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Source: *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, December 2015, Vol. 1, No. 3, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act at Fifty and Beyond (December 2015), pp. 96-111

Published by: Russell Sage Foundation

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/rsf.2015.1.3.05>

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Getting to Sesame Street? Fifty Years of Federal Compensatory Education



GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS

“Sunny day, sweeping the clouds away,
On my way to where the air is sweet,
Can you tell me how to get,
How to get to Sesame Street?”

—Stone and Hart Theme Song,
Sesame Street

Education research primarily draws from the social science disciplines of psychology and sociology (and to some extent, economics). Each of these disciplines contributes much to our understanding of education in complex societies. This article argues for the inclusion of anthropological or cultural perspectives in understanding the policy known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Rethinking culture might help policymakers be more aware of and challenged to include culture as an important construct to factor into decision-making when serving traditionally underserved communities.

Keywords: culture, culture and policy

I must start with a confession, I was one of those parents who placed her children squarely in front of the television each afternoon to watch the Children’s Television Workshop’s *Sesame Street* in its earliest days. I thought of it as a virtuous thing to do because the only things the program was selling were letters and numbers. I appreciated its educational value and its innovative way of reaching children without patronizing them. Also I must confess I did not think much about the program’s actual premise and purposes—to reach those children who did not have the advantage of high-quality preschool or highly educated parents. I did not think of *Sesame Street* as a com-

pensatory education program because of its availability to and use by families across the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic spectrum. Everyone loved Big Bird, Cookie Monster, Gordon, and the entire *Sesame Street* cast. More recently, *Sesame Street* has extended its audience across the globe and in each instance the show has tailored its programming to the local culture and conditions. For example, *Sesame Street* in Israel deals with the tensions that exist between Arab- and Jewish-descent peoples and seeks to ensure that young children do not foster the prejudices of the adults. In South Africa, *Sesame Street* has made deliberate strides toward explaining the scourge of HIV-

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AIDS that was ravaging the nation. Interesting, a recent study suggests that *Sesame Street* has a Head Start–like effect on children’s cognitive skills (Kearney and Levine 2015). *Sesame Street* provides this cognitive impact at a fraction of the cost. Head Start typically costs about \$7,600 per child each year while the annual per-child cost of *Sesame Street* is just \$5 in today’s dollars.

This wide reach of *Sesame Street* in some ways serves as a metaphor for the construction of this article. I argue that despite its most earnest efforts the fifty years of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) have not helped to close the achievement disparities between low-income students and their middle-class peers. I begin with a look at the contribution of anthropology to education research and policy.

WHAT ANTHROPOLOGY CONTRIBUTES TO EDUCATION RESEARCH AND POLICY

The work of an anthropologist is to document the cultural practices of a specific group or subgroup of people. This work is rarely predictive or speculative. Instead, anthropologists provide very detailed and specific information about how groups function. Analytically, anthropology sometimes uses analogy, metaphor, and parallels in its “thick description” and works to “make the familiar strange” (Geertz 1977). Anthropology began as a field designed to study “the other.” Much like the field of geography the British early on dominated the field of anthropology. As an empire Britain understood the need to map the world it was set to conquer. It used anthropology as a way to rate and rank cultural groups where those of northern and western European stock always came out as superior to every other group. Despite Franz Boas’s emphasis on cultural relativity and the need to assess cultures by their internal standards, American anthropologists maintained this practice of cultural ranking and in the United States the concept of race was promulgated by anthropology (Smedley and Smedley 1993).

To do their work, anthropologists often study either very traditional, less complex societies (for example, the Nuer of Southern Africa or the Arunta of Australia) or small seg-

ments of a society (such as Santeria priests or Vietnamese fishermen) because studying culture up close is labor intensive and time consuming. However, as anthropologists began to study more complex societies (including their own) the scope of the inquiry required highly specific foci. Studies of single schools, classrooms, and teachers became popular (see, for example, Spindler and Spindler 1994; Rosenfeld 1983). This work helped construct narratives of teaching and learning that elaborated the more statistical explorations and analysis of schools and classrooms detailed by social scientists in disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and economics. The ethnography of schooling grew throughout the 1970s and 1980s and has become an accepted form of educational research and inquiry. Despite growth in the field of educational anthropology, rarely is anthropology used to analyze education policy and legislation. This article attempts to do just that. It will look at a specific piece of education legislation, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, and describe it as a “cultural phenomenon” that helped shape education practice.

I do not want to suggest that anthropology has nothing to add to policymaking and policy debates. Indeed, a special interest group of the American Anthropological Association, the Association for the Anthropology of Policy, is charged specifically with addressing policy. Its mission statement asserts the following:

The study of policy deals with issues at the heart of anthropology such as: institutions and power; ideology and discourse; identity and culture; and interactions between the global and the local, public and private, and bureaucracy and market. Understanding the dynamics of policy processes is ever more important because of greater global interconnectedness; decisions made in one place or arena increasingly have major effects in other places and arenas. Policy connects disparate and diverse peoples—many of whom never interact personally or directly—yet who are dispersed among the multiple arenas of interaction that policy processes trigger or touch across place and time. (Association for the Anthropology of Policy 2012)

Rather, I argue that what anthropology contributes to policy is a way to think about the cultural context of policymaking and the way anthropological knowledge can provide background knowledge to inform and improve policymaking. For example, anthropology can be useful for government agencies that deal with indigenous populations. Anthropological knowledge can help decide what constitutes a fair and just settlement of resources and ongoing government relations. Or, anthropology can help avoid awkward or coercive policies that deal with health or nutritional regulations between mainstream societies and those regarded as culturally separate and distinct.

