more clear that general social address labels (e.g., "working class," "Hispanics," "Rust Belt residents") do not predict specific cultural practices, at the individual level. Cultural variability within social address categories is real, and it must be accounted for in understanding how culturing works in everyday life.

Another problem with the earlier conception of culture is that it does not account well for another reality – cultural practices are continually changing across time. This recalls the aphorism about history attributed to Mark Twain: "History doesn't repeat itself; at best it sometimes rhymes." Culture, like history, doesn't reproduce itself exactly in successive generations, although it may sometime rhyme. Indeed, culture is not only transmitted as tradition *between* generations but is also invented and shared as innovation *within* generations. Tylor's "complex whole" – especially when conceived as consisting of highly integrated parts – is a system of patterns outside history, with no room for change. Still it's obvious that things do change over time (as well as remain similar). It's not a matter of change versus continuity, but a matter of "both/and."

Yet another problem with the classic view is its political naivety. Cultural differences run along fault lines of power difference in modern societies, across social classes, across political and religious affiliations, and across gender and sexual identity categories. This was also the case in pre-modern societies. Yet anthropological studies of culture in those places – the anthropologists themselves having arrived through sponsorship by European and American colonial explorers, soldiers, and governing officers – tended to mask power differences, relationships of domination within the colonized societies and between them and their colonial overlords. Cultural difference need not be a source of conflict among people, but in situations of intergroup competition for scarce resources (including those occurring in situations of colonial and post-colonial inequity as well as in inequitable life conditions within modern nation states), culture difference gets used as a reason for conflict – a great way to start and continue fights that are not really about culture per se but about asymmetries of privilege and power.

New conceptions. Recent work in rethinking the "what" of culture attempts to correct the limitations in the classic conception of culture. Cultural learning – as intergenerational transmission and also as within-generation invention – does not take place in large-scale settings, but rather takes place in face-to-face interaction within "local communities of practice," i.e., in everyday life in families, neighborhoods, religious worship settings, school classrooms, playgrounds, extracurricular and after-school settings, workplaces, and voluntary associations. From this perspective, "learning" is defined as changes over time in an individual's participation in the cultural practices of the local setting – moving from "peripheral" participation at the edge of the setting to increasingly central participation. Thus, a learner changes from initially partial and dysfluent participation as a novice to full and fluent participation as an expert – with fellow expert practitioners in the setting (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The daily rounds of individuals consist of engagement in differing levels of participation within differing local communities of practice. Which settings are there in the daily round, and how the learner participates – in some settings remaining at a peripheral stage of participation and in other settings moving to increasingly central participation – establishes a *personal cultural repertoire* (Erickson, 2012; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Who you are, culturally, depends

upon where you show up, and within which local communities of practices you participate most actively. This is what determines one's fluency in participation. The individual's personal culture repertoire is not only learned in interaction with others but is activated in interaction with others, i.e., cultural practices are not simply the behaviors of individuals; they are the actions of individuals engaging together in conjoint and mutually influencing actions. (Even writing in solitude involves making use of resources for making meaning that are shared with others – e.g., a language system – and crafting written statements directed toward others as a reading audience). Thus, fluency in performing cultural practices is a matter of being able to participate with others in ways that complement the actions the others are taking, through mutual adjustments made in real time, as in the mutually adjusting (and constituting) actions of partners in ballroom dancing. This mutuality of action produces an ecosystem of action within which participants, through mutual midcourse corrections in real time, avoid stumbles and glitches. But participants who are new to a community of practice don't yet know how to participate fluently, and so they stumble, which has the effect of influencing others to stumble, upsetting collective conduct in the situation of interaction.

The personal cultural repertoire is akin to what linguists call an *idiolect* – the individual's unique way of speaking their language. No one actually speaks a "language" – rather they have a personal version of it that is the result of unique personal experience. Yet idiolects are similar enough so that people can talk together and understand one another – if they choose to do so. Or they can choose to nitpick over small differences in ways of speaking so as to produce misunderstanding and discomfort in interaction.

