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Understanding Cultural Diversity and Learning

JOHN U. OGBU

Core curriculum and multicultural education are two major approaches advocated in the current school reform movement. This article argues that neither of these approaches adequately addresses the problem of those minority groups who have not traditionally done well in the public school. Core curriculum advocates falsely assume that as a result of instituting a core curriculum, demanding higher standards, and patching up supposed individual deficiencies, all students will perform as expected. Multicultural education advocates inadequately design their program to focus on cultural differences in content and form. This article contends that the crucial issue in cultural diversity and learning is the relationship between the minority cultures and the American mainstream culture. Minorities whose cultural frames of reference are oppositional to the cultural frame of reference of American mainstream culture have greater difficulty crossing cultural boundaries at school to learn. Core curriculum and multicultural advocates have yet to understand and take this into account.

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Cultural diversity has become a household phrase in education, especially minority education. I suspect, however, that there is some misunderstanding about what it means and its relevance to minority education. As an anthropologist, I am sensitive to the use of the phrase *cultural diversity*; as a student of minority education, I am concerned about its application or misapplication with respect to the school adjustment and performance of minority children.

This article addresses two contrasting educational responses to the cultural diversity: (a) a core curriculum education movement and (b) a multicultural education movement. I argue that neither of the two responses will have an appreciable impact on the school-learning problems of those minorities who have not traditionally done well in school. The reason is that they are not based on a good understanding of the nature of the cultural diversity or cultural differences of minority groups.

I first summarize the two responses and their shortcomings. Second, I attempt to explain the nature of the cultural diversity and its implications for minority schooling. I do so by first distinguishing and describing different types of minorities and the difference in the relationship between their cultures and the mainstream American culture. Third, I examine their differing educational implications. I will conclude with some recommendations.

Responses to Cultural Diversity

Core Curriculum Education

Explicit advocates of a core curriculum for the U.S. public schools come largely from the humanities (Bennett, 1984;

Bloom, 1987; Finn, 1989; Hirsch, 1987, 1988). Their critics call them "assimilationists" (Carroll & Schensul, 1990). I believe, however, that core curriculum advocates are more concerned about U.S. economic and technological status in international competition than about assimilating culturally diverse groups into the mainstream culture. They think that U.S. schools should teach a core curriculum like German, Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese schools, countries that have made remarkable economic and technological advances. Americans attribute the technological advances to their superior education as evidenced by the fact that their students outperform American students by every academic measure.

Will this movement improve the school performance of those minorities who have not traditionally done well in school? One assumption in the core curriculum movement (and in related school reform movements) is that the academic performance of both the majority and the minority students depends on what goes on inside the schools and that what needs to be done is to "fix" the schools (Ogbu, 1988; Weis, 1985). Fixing the school will certainly have some positive effects, as can be seen from increasing numbers of minorities graduating from high school and college as well as entering the fields of math and science due to intervention programs.

However, the ability of a core curriculum to increase the school performance of some minority groups will be limited because it does not address the nature of minority cultural diversity. Past experience with compensatory education and other remedial programs suggests that it is not enough to simply announce higher academic standards and expectations (Passow, 1984). What goes on inside the schools, including the kind of curriculum taught, is very important for minority students (Edmonds, 1986; Ogbu, 1974), but more is involved. What the children bring to school—their communities' cultural models or understandings of "social realities" and the educational strategies that they, their families, and their communities use or do not use in seeking education are as important as within-school factors (Ogbu, 1988).

Multicultural Education

The other response is multicultural education. The current movement, led largely by minorities, emerged primarily in the 1960s, initially in response to cultural deprivation theory.

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Before then, minorities, such as Black Americans, protested against a differential and inferior curriculum; they wanted the same curriculum that was available to Whites (Bullock, 1970; Ogbu, 1978). Today, however, multicultural education is linked to cultural diversity (Yee, 1991). Moreover, the current demand for multicultural education is for both minorities who are doing relatively well in school and those who are not.

There is, however, no clear definition of multicultural education (see Appleton, 1983; Banks, 1989a, 1989b; Bullivant, 1981; Gay, 1979; Gibson, 1976; Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Suzuki, 1984). Furthermore, many writers propose diverse "models" of multicultural education that are rarely based on ethnographic or empirical studies of minorities' cultures. Gibson's (1976) survey found five models in the mid-1970s: (a) multicultural education for cross-cultural understanding, which, among other things, stresses teaching strategies affirming the right to be different and the need for members of different cultures to respect one another; (b) "culturally responsive education" at the elementary and secondary schools to enhance minority school learning by including minority cultures in the content of the curriculum and as a medium of instruction; (c) bicultural education, often associated with bilingual education programs, designed to reinforce minority students' cultures, languages, and identities while teaching the language and other skills functional in mainstream culture; (d) cultural pluralism in education, designed to preserve and strengthen ethnic-group identity and to increase minority groups' social, political, and economic participation in society; (e) multicultural education as the normal human experience, enabling individuals to participate competently in a multicultural society.

