

Intercultural Communication in the Classroom:

The Co-Culture of Poverty in the Classroom driven by the Hidden Rules of the Middle Class

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MS 112, Cultures and Conflict

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March 27, 2005

## Introduction

In order to communicate appropriately and effectively with diverse groups of people, one must be competent in intercultural communication. This competence is defined as the ability to “acknowledge, respect, tolerate, and integrate cultural differences that qualifies one for enlightened global citizenship” (Chen & Starosta 2003). Because “culture is the rule-governing system that defines the forms, functions, and content of communication,” knowledge of the many aspects of other cultures is necessary for intercultural communication competence (Gay 2003). By understanding a culture’s values, beliefs, communication patterns, and hidden rules of behavior, one is able to communicate more appropriately and effectively with the individuals of that culture.

Within the United States only, there are countless amounts of co-cultures comprised of individuals who “hold dual or multiple cultural memberships” (Samovar & Porter 2003). These groups may share “a common religion, economic status, ethnic background, age, gender, sexual preference, or race” (Samovar & Porter 2003). Each specific co-culture often has a “specialized language system, shared values, a collective worldview, and common communication patterns” (Samovar & Porter 2003). Therefore, these individuals are not solely members of the mainstream culture; rather, their cultural influences include many other cultural groups. Divisions along socio-economic status create the co-cultures of poverty, of the working lower class, of the middle class, and of the upper class. These co-cultures differ drastically concerning values, norms of communication, family structures, attitudes toward education, behavioral expectations, and more.

Within the United States’ public education system, many co-cultures exist together. The co-cultures of differing among socio-economic status vary drastically concerning values,

behavioral expectations, and communication patterns. Schools “operate from middle class norms and use the hidden rules of the middle class,” but these norms and hidden rules “are not directly taught” (Payne 2001). The co-culture of the middle class then becomes the mainstream culture within the school. Thus, the norms of the school greatly contrast the norms of the students’ home lives in poverty. Therefore, those students from the co-culture of poverty are not familiar with the underlying assumptions of the middle class that pervade values, behavioral expectations, and communication patterns. Because of the differences between these contrasting co-cultures, students from poverty have more difficulty than students from the middle class when adjusting to the classroom expectations concerning values, behavior, and communication.

In this study, I will discuss the interactions involving the co-culture of poverty in the classroom that is driven by middle class rules. Though the co-culture poverty is generally defined by its socio-economic status, the co-culture of poverty includes those who lack resources other than financial resources, as well. For this study, poverty will be defined as “the extent to which an individual does without financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical resources, as well as support systems, role models, or knowledge of hidden rules” (Payne 2001). Therefore, a child living in poverty often faces many challenges in addition to lacking in financial resources.

The students to which I will refer (with pseudonyms) are third graders at a rural public elementary school. Their teacher is extremely familiar with each student’s home life and has identified these particular students as living in poverty (Auxier 2005). I worked with these students one-on-one in a literacy program because each of them is below average for their age in academic, emotional, and social development. I will focus on three aspects of my interactions with these students: the value of education and learning, the expectations for behavioral and

social development, and the communication patterns. These three topics will be discussed concerning the challenges to classroom success for children in poverty.

### **The Value of Education and Learning**

Within a classroom guided by the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values of the middle class, education is seen as absolutely “crucial for climbing the success ladder and making money” (Payne 2001). Thus, classes are often taught with the assumption that the students acknowledge that school is necessary for success and, thus, act accordingly. Students are expected to acknowledge the value of school for future goals and, then, put forth a great deal of effort to reach these goals. Middle class culture assumes that school success directly translates to professional and economical success.

However, this middle class perspective of education is not consistent with the view of education pervasive in the co-culture of poverty. Often, students in poverty see school as an unavoidable, necessary evil because education is “valued and revered as abstract but not as reality” (Payne 2001). Students from poverty often “find that schooling may not pay off in the long run” (Johnston 1992). Therefore, to put forth any effort in school is simply in vain because educational success does not produce any rewards. Much of these beliefs concerning education have their roots in the students’ home lives. Student’s willingness to “participate actively in their schooling has much to do with the home environment that stimulates and sustains their interest in school. Much of the motivation transmitted to children derived from the parents’ belief that education could improve their children’s future economic opportunities” (Delgado-Gaitan & Alexsaht-Snider 1992). Therefore, because education is not seen as a realistic means to future economic opportunities, students in poverty are not motivated to strive for success in the classroom.

Adam, one of the third-graders, epitomizes the lack of motivation in the classroom. According to his teacher, Adam rarely shows any initiative to begin or complete any schoolwork (Auxier 2005). This lack of effort is apparent in Adam's educational development. Adam has only successfully completed five of the twenty-four standards for third-graders and reads at the level of a preschooler (Auxier 2005). Though he has dreams of becoming a lawyer, Adam does not connect success in the classroom with his future professional goals. Adam longs for a typical profession of the middle class. However, he lacks the knowledge taught in the middle class that connects educational success to future professional success. When we discussed the necessary skills to becoming a lawyer, Adam did not articulate the need for writing and reading skills. Rather, Adam simply stated that he would just talk to different people during the day. After affirming his suggestion that social skills are crucial for success in the lawyer's profession, I then suggested the importance of reading and writing skills. I stated that working hard and doing well in school is the necessary and only way to become a lawyer. We then discussed what that means right now for Adam as we talked about the importance of practicing and studying at home to be able to advance his reading, write legibly, and spell correctly. This idea seemed foreign or strange to Adam. However, each following week we revisit this topic as I ask Adam more questions. I hope that Adam will be able to articulate the connection between educational success and future professional success and explain exactly what actions he must take to improve in the classroom.

