

I Just Want to Be Myself: Discovering What Students Bring to School "in Their Blood"

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When my daughter Maya was 3 years old, she surprised my dinner guests and myself with a particularly insightful comment. Maya was playing under the table while we were eating dinner, and I decided to try a strategy that I had found useful when working with preschoolers professionally. "Maya," I said, "if you wanted to be a big girl, you would sit in the chair and eat your dinner like Uncle Larry, Mommy, and Aunt Joyce." Maya came out, stood up, and said, "But Mommy, I don't want to be a big girl, I want to be myself, I just want to be Maya, the only Maya in the whole wide world." Then, with dramatic arm gestures and a louder voice for emphasis, "Mommy, *I just want to be myself!*" Needless to say, we sat in stunned silence. None of us knew how to respond, because, indeed, what response could there be? Maya understood the importance of being her 3-year-old self, despite the pressures of the adults around her that she be otherwise.

I'm thankful that I have been given a child at an age when I am old enough to begin to forget the miracle of childhood but young enough to remember that I wanted what I was losing. I now feel that I have a chance to relearn, and that this child—even when I've felt like wringing her neck—has taught me more than I can say. Maya understands, "I just want to be myself."

Having worked with children of color over the years, I am struck with the difficulty that many of our children have "just being themselves" in institutions designed to coerce them into being someone

else: 8-year-old African American Randall was punished by his principal with no recess for the rest of the school year because he would not allow into a game a white classmate who insisted on calling African American children "nigger"; 14-year-old Duane's mother was shocked to learn that his teachers believed him to be a nonachiever and "from a bad family" based on his haircut. I've known too many African American children to count who have been placed in special education as a result of their energy levels rather than any lack of intellectual prowess.

My realization of the predicament of many of our children was captured in a metaphor of doors when I was a student teacher in an alternative school in an urban area of the Northeast. The principal purposely maintained a racial balance: 60% of the children were from poor African American families from the South Side; 40% of the children were from the upper-middle-class white families of Society Hill. The school was located just on the border of those two communities. The front door opened onto Society Hill, and the back door opened onto the South Side. The problem is, the back door never opened. It was permanently locked. All the African American kids had to literally and figuratively leave their community in order to come to school.

I came to understand that the doors of the building were a telling metaphor for what happened inside. Just as the school opened only to Society Hill, what happened inside was in great part an expression of Society Hill culture. This may have been why there was such a long waiting list for white children to enter the school but no waiting list at all for African American children, who sometimes had to be recruited. On their trip every morning to the other side of the building, the South Side children were asked to leave what they knew and who they were behind, and to become someone else. They were not asked or expected to be themselves, but rather some permanently inadequate version of the white Society Hill children.

This struggle to maintain a sense of self in an institution designed to make you into someone else has always reminded me of one of my favorite sayings by e. e. cummings:

To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting

I write here about the ways our institutions of education try to force children of color—and parents and teachers of color as well—

to be "everybody else." The real question that we must answer is, What happens when the power to define oneself, to determine the self one should be, lies outside of the self or outside of one's referent community?

We live in a society governed by power. And those in power are typically not oppressed people of color. Oppressed groups in this society are inevitably assessed differently from the white mainstream by virtue of their skin color. Here are some typical examples:

- The assumption that an African American professor in an exclusive high-rise apartment building near the university is a maid.
- The assumption that an Asian college student will have difficulty with English, even though he was born in New Jersey.
- The assumption by the Educational Testing Service that the test scores of Jaime Escalante's Latino students in East Los Angeles were falsified because they were too high.

This false assessment plagues both teachers and students of color in our educational system, but not because the educational system is *especially* biased. The problem is that the educational system is as *typically* biased as *any* institution in a society stratified by race.

What happens when the self is defined and determined by others? In education, as in the larger society, you will find that there are assumptions of inferiority and deviance about oppressed minorities. Further complicating the matter, there are misinterpretations of behavior and misjudgment of academic competence stemming from the tendency we all have to assume that the way "we" do things is the right way, the only way. When one "we" gets to determine standards of appropriateness for all "we's," then some "we's" are in trouble.

