

The Effects of Culture, Socioeconomics, and Politics on  
Curriculum and Instruction, Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

Teaching and learning are very complicated processes. The diversity of learning styles, academic abilities, interests, emotional issues and cultural issues are only some of the factors that need to be considered when discussing the process of educating our ever-diversifying population. To further complicate the issue of adequately teaching every student, these factors apply to the students as well as the teachers, so actually, in mathematical terms, each factor is multiplied greatly. The attributes of the persons involved are but one over-arching consideration in the education process. Additionally, political, cultural and socio-economic factors greatly affect the education process. Curriculum, instruction, the organization of schools, instructional design, the preparation of teachers and the personal characteristics of the individuals involved are all connected to and interrelated to political, cultural and socio-economics and as such must all be considered in any school initiatives or reforms.

Cultural Contexts With Respect to Teaching and Learning

Our educational system has always been influenced by the prevailing culture of the time. The ideals, dreams, goals and cultural attributes of our people walk through the front door with the arrival of the students and staff. Our cultural characteristics influence all aspects of the education process including what will be taught, how it will be taught and even who will be taught. As our cultures coexist or clash, these cultural interactions become a part of the fabric of our schools. An example of culture influencing education can be seen in the spirit of “leaving no

child left behind.” Though this phrase has been linked to the controversial Federal educational initiative, the spirit of this notion of equity can be seen as an underpinning of the cultural clash in the **Brown vs. Board of Education** lawsuit. This lawsuit sought to bring equity to our educational system and may have been the original attempt to leave no child left behind. This landmark court decision helped undo **Jim Crow** segregation of schools and led the way for many other movements to bring equity in policies to other minority groups (**Gay, 2004**). Desegregation was the start of a movement that grew in a multitude of ways. It was the catalyst for the multicultural movement that has been fighting to bring educational equity to schools for the many students who have been integrated into the “mainstream” schools. Desegregation may have had one of the most profound effects on education in our history. Every aspect of teaching and learning has been impacted by this effort to deal with the consequences of America’s cultural divide. The implication is that cultural issues play an important role in teaching and learning.

Research done by **Gay** highlighted many of the cultural issues that have been brought in to the debate when discussing the effect that desegregation has had on our schools. While certain gains have been made as a result of **Brown vs. Board**, there were issues that were not considered when the decision was made. This decision produced unintended consequences. Teaching and learning, pedagogical considerations, curriculum and instructional designs would be impacted in ways that our educational system would not be ready to address. As many advocates for multicultural education have seen, desegregation solved some problems but essentially perpetuated others. Advocates for multicultural education would claim that the education for cultural groups other than White Europeans has proven to be ineffective in certain ways. How various cultural groups communicate and process information was not considered when these students were integrated in to “White” public schools. According to research by **Banks, Gay, et al.**, teachers were and are ill equipped to understand the pedagogy involved and necessary to teach differing cultures. The infrastructure remains Eurocentric in the fact that the predominant race and gender of education school graduates are white females (**Darling-Hammond**).

Additionally, prior knowledge is a key factor in learning. Research has indicated that anecdotal information used by teachers, textbooks and other teaching material has been predominantly Eurocentric in nature. Research by **Banks** has shown that this cultural gap can be seen in the standardized tests used to assess students. The multicultural education movement has focused on bringing to light the chasm between “mainstream” schools and the needs of our diverse population of students.

Education researchers and advocates such as **Kozol, Banks, Ladson Billings** and others have sought to explain the way culture affects curriculum and instruction and how they ultimately affect teaching and learning. **Ladson-Billings** points out that one of the first and most important things that needs to be acknowledged is that there are huge gaps in the achievement of most minority groups and the “White Majority” students. She points out that in the **2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress** results and the **Education Commission of the States 2005**, the gap between Black and Latina/o fourth graders and their White counterparts in reading scaled scores was more than 26 points. In fourth-grade mathematics the gap was more than 20 points. In eighth-grade reading, the gap was more than 23 points, and in eighth-grade mathematics the gap was more than 26 points. We can also see that these gaps persist over time. The facts don’t give us the insight as to why these gaps persist. Researchers postulate that the answers are found in the nature of curriculum design and instructional design. It is concluded that cultural differences are a factor in the disparity in learning.

