

PART IV

Personal Perspective

Rethinking the Role of “Culture” in Educational Equity: From Cultural Competence to Equity Literacy

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“Culture” has tended to play a central role in the nomenclature and operationalization of popular frameworks for attending to matters of diversity in education. These frameworks include multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, cultural proficiency, and cultural competence. In this article, I argue that too tight a focus on “culture,” the meaning of which remains intensely contested, stunts the possibility of real progress toward educational justice. As I will show, although some culture-centric frameworks are grounded in commitments to educational equity, they often are implemented in ways that essentialize marginalized students and mask the forms of structural injustice that feed educational outcome disparities. I argue for a new commitment to centering equity rather than culture in conversations and practices related to educational justice—recommending the equity literacy framework as one way to enact that commitment.

Introduction

In their essay on cultural proficiency as a framework for better serving English language learners (ELLs),

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Moyer and Clymer (2009) rightly bemoaned the fact that schools in the United States continue to privilege Whiteness. They lament, more generally, “many teachers are unaware of the importance of helping ELLs—who frequently feel lost, depressed, alienated, lonely, fearful, and abandoned when immersed in a class of students that caters to a culture unlike their own—develop a sense of belonging” (p. 16). As a salve for this inequitable access to affirming, safe, and just educational opportunity, they endorse cultural proficiency: a popular framework for attending to matters of diversity in schools. Culturally proficiency was developed as an approach for responding to diversity in part out of dissatisfaction with the stereotyping and simplifying tendencies of cultural competence (Lindsey, Robins, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2009).

Many, although not all, educators and scholars who have embraced or helped to construct the cultural proficiency framework have grounded their conceptions of it in commitments to creating more equitable, more racially and otherwise just, schools (Bakken & Smith, 2011; Lindsey, Terrell, Robins, & Lindsey, 2010) to at least some extent. Others, including Moyer and Clymer (2009), appear to have interpreted the cultural proficiency framework through a considerably less justice-oriented lens. While acknowledging the need for cultivating more equitable schools, they described a process for doing so that was heavy on appreciating cultural diversity and virtually silent on the need to prepare teachers to recognize and respond to the racism and other injustices ELLs experience

or to advocate for ELLs and their families. Instead, they described a multicultural fair “that featured music, dance, food, and customs and traditions that represent the varied cultures of the student population” (p. 16). They championed the fact that students had been asked to “research the various cultures represented at the fair” (p. 16). Teachers, meanwhile, were trained to be culturally sensitive rather than racially or linguistically just. For example, they were cautioned to avoid using red pens because red ink symbolizes death in some Asian cultures.

There is nothing inherently wrong about a school hosting a multicultural fair so long as students’ complex and intersectional identities are not reduced to a song and dance. In the same way, certainly cultural sensitivity is an important element in a more robust approach to educational equity, so long as we embrace the whole selves of all students rather than assigning them to “cultural groups” based on single dimensions of their identities. I am uninspired, although not particularly alarmed, by the “celebrating cultural diversity” orientation of the cultural proficiency initiatives endorsed by Moyer and Clymer (2009). What does alarm me—and, as I will argue, ought to alarm anybody committed to the educational rights of racially, linguistically, economically, or otherwise marginalized students—is their endorsement of these cultural initiatives *as a response to inequity and injustice*. I enjoy learning about culture as much as anyone when the learning is not orchestrated in ways that confirm existing stereotypes about marginalized communities; and when it is not orchestrated, even implicitly, in order to replace more serious efforts to eradicate from schools the racism, xenophobia, heterosexism, and other forms of injustice with which many students and families contend.

In this article, I challenge us—the equity advocates, the people committed to ensuring the educational rights of all students and families—to make sure we are distinguishing adequately between *cultural* initiatives and *equity* initiatives. I begin by describing what I see as a culture fetish among people ostensibly committed to educational equity and how this fetish is reflected in the nomenclature and applications of popular approaches for creating more equitable schools. I then describe two ways in which this “cult of culture” impedes progress toward educational equity and justice. I end by introducing premises against which we can assess the extent to which our equity initiatives are, in fact, a threat to the inequity we hope to eliminate.

