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ABSTRACT

Before engaging in a debate about the relationship between culture and education, it is necessary to recognize how teaching about folklore and folklife can serve as an agent for cultural conservation. The example of the prohibitions given Lakota children at a mission school two generations ago illustrates constraints imposed on the practice of ethnic folk traditions. Today, multicultural education is a form of cultural intervention in that teachers work to bring about cultural change. Unfortunately current multicultural education often reflects class, race, and sex biases. It would be fairer for American schools to include the study of traditional and ethnic folklife and to provide opportunities for tradition-bearers to share their knowledge with students. Ample research supports using folk culture to support academic instruction, as several examples illustrate. Bringing active tradition-bearers into schools demonstrates that many people with little formal education have a richness of knowledge and experience that are valuable resources for educators. (Contains 18 references.) (SLD)

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Folklife in Education and Cultural Conservation

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Folklife In Education and Cultural Conservation

Education plays a crucial role in cultural conservation. Through schooling, members of various societies transmit the cultural information they consider worth knowing to future generations. (Bulger, 1991) The anthropological theory of education explains that this flow of information is controlled by societal value systems that also filter out information not considered worth teaching. (Whisnant, 1990) At one time, teachers on a Lakota reservation purposefully used this filtration system inherent to the educational process to impose sanctions against an ethnic groups' efforts to preserve their culture. In **Lakota Woman**, Mary Crow Dog writes of cultural conservation and her grandfather's Jesuit mission school:

> I still have a poster I found among my grandfather's stuff, given to him by the missionaries to tack up on his wall. It reads:
>
> 1. Let Jesus save you.
> 2. Come out of your blanket, cut your hair, and dress like a white man.
> 3. Have a Christian family with one wife for life only.
> 4. Live in a house like your white brother. Work hard and wash often.
> 5. Learn the value of a hard-earned dollar. Do not waste your money on giveaways. Be punctual.
> 6. Believe that property and wealth are signs of divine approval.
> 7. Keep away from saloons and strong spirits.
> 8. Speak the language of your white brother. Send your children to school to do likewise.
> 9. Go to church often and regularly.

10. Do not go to Indian dances or to the medicine men. (Crow Dog, 1990)

Seventy years ago educators could overtly state that education must assimilate various ethnic groups into society. At the same time, others also could blatantly argue that education should keep various ethnic groups out of mainstream society. At present, the role of education in the tension between assimilation and ethnic identification may be discussed on a more sophisticated level, but how have educators regarded education's role in cultural conservation? A dichotomy similar to the tension between assimilation versus ethnic identification emerges in perspectives by writers and educational theorists: there is a sharp distinction between writers who argue that the classroom is not a place for students to learn their own culture and those who argue that culturally responsive teaching means that teachers should develop education's potential as an agent for cultural conservation.

Those who argue that education should not "teach children the customs and folkways of their ethnic or racial group" sometimes also argue that "the mission of our public schools should be to instill in our children our shared, not separate, cultures." (Ravitch, 1991) Diane Ravitch separates public from private cultural expressions, and she argues that the public schools need to teach the skills necessary for participation in society and to encourage artistic expression that typifies the American spirit solely as these expressions relate to public culture. This position is counterbalanced by the perspective that education

should provide students with resource both physical survival and cultural survival. (Pewewardy, 1992) Cornel Pewewardy argues that his school addresses American Indians' educational needs by placing education within its cultural context "rather than continuing the practice of placing culture into education." His perspective employs an anthropological model of education, which questions Ravitch's distinction between public and private culture. Although polarized, proponents of each side of the debate are primarily concerned with how educational institutions deal with one aspect of culture: folklore. At present, before new perspectives can help resolve the debate, it is essential to recognize how teaching about folklore and folklife serves as an agent for cultural conservation.

In the list of rules that teachers proscribed Mary Crow Dog's grandfather to follow, practicing ethnic folk traditions was specifically constrained. By attempting to destroy peoples' symbols of ethnicity, the teachers were exercising hegemonic control by attempting to force a group to conform to their own society's standards. This disdain for folk culture is all too typical an attitude of those who are in positions of power. A fear of folk culture continues to be evident within numerous authoritarian regimes as ethnic folk narratives, dances, songs, and speech are presently banned in various parts of the world. (Whisnant, 1989) Being able to maintain traditional culture is, therefore, a political act. While our government has few official sanctions that censor the transmission and expression of

traditional culture, American society has other pressures that threaten the conservation of various forms of folklife. One of these pressures is the lack of attention provided to traditional and ethnic culture within American educational institutions. When educators ignore folklife, they are not solely overlooking a primary aspect of their region's cultural identity; they are also supporting ideological pressures and social structures that make it challenging for people to maintain their culture.