For example, this story about Anthony and Carolyn illustrates what can happen when ethnic stereotyping enters the classroom. Carolyn is a young Irish American kindergarten teacher who has been teaching for 5 years. She has taught at a predominantly white middle-class school in a quiet neighborhood in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Because of recent redistricting, the school population now includes children from a housing project not far away. These children are almost exclusively poor and Black. Thus, Carolyn and the other teachers in the school are newly faced with a population of children with whom they are completely unfamiliar. I am working in a research project with Carolyn. She has asked me to observe a little boy named

Anthony, a 5-year-old Black boy from "the projects," whom she has defined as a child with behavior, learning, and language problems. She wants to use the results of my observations to "get him help."

In my observations of Anthony in the classroom, I have noticed that he gets almost no positive feedback during the course of a day; instead, he receives a tremendous amount of negative attitude and commentary. I have taken Anthony out into the hallway several times to talk and play privately so as to get a better idea of his actual abilities. The following dialogue is taken from a transcript of a conference with Carolyn about my observations. I am attempting to point out some of Anthony's positive points to her:

LISA: Anthony told me that he liked school and that his favorite thing in his class was group time.

CAROLYN: That's amazing, since he can't sit still in it. He just says anything sometimes. In the morning he's OK, after nap he's impossible.

LISA: He's really talking more it seems!

CAROLYN: He's probably never allowed to talk at home. He needs communicative experience. I was thinking of referring him to a speech therapist. He probably never even got to use scissors at home.

LISA: He told me about his cousin he plays with after school. It seems he really does have things to talk about.

CAROLYN: It's unfortunate, but I don't think he even knows what family means. Some of these kids don't know who their cousins are and who their brothers and sisters are.

As a result of living in this society, Carolyn makes big assumptions about Anthony, assumptions that blind her to what's directly in her path. What you have here is a teacher who, because of the stereotypical attitudes she has developed about African Americans who are also poor, is incapable of really seeing this child. She sees his actions, words, family, and community as a collection of pathologies.

Here is another, related example. Charles is a 3-year-old African American boy who likes a little white girl in his nursery school. Like most 3-year-olds, his affection is expressed as much with hugs as with hits. One morning when I dropped Maya off, I stayed for a while to make sure she was settled in. I noticed that Charles had been

hovering around Kelly, his special friend. He grabbed her from behind and tried to give her a bear hug. When she protested, the teacher told him to stop. A short time later, he returned to her table and tried to kiss her on the cheek. She protested again, and the teacher put him in "time-out." I commented to the teacher with a smile that Charles certainly seemed to have a little crush on Kelly. She frowned and replied that his behavior was "way out of line." "Sometimes what he does just looks like lust." I was shocked. I tried to tell her that children often imitate what they see on television, that I didn't think she could attribute adult emotions to this 3-year-old's actions. Clearly, she was unimpressed with my explanation, and I left pondering the fate of our African American boys when such devastating stereotyping starts in nursery school.

Courtney Cazden (1988) reported on a project that studied narrative styles. In her study, a white adult read on tape the oral narratives of Black and white first graders with all dialectal markers removed. Educators were then asked to listen to the stories and comment about the children's likelihood of success in school. Researchers were surprised by the differential responses of African American and European American educators to an African American child's story. European American adults were uniformly negative. Their typical comments included: "terrible story, incoherent"; "not a story at all in the sense of describing something that happened."

This child's story was told in a style referred to as associative, which, according to Michaels and Cazden (1986), is more typical of African American children's stories. The style referred to as topic-centered is more typical of white children's stories. Asked to judge the child's academic competence, all the white adults rated her below children who told topic-centered stories. They also predicted difficulties with the child's school career: "This child might have trouble reading." One white adult indicated that this child exhibited language problems that would affect school achievement: "Family problems or emotional problems might hamper academic progress."

By contrast, African American adults found the story "well formed, easy to understand, and interesting, with lots of detail and description." All five African American adults mentioned the "shifts" and "associations" or "nonlinear" qualities of the story, but they didn't find this distracting. Three of the five African American adults selected this story as the best of the five they heard. All but one judged the child as exceptionally bright, highly verbal, and potentially successful in school.

