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The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children

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A Black male graduate student who is also a special education teacher in a predominantly Black community is talking about his experiences in predominantly white university classes:

There comes a moment in every class where we have to discuss 'The Black Issue' and what's appropriate education for Black children. Tell you, I'm tired of arguing with those White people, because they won't listen. Well, I don't know if they really don't listen or if they just don't believe you. It seems like if you can't quote Vygotsky or something, then you don't have any validity to speak about your own kids. Anyway, I'm not bothering with it anymore, now I'm just in it for a grade.

A Black woman teacher in a multicultural urban elementary school is talking about her experiences in discussions with her predominantly white fellow teachers about how they should organize reading instruction to best serve students of color:

When you're talking to White people they still want it to be their way. You can try to talk to them and give them examples, but they're so headstrong, they think they know what's best for everybody's children. They won't listen. White folks are going to do what they want to do anyway.

It's really hard. They just don't listen well. No, they listen, but they don't hear—you know how your mama used to say you listen to the radio, but you hear your mother? Well they don't hear me.

So I just try to shut them out so I can hold my temper. You can only beat your head against a brick wall for so long before you draw blood. If I try to stop arguing with them I can't help myself from getting angry. Then I end up walking around praying all day. Please Lord, remove the bile I feel for these people so I can sleep tonight. It's funny, but it can become a cancer, a sore.

So, I shut them out. I go back to my own little cubby, my classroom, and I try to teach the way I know will work, no matter what those folks say. And when I get Black kids, I just try to undo the damage they did.

I'm not going to let any man, woman, or child drive me crazy—White folks will try to do that if you let them. You just have to stop talking to them, that's what I do. I just keep smiling, but I won't talk to them.

A soft-spoken Native Alaskan woman in her forties is a student in the Education Department of the University of Alaska. One day she storms into a Black professor's office and uncharacteristically slams the door. She plops down in a chair and, still fuming, says, 'Please tell those people, just don't help us anymore! Give up. I won't talk to them again!'

And finally, a Black woman principal who also has a doctoral student at a well-known university on the West Coast is talking about her university experiences, particularly about when a professor lectures on issues concerning educating Black children:

If you try to suggest that's not the way it is, they get defensive, then you get defensive, that's where the cat and mouse.

I try to give them my experiences, to explain. They just look and nod. The more I try to explain, they just look and nod, just keep looking and nothing. They don't really hear me.

Then, when it's time for class to be over, the professor tells me to come to his office to talk more. So I go. He asks for more examples of what I'm talking about, and he looks and nods while I give them.

This was the first half of the title of this text—'The Silenced Dialogue.' One of the tragedies in the field of education is that scenarios such as these are enacted daily around the country. The saddest element is that the individuals that the Black and Native American educators speak of in these statements are aware that the dialogue has been silenced. Most likely the white educators believe that their colleagues of color did, in the end, agree with their logic. After all, they stopped disagreeing, didn't they?

I have collected comments and statements since completing a recently published article. In this somewhat autobiographical account, entitled 'Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator,' I discussed my perspective as a product of a skills-oriented approach to writing and a teacher of process-oriented approaches. I described the struggle that I and many teachers of color feel from the progressive movement when writing process advocates dismiss us as too 'skills oriented.' I ended the article suggesting that it was incumbent upon writing-process advocates—or indeed, advocates of my progressive movement—to enter into dialogue with teachers of color, who may not share their enthusiasm about so-called new, ideal, or process ideas.

In response to this article, which presented research data and did not even cite a reference, I received numerous calls and letters from teachers, professors, and even state school personnel from around the country, but Black and white. All of the white respondents, except one, have wished to talk more about the question of skills versus process approaches—to support or reject what they perceive to be my position. On the other hand, all of the non-white respondents have spoken passionately on being left out of the dialogue about how best to educate children of color.

How can such complete communication blocks exist when both parties truly believe they have the same aims? How can the bitterness and resentment expressed by the educators of color be drained so that the sores can heal? What can be done?

I believe the answer to these questions lies in ethnographic analysis, that is, in identifying and giving voice to alternative world views. Thus, I will attempt to address the concerns raised by white and Black respondents to my article 'Skills and Other Dilemmas.'

