

Iryna Labatiuk

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Iryna Labatiuk

Wydział Nauk Pedagogicznych. Dolnośląska Szkoła Wyższa

George Spindler's Concept of Cultural Therapy and its Current Application in Education

ABSTRACT: This article aims at examining the interaction between anthropology and education with a particular focus on reciprocal advantages of such interaction for both disciplines. Cultural therapy, a model developed by George Spindler, serves as an illustration of the positive outcome of this interdisciplinary co-operation, presenting an important contribution to the theory and practice of scholars and practitioners in the fields of anthropology, educational anthropology and education. This article also provides a number of examples of application of cultural therapy by both anthropologists and educators.

KEYWORDS: anthropology of education, culturaltherapy, George Spindler

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In this article I will explore the connection between anthropology and education through the notion of cultural therapy elaborated by George Spindler. Anthropology has developed interdisciplinary ties with many fields of scholarship and in this article I intend to investigate the benefits of collaboration between anthropology and education. Cultural therapy serves as an interesting example of how beneficial the partnership of anthropologists and educators can be to both parties and how it enriches the theory and practice of the related disciplines. It helps to unravel the way in which cultural biases of a teacher (and a student) affect the educational process, and what can be done to improve the teacher-student communication and help them understand oneself and others in multicultural environment of a classroom.

The interest of anthropologists in education dates back to the very beginning of anthropology as an academic discipline and many renowned anthropologists were engaged in research on educational processes and made valuable contributions to the field, including Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Melville J. Herskovits, Bronislaw Malinowski, Robert Redfield, Clyde Kluckhohn, John Gillin or John Whiting (Eddy, 1985; Nash, 1974). However, it was the 1954 Stanford University conference organized by George Spindler that gave an impetus to the formation of this concentration into a separate subdiscipline – the anthropology of education.

Anthropology employs a variety of methods and theories for the critical investigation of sociocultural aspects of human life. The anthropological analyses of educational processes and institutions, and their structure and content, may shed light on how society operates. They also contribute awareness of sociocultural processes that are often taken for granted. In the school context, anthropology can help find sources of children's failure and eliminate miscommunication between teachers and students.

Anthropology can help educators become more culturally aware, so that they can reflect and understand how culture creates and predetermines the conditions of their practice. In turn, anthropologists vastly exploited learning theories that provided frameworks within which they could explain learned behavior of individuals in a certain culture. Education and the schooling system, so closely connected with culture and society, turned out to be an expedient field opening vast opportunities for anthropological discoveries. Consequently, many concepts and issues connected to education drew attention of anthropologists, and the many-faceted process of learning is one of the key matters of investigation in cultural anthropological research. The study of schools as fundamental elements of social sustainability and culture transmission helped anthropologists get a better insight into culture operational processes. Teachers can also become useful partners of anthropologists. If we approach education as culture transmission, which according to Spindler is aimed „to teach young people how to think, act, and feel appropriately” (Spindler, 1974, p. 279), teachers in this case undertake the role of active participants in the process of culture communication to the next generations, being at the same time witnesses of the transformation of contemporary youth culture, its adaptation or rejection and conflict with dominant culture, and the process of creating a distinct youth culture of their own. The teachers'

perspective on these cultural processes can facilitate significantly the work of anthropological researchers.

„Teachers have much to offer anthropologists, because they find themselves in the crucible of cultural change. They are in a unique position to view the acquisition of contemporary youth culture by new generations. But teachers are much more than observers. They can play an active role in facilitating the change process as students move among home, peer, and school cultures, adapting this and shedding that, ultimately creating their own personal culture, as well as sharing in the larger youth culture. Given contemporary anthropological interest in cultural borders and cultural change processes, teachers' insights about these issues are of great value.” (Henze & Hauser, 1999, p. 3)

Anthropologists and educators can learn from each other. When using the same research tools, anthropologists and educators will use it differently. Teachers and educators would concentrate on understanding the peculiarities of teaching practices and searched for means to better use the acquired knowledge, while anthropologists would focus on deeper insight into the nature of school culture. Margaret Mead, however, claimed that educational practices are inseparable from anthropological work: „I mean, can someone defined as a pure anthropologist who has no experience in education, who has not primarily studied education in primitive societies, who is not interested in teaching... engage in a very profitable form of communication except at the book-reading source material level?” (cf. Eddy, 1985, p. 92). Anthropologists are trained to be primarily researchers, and only then teachers; to become the latter they need education and learning theories, in order to find the best ways to convey their knowledge and teach anthropology to their students. As David G. Mandelbaum wrote, an anthropologist apart from time dedicated to his or her research is also involved in a number of activities connected with the academic sphere, he or she must „plan his teaching carefully, coordinate it with that of his now more numerous colleagues in a department, revise his courses frequently to keep them scientifically alive, and adjust his teaching procedures to meet new conditions of academic demography” (Mandelbaum, 1963, p. 3), these and many other teaching responsibilities make education an important part of anthropologist life.