### **The Expectations for Behavioral and Social Development**

Within the school, high expectations are created and maintained through the development of classroom rules. However, not all behavioral expectations are clearly stated and posted on the walls of the classroom. Rather the middle class behavioral and social expectations are assumed

and unstated as students are expected to engage in “self-control concerning behavior” (Payne 2001). That is to say, students are expected to monitor their own behavior and be able to discern what is and is not appropriate behavior for the classroom with little pre-given guidance by the teacher.

However, the middle class assumed behavioral expectations of the classroom often oppose those within the poverty of co-culture. The behaviors of students in poverty that conflict with the classroom expectations are often behaviors that “are necessary to help them survive outside of school” (Payne 2001). Some of these behaviors may include arguing with the teacher, responded with anger, physically fighting, using vulgar language, talking incessantly, etc. (Payne 2001). These examples of disruptive classroom behavior are dictated by students’ “emotional responses” (Payne 2001). If students lack emotional support in their home lives, they have often not been taught the skills necessary to follow the behavioral expectations of the middle class. Additionally, middle class behavior skills do not offer help to survival in the co-culture of poverty.

Ben has great difficulty in his behavioral and social development. According to his teacher, he lacks the skills necessary to socialize successfully with children of his own age because Ben is so underdeveloped socially (Auxier 2005). Additionally, Ben often has loud, emotional, unpredictable, angry outbursts in class because he is upset that things have not exactly occurred how he desires (Auxier 2005). His teacher believes that these emotional outbursts are a product of Ben’s unstable home life in which screaming and yelling is the only way to get someone’s attention (Auxier 2005). Also, when prompted to create an imaginary story, Ben writes realistic stories often including violence. However, the violence is not interpreted as good or bad, it just is. These different examples demonstrate Ben’s difficulty in adjusting to the

middle class behavioral and social expectations in the classroom. These are skills that Ben needs to achieve educational success; however, these skills do not offer Ben in his home life within the co-culture of poverty.

### **The Communication Patterns**

Within the classroom driven by the hidden rules of the middle class, the formal registrar of English is the expected norm of communication. When engaged in conversation, the “pattern is to get straight to the point” in a linear, logical organization (Payne 2001). The ability to talk in the “formal registrar is a hidden rule of the middle class” that is necessary for success in the classroom (Payne 2001). Students’ “academic performance may be misdiagnosed or tripped in communicative mismatches” if they are not “proficient in school communication, and teachers do not understand or accept the students’ cultural communication styles” (Gay 2003). Because of this miscommunication between student and teacher, “students may know much more than they are able to communicate, or they may be communicating much more than their teachers are able to discern” (Gay 2003). Therefore, being fluent in the formal registrar of English is a necessity for success in the middle class school.

However, students from the co-culture of poverty often engage in conversation in the “casual registrar” (Payne 2001). Students in poverty often communicate in a cyclical manner with “no direct answer” and seem to “talk incessantly” (Payne 2001). Questions are answered in round about ways that “go around and around and finally get to the point” (Payne 2001). Thus, teachers can grow impatient with students’ long-winded answers and deem a student incorrect who arrives at the correct answer in a different fashion. Teachers view students who use the casual registrar to communicate as illogical, inarticulate, and fragmented. Because these

students articulate their answers in a completely different way, their responses are judged as incorrect, though the students do have an understanding of the content of the particular concept.

Christina often talks in circles. When answering a question, Christina does not give a straightforward or direct response. Rather, her answer seems disjointed as a random conglomerate of ideas that are not logically pieced together in a linear fashion. Christina will tell a story that seems completely unrelated to the topic that we are discussing; she will not articulate the connection between her story and the topic. Instead, as the listener, I must link these two seemingly unrelated ideas together to gain any understanding of Christina's answer. To aid in Christina's ability to articulate the relationship from the story to the specific topic, I ask her questions hoping to prompt Christina to offer a logical explanation of her answer. I often must rephrase the question several times to illicit the desired response from Christina. By being able to explain her answer in a direct manner, as well, Christina will be more successful in the classroom. Christina will be able to be "fluent" in casual registrar and formal registrar.

### **Conclusion**

My experiences with Christina, Ben, and Adam offer insights into the interactions of the co-culture of poverty within the middle class school, specifically communication patterns, behavioral and social expectations, and the value of education. These examples highlight some of the issues that children in poverty face when entering the classroom. Because the school is rooted in middle class assumed norms and hidden rules, children in poverty face challenges in the classroom.

The conflicts that arise among the co-culture of poverty in the middle class school are a pressing issue for the U.S. public education system, especially when considering that 12.9 million or 17.6 percent of children under eighteen live in poverty (U.S. 2004). Educators must



continually be questioning what type of role the school is having in these children's lives as well as the pervasive influence of a child's home life. Educators should not be discrediting the values, beliefs, behavioral norms, and communication patterns of the co-culture of poverty. Rather, educators should be knowledgeable of the co-culture of poverty to better understand their students. Additionally, educators should help equip their students with the tools and skills necessary to succeed in the classroom guided by middle class norms. By being able to function effectively and appropriately within differing cultures, the students in poverty will then be able to better negotiate their behavior and communication patterns amongst different cultures and be successful in both the home and the classroom.

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