James Banks, probably the most prolific theorist, has also reviewed various models of multicultural education (Banks, 1981). He criticizes them for emphasizing cultural differences and deficiencies. He proposes a "multiple acculturation" model that would promote "cross-cultural competency" (Banks & Shin, 1981). Sleeter and Grant (1987) classify multicultural education into four types and added a fifth: (a) teaching the "culturally different," an assimilationist approach; (b) a human relations approach to improve interpersonal relations; (c) single-group studies to promote cultural pluralism by raising consciousness; (d) multicultural education within the regular curriculum to reflect diversity and thereby enhance pluralism and equality; (e) education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist (p. 423), proposed by the authors to encourage students to challenge social inequality and to promote cultural diversity. Baker (1978), Baptiste (1979), Gay (1979, 1988, 1990), and Suzuki (1984) have proposed other models.

Taken together, multicultural education fosters pride in minority cultures, helps minority students develop new insights into their culture, reduces prejudice and stereotyping, and promotes intercultural understandings (Rubalcava, 1991). But the crucial question is to what extent will multicultural education improve the academic performance of those minorities who have not traditionally done well in school? Rarely do multicultural education models address this question explicitly. Two exceptions are bicultural education and culturally responsive education (Gibson, 1976).

Multicultural education may indeed improve school learning for some minority children. However, for several reasons it is not an adequate strategy to enhance the academic per-

formance of those minorities who have traditionally not done well in school. One reason is that multicultural education generally ignores the minority students' own responsibility for their academic performance. Multicultural education models and actual programs convey the impression that educating minority students is a process whereby teachers and schools must change for the benefit of the students. They should acquire knowledge of minority cultures and languages for teaching minority children, promoting cross-cultural understanding, reinforcing ethnic identity, and so on. Multicultural education generally emphasizes changing teacher attitudes and practices. Yet a comparative study of the situation will show that school success depends not only on what schools and teachers do but also on what students do (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

Second, we suspect that multicultural education theories and programs are rarely based on actual study of minority cultures and languages. To our knowledge, many proponents of multicultural education models have not studied minority cultures *in minority communities*, although some have studied minority children at school and some are minority-group members. However, membership in a minority group is not a sufficient basis for theorizing about cultural influences on learning. For example, I have found that some members of my research team studying their own local communities initially did not recognize some relevant cultural data, including cultural assumptions underlying their own behaviors. Research with minority children at school provides a very limited access to the cultural assumptions underlying the children's distinctive attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, a good study of a minority group's culture or language may turn up some cultural/language differences that actually cause learning problems that cannot be remedied through cultural infusion into the curriculum or teaching and learning styles (Closs, 1986; Orr, 1987). What is also instructive is that there are minority groups whose language expressions, mathematical or number systems, and overt cultural behaviors might be different enough from those of White Americans to be considered barriers to learning math and science but whose members, nevertheless, learn more or less successfully. That is, they are able, eventually, to cross cultural and language boundaries and succeed academically. Thus, a third reason for the inadequacy of the multicultural education solution is that it fails to separate minority groups that are able to cross cultural and language boundaries and learn successfully, in spite of initial cultural barriers, from those that are not able to do so (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1987, 1990).

The question of who needs multicultural education to enhance academic success and who does not becomes more important when one looks at the increasing diversity in U.S. schools and classrooms (Yee, 1991). For example, we found only 5 or 6 ethnic groups represented in our initial study of Stockton, California, schools in 1968-1970. However, by 1986 the ethnic representation increased to 12 at the elementary, 11 at the junior high, and 16 at the senior high schools. As in earlier years, in 1986 some of the minority groups were doing very well in school in spite of their language and cultural differences, and some were not.

In summary, neither the core curriculum response nor the multicultural education response in its various forms is likely to enhance appreciably the academic achievement of those minority groups who have not traditionally done well in

school. Like the core curriculum movement, the multicultural education movement is based on the erroneous assumption that academic achievement is primarily the result of the transaction between the specific skills and abilities of the students and the teaching of the curriculum and the process of the classroom environment, including teacher attitudes. These movements fail to recognize that the meaning and value students associate with school learning and achievement play a very significant role in determining their efforts toward learning and performance. Furthermore, the meaning and value that students from different cultural groups associate with the process of formal education vary and are socially transmitted by their ethnic communities. The important point here is that neither the core curriculum approach nor the multicultural education approach will appreciably improve the school performance of some minority groups until they and other school interventions, innovations, and reforms are informed by an understanding of *why* children from specific minority groups are experiencing learning and performance difficulty.

The problem is not merely one of cultural and language differences, although these differences are important. What is even more significant, but thus far unrecognized, is the nature of the relationship between minority cultures/languages and the culture and language of the dominant White Americans and the public schools they control. The relationship between the minority cultures/languages and the mainstream culture and language is different for different minorities. And it is this difference in the relationship that is problematic in the ability of the minorities to cross cultural and language boundaries and that calls for understanding in order to enhance the success of intervention and other efforts. What is the nature of this intercultural relationship and what are its implications for minority education?