My charge here is not to determine the best instructional methodology; I believe that the actual practice of good teachers of all colors typically incorporates a range of pedagogical orientations. Rather, I suggest that the differing perspectives on the debate over 'skills' versus 'process' approaches can lead to an understanding of the alienation and miscommunication, and thereby to an understanding of the silenced dialogue.

In thinking through these issues, I have found what I believe to be a connecting and central theme: what I have come to call the 'culture of power.' There are five aspects of power I would like to propose as given for this presentation:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power, that is, there is a 'culture of power.'
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence.

The first three are by now basic tenets in the literature of the sociology of education, but the last two have seldom been addressed. The following discussion will elucidate these aspects of power and their relevance to the schism between liberal educational movements and that of non-White, non-middle-class teachers and communities.

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
These issues include: the power of the teacher over the students; the power of the publishers.
of textbooks and of the developers of the curriculum to determine the view of the world presented; the power of the state in enforcing compulsory schooling; and the power of an individual or group to determine another’s intelligence or ‘normalcy.’ Finally, if schooling prepares people for jobs, and the kind of job a person has determines her or his economic status and, therefore, power, then schooling is intimately related to that power.

2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a ‘culture of power.’

The codes or rules I’m speaking of relate to linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting.

3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.

This means that success in institutions—schools, workplaces, and so on—is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power. Children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those from non-middle-class homes because the culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle classes—of those in power. The upper and middle classes send their children to school with all the accoutrements of the culture of power; children from other kinds of families operate within perfectly wonderful and viable cultures but not cultures that carry the codes or rules of power.

4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.

In my work within and between diverse cultures, I have come to conclude that members of a culture transmit information implicitly to co-members. However, when implicit codes are attempted across cultures, communication frequently breaks down. Each cultural group is left saying, ‘Why don’t those people say what they mean?’ as well as, ‘What’s wrong with them, why don’t they understand?’

Anyone who has had to enter new cultures, especially to accomplish a specific task, will know of what I speak. When I lived in several Papua New Guinea villages for extended periods to collect data, and when I go to Alaskan villages for work with Alaskan Native communities, I have found it unquestionably easier—psychologically and pragmatically—when someone kind soul has directly informed me about such matters as appropriate dress, interactional styles, embedded meanings, and taboo words or actions. I contend that it is much the same for anyone seeking to learn the rules of the culture of power. Unless one has the leisure of a lifetime of immersion to learn them, explicit presentation makes learning immeasurably easier.

And now, to the fifth and last premise.

5. Those with power are frequently least aware of— or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence.

For many who consider themselves members of liberal or radical camps, acknowledging personal power and admitting participation in the culture of power is instantly uncomfortable. On the other hand, those who are less powerful in any situation are most likely to recognize the power variable most acutely. My guess is that the white colleagues and instructors of those previously trusted did not perceive themselves to have power over the non-white speakers. However, either by virtue of their position, their numbers, or their access to that particular code of power, calling upon research to validate one’s position, the white educators had the authority to establish what was to be considered ‘true’ regardless of the opinions of the people of color, and the latter were well aware of that fact.

A related phenomenon is that liberals (and here I am using the term ‘liberal’ to refer to those whose beliefs include striving for a society based upon maximum individual freedom and autonomy) seem to act under the assumption that to make any rules or expectations explicit is to act against liberal principles, thus limiting the freedom and autonomy of those subjected to the explicitness.

I thank Fred Erickson for a comment that led me to look again at a tape by John, a student who was very different in cultural interactions. One of the episodes showed an East Indian interviewing for a job with an all-white committee. The interview was a complete failure, even though several of the interviewers appeared to really want to help the applicant. As the interview rolled steadily downhill, these ‘helpers’ became more and more indirect in their questioning, which exacerbated the problems the applicant had in performing appropriately. Operating from a different cultural perspective, he got fewer and fewer clear clues as to what was expected of him, which ultimately resulted in his failure to secure the position.

I contend that as the applicant showed less and less aptitude for handling the interview, the power differential became ever more evident to the interviewers. The ‘helpful’ interviewers, unwilling to acknowledge themselves as having power over the applicant, became more and more uncomfortable. Their indirectness was an attempt to lessen the power differential and their discomfort by lessening the power-revealing explicitness of their questions and comments.