The Cult of Culture

As I have written previously (Gorski, 2006b, 2009), the tendency for educators to try to remedy injustice-based problems with culture-based strategies is all too common—some-what of an epidemic. It became particularly pronounced for me when I started examining initiatives schools and school

districts typically adopt to redress socioeconomic-based educational outcome disparities. This is why I have spent much of the past decade shouting from the social and economic justice rooftops, incredulous over the popularity of the “culture of poverty” approach for resolving these disparities (Gorski, 2006a, 2008, 2013). As I have explained elsewhere (Gorski, 2009, 2012), this approach is based on the indefensible premise that we can *achieve* equity by *ignoring* inequity. Despite the premise, educators across Canada and the United States, including diversity specialists, equity directors, and others who see themselves as champions of justice, have set about trying to fix an imaginary culture attributed falsely and foolishly (for reasons I discuss below) to economically marginalized people. Left unattended in this approach are the social, political, and structural conditions that marginalize people economically and, as a result, create the educational disparities equity advocates should want to destroy (Berliner, 2013). The result is that a good portion of an entire generation of educational policy and practice ostensibly meant to support students experiencing poverty has instead elevated their oppression—making them the culprits and naming them as the causes of the educational outcome disparities that are the results of their poverty (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

In fact, look more broadly at scholarship and professional development programs related to “diversity” in education, paying special attention to nomenclature, and it can be easy to conclude that we, in the education world, are obsessed with culture: *cultural* competence, *cultural* proficiency, *culturally* relevant teaching, *culturally* responsive teaching, *multicultural* education, *intercultural* education, *cross-cultural* education, *intercultural* communication (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). Some conceptions of some of these frameworks, including culturally responsive teaching, multicultural education, and cultural proficiency, are rooted theoretically in principles of equity and justice. However, as many of the scholars who have endorsed these frameworks have warned (e.g., Gorski, 2006a, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Sleeter, 1996), and as Moyer and Clymer (2009) and others have illustrated, when it comes to matters of equity, the most transformative aspects of transformative theory often fade to invisible in practice.

On the other hand, some of these frameworks, such as cultural competence and cross-cultural education, sidestep matters of equity altogether (Beach, Price, & Gary, 2005; Kumagai & Lypson, 2009). I would include in this category the “culturally and linguistically diverse” (CLD) students framework. I am confounded by this term, which can mean everything or nothing simultaneously. All students are culturally and linguistically diverse relative to one another: No student is culturally and linguistically diverse on her or his own without being compared to somebody else. This raises the questions: Who or what are we attempting to protect with this sort of empty framing? What is it that we are reluctant to name?

Complicating matters, the uncomfortable reality underlying empty language like *culturally and linguistically diverse students* is that the very notion of culture is so contested that nobody seems to know with any precision what it means. According to Wright (1998), literature reviews have revealed more than 150 distinct definitions of the term (that was almost 20 years ago). Archer (1985), a sociologist, argued culture has “the weakest analytical development of any key concept” (p. 333) in her discipline. Ladson-Billings (2006) lamented the ways in which her teacher educator students bend and twist the term to mean, in essence, whatever they need it to mean, stunting meaningful conversations about educational equity. The amorphous nature, or what Park (2005) called the “sheer slipperiness” (p. 14), of culture should raise questions about how and why it has come to play such a featured role in conversations about educational equity. This reality, alone, should be impetus enough to reconsider the centrality of culture in scholarship and professional development programs designed at least ostensibly to support equity efforts in schools. But it has not been impetus enough—not yet, at least.

As I argue next, this stubborn persistence of culture as the central frame of reference for conversations about equity ensures inattention to the conditions that underlie the inequities we want to destroy, such as racism, economic injustice, heterosexism, and sexism.

Rethinking Culture

Regardless of how we might define it, we probably can agree culture is important in the sense that it is one aspect of students’ identities. If we think of culture in everyday terms, outside the context of the dozens of theoretical conceptions of culture that continue to befuddle the scholars studying it, it is difficult to imagine a sensible argument for striking the concept from the list of equity concerns. Certainly as educators we position ourselves to be more effective, more equitable, when we understand and are responsive to the individual cultures of our students and their families.

