

## FOLKLORE AND COMMUNITY ACTION -- EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

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Let me begin by saying that I think what we mean by applied folklore is not what we've been talking about here at all. What concerns most of the people who are involved in applying folkloristic perspectives is affecting the power structure, turning power in one direction or another. Specifically I feel that folklore is becoming more **and** more concerned with doing something for the people with whom folklorists have been working for all these years. I think this is the underlying theme of those practicing applied folklore. I'm just going to devote my remarks to describing what I've been doing -- **and** what the Texas Education Agency has been doing -- in the area of developing in-service courses in black language and folklore for integrating school districts.

We do what we usually refer to as head-busting work. We have a task force operation, three of us form the core: Rudy Troike, Mary Galvan, and myself. Rudy Troike is a linguist-dialectologist; Mary Galvan, an educator, head of the special programs division of oral language arts, Texas Education Agency. My end of the head-busting work is primarily teaching black folklore and culture. At first I taught mainly black folklore, but it's come around more and more to where I begin with the broad perspective of black culture and then **end** with a survey of the black folklore they may observe among their students in their home culture. In a sense what I'm going to say will be just a gloss on a few of the things Bruce Jackson remarked on, because our primary concern is indeed in taking some of these images and idea-fixes, some of these patterns which have established themselves, and trying not to break them down but simply trying to get teachers to recognize where they have these fixes and where they come into the classroom.

Now, the biggest problem that we've run into is that there is an assumption which teachers tend to bring into the classroom about any kind of child: that they're coming in with a kind of tabula rasa. The dominant pattern of expectation in American education (to put it in its absolutely minimal form) is to take kids who come in as children, having gone through what they regard as the free time of life, and to impose on them a sense of responsibility. The system does this through a very linear, progressive, age-graded, and supposedly logical form and the kind of product which is turned out is a good citizen. If we don't do anything else, we seem to want to turn out good citizens. This means that they are battling a stereotype from the very beginning. To assume that any culture creature comes into the classroom bringing with them nothing but a kind of battery pack, a source of energy, to assume that they need some way of learning how to direct this source of energy, is arrant ethnocentrism at its worst. It's especially bad, however, with lower class kids who come from especially large families because any lower class kid is going to be coming into that classroom with a very strong sense of who they are and what they are. They've already developed this in their homes and on the streets because their family systems operate in such a way that they come into that classroom with a very high degree of responsibility already inculcated. They have to have this to operate within a family system in which everybody in that unit is somehow made to feel a working cooperative member. It is crucial to outline, for instance, the ways in which the black child is socialized from the infancy lap baby stage into what is called the knee-baby state; that is, how this baby is made

into a functioning member of this cooperative unit. This is accomplished primarily by being placed in the care of slightly older children. Somehow or another, we have to put over the idea that the black child (and indeed all lower class children) not only come into the first, second or third grade class with a language system already fully developed, but also with a system of interaction and a sense of responsibility that it would seem the teacher assumes is not there.

The child from this kind of lower class background walks into that first grade classroom and encounters an entirely different culture, the culture of the classroom. This classroom culture is a special, but highly stylized form of your own American culture. What the child is told at that point is "You speak a bad language," "You're not capable of responsibility," and "You come from a defective culture; from broken homes." At any rate, we throw this at black kids and then all of a sudden we're surprised when they turn off in the classroom and eventually they drop out when other kinds of peer group pressures are introduced into their environment. It is in some ways sufficient in these in-service courses simply to point out to the teachers how they are niggerizing the student when they preach such sermons, when they say, "You have no language, you have no culture." Then we demonstrate to the teachers what some features of black culture and black English are.