When acknowledging and expressing power, one tends towards explicitness (as in telling your 10-year-old, ‘Turn the radio down!’). When de-emphasizing power, there is a move toward indirect communication. Therefore, in the interview setting, those who sought to help, to express their egalitarianism with the East Indian, became more indirect—and less and less helpful—in their questions and comments.

In literacy instruction, explicitness might be equated with direct instruction. Perhaps the ultimate expression of explicitness and direct instruction in the primary classroom is Distor. This reading program is based on a behaviorist model in which reading is taught through the direct instruction of phonics generalizations and blending. The teacher’s role is to maintain the full attention of the group by continuous questioning, eye contact, finger maps, hand claps, and other gestures, and by eliciting choral responses and initiating some sort of award system.

When the program was introduced, it arrived with a flurry of research data ‘proved’ that all children—even those who were ‘culturally deprived’—could learn to read using this method. Soon there was a strong response, first from academics and later from many classroom teachers, stating that the program was terrible. What I find particularly interesting, however, is that the primary issue of the conflict over Distor has not been over its instructional efficacy—usually the students did learn to read—but the expression of explicit power in the classroom.

The liberal educators opposed the methods—the direct instruction, the explicit control exhibited by the teacher. As a matter of fact, it was not unusual (even now) to hear of the program spoken of as ‘racist.’ I am not an advocate of Distor, but I will return to some of the issues that the program—and direct instruction in general—raises in understanding the differences between progressive white educators and educators of color.

To explore those differences, I would like to present several statements typical of those made by the best of intentions by middle-class liberal educators. To the surprise of the speakers, it is not unusual for such content to be met by vocal opposition or stony silence from people of color. My attempt here is to examine the underlying assumptions of both camps.

‘I want the same thing for everyone else’s children as I want for mine.’

To provide schooling for everyone’s children that reflects liberal, middle-class values and aspirations is to ensure the maintenance of the status quo. Full power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it. Some children come to school with more accoutrements of the culture of power already in place—‘cultural capital,’ as some critical theorists refer to it—some with less.

Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal for education is for children to become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom setting without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them. This is a reasonable goal for people whose children are already participants in the culture of power and who have already internalized its codes.

But parents who do not function within that culture often want something else. It’s not that they disagree with the former aim, it’s just that they want something more. They want to ensure that the school provides their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society.

It was the lack of attention to this concern that created such a negative outcry in the Black community when well-intentioned white liberal educators introduced ‘dialect
readers.' These were seen as a plot to prevent the schools from teaching the linguistic aspects of the culture of power, thus deeming Black children to a permanent outsider caste. As one parent demanded, 'My kids know how to be Black—you all teach them how to be successful.'

Several Black teachers have had the opportunity to discuss these issues with their students. In one class, a teacher asked her students to reflect on the ways in which they had been taught to believe in a system that was designed to work against them. She pointed out that many of the teachers in her school were not trained to work with Black children, and that they often struggled to find ways to connect with their students.

One teacher, for example, had difficulty finding ways to engage her students in discussions about their experiences as Black children in a predominantly White school. She explained that many of her students felt like they were being judged based on their race, and that they often felt like they had to work twice as hard to get the same recognition as their White classmates.

In another class, a teacher used a scenario to help her students understand the ways in which systemic racism can affect their lives. She explained that even when they followed all the rules, they might still face challenges that their White classmates did not.

The teacher emphasized the importance of helping children develop a sense of agency and empowerment, even in the face of systemic barriers. She encouraged her students to think critically about the ways in which they could overcome these challenges and to work together to create a more just and equitable school environment.

The students were able to connect with the teacher's message, and they began to see the ways in which they could use their education to fight against systemic racism. They formed a group to plan protest activities and to reach out to other students and teachers in the school to raise awareness about the issues they were facing.