The trouble is not the desire to afford culture some amount of attention in our conversations about educational equity, but rather the tendency to afford culture disproportionate, confounded, and stereotype-laden attention. In this section, I describe two examples of this kind of trouble and how they lead us off the equity path: (a) essentializing culture and (b) emphasizing culture in order to deemphasize inequity.

Essentializing Culture

As previously mentioned, culture is one dimension of our identities. Depending on the definition of culture to which I subscribe, I might even argue culture is a particularly unique and important dimension. After all, culture

can reflect a composite of other identities and life circumstances, such as regional location, ethnic heritage, religion, and home language, or the implications of these identities and circumstances. According to some definitions, culture might be informed by other identities—perhaps even by race or sexual orientation when considered in particular geographical, social, political, or economic contexts (e.g., Young Laing, 2003). Even so, culture still is only one dimension of people’s complex identities. We simply cannot predict anything about anybody’s culture based on any one or any combination of her or his identities or life circumstances (Gorski, 2013).

It is equally unsound thinking to presume two randomly selected people with one, several, or all of these factors in common are necessarily the same culturally. Consider the “culture of poverty.” I often have written about my Grandma Wilma who grew up in deep poverty. Among other identities and life circumstance factors, she is Appalachian (what she calls “mountain people”), White, Presbyterian, rural, and a native speaker of a middle-Appalachian variety of English. Should I presume she has anything in common with an equally economically marginalized Muslim Somali refugee living in urban Minneapolis who is in the process of learning English? If so, what can I accurately and justly presume these two people have in common culturally? Can I even assume with any degree of certainty my Grandma has the same worldview, taste in art, attitude about authority, or any other common cultural attribute as all or most other White rural Christians? Of course not.

When, despite its obtuseness, we make this sort of presumption, we are practicing essentialism (Fuchs, 2001). In essence, we are embracing the idea there is some singular and consistent true nature shared among large groups of people: people experiencing poverty, Latinas/os, or ELLs, for example. There isn’t. People experiencing poverty, Latinas/os, and ELLs are endlessly diverse. There is no singular and predictable culture of ELLs, Latina/o ELLs, or even ELLs from Mexico, which, like every country, contains an enormously diverse population. This is one reason why culturally and linguistically diverse is so empty a concept, why cultural competence and its presumptions of cultural homogeneity within hugely diverse groups of people is dangerous (St. Denis, 2009), and why intercultural communication and its adherents’ workshops on *communicating effectively with Asian American families* threaten the potential for equity. There is no shared or predictable true nature of Asian Americans or their cultures (Lee, 2006), so there cannot be a predictable and universal Asian American communication style.

So when our equity attention is focused on the cultures of this or that identity group, we are almost always stereotyping through erroneous essentialist conceptions of who students are (Ladson-Billings, 2006; St. Denis, 2009). We also are failing to prepare ourselves to be responsive to who students *actually* are. When we do

focus on culture—again, as one of a vast array of foci—we should focus on the individual cultural identities of individual students rather than on lists of presumed cultural traits stereotypically attributed to entire groups of people based on language, race, ethnicity, class, immigration status, or other identities. And we must refuse to conflate these identities with amorphous notions of culture or emphasize culture at the expense of emphasizing other ways in which students are marginalized.

Emphasizing Culture to Deemphasize Injustice

Another danger of overemphasizing culture in our equity efforts is that when we do so we run the risk of neglecting what ought to be at the center of equity efforts: inequity. As St. Denis (2009) explained in her analysis of how culture is used in discourses related to Aboriginal education in Canada, when racism

erupts in a way that makes it clear that collective action is required, more often than not what is recommended is not anti-racism education but cross-cultural awareness or race relations training for the primarily “white” service providers (p. 163).

Illustrating this point more broadly, when Beach, Price, and Gary (2005) analyzed 34 cultural competence initiatives designed in medical education contexts in the United States, they found most were silent on matters of justice. Only two of the 34 initiatives incorporated conversations about racism into their approaches to cultural competence.