Two paradigms dominate educational anthropology—cultural ecology and cultural difference theory. Cultural ecology is best known as a theory John Ogbu promoted (1978, 1987; Gibson and Ogbu 1991). The premise of the cultural ecology theory is that “caste-like minority” status affects motivation and achievement and depresses IQ scores. More specific to the U.S. context, Ogbu argued that cultural differences associated with being a member of a minority group alone does not account for educational differences. Some minority groups appear to do quite well. To explain those differences, Ogbu contended that some minority groups fall into voluntary minority status while others are in what he terms involuntary minority status. Voluntary minorities are those groups who chose to immigrate to the United States with the hopes of securing a better life for their families and quality education for their children. Thus, many of the groups that immigrated to the United States from Asia (for example, Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indians, and others) of their own volition are more likely to find academic success in U.S. schools. On the other hand, involuntary or caste-like minorities are groups who found themselves in the United States (or under U.S. jurisdiction) against their own will (for example, African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians). Ogbu’s theory represents a macro-social approach to the issue of minority school achievement.

The theorists Frederick Erickson, Henry Trueba, and Shirley Brice Heath argue that the problems of minority student achieve-

ment are rooted in cultural differences and our inability to account for those differences in the delivery of school services (Erickson and Mohatt 1982; Trueba 1988, 1990; Heath 1983). Cultural difference theorists point to the micro-social practices that occur in classrooms through instruction, specifically, linguistic and social practices. They argue that Ogbu’s perspective lacks historical context and explanatory power for those members of so-called involuntary minorities who are successful. Cultural ecological theorists argue that cultural difference theorists miss the broad structural determinants of minority status that result in differential outcomes despite similar socioeconomic status.

Anthropologists privilege culture over socioeconomic status and class in their analysis. However ESEA is aimed at low-income children and some low-income members of cultural groups (as Ogbu and others argue) experience success in U.S. schools but others struggle generation after generation. Anthropologists are more interested in the way “cultural practices” determine educational outcomes (Gutierrez and Rogoff 2003). One powerful example of the salience of culture appears in the evidence that suggests middle-class African Americans continue to lag academically behind their white counterparts. If the more significant explanatory variable is class, what explains this disparity? Cultural factors may provide some insight. It is here that anthropologists can contribute to the debate since they are more likely to argue that one-size-fits-all solutions are unable to account for the way culture is differentially deployed and differentially accessible to various groups.

Education policy rarely accounts for culture because the concept is difficult to manipulate as a variable. For instance, if a researcher uses race, class, socioeconomic status, or gender as variables they are relatively discrete notions even if they are sometimes inaccurate or crudely determined. Graduate students often fall into the category of low income although culturally they are more likely to be very different from families who have experienced generational poverty. The category of race is particularly problematic because it has little scientific validity. It

is, however, an agreed-upon category in U.S. society. Fewer policies are racially specific and those that are face increasing scrutiny. California, Washington, and Michigan have all struck down state-level policies that take race into consideration. At the federal level, public colleges and universities are awaiting a U.S. Supreme Court decision on the use of race as a “value-added”¹ component in college admissions policies. Culture is not considered in these state and federal policy decisions. Only when culture is encapsulated in other specific elements, such as language or religion, are policymakers able to identify cultural practices that may matter in the public arena. For example, the landmark *Lau v. Nichols* decision (414 U.S. 563, 1974) links directly to students’ language. Language groups may overlap with cultural groups. In the case of religion increasing numbers of students from Muslim cultures find it important to emphasize that aspect of their cultural identities. Female Muslim students who cannot wear shorts in physical education classes may be exempt from that requirement for religious reasons, not cultural reasons. However, pulling apart the religion from the culture is difficult and may make little sense from the standpoint of the person engaged in these cultural practices.

Despite the difficulty of operationalizing the concept of culture so that policymakers can consider it as they make decisions, it may still be useful to consider culture as a rubric for thinking about the foundations that ultimately undergird policy. In the next sections of the paper I provide a brief history of ESEA and its shortcomings from a cultural vantage point.

