

Schooling: Crossing Cultural Borders

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As we press on towards universal secondary education, many of us consider the process of schooling to be non-problematic. Students are offered an opportunity—a place—within the system and are expected to make the best use of it. So we are often disappointed and surprised when many of the students fail, drop out, or, while within the system, seem to actively reject or make little use of the opportunity provided. This reaction reflects a taken-for-granted, non-problematic view of education in which students are expected to integrate smoothly into the system. However, there is another view that sees schooling as problematic and as a hazardous venture for many of the students who enter these schools. Within this framework, the school is viewed as a cultural enterprise, which may be at variance with the culture of many of the students who attend, and the process of schooling is considered as cultural border crossing.

Two personal experiences illustrate how differences in cultural norms and symbols can affect interpersonal relations. In the first case, a Trinidadian student was being upbraided for misbehaviour by a North American teacher, who also scolded the student for being rude because she did not make eye contact with the teacher during the interaction. However, local culture would accept this as a sign of respect for elders, who might otherwise admonish the youth for "playing man" (or of being "mannish") or "woman," if they looked them in the eye.

In the second case, during a visit to Canada in the early 1980s, a relative commented on my use of a handkerchief, while indicating that Canadians had abandoned the use of cloth. Instead, they used paper tissues—"progress" at work. She had recognized the cultural symbol. This incident comes to mind when I hear stories about disapproval of the use of wash rags in secondary school. One wonders whether this stance is a reaction to an unacceptable cultural symbol. Yet, as a norm, many primary school students are provided with wash rags instead of handkerchiefs or paper tissues, without comment. What happens when students enter the secondary system? Why does this become unacceptable behaviour? Is it a case of middle-class teachers and administrators having different norms and symbols?

These are but two examples of "visible" cultural artefacts mediating interpersonal relationships within the school system. However, the role of culture does not end there. The school also adopts more subtle norms that may impact on students' attitudes to school. For example, within the classroom there is emphasis on competition to the exclusion of cooperative activities. In fact, the classroom is highly individualistic with few opportunities for group work, unlike family and community life in which these opportunities exist.

Culture can also mediate the way in which students relate to various academic disciplines. In science, students often come into the classroom with what they perceive as perfectly rational out-of-school explanations of phenomena, but which have no place in the

formally accepted scientific body of knowledge. For example, how many of our students shelter from rain, or are told to avoid playing in water to prevent the occurrence of colds? Yet, in the science classroom they are taught that the cold is caused by a virus, and not by an inappropriate way of interacting with the environment. Additionally, in science, there is no cure for the virus. However, some students, especially those who live in rural areas, may know from their cultural context that a good sea bath can cure the cold.

It is clear that, as students are exposed to academic disciplines, there are borders that some must cross. Local beliefs and practices are not discussed in the classroom, so that many students who seek to make connections between home and school knowledge, and not hold these as parallel domains, may not see how school is relevant to their daily lives, unless they abandon their prior knowledge. Many students are not prepared to do this. There is too much emotional attachment to the products of primary socialization. This lack of acknowledgement of students' beliefs within the formal school system can be seen as a form of symbolic violence. The same applies to the disdain meted out to the language used by some students in many formal classroom environments. Symbolic violence can, in turn, be reflected as physical violence.

A number of questions arise with respect to the ability of our teachers to act as mediators of cultural knowledge: Are local teachers capable of buffering the culture shock that some students may experience as they move to the culture of the school, and of acting as mediators as students negotiate these different worlds? How does the teacher who has been socialized into a world of one right way or of universal truth adapt to a new world—a post-modern world—that applauds multiple views and celebrates diversity? Can we retain standards of excellence that were set in pre-independence times but abandon the strategies that were sometimes invoked—humiliation, superior vs. inferior forms of knowledge/language—to achieve those standards? Do we have the capacity to, or even the will to, accept diversity, which is the backbone of creativity?

Teachers who reflect on the sociocultural context from which they and/or their students come may provide some insights into the cultural artefacts that can be discussed in the classroom. In turn, they may be able to use these issues as a basis for lesson design as they seek to prepare students for life in a globalized environment by exposing them to other "worlds." For example, students' confidence can be boosted by focusing on the communicative function of language, thereby allowing for expression in the dialect before the "standard" is introduced as an alternative way of expressing these ideas. In science, students can be encouraged to compare alternative ways of explaining health conditions by looking at the similarities and differences, and the strengths and weaknesses of these explanations. This will help them to make informed choices as they conduct their lives outside the school walls.

As we embrace the concept of education for all and design curricula that are appropriate for all of our students, cultural border crossing is a useful analogy for the process of schooling. To put this idea into action, however, we must become truly accommodating

of diversity by trying to learn/understand the students in our charge before ascribing motives and labels that may be unfavourable and/or demeaning.

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