These examples illustrate the power of education and the importance of creating spaces where students can learn to think critically and to act on those ideas. By providing students with the tools and resources they need to succeed, we can help them to become active agents of change in their communities and in their schools.
positive changes was a subsequent student-centered conference with the teacher. (Peer conferencing in this group of Black students who were not members of the culture of power produced the least number of changes in students' writing. However, the classroom teacher maintained—and I conjecture—that such activities are necessary to introduce the elements of 'real audience' into the task, along with more teacher-directed strategies.)

'It's really a shame but she (that Black teacher upstairs) seems to be so authoritarian, so focused on skills and so teacher directed. Those poor kids never seem to be allowed to really express their creativity. (And she even yells at them.)'

This statement directly concerns the display of power and authority in the classroom. One way to understand the difference in perspective between Black teachers and their progresive colleagues on this issue is to explore culturally influential oral interactions.

In Ways With Words, Shirley Brice Heath quotes the verbal directives given by the middle-class 'townspeople':

- 'Is this where the scissors belong?'
- 'You want to do your best work today?'
- 'Put those scissors on that shelf,'
- 'Put your name on the papers and make sure to get the right answer for each question.'

Is one oral style more authoritarian than another?

Other researchers have identified differences in middle-class and working-class speech to children. Snow et al., for example, report that working-class mothers use more directives to their children than do middle- and upper-class parents. Middle-class parents are likely to give the directive to a child to take his bath as, 'Isn't it time for your bath?'

Even though the utterance is couched as a question to the child and adult, the mother understands it as a directive. The child may respond with 'Aw, Ma'am, can't I wait until...', but whether or not negotiation is attempted, both conversants understand the intention of the utterance.

By contrast, a Black mother, in whose house I was recently a guest, said to her eight-year-old son, 'Boy, get your rusty behind in that bathtub.' Now I happen to know that this woman loves her son as much as any mother, but she would never have posed the directive to her son to take a bath in the form of a question. Were she to ask, 'Would you like to take your bath now?' she would not have been issuing a directive but offering a true alternative. Consequently, as Heath suggests, upon entering the school the child from the same family may not understand the indirect statement of the teacher as a direct command. Both white and Black working-class children in the community Heath studied had difficulty interpreting these indirect directives for adherence to unarticulated rules.

But those veiled commands are commands none the less, representing true power, and with true consequences for disobedience. If veiled commands are ignored, the child will be labeled a behavior problem and possibly officially classified as behavior disordered. In other words, the attempt by the teacher to reduce an expression of power by expressing herself in indirect terms may remove the very explicitness that the child needs to understand the rules of the new classroom culture.

A Black elementary school principal in Fairbanks, Alaska, reported to me that she has a lot of difficulty with Black children who are placed in some white-mixed classrooms. The principal explained to me that she had no idea what to do with the children. She then explained to me, 'It's very difficult to keep the children from disobeys teacher directives. Their parents are frequently called in for conferences. The parents' response to the teacher is usually the same, 'You do what I say, if you just do what I say, they'll do it.'

I don't mean to imply, however, that the only time the Black child disobeys the teacher is when he or she misunderstood the request for certain behavior. There are other factors that may produce such behavior. Black children expect an authority figure to set the standard. Consequently, they may not be able to follow teacher directives. In her dissertation, Michelle Foster quotes one young Black man describing such a teacher:

She's boring, boring. She could do something creative. Instead she just stands there. She can't control the class. Doesn't know what to control the class. She asks me what I was doing wrong. I told her she just stands there like she's meditating. I told her she could be meditating for all I know. She says that we're supposed to know what to do. I told her I don't know what. I think she just can't control the class. I hope we don't have her next semester.

But of course the teacher may not view the problem as residing in herself but in the student, and the child may once again become the behavior-disordered Black boy in special education.

What characteristics do Black students attribute to the good teacher? Again, Foster's dissertation follows this question, which supports my experience with Black students. A young Black man, an aspiring teacher, is an example of a group of friends:

We had a class in his class but she was mean. I can remember she used to say, 'Tell me what's in the story, Wayne.' She pushed, she used to get on me and push me to know. She made us learn. We had to get in the books. There was this tall guy and he tried to take her on, but she was in charge of that class and she didn't let anyone run her. I still have this book in my possession. It's a bunch of stories in it. I just read one on Coca-Cola again the other day.