BRIEF HISTORY OF ESEA

As a part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, the U.S. Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA, P.L. 89-10) on April 9, 1965.² Johnson, a former teacher on

the Texas border, believed that equal education access was crucial to insure the futures of the nation’s most needy children. Symbolically, President Johnson signed the act at a rural school in Stonewall, Texas, with his own first grade teacher, Katherine Deadrich Loney, seated at his side. Through a special funding source (Title I), the law allocated large resources to meet the needs of those children considered “educationally deprived” through compensatory programs for the poor, especially in the basic skills areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. Some of the specific wording from the act states

In recognition of the special educational needs of low-income families and the impact that concentrations of low-income families have on the ability of local educational agencies to support adequate educational programs, the Congress hereby declares it to be the policy of the United States to provide financial assistance . . . to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means (including preschool programs) which contribute to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children. (Section 201, ESEA)

The principle under which the Title I section of ESEA was developed was that of redress—that children from poor families needed more educational services than those from more affluent families. Title I therefore provided \$1 billion in funding for schools serving the nation’s poorest children. Although the legislation was designed to focus on low-income children regardless of race and ethnicity, it would be culturally and historically naïve to overlook the significant role that the civil rights movement had on shaping and encouraging the law (see Cohen and Moffit, this issue). It is also important that race and socio-

1. The use of the term *value added* here is not to be confused with the statistical technique currently used to determine teachers’ contributions to students academic achievement as measured by standardized test scores.

2. See editors’ introduction. This section includes information retrieved electronically from Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965. Available at: <http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/events/elementary-and-secondary-education-act-of-1965/> (accessed October 30, 2014).

economic status covary and most analyses of poor children in public schools will have higher proportions of children of color, particularly African American children. The goal of the legislation was to reach five million children from poor and low-income families in an attempt to level the educational playing field. Johnson declared this legislation to be the nation's most far-reaching education act since 1870 and it would maintain that stature until President George W. Bush signed the 2001 ESEA reauthorization known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

In 1965 ESEA contained six sections: Title I, Financial assistant to local education agencies (LEAs) for the education of children of low-income families; Title II, School library resources, textbooks, and other instructional aids; Title III, Supplementary educational centers and services; Title IV, Educational research and training; Title V, Grants to strengthen state departments of education; and Title VI, General provisions. In 1968, the act was amended to include Title VII, Aid to schools to assist with the educational needs of limited-English speaking students.

On the surface, ESEA appears to be an example of affirmative steps that the federal government took to right the perceived wrongs of the past. However, as is true with most education policy in the nation, ESEA reflects the political wrangling and deal making that result from legislators and an electorate of disparate ideological positions and political interests. Johnson's first inclination may have been to distribute funds in a wholesale fashion to all public schools. However, such a decision would alienate constituents in Catholic schools—particularly when many Catholic schools in urban communities served a population similar to those in urban public schools. A second tack would have been to allocate funds to all K-12 schools, public and private, but that strategy would raise strong constitutional concerns regarding the separation of church and state. Thus, the third tack, which Johnson took, was to link the funding to the income of the families. Few could argue the need to provide assistance to the poor. The other advantage of this strategy was that in-

stead of suggesting that the federal government was participating in a takeover of local schools and subverting states' rights, the federal government could establish itself as providing only categorical aid linked to national policy such as defense, poverty, and economic growth. ESEA, as written, also permitted the federal government to assist low-income children attending parochial (and other religious) schools by arguing its support of students, not institutions. In addition, ESEA greatly expanded the power and scope of state departments of education (SDEs) because of the need for SDEs to grow in order to administer the federal funds.

Given the incredible infusion of money ESEA has provided for children from low-income families, one might wonder why what is regularly referred to as the achievement gap has not been substantially closed. It is important to acknowledge the good ESEA has done in its attempt to mitigate disparities that exist between poor children and their middle-income peers. Unfortunately, much of the public discourse focuses on academic disparity along racial (specifically black-white) lines. Sean Reardon argues, however, that the "income achievement gap" is nearly twice that of the black-white gap, and that almost fifty years ago racial achievement disparity was one and a half times that of income academic disparity (2011). However, the interesting aspect of this gap is that it is less fueled by the inability of children of families at the low-income level to advance than by the increased investments that children of families of middle and higher income levels seem to make on their behalf. Specifically, raising those on the bottom is almost always accompanied by additional supports for those on the top through personal and private resources. The other cultural challenge the society has in its public debate about academic disparity is that the face of poverty is regularly represented as black. Everything from Ronald Reagan's infamous "welfare queen" to George H. W. Bush's "Willie Horton" political ads have superimposed race on to poverty. Thus, the conflation of an entire set of social problems—drug use, crime, poverty, failing schools, and so on—often are associ-

ated with specific racial groups and the public discourse sometimes creates a less than sympathetic response to particular groups.

In the remainder of this article, I focus on two classroom-level shortcomings I think contributed to the reasons that compensatory education (that is, ESEA) failed to live up to the promise of 1965. These include the failure to recognize, first, the assets that low-income families do have that can be leveraged in school classrooms and, second, the importance of appropriate pedagogies for low-income students.

WHAT LOW-INCOME CHILDREN BRING

Discussions about the lack of achievement among children from low-income parents typically focus on deficiencies. Popular depictions of poor families tend to highlight dysfunction that works against achievement. Each week America's airways are filled with television programs such as *Cops*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *The Wire*, and *Treme*, but in the 1970s TV producer Norman Lear dared to show a positive example of a poor family living in a public housing project in the sitcom *Good Times* (Blair 2014). Critics argued that Lear's depiction of the Evans family was too optimistic and failed to highlight the terrible outcomes and life chances such families were likely to suffer. However, in 1974, when *Good Times* appeared, the nation was in the midst of a recession. Many households knew what it was to struggle to make ends meet. *Good Times* was emblematic of a common condition. However, today with increasing income disparity empathy between haves and have-nots is almost nonexistent. What *Good Times* did not (and probably could not) tell us is the way structural forces such as institutional racism helped to create the policies that impoverished African Americans in particular.

