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Beyond the Classroom: The impact of culture on the classroom

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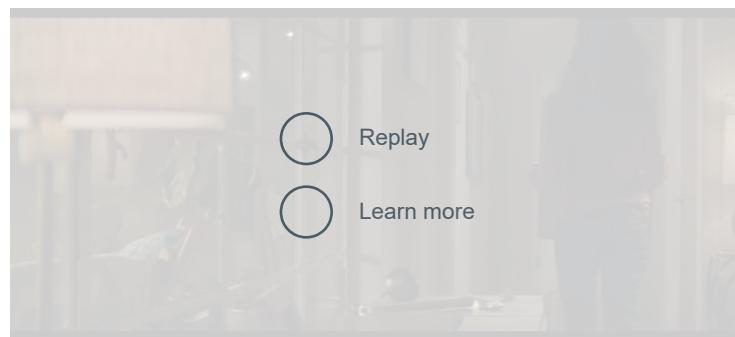
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Many years ago, a cold-hearted scientist placed 100 babies on an uninhabited but fertile island, half of them boys, half girls. He provided only the minimum requirements to keep them alive. He left them food and water, being careful not to be seen. He kept them from harm, when possible. For years, the children received none of the trappings of a normal upbringing: no language, no education, no culture. Later, he slowly began feeding and watering them less and less, until eventually he gave them nothing at all.

After 20 years on the island, who are these people? Have they retained the thinking and sentient qualities that make them undeniably human or are they merely hairless apes? Myriad possible scenarios unfold — war, camaraderie, invention and language. Within a few hundred years, the islanders might have even cultivated traditions and cultures.

Most likely, however, within that 20 years the only proof of the experiment would be the finding of a few small bones on the now deserted coastline. The islanders would be dead.

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— Excerpt from New Scientist “Island of wild children: Would they learn to be human?” by Christopher Kemp.

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Culture and Cultural Anthropology

When humans grow up without culture, do they ultimately invent it? What role does culture play in defining the individual? How does culture impact learning?

Paleoanthropologist Ian Tattersall says “You cannot think of human beings as independent of culture and their society. This goes back a long, long way before we were human. It goes back millions and millions of years, back into our primate and mammal past. Even the most basic aspects of our cognitive development depend on being raised by linguistic, articulate parents, embedded within a rich and historical culture.”

According to her article, “Reflections on the Impact of Culture in the Classroom,” Giselle Mora-Bourgeois says culture refers to the ways in which different groups of people organize their daily lives within national or ethnic groups, urban neighborhoods, companies and professions, and other settings. Culture includes what people actually do and what they believe. Culture influences greatly how we see the world, how we try to understand it and how we communicate with each other. Therefore, culture determines, to a great extent, learning and teaching styles.

Impact of Culture on Worldview

In his Huff Post Education article “Examining the Impact of Culture on Academic Performance,” Matthew Lynch, EdD says a person’s culture and upbringing has a profound effect on how they see the world and how they process information. “The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently,” by Richard Nisbett, showed how the Asian holistic view of the world differed from their American counterparts, who tended to view the world in parts or distinct classes of objects defined by a set of rules.

In other words, the Asian children see the world in terms of the relationship between things, whereas the American children see the world in terms of the objects as distinct entities. This information is helpful when we consider how cultural background might influence approach to learning and school performance.

Theories exist to help explain differences in school performance among different racial and ethnic groups.

Culture: Parents and Educators

Parents and educators are aware of the disparities that exist under their own school house roofs. Disparities exist in achievement, funding and readiness. But we cannot be expected to sufficiently address any of these gaps without acknowledging the cultural gaps that continue to exist between students and teachers.

Culture is often perceived as celebrated holidays and recipes, or religious traditions. But at the root of it, culture is a unique experience. Cultural tendencies impact the way children participate in education. To engage students effectively in the learning process, teachers must know their students and their academic abilities individually, rather than relying on racial or ethnic stereotypes or prior experience with other students of similar backgrounds.