When the interpretation of narrative differences can produce such differential results in teachers' attitudes toward Black and white children, clearly those children who are different from the teacher and from the mainstream may be in serious trouble.

In still another example, in my first-grade class, Howard couldn't do the simplest math worksheets. The best conventional school knowledge recommended special education assessment. I agreed until I got to know his life outside of school. I discovered that his mom was afflicted with drug problems and that his 3-year-old sister had cerebral palsy. Howard got both of them up every morning, dressed his sister, and got both of them on the bus. He had to do a good bit of math figuring simply to get the right amount of money for the bus. Howard also did the family laundry. He had to keep track of his change for the laundromat and had to keep from being cheated when he bought detergent. Still Howard couldn't seem to do a simple math worksheet on coins: 5 pennies = 1 nickel, or 2 nickels = 1 dime.

This story illustrates two concepts of an African American child's difficult struggle to be himself. First, it shows the multiple negative assumptions we make on the basis of school behavior without adequate data on out-of-school behavior. Second, it reveals the limited means by which we seek to assess competence. Whereas Howard found it difficult to perform in a decontextualized paper-and-pencil setting, he was superior in a contextualized real-life setting.

When I think about the narrow scope of much of the instruction provided in schools, and the potential negative effect on many children, I wonder what it would look like if schools were responsible for teaching African American kids to dance. Rather than have the children learn from one another in real contexts, the school would have each particular dance broken down into 200 mastery-learning units. Kids would have to complete a workbook and pass paper-and-pencil tests on each unit before moving on to learn the first half of the first hand movement of the first dance. By the end of a year we'd have a slew of remedial African American dancers!

Several years ago I conducted interviews with Native American teachers. These teachers poignantly expressed the pain of living and teaching in a world that expected less of Native Americans. Here, a Native Alaskan teacher is talking about her teacher-training experiences:

I must have heard this so many times, that Native kids are low achievers. It used to frustrate me to hear that, and here I used

to think, *what they don't know*. What I thought was that these "educators" have never really been out there. They just went by what they learned from books.

I had a hang-up about this for a long time. I used to try to strike back without realizing what I was saying. Finally I started to say to myself, "In order to get through this thing, I have to pass this course, even though they're talking about me."

This is happening in my graduate classes right now.

They're talking about Native kids and I relate it to me—low achievers, high drop-outs, they don't function well academically. We are labeled right from the beginning, although I didn't know that when I was growing up. We were never labeled that way. I never saw that I was a low achiever. I never saw myself as "at risk." It kind of shocked me to hear these things about my people. I was succeeding, you see. But then I hear these things about my people and I get so frustrated.

Several interviewees criticized professors, students, and the curriculum for perpetuating stereotypes about people of color. This kind of discrimination is exemplified by the comments of a Native woman who objected to a fellow student who declared in class that one could not expect Native children to speak in a classroom "because they're just not like that, they're very silent." The people from her region, she counters, "are very vocal, and children are taught to be vocal, too." She continued:

I resented those kinds of stereotypes about Native children. I remember in a reading class there was a discussion. The generalization was made that Native children coming from a village are a lot slower than white children living in town, and that you've got to expect this and you've got to expect that. And really, when everybody knows the clout of teacher expectations, people who say that really burn me up. They develop a very narrow view, a stereotype of how a Native child is. They don't really look at that child as a person, but as a Native. That was one thing I struggled with as well, people supposing things about me before getting to know me.

Another Native teacher said that "reading all those studies about the plight of Native students" made me feel like part of a group of

people who were failures and I was the one exception. Why do they do that? I guess that's one way for a dominant culture to maintain dominance—not to recognize any of the strengths of another group." It is sobering to realize that most of what concerns these teachers was probably added to curriculum in an attempt to address issues of cultural diversity.