In the 1950s, suburban communities developed by Levitt & Sons began offering single-family homes to returning veterans (Lambert 1997). However, the homes were not available to black or any other nonwhite veterans and their families. Although not alone in imposing restrictive covenants, Levittown is emblematic in the construction of the wealth gap that

emerged in the 1950s. Buyers in Levittown were permitted to move in with zero down payments to purchase the \$8,000 home. African Americans were encouraged to take advantage of the newly built public housing that only provided rental units. Today, Levittown homes are valued at about \$450,000. Over time, Levittown residents have been able to accumulate wealth, but families relegated to public housing were often left with no wealth, despite paying about the same in rent that their white peers in the suburbs paid in mortgage payments. Thus, the poverty we bemoan may be a result of deliberate policies that disenfranchise segments of our society. It is not endemic to specific groups of people.

What Lear attempted to do in his sitcom forty years ago was to suggest certain strengths in poor families. Indeed, given their circumstances, often they were required to find strengths to survive. The research literature in child and family studies supports Lear's assertion. Dennis Orthner, Hinckley Jones-Sanpei, and Sabrina Williamson examined a random sample of low-income households with children (2004). Their work used an instrument called the Family Strength Index to assess strength according to economic, problem solving, communication, family cohesion, and social support assets. Their findings indicate that relationship assets such as communication, problem solving, and social support predict positive outcomes for low-income families. Similarly, Walter Mullin and Miguel Arce were able to identify factors such as positive beliefs, positive thinking, and taking action steps as key to producing resilience among low-income families (2008). They stress that these factors must take place in a context of supportive internal family relations and external community connections.

Documenting strength and resilience among low-income families might prompt researchers to ask which specific aspects of these qualities do low-income school-age children exhibit and how can these qualities be leveraged to improve their academic performance? Joseph Williams identifies protective factors for African American high school graduates from low-income families in urban contexts

(2011).³ He finds that participants in his study benefitted from identifying at least one adult who served as a source of support and inspiration, education-specific parenting practices, nontraditional ways of supporting education, maintaining kinship networks, school as an agent of families, resilience-promoting features of schools, supportive relational networks within the community, promoting ecological resilience to improve student outcomes, and relational strategies to promote educational resilience. Geoffrey Borman and Laura Rachuba studied various school-level models that might promote and support resiliency among low-income students (2001). Their findings indicate greater engagement in academic activities, an internal locus of control, efficaciousness in math, a more positive outlook toward school, and a more positive self-esteem were characteristic of all low-SES students who achieved resilient outcomes. The most powerful school characteristics for promoting resiliency were represented by the supportive school community model, which, unlike other school models, included elements that actively shielded children from adversity.

Each of the strength and resilience studies tends to look for ways that low-income students can better assimilate into extant school models. Some might argue that this approach of fitting students into already problematic school structures is not the best way to support and encourage their intellectual, social, emotional, and civic development. Rather, it is merely a mechanism for helping them appear more like middle-class children. Thus, an alternate look at what low-income children bring to school might be a cultural resources model.

Marcelle Christian and Oscar Barbarin, for example, find that African American children from low-income families are more likely to experience school success if their parents attend church regularly (2001). Thus, some sense of spiritual connection could support not just an individual child but foster a classroom culture of justice, fairness, and reciprocity. Per-

haps the most powerful “existence proof” of building academic excellence from the cultural resources of low-income students comes in the form of the African-Centered Schools movement. Begun in the 1970s, these schools were an attempt on the part of low-income African American communities to gain control over their schools to ensure that their children received academic, socioemotional, and cultural support. The philosophy of these schools emphasized unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. These principles comprise what is called the *Nguzo Saba* (the basis of the holiday *Kwanzaa*) as core beliefs and cultural characteristics that are a part of African American culture.

Similarly, Wade Boykin and Caryn Bailey explore a “talent development” model to point out the resources that low-income African American students bring to classrooms. In their work, they examine

certain home cultural factors, cultural orientations, and learning preferences of African American school children from low-income backgrounds in order to document the relationship of prior cultural socialization experiences to enhanced cognitive, performance, and motivational outcomes. In their work they attempt to offer a conceptual basis for how certain Afro-cultural themes—Movement, Communalism, and Verve—in low-income African American children’s proximal experiences outside of school are transmitted and acquired, and the consequences of such acquisitions on their orientation and preferences for learning. Specifically, their research documents the cultural integrity residing in the experiences of African American children from low-income backgrounds and offers ways to proactively build upon these assets for enhancing school achievement. (2000, v)

This work in African American communities began to gain traction in other low-income

3. It is important not to assume that research done on African Americans or other “minoritized” groups have no applicability to those in the general public. Early work done in cooperative learning was done primarily on African American students entering desegregated schools. Today, cooperative learning is an accepted practice regardless of classroom composition.

communities of color where Latino, immigrant, and Native peoples began to inquire about how cultural models might increase academic performance for their children.

