

## Culture, Poverty and Education in Appalachian Kentucky

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Appalachian Kentucky has a long history of poverty and subsistence living that has permeated the social structure and culture, including public education. Consequently, poverty has actually postponed or delayed the development of public education, as well as contributed to nonparticipation in the education system by much of the population well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (McVey, 1949). "Livin's more important than schoolin'" is a powerful statement by one mountain woman that condenses a complex socioeconomic situation into the priorities of mountain life (Reck & Reck, 1980, p. 19).

Four books are considered necessary background reading before beginning any project in Appalachian studies: *Appalachia on Our Mind* (Shapiro, 1978); *Yesterday's People* (Weller, 1965); *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers* (Eller, 1982); and *Night Comes to the Cumberland* (Caudill, 1963). These four sources are consistently cited in the majority of the literature on Appalachia. The authors describe a multifaceted culture that includes geographic and social isolation; the relationship of the people to the land; the value of kinship ties; the relevance of schooling; a stagnant economy; distrust of outsiders and government; powerlessness and reluctance to change; fatalism; and the results of political and economic exploitation (Ball, 1969; Billings, 1974; DeYoung, 1995; Fisher, 1977; Gaventa, 1977; Lewis, 1970; Miller, 1977). The interconnections of all of these characteristics make the study of just one or two characteristics difficult.

### *Historical and Sociological Overview*

The first settlers to the Kentucky mountains were English, Scottish, and Irish immigrants to the United States. They were a strong and stubborn lot, opinionated and often cruel (McVey, 1949; Weller, 1965). The collective group reflected the perennial frontiersmen, interested in freedom from the restraints of law, order, and a differing culture. Settling into wealth, comfort, and the benefits of a regulated society was not the mountaineer dream or preference (Caudill, 1963; Weller, 1965). The settlers in the mountains were rugged, ingenious, and wanted to be left alone. When commerce, industry, and education were growing and developing in much of the country, little change or progress found its way into the Appalachian Mountains (Clarke, 1997; Shapiro, 1978).

Appalachian Kentucky had a "closed door" culture that was fiercely independent. Independence gradually became staunch individualism. The "public good" was of no interest unless it coincided with "private good." Subsequently, the Appalachian people became existence-oriented rather than improvement-oriented (Shapiro, 1978; Weller, 1965). This traditional status quo held a certain comfort, and change was undesirable. Fatalism and religious fundamentalism developed to deal with the harshness of the land, the consequences of poverty, and the physical isolation (Caudill, 1963; Clarke, 1997; McVey, 1949; Weller, 1965).

The poor and rural mountainous areas received little money or attention from the state to build schools or an education system for many years. The politicians and the wealthy, living in predominantly populated urban counties, held the real power in the state and totally ignored the poor Appalachians (McVey, 1949). Monies earmarked for roads throughout the state always seemed to disappear or dry up before arriving in the mountain counties. No roads continued the isolation. The state government's partiality with more populated counties and neglect of the mountain counties continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Deskins, 1994; Shapiro, 1978).

The first two state constitutions of 1792 and 1799 made no mention or provision for public education (McVey, 1949). The educated men who settled in Kentucky believed education was only for the elite, not the common man. In fact, the majority of Kentucky citizens, rich or poor, felt that education was a private matter and not the business of the state to furnish free education at public expense. Priorities considered more important than education were many, including: settling land title disputes; clearing the land and making a living; establishing a stable banking system and court system; promoting economic development; and maintaining a strong opposition to taxes (Clarke, 1997). The people simply did not realize the value or utility of education (Ligon, 1942).

McVey (1949), Ligon (1942), and Clarke (1997) consistently refer to this negative public attitude concerning public education. Consequently, public schools were not funded by the state until 1904, one hundred twelve years after statehood. Sadly, this would not be the end of political and irresponsible inaction in Kentucky, especially in Appalachia.

Poverty, subsistence farming, and lack of transportation delayed public education in the Kentucky mountains considerably longer than the rest of the state (Deskins, 1994).

### *Appalachian Culture*

Appalachia is a descriptive term that means different things to different people, depending on whether you are an outsider or have roots in the region. The most common assessment of Appalachia by outsiders is of a poor, isolated, and shoeless mountain people with too many children, little or no formal education, and barely making a hardscrabble living in an inhospitable environment (Weller, 1965). As with most stereotypes, there is an element of truth to this characterization, but little understanding of the people, their ways of knowing, their environment, or their circumstances.

