

The Role of Symbolic Anthropology in a Model to Raise Achievement and Reduce the Achievement Gap in Education

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Achievement gaps in Virginia public education continue to be the primary focus in school improvement initiatives. The Virginia Board of Education and the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) outline specific accountability targets that schools must meet in an effort to decrease the achievement gap in groups of students that have historically underperformed. These groups represent culturally diverse populations taught primarily by White females (Feistritzer, 2011) who may not understand their students' culture and its effect on their achievement.

The disciplinary perspective of anthropology can help school divisions address the issue of cultural competency of their faculty and staff. Specifically, within anthropology, symbolic anthropology focuses on the symbols and rituals that help give meaning to life experiences. Because culture is a ritual action, it creates the ideology and behavior in schools (McLaren, 1986). Framing research about the nation's achievement gap with symbolic anthropology focuses on understanding social dramas to reduce suspensions among minority students and the creation of rituals that promote a positive, supportive, academically-orientated culture among the faculty, staff, and students.

Accreditation and Accountability

The Virginia Board of Education provides standards to better inform the public about the progress of schools through annual accreditation ratings. To be fully accredited, public schools in Virginia must achieve these pass rates on Standards of Learning tests and other approved assessments: English, 75 percent or higher; and mathematics, science, and history-70 percent or higher (Virginia Department of Education, 2015a). In addition to

state accreditation, NCLB (2002) also requires states to set annual measurable objectives to increase student achievement in reading and mathematics and to close achievement gaps among various subgroups that have historically underperformed. These proficiency gap groups include: students with disabilities, limited-English proficient students, and economically disadvantaged students, regardless of race and ethnicity; African-American students, not of Hispanic origin; and Hispanic students, of one or more races (Virginia Department of Education, 2015b). While many school divisions meet and exceed accreditation standards, meeting the additional requirements of federal annual measurable objectives for students that fall within the gap groups remains a challenging and ongoing initiative and is the basis of most public school improvement plans.

Anthropology

Anthropology is the study of the various aspects of human experience and is one disciplinary perspective that lends itself to research on raising achievement in schools and closing the gap. Franz Boas is the founder of relativistic, culture-centered anthropology (Tax, n.d.) who discredited the common early notion that western civilization was superior to other societies. Through his research and publications, he attempted to change the way the educated community viewed race and culture. Boas believed that the differences among races did not result from physiological factors but from historical events and circumstances (Tax, n.d.), and that, ultimately, race is a cultural construct.

Sociocultural anthropologists study people and cultures across the globe to understand their varying viewpoints on social structure, norms, rules, and interactions. Similarities and differences of

cultures are collected and analyzed to determine social and personal perspectives, practices, and social organization in order to increase human understanding. Ericksen (2004) indicated that the idea of *person* varies across cultures, and that while the term *society* is commonly used, it is not easy to identify in anthropological research. Society not only denotes a state or area, but it also includes the systems and partial systems that exist within society. The word *culture* is used routinely in anthropology and can be the single most difficult concept to define. Eriksen (2004) stated,

It is beyond doubt that there are relevant, systematic, and sometimes striking differences between persons and groups, and that some of these differences- possibly some of the most important ones-are caused by the fact that they have grown up in systematically different social environments. (p. 31)

Symbolic Anthropology

Origins and Theory

Symbolic anthropology (SA), sometimes also known as interpretive anthropology, studies symbols and the processes by which humans assign meaning, such as myth or ritual, in the context of culture (Spencer, 1996). Crotty (1998) stated that without culture, society could not function because it depends on culture to direct behavior and organize experiences. When people first see their world in a meaningful fashion, they are viewing it through the lenses given to them by their culture (Crotty, 1998). Spencer (1996) argued that SA views culture as an independent system of meaning deciphered by interpreting key symbols and rituals in social action. Two main premises exist in SA. The first is that beliefs can only be understood when viewed in context of the overall culture (Des Chene, 1996). The second major premise is that actions are guided by interpretation, allowing symbolism to aid in interpreting activities.