Cultural Diversity and Differential School Success

Societal and School Influences on Minority Education

The school learning and performance of minority children are influenced by complex social, economic, historical, and cultural factors. Therefore, before describing the cultural forces, I want to make it categorically clear that I am focusing on only one group of forces. I have described elsewhere other forces at work, namely, how American society at large, the local communities, and the schools all contribute to minority problems in school learning and performance. Societal contributions include denying the minorities equal access to good education through societal and community educational policies and practices and denying them adequate and/or equal rewards with Whites for their educational accomplishments through a job ceiling and other mechanisms. Schools contribute to the educational problems through subtle and not so subtle policies and practices. The latter include tracking, "biased" testing and curriculum, and misclassification (see Ogbu, 1974, 1977, 1978, 1991). Here we are focusing on cultural forces, specifically, on the relationship between minority cultures and mainstream culture and the implications of that relationship for minority schooling.

Differential Influence of Cultural Forces

There is evidence from comparative research suggesting that differences in school learning and performance among minorities are not due merely to cultural and language dif-

ferences. Some minority groups do well in school even though they do not share the language and cultural backgrounds of the dominant group that are reflected in the curriculum, instructional style, and other practices of the schools. Such minorities may initially experience problems due to the cultural and language difference, but the problems do not persist.

The reason some minorities do well in school is not necessarily because their cultures are similar to the mainstream culture. For example, Gibson (1988) reports that in Valley-side, California, the Punjabis do well even though judged by mainstream culture they would be regarded as being academically at risk.

One cultural feature, namely, differential interpretation of eye contacts by White teachers and minority-group members, has been offered as an explanation for the learning difficulties among Puerto Rican children in New York (Byers & Byers, 1972) but has not had similar adverse effects on the Punjabis. Other examples of differential academic influence of minority cultural differences have been found in studies of minority education in Stockton (Ogbu, 1974), Watsonville (Matute-Bianchi, 1986; see also Woolard, 1981), and San Francisco (Suarez-Orozco, 1988).

Studies outside the United States have also found that minority children do not fail in school because of mere cultural/language differences or succeed in school because they share the culture and language of the dominant group. In Britain, students of East Asian origins, for whom the British language and culture are different, do considerably better in school than West Indian students, who have much longer been privy to the British language and culture (Ogbu, 1978; Taylor & Hegarty, 1985). In Japan (DeVos & Lee, 1981) and New Zealand (Penfold, conversation with author, 1981), minority groups—even if they have similar cultures and languages but different histories—differ in school learning and academic success.

There are cases where a minority group does better in school when it is away from its country of origin, residing in a host society where its language and culture differ greatly from the language and culture of the dominant group. Take the case of the Japanese Buraku outcaste. In Japan itself, Buraku students continue to do poorly in school when compared with the dominant Ippan students (Hirasawa, 1989; Shimahara, 1991). But the Buraku immigrants in the United States are doing just as well as the Ippan immigrants (DeVos, 1973; Ito, 1967). The Koreans in Japan are another example. In Japan, where they went originally as colonial forced labor, they do very poorly in school. But in Hawaii and the continental United States, Korean students do as well as other Asians; yet Korean culture is more similar to Japanese culture than to American mainstream culture (DeVos, 1984; DeVos & Lee, 1981; Lee, 1991; Rohlen, 1981). The Koreans' case is further instructive because of their differential school success as a minority group in the United States, Japan, and China (see Kristoff, 1992, for Koreans in China). Korean peasants relocated to these three countries about the same time as emigrants, except the group that went to Japan. The Koreans are academically successful in China and Hawaii, but not in Japan. West Indians are a similar example. They are academically successful in the continental United States and in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where they regard themselves as "immigrants" (Fordham, 1984; Gibson, 1991); less successful in Canada, where they regard themselves as members of

“the Commonwealth” (Solomon, 1992); and least successful in Britain, which they regard as their “motherland” (Ogbu, 1978; Tomlinson, 1982).

As these studies suggest, mere cultural and language differences cannot account for the relative school failure of some minorities and the school success of others. Minority status involves complex realities that affect the relationship between the culture and language of the minority and those of the dominant groups and thereby influence the school adjustment and learning of the minority.

Types of Minority Status: A Prerequisite for Understanding Cultural Diversity and Learning

To understand what it is about minority groups, their cultures and languages that makes crossing cultural boundaries and school learning difficult for some but not for others, we must recognize that there are different types of minority groups or minority status. Our comparative study has led us to classify minority groups into (a) autonomous, (b) immigrant or voluntary, and (c) castelike or involuntary minorities.

1. Autonomous minorities are people who are minorities primarily in a numerical sense. American examples are Jews, Mormons, and the Amish. There are no non-White autonomous minorities in the United States, so we will not discuss this type further (see Ogbu, 1978).

