“Multiplication Is for White People”: Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children
by Lisa Delpit


As reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Lisa Delpit has won awards from the MacArthur Foundation, American Educational Studies Association, and Teacher Magazine; her book Other People’s Children has sold 250,000 copies; and she has a named chair at Southern University. Nonetheless, she is angry. In fact, the phrase “I am angry” appears 11 times in the introduction to this summary critique of the education of African American students. Delpit’s anger stems from two things: one, the persistently low achievement of those students, and two, school policies and attitudes that cause and maintain it.

Straight off, even the most generous reformers come under indictment. Bill and Melinda Gates, for instance, devote much of their gigantic philanthropy to getting black and brown kids ready for college, yet they earn her scorn for “corporate foundations, which indeed have those funds because they can avoid paying taxes that the rest of us must foot.” It gets worse, as she adds, “I am left in my more cynical moments with the thought that poor black children have become the vehicle by which rich white people give money to their friends.”

The charge extends to the very problem the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, Teach For America, and other groups criticized by Delpit propose to remedy: low African American performance. She dismisses the usual explanations—poverty, poor preparation, homes with no books—and identifies two other causes, one the result of the other.

Low performance begins with American racism. Our society, Delpit writes, has a “deeply ingrained bias of equating blackness with inferiority,” and it seems always ready to identify African Americans with almost all negative behaviors.” At tender ages, black students undergo a series of “microaggressions...small psychic insults” that debilitate them. Black males perform poorly because “our young men have internalized all of the negative stereotypes.” Sometimes black students are invisible, unnoticed, and disrespected, and sometimes they are “hypervisible,” their normal youth behaviors magnified into pathologies. They end up estranged from school culture (“disidentification”), mistrusting their own capacities and fulfilling belittling expectations.

Teachers misinterpret them again and again, Delpit alleges, mainly by disregarding the culture black students inhabit. This is the second cause of low achievement. The classroom is a white, middle-class space often hostile to African American norms. It downplays collaboration, she notes, even though these students need it to “feel more secure and less vulnerable.” It ignores past contributions to learning and science by African Americans. It neglects spirituality, whereas “traditional African education” incorporates “education for the spirit” into everyday lessons.

Delpit assembles classroom anecdotes, including her daughter’s experiences, with research on “stereotype threat” to prove the point. Voices of black students bespeak the demoralizing results, as with the middle schooler who announces, “Black people don’t multiply; black people just add and subtract. White people multiply.” On the other hand, Delpit provides counter-examples of success, for instance, Afrocentric assignments, inspiring teachers who love and sympathize but maintain rigor, and a beloved white teacher whom the students consider “black” for this reason: when asked “how he felt as a white man teaching black history... tears came to his eyes as he answered that when he learned about Emmett Till and other terrible things white people had done to black people, it sometimes made him ashamed to be white.”

Of course, tales and profiles and selective research don’t amount to proof, nor do they serve as grounds for policy revision. Delpit identifies a significant problem—the clash of school culture with African American out-of-school culture—but her racial lens casts it simply as one of respect and morale, not of effective education. She believes that the former produces the latter, for “African American students are gifted and brilliant,” and they would prosper if schools and teachers became sensitive to their culture.
But this translation of teacher sensitivity into student achievement is precisely what remains to be demonstrated. Delpit praises Afrocentric curricula, but her support focuses entirely on inputs and premises, not on outcomes. A unit that instills math by taking racial profiling as the subject wins her admiration, but her only evidence for its effectiveness comes from a student who professes, “now I realize that you could use math to defend your rights and realize the injustices around you.” But what about the math scores those students attain in 12th grade? What grades do they get in first-year college calculus? Delpit claims that schools impart the message that “you must give up identifiably African American norms in order to succeed,” but she never shows that embracing those norms produces higher college enrollment or workplace readiness.

If that evidence doesn’t exist, then Delpit’s argument isn’t with schools. It’s with U.S. history, society, culture, economics. Many pages in “Multiplication Is for White People” suggest that this is, indeed, the case, such as the indignant section on racist actions after Hurricane Katrina. If society at large is racist, though, then schools should receive more credit than Delpit allows. She asserts that “Typical university curricula leave out contributions of people of color to American culture, except in special courses in African American studies,” a flatly false claim. Sylabii in U.S. history, literature, music, and other areas at nearly every campus amply represent African American creators. Her complaint really is that schools haven’t sufficiently countered popular attitudes.

Delpit’s prescription that schools show more respect for African American culture, then, may have the effect of cultivating an adversarial posture among students. If American society is anti–African American, then a “culturally relevant curriculum” necessarily conflicts with it. If high schools offer an Afrocentric curriculum, will students find university offerings uncongenial and drift toward African American studies and away from STEM fields, where job prospects are brighter? Will a high school teacher ashamed of his whiteness alienate students from white college teachers and employers not so ashamed? Delpit notes that yelling is often assumed in African American culture to be a sign of caring, but won’t failing to inform students of the inappropriateness of yelling in public and in workplaces set them up for future tensions?

These are open questions, and this book doesn’t begin to consider them. We might easily dismiss it as an expression of resentment—the shadow of Jim Crow looms on every page—but we do better to take the starting point seriously: we have a culture clash in the classroom. Rather than expounding the pains and injustices and prescribing a “sensitivity” reform, however, let’s examine various schools and curricula on the standard accountability measure. Do they produce graduates who proceed to college and workplace and thrive?

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