



ARTICLES

Understanding Cultural Differences and School Learning

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Abstract

Paper presented to the Special Libraries Association, 83rd Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA., on June 9 1992. Focuses on understanding cultural differences and school learning in minority groups from a comparative perspective. Looks at conventional explanations as to why some groups adapt better than others. Defines and emphasizes the need to recognize the different types of minorities, i.e. autonomous, immigrant or voluntary minorities and non-immigrant or involuntary minorities. Explores primary cultural differences existing before immigrants arrived in United States and secondary cultural differences arising after a group has become a minority.

Concludes that, generally, immigrant minorities tend to be more successful in school than involuntary minorities but that both types of minorities can benefit from additional help in school to manage their different cultural problems. Recognizing these differences is the key to better school adjustment and performance.

INTRODUCTION

For more than two decades I have studied the education of minority groups in contemporary urban industrial societies, such as the United States, Britain, Japan and New Zealand. One of the intriguing things about this issue is that some minority groups continue to experience difficulties in both school adjustment and academic performance in spite of intervention programs on their behalf. For some other minority groups the adjustment and academic difficulties appear to be more or less temporary. More specifically, for some minorities the cultural and language problems they encounter in school learning appear to be enduring, whereas for others they are transitional. Because of the differences among minority groups I have found it useful to approach my research from a comparative perspective.

Some Conventional Explanations

There are several explanations of the difficulties experienced by minority children at school. Some researchers attribute the problem to lack of sufficient and appropriate "intelligence." Others suggest that minority children experience difficulties in school because of poor home environments which do not provide them with the socialization experience of white middle-class children. Still other researchers argue that the cause of poor

school adjustment and performance lies in the low socioeconomic status of the minority groups. Generally, anthropologists and minority-group scholars believe that minority children experience difficulties in school because of cultural conflicts. Each of the explanations has led to suggestions about how to solve the school-learning problems of the minorities. Unfortunately, the intervention programs have not usually produced expected results, although they have helped some children.

It is probably true that some of the factors suggested above contribute to the difficulties experienced by minority children or the variability in their school performance. But they do not adequately account for the situation. Take for example, the suggestion that the lower school performance of some minorities is due to their low socioeconomic status. This explanation cannot account for the fact that black children from families with median annual income of \$50,000 or more who took the SAT in 1980-81 season scored in the math section at the level of white children from homes with median annual income of \$6,000 (Slade 1982). The cultural/language difference and conflict explanation is not supported by many instances in which minority groups who differ from the dominant group in language and culture do well in school; and, in fact, in some places such minorities do better than other minorities who are less different from the dominant group in language and culture (Ito 1967; Ogbu 1988). The differences in school adjustment and academic performance

among minority groups are not limited to those in the United States. They are found in Britain (Tomlinson 1982; Ogbu 1978), Australia (Bullivant 1987) and elsewhere.

One reason researchers have a problem explaining why some minorities have persistent problems in school is that by and large they tend to focus their studies on what goes on within the school, within the classroom or within the family. In the light of my own comparative research, I believe that some factors outside school and family are important. One such factor is the adaptation of a minority group as a minority group to minority status in society. Therefore, the assumption of this essay is that in order to understand the disproportion and persistence of adjustment and academic performance difficulties of some minority groups it is necessary to study more than the events and situations in the school, classroom and the home. Such research must examine the historical and structural contexts of the education of the minorities, including the historically developed adaptations of the minorities which influence their perceptions of and responses to schooling.

Historically, the adaptations of minority groups are shaped (a) by their initial terms of incorporation, (i.e., whether they came as voluntary immigrants or whether they were forcibly incorporated through slavery, conquest or colonization); (b) by the subsequent treatment of the minorities by white Americans and (c) by the minority groups' own responses to these events. Different minority groups have different collective interpretations of and responses to the discriminatory treatment by white Americans, depending on their history of incorporation. I think that we will gain a better understanding of the school-learning problems of minority children if we know more about the patterns of adaptation the minorities have made to their status as minorities in the United States. Although immigrant and non-immigrant minorities often face language and cultural barriers in society at large and at school, these barriers appear to have different consequences for the two types of minorities. Why?

