**It’s Not the Culture of Poverty, It’s the Poverty of Culture:**

**The Problem with Teacher Education**

**GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS**

*University of Wisconsin–Madison*

*The preparation of novice teachers is dominated by psychological notions almost to the exclusion*

*of other social science paradigms. The perspective that is least likely to be evident in*

*teacher preparation is that of anthropology. However, prospective and novice teachers regularly*

*and loosely use the word “culture” as an explanation for student patterns of behavior*

*they cannot explain.* ***This discussion focuses on the ways prospective and novice teachers construct culture simultaneously as both the problem and the answer to their struggles with students different from themselves.*** [culture of poverty, self-esteem, teacher education]

**Remember: Your own experiences are not the “Norm.”**

One reason that students {TEACHERS} use culture as a catchall phrase is that it is often a proxy

for race. **The elephant in the teacher education parlor (along with America’s parlor)**

**is race.** As novelist Toni Morrison (1992:63) has argued:

Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes,

and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body

politic than biological “race” ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious

and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during

the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering

of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded

in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever

before.

**Parents**

How many school personnel have attended functions in the Hmong

or African American community? Which teachers had attended a church service in

these communities? Which teachers had attended a New Year’s event in the Hmong

community? No one could say that they had done any of those things. They

explained how busy they were and how hard they worked—things that I certainly

would not deny. But no one acknowledged that they had *cultural* expectations that

the parents did not meet. **Instead they cloaked their cultural understandings as correct**

**behavior without acknowledging those of the students and their parents.**

**Smartness as a Cultural Practice in Schools**

Beth Hatt

**As early as preschool, African American children begin to be overrepresented**

**in ‘‘low ability’’ classes or classes for the ‘‘educable mentally retarded’’**

(McBay, 1992). Such assignment can be devastating to students’ self-concept,

leading to perceptions of themselves as ‘‘not smart,’’ resulting in many

African American students exhibiting low achievement, lack of motivation,

and a desire to drop out of school. As Joseph (1996) states, ‘‘[T]he failure

of many of these students is often attributed to their ability rather than the

school’s ability to provide quality education’’ (p. 344). Nieto and Bode

(2007) posit,

*Black and Latino students are chronically underrepresented in programs*

*for the gifted and talented; they are only half as likely as*

*White students to be placed in a class for the gifted though they*

*may be equally gifted. (p. 71)*

Sapon-Shevin (1987, 1994) addresses the ways giftedness is a social construct

that works to resegregate schools, wherein White students attend

gifted programming while students of color are tracked into ‘‘regular’’ educational

programming. Staiger (2004) goes one step beyond to claim

Whiteness and giftedness can be framed as inherently connected in schools.

Students, as a result of tracking, ‘‘begin to believe that their placement in

these groups is natural and a true reflection of whether they are ‘smart,’

‘average,’ or ‘dumb’’’ (Nieto & Bode, 2007, p. 119), connected not to education

but to the ‘‘natural order.’’ Students in top tracks are more likely to

attend college while students in lower tracks frequently drop out or become

unskilled workers (Nieto & Bode, 2007). **Tracking continues to be utilized in**

**schools despite the fact it is shown to be largely based on ideologies of race**

**and social class and does little to improve academic achievement, especially**

**that of students in lower tracks (Finn, 2009; Oakes, 2005).**

**Culture as Disability**

**RAY MCDERMOTT Stanford University and Institute for Research on Learning**

**HERVE VARENNE Teachers College Columbia University**

**Common sense allows that persons unable to handle a difficult problem can be labeled “disabled." Social analysis shows that being labeled often invites a public response that multiplies the difficulties facing the seemingly unable. Cultural analysis shows that disability refers most precisely to inadequate performances only on tasks that are arbitrarily circumscribed from daily life. Disabilities are less the property of persons than they are moments in a cultural focus. Everyone in any culture is subject to being labeled and disabled.**

**A disability may be a better display board for the weaknesses of a cultural system than it is an account of real persons.**

What we’re teaching teachers: An analysis of multicultural teacher

education coursework syllabi

**Paul C. Gorski\***

**George Mason University, 4400 University Avenue, MS 5D3, Fairfax, Virginia 22030, USA**

**5.1. Teaching the ‘‘Other’’**

Seven (15.6%) of the syllabidthose consistent with conservative

multiculturalismdreflected the ‘‘Teaching the ‘Other’’’ approach to

MTE. These syllabi framed multicultural education in ways that

supported hegemony and existing power relations. They did so by

(1) using othering language, (2) presenting non-dominant groups as

homogeneous, and (3) defining multicultural education through

a market-centric or capitalistic lens.

**5.1.1. Othering language**

Othering language defines a person or group as being outside the

realm of normalcy. Such language helps maintain hegemony,

attaching negative value to identities or ideologies that differ from

the hegemonic norm.

These six syllabi were replete with implicit and explicit othering

language. Several referred specifically to learning about ‘‘other

cultures.’’ For example, one syllabus explained that students would

develop skills and knowledge necessary for communication

with people from other cultures and co-cultures. Co-cultures

include African American, Asian American, Native American,

Latino/a, women, gays and lesbians, the disabled, and social

class.1

In fact, three of these syllabi referred to groups of color and other

disenfranchised peoples as ‘‘co-cultures’’ or ‘‘subgroups’’dexplicit

othering language. One noted that participants would ‘‘be aware of

and understand the various values, lifestyles, histories, and

contributions of various subgroups in our society.’’ Another referred

to the ‘‘communication styles of various American subgroups.’’

A somewhat less explicit way several of these syllabi othered

was by drawing lines of distinction between particular groups. Two

of the syllabi, for example, distinguished between ‘‘white’’ and

‘‘multicultural’’ by using the latter to mean ‘‘people of color.’’

According to one syllabus,

By the year 2010, multicultural groups [my italics] in the United

States will collectively out-number European Americans. The

changes in these demographics will bring about new challenges

and frustrations for institutions that serve a diverse population.

Similarly, the authors of many of these syllabi seemed to assume

that all of their students would be white. One syllabus from a large

urban university asked,

Can we effectively translate what we do as professionals to those

who may need our assistance, or will we fail at bridging the gap?