2. Immigrant or voluntary minorities are people who have moved more or less voluntarily to the United States—or any other society—because they desire more economic well-being, better overall opportunities, and/or greater political freedom. Their expectations continue to influence the way they perceive and respond to events, including schooling, in the host society. Voluntary minorities usually experience initial problems in school due to cultural and language differences as well as lack of understanding of how the education system works. But they do not experience lingering, disproportionate school failure. The Chinese and Punjabi Indians are representative U.S. examples. Refugees are not voluntary minorities; they are not a part of this classification or the subject of this paper (see Ogbu, 1990, for a full discussion of the distinction).

3. Castelike or involuntary minorities are people who were originally brought into the United States or any other society against their will. For example, through slavery, conquest, colonization, or forced labor. Thereafter, these minorities were often relegated to menial positions and denied true assimilation into the mainstream society. American Indians, Black Americans, early Mexican-Americans in the Southwest, and native Hawaiians are U.S. examples. Puerto Ricans may qualify for membership in this category if they consider themselves “a colonized people.” The Burakumin and Koreans in Japan and the Maoris in New Zealand are examples outside the United States. It is involuntary minorities that usually experience greater and more persistent difficulties with school learning.

Minority Status, Culture, and Identity

The different types of minorities are characterized by different types of cultural differences as well as social or collective identities. Voluntary minorities are characterized by primary cultural differences and involuntary minorities by secondary cultural differences.

Primary cultural differences are differences that existed

before two groups came in contact, such as before immigrant minorities came to the United States. For example, Punjabi Indians in Valleyside, California, spoke Punjabi; practiced the Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim religion; had arranged marriages, and wore turbans, if they were male, before they came to the United States. In Valleyside they continue these beliefs and practices to some extent (Gibson, 1988). The Punjabis also brought with them their distinctive way of raising children, including teaching children how to make decisions and how to manage money.

We gain a better understanding of primary cultural differences when we examine non-Western children who attend Western-type schools in their own countries. The Kpelle of Liberia are a good example. John Gay and Michael Cole (1967) found that the arithmetic concepts in Kpelle culture were similar in some respects to those used in the American-type school but differed in other ways. The Kpelle had few geometrical concepts, and although they measured time, volume, and money, their culture lacked measurements of weight, area, speed, and temperature. These differences in mathematical concepts and use existed *before* the Kpelle were introduced to Western-type schools.

Secondary cultural differences are differences that arose after two populations came into contact or after members of a given population began to participate in an institution controlled by members of another population, such as the schools controlled by the dominant group. Thus, secondary cultural differences develop as a response to a contact situation, especially one involving the domination of one group by another.

At the beginning of the culture contact the two groups are characterized by primary cultural differences; later, the minorities develop secondary cultural differences to cope with their subordination. The secondary culture develops in several ways: from a reinterpretation of previous primary cultural differences or through the emergence of new types of cultural norms and behaviors.

Several features of secondary cultural differences are worth noting for their effects on schooling. First, it is the differences in style rather than in content that involuntary minorities emphasize: cognitive style (Ramirez & Castenada, 1974; Shade, 1982), communication style (Gumperz, 1981; Kochman, 1982; Philips, 1972, 1983), interaction style (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982), and learning style (Au, 1981; Boykin, 1980; Philips, 1976).

Another feature is cultural inversion. Cultural inversion is the tendency for involuntary minorities to regard certain forms of behavior, events, symbols, and meanings as inappropriate for them because these are characteristic of White Americans. At the same time the minorities value other forms of behavior, events, symbols and meanings, often the opposite, as more appropriate for themselves. Thus, what is appropriate or even legitimate behavior for in-group members may be defined in opposition to White out-group members' practices and preferences.

Cultural inversion may take several forms. It may be in-group meanings of words and statements (Bontemps, July 1969, conversation with author), different notions and use of time (Weis, 1985), different emphasis on dialects and communication style (Baugh, 1984; Holt, 1972; Luster, 1992), or an outright rejection of White American preferences or what Whites consider appropriate behavior in a given setting (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Petroni, 1970). Cultural inversion,

along with other oppositional elements, results in the co-existence of two opposing cultural frames of reference or ideals orienting behavior, from the perspectives of involuntary minorities.

Involuntary minorities sometimes use cultural inversion to repudiate negative White stereotypes or derogatory images. Sometimes they use it as a strategy to manipulate Whites, to get even with Whites, or, as Holt (1972) puts it for Black Americans, "to turn the table against whites."

Secondary cultural differences seem to be associated with ambivalent or oppositional social or collective identities vis-a-vis the White American social identity. Voluntary minorities seem to bring to the United States a sense of who they are from their homeland and seem to retain this different but non-oppositional social identity at least during the first generation. Involuntary minorities, in contrast, develop a new sense of social or collective identity that is in opposition to the social identity of the dominant group after they have become subordinated. They do so in response to their treatment by White Americans in economic, political, social, psychological, cultural, and language domains. Whites' treatment included deliberate exclusion from true assimilation or the reverse, namely, forced superficial assimilation (Castile & Kushner, 1981; DeVos, 1967, 1984; Spicer, 1966, 1971). Involuntary minorities, such as Black Americans, developed oppositional identity because for many generations they realized and believed that the White treatment was both collective and enduring. They were (and still are) not treated like White Americans regardless of their individual differences in ability, training, education, place of origin or residence, economic status, or physical appearance. They could not (and still cannot) easily escape from their birth-ascribed membership in a subordinate and disparaged group by "passing" for White or by returning to a "homeland" (Green, 1981). Native Americans and native Hawaiians have no other "homeland" to return to. In the past some Black Americans sought an escape by returning to Africa (Hall, 1978) and, more recently, by converting to the Muslim religion (Essien-Udom, 1964).

