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Commentary

Culturally Based Explanations of Minority Students' Academic Achievement

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Some cultural ecologists have proposed a classification of minority groups as "autonomous," "immigrant," or "castelike," and have defended the dichotomies between "macro" and "micro," "explanatory" and "applied" ethnography. Other scholars, arguing against this position on both theoretical and empirical grounds, suggest that culture is crucially important at the collective and individual levels for the academic achievement and overall psychological adjustment of immigrant, refugee, and other minority children. The construction of learning environments guaranteeing academic success for all children requires theoretical and practical approaches that (1) recognize the significance of culture in specific instructional settings, (2) prevent stereotyping of minorities, (3) help resolve cultural conflicts in school, (4) integrate the home and the school cultures, and (5) stimulate the development of communicative and other skills that children need in order to participate meaningfully in the instructional process. These approaches have permitted applied ethnographers to rapidly turn failure into success. CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS OF MINORITY ACHIEVEMENT, TAXONOMIES OF MINORITIES, ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

What is surprising is not that children fail, but that some do succeed against all odds.

—Marcelo Suarez-Orozco

If we take seriously that failure is an institutional fabrication . . . a culturally mandated foolishness that keeps us all in our respective places, what would an explanation of failure be?

—Ray McDermott

In their attempt to explain differential achievement of minorities, some scholars (Gibson 1987; Ogbu 1974, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1987a, 1987b; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi 1986; Suarez-Orozco 1987, 1988), inspired by the work of DeVos (1967, 1973, 1982, 1984), have defended a taxonomy of minority groups. Groups may be classified as "autonomous," "immigrant," or "castelike," emphasizing the dichotomies

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between "macro" and "micro," "explanatory" and "applied" ethnographic research.

In response, other scholars have argued against these dichotomies and taxonomy (Erickson 1987; McDermott 1987b; Moll and Diaz 1987; Trueba 1986; and others) on both theoretical and empirical grounds. They see the role of culture as an important factor in school achievement not only at the collective (ethnic group) level, but also at the individual (context-specific) level. In addition, they see schools and instructional activities as crucial in the overall adjustment of immigrants, refugees, and other minorities.

Macro- versus Microethnographic Research

During the 1950s and '60s educational sociologists (Bidwell and Friedkin 1988; Whitty 1985) seriously questioned the value of education as an instrument of social participation and upward economic mobility of all members of society. These sociologists used the concept of culture, conceived as the common life-style of members of a social class, in order to explain why the children of low-income families were less successful in school than their middle- or high-income counterparts. They gradually began to look beyond traditional areas of social organization and social structures, moving into an examination of instructional organization through the use of microethnographic methods, those same methods that earlier had provoked, on the part of traditional sociologists, severe criticism and the label of "unscientific" to many interactional analysts, ethnomethodologists, and sociolinguists (Whitty 1985).

Mainstream sociology, however, continued to focus on power distribution and the macroanalytical levels in the study of the use of power in social institutions:

The theoretical path, which in practice turned out to be a largely neo-Marxist one, was taken by those whose major concern was with the ways in which the interests of dominant groups in society are translated into social values which inform schools, which in turn replicate the social structure. [Whitty 1985:22]

What macrosociologists (Apple 1979; Sharp and Green 1975) pointed out insistently was that it really does not matter what the construction of reality is, or whose construction it is; what matters is that some people have the ability to control others, and that this ability is not directly related to language, or to any other psychological entity, but to the use of power and authority in the macrostructure. The work of American neo-Marxists Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (1976), was uniquely influential in liberal European academic circles because it stated that the view of education as an instrument of social justice

and economic mobility was an American democratic myth (Bidwell and Friedkin 1988; Whitty 1985).

It is precisely in this historical and theoretical context that Ogbu's writings, in particular two major volumes, *The Next Generation* (1974) and *Minority Education and Caste* (1978), along with his subsequent work (Ogbu 1981, 1982, 1983, 1987a, 1987b), have been given an important place in current liberal anthropological thinking. Ogbu, impatient with the myopia of some microethnographers, contends that most of them "basically accept the assumption that minority children's social adjustment and academic performance difficulties are due to cultural and language differences" and that they focus on specific cultural domains such as "communicative style," "cognitive style," "motivational style," or "classroom social organization and social relations, interaction style, and, nowadays, 'literacy' and 'writing' styles" (Ogbu 1987b:313). Ogbu attacks microethnographers for studying only the failure of minorities, and for claiming theoretical legitimacy while advocating educational interventions, that is, while practicing "applied ethnographic research."