Anthropology as a discipline has at its disposal the tradition and research results, elaborated theories and methods of investigation that contributed greatly to the domain of education. Education offered anthropologists the possibility to explore the school environment by investigating culture transmission and culture acquisition processes, and to discover culturally predetermined behavior and attitude patterns of people involved in the educational process, i.e. teachers, students and school administration. In the following section I will bring an example of a notion that is both a product and a driving force in anthropology and education.

CULTURAL THERAPY

Cultural therapy is defined by George Spindler as the process of bringing „one's own culture in its manifold forms to a level of awareness that permits one to perceive it as a potential bias in social interaction and in the acquisition or transmission of skills and knowledge” (Spindler, 1999, p. 466). George Spindler and his wife, Louise Spindler are prominent American anthropologists, who worked in the fields of psychological anthropology, education and anthropology of education, and made significant theoretical and methodological contributions to the disciplines broadening the understanding of culture, and cultural processes.

The impetus for the development of this new concept was George Spindler's first experience of fieldwork in a school setting, when he worked with a young teacher, Roger Harker in one of West Coast elementary schools. However, the concept itself was developed much later. George Spindler started his research in education in 1950 by joining the team of Robert Bush for the study of schooling consisting in case studies of teachers and other educational personnel in three communities near Stanford University (Spindler & Spindler, 2000). The random choice among volunteers fell on the young teacher Roger Harker (a pseudonym), with whom George Spindler started working. This very first case study in a school setting, according to George Spindler, influenced and predetermined the direction of his research interest in educational anthropology. At first, doing ethnography in such an ordinary place as school seemed much less exciting to George Spindler than investigating the culture of Native American nations. Being familiar with the research situation made it difficult to change one's perspective since „the familiar was all too familiar” (Spindler & Spindler, 2000, p. 202). However, later he „began to see the teacher and the pupils as ‘natives,’ engaging in rituals, interaction, roleplaying, selective perception, cultural conflict, sociometric networks, defensive strategies, and so on” (Spindler & Spindler, 2000, p. 202).

That enabled him to discover the complexity of communication in the classroom, as well as the role of the teacher in culture and value transmission. In the process of investigation, Spindler noticed the difference in the behavior of the teacher toward a certain group of students in his classroom who were representatives of lower social classes. Although Roger Harker was not hostile to these children, his preferences for the upper-middle-class children was clearly observable in his judgments. He favored the white middle-class and upper-middle-class children. While he was not treating children from lower-status families badly, he conducted his classes in a manner that discouraged those students. He positioned himself as an open-minded individual who had no favorites, and was regarded by the administration as one of the best among young teachers, but evaluations from the students detected the teacher's prejudices. George Spindler discovered that Harker was completely unaware of his own biases in relations with students. He shared his observations and the results of his research with the teacher, who at first didn't believe in the veracity of the data. Roger Harker was absolutely unaware of his prejudices and even objected to George Spindler's attempt

to explain the situation to him. But „eventually, he saw the truth of what I was telling him, and he began acquiring skills that would enable him to more effectively relate his teaching to all the children who were being taught” (Spindler, 2008, p. xxv).

In this case, cultural therapy would consist in helping the teacher realize that his intended aims were not being implemented in his class work with children because of biases of which he was not aware. Harker’s illusions, according to George Spindler, came from his background and social experiences, and the role of cultural therapy was to bring „one’s own culture in its manifold forms to a level of awareness that permits one to perceive it as a potential bias in social interaction and in the acquisition or transmission of skills and knowledge” (Spindler, 1999, p. 466). In developing awareness of one’s own culture, the individual can perceive it in the relation to other cultures and thus become able to calculate the possible misinterpretation of behavior.