Cultural Differences, Identity, and School Learning

I have identified different types of cultural differences characteristic of the voluntary and involuntary minorities and have described the relationship between these cultural differences and mainstream (White) American culture. I turn now to the way the relationship between the minority cultures and mainstream culture affects minority schooling.

The primary cultural differences of voluntary minorities and the secondary cultural differences of involuntary minorities affect minority school learning differently. My comparative research suggests that involuntary minorities experience more difficulties in school learning and performance partly because of the relationship between their cultures and the mainstream culture. As I have come to understand it, they have greater difficulty with school learning and performance partly because they have greater difficulty crossing cultural/language boundaries in school than voluntary minorities with primary cultural differences.

Primary Cultural Differences and Schooling

What kinds of school problems are associated with primary cultural differences and why do the bearers of these differences overcome these problems and learn more or less

successfully? Why do voluntary minorities successfully cross cultural boundaries?

In school, primary cultural differences may initially cause problems in interpersonal and intergroup relations as well as difficulties in academic work for several reasons. One is that children from different cultural backgrounds may begin school with different cultural assumptions about the world and human relations. Another is that the minorities may come to school lacking certain concepts necessary to learn math and science, for instance, because their own cultures do not have or use such concepts. Still another problem is that the children may be non-English-speaking. Finally, there may be differences in teaching and learning styles.

However, the relationship between the primary cultural differences and White American mainstream culture helps voluntary minority children to eventually overcome the initial problems, adjust socially, and learn and perform academically more or less successfully. First, the cultural differences existed before the minorities came to the United States or entered the public schools; the differences did not arise to maintain boundaries between them and White Americans. They are different from, but not necessarily oppositional to, equivalent features in mainstream culture in the schools.

Furthermore, because primary cultural differences did not develop in opposition or to protect their collective identity and sense of security and self-worth, voluntary minorities do not perceive learning the attitudes and behaviors required for school success as threatening their own culture, language, and identities. Instead, they interpret such learning (e.g., English) instrumentally and as additive, as adding to what they already have (their own language), for use in the appropriate context (Chung, 1992). They also believe that the learning will help them succeed in school and later in the labor market. Voluntary minorities, therefore, tend to adopt the strategy of "accommodation without assimilation" (Gibson, 1988) or "alternation strategy" (Ogbu, 1987). That is, while they may not give up their own cultural beliefs and practices, voluntary minorities are willing, and may even strive, to play the classroom game by the rules and try to overcome all kinds of schooling difficulties because they believe so strongly that there will be a payoff later (Gibson, 1987). With this kind of attitude, they are able to cross cultural boundaries and do relatively well in school.

Still another factor in favor of voluntary minorities is that they interpret the cultural and language differences they encounter as barriers to be overcome in order for them to achieve their long-range goals of obtaining good school credentials for future employment. They did not come to the United States expecting the schools to teach them in their own culture and language, although they are grateful if the schools do. Usually, they go to the school expecting and willing to learn the culture and language of the schools, and they also expect at least some initial difficulty in doing so.

Finally, primary cultural differences and the problems they cause are often specific enough to be identified through careful ethnographic research. This specificity and identifiability facilitate developing educational policies, programs, and practices to eliminate their negative impact.

Secondary Cultural Differences and Schooling

Many of the "cultural problems" caused by secondary cultural differences are on the surface similar to those caused

by primary cultural differences: conflicts in interpersonal/intergroup relations due to cultural misunderstandings, conceptual problems due to absence of certain concepts in the ethnic-group cultures, lack of fluency in standard English, and conflicts in teaching and learning style.

However, the underlying factor that distinguishes these problems from those of primary cultural differences is the style, not the content. Sociolinguists stress differences in communication style; cognitive researchers emphasize cognitive styles, styles of thought, or a mismatch between teacher and minority students in cognitive maps; interactionists and transactionists locate the problem in differences in interactional style. Researchers working among native Hawaiians traced their reading problems to differences in learning style.

What needs to be stressed is that secondary cultural differences do not merely cause initial problems in the social adjustment and academic performance of involuntary minorities but the problems appear to be extensive and persistent. One reason for this is that these minorities find it harder to cross cultural and language boundaries.

This difficulty occurs because of the nature of the relationship between the minority culture and the dominant White American culture. The cultural differences arose initially to serve boundary-maintaining and coping functions under subordination. As boundary-maintaining mechanisms, they do not necessarily disappear or change when involuntary minorities and Whites are brought together, as in desegregated schools. Secondary cultural differences evolved as coping mechanisms under "oppressive conditions," and the minorities have no strong incentives to give up these differences as long as they believe that they are still oppressed; some of the cultural differences have taken on a life of their own, and the minorities are not necessarily aware of their boundary-maintaining functions or oppositional quality.