The definition of *normal* school behavior can be based upon individualist and collectivist cultures. Teachers who lack knowledge about a culture might misinterpret the behavior of a child and inaccurately judge students as poorly behaved or disrespectful.

M.S. Rosenberg, D.L. Westling and J. McLeskey in “Special Education for Today’s Teachers: An Introduction,” say that the influence of culture on the importance of education and participation styles cannot be overestimated. Many Asian students, for example, tend to be quiet in class, and making eye contact with teachers is considered inappropriate. In contrast, most European American children are taught to value active classroom discussion and to look teachers directly in the eye to show respect, while their teachers view students’ participation as a sign of engagement and competence.

Parents from some Hispanic cultures tend to regard teachers as experts and will often defer educational decision making to them, whereas European American parents are often more actively involved in their children’s classrooms, are visible in the classrooms, or volunteer and assist teachers. These cultural differences in value and belief may cause educators to make inaccurate judgments regarding the value that non-European American families place on education.

Impact on Education

Educators understand that learners are not all the same. Pat Guild of the Johns Hopkins School of Education says that too often, educators continue to treat all learners alike despite the obvious cultural diversity within.

Mora-Bourgeois adds that addressing cultural differences in the teaching-learning process is both important and controversial. It is important because we are confronted with an increasingly diverse population of students and the wide achievement gap between minority and non-minority students. It is controversial because we may fall into the trap of cultural stereotyping and making naive attempts to explain achievement differences among our students.

Teachers remain the ultimate advocates for learning, yet many are not necessarily aware of what their students deal with once the dismissal bell has rung. The Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance says that many teachers are white, middle class English speaking individuals. While teachers typically are color blind — they teach with equity and without discrimination — this practice does not always address cultural diversity.

Teachers cannot escape the fact that their communication “styles” reflect their cultural background. Much of what they say, the way they say it, and their relationship with students, parents and colleagues are deeply influenced by the way they have been socialized.

Race and ethnicity often play integral roles in children’s identities, and contribute to their behavior and their beliefs. Recognizing this can help students succeed in a school culture where expectations and communication are unfamiliar.

Curriculum

Even the most “standard” curriculum decides whose history is worthy of study and whose books are worthy of reading. Guild says that despite the acknowledgment of important differences among learners, uniformity continues to dominate school practices.

Nathaniel Cantor stated in his 1953 book “The Teaching-Learning Process,” that “the public elementary and high schools, and colleges, generally project what they consider to be the proper way of learning which is uniform for all students.” In 50 years, many might argue that not much has changed. Most schools still function as if all students were the same. Students use the same textbooks and the same materials for learning. They may work at a different pace, but they study the same content and work through the same curriculum. And, of course, schools use the same tests for all to measure the success of the learning.

Curriculum and text selections should include different voices and ways of knowing, experiencing, and understanding life. In this way, students can find and value their own voices, histories, and cultures.

Diversity vs Uniformity

Guild explains that schools are heavily biased toward uniformity over diversity — mostly because sameness is easier to accommodate than difference, and because educational practices have been developed to promote equity for all students. Only a few teaching models exist that accommodate both educational values and human diversity.

Honoring diversity does not negate the need for absolutes in education. Every learner benefits from an outstanding teacher and an engaging learning experience. Every student and teacher deserves to be treated with respect. Every student should have an opportunity to reach his or her individual potential. Every student should master specific basic skills. The challenge is to identify what should be the same in schools and what should be different.

Uniform standards but not standardization

The emphasis on uniformity creates disadvantages for students whose culture has taught them behaviors and beliefs that are different from the norms of the majority culture most often emphasized in schools. Students whose families value collaboration are told to be independent. Students whose culture values spontaneity are told to exercise self-control. Students who are rewarded in their families for being social are told to work quietly and alone. Other cultures come with a duality in that kids embrace the culture in which they live but must take on the behaviors necessary to become upwardly mobile. This cultural clash often causes struggle when individual strengths are not valued or respected.