An unbiased reading of the literature does not support Ogbu's criticisms. The writings produced by scholars from the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP), the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition (LCHC), Stanford University and others (see, for example, Au and Jordan 1981; Boggs 1985; Diaz, Moll, and Mehan 1986; Moll 1986; Moll and Diaz 1987; Scribner and Cole 1981; G. Spindler 1982; Spindler and Spindler 1983, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c; Tharp and Galimore 1988; Trueba 1987a, 1987b, 1988a; and Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan 1988) show a great deal of flexibility in the use of theoretical frames and in their concern for expanding the success of minority and other children.

It is interesting to note that Ogbu claims that *only* macroethnography is "explanatory" ethnography:

Closely associated with microethnography is "applied ethnography," typified by two case studies. . . . In my understanding, these studies (Moll and Diaz 1987; Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp 1987) are not designed to "explain" why minority children succeed or fail in school. Instead, they are "intervention" studies, as Moll and Diaz repeatedly characterize their case study. Intervention ethnography or ethnographic research in search of "cultural solutions" or "cultural compatibility" is not and cannot be about *why* minority children succeed or fail in school; the orientation is toward discovering "what works" and, perhaps, "what works best for whom?" . . . One reason is that, like microethnography, intervention ethnography generally excludes minorities who are successful in spite of their cultural and language differences. [Ogbu 1987b:314; emphasis in original]

This statement reveals Ogbu's misconception about the role of culture in specific contexts, as well as the significance of research focused on this role. Anyone who has carefully read the studies cited (Au and

Jordan 1981; Boggs 1985; Diaz, Moll, and Mehan 1986; Moll 1986; Moll and Diaz 1987; Scribner and Cole 1981; G. Spindler 1982; Spindler and Spindler 1983, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c; Tharp and Gallimore 1988; Trueba 1987a, 1987b, 1988a; and Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan 1988) can see that not all "microethnographic" studies involve applied ethnography, and those that are applied have a cohesive theoretical framework behind them. Theory and fieldwork research feed each other and are complementary. Interventions may be part of the fieldwork study. Intervention studies have focused on children's differential success, and on issues other than language and culture group differences.

Explanatory versus Applied Ethnographic Research

The term "explanatory" regarding research is used in lieu of "basic," though the meaning of these terms did not become fully accepted until the Johnson administration. Anderson (1985) makes the following statement:

A taxonomy of research terminology employed during and subsequent to the Johnson Administration would include the following terms for applied research: research in the service of man, strategy for the cure of disease, targeted research, mission-oriented or disease-oriented research, programmatic research, relevant research, commission-initiated research, contract-supported research, and payoff research. Basic research was also termed fundamental, undirected, or non-targeted research. [Anderson 1985:31]

Anderson's critical point is that funded research has been inextricably tied to political waves, and that much of the research during the last and this century has clearly been utilitarian, linked to expectations of economic productivity, improvement in public health and international prestige (Anderson 1985). This is especially true of much of the post-World War II research funded by the federal government in the United States. Basic research has gradually become to mean research in which knowledge (regardless of how it has been produced) is not intended for policy or practice.

The intervention-oriented research by scholars associated with the University of Hawaii and the Kamehameha schools, teamed with others from the University of California at Los Angeles (see Tharp and Gallimore 1988), and Santa Barbara (Duran 1983; Goldman and Trueba 1987; Trueba 1987a, 1987b, 1988a; Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan 1988) has been inspired by the work of neo-Vygotskians from the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition (LCHC—Cole and D'Andrade 1982; Moll 1986; Scribner and Cole 1981), and ultimately by the work of Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1962, 1978). Their research offers a clear example that intervention and explanatory ethnography can go hand in hand. More recently, Tharp and Gallimore (1988) have proposed the application of Vygotsky's notion of socially based cognitive development as interpreted by neo-Vygotskians (Cole and D'Andrade 1982;

Cole and Scribner 1974; Wertsch 1981, 1985) to teacher education. This approach promises to become extremely helpful in integrating culture theories and recognizing the significance of the cultural context of learning (see Diaz, Moll, and Mehan 1986; Rueda 1987; Scribner and Cole 1981; Wertsch 1985).

