

“Multiplication is for White People”: Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children

Reviewed by

Jennifer E. Sanders

University of Missouri

In *“Multiplication is for White People”: Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children*, Lisa Delpit calls for educators, from early childhood through adulthood, to restore the primary purpose and value of public education. Delpit provides a comprehensive lens through which to view the current state of formal, public education, offering stories of her personal experiences as a scholar and mother, the presentation of relevant research studies, and examples of successful strategies. Throughout her book, Delpit identifies factors that either hinder or enhance the educational attainment of students, specifically those of African American heritage. She charges educators with the responsibility of knowing their students in the classroom and community contexts. She suggests that teachers can raise their own expectations of their students by paying attention to the passive and active aspects of these environments. Delpit claims that teachers must also attend to students’ developmental progress and encourage their holistic engagement in the learning process.

In a passionate introduction to the content of her book and her motivation for writing it, Delpit contends that “Yes, . . . I’m Still Angry” with regard to the continued evolution of public education in the United States. Delpit adamantly responds to an inquiry from Dr. Diane Ratvitch, former assistant secretary of education, regarding her silence in the face of national applause for the public education system in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Delpit communicates her frustration with the current landscape of public education nationwide, focusing on what she describes as an influx of corporate funding influencing educational reform, manipulation of the charter school system, preoccupation with standardized tests, and a reduction in teachers who understand and relate to the students and their communities, among other concerns. African American children within these environments, Delpit asserts, will only be successful if insulated by teachers who are invested in “creating classrooms that speak to children’s strengths . . . and building connections to cultures and communities” (p. xviii). This theme lays the groundwork for the remainder of the book and becomes the framework for Delpit’s discussion of each challenge presented.

In each chapter of the book, Delpit identifies an aspect of current educational practice (e.g., policy, methods, and classroom environment) that contributes to the “disidentification” of African American students in academic settings. These students “disidentify,” or psychologically disconnect from sources of physical, mental, or emotional threats, in order to cope with adverse experiences. Each chapter introduces the issue with a historical or personal narrative that further characterizes and defines Delpit’s position, perspective, and approach to the subject. For example, Delpit describes the rich history of education and culture within African traditions as a pretext to a conversation on believing in the infinite capacity of African American children to learn. She draws on ideas rooted in the African continent, including the belief of the

child as divine. This ancient wisdom is used by Delpit to reinforce her argument that educators' positive perceptions of their students are vital to their success in the classroom. Delpit utilizes narratives as vehicles to identify the components of effective educational practice. She gives specific examples of teachers or institutions that incorporate these practices and works outward, providing recommendations for broader adoption of these strategies.

The first two chapters of the section called "Inherent Ability," discuss assumptions and stigma pertaining to African American students' ability to learn. Delpit begins by citing studies (e.g., works by Marcelle Geber in 1956 and William Frankenburg and Joe Dodds in the 1960s) that consistently contradict the claim that these children are born at a disadvantage or with inherent deficits concerning performance and learning. Instead, she argues that the disparities materialize when formal schooling begins—as a result of differences in resources, experience of teachers, and quality of instruction. She asserts that when teachers, while meaning well, assume that a group of students possess less capacity for academic achievement, "our tendency is to teach less, to teach down, to teach for remediation" (p. 60). Delpit rejects the suggestion that poor performance is an attribute of one's culture. "It is critical that we figure out the difference between culture and a response to oppression," she argues (p. 8), meaning appropriately crediting evolved negative behaviors, habits, and lifestyles to the mental and emotional strain of oppression, such as racism, instead of to the culture itself. African American students, she continues, must be held to the same high expectations as other students. For maximum effectiveness, she asserts that classroom learning must resonate with the culture and experiences of the students, and not rely upon a scripted curriculum, frequently found in lower socioeconomic, minority schools. Finally, an appreciation of and interest in the whole identities of the students in the classroom, including their histories, their lives, and their values, facilitates relationships that are more likely to be supportive and encouraging.

The next few chapters in a section called "Educating the Youngest," address instruction in elementary classrooms, the importance of teachers themselves, inclusive classroom environments, and current issues with educational reform. Delpit highlights common assumptions that she argues are based upon White, middle class experiences that inform the development of curriculum, expectations for knowledge, indicators of achievement, and measures of assessment. As one example, she points out how young students who demonstrate "higher order skills" like problem solving and task completion, which they learned as a result of family responsibilities familiar to many children from lower-income families and communities. Yet, these young students are relegated to remedial academic placements based upon the early inventory of "basic skills" for all students. The teacher's recognition and valuing of each child's contributions and diverse skills could mitigate the likelihood of exclusionary labels and classifications within the school system. The role of the teacher takes on heightened importance, as "many of our children of color don't learn from a teacher, as much as for a teacher" (p. 86). As a result, the teacher's relationship to, and understanding of, the students' culture becomes vital to the children's education. Delpit emphasizes the limitations of teachers who lack that connection to the communities in which they work, citing the growth of programs such as Teach for America, which place young and often White teachers with no experience in some of the most challenging districts in America. As Delpit sees it, the "Whitening" of education, as these reform progress and veteran African American teachers are dismissed or replaced when schools are shut down or turned around is significant cause for concern.