SOME PREREQUISITES FOR UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND LEARNING AMONG THE MINORITIES

One prerequisite for understanding why different minorities differ in their ability to overcome cultural differences or to cross cultural and language boundaries in school is to recognize that there are different types of minorities. For this purpose I have classified minority groups into **autonomous, immigrant or voluntary and non-immigrant or involuntary minorities**.

Autonomous minorities, such as Jews and Mormons in the United States, are minorities primarily in a numerical sense. They may be victims of prejudice and pillory, but not of stratification. They usually have a cultural frame of reference which demonstrates and encourages academic success. There are no non-white autonomous minorities in the United States. This essay is not about autonomous minorities.

Immigrant or voluntary minorities are people who have moved more or less voluntarily to the United States or to any

other society because they believe that this would result in improved economic well-being, better overall opportunities, and/or greater political freedom. The way the immigrants perceive and respond to their treatment by white Americans and the institutions controlled by the whites, such as schools, is influenced by the expectations they brought to the United States. The immigrants usually experience initial problems of adjustment in school, but they are not characterized by persistent problems of adjustment and low academic performance. The Chinese in Stockton, California (Ogbu 1974) and Punjabi Indians in Valleyside, California (Gibson 1988) are examples of immigrant minorities.

The third type, *non-immigrant or involuntary minorities* are people who *did not initially choose* to become members of the United States society. Rather, they were brought into the U.S. society *against their will* through slavery, conquest and colonization. American Indians, Black Americans, Mexican-Americans in the Southwestern United States, and Native Hawaiians are examples of involuntary minorities. Involuntary minorities exist in Japan, namely the Burakumin and Japanese Koreans and in New Zealand, namely, the Maoris. It is important to bear in mind that involuntary minorities did not become a part of the United States, Japan and New Zealand because they expected a better future like the immigrants. Thus, whereas the immigrants may regard the hardships they encounter, including discrimination, as unavoidable the pursuit of their goals of coming to America or their host society, the non-immigrant minorities usually resent the loss of their former freedom and tend to interpret social, political and economic barriers against them as undeserved oppression. For them the future is grim without a struggle (Shack 1970). This perspective influences the way involuntary minorities respond to white Americans and the societal institutions controlled by the whites. In general, it is involuntary or non-immigrant minorities who experience persistent problems in school adjustment and academic performance.

The initial terms of incorporation of a minority group into American society or any other society together with the treatment by white Americans affect minority group members' understanding of their universe, i.e., their understanding of their "social reality" in America. This understanding or their cultural model is a part of their ideological adaptation or belief system which affects other aspects of their general adaptation and behavior adaptations—instrumental, expressive or symbolic and relational—including their perceptions of and responses to schooling.

Another prerequisite for understanding minority school adjustment and performance is to recognize that the cultural differences which characterize different minorities are not of the same order. That is, minorities make different types of cultural adaptation. More specifically, the important differences in cultural adaptation lie in **the type of relationship which develops between the cultures of involuntary minorities and white American mainstream culture, on the one hand, and on the other, in the type of relationship which develops between the culture of voluntary minorities and the mainstream culture of white Americans**. For example, the cultural and language

differences of black Americans (an involuntary minority group) vis-a-vis white American mainstream culture are of a different order than the cultural differences of West Indian immigrants or Chinese immigrants vis-a-vis white American mainstream culture. I have called the cultural differences of the immigrants minorities **primary cultural differences**; and called those of the non-immigrant minorities **secondary cultural differences**.

Primary cultural differences are differences that existed before the immigrants came to the United States, such as before immigrants from China, India, Latin America or the Caribbean arrived in the United States. For example, before the Punjabi Indians in Valleyside, California, came to the U.S., they spoke Punjabi, practiced Sikh, Hindu or Moslem religion, had arranged marriages, and the males wore turbans. The way they raised their children was different from the way white middle-class Americans raise their children. Thus, the Punjabis prefer to teach their children to make decisions by having them observe how their parents make decisions *for them*. White middle-class Americans, on the other hand, let their children make their own decisions and thereby learn how to make decisions. The Punjabis continue to some extent their pre-emigration cultural beliefs and practices in America. But they also recognize the need to learn English and other aspects of American mainstream culture which they think will help them achieve the goals of their emigration. Their adaptation encourages them to interpret the cultural/language differences they encounter in school and work place as *barriers to be overcome* in order to achieve their goals.