To clarify, this student was proud of the teacher's 'meanness,' an attribute he seemed to describe as the ability to run the class and pushing and expecting students to learn. Now, does the liberal perspective of the negatively authoritarian Black teacher 'really hold up?' I suggest that although all 'experts' Black teachers are not also good teachers, there are different attitudes in different cultural groups about which characteristics make for a good teacher. Thus, it is impossible to create a model for the good teacher without taking issues of culture and community context into account.

And now to the final comment I present for examination:

'Children have the right to their own language, their own culture. We must fight cultural hegemony to fight the system by insisting that children must be allowed to express themselves in their own language style. It is not they, the children, who must change, but the schools. To push children to do anything else is repressive and reactionary.'

A statement such as this originally inspired me to write the 'Skills and Other Difficulties' article. It was first written as a letter to a colleague in response to a situation that had developed in our department. I was teaching
senior-level teacher education course. Students were asked to prepare a written autobiographical document for the class that would also be shared with their placement school prior to their student teaching.

One student, a talented young Native American woman, submitted a paper in which the ideas were lost because of technical problems—from spelling to sentence structure to paragraph structure. Removing her name, I duplicated the paper for a discussion with some faculty members. I had hoped to initiate a discussion about what we could do to ensure that our students did not reach the senior level without getting assistance in technical writing skills when they needed them.

I was amazed at the response. Some faculty implied that the student should never have been allowed into the teacher education program. Others, some of the more progressive minded, suggested that I was attempting to function as a gatekeeper by raising the issue and had internalized repressive and dehumanizing aspects of the power elite to suggest that something was wrong with a Native American student just because she had another style of writing. With few exceptions, I found myself alone in arguing against both camps.

No, this student should not have been denied entry into the program. To deny her entry under the notion of upholding standards is to blame the victim for the crime. We cannot justify continuable exclusionary standards when the reason this student lacked the skills demanded was poor teaching at best and institutionalized racism at worst.

However, to bring this student into the program and pass her through without attending to obvious deficits in the codes needed for her to function effectively as a teacher is equally criminal—for though we may assume our own conisences for not participating in victim blaming, she will surely be accused and convicted as soon as she leaves the university. As Native Alaskans were quick to tell me, and as I understood through my experiences in the Native community, not only would she not be hired as a teacher, but those who did not hire her would make the (false) assumption that the university was putting out only incompetent Natives and that they should stop looking seriously at Native applicants. A white applicant who exhibits problems is in individual with problems. A person of color who exhibits problems immediately becomes a representative of her cultural group.

No, either stance is criminal. The answer is to accept students but take responsibility to teach them. I decided to talk to the student and find out why she had recognized that she needed some assistance in the technical aspects of writing soon after she entered the university as a freshman. She had gone to various members of the education faculty and received the same two kinds of responses: (1) four years later, faculty members thought that she should not even attempt to be a teacher, or that it didn't matter and that she shouldn't worry about such trivial issues. In her desperation, she had found a helpful professor in the English Department, but he left the university when she was in her sophomore year.

We sat down together, worked out a plan for attending to specific areas of writing competence, and set up regular meetings. I stressed to her the need to use her own learning process as insight into how best to teach her future students those skills that her own schooling had failed to teach her. I gave her some explicit rules to follow in some areas; for others, we devised various kinds of journals that, along with the structure of the language, allowed her to find her own insights into how the language worked. All that happened two years ago, and the young woman is now successfully teaching. What the experience led me to understand is that pretending that the teaching points don't exist is to ensure that many students will not pass through them.

Now you may have inferred that I believe that because there is a culture of power, everyone should learn the codes to participate in it, and that is how the world should be. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. I believe in diversity of style, and I believe the world will be diminished if cultural diversity is ever obliterated. Further, I believe strongly, as do my fellow citizens, that each cultural group should have the right to maintain its own language style. When I speak, therefore, of the culture of power, I don't speak of how I wish things to be but of how they are.

I further believe that to act as if power does not exist is to lie. No one who is a participant in the power status quo remains the same. To imply to children or adults (but of course the adults won't believe you anyway) that it doesn't matter how you talk or how you write is to ensure their ultimate failure. I prefer to be honest with my students. Tell them that their language and cultural style is unique and wonderful and that there is a political power game that is also being played, and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games that they too must play.