Another way to consider this is to say that at the individual level everyone is multicultural. This point was made by the American anthropologist Ward Goodenough in an article titled "Multiculturalism as the Normal Human Experience" (Goodenough, 1976). He observed that even in the most traditional and small-scale societies, as a child grows up, the child encounters interaction situations that differ somewhat from the patterns found in the household of the nuclear family. People in adjacent households speak slightly differently from those in the child's home, and they prepare food slightly differently, dress slightly differently, etc. As the child becomes older he or she develops daily rounds in which further cultural differences are encountered, from one setting of local practice to another. Thus, the individual's cultural repertoire, as it develops throughout the life span, is not unitary but multiplex. While we may think of multiculturalism as something that is especially characteristic of large-scale modern societies, with increasing global migration, Goodenough took a different view. He argued that at the level of the individual's personal cultural repertoire, everyone is multicultural, wherever they grow up, and that our species has been evolving that way for a very long time. Thus multiculturalism is not something special or new. It is a fundamental aspect of being human.

Informal culture as transparent and multisensory. Cultural learning takes place largely outside conscious awareness. As we begin to acquire the capacity to perform a new cultural practice, we may be reflectively aware of what we are doing. Yet as the practice becomes habitual and its performance becomes more fully fluent, the

practice becomes transparent to us, we lack words to describe it, and we model it with others without realizing that we are doing so. This has been called "implicit," or "informal" or "invisible" culture. It is taught and learned without deliberate awareness. When others we encounter don't act as we expect, this may be due to subtle informal culture differences. But rather than viewing others' actions as possibly a matter of culture difference, there is a tendency to attribute ill intent – malevolence. Or we may attribute ignorance – this person just doesn't know how to act right.

Cultural practices and participation in a local community of practice involve the whole human organism – the whole sensorium. We learn ways of perceiving in multiple sensory ways – not only visually (when and where to look while participating with others) and auditorially (what seems too loud or not loud enough) but olfactorily (smells in a room, smells of food, interpersonal smells), thermally (what seems too warm or too cold), tactilely (our experience in touching surfaces), and kinesthetically (how it feels to move in interaction situations with others). We learn habits of sensory judgment – what is too much or not enough sensation, pleasing or displeasing experience – in differing sensory modes, in different situational circumstances. Because these are habitual ways of acting we make use of them largely outside conscious awareness – like other aspects of informal culture. And these sensory experiences can trigger intense emotional reactions, positive and negative, to the familiar and to the alien – modern neuroscience is helping us understand the biochemistry and neural networking that is involved. The hormones oxytocin and vasopressin facilitate mother-infant bonding and in later life facilitate monogamous pair-bonding as well as supporting cooperation and generosity in general interaction with others. *But* – this prosocial relation happens with those we define as *us*, not with those we define as *them*. The biosocial consequence of in-group affiliation appears to be an increase in out-group disaffiliation (see the discussion of *us/them* distinctions in Sapolsky, 2017, pp. 135, 387–424).

Culture, "othering," deficit narratives, and bordering. Negative emotional experience of culture difference can lead to individual and collective actions of ethnocentrism and xenophobia – negative judgments of ethnic others and fear of foreigners. In extremes the "other" is regarded as subhuman, an inferior kind of human, or as nonhuman, an "animal" (forgetting that humans are animals too). When "othering" takes place, the moral status of the "other" is diminished – and obligations of reciprocity and generosity are cancelled. The "other" is beyond the pale, outside the law (see Hall, 1997; Said, 1978).

