

ONE MILE IN ANOTHER MAN'S MOCCASINS¹

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At the core of our present teaching system lies the fact that education, all too often, has attempted little or no correlation with life outside of the classroom. The present decade has brought with it the exposure of this flaw in the educating of our nation's children. Perhaps the catalyst has been the recent amendment of the system's blindness. This, it must be emphasized, is not to say the system has been cured. Such an improvement, to continue with the earlier analogy, has been a step up from blindness to myopia. In attempting to rectify the inequities perpetrated upon children not belonging to the ruling class of American culture, the revised educational system, inadvertently, has offered infection rather than antidote.

Although professional education has habitually walled itself off from life, the rules on either side of the barrier were the same, or at least so it was posited. To those who could not adjust, there remained an open door marked EXIT. As has been previously mentioned, attempts recently have been made to make the use of this door less frequent, but most of them must be relegated to the category of well-intentioned bungling.

By far the most damaging manifestation of the myopia is ethnocentricity. To be sure, there remain many vestiges of the "blind period" in education: value-laden classroom materials, ignorance of the existence of cultural difference, and even overt prejudice. The new threat, however, seems to be the educator armed with love for his fellow man, but hampered by ignorance of his charges' life-style. Such a mentality, so often equipped with simple answers, can be devastating to the delicate cultural balance extant in the students that they must teach. Any naive interference with cultural or linguistic patterns may be fatal to the student's educational career, since it appears that disruption of either or both of these closely interrelated systems causes learning to cease.² Thus ignorant, if benevolent, tactics result not in acculturation, but in anomie.

The vestiges of "educational blindness" are subject to straightforward attack. Its manifestations have been, by and large, recognized as detrimental and little opposition is found to their eradication. Well-intentioned patronization,³ on the other hand, is more a state of mind and is not so easily uprooted. Protean in nature and encased in complex defenses, it often defies recognition.

At the risk of being somewhat simplistic, one may approach one facet of this reverse bigotry through a consideration of naming and its resultant expectation patterns. Casting about for suitable linguistic grips upon the incredibly complex problem at hand, experts (the majority of them self-styled) encompass their particular "problem cultures" within the magical semantic circle of ethnocentric terms ranging from the blatant "culturally deprived" to the somewhat milder, but still undesirable, "culturally disadvantaged." It should be evident, upon examining these terms logically and with a modicum of

cultural perspective, that such appellations are defeatist and tend to lead into self-fulfilling prophecies.⁴ To explain further, as soon as we have euphemistically, but ethnocentrically, renamed those groups outside the naming culture, we may then be said to have restereotyped them. It is then possible to continue their denigration by use of the same patterns, with merely nominal changes of position. Since both disgust (the pose of prejudice) and pity (the pose of reverse-prejudice) are superior attitudes, there is no basis for the empathy imperative for cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, by regarding the student from a non-ruling class culture through such ethnocentric "filters" it is impossible for him to receive anything resembling educational opportunity. It is impossible, that is, so long as he chooses to be influenced by his particular cultural background. Educational opportunity is an impossibility simply because "we are prone (when not properly sensitized) to perceive what we expect and to fail to perceive things that do not fit our expectations."⁵

Hiles V. Zintz states in Education Across Cultures:

1. Lack of communication is the greatest problem between members of different cultures.
2. An inter-disciplinary approach to problems is best.
3. Consultants from the dominant culture must learn to work through the existing social organization of the sub-culture.
4. Empathy is a prerequisite to adequate communication.⁶

It is imperative, then, that the first step must be to make the teacher "walk one mile in the moccasins" of his students (to rephrase an American Indian proverb) instead of cutting off his charges' cultural feet.

The accomplishment of this prerequisite to teaching effectiveness calls for a program of teacher education incorporating dialectology, folklore, applied education, and cultural sensitivity sessions. As previously indicated, such indoctrination cannot, to have any value, be aimed at providing easy solutions or standardized answers to recurrent problems. The experience must revolve around a reorientation of values and concepts. It must provide educators with an internalized mental apparatus for detecting specific ways in which culture manifests itself. It must, further, enable the teacher to learn from these traits.