A final story of how differences are interpreted as deficits by schools in which children of color reside has to do with parental behavior. In a predominantly Puerto Rican school in Boston, the non-Latino teachers were frustrated with the parents because even though the school had requested that parents drop their children off in the school yard and then leave, these Latino parents insisted on bringing their first-grade children to their classrooms up to 30 minutes before the bell rang every day. It got to the point where teachers locked the doors and parents threatened to go to the school board. The teachers failed to realize that in many Latino communities, 6-year-olds are thought of as babies in need of a mother's protection. The parents' perspective was that these teachers did not even attempt to protect their children, so the parents took up the responsibility. The parents were particularly distressed because teachers are thought of as surrogate mothers, and these teachers did not act that way. The teachers not only did not protect the kids in the school yard (where paraprofessionals were left in charge) but they tried to prevent parents from doing so. The parents concluded that these teachers did not care about their kids and could not be trusted to supervise them. Rather than trying to understand the problem, teachers merely assumed that the parents were uncooperative, stubborn, and intent on creating problems in the school. The widespread misinterpretation of behaviors and misjudgment of competence or intention can grow and develop when there are basic assumptions of inferiority and deviance.

Another way that people of color are not allowed to define and be themselves is through the invisibility of their histories and themselves in teachers' minds and in the school curriculum. Whether we are immediately aware of it or not, the United States is composed of a plethora of perspectives. I am reminded of this every time I think of my friend Martha, a Native American teacher. Martha told me that one year she got very tired of being asked about her plans for Thanksgiving by people who seemed to take no note that her perspective on the holiday might be a bit different from their own. In her frustration, she told me that when the next questioner asked, "What are you doing for Thanksgiving?" she would answer, "I plan to spend the day saying, 'You're welcome!'"

If we plan to survive as a species on this planet, we must certainly create multicultural curricula that educate our children to the differing perspectives of our diverse population. In part, the problems we see exhibited in school by African American children and children of other oppressed minorities can be traced to this lack of a curriculum in which the intellectual achievements of people who look like themselves are represented. Were that not the case, these children would not refer to doing well in school as "acting white." Our children of color need to see the brilliance of their legacy, too.

Ellen Swartz (1992) notes that in typical American textbooks, statements like this go unchallenged: "Most cotton planters in the South believed their way of life depended on slave labor." "What about the perspectives of the enslaved?" "Depended on" implies that slavery was natural and inevitable, even though slavery was a choice the planters made. Contemporary textbooks continue to include sympathetic, apologetic accounts of slave owners like the one above. But notice the difference in this perspective: "Most cotton planters in the South prospered from the forced and free labor of millions of African American men, women, and children. Even though the white planters' way of life created misery for so many people, they were not willing to give up the profits made from slavery."

I must point out, however, that merely changing the textbooks and creating a more inclusionary curriculum are insufficient. Great damage can still be done to children of color when the attitudes of teachers or school administrators are less than sensitive. Attitudes are all-important. The new multicultural textbook or the new multicultural curriculum will do as much harm as good if the real adults of color connected to the children's *everyday* lives—their teachers and parents, the school's paraprofessionals, the other adults with whom children regularly have contact—are not respected and recognized as being valuable to the school and to the community. Furthermore, if administrators and teachers do not really believe that these children can excel in the same way that the personalities they read about have, this message, spoken or unspoken, will be heard loudly and clearly by the students.

When we were in another city for an extended period, my daughter Maya attended a child-centered, progressive preschool. It was predominantly European American children and teachers, but there were a number of African American "grandmothers" hired to help in each class. A deliberate attempt was made to be multicultural. I

was happy to see that, unlike at the nursery school Maya attended in Baltimore, there was a great emphasis placed on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. There was a special whole-school assembly led by one of the teachers, Robert. At the assembly, videos of Dr. King were shown, and songs of the freedom movement were sung. There was a serious discussion of segregation.

At first I couldn't figure out why I felt so uncomfortable about all this. Finally it hit me. All this information was being provided for children—both Black and white—by Robert, a white man. Although the African American "grandmothers" had lived through everything that was being presented, they were not asked to lead, or even participate in, the formal assembly. Even with the best of intentions, children were still being given the subtle message that white men had all the knowledge—even (or especially) about Black people—and were the only ones competent to speak.

I realized that what I was feeling was my own child's heritage being taken from her. We must be constantly aware of this. It reminds me of what Ken Haskins (personal communication, 1987) calls the "Star Trek" model of multiculturalism: "one of everything with a white man in charge." It's quite possible to have a great curriculum and send overt as well as subtly negative messages.