The point of addressing issues of strength, resilience, and cultural resources is to remind us that policies like ESEA are based on a presumption of lack or deficiency on the part of families and children. However, the school and classroom experiences of their middle-class peers presume they bring assets such as family involvement and engagement, prior knowledge, an achievement orientation, and networks rich in social and cultural capital. Similar presumptions may actually support the academic success of low-income students.

Anthropologists are more likely to ask, “How might the culture of under-served communities help inform the planning and programming associated with broad scale policies such as ESEA?” This approach moves away from the standardization of service delivery and incorporates more local cultural resources to ensure positive outcomes. For example, instead of accepting attending school improvement plan (SIP) meetings and signing the SIP document as evidence of parent engagement, anthropologists examine the cultural practices that may be compatible with increased parent engagement. This may mean SIP meetings that take place in churches, mosques, or community centers. It may mean curriculum materials selection committees that include parents. It may mean recruiting what Patricia Collins calls “other mothers”—people (generally, women) who have influence in a particular community despite not being a parent attached to a youngster in a neighborhood school (2008).

In one community, a woman who was actually a great-grandmother was referred to as Super Gram and was one of the most reliable sources of information to the community and understood how to negotiate school bureaucracy. From a typical ESEA policy perspective, Super Gram would most likely not be asked to participate on the SIP Council, but she could be one of the best people to engage to improve governance and compliance. In another community, a teacher noticed how confused her students were when children from her class were pulled out of the room to receive compen-

satory education services. She decided to ask the Title I reading teacher whether she could bring her entire class to the reading center so they could see what happened there. After the class visit to the reading center, individual students wanted to volunteer to visit the center with their classmates. The teacher set up a schedule that allowed individual students to go once a week to the reading center with the Title I students. Legally, that non-Title I students were visiting the reading center was an issue of noncompliance. Culturally, including friends and classmates was a way to demystify the Title I program and allow the students receiving Title I services to continue to share with their academically more able classmates.

These examples represent the ways that culture could have an impact on policy formation and implementation. They point to the way specific cultural contexts may require changes in standard regulations where the ends—improved academic performance—may require very different means. In the next section, I address the impact of teaching or instruction on academic performance and its obvious absence from ESEA.

TEACHING MATTERS

Almost all of the resources that came with the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 were for personnel and curriculum. Schools were permitted to hire additional teachers and instructional aids and to order supplementary curriculum materials. The predominant Title I program model involved removing eligible students from their classrooms to receive more individualized or small group instruction, as described. This strategy, called *pull-out* instruction, was legally supposed to supplement and not supplant regular classroom instruction (see Gordon and Reber, this issue). Thus, students who received Title I services were not supposed to receive those services during the reading and mathematics instruction block of their regular classroom. Title I was supposed to provide eligible students with added instruction. However, in far too many instances, students’ Title I reading and math instruction were their only instruction in those areas.

The other problem with the pull-out services was that children felt the stigma of not

being a part of the classroom community—sometimes leaving and reentering their classrooms midstream. So pronounced were the differences between who was and was not eligible for Title I services in one first grade classroom that whenever a student of color enrolled in the school and was assigned to this class, white middle-income students would ask the teacher, “Is he Title?” (see, for example, Weinstein et al. 2009). The very services that were supposed to eliminate the classroom achievement gaps were actually exacerbating the sociocultural gaps and labeling students in the program.

In some instances, schools determined that the best use of Title I resources was to hire instructional aids to go into classrooms to assist the eligible students with the ongoing work of the classroom. The problem with this model was that often the instructional aids were unsure of exactly who they should be serving and their human inclination was to help any student who asked for help. Also, as paraprofessionals they were often in no position to make instructional decisions. They followed the direct instructions of the classroom teachers. In this model, it was difficult to see how students were actually benefiting from the Title I resources. State and local agencies provided the resources; they did not provide the instructional know-how.

After the release of the Commission on Excellence in Education’s widely publicized 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, addressing the needs of the nation’s low-income children shifted to sounding an alarm that the nation’s entire public school system was in jeopardy. This report focused on the cafeteria-like offerings of the high school curriculum and demanded a more coherent, rigorous approach to secondary education. However, despite the stir that *A Nation at Risk* caused, the report also failed to address the need to build teacher capacity and expand pedagogical repertoires. It would be the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy that in 1986 focused the nation on the dire need to upgrade its teaching force. The next year, 1987, Lee Shulman published “Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform” to provide some theoretical and conceptual coherence to the field of teaching. Shulman’s work provided the impetus for cre-

ating a national assessment to professionalize teaching by focusing on content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge.

Shulman’s paper was followed by work that raised questions about the role of culture in teaching. Scholars such as Lis Delpit (1986, 1988), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995a), and Michele Foster (1998) introduced the idea that the teachers’ culture and perspectives affect student achievement. An underlying premise of much of this work was that a generic vision of “good teaching” was unlikely to help low-income students who have struggled with traditional teaching be successful. On the ground, studies of excellent teaching revealed that teachers who understood students’ culture and incorporated that culture into their teaching were having more success with low-income African American students. Additionally, work with Native Hawaiian students and American Indian students revealed similar results (Au and Kawakami 1985; Erickson and Mohatt 1982). Ladson-Billings calls this teaching “culturally relevant pedagogy” and in a three-year study of eight exemplary teachers was able to isolate three major propositions—conceptions of self and others, conceptions of social relations, conceptions of knowledge—as ways to make sense of outstanding practice that is likely to support the academic, cultural, and socio-civic success of students who traditionally struggle in schools (1995a, 1995b).