„One’s culture as well as the other cultures, become a third presence, removed somewhat from the person, so that one’s actions can be taken as caused by one’s culture and not by one’s personality. A certain comforting distance and objectification becomes possible, and relationships, such as those between teachers and students, can be explored without getting personal (or unduly upset) about it.” (Spindler & Spindler, 2000, p. 367)

Cultural therapy helps to develop a relatively detached point of view on one’s behavior and interpersonal relations. As a result, one will be able to separate culture from personality and see what conditions his/her actions. The Spindlers developed cultural therapy with the intention to resolve conflicts between teachers and students and raise cultural awareness. George Spindler justifies the use of the term „therapy” by saying that „immersion in one’s own culture in the world we live in is a kind of illness” (Spindler, 1999, p. 466). Being an inseparable part of human life, culture is, at the same time,

„the basis for ethnocentrism, something teachers and others who make judgments about people and act on them cannot afford. A healthy identification with one’s own culture is desirable. The cultural blindness that accompanies this identification is what we intend to correct with cultural therapy.” (Spindler, 1999, p. 466)

George and Louise Spindler also strongly supported the idea of making cultural therapy the part of teacher-training programs as he considered teachers to be cultural transmitters. Cultural therapy can be an intervention in teachers’ usual practices. It can help them understand their own cultural position: how their cultural assumptions influence their relations with students of different cultural backgrounds; how they perceive their reactions to behaviors in different cultures; why they might find those behaviors irritating, unacceptable or agreeable.

Consequently the Spindlers started applying cultural therapy in their work not only with teachers, but in groups of students and teachers, separately and mixed together, to make participants reflect on culture matters. Students also displayed a great deal of bias concerning school and education, which affected their performance in school life. Some of them thought school was the only key to success in life; others considered it absolutely irrelevant to their future, or even an obstacle to their desired way of life.

„For students, cultural therapy is essentially a means of consciousness raising – that is, to make explicit unequal power relationships in the classroom, the school, and the larger society. Further, cultural therapy can be used to help students clarify the steps necessary to obtain the instrumental competencies they need to gain access to opportunities within the school system (and hopefully the larger society).” (Spindler & Spindler, 2000, p. 368)

Cultural therapy thus will empower students (especially, those who are members of minority cultures), help them understand the factors that work against them and see the obstacles; it will not make them feel helpless.

George Spindler distinguishes three categories of cultural knowledge that are necessary in the process of cultural therapy. To recognize and avoid possible prejudices, one has to deal with mundane cultural knowledge, self-other cultural knowledge and submerged cultural knowledge (or hidden assumptions). „Mundane cultural knowledge is the kind of knowledge that we use to get along in everyday situations” (Spindler, 1999, p. 467). It includes such skills as knowing how to dress, answer a phone, drive a car and understand traffic regulations. This kind of knowledge does not require much consideration and, once learned, is used automatically. „Self-other cultural knowledge is something we use constantly to place ourselves in relation to others, and it directly affects our self-expression, as well as our feelings about ourselves” (Spindler, 1999, p. 467). Raising awareness in this category of knowledge will help fight ignorance of one’s own traits and build an adequate picture of relations with others. Submerged cultural knowledge is the one George Spindler considered the most difficult to define. It overlaps with the both mundane and self-other cultural knowledge but has a more generalizing character. „Much of what we do every day is an indirect expression of submerged cultural understandings (or hidden assumptions) that permeate every dimension of our beliefs and attitudes” (Spindler, 1999, p. 469). Working on the three categories of cultural knowledge mentioned above is a necessary condition in the process of cultural therapy. As a result, one becomes aware of peculiarities of his or her culture and the culture of the other. This understanding is the key to dealing with contradictions. As Spindler wrote: „When the nature of the problem is seen in this objectified manner, self-determinative choices may be made on a realistic and less self-damaging basis” (Spindler & Spindler, 1989, p. 43).

THE APPLICATION

The Spindlers' cultural therapy profoundly influenced further developments in the field of educational anthropology. Many anthropologists as well as educators were inspired by the concept and incorporated, used and adapted cultural therapy into their own theories and practices. I'm going to bring an example of a few of them.