David Whisnant's theory of cultural intervention provides perspectives on the role of folklife programming within education. In **All that is Native and Fine**, Whisnant examines the history of Appalachian settlement schools to explain cultural intervention as outsiders' efforts to affect social change either purposefully or unintentionally. (Whisnant, 1983) He analyzed how educators from New England entered Appalachian communities to develop settlement schools in response to their perceived understanding of rural students' educational needs. Whisnant argues that the programming designed to conserve Appalachian culture actually reflected wealthy New Englanders' romanticized conceptions of Anglo-American traditional culture rather than the existing folk culture maintained by the area's residents. His study demonstrates how easy it is to misrepresent culture within educational institutions and how existing cultural resources can be overlooked by well-meaning educators. A crucial problem, relevant to contemporary issues in multicultural education, was that the settlement schools'

approach to cultural intervention was embedded in an ideology which was classist, and in some situations, racist.

Multicultural education is cultural intervention, as is evinced in the Florida Department of Education's definition of multicultural education:

> Multicultural education is a process that prepares students to live, learn, communicate, and work to achieve common goals in a culturally diverse world by fostering understanding, appreciation and respect for people of other ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, language and cultural backgrounds.
>
> (Multicultural Education Review Task Force, 1993)

If one accepts that many teachers subscribing to these goals are regarded as outsiders by members of the immediate communities within which their schools are located, then multicultural education clearly is a program for cultural intervention as conceptualized by Whisnant: outsiders work within a community to bring about cultural change. As were the teachers in Appalachian settlement schools, contemporary multicultural educators are influenced by their own cultural experiences and worldviews.

Whisnant's research was concerned with the motives of the original coordinators of the settlement schools just as contemporary critics are concerned with what current multiculturalism supports: the "existing conceptions and structures of knowledge, power, and racism." (Vincent, 1992) This schism between how various multicultural theorists regard cultural intervention and how the people of the community regard their culture becomes evident when one considers the conservation of culture and school curricula. The existing paradigm of educational

theories simply does not support the conservation of traditional and ethnic culture. Furthermore education's potential for cultural conservation remains little-explored, although supporting the preservation of cultural expression is either an underlying theme or a parenthetical footnote within numerous theories of multicultural education. James Banks, for example, argues that multicultural education supports pluralism, as he states that the movement affirms the rights of people to maintain their culture. (Banks, 1987) Christine Sleeters' concept of social reconstructionist multicultural education also supports the goal of using educational resources for cultural conservation as interest in historic preservation and cultural conservation are often vital social concerns held by many residents of a community. (Sleeter, 1992)

On the other hand, supporting academic and corporate culture is an overt goal for educators. Mathematics, science, and business teachers transmit knowledge and practices that provide the basis for conserving, developing, and perpetuating the culture of mathematicians, scientists, and business people. Academic culture is also preserved through instruction in the social sciences and humanities, and arguments for maintaining our nation's cultural heritage are frequently used to maintain support for the fine and liberal arts. American schools develop and coordinate programs designed to perpetuate academic culture, and few would argue that schools should not use their potential to preserve our nation's literary, artistic, and intellectual heritage.

Educators' lack of support for traditional and ethnic cultural intervention programs supports the contention that current multicultural education reflects classist, racist, and sexist biases. The bias is obvious as the study of folklife and folk arts is not a part of the school curricula. Fiddle tunes, quilts, jubilee gospel songs, shotgun houses, klezmer music, and other traditional expressions are virtually invisible within educational programs of instruction. If they are included, they are frequently presented only in extracurricular activities and not studied within orthodox classroom instruction.

It would be fairer for American schools' "cultural enrichment programs" to include the study of traditional and ethnic folklife and opportunities for tradition-bearers to share their knowledge with students. To exclude traditional culture from academic study limits students' understanding of cultural expression and devalues community history and local culture. Furthermore, the perspective that education should not preserve folk culture is ethnocentric as it simply is not shared by all societies. Various nationalities and ethnic groups develop and implement programs for the express purpose of conserving their traditional culture here and abroad.

There is ample research on the value of using folk culture to support academic instruction. In particular, the Foxfire project in Rabun Gap, Georgia has spawned entire theories and methods for educational reform. (Wiggington, 1985) Current research shows that folklife can be a valuable resource for teachers, but teachers can also become valuable resources for the bearers of tradition who

maintain their folk culture. Studies of various projects show the extent to which educators' attention to folk culture supports a community's interest in cultural conservation. When developed by folklorists, these projects are termed "folklife in education" programs, and they frequently include a folklorist or anthropologist working in-residence to bring traditions and tradition-bearers into the classroom. (Nusz, 1991) The following excerpts from ethnographic studies of folklife in education projects are examples of the potential for using folklife within programs of cultural intervention and cultural conservation. These examples demonstrate how researching the vital traditions maintained within an area and presenting the traditional arts back to the community's children can help people maintain their history and culture.

