

Assumptions About Families



When I enter the staff room at my school, I often hear teachers discussing the families of our students. Located in a high-poverty area of a medium-sized city, my school serves students from diverse backgrounds. Assumptions are often made, and blame is often placed on parents.

"These kids need structure; they don't have any at home."

"Cedrick's mother didn't show up for his parent conference. That's half the kid's problem right there."

"No wonder these kids can't read—look at this note from Keisha's mother. What do you expect when the mother can't spell?"

"The mothers around here are just kids themselves; it's kids raising kids."

"I don't think Jordan has ever seen a book."

When I hear these comments, I often remind my colleagues that we don't really know much about most of our students' families and our suburban lives are very different from theirs. I explain that we may not understand the complexities of their lives.

Yet even as I challenge these assumptions, in my colleagues' voices I can hear echoes of my own. Several years ago I left a position in a white,

middle-class suburb to teach at a large urban elementary school that served a diverse student body. I entered a classroom that was familiar and yet very different. I couldn't help but compare my experiences with my new urban students to those with my more familiar suburban students. In contrast, many of my new students seemed more active, more frustrated, and less successful. The task of trying to help 29 students, several of whom displayed great energy and strong emotions but limited skills and an apparent lack of focus, was frustrating and initially overwhelming. The easy explanation was that the children's parents were to blame for the problems I was having in the classroom.

However, as the years went by, my motto became "You can't judge anyone until you've walked in their shoes." I did not realize that I, too, still harbored many assumptions about the families of my students. When I began a teacher research study that examined my students' and their parents' concepts about reading, I came face-to-face with my assumptions. I had to acknowledge that I too was subject to socially accepted ways of thinking and that commonly accepted assumptions about people living in poverty had permeated my own thoughts. Through professional readings, educational conferences, and sometimes very painful conversations with others, I have come to realize that my assumptions are not just the result of flaws in my individual psyche; they reveal commonly accepted yet seriously flawed ways of viewing the world.

Interestingly, it was the parents of my students and some very wonderful staff members who helped me understand the productive and positive role I could play in the classroom. The staff members who assisted me were neither teachers nor administrators; they were paraprofessionals, cafeteria assistants, and members of the custodial staff who lived in our school community. These individuals were willing to spend time with me helping me begin to understand the lives of my students and their families. Despite my struggles as a young teacher, both staff members and parents recognized that I cared deeply about my students; they supported my efforts to help children, offered advice and encouragement, and requested me as the teacher for their children.

In this section, I will explore assumptions that are often made about diverse families and reading. First, in Chapter 1, I will consider the ways my students and their family members are often portrayed in our society. Then I will explore the role power plays in the daily lives

of my students and their family members and suggest a theoretical framework for understanding power. In Chapter 2, I will examine commonsense assumptions about reading and explore the roles these assumptions play in my students' lives.

Portrayals of My Students and Their Families

The media have contributed to associating a particular set of beliefs with poor African American and Hispanic people. Television images of people of color are often mug shots. Newspapers report on African American and Hispanic men and women who are allegedly associated with various crimes. Our weekday talk shows feature people of color, often from low-income communities, who are manipulated and cajoled by some talk show hosts to reveal the most sordid details of their lives. When successful African American and Hispanic people are glamorized by the media, they are generally sports heroes or music idols. Too often the sensationalized reports that feature these individuals focus on them as irresponsible, moody, unprofessional, drug addicted, or immoral.

Moreover, our society has a particularly ugly history of racism dating back to the mass capture and confinement of African people and the subjugation and conquest of our Native American populations. Faced with the unethical and inhuman nature of these acts, white colonists were left with the need to justify their actions by dehumanizing the people who were the subjects of their racist attacks. Thus, African American, Native American, and Hispanic peoples have been positioned and are commonly viewed as being inferior and less deserving (Gans 1995). Scientific explanations were created to prove the inferiority of the darker races, and intelligence tests were developed to confirm this socially constructed belief (Gould 1981).