Building on the concept of cultural therapy and Paulo Freire's liberatory pedagogy, educational anthropologist Francisco Silva Cavalcante created a practice called Circles of Literacies with elementary school teachers in a municipality in the north-east of Brazil. The purpose of the practice of Circles of Literacies is to encourage participants

„to understand why they do what they do in their lives, becoming conscious of their own cultural and historical conditioning. This consciousness leads to liberation from oppressive, dominating experiences, making them aware of their own cultural values and their tolerance for different lifestyles in others.”
(Cavalcante, 2000, p. 1)

The process of consciousness-raising and awareness-transformation is realized with the help of the method developed by Cavalcante called the Multiple Literacies (Con)text Method. It is based on the concept of literacies, which states that there are many ways of being literate in a certain cultural context, as the world can be represented in multiple forms; at the same time every individual has hidden potential (tools) for discovering (reading and writing) the world. So the participants of a Circle of Literacies learn to discover different intrinsic forms to communicate and express their feelings and ideas. However, single consciousness-raising of the participants' behavior patterns is not sufficient to sustain a process of change. What is also needed is to make them feel that they are also agents who transform the newly-obtained awareness into action. However, for such a shift into action to happen, participants have to discover their inner ways of expression and transformation, i.e. the tools, which will enable them to express their ideas and feelings. No instructions of tool selection and application are forced on participants. They are just asked to search in which way they want and can express their ideas with pleasure. Another principle of the Circle of Literacies is to create a safe and open-minded environment, where participants would not fear the probability of being judged or humiliated. In the majority of cases insecurity and previously experienced traumas inhibit the intrinsic tools of self-expression, as Cavalcante brings an example of a poet, whose verses had been torn up, a dancer, whose sexuality had been questioned, or a painter, whose pictures had been belittled. In the groups of the Circle of Literacies,

”a poet discovers that his poetry has the same value as a painting brought by his artist colleague. The artist discovers that his work is worth as much as the story brought by his writer friend. The singer composes a song with his actor

friend. Such moments, as well as being therapeutic, allow the participants to grow.” (Cavalcante, 2000, p. 6)

This principle constitutes the only rule of a Circle of Literacies i.e. the participants can express their thoughts, ideas and feelings without fear of being judged negatively by other members of the group. The leadership within the groups is not obligatory, so teachers-participants can take up the role of a literacies mentor, only if they wish and feel up to do so. Participants of a Circle of Literacies cultural therapy learn not only to discover their own individual talents but also see and appreciate the potential of others.

Diane M. Hoffman says that the notion of cultural therapy has resonated among many contemporary anthropologists of education, including herself (Hoffman, 1998), because it helped explain the reasons for school failure among minority students who perceive school adjustments as an identity threat, leading to the development of cultural inversion and oppositional identities. Hoffman claims that cultural therapy as a means of exploring relationship between individual self and culture can be helpful, since

„it assumes that one can question that relationship, that cultural identity (for example) is not the finish line where all inquiry stops, as if people were locked into fixed patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving determined by their identities, without the possibility of envisioning alternatives. As such, cultural therapy is an orientation toward the examination of the implicit, tacit, unconscious, or unobserved aspects of culture as they function within the individual; by bringing these to consciousness, it can help to alleviate bias, distortion, and unproductive adaptations to cultural situations (such as schooling).” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 331)

In her analysis of identity and self, she points out that anthropology of education needs to redirect its attention to this domain of the „inner person” in its discussions of identity and schooling, by revisiting the concept of self. She also claims that

„the concern for identities has led to an appreciation for the effects of cultural diversity in schooling, better understanding of the processes involved in identity construction in and through schools, and legitimate concern for the human experiences of suffering and inequity by those whose identities have not been respected, the question of self has been neglected.” (Hoffman, 1998)

She justifies her advocacy of the notion of self by the fact that „the shift in terminology from "identity" toward "self" reflects a more subtle philosophical shift away from conceptualization of identity as group membership and boundary marker to identity as the confluence of social roles and social positioning that are more or less shifting and negotiable” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 328).