SA was developed in the 1960s and 1970s. It was originally used to understand religion, ritual

activity, and expressive customs such as mythology and performing arts particularly in less developed societies (Des Chene, 1996). Two major approaches to SA were developed by anthropologists Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) and Victor Turner (1920-1983). While similar, they do have distinct differences.

Clifford Geertz. Clifford Geertz built on Max Weber's (1864-1920) work in interpretive social science. Like Weber, Geertz (1973) believed that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (p. 5) and that culture is those webs. Geertz (1973) felt that anthropologists cannot develop theoretical laws to compare cultures but that they should interpret cultures to understand their meaning. His argument was that culture is not a model inside people's heads but rather is embodied in public symbols of actions (Geertz, 1973). Geertz prescribed interpreting a culture's web of symbols by isolating elements and specifying the internal relationships among those elements and characterizing the whole system in some general way. These web of symbols must be studied from the participant's, or actors, point of view.

In order to study the cultural symbols of art, religion, ideology, science, law, and morality, Geertz utilized Gilbert Ryle's *thick description*. A thick description tries to paint a clear picture of an event, situation, environment, or culture. Ponterotto (2005) summarized thick description as having five components. The first involves accurately describing and interpreting social actions within the appropriate context in which it took place. Second, thick descriptions capture the thoughts, emotions, and web of social interaction among observed participants. The third component assigns motivations and intentions. Fourth, the context for the social action are so well described that the reader will believe them, and finally, that thick descriptions of social actions promote *thick interpretations* which lead to *thick meanings* that resonate with the reader. However, the thick description is neither predictive nor verifiable since it is primarily a descriptive approach.

An example of a thick description is the blink vs. wink. Both the blink and wink involve the same physical motion, but the wink is a form of communication intended to impart a message to someone in particular, and according to a socially-established code (Geertz, 1973). In order to determine if the motion is a wink or a blink, the researcher must carefully analyze the actions in terms of social understanding of the wink as a gesture as well as the real intention of winker and how the meaning of the winking action itself is interpreted by the recipient and society.

Victor Turner. Victor Turner was another prominent figure in SA. He was not interested in symbols as mediums of culture, but instead was interested in them as promoters of the social process (Ortner, 1984). Turner was influenced by Marxist theory which implies that the usual state of society is not one of unity and harmonious integration of parts, but rather one of conflict (Ortner, 1984). Turner felt that symbols of society, by their arrangement and context, produce social transformations that tie the people in a society to the society's norms, resolve conflicts, and aid in changing the status of the people in the society (also called actors) (Ortner, 1983). Turner (1975) believed that ritual symbols "give a visible form to unknown things, they express in concrete and familiar terms what is hidden and unpredictable" (p. 213). Rituals are collective experiences that can range from the Olympics, to the commemoration of 9/11, to the annual pumpkin carving at Halloween. Turner believed rituals are an essential mechanism for transmission of cultural identity. They frame a culture's experience and are important to the transition of individuals within the society.

Turner devised the concept of a social drama to study social transformation. He believed that these dramas provided windows into social organization and values within the society since they occur within groups that share values and have a history. The drama can be broken into four acts. The first act is the rupture in social relations or breach. The second act is a crisis that cannot be handled by normal strategies. The third act is

redressive action, which seeks to remedy the initial problem and redress and re-establish social relations. The fourth and final act can happen in one of two ways. There can be reintegration, which is the return to the status quo, or the recognition of a schism which is an alteration in social arrangements (Turner, 1980).

Methodological Paradigms

Ontology

According to Ponterotto (2005), symbolic anthropologists follow a constructivists–interpretivists ontology. They believe in multiple, constructed realities instead of one single known reality. Reality is subjective and influenced by the context of the situation including a person's experience and perceptions, the social environment, and the interaction between the individual and the researcher (Ponterotto, 2005). All of these multiple realities are apprehendable and equally valid (Schwandt, 1994). Geertz (1973) believed that symbols already exist in a community when a person is born, and they remain in circulation, with some changes, after the person dies. During their life, they construct their culture from those symbols and rituals.