In these cases, culture may be used as code language for race, socioeconomic status, and other equity concerns, perhaps to make the conversation more bearable to people who are racially, economically, and otherwise privileged (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Park, 2005). The implication of making culture the center of the conversation, comforting privilege rather than discomforting inequity, though, is that by doing so we mask racism, xenophobia, and other oppressions, undermining the goal of equity (Gorski, 2009; González, 2005; Kumagai & Lypson, 2009). According to Park (2005):

The key problem inherent to the discursive designation of “culture” as an essential, identifiable, knowable entity, is that the central role of power becomes concealed. One of the more interesting consequences of this construction of culture is that it obviates the necessity of structural reform (p. 25).

This makes sense, of course, because race, socioeconomic status, gender, and other identity markers around which people are marginalized are not cultural identities. Nor are racism, economic injustice, and sexism simply

the outcomes of cultural clashes. They are, instead, matters of power: of the ways in which power and opportunity, and at times even material resources, are distributed and exerted. Because inequity and injustice are not cultural problems, they cannot be resolved through cultural analyses and cultural solutions.

As Kumagai and Lypson (2009) explained, culture-centered approaches like cultural competence and cultural proficiency fail to sufficiently demand equity and justice; they fail to insist upon an equitable distribution of power. No amount of cultural knowledge can prepare me sufficiently to recognize and respond justly to the insidious and often implicit and intersectional inequities experienced by many students—to the racism, xenophobia, heterosexism, ableism, economic injustice, Islamophobia, sexism, and other oppressions they may experience through unjust educational policy and practice. This is why, when I look through my most cynical lens, I wonder whether rendering ourselves ill-equipped to create informed equity solutions is precisely the point of the culture obsession. It helps, in Kamoea’s (2003) words, to keep “suffering and oppression. . . under wraps, far below the surface, never to be revealed” (p. 20). When we emphasize culture to deemphasize justice, we are creating the illusion of progress toward justice while adopting approaches that guarantee minimal, if any, such progress. That is the inverse of equity.

An Equity-Centered Path Forward

I intended in this section to argue that, in the end, what we call our work—cultural proficiency, multicultural education, educational equity—is less important than what we advocate through our work. I was mentored into social justice activism and education through multicultural education: a framework some critical scholars have criticized harshly (e.g., Henry, 2012) for, among other reasons, what they see as its failure to take injustice seriously. I had studied foundational multicultural education scholars in the United States, such as Christine Sleeter (1996), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1996), and Sonia Nieto (2000), whose conceptions of multicultural education were and remain grounded centrally and explicitly in commitments to educational equity, social justice, and critical pedagogy, and none of whom appear to have any less critical a theoretical position than Henry (2012) or the other critics. So, because the visions for multicultural education I embraced, like some scholars’ visions for cultural proficiency or intercultural education, named and responded to injustice, I rejected the criticisms as straw person formulations.

Then I noticed something both Sleeter (1996) and Nieto (2000) observed in their own scholarship. What passes as multicultural education *in practice*, reflecting what I dismissed as straw person criticisms of multicultural

education, often looks more like celebrating cultural diversity than like social justice (Gorski, 2006b, 2009). Despite never consciously having decided to do so, I largely stopped using the term *multicultural education* in my scholarship, teaching, and teacher workshops. Looking back now, I probably did so because I worried based on my experience working with schools that despite my commitment to centering equity and justice, the cultural nomenclature offered people a way out of that commitment. They could choose to focus on cultural diversity—on multicultural arts and crafts or on simplistic assignments in which students are forced to stereotype entire nations of people into a single “culture.”

Often people in my workshops have the mistaken notion this sort of cultural celebration is a stepping stone to more serious equity work. They mistake a diversion for a stepping stone. In the end, cultural arts and crafts are not about equity because they are no threat to inequity—no threat to racism or xenophobia or heterosexism. Rather than being a starting point toward equity, they are a point of continuity away from equity.

