CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS of Education

SECOND EDITION

oung Pai

Susan A. Adler

Cultural Foundations of Education

Second Edition

Young Pai
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Merrill,
an imprint of Prentice Hall
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey Columbus, Ohio

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Pai, Young
Cultural foundations of education / Young Pai, Susan A. Adler.—2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-13-396979-7
1. Educational anthropology—United States—Case studies. 2. Multicultural education—United States—Case studies. 3. Pluralism (Social sciences)—United States—Case studies. 4. Educational psychology—United States—Case studies. I. Adler, Susan A. II. Title.
LB45.P35 1997
370.19—dc20 96-4176
CIP

Cover photo: Anthony Magnacca
Editor: Debra A. Stollenwerk
Production Editor: Linda Hillis Bayma
Design Coordinator: Julia Zonneveld Van Hook
Text Designer: Mia Saunders
Cover Designer: Rod Harris
Production Manager: Patricia A. Tonneman
Electronic Text Management: Marilyn Wilson Phelps, Matthew Williams, Karen L. Bretz, Tracey Ward

This book was set in Baskerville by Prentice Hall and was printed and bound by R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company. The cover was printed by Phoenix Color Corp.

© 1997 by Prentice-Hall, Inc.
Simon & Schuster/A Viacom Company
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

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Earlier edition © 1990 by Macmillan Publishing Company.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

ISBN: 0-13-396979-7

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*
Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*
Prentice-Hall of Canada, Inc., *Toronto*
Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S. A., *Mexico*
Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*
Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*
Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*
Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

To
Sunok, a wellspring of my growth,
in whom the East and the West meet
ever so gracefully,
and our grandchildren,
Vanessa, Chelsea, and Nathan,
whose lives shall be enriched
by the confluences of the two cultures

To
Natalya, Karolyn, and Ethan—
For education is about the future

Preface

Educators generally agree that education takes place in a specific sociocultural context. But we are not always clear and precise about the myriad of ways in which cultural factors influence the processes of schooling, teaching, and learning. More often than not, our insensitivity to and the lack of knowledge regarding the rule of culture in education lead to unsound educational policies, ineffective school practices, and unfair assessment of learners. Accordingly, the primary purpose of this introductory text is to examine education as a cultural phenomenon and the implications of this perspective for schooling, multicultural education, educational development, and the processes of teaching and learning.

Cultural Foundations of Education is designed to provide educators and prospective educators with knowledge essential to making decisions about teaching and learning. It is not a methods textbook; rather, as the title implies, it is intended as a foundation for thinking about curriculum and pedagogy. We are in a time of sociocultural as well as educational change, and educators must be equipped with the knowledge and understanding necessary for effective analysis of educational issues. Teachers cannot close their classroom doors on cultural influences on education. It is our intention that this book will contribute to more thoughtful dialogue about education in its cultural context.

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Use of This Text

Most of the concepts, theories, and issues presented in this text, along with their educational ramifications, will require further probing and elaboration; therefore, instructors are encouraged to introduce their own materials, experiences, and insights to these topics as well as to the influences of political, economic, and religious variables on education and schooling.

Case studies involving African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, Native American, and white American groups are presented at the end of each chapter. The contents of individual chapters will help readers analyze the cases; also, additional sources in anthropology and education, opinions of other students, and the instructor's guidance will be useful in gaining varied and alternative insights.

New to This Edition

A number of changes have been introduced to this second edition. Many sections have been updated, including the discussions of **core values** in chapter 2 and **multicultural education** in chapter 5. The extended discussion of **current reform efforts** in chapter 4 should help readers consider these efforts within the context of cultural issues. The overview of theories about the role of schooling in chapter 5 has been reorganized and extended to include a look at the **postmodern perspective.** Several end-of-chapter cases have been replaced with newer examples for student analysis. Other updates, while changing the text in only minor ways, are aimed at keeping the text connected with current trends and theories, as well as with the experiences of readers.

Acknowledgments

Our thanks to Shu Chen for her work in preparing the revised manuscript and to our colleagues at the University of Missouri-Kansas City for their ongoing support and review of this work. Comments and suggestions by the following reviewers have been most helpful in enhancing the depth and breadth of the book: Frederick J. Baker, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Malcolm B. Campbell, Bowling Green State University; John B. Cross, Livingston University; and Etta R. Hollins, California State University, Hayward.

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PART ONE

Culture and the Educative Process

1

Introduction

WHY STUDY THE CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION?