I would suggest that the immigrants' perceptions and interpretations of their behavior in the area of cultural and language learning are similar to the perceptions and interpretations of Spanish lessons that Americans take while preparing for a vacation in Mexico. An American who is planning a vacation to Mexico, but who has not yet learned Spanish, realizes that in order to enjoy the vacation, he or she would have to study Spanish. The prospective tourist usually embarks on learning Spanish, and in the course of doing so, does not interpret the learning of the language as a threat to his or her cultural or language identity. The learner believes himself or herself to be merely acquiring a second language, Spanish to achieve a specific goal — to enjoy a forthcoming vacation in Mexico. Likewise, the immigrant arrives in the United States from India, Peru, the Caribbean or Nigeria, with previously learned cultural values and previously acquired cultural behaviors and communication, i.e., he or she arrives with a different cultural frame of reference. Because the immigrant interprets not knowing American cultural ways of behaving and not knowing how to speak English as barriers to be overcome, he or she recognizes the need to learn aspects of the mainstream American culture and how to speak English in order to participate in the new or host society. The necessity to participate in the cultural frame of reference of white Americans is perceived as important and not as a threat to his or her own minority culture. It is with this kind of attitude that the immigrant endeavors to cross cultural boundaries, although not without the difficulties faced by anyone who tries to learn a foreign language or cultural behaviors.

Secondary cultural differences which characterize nonimmigrant minorities are of a different order. The secondary

cultural differences usually arise after a group has become a minority, such as after blacks were brought to America as slaves, or after Native American tribes were conquered and placed in "reservation." This type of cultural differences is thus the product of an unpleasant contact situation, one that involves the subordination and exploitation of one group by a more powerful one. At the beginning of the contact and subordination the dominant group and the minorities might be characterized by primary cultural differences. But subsequently the minorities usually develop new cultural features and might reinterpret old ones in a manner that would enable them to cope with their subordination or oppression. Blacks, for instance, spoke numerous African languages and practiced a variety of primary African cultural beliefs and behaviors at the time of their arrival as chattels of whites in America. However, due to their subordination and exploitation under slavery and after, they eventually reinterpreted, modified, lost and replaced with new forms the indigenous languages and cultural beliefs and practices. These new cultural beliefs and practices came to be invested with new and secondary meanings vis-a-vis white cultural beliefs and practices. The minorities thus developed a new cultural frame of reference or new ideal ways guiding behaviors, one that is oppositional. As a result, the minorities came to differentiate between the "white way" and their own "minority way." Thus, for the non-immigrant black Americans there is "a white way of talking" and "a black way of talking;" "a white way of thinking" and "a black way of thinking" (Kochman 1983; Luster 1992; Stanback 1992). Moreover, the minorities feel strongly that their way of talking, walking, thinking, feeling, etc. is an expression of their group or collective social identity. The point to stress, however, is that unlike the primary cultural differences of the immigrants, the contents of the secondary cultural adaptation of the non-immigrants need not be different from the contents of white mainstream American culture, but their expression and meaning are different. **What is at issue is the relationship between the cultures of minorities and mainstream white American culture: The relationship between the secondary cultures of non-immigrant minorities and white American culture is more or less oppositional, whereas the relationship between the cultures of the immigrants and white American mainstream culture is different, not oppositional. The two types of minorities have different cultural adaptation.**

Because of their secondary cultural adaptation, non-immigrant minorities do not interpret the cultural differences between them and white Americans as barriers to be overcome. Rather, these minorities interpret the cultural differences as *markers or symbols of their group identity to be maintained*. The cultural differences have come to be invested with secondary meanings, as noted above, and have become a part of the means of maintaining boundaries between the minorities and white Americans.

Unlike the immigrants, non-immigrant minorities may, perhaps unconsciously, perceive learning or speaking standard English and practicing other aspects of white middle class culture as threatening to their own minority culture, language and identity. Consequently, those who try to cross cultural boundaries may experience social or psychological pressures not to do so.

Researchers find this oppositional cultural frame of reference not only among students or adolescents (Fordham and Ogbu 1986) but also among adults in the community. For example, in a recent study of black women attending school to obtain the GED, the researcher concluded from interviews and observations that "Just as the study community generally distrusts and is suspicious of whites, it is also suspicious and condemning of blacks perceived as deviating from what they consider black ways of behaving and speaking" (Luster 1992:147). One woman described her attitude about "acting white" this way:

But certain people do like to walk like the white people do, like to talk like them and boy, that makes me sick. Just be yourself. Well, it makes me sick. When they be on TV they be talking white. You know, trying to talk so proper until they be getting their words all confused and you know they don't even come out right. (Luster 1992:148).