Researchers such as **Darling Hammond** have stressed the importance of considering cultural factors when designing curriculum and instructional materials. Curriculum design takes in to consideration the policies and procedures associated with the day to day running and structure of our schools while instructional design is related to pedagogy and pedagogical content knowledge. The decisions related to each of these set the tone for the way teachers teach and therefore how students learn. Curriculum design plays a role in the structure of the school day as well as decisions related to building design, discipline policies, rules of behavior, classroom

etiquette and protocols and other factors that may have a completely different affect on different cultures.

Instructional design affects the content and delivery method of the material required by a state or district to be taught. When designing instructional materials, the learning styles, prior knowledge, cultural context, relevance, schema and other attributes of the students must be considered for the material to have a positive impact (**Apple, Beane**). According to researchers such as **Gay and Banks**, there has been an effort on the part of instructional designers to create material that is relatable to students of multiple cultures. The earliest advocates of multicultural education reform pointed out the extremely narrow focus of the educational materials up to that time (**Ruggs**). Textbooks not only excluded the accomplishments of various minority groups but also actually mischaracterized them. Evidence of stereotypes and negative images were portrayed in an abundance of ways (**Loewen**).

It is clear as we study the research published on our educational history, that cultural issues have had a profound affect on teaching and learning. A discussion of culture in education would be incomplete without a look at the corollary issue, socio-economics. They are inextricably linked since there is a direct link between race, culture and economics.

#### Socio-economic Contexts With Respect to Teaching and Learning

According to **Haycock and Peske, (2006)**, students in schools in low socio-economic districts are populated by high percentages of minority students. Statistics published by **The School District of Palm Beach County** reveal that the top ten schools at most risk of failure have two distinct factors. They are in the 90% range in minority students and they are the highest in free and reduced lunch recipients. This is a clear link in three areas. These three factors are poverty, minority students and low achievement.

**Darling-Hammond** has published a great deal of material that examines this unfortunate link. Schools in low socio-economic communities have some very disturbing characteristics. Some of these include a very high teacher attrition rate. They also have the highest percentage of teachers not rated as highly qualified (**Haycock & Peske**). The administrators from these low socio-economic schools are quoted as saying that they are in the unfortunate position of having to hire teachers that will work out of field and many of whom are at the very beginning of their teaching career therefore at the bottom of the ladder in terms of seniority and have the least choice in where they work. Conditions in these schools make it difficult to find teachers willing to teach there and even more difficult to get them to stay (**Ferguson**).

**Haycock and Peske** reveal that it is the students in these schools that are in the greatest need of high-quality teachers. They also point out that it is these schools that are most likely to have the least qualified and experienced staff. There is a perpetuation of the problems in these schools. Students are perpetually behind. Discouragement feeds discipline problems. There are reports of extremely poor climate fueled by a lack of confidence or collective efficacy on the staff. Teachers express disillusionment with their lack of support from administrators, mentors, parents and students. The lack of confidence in so many of the factors important to the education system is affecting the success of schools in socio-economically depressed communities (**Hoy, et al**). These negative attributes are clearly affecting teaching and learning.

### Politics With Respect to Teaching and Learning

Since the very beginning of our history as a nation, education has been a part of our culture. That history is replete with political movements that have sought to influence the course of education. According to **Kliebard**, there have been distinct groups seeking to use the education system as its vehicle to affect cultural change. They found the educational system as a way to further their own political agendas. Some of the groups include progressives, social meliorists,

mental disciplinarians, humanists, developmentalists, and social efficiency proponents. Each professed the belief that their approach to education was the best for the students, teachers and American society.

Political activism has most recently brought us the No Child Left Behind Act (**United States Department of Education**). Regardless of the position one takes on its worth, there is no doubt that it has had a profound effect on teaching and learning. Policies are centered around accountability and the educational world revolves around high-stakes testing. The term “teaching to the test” is used to describe how curriculum, instruction, teaching and learning have been affected by a political decision. Our political decisions ranging from local school boards and districts to Federal mandates have a tremendous impact on the classroom.