A remarkable success story is evident in Louisiana. Cajun fiddler, Dewey Balfa spent the last thirty years of his life working to conserve Cajun music, dance, and oral history throughout his home state. Prior to his work in Louisiana, there is strong evidence to suggest that Cajun music and culture was regarded as an out-moded source of embarrassment for many Louisiana Acadians. In interviews with Frank Proschan and Ralph Rinzler, Balfa was asked about young people's feelings about traditional Cajun music. His reflections show the dramatic effects that cultural intervention programs had on Cajun culture:

> DEWEY BALFA From the time that we went to the first festival, people thought it was more or less an occasion to bring the Cajuns up to be laughed at. . . . I can remember people

saying , "Why are those boys going up there? Nobody wants to listen to that chenka-chenk music!"

And I was so moved, performing for an audience of about 17,000 people that year [1964 Newport Folk Festival], and almost getting a standing ovation. It gives you a different feeling. I wanted to do something about it and I didn't know what to do.

Balfa explains that performing in National festivals outside of his home community helped many people appreciate his music. He became an advocate for the conservation of Cajun culture and eventually was able to work in-residence in Louisiana's schools under a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts:

DEWEY BALFA I did work with the Southern Folk Culture Revival Project. . . They were very moved by the way I felt, the way I tried to explain the existing of the Acadians here in Louisiana and that I was afraid that the music and the culture were eventually just going to fade away. I said I would have very much liked to have been able to bring the music and the story of the Acadians to the young people in school.

They proposed a small grant for me to start doing this here in Louisiana. . . I must say it was very well-spent time and money. It was just amazing to see the faculty and student response.

Balfa explained that the school presentations helped to revive young people's interest in Cajun culture. (Wilson and Udall, 1982) Due in part to Balfa's work, traditional Cajun music is currently the music of choice among teenagers in numerous Southern Louisiana communities.

For six years, I had the opportunity to develop folklife in education programs in Jacksonville, Florida. I completed field research with tradition-bearers whom I brought to classrooms to share their arts with elementary students. Ethnographic interviews reveal that the folklife in education programming had some of the

same effects to which Dewey Balfa alluded. Cultural expressions that the tradition-bearers felt were devalued within their own communities were showcased in the classroom presentations, and the tradition-bearers appreciated the opportunity to share their history and culture with young people. All of the folk artists and musicians whom I interviewed perceived that the school presentations were not only helping to preserve their culture but the sessions also encouraged outsiders' appreciation of their traditions.

L. V. Starling and her group 'The Versiteers' have performed traditional African-American a cappella gospel music for hundreds of students in Jacksonville. In her presentations she has expressed concern that the a cappella style of quartet singing is a threatened tradition within African-American communities, and she encourages school children to maintain the art. As a result of the school presentations, she was awarded an apprenticeship through the Bureau of Florida Folklife Programs, and she worked with a younger gospel group to help them learn this particular style. In an interview, she explained that the school and festival presentations have encouraged other gospel groups in the city to include a cappella selections in some of their programs and that she is less concerned that the tradition could be lost. (Starling, 1992)

Richard Seaman is a fiddler who plays traditional square dance music. He has special status as one of the few old-time fiddlers in Florida who learned his art by attending home square dances eighty years ago in Florida. His repertory of tunes, stories, and

personal recollections is a time capsule for studying the social history of rural Florida. He had stopped playing forty years ago after the breakup of his family's string band, and he had not touched his fiddle for thirty years until contacted by a local bluegrass musician. I was introduced to Seaman seven years ago and was able to bring him to numerous schools to play for school students. It became evident that the only venues for him to play were in schools and local events that folklorists coordinated, and he explained that these opportunities to play for various audiences are what keeps him playing. (Seaman, 1991) Whether or not students have been inspired to learn old-time fiddling after seeing Seaman's presentations is an open question. The school presentations, however, have provided an incentive for him and other tradition-bearers to preserve their arts within their own lives.

One theme evident in ethnographic research with the participants in the folklife in education programs is that members of their family and community often do not understand the attention that educators are providing their arts. Their family members and peers may scarcely consider the traditions as art and the tradition-bearers as artists with unique talents to offer students. Yasuko Dawson completes demonstrations of Japanese origami in schools, and I asked her if she has told other members of the city's small Japanese community about her demonstrations of the art of folding paper:

> I tell everybody. [Laughs] I'm proud of it. So they say, 'Wow, I wish I could get into it.'

GREGORY HANSEN How about your mother in Japan? What does she think about you coming into the schools?