The geography of Appalachian Kentucky has always been problematic and greatly responsible for determining a particular way of life. The mountains on the eastern boundary of Kentucky range from 4,000 to 5,000 feet elevation and are covered with thick forests. The only arteries of transportation before the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the valley floors between the mountains and the natural waterways. Natural waterways were only usable in the summer and fall because of bad weather. The relief and steepness of the mountain slopes affected land use and was highly susceptible to erosion if trees were removed, making cultivation difficult (Shapiro, 1978; Whisnant, 1983; U.S. Dept. Agriculture, 1935).

Appalachia's isolation began as physical isolation enforced by a rugged topography. The isolation eventually influenced the culture by holding the mountaineer in and keeping others out, preventing change or contact with the outside world. Decades of harsh and desperate living conditions nourished fatalism and fundamentalism, which encouraged the peoples' acceptance of the conditions as permanent and their lot in life (Caudill, 1963; Shapiro, 1978; Weller, 1965). Eventually, people no longer wanted change, nor would they accept change. The mountains and hollows isolated the people from the rest of Kentucky and the rest of the country, creating a kinship system of shared work, support, and recreation. All family members were needed for tending crops and farm animals, hunting and fishing, and taking care of younger children, performing household duties, and providing continuity (Weller, 1965).

The people developed pride and rugged individualism through strong bonds of kinship and love of the land. Because each "holler" often had its own family group, mistrust of outsiders was continued and reinforced (Caudill, 1963). Little value was placed on "book learning," thus a fundamentalist and fatalistic religious faith developed that comforted, as well as encouraged the acceptance of poverty and hardship as one's lot in life (Pierce, 1995). The family network of each hollow

was practically self-sufficient, giving little reason to "go to town," which could be a day's ride on horseback. Bartering with neighboring hollows provided needed and available goods and services. Life was hard in the mountains, but the mountaineers were happy and satisfied with their life (Weller, 1965).

Although the aforementioned cultural characteristics have in some way affected the development of education, poverty has historically been the most consistent and salient factor shaping education in Appalachia (Gotts, 1986; Silver & DeYoung, 1985; Maggard, 1990). Isolation, and the culture that developed from that isolation, are also interconnected with poverty. Alan DeYoung, of the University of Kentucky Appalachian Center, as well as other Appalachian historians, suggests that poverty and isolation are so entrenched in the rural Appalachian Mountains, a remedy has not been forthcoming (1985). Present circumstances and one hundred and fifty years of history appear to support that position in many eastern Kentucky counties.

Cause for continued poverty in Appalachian Kentucky can be separated into two categories: environmental influences and cultural influences (Billings, 1977; DeYoung, 1985; Friedman, 1966; Gotts, 1986; U.S. Dept. Agriculture, 1935). Environmental reasons for poverty include physical isolation from the rugged mountain terrain, lack of any economic development, and sparse population. In the case of Appalachian Kentucky, the isolation and rugged terrain have made the introduction of any economic development implausible, if not impossible. There is literally no flat land in the more rural counties, as well as a very limited number of employable workers (Ford, 1962; Watson, 1993).

Explanation of the cultural influences on continued poverty in Appalachia Kentucky is more complicated. This paper does not debate the existence of an Appalachian culture or the merits of a "culture of poverty" (Friedmann, 1966; Leacock, 1971; Levine & White, 1986; Valentine, 1968). However, my underlying assumptions affirm a culture, as well as certain cultural characteristics that have been most influential in the continued poverty and limited circumstances. The Appalachian people have always been impoverished compared to middle-class American standards (Bradshaw, 1992; Commission on Poverty, 1968). One generation passed to the next generation the acceptance of poverty and a fatalistic viewpoint of life (Lewis, 1970). Additionally, since education was not a priority and no jobs were available, why continue an education? A fatalistic and fundamentalist view of life developed coping skills that perpetuated the acceptance of the "status quo." The close kinship ties prevented many from leaving the area to find work for fear of leaving the security of family and comfort of the mountain lifestyle. Thus, poverty persisted (Caudill, 1963; Eller, 1982; Shapiro, 1978; Weller, 1965; Whisnant, 1983).

The literature is replete with statistics which show few Appalachian children score above average on standardized tests, and significantly more score below average when compared to non-Appalachian counties (Asher, 1935; DeYoung, Vaught & Porter, 1981; DeYoung, 1985; Tickamyer & Tickamyer, 1987; Watson, 1993). The connection between poverty and education is illustrated in these studies through comparison of test scores and money spent per student in Appalachian and non-Appalachian counties. Explanations consistently given for comparative differences include culture, poverty, and economic conditions (Watson, 1993).