Conceptions of Self or Others

A big challenge for the teaching profession is in elevating the status of teachers. Although teachers are among the nation’s more widely “admired” professionals (second only to fire fighters), the profession ranks low on prestige. Additionally, the perception of low status is exacerbated when teachers work with what they consider to be low-status students (Foster 1986). But teachers who practice a culturally relevant approach to teaching do not think of their students, their families, and their communities as deficient or defective. They believe their students are capable of academic success and that they as teachers are capable of contributing to that success. These teachers are less likely to have a technical orientation to-

ward teaching, are instead open to more fluid, less predictable classroom experiences and willing to change their practices when necessary. These teachers also connect with their students' communities in meaningful ways, such as attending local church services, athletic contests, block parties, and community cultural celebrations such as Juneteenth, Kwanzaa, and students' *quinceñeras*. Their approach to teaching reflects a belief that their students came to school with knowledge as opposed to being "empty vessels." This orientation stands in stark contrast to the one seemingly promulgated by deficit-based programs that advocate an approach that suggests that getting students away from home and community was essential for school success (see, for example, Payne 2005).

Conceptions of Social Relations

In their 1997 volume, *Working for Equity in Heterogeneous Classrooms*, Elizabeth Cohen and Rachel Lothan build on Cohen's early work to argue that how we structure classroom relations can support learning. The literature on classroom social interactions is plentiful and long-standing and teachers engaged in culturally relevant practice work to maintain fluid and flexible student-teacher relationships, attempt to connect with all students, develop a community of learners and encourage their students to learn collaboratively and take responsibility for each other (see, for example, Brophy and Good 1970; Rist 1970; Wilcox 1982; Ryan and Patrick 2001).

Classrooms structured this way try to minimize individual competition and instead work toward a team or family concept. Teachers working in this framework are willing to share power without relinquishing authority. Thus, in some instances students can expect to assume the role of teacher as they demonstrate knowledge and skills they have acquired. The collaborative grouping of students in these classrooms is not viewed as an opportunity to merely try something novel. Teachers are purposeful and systematic in making sure that students develop deep and extensive relationships with all of their classmates, not just those whose academic performance mirrors their own. Even in those instances character-

ized by some ability grouping, these groups remained fluid. Teachers encouraged peer tutoring and mentoring to remind students that they were in interdependent relationships with each other.

Conceptions of Knowledge

Finally, the research on culturally relevant pedagogy revealed that teachers in this pedagogical paradigm have a critical stance to the curriculum, knowledge, and skills they teach. They believe that knowledge is not static, that it should be shared, recycled, constructed and reconstructed. In addition to viewing knowledge critically, the teachers were passionate about knowledge and learning and build scaffolding to facilitate students' learning. In these classrooms, assessment is multifaceted and incorporates multiple ways for students to demonstrate competency and mastery.

In the well-researched work on cognitive guided instruction (CGI), Thomas Carpenter and Elizabeth Fennema and their colleagues argue that all children come to school with problem-solving abilities (1992). However, few classrooms offer meaningful, challenging problems for young children (especially classrooms serving low-income students) and consequently never really help students improve and develop additional problem-solving abilities (Carey et al. 1995). In their model, teachers may pose a problem but start by giving children time to solve problems, recruit responses from students that ask not what the answer is but rather how they arrived at an answer, listen beyond the answer, listen to the children's comments and vocabulary, and invite alternate problem-solving strategies. In this process, children learn that multiple paths to solving problems are respected and encouraged. Instead of focusing on right answer thinking, children learn that divergent thinking is more likely to yield deeper understanding of mathematical concepts than simply an answer.

In each of the classrooms where teachers practiced culturally relevant pedagogy, students were in multiple instances encouraged and rewarded for developing more robust problem-solving repertoires, not only in mathematics but in all subject areas and classroom interactions as well.

HOW ESEA COULD BE A BETTER POLICY

The significant changes in public education that have transpired since the passage of the legislation and its subsequent reauthorizations reflect the dynamic and shifting environment in which we attempt to educate all students.

How People Learn

Since 1965 scholars of learning sciences have come to prominence with more robust theories of learning that have a profound impact on how education can take place (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). We are seeing an exponential growth in what we now know as the *learning sciences*. Instead of separate and distinct disciplinary domains, learning sciences pulls on cognitive psychological, social psychological, and cultural psychological foundations of human learning. Drawing on fields as diverse as psychology, anthropology, cognitive science, computer sciences, and applied linguistics, the learning sciences extend the scope of learning beyond the classroom to include informal learning environments such as the home, church, community, after school experiences, and peer networks. This new approach to learning and teaching demands different ways to think about curriculum design and pedagogical strategies. Although ESEA has been reauthorized six times, the last round ushering in what became known as No Child Left Behind, little attention has been given to pedagogical innovation. This is clearly an area in which ESEA can be improved.

