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Book Review

"Multiplication is for White People" Raising Expectations for Other People's Children, by Lisa Delpit

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As a senior in college, no other book affirmed my decision to become an urban teacher like *Other People's Children* by Lisa Delpit (1995). Delpit gave words to experiences in pre-dominantly Black K-12 schools like my own, where cultural conflict thrived as one of the intangible elements driving underperformance among African American students. In *Other People's Children*, Delpit uncovered the reality felt by so many Black students like myself about how they are treated by White teachers. Rather than place blame or evoke guilt, she provided strategies for how to bridge cultural gaps and misunderstanding in classrooms. Not only did Delpit's text help me to better understand my own educational experience, but it also helped me to more effectively serve urban youth from diverse ethnic communities.

Sixteen years after reading her first text, I saw the book, *"Multiplication is for White People" Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*, sitting on the desk of one of my teachers. I found the title compelling and provocative and was committed to finding time to read it. After completing Delpit's second book, I was far from disappointed. I have found occasion to quote this book to almost a dozen educators since I started reading it. Ironically, this book was emotionally difficult for me to get through, mainly because of the realization that little has changed for Black children in America's public schools in the sixteen years between Delpit's texts.

"Multiplication is for White People" is divided into four sections, moving through the experiences of African American students from birth to adulthood. While analyzing the plight of Black children in America's schools, Delpit also shares the experience of her daughter Maya, providing an intimate look into the PK-13 educational experience of a Black student. Delpit examines themes found at each developmental stage, identifying misguided instruction as well as a profound *lack* of instruction that plagues the classrooms of Black children. She also draws from a myriad of researchers and educators who demonstrate more effective ways to educate African American children. The flow of the book from the current reality, to historical examples, to the experience of Maya provides a well-researched academic text with a narrative component that is engaging for the reader. I think I honor Delpit's work best by placing her rich information within major themes that spoke to me throughout the text.

Theme 1. Black children are as intelligent as their White counterparts and bring unique cultural aspects that should be acknowledged.

Delpit starts chapter 1 with an assertion: "There is no achievement gap at birth" (p. 5). Quite to the contrary, she cites different research studies that discovered a

developmental advantage that favored African children compared to their European counterparts. She starts to define why she believes that achievement gaps begin after pre-school by describing two major culprits: lack of quality teaching for African American children and ingrained racism. According to Delpit, in many classrooms of African American students, teachers are simply not instructing. “Good teaching is desirable, but any teaching is preferable to classrooms where teachers have abdicated the role completely” (p. 9). Secondly, Delpit argues that the ingrained racism in our society supports the notion that Black is automatically inferior. This notion not only poisons teachers’ perceptions of their Black pupils, but also infects Black children with heart-breaking results. I imagine that the title of the book “*Multiplication is for White People*” is drawn from a quotation spoken by an eighth-grade, African American student to his math teacher: “Black people don’t multiply. Black people add and subtract. White people multiply” (p. 14). According to Delpit, racist notions are not only perpetuated through ideology, but are also internalized by Black students themselves.

One of Delpit’s solutions to addressing this myth of inferiority is to provide learning experiences that acknowledge the legacy and cultural experiences of African American students. In chapter 2, she details perspectives from traditional African education that celebrate a child’s inherent ability and attribute academic failure to a malleable character flaw, rather than inherent mental capacity. She discusses the importance of celebrating the contributions that Africans made to World history. Bringing it into the current-day, she provides examples of teachers who use their students’ cultural experience in the classroom to teach academic content.

Delpit’s idea of cultural continuity would be advocated by social theorists like Brofenbrenner (1979), who argues that continuity in a student’s macrosystem, in this case, school and home, support his development. Another theorist who supports Delpit’s assertion is Luis Moll. Moll and his colleagues advocate for a sociocultural approach to make school more meaningful for students (Moll, Gonzalez, Greenberg & Velez, n.d.). Their study of writing instruction with bilingual Mexican American students found that instruction was more successful when the classroom utilized the knowledge of the community. Utilizing the knowledge of the community allows students to make meaning of academic content by connecting it to information that is valuable to them and their families. Delpit advocates for instruction that aligns the cultural experiences of students with academic content in order to create relevant learning experiences.