A young teacher I know taught Black history through literature. She spent much time in libraries searching for the right books. She even did a special unit on Gwendolyn Brooks with her first graders. But the way she handled discipline undermined and overturned everything else. For example, she would say to children who were not sitting still, "You'll never be like Gwendolyn Brooks or anybody else we've studied in this classroom. You better learn how to behave. You just don't appreciate what I'm trying to do for you."

When this class and a neighboring class taught by a culturally aware and child-sensitive teacher got together to watch Bill Clinton's inauguration, the children were asked, "How many of you think you could be president?" All the children in the sensitive teacher's class raised their hands. None in the other teacher's class did so. It turns out that her attitude was more important than any Black-history-through-literature curriculum.

Even with well-intentioned educators, not only our children's legacies but our children themselves can become invisible. Many of the teachers we educate, and indeed their teacher educators, believe that to acknowledge a child's color is to insult him or her. In her book *White Teacher*, Vivian Paley (1979) openly discusses the problems

inherent in the statement that I have heard many well-intentioned teachers utter: "I don't see color, I only see children." What message does this statement send? That there is something wrong with being Black or Brown, that it should not be noticed? I would like to suggest that if one does not see color, then one does not really see children. Children made "invisible" in this manner become hard-pressed to see themselves as being worthy of notice. Of course, the noticing must be in the context of noticing their strengths, their beauty, and their heritage, and not in noticing the screens of stereotypes through which we are prone to see children who are different from ourselves.

In order to begin to address the problem, we must overcome the narrow and essentially Eurocentric curriculum we provide for our teachers. At the university level, teachers are not being educated with the broad strokes necessary to prepare them properly for the 21st century. We who are concerned about teachers and teaching must insist that our teachers become knowledgeable of the liberal arts, but we must also work to change liberal arts courses so that they do not continue to reflect, as feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh (Keohane, 1986) says, only the public lives, exploits, and adventures of white Western men. These new courses must not merely teach what white Westerners have to say about diverse cultures, they must also share what the writers and thinkers of diverse cultures have to say about themselves and their history, music, art, literature, politics, and so forth.

If we know the intellectual legacies of our students, we will gain insight into how to teach them. For instance, Jaime Escalante repeatedly calls upon the Latin American heritage of his poor Latino students as he successfully teaches them advanced calculus. The movie chronicling his work, *Stand and Deliver*, reenacts a scene in which Escalante tells his students, "You have to learn math, math is in your blood! The Mayans discovered zero!" In another case, Stephanie Terry, a first-grade teacher I recently interviewed, breathes the heritage of her students into the curriculum. Stephanie teaches in an economically strapped community in inner-city Baltimore, in a school with a 100% African American enrollment. She begins each year with the study of Africa, describing Africa's relationship to the United States, its history, its resources, and so forth. As her students learn each new aspect of the regular citywide curriculum, Stephanie connects this knowledge to aspects of their African ancestry: While covering a unit about libraries, she tells them about the world's first libraries, which were established in Africa; a unit on health presents

her with the opportunity to tell her students about the African doctors of antiquity who wrote the first texts on medicine. Stephanie does not replace the current curriculum; rather, she expands it. She also teaches about the contributions of Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos as she broadens her students' minds and spirits. All Stephanie's students learn to read by the end of the school year. They also learn to love themselves, love their history, and love learning. Stephanie could not teach her children the pride of their ancestry and could not connect it to the material they learn today were it not for her extraordinarily broad knowledge of the liberal arts. However, she told me that she did not acquire this knowledge in her formal education. She worked, read, and studied on her own to make such knowledge a part of her pedagogy. Similarly, were it not for his knowledge of their culture and history, Jaime Escalante could not tell his Chicano students that mathematics was "in their blood."

Teachers must not merely take courses that tell them how to treat their students as multicultural clients, that is, those that tell them how to identify differences in interactional or communicative strategies and remediate appropriately. They must also learn about the brilliance the students bring with them "in their blood." Until they appreciate the wonders of the cultures represented before them—and they cannot do that without extensive study, most appropriately begun in college-level courses—they cannot appreciate the potential of those who sit before them, nor can they begin to link their students' histories and worlds to the subject matter they present in the classroom. Thus the children are hampered not only by being unable to be themselves now but also by being unable to be what they could be in the future.