Yet culture difference need not automatically trigger "othering." It can be experienced positively or neutrally, but that is a matter of situational circumstances and framing. We can frame culture difference in border terms or in boundary terms (Barth, 1969; McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1979/1981). When we treat culture difference as a matter of *boundary*, the difference is recognized, but it doesn't have moral or political consequences; rather, it's treated as just another social fact in the scene. When we treat culture difference as a matter of *border*, however, then moral and political consequences follow from the difference – asymmetry of rights and obligations. As an example, think of the border between the United States and Mexico. On the south side of the border, the cultural practice of fluency in Spanish is

a moral and political advantage – far from being stigmatized that cultural competence enables full participation with others in everyday life. On the north side of the border, however, fluency in Spanish lacks the kind of advantage it affords on the other side of the border. Indeed it can be an actual disadvantage – treated as a badge of stigmatized identity and damaged moral worth.

Social scientific justifications for cultural bordering developed in the latter part of the twentieth century, moving away from the cultural relativism of Boas and his followers. This is a tragic story of good intentions gone awry. In fieldwork in rural and urban communities in Latin America the anthropologist Oscar Lewis noticed negative consequences of poverty and oppression (Lewis, 1951). He coined the term "culture of poverty" to characterize pragmatic adaptation to straitened circumstances. Child development researchers in the United States identified negative conditions of poverty as "cultural deprivation" (with parallel terms "cognitive deprivation," "language deprivation," and "sensory deprivation"). As with the work of Lewis, the intention was to point to difficulties in life circumstances experienced by poor people. But the emphasis on deprivation and deficit got out of hand, providing a social scientific justification for widespread ethnic and social class prejudices concerning the moral and intellectual inferiority of poor people. Deprivation terms, together with the "culture of poverty" label, were increasingly used to characterize as inadequate child-rearing practices of low-income parents from nondominant ethnic and racial backgrounds who did not speak "standard English" (see Riessman, 1962). This justified early intervention – preschool programs to provide positive circumstances for cognitive and language development that low-income parents were unable to provide for their children at home. In a profound irony, what had begun as social criticism – pointing to victimization of people at the bottom of the social ladder – was hijacked by existing negative attitudes, producing a "deficit narrative" portrayal of the low-income parent as an "other" who was incapable of good child rearing. Conventional beliefs in the inherent inferiority of poor people, especially poor people of color – as fundamentally lazy, ignorant, and immoral – combined with the new beliefs in social environmental deprivation, produced an ideology of "blaming the victim."

Culture and co-membership. An alternative framing that interrupts "othering," deficit narratives, and cultural bordering is the recognition of shared experience between people – in other work I have called this "situational co-membership" (see Erickson, 2012; Erickson & Shultz, 1982). It happens as persons in situations of face-to-face interaction reveal commonalities that they share. This has the effect of blurring or eliminating the *us/them* distinction – the potential "other" is redefined as "one of us," with whom moral obligations of "us" apply. Examples of co-membership and its effects will be presented in the discussion that follows.

The "How" of Culture in Schools

Home culture students bring with them to school. Here is an example that shows how informal cultural difference gets treated invidiously in the routine conduct of classroom instruction. First grade students and their teacher were engaged in a reading

lesson in a classroom in an inner city neighborhood in Berkeley, California. The children read aloud from their reading book. They read together, in chorus:

1. T: All right, class, read that and remember your endings.
2. CC: What did Little Duck see? (final *t* of "what" deleted)
3. T: **What.** (emphasizing final *t*)
4. CC: What. (final *t* deleted as in turn 2)
5. T: I still don't hear this sad little "t".
6. CC: What did – what did – what. (final *t*'s deleted)
7. T: **What.**
8. T&CC: what did Little Duck see? (final *t* spoken)
9. T: O.K., very good.
   (from Piestrup, 1973)