Theme 2: Excellent teachers who take a holistic approach to teaching make a significant difference for students who live in poverty.

Throughout the text, Delpit honors excellent teachers who work with students in poverty. She refers to these teachers as “warm demanders” (p.71). These teachers demonstrate care and concern while maintaining high expectations of student performance. Delpit critiques attempts to teach students isolated skills without context or critical thinking. Warm demanders expect that their students will think deeply and produce work for authentic audiences. They maintain a no-excuses approach, but still acknowledge and accommodate for the challenges students bring to school.

Most impressively, these teachers also extend this approach to students with identified learning disabilities. Delpit argues that some students with identified learning disabilities are actually victims of poor instruction. She promotes an approach that identifies students' learning needs and provides the necessary support, rather than assigning students with a label. "Since we are all on a continuum of performance, how can we identify one specific point that determines a 'disability?'" (p. 97). Delpit provides several examples in chapter 5 of teachers who have successfully helped previously labeled students grow academically by emphasizing their strengths rather than their deficits.

In her continued support for urban teachers, Delpit specifically addresses the injustice of African American teachers who have curiously lost their jobs in significant numbers as a result of so-called educational *reform*. In chapter 6, she critiques the popular practice of replacing African American teachers with young, White teachers, namely Teach For America candidates. While she does not completely dismiss Teach For America as an organization, she does criticize the notion that young, White inexperienced teachers can teach Black students more effectively than the Black teachers who come from their communities. She instead suggests that White teachers should respect the expertise of experienced, successful Black teachers and consider them potential mentors. Delpit provides several statements from students who identify teachers who maintain high expectations and acknowledge their cultural roots. Delpit takes a controversial stance by revealing statistics that show a disturbing trend to displace Black teachers with inexperienced White teachers.

Theme 3: The intellectual promise of young adults should never be limited to their current skill level.

Delpit details the lack of rigorous academic content so frequently assigned to African American students. She argues that students are frequently expected to complete fill-in-the-blank worksheets that do not engage their minds to think critically or create purposeful work. Regardless of the program, according to Delpit, "if children's minds are not engaged, then the programs are failures" (p. 123). In urban education, it is as if small increases in standardized state tests have become the barometer of student success rather than student learning.

Delpit continues her analysis into the university, where too often intelligence is judged by students' skill level, not potential. According to Delpit, skill level is a matter of practice, not intelligence (p. 153). In this way, Delpit aligns herself to the work of Carol Dweck (1995) as well as neuroscientists who support brain theories of neuroplasticity (Sousa, 2010). Delpit advocates for rigor with support rather than remediation to get students up to academic standards (p. 184). While remediation stigmatizes students, rigorous content with support emphasizes their capability and potential.

Delpit has created an urgent, engaging, well-substantiated book that provides the reader with compelling, on-time arguments about the mis-education of African American students, with tangible next steps toward improvement. Given that I serve a pre-dominantly Latino student population, I can see the applicability of Delpit's ideas in that community as well as in any community where the students and their families are marginalized and underserved. I deeply appreciate how Delpit celebrates the achievements of urban teachers whose tenacious efforts are often underappreciated or ignored.

My one criticism of the book is the title. As I was reading the text, I often found myself hiding the book cover as not to evoke strange looks from nearby White people. I think the book sends an in your-face, race-based message that some educators may find offensive, or at least uncomfortable. *Those are exactly the people who need to read this book.* Therefore, I would advocate for a title that includes the theme of raising expectations, while *inviting* readers rather than repelling them. I am glad that Delpit focused her book on African American students, though I would love to see a sequel to this book that focused on Latino students and English Language Learners, given the changing demographics throughout the nation.

Short of the provocative and potentially off-putting title, this is a book that I would urge every educator to read, as the ideas and lessons are applicable to a variety of student populations. Delpit champions high quality teaching and maintains a focus on student learning. It will speak to those willing to take a sobering look behind the rhetoric, inside the state of public education for African American children.

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