In summary, the dichotomy between basic and applied research was constructed for political and practical reasons that have nothing to do with the intrinsic nature or value of the research itself. This dichotomy is particularly unsuitable to ethnography which, as a scientific endeavor, is always explanatory and potentially applicable to actual organizations. Is there any reason why a theoretical analysis cannot have implications for practice? Indeed increasing literature would argue the opposite (see Cummins 1986; Freire 1973; Giroux 1983; Lather 1986; Montero-Sieburth 1985; Namenwirth 1986; and others following "action research" in the liberation movement of Freire).

In brief, it seems rather presumptuous and self-serving for opponents of intervention research to claim that applied ethnographic research does not start with theoretical assumptions about differential achievement of student groups, that only explanatory ethnography does start with such assumptions, and that applied research is not theoretically sophisticated or comparative (Ogbu 1987a, 1987b). The problem with Ogbu's dichotomies is not that they are difficult to understand (Ogbu 1987b:315), but that they are unwarranted.

Ogbu is concerned with a central issue: "Why do some minorities successfully cross cultural boundaries and/or opportunity barriers and do well in school? Why do some other minorities lack success in crossing cultural boundaries and/or opportunity barriers and, therefore, perform less well in school?" (Ogbu 1987b:317). Perhaps theory, in order to be truly "macroanalytical," should be broader: Why do some students (minority and mainstream) succeed while others do not, regardless of cultural boundaries? Why should culture operate as a boundary? Might the idea of cultural boundaries be stereotypic? Ogbu implies that school success and cultural assimilation (or "crossing cultural boundaries") go together. Many minorities succeed in school without losing their cultural identity.

The explanation given by Ogbu for the differential academic success of minority students is "societal forces" plus "culturally determined boundaries." Societal forces (Ogbu 1987b:318) as an explanation is not new. Sociologists, particularly neo-Marxists, have articulated that position since the early 1950s and '60s, and have alluded to the *job ceiling* created by economic and social macrostructures mentioned by Ogbu (1978, 1987a, 1987b). See, for example, the discussion by Bowles and Gintis (1976) in the United States, restated in Europe by Whitty (1985). Bowles and Gintis explain that their model of corporate enterprise examines the control of employment by capitalist employers "in their own interests and geared toward mediating the inherent conflict be-

tween capital and labor" (Bowles and Gintis 1976:83). As these authors point out:

The degree of wealth inequality has remained unchanged since World War II. Viewing this panorama of persistent inequality, the liberal community of the 1960's grew to emphasize ever more heavily the age-old distinction between inequality of economic opportunity and inequality of economic outcomes. According to this perspective, inequality of economic outcomes (income, status, or job desirability) is necessitated by the very structure of industrial society. [Bowles and Gintis 1976:86–87]

Societal forces alone are not the full explanation for differential achievement within and between minority groups. Anthropologists should perhaps follow the lead of their colleagues in sociology, who are dropping the macro versus micro and the basic versus applied dichotomies and are moving freely from one extreme to the other in the methodological spectrum (Mehan, Hertwick, and Meihls 1986).

Stereotyping Taxonomy of Minority Groups

The cultural ecologists' taxonomy, particularly as used by Ogbu, divides minority groups into autonomous, immigrant or castelike categories, based on psychological responses of "types" of minorities to similar oppressive conditions.

Ogbu's position (1974, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1987a, 1987b) has been criticized (Erickson 1987) on the grounds that (1) it does not explain the success of many minority students (including "castelike" minorities), (2) it ignores language and tends to be reductionistic to a position of economic determinism, and (3) it lacks empirical evidence. Erickson's reaction is predictable in terms of his sociolinguistic theoretical perspective (see Erickson 1984, 1986). Some of the problems with Ogbu's overgeneralization and reasoning, however, need further discussion. For example, the role of culture in the acquisition of knowledge within context-specific settings may need some clarification. Perhaps Ogbu's peculiar use of castelike, immigrant, and autonomous minority types, which was based on the work by DeVos (1967, 1973, 1982, 1984), may not be applicable to some of the ethnic groups that Ogbu has identified as prototypes of each category. Is the justification for Ogbu's taxonomy psychological—he deals with "involuntary" presence of some minorities in this country, or with their lack of motivation to achieve in school, or with their psychological response to oppression and their development of psychological boundaries in the context of acculturation—or is it primarily structural, that is, based on "societal forces"? In any event, what kind of empirical evidence does he present?