Over the past two hundred years these themes have acted on our psyches; literature, theater, film, newspaper, advertising, and television have constructed almost indelible images of people of color as stupid, ignorant, foolish, criminal, and inferior (Nieto 1999). Despite the growing number of positive depictions of people of color in our media, those initial images remain with us and continue to infect our perceptions about non-white people. Similar depictions transcend race, claiming additional victims by virtue of people's physical stature, ableness, language, dialect, religion, sexual orientation, and gender.

While current depictions of deficit are less blatant, these perceptions continue to proliferate. Statements such as "His mother just doesn't care," "That family has always been trouble," and "I'd bet her mother doesn't know how to read" are thinly cloaked manifestations of these beliefs. These images allow us to blame the difficulties of African American and Hispanic children on families while society, schools, and teachers are absolved of blame for the miseducation of millions of children.

Attributing the difficulties of lower socioeconomic students to their families is not unique to American schools. Peter Freebody, Tim Forrest, and Stephanie Gunn (2001) describe the assumptions made by Australian educators about lower-class families. Freebody and his colleagues note four ways in which educators characterize the neglect that is assumed to accompany the experiences of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. First, Australian educators often maintain that stresses associated with lower-class life contribute to the parents' inability to attend to their children's academic needs. Second, they also believe that there is an "intergenerational cycle" that links children's poor literacy performance with the attitudes of the parents about literacy. Third, lower-class parents are assumed to possess deficient parenting skills. Finally, educators cite material and cultural differences to account for the disadvantages lower-class children face. Freebody and his colleagues suggest that these assumptions about poor families need to be carefully examined by Australian educators.

Likewise, Eve Gregory and Ann Williams examine the myths "concerning the teaching and learning of reading in urban multicultural areas" (Gregory and Williams 2000, p. xvi) based on their research in Spitalfield, England. These myths include the equating of economic poverty with poor literacy skills and early reading success with a particular type of middle-class parenting. In addition, Gregory and Williams challenge the assumptions that reading difficulties can be attributed to a mismatch between home and school language and learning styles or that one particular teaching method is superior to others. Gregory and Williams explain that these myths about reading are not unique to the British educational system and are equally relevant to American educators.

Thus the assumptions that are made about the relationships among reading, poverty, and multiculturalism not only transcend North America but also extend beyond our national borders.

Defining the Good Parent

In my earlier book *Reading Families: The Literate Lives of Urban Children* (Compton-Lilly 2003), I included the following editorial, which was printed in my local paper. It was written by a teacher in my school district who was incensed that parents had been invited by our school district to annually evaluate their children's teachers. She writes the following:

I have a problem being evaluated by parents who are not accepting their responsibilities. This year there was about 80 percent involvement at fall conferences, 25 percent involvement at open house. Fifteen percent of the class was absent 35–95 days; 10 percent were tardy upward of 37 times; 60 percent of the parents came in for spring conferences (mandatory); 20 percent of students didn't come the last day of school to get their report card or summer work packet. (As quoted in Compton-Lilly 2003, p. 2)

Based on generally accepted norms of parental involvement, this teacher has concluded that the parents of her students do not care about their children's schooling. She assumes that attending parent conferences, getting children to school on time, and attending open houses are evidence of good parenting. Furthermore, she assumes that failure to do these things is evidence of neglect. My own research suggests that these criteria may not be reliable indicators of parents' interest or commitment.

Living in poverty can affect parent attendance at parent conferences and open house events. Meeting with parents during traditional conference times—late afternoons—may be impossible for parents who are working minimum-wage jobs and cannot miss work to attend school conferences. Furthermore, parents who work nights and early mornings are not available to supervise children as they leave for school, which affects both student absenteeism and tardiness. Parents without cars and telephones are at a further disadvantage.

The information in this book focuses primarily on research I conducted with my first grade students and their families. In that project, I interviewed ten of my first grade students and their parents about reading. Over the course of the one-year research project, the families experienced many tragedies and challenges. When the project commenced, Ms. Holt has recently lost her eldest son in an automobile accident.