In this example the students in the reading group were African American and their teacher was white. The students displayed a feature of African-American Vernacular English (AAV): deletion of final consonants, in this case the letter *t*. What was the lesson about? Ostensibly it was about comprehension – understanding the story that was being read. Whatever it was that Little Duck saw, however – the comprehension issue at hand – got lost in a switch to framing the instruction as a practice lesson in the pronunciation of "standard English." This is an example of treating a small cultural difference in language style – final consonant deletion – as a "border" issue rather than as a "boundary" issue. Interestingly, Piestrup found that in classrooms where the teacher, whether white or African American, negatively sanctioned the classroom use of AAV by African-American students, by the end of the school year, the students spoke a more exaggerated form of the dialect than they had at the beginning of the year. In classrooms where the teacher, whether white or African American, did not negatively sanction the students' classroom use of AAV (i.e., the teachers treated dialect features as a "boundary" matter rather than as a "border" matter), by the end of the school year, the students spoke a less exaggerated form of the dialect than they had done at the end of the year. This suggests that culture difference increases (as resistance that is not necessarily deliberate) in situations of culture conflict, while it decreases in the absence of such conflict. Other researchers have found this to be the case, both in terms of language change and in other aspects of culture change.

Another aspect of language and culture that manifests in schools concerns language socialization at home to certain ways of speaking that may or may not match teacher expectations. Heath (1983) found that in African-American homes in which she did long-term participant observation and interviewing, adults did not ask one another "known information" questions, nor did they teach preschool children about such questions, e.g., "What does mommy use the stove for?" The answers to such questions were obvious. Questions asked at home concerned information the questioner did not already have. When children from those families came to school in kindergarten, however, they were instantly confronted with teacher-like known information questions, e.g., the teacher holds up a piece of red construction paper and says "What color is this?" If students have not been coached already on questions like this, they typically remain silent. This can be taken as evidence that

the child "does not know her colors." Sometimes this can result in assignment of the child to a "low ability" reading or math group in classroom, or it can lead to referral for testing for special education services.

The next example concerns a kindergarten student from a working-class Italian-American family who was unfamiliar with known-information questions (see Erickson, 1996, 2004, pp. 53–71). In the "sharing time" conversation that took place as the third day of school began in September, the teacher and the student engaged in this question/answer exchange.

At first the conversation proceeded smoothly as the teacher asked questions that were not "teacher-like," about information Angie had but the teacher didn't – what Angie had done after school the day before. Then the teacher switched to a known-information question, concerning the names of the stories she had read aloud to the students the day before. At that point Angie hesitated and shrugged her shoulders without speaking. The teacher followed up with prompts – "the one about the bus" and "the one about the three billy goats." Angie continued to remain silent as other students began to answer the teacher's question, even though it had been addressed to Angie. (These were mostly first graders who from last year with the teacher were thoroughly familiar with known-information questions.) Then the teacher returned to asking nonteacher-like questions of Angie, "What else do you like about school?", and Angie answered each question promptly. However when the teacher at switched to a known information question, "What's the name of that letter?", written on the chalkboard, Angie hesitated and shrugged her shoulders. Immediately three other students (first graders) answered "S. . .S. . .S." As experienced veterans they knew what to do with known information questions (and they knew the proper timing of answer slots in teacher-student questioning sequences). In other words they had informal cultural knowledge and performance capacity that Angie as a newcomer had not yet acquired. They were able to use this proficiency in local cultural practices to act as "turn sharks" – attacking and stealing Angie's turns at talk with the teacher (for further discussion see Erickson, 2004, pp. 53–71).

Just after the "sharing time" conversation on that same morning, Angie was summoned from the play area of the classroom, to which she had gone to build block structures with other children. A visitor to the classroom was testing students, administering a special education screening examination. As Angie sat in front of the tester, she was asked yet another known-information question: "What does mommy use the stove for?" Once again Angie remained silent, and the tester scored her as not knowing the answer.

On two afternoons in the next few weeks, research assistants followed Angie home after school and videotaped her interaction with adults there until she went to bed. No adult uttered a known information question during those two occasions. Such questions addressed to Angie were not part of the home conversational culture. Also Angie was an only child. It is possible that because she lacked the child cultural knowledge of how, when talking with adults, to fend off interruptions by siblings, she was doubly at a disadvantage in the sharing time conversation on the third day of school: (a) she was not familiar with known information questioning routines, and

(b) she didn't know how to hold her own with the teacher, in the presence of the locally culturally skilled "turn sharks."