Ogbu has often clearly expressed the position that the system has oppressed minorities, and that minorities develop a response toward mainstream cultures that is shaped by the nature of the systemic social

exploitation. This makes sense in a broad sociohistorical sense, but it does not explain why individuals subjected to the same oppression, even from within the same ethnic group, respond differently. Ogbu views the differential response of ethnic groups as a culturally based boundary mechanism that mediates the impact of social and economic oppression, but he does not accept significant differential responses within a single ethnic group. Ogbu states that:

Castelike or involuntary minorities are people who were originally brought into United States society involuntarily through slavery, conquest, or colonization. Thereafter, these minorities were relegated to menial positions and denied true assimilation into mainstream society. American Indians, black Americans, and Native Hawaiians are examples. In the case of Mexican Americans, those who later immigrated from Mexico were assigned the status of the original conquered group in the southwestern United States, with whom they came to share a sense of peoplehood or collective identity. [Ogbu 1987b:321; emphasis in original]

Ogbu has attempted to build arguments regarding collective, psychological, culturally determined responses of entire ethnic groups, in the face of oppressive societal forces suffered by the ancestors of current ethnic group members. The typology of minority groups as autonomous, immigrant, or castelike is unfounded and highly stereotypic, mostly because it is built on imputed behavior and presumed psychological responses of certain members of ethnic groups, or on statistical macrosociological samples. In addition, this categorization is faulty because it is not supported by enough empirical evidence and it is based on reasoning contaminated by neo-Marxist and psychoanalytic biases. This position assumes a culturally determined response to societal forces on the part of "castelike" groups, for example, and makes this unique response the criterion to differentiate one group from another; in other words, the presumed cultural response to societal forces becomes the basis of the taxonomic differences between groups and forms the structure for the interpretation of ethnographic data gathered.

Ogbu has described "castelike" groups, and Mexicans in particular, as being composed of individuals who live *involuntarily* in this country, occupy menial positions, and remain at the bottom of the educational and economic ladder, failing to incorporate into mainstream American society. Where is the data for such an overwhelming generalization? There is the sociologically permanent reality of always having certain minority groups doing poorly in schools and living in low-income areas. Yet there is another reality, that of rapid upward mobility of individuals and families, moving out of the ghetto, to advance economically and educationally.

In the case of Mexicans, classified by Ogbu as an exemplary castelike group, we have obtained recent empirical evidence from studies showing that there is educational progress, an increase in English lan-

guage proficiency, and upward economic mobility taking place among the Mexican families in California and Arizona, and that the improvement is incremental across generations over a period of time (see Vélez-Ibáñez 1987; and the Rand Corporation Reports, McCarthy and Valdez 1985, 1986). With respect to the Mexicans of California, Rand's *Current and Future Effects of Mexican Immigration in California* (McCarthy and Valdez 1986) makes several important points:

1. The majority of Mexican-origin population living in the United States is foreign born, 45%, 40% are first generation, and only 15% are second generation. Thus the overwhelming majority of people who recognize themselves as Mexicans (85%) are either foreign born or first-generation U.S. born (McCarthy and Valdez 1986:9).
2. The pattern of immigration of Mexicans (85% are males in their twenties), both for legal and illegal immigrants, starts with short-term visits (commuters), goes on to cyclical "bracero-type" working, and ends in permanent residence (McCarthy and Valdez 1986:14).
3. The legal immigrants in 1980 were 1,265,000, distributed as follows: 25,000 short-term, 260,000 cyclical, and 980,000 permanent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1983).
4. The English-language ability of short-term immigrants was primarily either none or limited (77%). The English-language ability of cyclical immigrants was also similarly none or limited (64%), the majority of permanent immigrants had a good English-language ability (51%), and only 19% had none (McCarthy and Valdez 1986:30).
5. High dropout rates are much more characteristic of the Mexican born, who constitute a large proportion of the current Latino population in the state. Dropout rates among the U.S.-born Latinos are not much higher than those of other Californians.
6. Comparing the occupational profiles of Mexican born with those of U.S. born, and both with that of all Californians, we find the following distribution:

Highly skilled jobs, professional, teacher, manager, technician, sales clerk, account for 5% of Mexican born, 12% of U.S.-born Mexican origin, and 27% of all Californians. Service jobs account for 14%, 33%, and 34%, respectively. Semi-skilled jobs represent respectively 21%, 20%, and 19%. Farm jobs, 15%, 6%, and 3%. Unskilled, 45%, 29%, and 17% (McCarthy and Valdez 1986:75).

To the chagrin of neo-Marxists and some cultural ecologists, the conclusions from the Rand Report are clear in stating the occupational

progress and socioeconomic mobility of Mexican immigrants as a result of educational improvements:

The key to this occupational progress is education. Because they typically have no more than a sixth-grade education, most immigrants have little hope of filling anything but the lowest-paying jobs. But the high school education their children receive is their ticket to the next rung on the occupational ladder. Finally, post-secondary education opens white-collar job opportunities to the second generation, a substantial proportion of whom are employed in such jobs. [McCarthy and Valdez 1986:54–55]

The overall conclusion of the Rand Report, that Mexican immigration is not any different from earlier European and Asian immigration waves, severely limits empirical support for the stereotypic taxonomy advanced by Ogbu and his associates:

This is essentially the same process followed by earlier European immigrants and also by the state's recent Asian immigrants. . . . By and large, the European immigrants entering the country at the turn of the century, like most Mexican immigrants today, were from rural backgrounds and had little formal schooling. Indeed, the European immigrants had even less schooling than today's Mexican immigrants. However, during the period of rapid industrial growth at the turn of the century, average education levels in the United States were much lower, and high school and college education were less central to upward mobility than they are today. [McCarthy and Valdez 1986:55]

The categories of "castelike," "immigrant," and "autonomous" minorities are not clearly defined, nor are they mutually exclusive, nor do they account for the internal stratification of ethnic groups. Cultural ecologists who use the above categories should also account for the similarities between refugee students, which exist at the same time as their differential academic success. Most of all, they should account for the documented success of "castelike" minorities in spite of the stereotypes and any imputed or presumed "castelike" behavior.

Socioculturally Based Theory of Achievement

An important assumption in this article is that there is a very close relationship between language, culture, and cognition, and that a theory is needed to conceptually integrate the explanation of successful learning activities, especially for children who find themselves in cultural transition. Theories developed by Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and neo-Vygotskians from the sociohistorical school of psychology, to be discussed below, attempt to explain the cognitive development of children on the basis of this relationship, and are often referred to as "socially and culturally based" theories of cognitive development.

The theories below raise a number of important questions: Is the relationship between language and cognition mediated by the role of

culture, or by culturally normed emotional responses from students? What is the nature and significance of internalization of new cultural values that are required for literacy development in English? What is the most effective use of language in the classroom, if the function of language is to transfer knowledge and cultural values? These and similar questions cannot be answered until we have a cohesive theory of learning that includes culture. The contribution of Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskians in this regard is important.

Ogbu may have placed himself in a position that does not permit him to develop a strong culturally based theoretical approach to differential school achievement. At the very foundation of such an approach must lie a clear understanding of the role of culture in knowledge acquisition. This is what has been accomplished by the neo-Vygotskian-oriented research of the sociohistorical school of psychology as interpreted by the scholars associated with KEEP and LCHC, mentioned above. The writings by scholars cited earlier (Cole and D'Andrade 1982; Cole and Scribner 1974; Diaz, Moll, and Mehan 1986; Goldman and McDermott 1987; McDermott 1987a, 1987b; Moll 1986; Moll and Diaz 1987; Rueda 1987; Scribner and Cole 1981; Tharp and Gallimore 1988; Trueba 1987a, 1987b, 1988a, 1988b; Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan 1988; Wertsch 1981, 1985), and by others who use similar approaches, emphasize the unique role of culture along the lines of the Spindlers' recent contributions (1987a, 1987b). The view that culture affects the entire process of knowledge acquisition and information processing, regardless of sociological forces, colonialist oppression, or historical backgrounds of students, is predicated on the ethnographic data gathered to document both academic success and failure, as well as to explore more effective ways to create adequate home and school learning environments.