Today there are widely divergent views of education. Some people see it as the process by which individuals are helped to become the best they can be on the basis of their ability and personally envisioned possibilities; others regard it as the development of the intellect through which learners acquire essential cognitive and social skills and perennial knowledge (truths). Still others prefer to view education as a process, fundamentally similar to that of industrial production, in which certain human behaviors are shaped and maintained so that they may become useful to the individual and others at some future time. Indeed, it is important to examine critically the relationships between these and other concepts of education, with their varied philosophical and ideological perspectives and their practical implications, for our ideas do make a difference in what we do and how we act. But the meanings of these ideas and their influence on human behaviors, thinking processes, and learning styles vary according to the society's prevailing worldview and values. This being the case, it is not surprising that each society has its own conceptions of what *liberal education, well-rounded person,* and even *basic skills* mean. Moreover, the relative worth of special goals and educative means is rooted in the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which people learn and educational institutions function. There is no escaping the fact that education is a sociocultural process. Hence, a critical examination of the role of culture in human life is indispensable to the understanding and control of educative processes.

Regardless of how education is defined, from a cultural perspective it can be viewed as the deliberate means by which each society attempts to transmit and perpetuate its notion of the good life, which is derived from the society's fundamental beliefs concerning the nature of the world, knowledge, and values. These beliefs vary from society to society and culture to culture. To put it differently, if we accept English anthropologist Edward B. Taylor's definition of culture, "the complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Gould & Kolb, 1964, p. 166), then we may regard education as the intentional attempt to pass on such a complex whole from one generation to another. Because educational practice is the design by which cultural contents are relayed to the next generation, the structure of the educational system, the role of the school, and the teacher-learner relationship reflect the social organization and the cultural norms of the society. For example, in a society where individuals treat each other as equals, the teacher-learner or parent-child relationship tends to be informal, and communication styles tend to be open with frequent reciprocal exchanges. On the other hand, in a culture where individuals see others as either above or below their own status (a hierarchical perspective), we are likely to find a formal teacher-pupil relationship with a communication style characterized by commands and demands issued from teachers to learners, who are seen as occupying a lower status.

In another sense, the aims and the ways of educating the young are not only influenced by the conditions of society and its culture, but they may also be viewed as responses to societal and cultural needs. This means that in a culturally diverse society such as ours, the various educational agents, especially the schools, must deal with the issues, problems, and needs arising out of the relationship between the dominant and minority cultures. In sum, no part of the educative process, neither its contents nor its products, is free from cultural influence. Educators need to realize that the processes of teaching and learning are influenced by the core values, beliefs, and attitudes as well as the predominant cognitive and communication styles and linguistic patterns of a culture. Further, the educative process, whether formal or informal, is equally affected by the socioeconomic status of the learner, peer pressures, the nature of the relationships between dominant and minority groups, and the impact of technology on the society.

As inextricable as the connection between culture and education is, education as a field of study has not always been concerned with this important relationship. Traditionally, the study of education and teacher education programs has placed much greater emphasis on the psychological rather than the sociocultural dimensions of teaching-learning processes. As well-known educational anthropologist George D. Spindler (1973) points out:

> Educational psychology has clearly dominated the scene, partly because of a historical accident that institutionally wedded psychology and education rather early in America and partly because the need for tests and measurements and applied principles of learning have been particularly obvious in the educational milieu of American schools and have been appropriate for psychological applications. (p. 101)

Even in other foundational fields, the sociocultural areas that are usually called *educational sociology* are primarily concerned with the relationship between socioeconomic stratification, social change, bureaucracy, sex roles, demographic trends, and so on, in education and schooling. It is true that in the early 1900s Edgar C. Hewet wrote about anthropology and education (1904) and ethnic factors in education (1905), and a significant number of works on education and culture by such well-known scholars as Margaret Mead, Jules Henry, Clyde Kluckhohn, Solon Kimball, Dorothy Lee, and others appeared in the 1940s and 1950s. But serious attempts to utilize the tools and the findings of anthropology in dealing with matters related to general education, schooling, and teacher education did not begin until the early 1960s. Even today, cultural foundations of education are usually subsumed under educational sociology, educational psychology, or social foundations of education or even history and philosophy of education.

The fact that the study of the cultural foundations of education is not yet a clearly established, distinct discipline should not diminish its importance as practitioners attempt to examine how cultural variables affect education, teaching, learning, and the growth and development of all learners. The relevance of such a field in the study of education rests on the fact that worldviews, values, cognitive and communication styles, linguistic patterns, child-rearing practices, tool making, knowledge acquisition, and the different ways in which people relate to each other are all culturally bound. They also have substantial impact on how people of all ages learn and become educated. Moreover, our knowledge of how these and other related factors influence human behavior may enable us to expose the cultural assumptions underlying the ways in which we and others think, analyze, and observe. Indeed, studying cultural foundations (bases) of education may give us a critical tool with which we can more accurately assess our work as educators and facilitate the development of more effective and just educational strategies and resource allocations so that optimal learning may be assured for all.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Given the nature and function of the cultural foundations of the education field as just described, anthropology should be considered its parent discipline and knowledge base. Anthropology, a science *(logos)* of man *(anthro)*, is concerned with describing, analyzing, and comparing the physical, social,

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