

7-2018

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Recommended Citation

Farmer, Angela (2018) "Understanding “Other People’s Children” Through 21st Century Lens," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol3/iss3/5>

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Understanding “Other People’s Children” Through 21st Century Lens

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UNDERSTANDING "OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN" THROUGH 21ST CENTURY LENS

Angela S. Farmer, Mississippi State University

Book Review

Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom
(Delpit, 2006)

Engaging in constructive discourse is perhaps one of the best ways to fully dissect a societal issue in the hopes of transforming it from what it is into what it could become. In Lisa Delpit's 2006 version of "Other People's Children," she does a remarkable job of leading the reader to the importance of developing the character of children. As a minority parent and educator who struggled with supporting her children amid the challenges they faced in institutionalized educational settings, the author confronts the realities of what many children still face today, as they attempt to assimilate to an environment so foreign from their home environment.

In an early section of the book, the author details the challenges faced by minority educators whose attempts to slowly introduce minority students into the complexities of majority doctrine were often ignored for the status quo of protocols considered appropriate for all students. She effectively details how the individual child can become lost in a setting which focuses on what is best for the masses. Further, she delves into the silenced dialog which unpacks the culture of power, explaining how it is only those in power who do not recognize the existence of the power platform. By recognizing that minority children hampered by poverty can enjoy full academic capacity, impeded only by their lack of instructional efficacy, it becomes critical that the adults amend their protocols to maximize student learning.

Further, she details how African American students need to develop fluency, a skill unlikely to be mastered with consistent criticism of the subtle errors made along the way. Her explanation of the affective filter where the instructor uses incessant critiques to correct a child's grammar resonates with many an educator. She goes into depth to reiterate that a child's background and experiences must be respected in order for him to ever get to the level of developing reading fluency and comprehension at a proficient or even superior level. Further, she expands on how educators must provide minority children with the tools for success in a culture which establishes regular, subtle tests of one's dominant discourse through "grammar, style, and mechanics to exclude from participation those not born to positions of power" (p. 153). It is through these experiences where she sees a critical need for educators to not only teach the material necessary for academic mastery but also reinforce this whole student concept where he learns the tangential behaviors and interactional necessary to attain societal capital and to learn to adapt in the dominant culture while remaining securely supported by his environmental norms.

Delpit's extended service in Alaska also shapes the book by giving depth to the author's experience and context. She does a detailed job of justifying why children need to be part of the school community to achieve maximum benefit from what it offers. If they are not participants within that environment, then they are less likely to have ownership in the learning offered. This section also transforms the teacher's paradigm from one who dictates information to students to

an educator who helps students see the world as it is, as well as how they can play a key role in their future.

Relationship value is reinforced throughout the book. There is almost an awaking from the pages where one wants to immediately adjust his lens in order to see more clearly through the eyes of all minority children. Furthermore, it reveals the irony of how the majority population seems empowered to dictate best practices for the teachers and students of minority populations. In an especially powerful section she titles, "Hello Grandfather," she explores the varied teaching methods used by Native American as compared to Caucasian teachers. The book resonates with a resounding call for change when educating minority students. Repeatedly, the author echoes the need for respect within the school community not for only the educators, but for the children themselves. She sees the students as active participants in their learning, respecting the background and experiences they bring with them to the school setting. It is this mutualistic respect that she sees as paramount to having the opportunity to then teach the children new material, underscored with how it will support their existing situation.

The book, "Other People's Children" does a resounding job of disturbing one's social conscience regarding the experiences of minority children within the classroom setting. While without malice aforethought, many educators set out to educate all, the lens of individuality is often lost. This book effectively details how the power brokers in schools, typically the majority population of Caucasian teachers and administrators, often set policies and practices aligned with middle-class values and expectations. Children entrenched in poverty, especially minority children in poverty, clearly have different responses to certain stimuli. They often become victims of their situation, being academically or behaviorally mislabeled simply because their responses do not align with the teacher's expectations. Further, minority populations whose home environment are limited in literacy and academic entrenchment, are often the same ones which regard advances in education with not a small degree of trepidation, rather based on personal experiences or those of other members of their immediate community.

This book is an ideal read for all educators, in that everyone has inherent biases which influence how he interacts and with others. By addressing a variety of minority student populations, Delpit establishes a consensus, focused on validating children's culture and home setting as a critical component of the educational process. While each minority, student population faces unique challenges, based on its geography and environment, she focuses on the commonalities within these divergent communities in order to establish a harmony for student success. The one, underlying current of the book is that of frustration with the limited progress made to educate minority populations within school settings in a manner aligned with respect to their background, experiences, and learning styles. Stimulating, thought-provoking and challenging best summarize the works of Lisa Delpit in "Other People's Children."

Reference

Delpit, L. (2006). *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. (2006). New York. New Press.