Involuntary minorities interpret the cultural and language differences as markers of their collective identity to be maintained, not as barriers to be overcome. This results partly from coexistence of opposing cultural frames of reference discussed earlier. There is, again, no incentive to learn or behave in a manner considered consciously and unconsciously as inappropriate for the minorities.

Among involuntary minorities, school learning tends to be equated with the learning of the culture and language of White Americans, that is, the learning of the cultural and language frames of reference of their "enemy" or "oppressors." Consider the current argument by some that school curriculum and textbooks are reflective of White culture. (Note that for their part, White Americans also define minority school learning in terms of learning White culture and language as reflected in the school curriculum and practices.) Thus, involuntary minorities may consciously or unconsciously interpret school learning as a displacement process detrimental to their social identity, sense of security, and self-worth. They fear that by learning the White cultural frame of reference, they will cease to act like minorities and lose their identity as minorities and their sense of community and self-worth. Furthermore, reality has demonstrated that those who successfully learn to act White or who succeed in school are not fully accepted by the Whites; nor do such people receive rewards or opportunity for advancement equal to those open to Whites with similar education.

The important point here is that unlike voluntary minorities, involuntary minorities do not seem to be able or willing to separate attitudes and behaviors that result in academic success from those that may result in linear acculturation or replacement of their cultural identity with White American cultural identity.

There are social pressures discouraging involuntary minority students from adopting the standard attitudes and behavior practices that enhance school learning because such attitudes and behaviors are considered "White." In the case of Black students, for example, the social pressures against "acting White" include accusations of Uncle Tomism or disloyalty to the Black cause and to the Black community, fear of losing one's friends and one's sense of community (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Luster, 1992; Ogbu, 1974; Petroni, 1970).

The same phenomenon has been described for American Indian students—the tendency to "resist" adopting and following school rules of behavior and standard practices (Deyhle 1989; Dumont, 1972; Kramer, 1991; Philips, 1972, 1983). According to some studies, Indian students enter the classroom with a cultural convention that dictates that they should not adopt the expected classroom rules of behavior and standard practices. A good illustration is Philips's study of Indian children in Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon referred to earlier. She found that the Indian students and their White teachers in an elementary school held different views about how students should interact with teachers and among themselves; they also held different views about how students should participate in classroom activities. Although the teachers' views apparently prevailed, the teachers were not particularly effective in classroom management and in getting the children to learn and perform.

There are also psychological pressures against "acting White" that are just as effective in discouraging involuntary minority students from striving for academic success. An involuntary minority individual who desires to do well in school may also define the behavior enhancing school success or the success itself as "acting White." Thinking that attitudes and behaviors associated with academic success and the success itself may result in loss of peer affiliation and support and at the same time uncertain of White acceptance and support if he or she succeeds in learning to act White, a student may feel a personal conflict. Put differently, an involuntary minority student desiring and striving to do well in school is faced with the conflict between loyalty to the minority peer group, which provides a sense of community and security, and the desire to behave in ways that may improve school performance but that the peer group defines as "White."

The dilemma of involuntary minority students, then, is that they may have to choose between "acting White" (i.e., adopting "appropriate" attitudes and behaviors or school rules and standard practices that enhance academic success but that are perceived and interpreted by the minorities as typical of White Americans and therefore negatively sanctioned by them) and "acting Black," "acting Indian," "acting Chicano," and so on (i.e., adopting attitudes and behaviors that the minority students consider appropriate for their group but that are not necessarily conducive to school success).

We noted earlier that researchers among involuntary minorities repeatedly emphasize conflicts and discontinuities in teaching and learning due to differences in style, rather

than content. Stylistic differences are more diffuse and less specific than the content differences of primary cultural differences. The differences in manifest contents are not the overriding problem, because they also exist within the primary cultural differences of voluntary minorities. Rather, the differences that are more problematic among involuntary minorities are differences in style and are oppositional in relation to White or mainstream culture. Moreover, it is more difficult for interventionists and teachers without special training to detect the problems and help the students.

Involuntary minorities lack some instrumental factors that motivate voluntary minorities to cross cultural boundaries. The latter try to overcome cultural, language, and other barriers because they strongly believe that there will be a material payoff later. Involuntary minorities—who did not choose to come to the United States motivated by hope of economic success or political freedom—believe less strongly. Furthermore, they lack the positive dual frame of reference of the immigrants, who compare their progress in the United States with that of their peers “back home.” Involuntary minorities compare their progress—if at all—with that of White Americans, and they usually conclude that they are worse off than they should be and blame Whites, the schools, and other societal institutions controlled by Whites. Thus, these minorities do not have as strong incentives merely to play the classroom game by the rules (Gibson, 1988).