But even here we discovered another more effective strategy to engineer change in the total education system by beginning with the lesson that these kinds of image-fixes are a deep part of the teachers' culture itself. Therefore what we do is to focus on the teachers to begin with, and try to show how much they operate in terms of their received knowledge and their traditions. Usually the way we do this is to demonstrate that teachers themselves are subject to embarrassment. Then we look into what the structure of the embarrassment is and what can be learned from embarrassment. There are all kinds of peripheral gains that can be made by attacking the whole things in terms of embarrassment. Among other things, we want to demonstrate what they're putting the children through when they embarrass the children by confronting them with different cultural norms as they come into the classroom. But the important thing is to show them that we are all subject to this kind of living by interactional rules and that stereotyping -- this kind of superfixation of images and ideas -- is something which is characteristic of the ordering processes of all peoples. In a very quick review, we survey, for instance, that what the Spanish attitude has been toward the gypsies and the British attitude has been toward the Irish has not been terribly different from our stereotyping of blacks or Chicanos. It's just incredible how the same traits are imposed by one group on the other -- laziness and brawling and drinking too much and fornicating too much and the big genitalia and all that range of traits. What the traits all add up to is kind of an image of man as inhuman. The way this is commonly put is that the members of a group are immoral. But what does immorality mean? Essentially that these group members have no sense of order, no sense of rules. As culture means, among other things, the shared orders of a group, this means they have no culture. What stereotyping does in such a situation is to say of the stereotyper, "Look what a great culture we have," at the same time saying, "Look at those other people who have no culture whatsoever."

Then simply as a strategy for bringing the teachers together as a professional group, we ask the big question, pointing a finger at the white teacher, "Have you ever thought whether blacks stereotype you?" When you ask a specific white teacher this, they will inevitably come back with, "Well, I guess they do, but I never thought about it." Then the inevitable little pieces of information are given: "Well, you talk about how blacks smell so bad, did you ever consider whether blacks talked about your smell at all?" The teachers say, "Well, we don't know. I don't think so, anyhow." Then you point to a black teacher who you think might be willing to come forth with the information (and it always comes out just about the same way); "Well, yes, whites do smell different, kind of like dogs coming in out of the rain," and that kind of begins to blow the white teachers' collective mind. Well, you see, if you get blacks to talk about their stereotype of whites, all of a sudden information is being provided to the white teachers that these are human beings that are subject to the same kind of stereotyping processes that whites are and that stereotyping is a two-way street. To admit that blacks do have a stereotype of whites is like admitting that blacks have a sense of order, that they have a separate culture. So you get to the point where you are able to talk about what is this different kind of way of looking at life, this different way of operating, the culture of black peoples. Now, unfortunately, to bring blacks and whites together in the classroom effectively, you have to go far beyond simply pointing out that there are stereotypes that one group holds for the other. The problem is that blacks operate in terms of a different set of cultural rules and receive a different configuration of traditions than whites do -- and these differences are absolutely crucial in that classroom situation. First of all, they are mainly unconscious traditions; they are built on the superstructure of micro-behaviors. There's a different set of rules concerning orderliness. There's a different set of rules concerning the way in which information is passed on and what information needs to be transmitted. There's a different set of rules of who teaches whom and under what conditions and what the proper subjects are to be taught under those circumstances. So really this means beginning at the very beginning with teachers, beginning with the smallest kinds of behaviors and talking about the different ways in which blacks interact with each other, the different ways in which blacks pass on information, the different ways in which black kids teach other black kids and what the social structure of the lower class black community is that provides a foundation for this kind of information passing, for this kind of teaching.

It's at this point, of course, that we finally get back into the folkloristic perspective because folklore is nothing if it is not the means by which the group gets together and announces themselves as being coordinated, announces themselves as going "into style," that is, bringing communication into high stylization. Inevitably when a group decides to stylize in this way, generally they're taking those very micro-behaviors that we were talking about (rules of decorum or manners), and they're building them into more of a performance phenomenon. Therefore, you can get at some of these generalizations that are made about the micro-behaviors more readily, more easily, and more appropriately through the analysis of these highly stylized forms, through folklore, the strategy being to make the teachers more aware of the humanity of their students, to what students actually bring into the classroom. The object is simply to get beyond that naive and stereotypical assumption that the kids are bringing nothing normal into the classroom when they first come to

school. So this is essentially the objective of the East Texas Dialect Project, to teach teachers how to listen to and observe effectively what their students are bringing into the classroom. Thanks.