But don't think that I let the onus of change rest entirely with the students. I am also involved in political work both inside and outside of the educational community, and that political work demands that I place myself to influence as many gatekeeping points as possible. And it is there that I agitate for change—pushing gatekeepers to open their doors to a variety of styles and codes. What I am saying, however, is that I do not believe that political change toward diversity can be effected from the bottom up, as do some of my colleagues. They seem to believe that if we accept and encourage diversity within classrooms of children, then diversity will automatically be accepted as gatekeeping points.

I believe that will never happen. What will happen is that the students who reach the gatekeeping points—like Amanda Bransome's student who dropped out of high school and failed his exit exam—all will understand that they have been lied to and will react accordingly. Not, I am certain that if we are to truly effect societal change, we cannot do so from the bottom up, but we must push our gatekeepers from the top down. And in the meantime we must take the responsibility to teach, to provide for students who do not already possess them, the additional codes of power.

But I also do not believe that we should teach students to passively adopt an alternate code. They must be encouraged to understand the value of the codes they already possess as well as to understand the power realities in this country. Otherwise they will be unable to work to change these realities. And once one does this...

Martha Demenieneff, a masterly Native Alaskan teacher of Ahtakasuk Indian students, tells me that her students, who live in a small, isolated, rural village of less than two hundred people, are not aware that there are different codes of English. She takes their writing and analyzes it for features of what has been referred to by Alaskan linguists as 'Village English,' and then covers half a bulletin board with words or phrases from the students' writing, which she labels 'Our Heritage Language.' On the other half of the bulletin board she puts the equivalent statements in 'Standard English,' which the labels 'Formal English.'

She and the students spend a long time on the 'Heritage English' section, savoring the words, discussing the nuances. She tells the students, 'That's the way we say things. Doesn't it feel good? Isn't it the absolute best way of getting that idea across?' Then she turns to the other side of the board. She tells the students that there are people, not like those in their village, who judge others by the way they talk or write.

We listen to the way people talk, we listen to them, but to tell what part of the river they come from. These other people are not like that. They think everybody needs to talk like them. Unlike us, they have a hard time hearing what people say if they don't talk exactly like them. Their way of talking and writing is called 'Formal English.'

We all feel a little sorry for them because they have only one way to talk. We are going to learn two ways to say things. Isn't that better? One way will be our Heritage way. The other will be Formal English. Then when we go to get jobs, we'll be able to talk like those people and can only really listen to one way. Maybe after we get the jobs we can help them to learn how it feels to have another language, like ours, that feels just as good. We'll talk like them when we have to, but we'll always know our way is best.

Martha then does all sorts of activities with the notions of Formal and Heritage or informal English. She tells the students, in the village, everyone speaks informally most of the time unless there's a potlatch or something. You don't think about it, you don't worry about following any rules—it's sort of like how you eat food at a picnic—nobody pays attention to whether you use your fingers or a fork, and it feels so good. Now, Formal English is more like a formal dinner. There are rules to follow about where the knife and fork belong, about where you place your napkin, and how you eat. That can be really nice, too, because it's nice to dress up sometimes.

The students then prepare a formal dinner in the class, for which they dress up and set a big table with fancy tablecloths, china, and silverware. They speak only Formal English at this meal. Then they prepare a picnic where only informal English is allowed. She also contrasts the 'wordly' academic
way of saying things with the metaphoristic style of Athabaskan. The students discuss how book language always uses more words, but in Heriag language, the shorter way of saying something is always better. Students then write papers in the academic way, discussing with Martha and each other whether they believe they've said enough to sound like a book. Next, they take the papers and try to reduce the meaning to a few sentences. Finally, students further reduce the message to a "saying" brief enough to go on the front of a T-shirt, and the sayings are put on little paper T-shirts that the students cut out and hang throughout the room. Sometimes the students reduce other authors' wordy texts to their essential meanings as well.

The following transcript provides another example. It is from a conversation between a Black teacher and a Southern Black high school student named Joey, who is a speaker of Black English. The teacher believes it very important to discuss openly and honestly the issues of language diversity and power. She has begun the discussion by giving the student a children's book written in Black English to read.