The Individual in Collective Adaptation

We have described what appears to be the dominant pattern for each type of minority. But when we enter a minority community, whether of voluntary or involuntary minorities, we usually find some students who are doing well in school and other students who are not. We also find that the members of each community know that some strategies enhance school success and other strategies do not. We may even learn about the kinds of individuals and subgroups who use the different strategies. However, the strategies of a voluntary minority community are not necessarily the same as those of the involuntary minorities (Ogbu, 1989).

Among the voluntary minorities there appears to be a collective orientation toward making good grades in school and there also appear to be social pressures, including peer pressures, that encourage making good grades. In addition, community gossips promote striving for school success. Partly to avoid ridicule (which may extend to one’s family), criticism, and isolation, voluntary minority youths tend to utilize those strategies that enhance their chances to succeed in school. The community also appears to use both tangible and symbolic means to encourage school striving. While successful members of the group may live outside the ethnic neighborhood, they tend to maintain social membership there and participate in activities in which they mix informally with the residents. They thus provide concrete evidence to the youth both that they can succeed through education and that they can be bona fide members of the community in spite of their success. Finally, voluntary minority students are eager to utilize information and resources available in school.

For involuntary minorities the situation is somewhat different. Although making good grades is strongly verbalized by students, parents, and the community as a desirable goal, there is less community and family pressure to achieve it. For example, there rarely is any stigma attached to being a poor

student, and there are no community gossips criticizing a poor student or his or her family. As for peer groups, their collective orientation is probably against academic striving. Therefore, peer pressures discourage making good grades. Students who adopt attitudes and behaviors enhancing school success or who make good grades may be subjected to negative peer pressures, including criticism and isolation.

Under this circumstance, involuntary minority youths who want to succeed academically often consciously choose from a variety of secondary strategies to shield them from the peer pressures and other detracting forces of the community. The secondary strategies are over and above the conventional strategy of adopting proper academic attitudes, hard work, and perseverance. These strategies provide the context in which the student can practice the conventional strategy.

I will use Black students as an example of involuntary minorities employing secondary strategies. I have identified among them the following strategies, some promoting school success, some not.

1. Emulation of Whites or cultural passing (i.e., adopting “White” academic attitudes and behaviors or trying to behave like middle-class White students). Some students say, “If it takes acting like White people to do well in school, I’ll do that.” Such students get good grades. The problem is, however, that they usually experience isolation from other Black students, resulting in high psychological costs.

2. Accommodation without assimilation—an alternation model—a characteristic strategy among voluntary minorities. A student adopting this strategy behaves according to school norms while at school, but at home in the community behaves according to Black norms. One school counselor in Stockton described this strategy this way: “Their motto seems to be ‘Do your Black thing [in the community] but know the White man thing [at school]’”. Black students who adopt this strategy do not pay the psychological costs that attend White emulators.

3. Camouflage (i.e., disguising true academic attitudes and behaviors), using a variety of techniques. One technique is to become a jester or class clown. Since peer group members are not particularly interested in how well a student is doing academically, the student claims to lack interest in school, that schoolwork/homework or getting good grades is not important. The camouflaging student studies in secret. The good grades of camouflaging students are attributed to their “natural smartness.” Another way of camouflaging is to become involved in “Black activities.” If a Black athlete gets As, there’s no harm done.

4. Involvement in church activities. This also promotes school success.

5. Attending private schools. For some, this is a successful way to get away from peer groups.

6. Mentors. Having a mentor is another success-enhancing strategy.

7. Protection. A few students secure the protection of bullies from peer pressures in return for helping the bullies with their homework.

8. Remedial and intervention programs. Some students succeed because they participate in such a program.

9. Encapsulation. Many Black youths, unfortunately, become encapsulated in peer group logic and activities. These students don’t want to do the White man’s thing or don’t consider schooling important for a variety of reasons. They don’t do their schoolwork. Many fail.

What Can Be Done

Prerequisites

Recognize that there are different kinds of cultural/language differences and that the different types arise for different reasons or circumstances.

Recognize that there are different types of minority groups and that the minority types are associated with the different types of cultural/language differences.

Recognize that all minority children face problems of social adjustment and academic performance in school because of cultural/language differences. However, while problems faced by bearers of primary cultural differences are superficially similar to those of bearers of secondary cultural differences, they are fundamentally different. The reason lies in the difference in the relationship between the two types of cultural differences and White American mainstream culture.

Helping Children With Primary Cultural/Language Differences

Most problems caused by primary cultural differences are due to differences in cultural content and practice. One solution is for teachers and interventionists to learn about the students' cultural backgrounds and use this knowledge to organize their classrooms and programs, to help students learn what they teach, to help students get along with one another, to communicate with parents, and the like. Teachers and interventionists can learn about the students' cultures through (a) observation of children's behavior in the classroom and on playgrounds, (b) asking children questions about their cultural practices and preferences, (c) talking with parents about their cultural practices and preferences, (d) doing research on various ethnic groups with children in school, and (e) studying published works on children's ethnic groups.