Ms. Green was struggling with the effects of the amputation of both her boyfriend's legs and eviction from an apartment with thirty housing code violations. Ms. Johnson lost her husband to cancer, gave birth to her youngest child, and became a grandmother via her sixteen-year-old daughter. Parents had also faced severe difficulties prior to the time of my study. Ms. Johnson ran away from an abusive father. Ms. Green has suffered from bipolar disorder since she was sixteen. Ms. Webster left the poverty of a small rural community to seek a job in the big city. Ms. Holt had been burned out of her home twice during her adult life and was starting over for the third time. These struggles left the parents of my students with challenges that I have never faced and that I cannot pretend to understand. Getting to know parents consistently reveals that each family has its own story and that simplistic explanations that focus on negligence and incompetence are generally inaccurate and incomplete.

Certainly, there are some urban parents who neglect their responsibilities as parents; however, negligent parents inhabit the suburbs as well. In the suburbs, many families have access to resources that help them disguise the evidence of their negligence. When parents can afford before-school daycare, their children arrive at school on time. When parents own a car and can take time off from work, they are more likely to attend parent conferences. These outward signs of caring are easier to fulfill when a family has a viable income and various resources. As a mother, I enjoy many benefits that the parents of my students do not. I can afford quality childcare so that while I am working I can trust that my child is being well cared for. I have a reliable car, ensuring that as I go through my day I will be able to keep the commitments I make without worrying that my car will break down or that the buses won't run on time. I can even resort to fast food or a restaurant on those evenings when the flurry of daily life prevents me from preparing dinner for my family.

An Example of Relative Power

The following story was told by the mother of one of my students. I had asked Ms. Holt if she thought that parents ever felt uncomfortable or unwelcome at their children's school.

Sometimes. As a matter of fact, yesterday I had to go to school for one of my sons. And when I went there the principal made me feel

very uncomfortable because we were talking and then all of a sudden he says, "When your son was staying with his dad he was doing so much better. As a matter of fact, how long has he been back home?" I said, "What are you trying to insinuate—that I'm a bad mother?" I mean I got offensive right quick because my son was only at his father's house maybe six weeks and he's trying to tell me that since he's come back with me he's got that much of a change. I said, "No, that's not why." Then I went in detail [about] why he changed and then the principal made a total about face but he had just made an assumption and this was the first time I had ever met him. And my son *was* cutting up. He was doing wrong things for these past six weeks, which I told him. But he [the principal] made an assumption, I think because I was a woman and I didn't appreciate that. Cause then I thought to myself, I been in this here situation for 20 years. I really took offense to it and I meet with him again [on] Monday and I'm going to let him know I took offense to that. You don't just say something like that to me. [For] 17 years this boy has been going to school and the last six weeks he's been kind of cutting up. When did he leave his dad's? For 17 years he wasn't with his dad. And I didn't have any problem out of him. Now you gotta say since he's home with me now I'm doing something wrong? You know, I'm there trying to straighten this mess out with my son and then you're going to assume that I'm not a good mother?

In this example, Ms. Holt confronts the assumptions that have been made about her. While she clearly identifies gender as the basis for the principal's unfair assumptions, I would add that her position as a poor, African American, single mother also contributed to the assumptions he made. The principal, as a person of relative authority, utilized his position to present his interpretation of the situation without inviting Ms. Holt's perspective. In this scenario, the school principal is enacting power that is socially accorded to him based on his position within the school; Ms. Holt is left to defend herself. While Ms. Holt clearly challenges the principal's display of power, the assumptions and the relative power the principal has brought to the table position Ms. Holt in particular ways that make it acceptable for him to challenge her ability as a mother.

This is one example of the power that schools hold over the lives of our students and their families. However, the power that schools and school officials display is part of a larger social order that privileges

people in particular positions while simultaneously privileging particular ways of viewing the world. Power-laden interactions accompany living in poor and diverse communities. These power dynamics exist when I meet with the parents of my first grade students. Whether I am aware of it or not, as a white, middle-aged, middle-class, female teacher, I bring power when I walk into my classroom of culturally and ethnically diverse students and there is always the potential for educators to abuse this power.