In the third section of the book “Teaching Adolescents,” Delpit utilizes three chapters to further discuss the role of teachers in continuing to challenge, engage, and motivate students of color in the classrooms. She approaches this section of the book primarily through examples of assigned reading, facilitated group conversations, and writing prompts from teachers, aimed at developing critical thinking skills. Delpit provides an example wherein students shared personal stories of injustices suffered within their school setting. As a group, the students reviewed and analyzed their own texts for themes. In doing so, the teacher demonstrates the utilization of lived experience to engage students with academic content and required skills. Formulating assessments and determining appropriate questions to uncover deeper meaning, Delpit argues, demands that teachers understand the cultural knowledge of the students with whom they work. Finding means of incorporating relevant societal issues into lessons not only motivates students to practice required skills, but also to see themselves within an academic context. In a mainstream society that often mirrors White, middle class expectations, the classroom environment subtly sends the message to African American students that, in order to meet expectations, they must give up pieces of who they are. Delpit claims this disidentification leads to poor academic performance and diminished motivation. She encourages collaborative assessment and teaching practices among experienced and new teachers within a community. If done frequently and with consistency, then this interaction allows for more realistic connections between the students’ lives and the content being taught.

In the final section titled “University and Beyond,” Delpit writes about her teaching experiences on predominantly African American and predominantly White campuses. At both she attempted to bring attention to the persistent challenges of African American students in higher education. Delpit explains research showing implicit biases of professors, such as how Black students are subjected to repeated exposure to subtle racism and assumptions of inferiority. She gives the example of two students in a waiting area, one White and one African American. The professor, seeing the students, automatically assumes that the African American student is waiting for tutoring, rather than the White student. Racism, firmly entrenched in the culture, language, and assumptions of American individuals shapes the formal and informal interactions of African American students within the campus environment. Delpit illustrates how African American students are subjected to repeated “microaggressions,” or individually unnoticeable but progressively damaging hostility or insult, on college campuses. She further explains how students experience these ongoing psychological slights as constant reminders of their lesser roles within society and on campus. Delpit argues that the continued marginalization of African American students as a result of microaggressions on the college campus creates a disidentification with their classes, with the curriculum, and with the educational environment overall. “Disidentification reduces performance across the board,” she contends (p. 182). Therefore, given the same circumstances and preparation, African American students continue to experience lower college completion rates than their White peers. Delpit urges educators on college campuses, like those in K-12 classrooms, to see students for who they are and ask students “what do you know?” This, she claims “is the question that will allow us to begin, with courage, humility, and cultural sensitivity the right educational journey” (p. 200).

Delpit’s broad, comprehensive approach in *Multiplication is for White People* confronts deeply embedded and blindly promulgated issues of race within the education system. Delpit primarily attends to the lack of cultural sensitivity and integration of African American students’

experiences in the K-12 classroom, but additionally provides insight into the challenges and potential strategies for success on college and university campuses. She speaks specifically to the unique challenges of African American students and the structure of the system that sustain those challenges. To address these obstacles, there is a strong and consistent urging for educators to embrace the totality of students' experiences. Doing so builds bridges between students' lives and academic content, thereby contributing to a greater degree of learning, as well as the enrichment of the academic environment and inclusiveness of the classroom.

In tackling such a complex and multifaceted issue, the influence of the public education system in the United States on the educational achievement of African American children, with such broad range, consistency becomes an essential thread of the discussion and content. When writing or reading on topics of this nature, terminology and language represent larger perceptions, opinions, ideals and beliefs. The designation of labels often conveys messages of their own. In this book, from the outset, Delpit interchangeably uses "African American" and "Black" at times within the same paragraph to identify the focus of her work. On several occasions, "students of color" and "persons of color" are also utilized. Though many choose one term to which they attach significance and meaning, Delpit does not address the fluidity she demonstrates in this area. The reader is left to assume how narrowly or widely to define each usage and then align it with the intent of each surrounding passage. Because of this, Delpit risks a loss of clarity and focus in a primary component of her book.

From another angle of consistency, reflecting upon the book in its entirety, Delpit's broad, comprehensive appeal of the book seems appealing as an introductory resource. The book is thorough, but concise, and packaged in manageable chapters. Delpit's tone and conversational style engages the reader and makes clearly outlined summaries and insights. However, the expansive amount of information provided includes some references for which familiarity is required to realize importance and specific relevance. For example, some readers may not understand the real significance of Dr. Diane Ravitch's initial question regarding Delpit's stance on the public education environment of post-Katrina New Orleans. Understanding, or at least being knowledgeable of, Dr. Ravitch's political history, current philosophy, and societal context provide the necessary weight to fully comprehend Delpit's response. Delpit's simple reference to "the notorious example of *The Bell Curve*" in the context of bias related to African American inferiority may raise more questions than answers depending on the reader's familiarity with the book. Though the essence of her argument remains intact, the argument loses depth. A single reference, due to its individual unfamiliarity, becomes disconnected from Delpit's larger, developed illustration. The focus shifts from understanding a comprehensive message to understanding an individual piece of knowledge. Seemingly in acknowledgement of this potential gap in knowledge, Delpit provides thorough "Notes" and "Appendix" with additional information and reading material.

As Beverly Daniel Tatum noted in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (1997), talk is critical in addressing racism, whether subtle or overt. However, "...talk does not mean idle chatter. It means meaningful, productive dialogue to raise consciousness and lead to effective action and social change" (p. 193). In addition to provoking thoughtful consideration of how educators facilitate learning for students who do not fit the White, middle class model, Delpit raises the reader's consciousness about inadequacies within the system that inhibit some

students from excelling. The awareness fostered throughout the book, whether aimed at elementary school teachers or college administrators can only enhance job performance and professional practice on behalf of all students.

***Jennifer Sanders* is a manager in Student Support Services at the University of Missouri.**

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer Sanders @
sandersjenni@missour.edu

References

Delpit, L.D. (2012). *“Multiplication is for whit people”*: Raising expectations for other people’s children. New York: New Press

Tatum, B. D. (2003). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?: And other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books.