Some problems caused by primary cultural differences can also be solved through well-designed and implemented multicultural education. Such multicultural education must be based on actual knowledge of the cultures and languages of the children's ethnic groups, how they differ from mainstream culture and language, and the kinds of problems they generate.

Helping Children With Secondary Cultural/Language Differences

First, teachers and interventionists must recognize that involuntary minority children come to school with cultural and language frames of reference that are not only different from but probably oppositional to those of the mainstream and school. Second, teachers and interventionists should study the histories and cultural adaptations of involuntary minorities in order to understand the bases and nature of the groups' cultural and language frames of reference as well as the children's sense of social identity. This knowledge will help them understand why these factors affect the process of minority schooling, particularly their school orientations and behaviors.

Third, special counseling and related programs should be used (a) to help involuntary minority students learn to separate attitudes and behaviors enhancing school success from those that lead to linear acculturation or "acting White" and (b) to help the students to avoid interpreting the former as a threat to their social identity and sense of security.

Fourth, programs are needed to increase students' adoption of the strategy of "accommodation without assimilation," "alternation model," or "playing the classroom game." The essence of this strategy is that students should recognize and accept the fact that they can participate in two cultural or language frames of reference for different purposes without losing their own cultural and language identity or undermining their loyalty to the minority community. They should learn to practice "when in Rome, do as the Romans do," without becoming Romans.

We have found from ethnographic studies (Ogbu & Hickerson, 1980) that whereas voluntary minority students try to learn to act according to school norms and expectations, involuntary minority students do not necessarily do so. Instead, they emphasize learning how to manipulate "the system," how to deal with or respond to White people and schools controlled by White people or their minority representatives. This problem should be addressed. A related approach that can be built into multicultural education programs is teaching the students their own responsibility for their academic performance and school adjustment.

Finally, society can help reorient minority youths toward more academic striving for school credentials for future employment by (a) creating more jobs in general, (b) eliminating the job ceiling against minorities, and (c) providing better employment opportunities for minorities.

The Role of the Involuntary Minority Community

The involuntary minority community can and should play an important part in changing the situation for three reasons. First, some of the needed changes can be most effectively brought about through community effort. Second, minority children do not succeed or fail only because of what schools do or do not do, but also because of what the community does. Third, our comparative research suggests that the social structure and relationship within the minority communities could be a significant influence on students' educational orientations and behaviors.

At this point in my research I suggest four ways in which the involuntary minority community can encourage academic striving and success among its children. One is to teach the children to separate attitudes and behaviors that lead to academic success from attitudes and behaviors that lead to a loss of ethnic identity and culture or language. This can be achieved partly by successful members of the group retaining their social membership in the community and not dissociating themselves from the neighborhood, labeling the less successful invidiously as "underclass," and so on. Second, the involuntary minority community should provide the children with concrete evidence that its members appreciate and value academic success as much as they appreciate and value achievements in sports, athletics, and entertainment.

Third, the involuntary minority community must teach the children to recognize and accept the responsibility for their school adjustment and academic performance. One difference between voluntary and involuntary minorities is that the former place a good deal of responsibility on the children for their school behavior and academic performance (Gibson, 1988).

Finally, the involuntary minority middle class needs to reevaluate and change its role vis-a-vis the community. We have discovered in our comparative research two contrasting

models of middle class relationship with minority community which we suspect have differential effects on minority school success. The first model is, apparently, characteristic of voluntary minorities. Here successful, educated, and professional individuals, such as business people, doctors, engineers, lawyers, social workers, and university professors, appear to retain their social membership in the community, although they generally reside outside predominantly minority neighborhoods. Such people regard their accomplishments as a positive contribution to their community, a community, not just individual, achievement. The community, in turn, interprets their accomplishments in a similar manner. The successful members participate in community events where they interact with the youth and less successful adults informally and outside their official roles as representatives of the welfare, police, school district, or White-controlled companies. In this community, the middle class provides concrete evidence to young people that school success pays *and* that school success and economic and professional success in the wider society are compatible with collective identity and bona fide membership in the minority community.

In contrast, involuntary minorities seem to have a model that probably does not have much positive influence on schooling. Members of involuntary minorities seem to view professional success as "a ticket" to leave their community both physically and socially, to get away from those who have not "made it." People seek education and professional success, as it were, in order to leave their minority community. White Americans and their media reinforce this by praising those who have made their way out of the ghetto, barrio, or reservation. The middle-class minorities do not generally interpret their achievements as an indication that "their community is making it"; neither does the community interpret their achievements as an evidence of the "development" or "progress" of its members. The middle class may later return to or visit the community with "programs," or as "advocates" for those left behind or as representatives of White institutions. They rarely participate in community events where they interact outside these roles with the youth and the less successful community members. Thus, the involuntary minority middle class does not provide adequate concrete evidence to the youth and the less successful that school success leads to social and economic success in later adult life. The involuntary minority middle class must rethink its role vis-a-vis the minority youth. What is needed is for the middle class to go beyond programs, advocacy, and institutional representation to reaffiliate with the community socially.

Note

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(continued from page 14)

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