Because of the growing income inequality in the society (the largest disparity in the highly technological Western or G-7 world) and the increasing resegregation of schools we now see more schools where ESEA funding is allotted schoolwide. These are characterized by concentrations of poverty, inexperienced teaching staffs, and increased mobility of both students and staff. Because the NCLB reauthorization was more focused on standardized test score results these schools often are known for their “drill and kill” approach to teaching and learning where schools function as “test prep” factories. By using more research from the learning sciences, the policy can offer more op-

portunity for teaching and learning innovation and exploration.

Another way ESEA could be improved is by paying close attention to the shifts in the teaching profession. We should be considering the impact of the proliferation of fast track alternative certification for teaching and learning. Programs such as Teach for America (TFA), Teach-Now, Troops to Teachers, and state-sponsored alternative certification almost exclusively produce teachers who are assigned to low-income schools. Fast-track alternative teaching programs are not new. The same year ESEA was passed, the Higher Education Act made provision for the Teacher Corps (Rogers 2009). Teacher Corps, another of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty programs, was designed to provide elementary and secondary teachers for low-income, hard-to-staff schools. Unlike many of today’s alternative teacher education programs, Teacher Corps programs were developed in conjunction with higher education institutions and their local school district partners. Rogers described the program as an attempt to attract the “smartest” non-education majors to work in urban and rural schools. Unfortunately, many of the participants in the first cohort did come from education. The second cohort drew more male participants perhaps because of the built-in draft deferment. In many ways, today’s alternative certification programs mimic the Teacher Corps model except that they are linked to more entrepreneurial, neoliberal perspectives that run counter to a notion of a public school system.

Another way ESEA could improve would be to factor in the ways that U.S. students will increasingly compete with students throughout the world. In 1957, the U.S. public school system received what it thought of as its first international wake-up call. Always proud of its attempt to offer free public education to almost all of its students (children with disabilities were regularly excluded from public schools before legislative changes), American public schooling was the envy of the world. However, once the Soviet Union launched a space satellite, the public discourse was centered on a need to improve U.S. schools. Although many programs and groups benefited from this increased emphasis on public school-

ing, no straight line could be drawn from the classroom to space exploration. Rather, historians of science have argued that the involvement of schools in the space race was merely a tactic to garner more support from the public for the scientists the United States already had (Rudolph 2002). But the tactic worked. A greater infusion of resources was funneled into the sciences, mathematics, world languages, and college loan support.

Today, the work of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has made international comparison of the educational status of nations a kind of gold standard. Interesting, the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), established as the intellectual arm of the United Nations, has almost no clout in the discussion of education in Western, highly technological nations. Rather, UNESCO seems to be relegated to helping “poor” countries improve their schools and recruit more teachers. How the United States does on PISA (the international science measure) and TIMSS (the mathematics measure) have become the gauges to determine progress. Despite the United States’ remaining decidedly in the middle of the pack on these measures over time, a sense of heightened alarm and urgency is now prevalent. ESEA was not concerned with international comparisons when it realized that the national system had too much internal inequality. Nations with the highest average scores on international comparative tests typically have the lowest variation in scores. Score gaps between children from low- and upper-income families are smaller in the highest performing countries. One of the emphases on improving federal policy could be on raising the performance of low-income children to that of international students in highly technological nations.

In addition to having ESEA attend to changes in the teaching profession, it seems important for demographers to help policymakers think seriously about how shifting population demographics can impact a changing public school landscape. Reproduction theorists have long argued that our public schools are operating exactly the way they were designed to work (see, for example, Apple 2011;

Bowles and Gintis 2001). Middle-class and wealthy students are succeeding and poor children are failing. Such failure was tolerable they argue because there would always be a need for low-skilled, low-wage workers. However, the nation was not prepared for a global, interconnected economy that would require many more skilled and highly educated workers. It was not prepared for a world economy where manufacturing could be exported to factories and sweatshops where people earned pennies a day. It also was not prepared for a move to a bifurcated economy filled with “knowledge workers” and service workers, many of whom would earn minimum wage.

This demographic shift that produced many more low-skilled workers meant that the need for ESEA services would grow exponentially, especially when their numbers would accompany an exodus of middle-class families from urban areas who would elect to send their children to suburban or private schools. This intense concentration and growth of poverty is something ESEA can begin to consider in its reauthorization to ensure that all students experience school success.

CONCLUSION

The entire nation can and should celebrate the accomplishments of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and the political will to fight for its multiple reauthorizations. The act itself is a landmark in shaping the federal role in public schooling. But no law is perfect. The premise here is that ESEA, with all of its good intentions, experienced some significant fails. These include the failure to consider the assets and strengths of children and families from low-income circumstances and the failure to consider pedagogy or teaching expertise in the implementation of the act. Research on the resilience and resources of low-income families suggests that schools can engage with families beyond a deficit-based paradigm. Instead of presuming that professional educators know better, a reauthorized ESEA can open up opportunities for significant and meaningful parent and family engagement. Despite these failures, I am hopeful that future reauthorizations will and can take into account major changes in technology, teacher prepara-

tion, and increasing globalization that may radically reorient our thinking about public schooling.