**Teacher:** What do you think about the book?
**Joey:** I think it's nice.
**Teacher:** Why?
**Joey:** I don't know. I just told about a Black family, that's all.
**Teacher:** Was it difficult to read?
**Joey:** No.
**Teacher:** What do you think different from what you have seen in other books?
**Joey:** Yeah, the writing was.
**Teacher:** Why?
**Joey:** It uses more of a southern-like accent in this book.
**Teacher:** Uhmm ... do you think that's good or bad?
**Joey:** Well, uh, I don't think it's good for people down this way, cause that's the way they grow up talking anyway. They ought to get the right way to talk.
**Teacher:** Oh. So you think it's wrong to talk like that?
**Joey:** Well ... [Laugh]
**Teacher:** Hard question, huh?
**Joey:** Uhmm, that's a hard question. But I think they shouldn't make books like that.
**Teacher:** Why?
**Joey:** Because they are not the right way to talk in and school they take off for that and I'll children grow up talking like that and reading like that so they might think that's right and all the time they getting bad grades in school, talking like that and writing like that.

Notice how throughout the conversation Joey's consciousness has been raised by thinking about codes of language. This teacher further advocates having students interview various personnel in actual workplaces about the attitudes toward divergent styles in oral and written language. Students begin to understand how arbitrary language standards are, but also how politically charged they are. They compare various pieces written in different styles, discuss the impact of different styles on the message by making translations and back translations across styles, and discuss the history, apparent purpose, and contextual appropriateness of each of the technical writing rules presented by their teacher. They practice writing different forms to different audiences based on rules appropriate for each audience. Such a program not only teaches standard linguistic forms, but also explores aspects of power as exhibited through linguistic forms.

Tony Burgess, in a study of secondary writing in England by Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen, suggests that teachers should not teach 'iron conventions ... imposed without rationale or grounding in communicative intent,' but 'critical and ultimately cultural awareness'. Courtney Cadzuen calls for a two-pronged approach:

1. Continuous opportunities for writers to participate in some authentic bit of the emerging conversation—thereby becoming part of a vital community of talkers and writers in a particular domain.
2. Periodic temporary focus on conventions of form, taught as cultural conventions expected in a particular community.

Just so that there is no confusion about what Cadzuen means by a focus on conventions of form, or about what I mean by 'skills,' let me stress that neither of us is speaking of page after page of 'skill sheets' creating compound words or identifying nouns and adverbs, but rather about helping students gain a useful knowledge of the conventions of print while engaging in real and useful communicative activities. Kaye Rove Grubis, a junior high school teacher in a multicultural school, makes lists of certain technical rules for her eighth grade students and then gives them papers from a third grade to correct. The students not only have to correct other students' work, but also tell them why they have changed or questioned aspects of the writing.

A village teacher, Howard Clouds, teaches his school students the conventions of formal letter writing and the formulation of useful questions in the context of issues surrounding the amendment of the Alaska Land Claims Settlement Act. Native Alaskan leaders hold differing views on this issue, critical to the future of local sovereignty and land rights. The students compose letters to leaders who reside in different areas of the state seeking their perspectives, set up audiconference calls for interviews, and develop videotapes to present the differing views.

To summarize, I suggest that students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to follow, hence, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors; that they must be allowed the resource of the teacher's expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own 'expertise' as well; and that while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent.

I also suggest that appropriate education of poor children and children of color can only be devised in consultation with adults who share their culture: Black parents, teachers of color, and most importantly, these students. Students must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest. Good liberal intentions are not enough. In an insightful study entitled Racism without Racists: Institutional Racism in Urban Schools, Scott and Dornbusch found that under the pressures of teaching, and with all intentions of 'being nice,' teachers had essentially stopped attempting to teach Black children. In their words: 'We have shown that oppression can arise out of warmth, friendliness, and concern. Paternalism and a lack of challenging standards are creating a distorted system of evaluation in the schools.' Educators must open themselves to, and allow themselves to be taught by, their students.