This book is about power that is often undetected by those who possess it—power that labels and positions each of us within a society that carries with it particular histories and particular ways of understanding the world. As teachers, we need to recognize this power and understand how it operates in our professional lives. In the following subsection, I will describe a few theories about power.

Theoretical Understandings About Power

Norman Fairclough (1989) believes that power is often both invisible and deceptively innocuous. He explains that people are unaware of the most dangerous forms of power; these forms of power circulate unbridled through our social landscape via the ways people generally understand their world and the ways in which they act upon those understandings.

James Gee refers to “master myths” that incorporate generally accepted ways of being in the world that seem “natural, inevitable and unavoidable” (1990, p. 138). It is through these master myths that the existing social order is constructed, conveyed, and continued. Gee (1992) uses the term “discourses” to describe the way in which these master myths of cultures are shared and maintained. He describes discourses as incorporating particular “ways of talking, viewing, thinking, believing, interacting, acting, and sometimes writing and reading” (Gee 1992, p. 104).

Gee (1998) explains that it is through the mastery of particular discourses that people gain access to resources in our society. However, not all people’s experiences are personally and collectively reflected in pervasive dominant discourses. This may be particularly true for students whose cultural, religious, and/or experiential backgrounds differ from those of people who ascribe to generally accepted, dominant understandings about the world. Children who are born into house-

holds in which their home discourses capture and represent mainstream ways of understanding the world have huge advantages in school and in the larger society. Other children whose home activities, preferences, mannerisms, and understandings of the world do not align with the world are at a disadvantage in classrooms and schools. In fact, the ways of being that some students bring to the classroom can be at odds with dominant, school-sanctioned discourses. “[Dominant] discourses often incorporate attitudes and values hostile to, and even in part define themselves in opposition to, these minority students and their home and community-based Discourses” (Barton and Hamilton 1998, p. 148). As Dell Hymes (1996) explains, the discourses that are connected to formal and academic contexts and institutions dominate over the narratives and experiences of people whose experiences and understandings do not align with generally accepted understandings of the world.

When Ms. Holt walked into the principal’s office, she confronted mainstream ways of viewing the world, when she was defined by the surface features of her life that coincided with socially constructed categories of people. Ms. Holt is a tall, well-groomed woman of medium build who exhibits a flair for short and “funky” hairstyles that would rarely be seen in the professional world. Her clothing sports bright reds and yellows that would turn heads on a metropolitan street. Ms. Holt has a deep, rich voice and strong African American speech patterns that are sometimes loud and often accompanied by a contagious rolling laugh that punctuates the ironies she encounters as she talks about her world.

However, in the office of the principal, her unconventional hairstyle and bright colors are read as unprofessional, ostentatious, and slightly illicit. Her voice, like her clothing, is too loud. Her African American speech patterns are viewed as evidence of her assumed lack of education and presumed low intelligence. She is easily positioned as a lower-class, single mother who cannot control her son.

Features of Personal Power

As a white, female, currently middle-class woman, do I have power? Am I a person of privilege? Fifteen years ago, I would have answered that question with a definitive “no.” I worked my way through high school, college, and graduate school, often struggling to repay student loans. I worked long hours in restaurants and bars to support myself

and complete my education. *Privilege* was a word I reserved for my friends whose parents paid their tuition, purchased their books, covered their living expenses, and subsidized spring break vacations. Teaching in a culturally and ethnically diverse school, however, has made me very aware of the many privileges I have taken for granted. These privileges are unrelated to my personal efforts and accomplishments. My race, class, dress, physical stature, ableness, and language all contribute to positioning me as a person of relative power within many if not most contexts.

Perhaps a story is in order. Last summer I purchased a shirt for my husband at a major department store. However, when I brought the shirt home, my husband found that the shirt was too large. Meanwhile I had lost the receipt and then discovered that I had taken the shirt from the store with the security tag still attached. Now this was a dilemma. I had a brand-new shirt with a security tag that did not fit my husband and no receipt to prove that I had paid for it. Being the brazen woman I am, I decided that my only option was to return to the store, explain the situation, and hope for the best. My cherubic, blonde, six-year-old daughter accompanied me. The man at the register eyed me suspiciously and said, "We'll have to check with security about this." With trepidation, I followed the salesclerk to the entrance of a long hallway that led to the rear of the building. He told me to wait as he walked down the hallway and knocked on a door. A door opened and a large, intimidating man stepped out. The salesclerk spoke to him in a soft voice. Then the security guard glanced over at me and my daughter; he nodded and went back into his office. The salesclerk issued me a thirty dollar gift card to cover the price of the shirt.