Many of these scholars argue that, from a neo-Vygotskian perspective, intellectual development is socially and culturally based, and that what happens in the home, school, and local community (which most likely mirrors the characteristics of the larger society) is crucial to understanding the learning processes and academic achievement of all children, including minority children.

The lack of theoretical structure in dealing with knowledge acquisition forces cultural ecologists to speculate that "castelike" individuals develop a "castelike" personality type; that is, they see themselves as inferior and the dominant population as superior, and this personality type explains why some children achieve higher than others. How does one explain a rapid change in the achievement ladder through successful interventions of the type described by Moll and Diaz (1987)? Was there also a sudden personality change? What is the empirical evidence for these speculations? There is a great need for the development of a theory of academic achievement that takes into consideration the home culture of students. The next section offers some ideas regarding current efforts to build such a theory.

Cultural Values and Learning

The significant role of cultural values, assumptions, knowledge, and commitments, which are at the heart of successful adjustment to the new culture of the school and to academic achievement, can be best understood in the context of the work by the Spindlers (1987a, 1987b), who deal with cultural conflict, acculturation, and acceptance of new cultural values. Having recognized the primary role of social institutions in the differential achievement of minorities, we still have to account for differential cultural responses to institutional hindrance. Culture, in the Spindlers' work, is not a peripheral entity that may or may not be part of the explanation of group "success" in school. Rather, culture operates both at the collective macrosocial, and at the micropsychological levels.

While sociologists have made considerable progress in creating cooperative macro- and microsociological approaches to study differential achievement of minorities, they may have left out the critical role of culture in explaining the relationship between instructional processes and learning processes. The more recent writings of psychologists educated in the anthropological tradition of ethnographic fieldwork in schools and theoretically involved in neo-Vygotskian thinking (see, for example, Tharp and Gallimore 1988) suggest ways to conceptualize the workings of culture in the acquisition of knowledge through formal instruction.

Central to neo-Vygotskian theory is the process of cognitive socialization taking place within the natural social units in which a child grows up. The entire process of intellectual development is conceptualized as intimately related to cooperative social activities, which pave the way for communicative and cognitive functions that will later become self-regulated in the child. The notion of "assisted" learning in children is developed by Tharp and Gallimore (1988) on the Vygotskian principle that the symbolic systems of communication and social action are dynamically intertwined and inseparable in the process of cognitive development:

From the very first days of the child's development his activities acquire a meaning of their own in a system of social behavior and, being directed towards a definite purpose, are refracted through the prism of the child's environment. The path from object to child and from child to object passes through another person. This complex human structure is the product of a developmental process deeply rooted in the links between individual and social history. [Vygotsky 1978:30]

The social and cultural basis for knowledge acquisition is predicated on the indivisibility of the psychological and sociocultural functions of the family and social group. As it has been documented in the historical research of Vygotskian theory, concerning the linkage between sociocultural and psychological dimensions of children's developmental

functions, Vygotsky felt that "any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or in two places. First, it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane" (Wertsch 1981:163). The cultural development of the child, therefore, "appears between people as a interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category" (1981:163). This process has been described as the process of internalization of cognitive and cultural structures (or socialization) whereby the child moves freely between socio-cultural activities and mental activities. Tharp and Gallimore (1988), interpreting this Vygotskian perspective, view the cognitive and social development of the child as "an unfolding of potential through the reciprocal influence of child and social environment," whereby the child is brought to engage in independent action through the assistance of others.

Vygotsky describes assisted performance and the zone of proximal development as:

The distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. [Vygotsky 1978:86]

Therefore, while the actual development of a child is measured by what the child can do independently (the fruits of development), the zone of proximal development "defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state" (the buds of development) (1978:86). This concept permits psychologists to understand the developmental processes that are forming and that will constitute future accomplishments.

