

Momma Said [Education'II] Knock You Out

Kal Alston

Syracuse University

As Shelton poses in the introduction to her article, there has been significant criticism of the “no excuses” brand of schooling, including from many of our esteemed PES colleagues. Shelton positions her response to those critics from an alternative space, a more sociologically-engaged one, but she uses language and strategies from a variety of methodological positions. Most intriguingly for me, she directly quotes students and parents speaking about their understanding of these schools’ environments and the expectations and aspirations that are pinned on the school’s and teachers’ reliance on structure. This response asks upon what grounds we ought to rest our support and/or criticism of this system of schooling for children whose life chances are tightly bound to educational route they take into the structures of power.

My response takes up three points. First, I think the article misreads Lisa Delpit’s challenge to this sort of schooling experience (or perhaps so condenses her account of it due to space that it is flattened). Second, I think the ways in which these schools replicate a carceral model of training should not be underestimated, which Shelton’s article seems to do. The third point derives primarily from an event – and responses to it – that occurred after Shelton’s article was submitted for the 2016 conference. In January 2016, *The New York Times* released a video of a teacher berating a first grader for the way she dealt with a math problem. That incident sparked several articles, published in the *Times*, about a parental change of heart regarding the treatment of their children in the Success Academy system.

When I – and many other teachers of social foundations – started to use either Delpit’s article, “The Silenced Dialogue,” which appeared in *Harvard Educational Review*,¹ or the related book to which Shelton refers, *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, I had many doubts. I often read her as saying that Black children or children from disadvantaged backgrounds were incapable of responding productively to creative, progressive methods of instruction. I also was concerned about my students, who often read the work as affirming that these kids were “naturally” (because of the conditions of birth) different in kind from their own children or the children they knew. And that seeming affirmation was challenging — either because it was easy to read as racially essentialist or culturally deterministic — in ways that were discomfiting to progressives or feminists or anti-racist pedagogues. I had an opportunity to go back to that work last year and see more clearly how nuanced Delpit’s arguments were — both about power and about whose knowledge she as a researcher and writer was driven to represent. Hence, I wrote:

Delpit’s critics often misread her challenges to the process-based literacy program as her promotion of rote and drill-based methods. However, she writes:

“I do not advocate a simplistic ‘basic skills’ approach for children outside of the culture of power. It would be (and has been) tragic to operate as if these children were incapable of critical and higher-order thinking and reasoning. . . . [This means] ensuring that each classroom incorporate strategies appropriate for all the children in its confines.”²

She advocates for contextual and “real-audience” features of the method and rejects the idea that these approaches to teaching literacy are automatically opposed. However, the codes affiliated with the culture of power in the classroom are differentially available to students, advantaging those whose family life and culture operate on the same codes. For students without that background, Delpit states affirmatively that those codes need to be made explicit — not because they are *better*, but because they form the operating system on which performance and success will be judged.³

In “no excuses” schools, the teachers adopt the totalizing “system” of the school in which they are teaching. This is the structural apparatus that many parents, not unreasonably, find a viable alternative to the chaotic and merely bureaucratic schools that often occupy their neighborhoods. The explicit demand of high standards, rules of conduct, and time management seem to line up with Delpit’s call for clear explication of the rules of the culture of power. However, through all the essays in her book, she also emphatically calls for the teachers to be multi-lingual — whether *literally* in spoken and written language or *figuratively*. Delpit demands respect for those teachers whose approach may not be seen as progressive, but is always based in the context of the cultural *lingua franca* of particular communities of origin and those outside communities that students and their parents want them to access. The systemization of teaching in no excuses schools seems to be responding to a very limited set of features of the environment. So here Shelton misses an opportunity to leverage the complexities of Delpit’s work to answer back fruitfully to Ben-Porath and Levinson.

Shelton clarifies for her readers the differences between no excuses schools and zero tolerance policies; the latter are, for her, designed to move students out of school. I agree with her in the main. However, the no excuses schools such as Success Academy have been accused of creating lists of children each year “not to be invited back,” those who cannot conform to either an academic or behavioral standard. Both no excuses and zero tolerance share a carceral regime’s perspective on the one who won’t be like the others. The motives may differ in different locales; in my City school district, the enforcement of district zero tolerance policy varied with the particularity of funding formulas from the state tied to stemming violence in specific buildings. When the expulsions or violence reports rose to a certain level, the teachers simply stopped reporting assaults or classroom violence. The work with families, which teachers and schools knew needed to be done, was ignored in the hope that a problem child would do something to get moved to “alternative placement,” which in our city is the first step toward dropping out or moving directly into the criminal (in)justice system. (I do want to shout out to some incredible folks who have spent their careers in alternative sites intervening in that school to prison pipeline). In the no excuses schools, teachers work with legal and administrative staff to create “Got to Go” lists, and help parents to “see” that their child “does not fit.”⁴ In some cases, what the schools describe as helping parents to seek the right environment for their child (through repeated suspensions or other methods), which leads to withdrawal of a student, is described internally as a “Big Win.” There is nothing new in these practices other than the branding.

Shelton seems to agree that the rigidity of the environment in no excuses schools may not produce students who are inclined to be full participants in a system that

calls for more individual agency. But she does not fully describe how what she sees as virtues of these schools can be leveraged to create civic actors (no less innovators/entrepreneurs) of our children. Furthermore, I am not convinced that we do a good job with middle- and upper-class children by giving them endless choices (that are often inconsequential) and a belief in their own efficacy (that is often incomplete).

In January of this year, *The New York Times* published an article about an incident that had happened a year earlier and had been surreptitiously videotaped by a student teacher. When a first grade teacher was handed a math solution by a student that was not in the form expected, she berated the student and sent her to the “calm-down chair,” ripped up her paper, and solicited the other students to do it “right.” Through the entire video, what struck me — as the daughter of a first grade teacher — was the angry tone with which she addresses not only the little girl who made the mistake, but also the whole class, seemingly inviting them to scorn the little girl as she had made the teacher so exasperated. The mother of the girl was eventually shown the video (once the school was made aware of its existence); the teacher apologized to her. The school asked her to defend the school and the teacher to the *Times*. The mother seems to have initially shared the perspective of the mother quoted by Shelton; she shared that over time her daughter had started to come home saying that she wasn’t as smart as the other children, and the mom did not know where this feeling was coming from until she saw the tape. After she moved to another school, she told her mom that she had been *afraid to ask questions in class*, as she anticipated punishment.⁵

The practices surrounding the learning of the rules of the culture of power have to be embedded in a schooling environment that also encourages agency and deliberation and that leaves enough space for creativity and curiosity. There are no excuses for depriving any children of those opportunities at the heart of the education project.

1. Lisa D. Delpit, “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children,” *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3: 280-298.

2. Lisa D. Delpit, *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: New Press, 2006), 30.

3. Kal Alston, “Lisa Delpit: Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom (1995),” in *Popular Educational Classics*, ed. Joseph L. DeVitis, (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

4. See, for example, Kate Taylor, “At a Success Academy Charter School, Singling Out Pupils Who Have ‘Got to Go,’” *New York Times*, October 29 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/30/nyregion/at-a-success-academy-charter-school-singling-out-pupils-who-have-got-to-go.html>.

5. See Kate Taylor, “Mother of Girl Berated in Video Assails Success Academy’s Response,” *New York Times*, February 25 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/26/nyregion/mother-of-girl-berated-in-vid-eo-assails-success-academys-response.html>.