

Culture and Race in Urban Education

Helen Muñoz

University of Illinois at Chicago

Abstract

In this paper, I take a moment to analyze urban education through the knowledge I have obtained within my first 5 weeks of college. While there are many different avenues that can be taken with such a broad topic, I felt that it was most appropriate for me to talk about race and culture; how the two greatly differ and influence urban education. Society quite often tends to take the two terms hand in hand and fails to recognize the sort of damage that it causes within several aspects of our lives. As aforementioned, I will explain the difference among the two with sources and terms provided to me by Croom, Coates, Durham-Barnes, and several other scholars. By the end of the analysis, I will take some time to discuss my own thoughts based on the sources given and conclude with a take on potential solutions that can be taken towards this ongoing issue.

Keywords: race, culture, urban education

Culture and Race in Urban Education

Within the first week of starting my college education, I was already being faced with the never-ending question that is “What is urban education?” I had no idea how to tackle this question seeing as how I couldn’t even identify if I went to an urban school or not. “What even makes a school urban?” I asked myself. As the course has progressed, however, I’ve come to understand that urban education has much to do with (but not exclusive to) race and culture.

What I’ve learned in urban education thus far is that race is primarily built off of society’s own personal perspectives and has played its fair share in how urban education is seen today. In his article about post-white orientation, Dr. Croom goes into great detail about the 2 different ways society can view race: through a common sense lens or consequential D/discourse view. Common sense was discussed “as a matter of color, nationality, culture, or blood” while D/discourse was seen through “meaningful ways of being, languaging, and symbolizing” (Croom 2016). Seeing through a D/discourse view, Croom argues that we are allowed to be much more honest with ourselves about race and how we see those that differ from us. When the term “black education” is stated, many people assume that it is subordinate to white education. Such presumptions can slowly be minimized if we stop seeing race as common sense. In addition to these perspectives, the type of ideology that we choose to follow can also impact how we see race play out in education. Hoover writes extensively both on the deficiency philosophy and vindicationist philosophy. The deficient point of view can be traced all the way back to slavery, arguing that people of color (primarily African Americans) were somehow deficient whether it was cognitively, linguistically, genetically, etc. This has consequently brought up many unfortunate decisions on educational policy, the “separate but equal” establishment being one of them. In order to fix these radical, preconceived notions on people of color, Hoover writes,

society must learn to take on the vindicationist philosophy in which people of color are seen to be just as capable of academic achievement as any other students.

Not only does race influence how urban education is seen and treated, but culture has a significant influence as well. In his book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes about what type of environment he grew up in and how that impacted the way in which he lives his life now. As he differentiates the lives of whites (“Dreamers”) and his own, he is able to show the reader the clear differences between him and the rest of the world. Coates provides several examples of the way in which “white” people live versus how “black” people live, but does not accept the idea that race is a legitimate form of identification. Instead, he discusses people’s customs and experiences--their culture, if you will--and how it is those things that determine how people are tied to one another. Coates explains that black people “were bound by all the beautiful things, all the language and mannerisms, all the food and music, all the literature and philosophy, all the common language...” (2016). All these aspects of life, as a result, greatly influence both how people live their lives and how they are seen by the rest of society.

Proceeding these cultural differences are conflicts within educational environments and Durham-Barnes touches on this problem by analyzing four urban teachers with at least 10 years of experience. She examined these four teachers in their work environment and would ask them to recall how their experience went by the end of the study. As they discussed mental and emotional turmoil, they also covered how tense things would become within the classroom. The teachers stated that they felt the cultural disconnect between themselves and the students which often led to misunderstandings during lessons and considered that they could have benefited from an increased understanding of the community (Durham-Barnes 2011). Duncan-Andrade also focuses on this issue between teachers and students with his “Gangstas, Wankstas, and

Ridas” article. As he goes over how the urban education experience can be improved for students and faculty, it is claimed that “multicultural education leads to successful teaching practices” (Duncan-Andrade 2007) and can be proved with the teachers that he identifies as the “Ridas” of the schools. It can be seen, then, how culture itself has a deep impact on the way urban education is dealt with by educators themselves.

At this point of the semester and course overall, I find myself agreeing with a vast majority of the things that have been discussed by these different authors. For one, I believe that Hoover has made all the right points when discussing the deficient/vindicationist philosophies and has most certainly provided strong evidence in order to support her claims. I do believe that poor decisions on educational policies and curriculum planning will continue to occur if the vindicationist philosophy does not soon replace the deficiency philosophy that has been established since the birth of this nation. As I say this, my mind can’t help but be brought to *The Birth of a Nation* and I find it ironic how the 1915 silent film itself shows us how a deficient philosophy has stood as a custom for so long and become a regular practice in America, even to this day. I now wonder: are we in too deep to get out of this issue? Have these thoughts been ingrained in our minds for too long to even get rid of them? Perhaps this is the case, but I don’t think it hurts to try. As several of the teachers from Durham-Barnes study stated, it can help educators themselves if they were to learn more about the community and different cultures in order to improve the environment in classrooms and overall relationships between faculty and students. It is certain that these sorts of things will help both how urban education is seen and dealt with, but to what extent? Croom makes a valid point when arguing that color blindness is not the answer; rather, we must attack the issue with honesty to ourselves. We must begin to realize that race is not inherent in the person, but it is what we are doing to each other.

In conclusion, I've finally started to comprehend some major key factors of urban education and why we see things the way we do. As my 5th week of college comes to an end, I can confidently say that race and culture are huge influencers of urban education and why that is. While there are many things that I have yet to discover, it feels good to know that I have set up a profound base of knowledge on this topic and can tackle these issues with different arguments provided to me by scholars such as Croom, Hoover, Coates, Duncan-Andrade, and Durham-Barnes. Urban education is a difficult topic to cover and even more so difficult to solve problems for, but the solutions are available to us and most certainly possible in my opinion.

References

- Coates, T. (2015). *Between the world and me*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau
- Croom, M. (2016). Reading: "The crisis in black education" from a post-white orientation. *Black History Bulletin*, 79(2), 18-26.
- Duncan-Andrade, J. (2007). Gangtas, wankstas, and ridas: Defining, developing, and supporting effective teachers in urban schools. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20(6), 617-638.
- Durham-Barnes, J. (2011). The balancing act: The personal and professional challenges of urban teachers. *The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal*, 9(1).
- Hoover, M. R. (1990). A vindicationist perspective on the role of ebonics (black language) and other aspects of ethnic studies in the university. *The American Behavioral Scientist*.