So yes, in some small ways, one could argue this is about semantics, not substance. But in other substantial ways, language informs interpretation and interpretation informs substance. Achievement gap or opportunity gap? Dropout or push-out? Culturally and linguistically diverse students or racially, economically, and linguistically marginalized students? How we frame the problem drives what we are capable of imagining as solutions. Language matters.

Along with my colleague and collaborator Katy Swalwell (2011), I started using the term *equity literacy* to describe my work cultivating in teachers the knowledge and skills necessary to become a threat to the existence of inequity in their spheres of influence (Gorski, 2013, 2016; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). By framing the equity literacy knowledge and skills explicitly and consistently around *equity* rather than *culture* (allowing, again, that culture is an important equity concern among many important equity concerns), we are constructing a framework and a movement keeping issues like racism and heterosexism at the center of the conversation, making it more difficult for the institutions with which we work to tiptoe away from that conversation and back to cultural diversity.

The equity literacy framework is designed to equip educators with four primary equity-based abilities:

- (1) the ability to *recognize* even the subtlest forms of inequity, such as subtle ways in which students’ home languages might be denigrated in a school environment;
- (2) the ability to *respond* in the immediate term to inequity, such as by skillfully challenging colleagues or students who denigrate students’ home languages;

- (3) the ability to *redress* inequity in the long term, such as by effectively and equitably attending to the deeper cultural dynamics of the institution that make people believe it is acceptable to denigrate students’ home languages; and
- (4) the ability to *sustain* equity efforts—even in the face of resistance (Gorski, 2013).

Critical to the ability to develop and use these sorts of skills is foundational knowledge about the nature of inequity and how it infests the educational and other experiences of marginalized communities while bolstering levels of access and opportunity for the privileged few. Some of this knowledge pushes against common cultural assumptions. For example, in order to create equitable school environments for Latina/o students, I must recognize, counter to the framing in many cultural competence models, that Latina/o students are enormously diverse in the same way that people of any racial group are enormously diverse. There is no shared culture common to all Latina/o students. There is no set of strategies that will work for all Latina/o students or African American students or any other group of students identified by a single dimension of their identities. In order to recognize inequity and sustain equity, I also must understand the structural barriers experienced in and out of schools by the students with whom I work. If I don’t understand those barriers—even the barriers I cannot eliminate, like income and wealth inequality—I render myself incapable of developing policy and practice that are responsive to the lived realities of my most marginalized students and their families. In addition, I must understand educational disparities reflect an unjust distribution of access and opportunity, so equity efforts that fail to redistribute access and opportunity are a threat to the possibility of equity and not a threat to the existence of inequity (Gorski, 2013). These are the realities that are masked by culture-centric “diversity” paradigms.

Certainly this sort of knowledge has been incorporated into some conceptions of cultural proficiency, multicultural education, intercultural education, and culturally responsive instruction. This article is not intended to be a call to loosen our embrace of any framework helping us deepen our equity consciousness and practice. After all, this is precisely what Sleeter’s (1996) conception of multicultural education as social activism did for me: moving me into a new set of educator, activist, and scholar commitments. It is, however, a call to measure our commitments to educational equity and justice, in part by considering our own equity literacy. Do we embrace approaches, or versions of approaches, for attending to “diversity”

that implicitly or explicitly emphasize culture at the expense of equity—that mask heterosexism, racism, linguisticism, economic injustice, and other forms of oppression? Do we embrace frameworks that essentialize students—simplifying their complex identities into stereotyped cultural traits?

When we do our equity work, are we constructing our conversations in ways that provide people entitled by their own privilege—people who might rather discuss made-up communication styles of African American families than the racism and economic injustice with which many African American families contend—vague notions of culture as theoretical or practical loopholes? If we are teaching cultural proficiency, are we also teaching equity proficiency—the knowledge and skills required to create and sustain an actively anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-other-oppressions classroom, school, and society? If we embrace culturally relevant or culturally responsive pedagogy, do we practice it in its intended form so we are responsive both to students' unique individual cultures and to students' rights to equitable and just educational opportunity (Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014)?

Do we have the equity literacy to know the difference?

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