Geneva Gay, a strong advocate of multicultural education, elaborated on the Spindlers' concept of culture therapy in her discussion on culture responsible teaching (Gay, 2002). She says that teachers' knowledge about different aspects of cultural diversity is important in predetermining the learning outcomes for students, who are representatives of different ethnicities, for culture may facilitate the achievements and success in learning, or become an obstacle in the learning process. „Culture simultaneously anchors and blinds us. It forms our center in the dynamics of living and interacting with others while leading us to assume that our own ways of being and behaving are the only right way” (Gay, 2002, p. 617). This cultural blindness can either take the guise of disregarding ethnic diversity or positing educational institution as a culturally neutral environment, when in fact, ethnicity and race differences have significant influence on school performance. Moreover, the greater these differences are between the culture of a student and normative standards of school, the harder would it be for this student to succeed, and so the lower would also be teachers' expectations. For this reason, she stresses the importance of critical cultural consciousness-raising for teachers. A big number of teachers differ considerably from their students. And they do not take into consideration these differences and do not understand how significantly they influence their teaching style, how strong is the influence of their culture on their behavior, viewpoint, attitudes and preferences. So, becoming culturally-conscious is the focal requirement in culturally responsible teaching. It is as important for teachers to acquire accurate knowledge about the cultures, experiences, and contributions of other specific ethnic groups, as about their own. And cultural therapy will help teachers to become aware of their own culture, and how it affects their attitudes and behaviors toward other cultures as well as understand the cultures of their students. Teachers will learn and be able to realize and analyze how their cultural values, assumptions, and beliefs shape their behaviors in educational settings, as well as determine ways to minimize the negative effects of these influences. Once this self-awareness is acquired, teachers are better able to recognize different cultural elements and peculiarities in their students' behaviors and then use these insights to enhance their teaching skills. Gay emphasizes that there are elements of the culture systems of different ethnic groups, that are more important for teachers to know than others, as they have direct implications for teaching and learning. Among them are values, communication styles, learning styles, contributions, social problems, and levels of ethnic identity development and affiliation.

„Of even greater significance are those elements of cultural diversity that operate habitually and routinely in classrooms, such as how students from different ethnic groups determine what is important and worthy of learning, how they engage in the process of learning, and how they organize thoughts and convey information. Understanding the attributes of the storytelling motif that some students of color routinely use in communicating ideas and interacting with others, and how they try to do the same thing in their written work in schools,

will help teachers to better determine the students' thinking strengths and weakness." (Gay, 2002, p. 620)

Gay also brings an interesting example of necessary culture awareness in case of bringing into educative process an examples of heroic personalities for children to have a role model to follow and associate with. It is crucial to know what the chosen heroes embody and what kind of cultural message they convey, since children will not associate themselves with a hero of a culture which is not familiar to them. If teachers are aware of ways in which ethnic learning styles are manifested in study habits and intellectual task performance, they will be able to teach ethnically diverse students and help them learn more effectively and successfully perform on standardized tests. In many cases when children are mistakenly considered to have learning disabilities, culture responsible teaching may prevent these students from being referred to special education, and help others to transfer back to regular education programs. Therefore, Gay considers the inclusion of knowledge about cultures and ethnicities, the cultural therapy that would lead to culture-awareness and the development of skills of teaching in culturally diverse group crucial in the professional preparation of teachers.

CONCLUSION

Dealing holistically with varied aspects of human life, anthropology has established strong ties with a variety of scientific disciplines and has made a significant contribution to their development, including the field of educational sciences. Both educational scientists and anthropologists share their interest in cultural aspects of educational and learning processes. Anthropology has helped educational scientists and practitioners become more culturally aware in order to better reflect and understand how culture creates and affects the conditions of educational practice. It has brought new perspective on the functionality of educational approaches, teaching practices and the functioning of educational institutions. The Spindlers' work showed that it was possible to overcome one's own cultural and social limitations and gain a different perspective on oneself as well as on others, that teachers and students could become critical thinkers and acquire cultural awareness, and that these critical openings could lead to successful cooperation and mutually beneficial outcomes.

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KONCEPCJA TERAPII KULTUROWEJ GEORGE'A SPINDLERA ORAZ JEJ ZASTOSOWANIE WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ EDUKACJI

ABSTRAKT: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest opis interakcji między antropologią a edukacją, a szczególnie przedstawienie wzajemnych korzyści takiej interakcji dla obu dyscyplin. Terapia kulturowa, której model opracował i rozwinął George Spindler, stanowiąca ważny wkład w teorię i praktykę, zarówno naukowców jak i specjalistów, z dziedzin antropologii, antropologii edukacji i edukacji, służy tu jako ilustracja pozytywnych rezultatów takiej właśnie interdyscyplinarnej współpracy. Artykuł podaje liczne przykłady wykorzystania terapii kulturowej przez antropologów i pedagogów.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: antropologia edukacji, George Spindler, terapia kulturowa