Epistemology

Epistemology is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know. For SA, the goal is to understand the lived experiences from the point of view of those who live it day to day (Schwandt, 1994). Since reality is socially constructed, the interaction between researcher and participant is central to capturing and describing the lived experience of the participant (Ponterotto, 2005) particularly through thick descriptions. Only by becoming a part of the culture can deeper meaning be uncovered (Ponterotto, 2005). Geertz (1973) related a story about how he was able to become a part of the Balinese culture by sharing in a symbolic rituals – illegal cockfighting and running from the police. By participating in the culture, he

was able to become a part of it since he developed a bond with the people.

Methodology

Since there is a need for intense researcher-participant interaction and to be immersed over longer periods of time in the participants' world, Ponterotto (2005) suggested research designs in which the researcher becomes a part of the community and the day-to-day life of her or his research participants. In particular, qualitative research methods such as in-depth face-to-face interviewing and participant observation should be used (Ponterotto, 2005). Geertz believed that in order to study a culture, the researcher had to be immersed in it. He developed a metaphor in which culture and cultural functions are related to be a series of texts. The fieldwork is the reading done by the researcher of those texts. "Doing ethnography is like learning to read a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but not written in the conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10).

Axiology

In terms of axiology, constructivists-interpretivists, and therefore symbolic anthropologist, maintain that the researcher's values and lived experience cannot be separated from the research process. The necessity of becoming a part of the society in order to develop a thick description means that the "researcher should acknowledge, describe, and "bracket" his or her values, but not eliminate them" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131).

Symbolic Anthropology in Education

Since a large majority of teachers are White females over the age of 50 (Feistritzer, 2011), a gulf may exist between students' cultural expressions and the teachers' understanding of them. Teachers who do not understand the culture may interpret certain cultural expressions, particularly movement

and speech, as threats (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). To facilitate understanding, thick descriptions of students' social actions can be used to place actions in context, capture the students' thoughts and emotions, and assign motivations and intentions. This will assist in acceptance of cultural differences and promote a more positive, understanding culture within the school.

Social Drama in the Classroom

Turner (1980) believed that dramatic episodes are not chaotic but rather are interaction rituals that are defined by how the actors respond to the evolving social situation. McFarland (2004) applied this knowledge to students' resistance to learning and found that when students resist learning they participate in social dramas and "symbolically invert cultural forms in subtle and dramatic ways such that the norms and pre-established codes of conduct in the school and classroom are distorted or undermined" (p. 1252).

In a social drama set within a classroom, the first act, or the breach, occurs when a student resists learning by talking out of turn, socializing privately, joking, complaining, challenging authority, etc. The second act moves into the crisis stage where other classmates get drawn into the drama and side with either the student or the teacher. At this stage, if the teacher is able to control the situation, the drama will be short. However, if peers reinforce the breach, it can extend to other issues and snowball to the teacher being undermined. The third act is redressive action where both parties present their solutions to the crisis and try to gain support that will ultimately define how the classroom situation should proceed. The fourth act is either reintegration or schism. Reintegration takes place when students and teachers gesture their acceptance of the situation and class moves on as before (status quo). Schism occurs when the situation gets out of control, and there is a forced exit of the resistant student (McFarland, 2004).

The social dramas described by SA can be important in understanding, explaining and potentially mitigating a small part of the

achievement gap. How these social dramas play out in classrooms for minority male students partially can explain the high rate of suspensions among Black students. Black high school students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2014). By excluding the student from class, the student falls further and further behind academically. Arcia (2006) found in her study of suspended ninth graders from a large, urban school district that this schism exacerbates the cycle of academic failure, disengagement, and escalating rule breaking. Within that school district, as many as 38% of students were suspended at least once, and 26% accumulated ten or more days in suspension (Arcia, 2006). A clear association between pre-suspension reading achievement and suspension rates was documented such that students with lower achievement were suspended more than students with higher achievement, and the more days that students were in suspension, the less gains they had in reading (Arcia, 2006). Toldson, McGee, and Lemmons (2013) found that some Black male students became disengaged from school because of non-inclusive curricula, racial biases, and poor relationships with teachers or because they have difficulty understanding the material. These issues can cause the student to create the initiate breach in a social drama that may end in suspension if teachers react to the situation rather than express an awareness of the progression of a social drama.