This experience raises several questions. What did that the security guard learn through that quick glance that assured him I had not stolen the shirt? What would have happened if I were African American or Puerto Rican? Would I have received my refund if I were dressed differently, overweight, male, or accompanied by my teenage son? Just as the older brothers and sisters of my students are often victims of police profiling, I benefited from "profiling" played out in a mall department store.

Features of School Power

As teachers we must ask whether schools, classrooms, and teachers are immune to the practice of race, class, gender, and/or ableness profiling.

Regrettably, data suggests that we are not. Schools that serve poor and minority students are often underfunded, are segregated by race, and offer limited access to a range of educational experiences (Nieto 1999). Schools with a majority of students of color are 3.7 times more likely to be severely overcrowded than schools that serve mostly European American children. Nonwhite and Hispanic students drop out of high school at two to three times the rate of white students. The wealthiest ten percent of school districts in America spend ten times more per student than the poorest ten percent of schools. Furthermore, the proportions of teaching faculty without appropriate credentials is seven times higher in high-poverty schools than in wealthy schools (Johnson et al. 2001).

The school principal made assumptions about Ms. Holt and the mall security officer made assumptions about me. According to Fairclough, these assumptions reflect ingrained ways of thinking that position particular people in particular ways. "Such assumptions and expectations are implicit, backgrounded, taken for granted, not things that people are consciously aware of, rarely explicitly formulated or examined or questioned" (Fairclough 1989, p. 77). The power of these assumptions resides in their commonsense nature. As Fairclough explains, assumptions are most effective when their workings are least visible.

Lurking among these assumptions are generally accepted beliefs that things are "just different" in schools that serve poor and diverse students: "Our students can't . . . ," "Their parents' won't . . . ," and "These kids are. . . ." These phrases begin sentences that are typically completed with comments that align with generally accepted understandings of the world yet obfuscate the very real power relationships that define mainstream interpretations of the world. This "ideological common sense" (Fairclough 1989) serves to sustain established, inequitable relations of power.

Thus, the mainstream assumptions made about Ms. Holt are more than personal responses to her appearance, deportment, dress, and/or attitude. They are instances of culturally constructed ways of viewing people who appear like her. Thus, when Ms. Holt disrupts those assumptions and challenges the beliefs of the school principal, she is doing more than addressing a personal wrong. "What are experienced as individual problems can be interpreted socially as indicators of the de-structuring orders of discourse which occur in the course of social struggles" (Fairclough 1989, p. 172). Unfortunately, Ms. Holt's attempts alone

are negligible against the dominance of mainstream ways of viewing the world, and it is questionable whether the school principal was significantly enlightened based on his interaction with Ms. Holt. At most he may have repositioned Ms. Holt as an "atypical parent," one who cares about her children.

Unfortunately, teachers, like most members of our society, are unaware of how systems of power operate in our schools and classrooms. We fail to recognize and challenge established ways of positioning people and labeling our world. Too often children in urban communities are viewed as deficient, difficult to teach, uncooperative, and troubled. Their parents are perceived as uninterested, complacent, subliterate, lazy, and negligent.

The intent of this book is to challenge our understandings of poor and diverse communities and to encourage teachers to systematically work toward unraveling our assumptions. In all societies, those people who control the society through money and might are the ones who are vested with the ability to label and explain the circumstances of others. Unfortunately, these systematic ways of understanding the world deny the existence of alternative interpretations and explanations for the experiences of students and their families.

Confronting Racism, Poverty, and Power

Classroom Strategies to Change the World

Catherine Compton-Lilly
With a Chapter by Todd K. Lilly