School cultures confronted by students. Home cultures, especially those in non-dominant communities, are easily seen, through deficit narrative lenses, as sources of problems by professionals in schools. But school cultures can also present problems for students and their parents. Schools, and teaching, have developed distinct professional orientations and habitual practices as a subculture of conventional wisdom – commonsense assumptions that are mostly taken for granted as obvious – a professional ideology. Not every teacher shares all the assumptions that will be mentioned in the ensuing discussion, but many hold to some of these, and as aspects of informal culture, these ideological assumptions are taught and learned by school professionals largely outside reflective awareness – they become part of the woodwork.

Schooling provides educational services – scaffolding instruction to support student growth in learning – but instruction is typically done in crowded circumstances, in age-graded classrooms. Schooling sorts students within the crowds, assessing the growth of individuals relative to one another. Some students grow faster than others academically, and so they come to be seen by school professionals as "ahead" or "behind" or "just where they should be."

There are default assumptions and beliefs which provide differences in student performance. One set of these involves attributions of talent and effort. If you have talent and you try hard, you will learn, it is assumed. What if you are not learning what the school sees itself as trying to teach? An assumption about academic talent is that it is normally distributed – across a full range of high to low, most students will be somewhere in the middle, with fewer students at the low end and at the high end. Thus, if half the students in a classroom are having difficulty learning what is being taught that is to be expected – half the students will be "below average" and half will be "above average." School conventional wisdom also recognizes that students differ in effort – some students "try hard" and others "don't try." Within this set of assumptions, it follows that if a student is "behind" – not learning at the expected rate, in comparison to other students – either they lack basic talent or they are not "trying hard," or both. Within this set of assumptions, it's easy to see how learning difficulty becomes characterized as moral failure, or as evidence of lack of basic ability.

Enter "deficit narratives." They lead us to assume that in a school attended by low-income students of color, many of whom do not speak "standard English" at home, the distributions of talent and effort in our classrooms will not be normal but rather will be skewed negatively – because of cognitive deprivation, language or dialect difference, lack of work ethic in the home, and parents who don't care about academic learning (and possibly because of the child's and the family's genetic inferiority in intelligence and motivation to achieve). It follows that if most of the students are not learning what the teacher thinks is being taught, that's to be expected. It makes sense that most of the students are "below average." (We tried to teach them – they just didn't learn.) And failure to learn is morally reprehensible. It is a matter of students' failure to learn, not of the school's failure to teach in ways that support student learning. Thus, blame the victim.

The next example comes from long-term observation and interviewing in an inner city second grade classroom. On a sunny morning in early October, a conventional instructional format was being employed. The teacher conducted a reading lesson with a small group of students at a table on the side of the classroom by the windows. Meanwhile the other students were at their seats, filling in answers on a printed exercise sheet – a "drill and kill" academic task. As the reading group concluded, the teacher stood and announced that it was time for recess. As everyone stood up, the teacher addressed one African-American girl who the teacher had noticed during reading instruction had not finished her work sheet. She addressed the child by name in front of the entire class and said, "Renee, you can't go to recess today. You will have to stay here with (name of the classroom aide) and finish your work sheet." Renee sat down at her desk. While the other children lined up to exit the room, tears began to run down her cheeks. I walked out of the classroom with the teacher, on the way to recess, and as we got to the school door at the end of the corridor she said, "I don't know why I bother to make Renee finish her work. She'll be a hooker by the time she's fourteen."