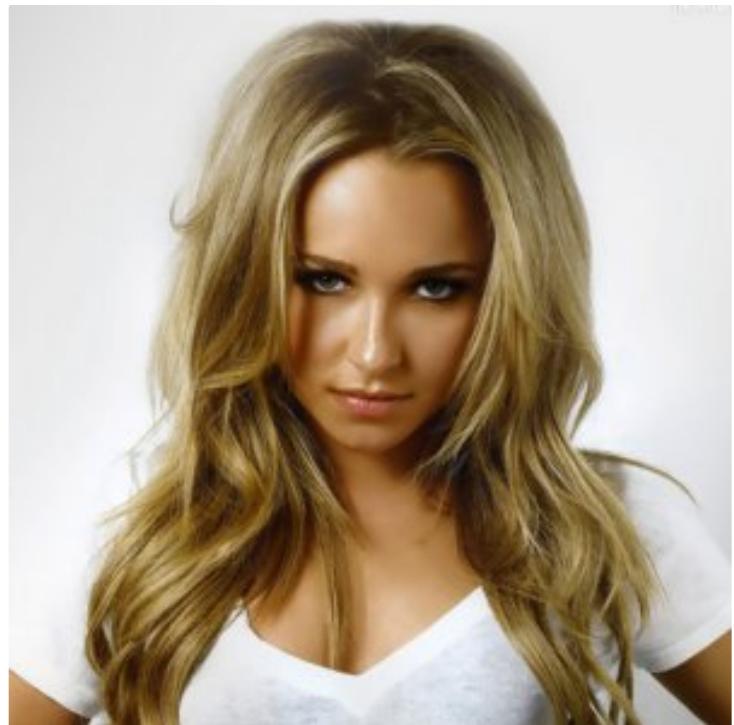
As Arthur Combs said: “Without an understanding of the unique meanings existing for the individual, the problems of helping him effectively are almost insurmountable.”

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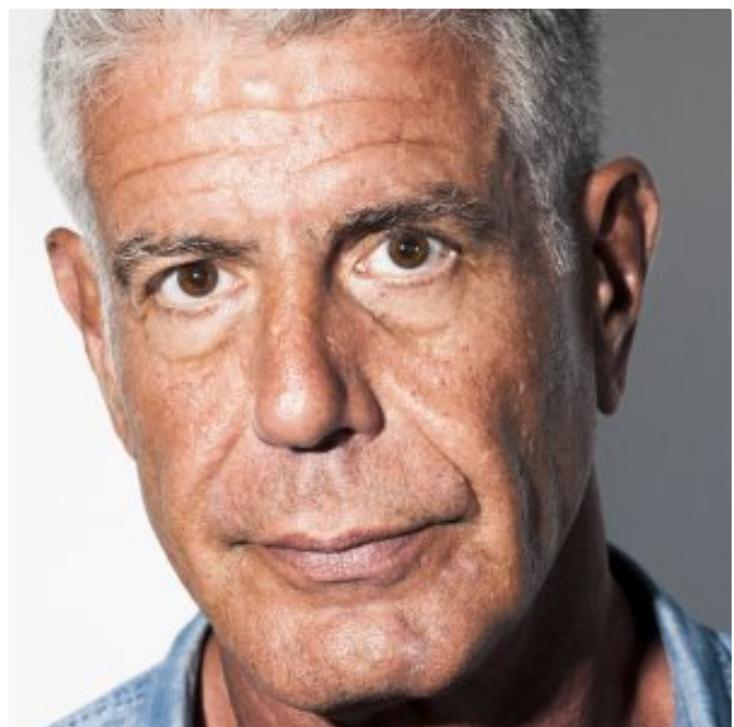
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