This article began with a reference to the award-winning and celebrated children's program *Sesame Street* because of its link in time and intent to ESEA. But *Sesame Street* was not limited by the slow, ponderous ways of law. As a part of a nimble and creative industry, *Sesame Street* can and does change with the external social and cultural changes. It has taken up issues of disability, child abuse, and even AIDS in its national and international iterations. *Sesame Street* also pays close attention to pedagogy. Its rapid, attention-getting, commercial-like appeals to learning numbers and letters reflects an understanding that from an early age infants and toddlers will stop what they are doing to pay attention to a jingle or catchy tune. The program uses rhythm, rhyme, and repetition to teach both skills and concepts. Viewers learn how to make analogies and moral judgments as they acquire basic skills like counting and recognition of sound-symbol relationships. Unfortunately, this combination of conceptual and skill-based knowledge is woefully absent in many of the practices embedded in ESEA Title I programming.

Also, *Sesame Street* never characterized the homes and communities of its audience as deficient or lacking. By basing the program solidly in an urban community, the creators of *Sesame Street* were deliberate in emphasizing the strengths and resources of the urban community. The program never considered various family configurations as problematic or "wrong." Some characters had two parents, some had one, and some lived in extended family relations with grandparents and fictive kin. Community members on *Sesame Street* all were thought capable of both teaching and learning to enrich each other. The intergenerational relations and various family configurations were reminiscent of urban life in low-income communities.

However, with all of the wonderful assets that *Sesame Street* brought to young children in low-income urban communities, it had no way to exclude middle- and upper-income families from both benefiting from and building on what the program offered. For example, al-

though low-income children could watch an hour of *Sesame Street* each day, middle-income and wealthy families could enhance the viewing hour with ancillary materials such as books, talking Muppets (like Tickle-me-Elmo), and later videos of the program. Although *Sesame Street* could help low-income students become ready for formal school settings, it also provided middle- and upper-income students with a boost given that their more highly educated parents were likely to create extensions that would extend their literacy and mathematics skills beyond those that *Sesame Street* offered.

The intent and results of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 should not be minimized. The act represents a deliberate attempt through schooling to close the opportunity gap and pay down the education debt (Carter and Welner 2013; Ladson-Billings 2006). The problems that low-income families face, however, are broader and deeper than what schools can remedy. Issues of under- and unemployment, health disparities (from prenatal to dental, optical, auditory screenings, and increased childhood obesity), environmental threats (such as lead paint poisoning, rising asthma rates due to air pollution and vermin, and so on) and food insecurity (such as living in food deserts, neighborhood saturated with fast food restaurants, and a lack of access to fresh produce) all affect the education outcomes of children from low-income families. In addition, material lack is not the sole basis for the disparity. The limited access to political power is a major factor in closing down opportunity for children from low-income families. Without the ability to choose their representatives to city government and school boards, low-income families remain without a voice and disenfranchised when it comes to decision making that directly influences the educational lives of their children. My notion of an education debt asserts that despite legal or policy decisions such as school desegregation and funding equity, U.S. public schools have failed to fully implement either (Frankenberg and Taylor, this issue).

New Orleans is a classic case of low-income disenfranchisement. The catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina allowed neoliberal in-

terests to make wholesale changes in low-income communities. Firing all public school teachers meant that those with long-standing community relationships would not be a part of rebuilding the school system. By creating market-like school choice, the poorest of the poor were more likely to be relegated to the least desirable schools. The entire concept of neighborhood schools was destroyed for low-income families. Conversely, middle-income and wealthy communities continue to have access to the best school facilities, the best curricular offerings, and the best teachers. What has been advertised as choice is not choice for all (Carr 2013; Dixon 2011). As was true with traditional school patterns, the “new” approaches to schooling, creating something called portfolio districts, creates winners and losers. And, through the use of market language, these portfolios include a variety of “investments” where “losers” are dumped and “winners” receive even greater investments. However, it is no surprise that the poorest children continue to attend “loser” schools (Dowdall 2011). Their schools lack adequate physical facilities, strong instructional leadership, well-prepared teachers, expansive curricular offerings, and positive home-school-community relationships.

Omnibus bills like ESEA always require refinement and adjustment. We must presume that policymakers can learn from past practices and previous mistakes. The goals of ESEA are the “right” goals. The anthropological contribution to a policy issue such as ESEA can be a more in-depth look at the resources and strengths of the culture or cultures the policy intends to affect. Instead of focusing on what a policy can do for a group, anthropological perspectives may force the question of what a policy can do with a group. We should be doing everything we can to close the education opportunity gap between low-income and middle-income communities. More recently, districts and municipalities have sought legal remedies for narrowing resource differentials between wealthy and poor districts (see for example, *Abbeville County School District et al. v. the State of South Carolina*, 335 S.C. 58, 68, 515 S. E.2d 535, 540, 1999 and *Campaign for Fiscal Equity v. State of New York*, 86, NY 2nd 306,

1995). Because the nation seems to have little appetite for pursuing school desegregation cases, cases have been brought in New York and South Carolina to argue for funding equity. If we cannot get commitments to dismantle “separate and unequal” some communities are willing to settle for a version of “separate and equal funding.” Ultimately, we will need policy, personnel, and practices that show our most vulnerable students how to get to *Sesame Street*.

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