### *Discussion*

Appalachia has long been studied through two commonly used models: the cultural difference model and the colonialism/dependency model (Ball, 1969; Billings, 1974; Branscome, 1971; DeYoung, 1985; Gaventa, 1977; Leacock, 1971; Lewis, 1970; Reck & Reck, 1980; Salstrom, 1990; Weller, 1965). These two models attempt to elaborate and explain the Appalachian subculture, as well as describe the psychological/sociological/economical/political inner-workings of the people. Both models encompass a historic overview and perspective that appear appropriate and necessary for full understanding of how poverty has influenced education in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. I posit that the cultural difference (not cultural deficit) model best examines the culture-poverty-education scenario in Appalachian Kentucky.

### *Cultural Difference Model*

The cultural difference model has experienced numerous name changes over the years (i.e., subculture model [Ball, 1969; DeYoung, 1995; DeYoung et al., 1981; Valentine, 1968], cultural deprivation model [DeYoung et al., 1981], and culture of poverty model [Billings, 1974; DeYoung et al., 1981; Leacock, 1971; Levine & White, 1986; Valentine, 1968; Whisnant, 1983]). The basic premise of the model describes how values and norms of a culture pass from generation to generation through socialization. If the cultural norms and values are mountain-rural and poverty-based, each generation appears to be unable to accommodate changing conditions in order to take advantage of opportunities for improvement and modernization (DeYoung et al., 1981; Levine & White, 1986; Valentine, 1968). Stagnant circumstances also maintain the status quo.

DeYoung (1985) further described the cultural difference model as a result of values resistant to change in which local ties to the land and reliance on extended family for support,

among other values, insulate the people from pressures to accept mainstream norms. Therefore, change is considered unacceptable by many Appalachians because it may not be consistent with long-held values and norms. The cultural context of poverty is necessary in any attempt to study Appalachia. Moreover, studies cannot judge, describe, or make conclusions concerning the value system of one culture by comparing them to another culture, which is exactly what has been done when Appalachia is compared to urban, suburban, or minority populations.

Characteristics of Appalachian culture are often depicted in the somewhat dramatic and destructive traits of traditionalism and fatalism, which portray Appalachians as passive and apathetic carriers of their culture (Anderson, 1964; Ball, 1969; Caudill, 1963; DeYoung et al., 1981; DeYoung, 1983; Eller, 1982; Ford, 1962; Lewis, 1970; Reck & Reck, 1980; Whisnant, 1983). Ball describes a fascinating portrait of the Appalachia people as an *analgesic* subculture, unwilling as well as unable to deal with change or improvement because of *nonrational* responses to their circumstances. This position apparently assumes that normal behavior should be rational, and that nonrational responses may cause one to be inflexible, nonadaptive, and unmotivated or goal oriented. Thus, the conceptualizations and cultural themes of fatalism, powerlessness, traditionalism, and religious fundamentalism act as pain relievers or "analgesics" to the conditions and circumstances in which the mountain people have found themselves for generations (Ball, 1969; Levine & White, 1986; Lewis, 1970; Reck & Reck, 1980; Valentine, 1968).

### *Conclusion*

Examination of the cultural difference model can improve understanding of poverty and its effect on education in Appalachian Kentucky. However, can examination of this model produce any possible solutions to social problems concerning culture, poverty and education? Thus far, solutions to the extreme poverty in many areas in Appalachia have not been forthcoming. A culture has developed based largely on that poverty, and the economic circumstances needed to bring about meaningful change appear unavailable or impossible to implement. Time and historical record reflect such a pessimistic conclusion.

Appalachian Kentucky has a long history of systemic poverty and inadequate education; the two seem forever bound to one another. In the process of trying to understand the interconnections of culture, poverty, and educational problems in Appalachia, the importance of the culture and environmental conditions cannot be overstated. A culture evolved from both the physical and social isolation of the people, which led to such cultural characteristics as strong

family ties, reluctance to change, distrust for outsiders, acceptance of poverty, and little need for schooling. LeVine and White (1986) classify these characteristics as typical in poor and rural populations throughout the world. 'Living is more important than schooling' expresses a mindset created by poverty and culture (Reck & Reck, 1980, p.19).

The cultural difference model also provides an opportunity as well as an appropriate framework to study and determine how and why Appalachians think, feel, and act as they do. Moreover, the model reminds researchers that remedies that are appropriate in urban or suburban environments may not be appropriate or beneficial to the people in the Appalachian Mountains. Assumptions that education will always solve poverty are not accurate. Cultural influence cannot be separated from the equation. The juxtaposition of culture, poverty, and education is necessary for understanding...and finding the solution to social problems.

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