YASUKO DAWSON Oh, she starts laughing. [Laughs] 'Yeah, what are you doing? This is just play stuff.' They don't believe it: 'in a school?' [Dawson, 1992]

Her mother's sentiments are echoed in an excerpt from an interview with Prema Kumar, an Asian Indian woman who has demonstrated the folk art of rice flour painting, or **kolam**, in Jacksonville's schools. She also explained her family's reaction to her in-class demonstrations:

> One thing is, it's something very, very common back home, and the fact that so much importance is being given to something that's a day-to-day occurrence is a source of amusement. (Kumar, 1992)

She notes, however, that her parents in India regard her demonstrations as worthwhile:

> But they're very, very happy that this is creating an interest and people are curious to know about us. They seem to have a lot of pride about that.

Another common theme is evident in this interview selection. All of the tradition-bearers explained that they knew the were not simply demonstrating their arts: instead they were using their demonstrations and performances to teach about their history and culture. In many respects, the distinction between myself as an outside interventionist and the tradition-bearers as a community resource person for the program became blurry. Each of the participants became teachers, using their own culture to help students understand cultural diversity:

Richard Seaman discusses his school presentations:

> It's something of the past being brought back. The way of life in this country many years ago is being renewed--brought back to the public where they can see it. . . . If a child is paying attention to what [the performance] is about, he can't help but wonder [about life in the community].

Prema Kumar notes students' reactions to her folk art demonstrations:

> It's something different that they find--
> Some of the kids might start by making fun of it, but still their curiosity is piqued. That's a step in the right direction.

L. V. Starling eloquently explains that presenting African-American gospel music provides a vibrant way to teach black history:

> The music is a beautiful way, especially black history--especially black history--because music and singing has been such a part of the black heritage. And I just don't believe that they would have been able to survive the things they had to endure had they not had a song to sing. . . I would like them to learn--the black children especially--I would like them to learn where they came from. And if they [know] where their forefather came from and now they came along, it will help them deal with the problems of today.

Bringing active tradition-bearers into schools demonstrates that many people with little formal education have a richness of knowledge and experience that comprises a valuable resource for educators. By opening new venues for people who are not trained educators but have a wealth of knowledge to share with students, folklife in education programs can be used to counteract the classism, sexism, and racism inherent within the structure of American education. In interviews with the folklife in education participants, none of the tradition-bearers imagined that they

would ever have had the opportunity to teach students about their arts within a school. Through their experiences, many of them explained that they came to appreciate the potential for using the classroom to provide opportunities to preserve their arts.

Folklorists across the country have documented numerous examples of programs that use the presentation of traditional and ethnic culture as agents for cultural conservation. By documenting, studying, presenting, and interpreting a people's cultural history using members of the community themselves, interventionists not only provide valuable educational experiences and address bias within educational structures; they also create opportunities for the indigenous educators to preserve their traditions. The tradition-bearers' perspectives suggest that they support Pewewardy's contention that educational systems and curricula must be contextualized as a part of culture. This anthropological model of education breaks with industrial or informational theories by emphasizing the vital role that education plays in the transmission of culture. (Bulger, 1991) The theorists who developed this model remind us that education is not merely knowledge imparted to youth; rather the educational experience is a program for cultural intervention.

After examining how folklife in education programs can serve as agents of cultural conservation, consider again the dichotomy mentioned previously: whether or not education should provide various communities the opportunity to preserve their traditional culture through classroom instruction. It is not solely a

contemporary concern as educationists from N. F. S. Grundvtig and Rachel Dubois to contemporary multicultural theorists have argued for culturally relevant teaching that connects the school to the community. What is new in the dialogue is that theories and models for using community history and culture are being developed by folklorists, and theorists are realizing that formal education is a vehicle for the transmission of culture. Folklorists' approaches involve researching the vital traditional and ethnic cultural expressions maintained by various groups of people, developing curricula from this research, and presenting the findings back to students. As folklorists study diverse cultural expressions and present the tradition-bearers in the schools, they become inherent advocates for cultural pluralism as the school presentations support the rights of people to retain their own cultural identity. Cultural conservation, thus, is an implicit aspect of folklife in education programs, and these programs suggest that without the conservation of various people's cultures, multicultural education would become an oxymoron. The lack of attention given to education's potential for cultural conservation is a curious omission within current multicultural theories. At present the issue perhaps is not "What role should education play in cultural conservation?" Instead it may need to be: "What role does education play in cultural conservation?" Educators' understanding of education as cultural intervention in the 1990s hopefully does not fully reflect the ideas of the turn of the century:

I still have a poster I found among my grandfather's stuff, given to him by the missionaries to tack up on his wall. It reads:

> Come out of your blanket, cut your hair, and dress like a white man.
>
> Live in a house like your white brother. Work hard and wash often.
>
> Learn the value of a hard-earned dollar. Do not waste your money on giveaways.
>
> Believe that property and wealth are signs of divine approval.
>
> Speak the language of your white brother. Send your children to school to do likewise.
>
> Do not go to Indian dances or to the medicine men.
>
> (Crow Dog, 1990)

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