Is this story principally a matter of cultural difference, or of race, or just of a girl who was bored by the task of finishing her work sheet? It's difficult to determine which were the most salient issues in the way this event played out. The teacher, who espoused conventional beliefs about teaching and classroom learning environments, sincerely believed that her responsibility as a teacher was to see that students complied with the requirements of the school district's mandated approach to teaching reading and writing. Completing worksheets was part of that mandate – "time on task" – time spent on tasks that had been assigned by the published teaching materials the school district had bought. Included in these mandates was the daily assignment of worksheets for lower order skill drill, presumed to be the route by which students would learn to read (see discussion below concerning the "ladder of skills" perspective as an aspect of school culture). According to the teacher's pedagogical commitments, she was justified in enforcing Renee's completion of the worksheet. But those "school cultural" beliefs supported the teacher's forcing Renee to do what the teacher wanted, embarrassing her in front of the other students in the class. And the teacher's inference that Renee would be a prostitute by age 14 was either triggered by the girl's race, or by her compromised moral status as a child who was out of compliance with classroom routines, or by some combination of both. Culture describes what is normal and what makes sense, and in some way or other, it seems justified to say that cultural border work was involved in what happened in the interaction between Renee and her teacher.

Wendy Kopp is the founder of the "Teach for America" program, in which senior undergraduates from prestigious colleges and universities are asked to volunteer to teach in an inner city school or a rural poverty school for 2 years after their college graduation. She gives a stock recruiting speech in which she lauds the heroism of her volunteers, who are willing to work as teachers with students who are "so difficult to teach." An uncontested ideology of deficit assumptions informs Kopp's rhetoric in recruitment.

Another widely held belief is that "we must have order before learning can take place." This leads teachers to focus on behavioral displays of compliance in the classroom (recall what happened with Renee) and to assume that more learning takes place in a quiet classroom where students sit still at their desks than in a noisy one where students move from place to place during instruction. These are cultural assumptions about what makes for a productive learning environment. In a speech on learning to teach delivered at the first annual meeting of the National Education Association in 1904, John Dewey made a distinction between two differing kinds of student attention. The first he called "inner attention" – students' engagement with subject matter that involved the exercise of genuine interest. The second kind of attention he called "outer attention" – students faking attention – seeming behaviorally to be interested and attentive while actually disattending. Dewey observed that a common mistake of novice teachers was to assume uncritically that student displays of outer attention were valid evidence of their inner attention. Firsthand experience of teaching, together with comments by colleagues in the faculty lounge, socializes teachers into informal cultural patterns of noticing while teaching – a form of "professional vision" (Goodwin, 1994). New lines of research on habits of teacher noticing are developing currently (see Sherin, Phillip, & Jacob, 2011) including research concern for what I have called teachers' "proximal formative assessment" of student learning – a key feature of which involves not mistaking students' outer attention for their inner attention (see Erickson, 2007; Erickson et al., 2007).

Another school cultural belief is in a "ladder of skills" approach to instruction. It is assumed that learning takes place across progressions from simple to complex. Learning tasks are thus broken into small components, discrete "low-order skills," and these need to be mastered, at a high level of proficiency, before moving on toward more complex, "higher-order skills." Thus, in reading instruction one begins with practice in letter sounds before moving on to words and eventually to utterances and sense making. (This is what the previously presented Little Duck example shows – pronunciation drill trumping comprehension instruction.) The result is conventional "drill and kill" pedagogy, especially in the early grades of school, as students are engaged in slowly climbing ladders of skills. (Again, the example of Renee and her worksheet is an apt illustration.) Skill and drill practice is boring, but you just have to buckle down, "try hard," and do it. If not, maybe you are "hyperactive" or maybe your parents "don't care." Maybe they, and you, are morally unfit.

Alternatives to Default Beliefs and Practices in Schools

Students in Finland do almost no homework until their teen years, and they take only one standardized test, at age 16. Yet their secondary school graduation rates and scores on international comparative tests for literacy and mathematics are considerably higher than those for the United States. Many students in European countries as well as students in Japan and Singapore show more understanding of fundamental mathematical concepts than do students, on the average, in the United States. Some inner city schools in the United States show consistent patterns of high student

learning morale and learning achievement, as do many private schools attended by children from affluent families and topflight public schools in affluent neighborhoods. All this suggests that school learning environments matter – teaching/learning and assessment of student performance can be resourced and organized in differing ways, with differing consequences for student affiliation and achievement, i.e., we have available alternatives to default beliefs and practices in schools, constituting alternative school cultures. Some of these alternative arrangements, especially concerning relationships between school cultures and student home and community cultures, are noted in the discussion that follows.

Culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogy. Given the pressures toward comparative assessment of students (which easily becomes invidious), crowding, and "batch processing" instruction in age-graded classrooms (teach everyone the same way and hope that at least half the students will "get it"), it is easy for schools to become sites of cultural border wars, conflicting with students' home and community cultures. In terms of student experience, classroom learning environments can have "bad breath," producing alienation and disaffiliation from what the school claims to be trying to teach. But that is not inevitable. Teachers can adopt "culturally responsive" practices that are consistent with habitual ways of thinking and acting that children bring with them to the classroom, and this can make a difference for student affiliation and learning morale (see Banks & Banks, 2007; Nieto, 1999; Torres-Guzmán, 1992).

The possible cultural unfamiliarity of "known information" questions has already been discussed, with citations from Erickson (1996, 2004) and that of Heath (1983), and this issue has now been considered by many scholars. But teachers can turn this from a cultural border matter to a cultural boundary matter by teaching explicitly the cognitive and interactional format of the "known information question game" without embarrassing children for whom that format is culturally unfamiliar. An adult asks a child a question that one would assume the adult already knows the answer to – without embarrassing children for whom that format is culturally unfamiliar. No moralizing around that – no shaming, simply an explanation that the teacher is asking a question he or she knows the answer to.

Another approach is to avoid known information questions entirely, at least in the public arena of whole group instruction. That is what a teacher did who I studied. She was a Native American teacher who taught in an early grades classroom on an Odawa reserve in northern Ontario. In 13 hours of video of her teaching, she never once asked a known information question of a named individual student during the whole group instruction. She only addressed such questions to the whole classroom group, so that group choral answers were an appropriate response. This was an adaptation to a cultural pattern in the children's homes and in the reserve community – it was considered impolite (and embarrassing) to single out people for public attention – whether for approval (as in "positive reinforcement") or for disapproval (as in "negative reinforcement"). People in the community avoided shining a spotlight of public attention on one another, and that is what the teacher was doing, in her culturally responsive pedagogical adaption (for further discussion, see Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Philips, 1983).

Still another example comes from the teaching of Carol Lee in an approach that she called "cultural modeling" (Lee, 2006). In high school English classes of inner city African-American students, she encouraged students to use culturally familiar "street" style language (i.e., African-American Vernacular) to discuss literature in her English class. Whether the subject matter was more or less familiar (texts by Alice Walker or those of Shakespeare), the students engaged their assigned readings by using language style that was customary outside school and showed high levels of interest and understanding in classroom discussion.

A related alternative teaching approach is characterized by Gloria Ladson-Billings as "culturally relevant" pedagogy. In this approach successful teachers of students from nondominant family backgrounds not only treat their students' cultural speaking styles neutrally as "boundary" phenomena – as nonstigmatized. Teachers also affiliate with the "view from beneath" in society, critiquing dominant assumptions that mask power relations. As an example, one teacher in a middle school class opened the desktop of one of her students while the students were away from the classroom. When all the students returned, the teacher held up personal objects from the student's desk and said "Look at what I discovered in (Student Name)'s desk." The student said "That's *my* desk, and *my* things!" From this opening prompt, class discussion turned to a critical analysis of the (usually unexamined) notion of "discovery" in social studies curriculum (as in the "Discovery" of America by Columbus, and in the later "Settling of the West" by white ranchers and farmers.) The point of the lesson was that who gets to "discover" and who becomes "discovered" are not simply matters of "natural" categories and labels, as taken for granted in conventional wisdom – rather, they are matters of asymmetry in power relations (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

A more recent approach that combines "cultural relevance" in Ladson-Billings' terms with "cultural responsiveness" is that of "culturally sustaining" pedagogy. This is to positively affirm students' home and community patterns, recognizing them as adaptations to life circumstances that are worthy of continuation and honoring the implicit and explicit social critiques that are manifested by culturally varying ways of thinking and acting (for discussion, see Paris, 2012).