With these elementary instruments for the observation and comprehension of cultural dynamics, the instructor may enhance his teaching efficiency, as well as the relevancy of the curriculum to both the world of the ghetto and the world of the mansion. In the first place, what better ground for the artificially induced context method of field collection could exist than the classroom situation? It is true that there is, in the upper grades at least, a conditioned response to the classroom environment. On the other hand, it is a familiar environment, populated by familiar inhabitants employing familiar interaction patterns. The most superficial analysis of the lore of the student enables an entrance into remarkable increases in teacher effectiveness. Through an often uncomfortable, but completely worthwhile reorientation of attitudes, the teacher, ideally, becomes able to regard recurrent cultural manifestations as clues and as teaching instruments, rather than as flaws to be excised as soon as possible.

The effective educational use of traditional expressive material demands not the mere injection of a few items from relevant minority cultures, but the approaching of the material to be learned through such items. The teacher

should not, for example, urge his students to consider why a "Little Moron" joke is humorous after dealing with the comic attitude in the abstract. He must lead them to consider the dynamics of comedy as revealed through the medium of humorous items extant in the lore of the individual learning group.

The preceding example may appear to be an extremely elementary re-shifting of technique and hardly an innovation. Yet, what could be more obvious to those of us involved in the study of culture than the fact that numerous elements of folk and popular culture are directed specifically toward the education of the group in which they arise. In spite of that fact, an inordinate amount of energy has been directed toward obliterating childlore when it emerges in the classroom. It is labeled, when not obscene, as a ridiculous waste of time --- as childishness.

This is exactly the point, childish (when relieved of its negative connotations, simply means befitting a child) lore can give the teacher an indication of the type of education which, likewise, befits the child. To take merely one side of the use of expressive culture as a teaching tool, it should be obvious that promoting the student's awareness of his own cultural products provides a more effective entrance into sophisticated art than does adult art itself. In the products of childish wordplay may be found the entire repertoire of art poetry: metaphor, versification, meter, and allusion, to name but a few. In addition, there are the added advantages of familiarity with the material, pride in the items, and cultural relevance.

The classroom study of the folklore produced by the student calls for a consideration of the lore not as a number of discreet items, but as a process. Thus, instead of treating riddles as inert items, the teacher must focus on the dynamics of the riddling session, a process in which there is give and take, a reward for individual merit, and an allowance for each participant's contributions. In such a folk process, when regarded in perspective, may be seen most of the elements extant within the governmental process of democracy. The incorporation of such spontaneous products into the formal educational procedure makes possible not only the utilization of a great source of energy, but an opportunity for ego gain on the part of the student. Present, also, is not only an avenue for the sublimation of hostility, but an excellent occasion for teaching pride in one's own way of life and the acceptance of other cultures.

It must be emphasized, once again, that this method of education requires special training, though not training of a conventional nature. Theoretical training, moreover, is an integral part of this variety of teacher education, but not with the exclusive end of a factual indoctrination. Such a system aims at adaptability rather than "plug-ins" or "print-outs" which attempt to be applicable in all situations. This is impossible, as has been demonstrated far too often to require documentation. What must be pursued are changes in attitudes and orientations. In order to accomplish any application of folk culture to education, the teacher must be equipped with devices capable of being internalized for dealing with each case individually. Only when so equipped is a teacher capable of aiding the non-ruling class student to attain the biculturalism necessary for his survival and, perhaps, for the survival of the dominant culture as well.

The flexibility of items of folk culture is proven by its continued existence. Folklore, then, may be just the tool that is needed for connecting the world of the book to the world of the street.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 I am indebted to Roger D. Abrahams who acted both as catalyst and critic of this article.
- 2 Miles Zintz, Education Across Cultures (Dubuque, Iowa, 1963), p. 38.
- 3 Such reverse prejudice, I have been informed, repeatedly, by Negroes participating in cultural sensitivity sessions, is at least as offensive as overt hostility.
- 4 We, ourselves, may be accused, I believe, of not ethnocentricity, but academecentricity if in our own comments we try to limit our considerations of the application of cultural information strictly to folklore and not consider material provided for us by linguists, commentators on popular culture, and scholars in many other relevant disciplines.
- 5 Joseph E. McGrath, Social Psychology, A Brief Introduction (New York, 1964), p. 47.
- 6 Op. cit., p. 43 from Robert Bunker and John Adair, The First Look at Strangers (New Brunswick, 1959).