The transition from assisted to independent performance must be anticipated by the parent, teacher, or more knowledgeable peer, and the assisted performance prior to transition requires (1) effective communication between child and adult/peer, (2) shared cultural values and assumptions, and (3) common goals for activities. While the child may have only a limited understanding of the activities, the task and its goals, adults (or more capable peers) guide and model for the child, and the child imitates. Gradually the child understands an activity and its components in its appropriate cultural context, along with the meaning and consequences of the activity. Through culturally and linguistically appropriate interaction, the child then develops a suitable cognitive structure that is continuously revised with new experiences and feedback (Tharp and Gallimore 1988; Wertsch 1985). The concept of "activity setting" is important to understand the role of culture in the acquisition of knowledge.

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) explain that activity settings encompass both internal (intramental, cognitive, intrapsychological) features,

and external (motoric, interpsychological, environmental) features. They continue to explain:

Maintaining a unit of analysis that incorporates simultaneously all these features, features that social science has always separated, requires some discipline of thought, and places some burden of explanation on those who advocate it. [Tharp and Gallimore 1988]

To describe activity settings, Tharp and Gallimore have devised the five W's: the who, what, when, where, and why of activity settings. Following the order and issues outlined by Tharp and Gallimore (1988), with special reference to our discussion, will help the reader identify the significance of culture during the acquisition of knowledge and the academic socialization of children. What we need is to search for a cohesive theory of culture that permits an understanding of culture's crucial role in the process of knowledge acquisition and its intimate link to the developmental processes of children's cognitive skills. This can be accomplished through a neo-Vygotskian perspective.

Within the Vygotskian perspective, academic failure or success of children is not a personal attribute of any child, nor a collective characteristic of any ethnic group, but a social phenomenon linked to historical and social conditions. Furthermore, academic success is not a function of schools alone, but is conceptualized as a normal process that can be anticipated and pursued through appropriate steps and interventions across the multiple activity settings in which children are involved. Adequate socialization of children to learn assumes socialization to live, to participate in certain activities, and to play an active role. If a child or a group of children do not learn, this is a "systemic failure" (Cole and Griffin 1983), that is, a failure that occurs at many levels and in multiple activity settings. Consequently, the solution, from a Vygotskian perspective, is not to blame any individual or group of individuals, but to create the appropriate conditions for effective learning.

Conclusions

The conditions for effective learning are created when the role of culture is recognized and used in the activity settings during the actual learning process. Ultimately, cultural congruence is not only part of the appropriate conditions (which can be conceptualized as the appropriate five W's discussed above) for learning effectively. At the heart of academic success, and regardless of the child's ethnicity or historical background, an effective learning environment must be constructed in which the child, especially the minority child, is assisted through meaningful and culturally appropriate relationships in the internalization of the mainstream cultural values embedded in our school system.

The construction of academic success for all children means the development of systems of assistance through the activity settings mentioned earlier. Tharp and Gallimore (1988) explain, "Activity setting is a unit of analysis that transcends individuals and provides a meaningful way to integrate culture, local contexts and individual function." The classroom, playground, cafeteria, auditorium, indeed the entire school, are formed by activity settings. These settings can be optimally used to develop certain kinds of skills that would have impact on all other activities. The development of spoken language in the context of discourse skills, to inquire and pursue or increase knowledge, is crucial to the development of other skills; the Carpinteria Program discussed by Cummins (1986), along with the Kamehameha program discussed by Tharp and Gallimore (1988), provide good examples of this development.

While some scholars continue to speculate about success or failure, others create and document success through a theoretical framework that recognizes the role of culture in specific learning settings. The sheer fact that school failure may be rapidly reorganized into genuine academic success (see Goldman and McDermott 1987; Moll and Diaz 1987; Spindler and Spindler 1987a, 1987b; Tharp and Gallimore 1988; Trueba 1988a; Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan 1988) should have positive consequences for the reorganization of our own theories on the differential achievement of minorities. Perhaps we will have to scale down our expectations regarding the value of one approach versus others. In the end, the strength of ethnographic research and its contribution to theory building (Spindler and Spindler 1987a) will depend on the strength of each of the microanalytical links of the inferential chains that form our macrotheoretical statements.

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