Co-membership as a strategy for prevention of "othering." Another line of approach is especially appropriate in classrooms that bring together students from many different cultural, linguistic, and social class backgrounds. They do not come to school speaking mostly the same ways at home. (This is in contrast to the situation of greater cultural homogeneity among students in the examples of the native American teacher in a reserve community or the high school students of Carol Lee, who because of urban residential segregation patterns were all African-American and predominantly from working-class families.) Default approaches to instruction, treating the student differences as "border" matters, would most likely lead to "othering" in the classroom – increasing invidious distinctions among the students and alienation between the students, their teachers, and the subject matter that is being taught.

Fostering affiliation among students and with the teacher is a possible alternative. This is done as teachers help students to reveal commonalities of experience outside school that they share – features called "co-membership" (Erickson, 2012; Erickson

& Shultz, 1982). Some of the children are the oldest child in their family – that's a feature of co-membership. So is being the youngest child in the family. Some children live in a household with a pet, others live without pets. How many students really don't like spinach? How many students take care of younger siblings? (What do they do in such caretaking, how do they do this?) How many students share preferences in popular music? How many would like to be teachers when they grow up? By emphasizing and encouraging the revelation of similarities that can obtain across social address categories, teachers make it socially safe to be distinct, on the one hand, and yet to make manifest lines of affiliation along which students can regard one another in a host of *us* relations rather than *them* relations. Just as teachers have considerable discretion in how they treat cultural differences in the classroom – as "border" matters or as "boundary" matters – so they have discretion in fostering awareness of co-membership or in fostering its opposite, in "othering" and disrespect. How difference and similarity among students gets framed in the routine conduct of classroom life is not trivial. It is an important aspect of formally organized learning environments.

Conclusion

Schools and schooling, as conventionally operated, can easily become places in which cultural difference is treated as a problem whose presence leads to increased inequality. For a variety of reasons, cultural difference gets treated as cultural deficiency. And since the default practices in doing schooling are by definition what is typical, schools typically disadvantage the cultural differences students bring with them to school. That disadvantage is structurally produced within standard operating procedures – it can result without anyone's deliberately intending to produce it.

Yet this is not inevitable. School teachers, administrators, and school boards can choose to organize the conduct of schooling in ways that are culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining. But that involves adopting practices that go against what is usual. This has been compared to swimming upstream rather than downstream, "teaching against the grain" (see Cochran-Smith, 1991; Erickson, 2012). It involves more effort and reflective awareness than what's involved in default conduct of schooling. But it is possible.

A final note: if as our earlier discussion of Goodenough maintained, multiculturalism is the normal human experience (Goodenough, 1976), and if there are personal cultural differences as well as group cultural differences, then "culture" is not something exceptional – specially possessed by people from nondominant social backgrounds whose cultural practices are conventionally regarded as having low prestige. This means that in the United States, upper middle-class white college-educated Americans who speak only English at home are just as "cultural" as are working-class Salvadoran immigrant Americans who speak mostly Spanish at home. Fifth-generation German Americans are just as "cultural" as first-generation Haitian immigrants. Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Unitarians are just as

"cultural" as evangelical African-Americans. Everybody is multicultural, but not in the same ways. And thus every school classroom (and every hospital emergency room, every courtroom, and every city council meeting) is "culturally diverse." Whenever groups of people gather and interact together, we cannot assume that they all share the same experience or inhabit the same subjective worlds. Difference is there always. How we deal with it is a matter of human choice.

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