A lack of cultural awareness may preclude successful interventions such that the social drama concludes with a schism. However, teachers that understand the implications of a social drama breach and are trained in how to redress it can create learning environments that are inclusive and compassionate for Black males (Toldson et al., 2013). These teachers will be able to reintegrate the student into the class thereby reducing suspensions and breaking the cycle that can lead to lower achievement.

Culture, Ritual, and Achievement Gaps

As the study of how the symbols and rituals influence humans, SA sets the stage to analyze how minority cultures affect the achievement gap. Rituals and ritual symbols transmit the values and beliefs of a society. Schools can be thought of as a society that can develop their own rituals and culture. McLaren (1986) identified several types of rituals that exist within schools: the ritual of instruction consisted of the lessons that took place on a daily basis; the ritual of revitalization was described as an event that renewed the commitment to the motivations and values of the ritual participants and not only included staff meetings and professional development for faculty and staff, but also occurred in the classroom when teachers and students discussed the importance of mastering course work and school objectives; and lastly, the rituals of intensification recharged teachers and students emotionally and unified the group. These rituals can sustain the achievement gap, or faculty, staff, and students can work to develop a culture and rituals that reduce the achievement gap.

Ladson-Billings (1995) recognized that minority students can possess social power. She suggested that rather than allow minority students to influence their peers in a negative way, teachers should challenge minority students to demonstrate academic power by drawing on issues and ideas they find meaningful. These suggestions can be developed into rituals of instruction and revitalization.

In her study of six diverse public schools that showed unusually large academic growth among minority children, Durham (2009) identified the cultural factors that contribute to the underachievement of Black and Latino students: low expectations both inside and outside of school, positive identity suppression to reduce negative peer consequences, opportunity gaps, and race-based challenges. Race-based challenges are obstacles that are overtly and clearly rooted in negative attitudes and behavior toward minority students. Collectively, Durham (2009) called this the *Cycle of*

Risk. Low expectations and positive identity suppression can be self-imposed by the student, or they could be imposed by faculty. Examples might be that minority children are not recommended for the gifted program because of worries about parental support or it may be suggested to minority students that Advanced Placement courses would be too difficult. Opportunity gaps can include a lack of enrichment activities and a lack of access to technology. These cultural elements help maintain the achievement gap.

Durham's (2009) study is notable in that it used grounded theory to create observation protocols and perform qualitative case studies on schools that have widely eliminated or reduced achievement gaps. Its strength is that it focuses less on the obstacles of gap students and more on the interface between student support services and social development. *The Cycle of Protection* put forth by Durham (2009) includes creating positive peer groups; immersion in positive, growth-oriented environment; interaction with caring adults; enrichment; and racial socialization.

Utilizing the rituals of instruction, revitalization, and intensification, cultural components can be developed within schools to reduce the achievement gap. For instance, a ritual of intensification could be the cultivation of adult models that coach students individually on growth and motivation (Durham, 2009). A principal creating a positive peer culture by reminding students that they need to be supportive of one another and challenging each student to do his or her best is an example of a ritual of revitalization. A positive, growth-oriented environment can be created through the ritual of instruction where students are continually challenged to set, obtain, and reset goals (Durham, 2009). Barr and Parrett (2007) also identified key factors that have raised achievement and closed gaps: engaged parents and community; understanding and holding high expectations for culturally diverse students; targeting low performers; aligning, managing, and monitoring curriculum; creating a culture of assessment and data literacy; and building

instructional capacity. Creating rituals within schools that enhance these features will create a culture of achievement and over time reduce the achievement gap.

Conclusion

The symbolic anthropological lens can be utilized to elucidate how the achievement gap can be affected by practices within the school. When schools understand and accept their obstacles and develop an unwavering belief that the students can thrive academically, they can develop new understandings of culture and develop symbols and rituals that can work toward ending the achievement gap. Specifically, understanding the social drama and being trained to reduce schisms can help reduce the number of suspensions among minority students. By reducing time away from class, students can have more educational growth. Creating rituals that transmit the belief that minority students can disrupt the cycles of risk and close the achievement gap, allows schools to create a culture that will lead to the success of students.

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