One of the best-known and respected educational theorists is **Freire**. He has not only written in terms of theory, but has actually worked in countries seeking to decolonize them. His work has inspired and informed reform movements in South America and Africa and his writings have influenced countless educators and leaders. His essential belief is that a critical, multicultural democracy needs to be the center of political reform and education is the key to informing and empowering the populous. **Freire** referred to conscientization, or a sense of history, praxis, and dialogue as essential to educational, political and social reform. **Freire** states that we need to be able to problematize, analyze and affect the socio-economic and political aspects of our lives and culture. To affect change, we need to place ourselves within our history. We need to be aware of the issues that affect the lives of our citizens. **Freire** would insist that politics and education are inextricably linked and are the lifeblood of a healthy democracy and culture.

#### In-depth Analysis of Political Context as Related to School Policies and Practices

The three contextual elements, cultural, socioeconomic, and political each in their own way has a profound affect on school policies and in turn, teaching and learning. They are all

related and their affects are intertwined. To separate them and isolate their affects is not fully possible. However, I would like to expand on one of these contexts and discuss its impact on school policies. The Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Board of Education* can be categorized in to the political context, however, because it has such wide sweeping consequences, it can easily be argued that its impact reaches across all contexts. I will discuss this landmark decision in the political context as a decision but its impact will be discussed in terms of its broad effect on education policies.

As stated earlier, politics has always been a part of education. Political interest groups have always used the education system as a vehicle to promote their agendas. The various groups generally believe their ideals are best for society. They understand that shaping thought is a powerful tool. Virtually every political system including socialist, democratic, theocratic or any other use their education system to promote their ideals (**Kliebard**).

The **Brown vs. Board** decision can be argued to have one of the most profound affects on education policies of any decision in history. It can be argued that the purity of the spirit of the law transcends mere politics or interest group think. It embodies the best in what a republic has to offer. It represents good people seeing an injustice and taking action to change it. This is the heart of **Freire's** beliefs that theory must be accompanied by action.

The emancipation of slaves occurred at the expense of many lives and much treasure. The spirit behind it was the sense by good people that an injustice existed and needed to be remedied. Unfortunately, the policies to bring freedom and equity to all men were only partially effective. The Jim Crow laws continued the spirit of racism and were intended to circumvent the changes decided by our Civil War. So the *Brown* decision embodied far more than the placement of children in a different geographic location for the school day. Its intensions were numerous and their consequences were as well.

The moving of minority children in to a different venue had pedagogical consequences. In the writings of **Banks, Gay et al**, it was pointed out that no one involved in the desegregation

process thought about the consequences pedagogically. The facilities, curriculum, instructional materials, teaching personnel and educational infrastructure were geared toward a European mindset. The greatest educational minds including **Dewey, Tyler, Bruner, Vygotsky** and others all point to the fact that the students' prior knowledge, experience, development, cultural sensibilities, language, home expectations and other personal factors must be considered when structuring curriculum and instruction.

It took decades before the chasm between the established educational institutions and the minority students would be addressed (**Ferguson**). Slowly, an analysis of textbooks, instructional styles, pedagogy and teacher training has built an awareness of how far we fall short of effectively educating minority students (**Loewen**). This is of particular importance in contemporary society. Census information illuminates the fact that minority students continue to grow as a percentage of our student population. Our need to accommodate our diverse population is an ever-increasing task. The ramifications of this political decision to integrate schools has rippled across the entire education system and hit our classrooms like a tsunami.

### Conclusion

In summary, political, socio-economic and cultural factors each have an individual impact on teaching and learning. The cumulative affect of these and other factors is what causes education to be such a complicated endeavor. As we resolve to change one area, the population changes. As our needs change, our teacher population changes. Mix in the fact that political interest groups struggle for influence in the development and delivery of the curriculum and what we have is a living and breathing organism with a dynamism that presents a world of challenges.