In conclusion, I am proposing a resolution for the skills/process debate. In short, the debate is fallacious; the dichotomy is false. The issue is really an illusion created initially not by teachers but by academics whose world view demands it. The goal of categorical divisions—not for the purpose of better teaching, but for the goal of easier analysis. As I have been reminded by many teachers since the publication of my article, those who are most skilled at educating Black and poor children do not allow themselves to be placed in 'skills' or 'process' boxes. They understand the need for both approaches, the need to help students to establish their own voices, but to coach those voices to produce notes that will be heard clearly in the larger society.

The dilemma is not really in the debate over instructional methodology, but rather in communicating across cultures and in addressing the more fundamental issue of power, of whose voice gets to be heard in determining what is best for poor children and children of color. Will Black teachers and parents continue to be silenced by the very forces that claim to 'give voice' to our children? Such an outcome would be tragic, for both groups truly have something to say to one another. As a result of careful listening to alternative points of view, I have myself come to a viable synthesis of perspectives. But both sides do
need to be able to listen, and I contend that it is these with the most power, those in the majority, who must take the greater responsibility for initiating the process.

To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue.

There are several guidelines. We must keep the perspective that people are experts on their own lives. There are certainly aspects of the outside world of which they may not be aware, but they can be the only authentic chroniclers of their own experience. We must not be too quick to deny their interpretations, or accuse them of ‘false consciousness.’ We must believe that people are rational beings, and therefore always act rationally. We may not understand their rationales, but that in no way militates against the existence of these rationales or reduces our responsibility to attempt to apprehend them. And finally, we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness. In other words, we must become ethnographers in the true sense.

Teachers are in an ideal position to play this role, to attempt to get all of the issues on the table in order to initiate true dialogue. This can only be done, however, by seeking out those whose perspectives may differ most, by learning to give their words complete attention, by understanding one’s own power, even if that power stems merely from being in the majority, by being unafraid to raise questions about discrimination and voicelessness with people of color, and to listen, no, to hear what they say. I suggest that the results of such interactions may be the most powerful and empowering coalescence yet seen in the educational realm—for all teachers and for all the students they teach.

References


Introduction

Everyone stared at the department chair in amazement. Jaws simply dropped. Soon the room was filled with a nearly chaotic mixture of sounds of anger and disbelief. It wasn’t the first time she had informed us about what was coming down from on high. Similar things had occurred before. After all, this was just another brick that was being removed. Yet, to each and every one of us in that room it was clear from that moment on that for all of our struggles to protect education from being totally integrated into the rightist project of economic competitiveness and rationalization, we were losing.

It was hard to bring order to the meeting. But slowly, we got our emotions under control long enough to hear what the State Department of Public Instruction and the Legislature had determined was best for all of the students in Wisconsin—from kindergarten to the university. Starting the next year, all undergraduate students who wished to become teachers would have to take a course in Education for Employment, in essence a course on the ‘benefits of the free enterprise system’. At the same time, all school curricula at the elementary and secondary levels—from five-year-olds on—would have to integrate within their teaching a coherent program of education for employment as well. After all, you can’t start too young, can you? Education was simply the supplier of ‘human capital’ for the private sector, after all.

I began this story because I think it is often better to start in our guns, so to speak, to start with our experiences as teachers and students in this time to conservatism. I begin here as well because, even though there is a new administration in Washington which may see in some of the excesses of the right’s social agenda, the terms of debate and the existing economic and social conditions have been transformed remarkably in a conservative direction (Apple 1991). We should stop being romantic about what will happen at our schools and universities, especially given the fiscal crisis of the state and the acceptance of major aspects of the conservative social and economic agenda within both political parties. The story I told a moment ago can serve as a metaphor for what is happening to so much of educational life at universities and elsewhere.

Let me situate this story within the larger transformations in education and the wider society that the conservative alliance has attempted.

Between Neo-conservatism and Neoliberalism

Conservatism by its very name announces one interpretation of its agenda. It conserves. Other interpretations are possible of course. One could say, more wryly, that conservatism believes that nothing should be done for the first time (Honderich 1960: 1). Yet in many ways, in the current situation this is deceptive. For with the Right now in ascendancy in many nations, we are witnessing a much more activist project. Conservative politics now are very much the politics of alteration—not...