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The Dominant Culture of Schools and the Ideal of Discourse and Dissent

Schools also have their own culture, and while there are differences between schools that make each one unique, most operate similarly. Schools in the United States tend to privilege an individualistic, competitive approach. (Consider how grades are awarded, honor rolls are determined, and class rankings are reported.)

This approach teaches that property is owned by an individual, and the physical world is knowable (Trumbull et al., 2000). Education is framed as a means to become upwardly mobile to create a more materialistically enriched future. (Consider the assumption that all students should strive to attend college.) This agenda has become even more pointed in the last two decades as postsecondary liberal arts education programs close while science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs grow at high rates (Shamir, 2020).

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In contrast to these Anglo-Saxon Protestant institutional values of schools, some cultures hold a more collectivist view of the world. Success is defined more often at the group level, and the group's interdependency relies on its members' social skills. This sets some children up for difficulty when they move to the United States from another country and suddenly need to navigate a school culture that is unlike the one they experienced at home. For example, in an article titled "Why I'm Not Involved," Jung-Ah Choi (2017), a U.S. education professor who grew up in South Korea, recounted her dismay and humiliation at her son's kindergarten conference. The teacher told Choi her son was disruptive. As Choi noted,

I expected to have a conversation with the teacher. I expected the teacher to ask questions about Michael's family life. I expected a true parent-teacher partnership for the benefit of his education. I expected the teacher to take an interest in my approach to raising Michael. But all I heard from his teachers—that year and the next—was information about where he stood on the spectrum from struggling to smart and where he stood on the obedience spectrum (from disruptive to respectful). . . . "Mommy," he told me in kindergarten, "I am in the bad behavior group at school." (p. 48)

Her frustration is well founded. How can teachers know about a child's culture if communication is one way and focused only on the dominant culture of the school?

Social justice educators, administrators, and families should not view the dominant culture of a school as permanent, particularly if that culture does not meet the educational needs of all students. Those who insist on

social justice and fair education for all students can dissent when schools fail to meet the needs of students. Schools typically mirror the ideals of a society. Education systems are the vehicle that reproduces societal culture (Mathews & Savarimuthu, 2020).

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justice educators must find ways to dissent from cultural norms that undermine learning and justice for groups of students. Discourse and productive dissent are fundamental to a democratic society. How else are those governed by policies and laws expected to share their thoughts on how decisions impact them? The framers of the U.S.

Constitution institutionalized the ideal of discourse and dissent in the First Amendment when they penned the notion that the public must protest against the state if it behaves unjustly. This protest is defined by discourse and dissent.

As social justice educators, we cannot be indifferent to decisions or decision-making processes that impact us or the people we care for, specifically our students and their families. We can discuss, share dissenting views, and disagree without being disagreeable. Admittedly, this has not been modeled very well at school board meetings throughout the country, especially during discussions about race, ethnicity, and inclusion. Still, discourse and dissent are fundamental to democratic processes, and the officials who make decisions about schools must balance the interests of the community and the needs of all children. These discussions surface a community's values. Through discourse and dissent in our schools, at school board meetings, and embedded in reporting about education in the news, and through the ratification of education policies, our intersectionality impacts how we decide what's important and what values dominate the culture of our community's schools.

NOTES

Pause and Ponder

How was education discussed in your family? Reflect on the values imparted to you about schooling. Did your school regularly communicate with your family? What were the expectations your school held for your family? Did you experience a difference in values between home and school?



The Rich Points

Social justice educators recognize the profound influence culture and identities have on our perceptions and actions. We are often the product of multiple cultures, rather than a single one. Anthropologist Michael Agar (2006) offered this thought experiment in one of his talks.

What if I . . .

1. went to college in the 1980s rather than the 1960s?
2. were female rather than male?
3. grew up Jewish rather than Catholic?
4. were raised in Mississippi rather than California?
5. were a native speaker of Spanish rather than English?
6. delivered a sales pitch rather than a lecture?

Would any of these differences have been noticed? (p. 3)

Yes, it is highly likely that these differences would have been noticed and would have likely impacted the experiences he had in college. Agar calls this noticing of differences on the part of listeners the “rich points.” These rich points include moments of confusion that you may experience when you talk with someone and realize that you don’t understand

something they have said. They are rich because they hold a wealth of information about both parties. When those rich points occur, you find yourself at a crossroads and must make one of three decisions:

- ▶ Ignore your lack of understanding and hope you'll reach a point where it makes sense again
- ▶ Attribute your lack of understanding to a shortcoming on the speaker's part
- ▶ Wonder why you don't understand and see it as an opportunity to know more about yourself through the other party

Unfortunately, the first two options occur all too frequently. But importantly, the third decision can't happen if you don't have a sense of your own identity and how it impacts and limits your understanding of the world.

Each of us has an intersectionality of identities that inform how we see ourselves and others. Those frames are, at times, highly aligned with others. In those cases, you share a similar background and set of experiences with some people, and your communication with them is effortless. You rarely have those moments of lost understanding. But in other cases, your frame differs from those with whom you interact. This can be especially true if you teach at a school where the students' experiences are not like yours.

Teachers may also experience generational differences between themselves, their students, and their professional colleagues. In fact, generational differences surfaced for us while writing this book. Our author group consists of a Baby Boomer, two members of Generation X, and two Millennials. We learned more about each other through reading each other's writing and examining social justice concepts from our varying perspectives. The diversity of our perspectives provides rich points of insight for us as authors, and we are thankful we can share our thoughts with you. The concepts in this book deepened our understanding of each other and ourselves. We hope you have the same experience.

NOTES

Pause and Ponder

How do you respond when your frame differs from those around you? What is it like for you to explore the richness of those differences? Think of a time when you lost understanding with someone. How did you chase a rich point? Reflect on an interaction you had with someone of a different generation than your own. What was confusing to you? How did you respond to your confusion?



Conclusion

Knowing ourselves requires a self-awareness and a self-consciousness that not only benefit our personal well-being but also shape our ability to impact the social, emotional, and academic learning of students. In our pursuit of becoming social justice educators, we examine how our self-identity has developed. We consider the complexities in the intersectionality of identities, including how racial identities have contributed to our perspectives and our frame of the world. We recognize that our own names and the words we choose as labels for people and ideas matter because of the associated connotations. We encourage the practice of analyzing the dominant culture of the school and its alignment to the values and culture of the students who learn within its walls. As social justice educators, we search for the “rich points” when communicating with students, families, and colleagues so that we can deepen our understanding of others and, in turn, grow our understanding of ourselves.



3-2-1 Chapter Reflection

Take an opportunity to think about the content of the chapter and what it means to you.

- What are three important ideas from this chapter?

- What are two action steps you can take based on this chapter?

- What is one idea or concept you would like to explore further?

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