A Critical Conversation: Remembering Culture in the Teaching of the Whole Child
By Ereka R. Williams

The author addresses the relationship between culture, schooling, and education of the whole child. She uses historical scholarship from the field of anthropology to unpack the significance of having those involved with the day-to-day operations of schools and classrooms critically examine their culture, the culture of the organization in which they work, and the institutional culture of the profession in the education of the whole child in the twenty-first century.

"Culture, then, consists of standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it and standards for deciding how to go about doing it."
(Goodenough, 1981)

To address educating the whole child, it is essential to discuss the role that culture plays in that process. The culture of the child is where some would start; however, the culture of the systems children inherit and are asked to learn within matter as much, if not more. To attempt this discussion otherwise would be akin to talking about an egg yolk in the absence of talking about the egg itself: it is simply incomplete. A review of historical scholarship from the fields of anthropology and education offers a clear and guiding light into why those responsible for leading classrooms and schools must come back to culture and examine the 'what' and 'how' of beliefs and practices if the goal is truly to reach the whole child.

What is Culture?

Nearly 35 years ago, in the now classic book, *Culture, Language and Society* (1981), anthropologist Ward Goodenough explored the systems that facilitate each. From his perspective, culture is fluid and is a product of one's experiences. Culture is not something that rests outside of a person—an "out there" phenomenon—but rather is internal. It operates at the core of "recipes, routines, values, and beliefs" (Goodenough, p. 90) of an individual. According to the Goodenough model of culture, all objects, practices, persons, and events in an individual's conceptual framework have some kind of symbolic meaning. Individuals do not arbitrarily assign positive or negative feelings to objects or occurrences; such feelings are learned. As such, culture is a product of human learning.

When one explores the intersection of culture and schools from the Goodenough (1981) model, some questions naturally evolve:
+ What are the "recipes, routines, values, and beliefs" of schools?

♦   What symbolic meanings have been attached to the practices and persons of schools?

♦   Are the beliefs that are printed in the school's vision or mission statement on the wall of the reception area alive and breathing daily in the hallways, classrooms, and cafeteria of the school?

♦   Do the daily interactions between leaders, learners, families, teachers, custodians, and so forth mirror those stated beliefs?

These questions are intentionally thought-provoking and the answers that surface in a school speak volumes about whether the whole child is at the center of the beliefs and practices of a school's personnel.

Beliefs in Action

Actions are the manifestation of beliefs. To understand the practices of an individual or a group of individuals is to understand first what it is he, she, or they believe. The curricula (written and unwritten) and the activities designed to support the curricula all speak to the belief systems of administrators, faculty, and staff. For example, teachers who pride one philosophical orientation to learning and teach primarily toward that orientation (regardless of various learning preferences of the students) put forth the belief that there is a "right" way of learning. From the Goodenough (1981) model, the standards for what is, what can be, and how it should be done (or culture) of this school have clearly been established. However, is it a culture for supporting the whole child?

Values and symbols are transmitted in schools daily through practices and protocols. School practices that limit physical education, out-of-class experiences, or recess in the effort to increase seated academic-learning time communicate a set of values. Classrooms that display little if any student work products also communicate a set of values or beliefs. Likewise, school personnel who continue to hold parent conferences and ceremonies primarily during the work day as opposed to nontraditional times that are a better fit for the work schedules of families are clearly communicating a definitive culture for schooling. These practices articulate a loud and clear cultural message that emphasize habitual procedures that, in too many cases, are antithetical to what educators know is sound for human growth and development. They are practices that all too often are also not conducive to building collaborative, reciprocal relationships between the families of the twenty-first century and school personnel. So, what happens when schooling culture and community culture do not align? What happens when families struggle to fit into the culture of the school that their children must attend? Who ultimately holds the responsibility for deciding what is and what will be best for the child?

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The Responsibility to Change

School leaders have such a moral obligation to assist in the growth and development of children and adults that an increased awareness of self is extremely important...[They] must foster a genuine feeling of identification with others...[and] recognize that healthy school environments promote collaboration, cooperation, and interdependence. (Combs et al., 1999, p. 115).

Individuals working for cultural change in schools must keep students—and specifically the whole child—at the forefront of all their interactions in the learning environment. Although saying this would seem to be unnecessary, the opposite is true. In the present and ever-increasingly dominant school-accountability phase of American education, educators face mandates that have, unfortunately, reduced students to state test proficiency levels, numbers on a scale, *proficient* versus *nonproficient*, and *exceptional* versus *average*. All too often, educators do not discuss students using *growth* and *travel* metaphors but instead use *machine* metaphors and *raw materials* analogies. Rather than facilitating conversations about teaching that address the engaging, dynamic, interactional enterprise that it truly is or could be at its best, educators often discuss teaching in terms of efficiency and bottom-lines, seemingly preferring to address product over process. For example, facilitating dialogue on a curricular planning day among a group of middle-school literacy teachers about ways to interject student voice and choice into the literacy objectives and requirements for the next quarter and highlighting best practices from the latest issue of a reputable practitioner journal with some modeling by a fellow teacher-leader creates a focus on student culture, engagement, and interaction in the classroom. However, to spend that planning day looking at quarterly benchmark data in isolation, reconstituting remedial groups based on testing-day data alone, and focusing on how these data sets will factor into teacher evaluation at the end of the year is to limit the nature of the learning environment. Such a narrow focus reduces the experience to boxes on a checklist void of connection to learners, their culture, and the wide range of possibilities in the learning environment.

> " *To affect school culture in a way that is toward the ultimate benefit of the whole child, educators must examine their language as well as their practices.* "

To affect school culture in a way that is toward the ultimate benefit of the whole child, educators must examine their language as well as their practices. If consonance between whole-child practices, school culture, families, faculty, and leaders is possible, it will only come after leaders and other standard- or culture-bearers address issues related to their self-perceptions as leaders of and participants in the current environment. Once these dispositions are identified and addressed, the work toward promoting an atmosphere of collegiality for and among themselves, students, and the community can begin in earnest. Leaders and other participants in the school environment must be clear about the dispositions before they can begin to align to whole-child-oriented practices. Therefore, it is essential that leaders in the school environment and classroom consistently assess the following questions:

  ◆ What do my body language and facial expressions communicate to colleagues, families, and learners?

+   Does my tone indicate concern? Sincerity?

+   As a leader, am I modeling respect for all who engage in this environment?

+   Do my communication practices (e-mail, letters home to families, updates on operations) operate from a place of "we" and "us," or do they convey a dictatorial approach?

+   Are the stakeholders invited to build the environment or am I informing stakeholders of what has been predetermined?.

+   How do I demonstrate my commitment to each child's growth and his or her right to an education?

As culture bearers in the learning environment, educators must remember to conduct these self-checks intermittently to move away earnestly from tendencies toward authoritarian, isolated, disconnected roles in the learning community.

The classic scholarship of the authors referenced here raises significant issues related to what those who are concerned about the whole child should consider. Goodenough's classic model (1981) simply serves as a reminder or indicator as to how complex and daunting a task it is to address culture. Nevertheless, no matter how complex or deeply embedded a given culture may appear, the exercise of critical reflection, examination, and dialogue must occur in these spaces in which children are expected to learn and grow. This examination is a task worth the effort if building schools and environments that promote and sustain the whole child is the objective. Ignoring the culture of schools and schooling is akin to ignoring the very foundation most essential as professionals and global citizens, *wholly* committed to children and their futures.

References

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Goodenough, W. (1981). *Culture, language, and society.* Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin Cummings.