The final issue I wish to raise about the difficulty people of color have in being themselves in a system designed for others is just that—the system is designed, and continues to be redesigned, for someone else. One of the problems with much educational research, for example, is that it purports to tell us what is good for all children while being "normed" on predominantly white children.

Even when children of color are included in norming samples, the effects specific to them are usually washed out in the final results. Recently some researchers, particularly researchers of color, have begun investigating the effects of specific strategies on specific groups of children. They are finding that there can be dramatic differences between groups in what was previously considered true for all children.

Harry Morgan (1990), a psychologist, compared African American and European American children's behavior in class and found that Black kids move more than white kids, and boys move more than girls; that is, Blacks and boys display greater activity, collaboration, and physical contact.

Allen and Boykin (1991), comparing the effect of background music on African American and European American kids when learning new tasks, found that the African American kids learned and recalled new information better *with* background music. European American children did not.

I have written about differences in children's home lives that enable them to bring different abilities, skills, and knowledge to classrooms. For example, classrooms that focus solely on "discovery" learning may be giving some children the opportunity to show what they have learned at home through more explicit teaching from their parents but handicapping other children who have received no such explicit instruction; this refusal to explicitly let them know what other kids already know keeps them out of the circle of knowing.

For example, I watched a middle-class father picking up his daughter from nursery school. In this Montessori classroom, there was a tree trunk into which the children were happily pounding nails. The father walked over to the tree trunk with his daughter, who wanted to show him her nail, and said, "That's wonderful, sweetheart! Do you remember what those circles inside the tree trunk were called? . . . Right, rings! And do you remember what those rings could tell you? . . . You don't? They can tell you how old the tree was when it was chopped down. Let's count the rings together to see how old this tree was." Clearly, this is a child who will appear to "discover" a lot about trees (and counting) in a student-centered classroom of the future. But what she will actually be doing is recalling the direct instruction her father gave her at home.

I also notice with my own daughter that I, like many other middle-class parents, take every opportunity to connect her sound play to the knowledge that she will need when she begins to read. When she goes around singing "m-m-m Maya," I join in saying, "That's right! And m-m-m mommy! And m-m-m milk! And what else goes 'm-m-m'?" Again, when Maya appears to discover the connection between sounds and letters in her literacy-rich kindergarten, much will be made of how bright she is, when in reality, she will only be replaying what she has learned at home.

In too many classrooms, teachers think that the children who

"get" the discovery lesson are truly discovering rather than exhibiting previously learned knowledge. They then find other children to be remedial before they're ever taught anything because they aren't "discovering."

So what can we do to make the struggle to be themselves in our institutions of education easier for children of color? Solutions are not easy to come by, for they involve fundamental changes in attitude.

We must begin to acknowledge, to paraphrase Pat Carini's 1986 presentation at the North Dakota Study Group, that people are the authors of their own lives. We must set more places at the tables where educational policy is created. We must make sure that parents, teachers, communities, and children of color have a voice in determining their educational needs. We must attempt to rid ourselves of the stereotypes society pushes on us about certain groups of people and be willing to do battle when we encounter those stereotypes among our colleagues or supervisors. We must reconsider how we conduct research to allow a focus on specific groups, so that we come to understand that what is good for one child or one group of children is not necessarily good for all. We must find the humility to learn from children and communities, and we must realize the fundamental connection that exists between ourselves and the children we teach.

We must, finally, come to the realization that the children we teach are the gifts we give to the future. And whether those gifts will be prized or spurned is in our hands. An older African American nursery school teacher brought this home to me when I visited her class. She pointed to a little boy and said, "You see that little boy over there? He's either going to grow up to be my doctor or hit me in the head and steal my purse. My job is to make sure that he's my doctor!"

I close with a slightly modified verse of Kahlil Gibran's poem, that has meant so much to my parenting and my teaching:

We are the bows from which our children
As living arrows are sent forth.
The Archer sees the mark upon
The path of the infinite,
And he bends us with His might
That His arrows may go swift and far.

My wish for us is that we allow ourselves to be bent so that all our young arrows find their marks in the future.