A third prerequisite for understanding why certain minorities adjust and perform as they do in school is to recognize that immigrant minorities and non-immigrant minorities interpret and respond differently to instrumental barriers (e.g., employment and other economic barriers). The immigrants do not like the discrimination against them; however, they are not particularly discouraged by it because they tend to compare their situation in the U.S. with that of their former selves or with that of their peers "back home," and they often conclude that there are more and better opportunities in the U.S. for themselves or for their children; moreover, they see their hardships as temporary problems that they will and can overcome with education and hardwork. The non-immigrants, such as Native Americans and black Americans do not have "homeland" situations or peers to compare with the situation in the U.S.'. Consequently, they do not interpret their menial jobs and low wages as "better" or as a temporary problem.

EDUCATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

The differences between immigrant and non-immigrant minorities described above affect their school experiences. Although each aspect of their adaptations — cultural and linguistic, relational, instrumental, etc. — contributes in particular ways to shaping minority school experience, I will focus on the role of cultural adaptation. I will not discuss the ways in which American society at large, the schools and white people who control the schools influence minority school experience because I have done so elsewhere (Ogbu 1974, 1978).

Among the *Immigrants* the cultural adaptation tends to promote school striving and success because their social identity and cultural frame of reference are interpreted by them as different and are not necessarily ambivalent or oppositional to white American social identity and cultural frame of reference. This perception and interpretation facilitate the immigrants' ability to cross cultural boundaries in the school context. More specifically, because the immigrants interpret the cultural differ-

ences as barriers to be overcome, they try to distinguish between what they have to learn (e.g. the English language and the expected school behaviors and attitudes), in order to achieve the goals of their immigration, *from* other cultural learning that would threaten their own minority culture, language and identity. Since the immigrants perceive and interpret their lack of competence in English language and white American mainstream cultural features necessary for school success *as barriers to be overcome* in order to achieve their long-range goals they do not go to school expecting the schools to teach them in their native languages and cultures. Instead, they go to school expecting and willing to learn the English language and the standard school behaviors and attitudes. I am not suggesting that immigrant minority children do not experience difficulties learning the school language and cultural difficulties. My point is that the children, their parents, and their communities perceive the difficulties or conflicts encountered in school as problems they have to overcome through their own effort and perseverance as well as through appropriate help from the schools.

The cultural adaptation of non-immigrant minorities, in contrast, does not seem to encourage crossing cultural boundaries and thus striving for school success. As noted before, these minorities appear to interpret the cultural differences they encounter as **markers of group identity** to be maintained, not as barriers to be overcome. They do not clearly differentiate, as the immigrants do, between what they have to learn in order to succeed in school from other kinds of cultural learning that may threaten their own minority culture, language and identity. They appear to think that learning certain aspects of white American mainstream culture or behaving according to a white American mainstream cultural frame of reference even in school context is detrimental to their own minority culture, language, and identity. Sometimes even educators from the non-immigrant minority groups complain that the school curriculum and language of instruction are "white."

This equation of school cultural frame of reference with white American mainstream cultural frame of reference and their rejection of the latter must be considered in the historical context to avoid blaming the victim. This consideration includes the understanding that the responses of the minorities were caused by the social aversion and cultural and linguistic denigration which whites historically accorded to the minorities. The aversion and denigration led the minorities to develop a cultural frame of reference that is more or less in opposition to the white cultural frame of reference in order for the minorities to maintain their sense of security and self-worth. But in so doing, the minorities also, perhaps unwittingly, came to interpret the school English, curriculum, and rules of behavior for achievement as tools of assimilation or linear acculturation and thus threatening to their own language, culture and identity. This leads to conscious or unconscious opposition, or to ambivalence toward learning and using these essential tools for school success. Some involuntary minority students who adopt the attitudes and behaviors conducive to school success, such as those who speak standard English and behave according to standard rules of school conduct and practices, are often accused by their peers of

“acting white” or, in the case of black students, of being “Uncle Toms” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Petroni 1970). They are often accused of disloyalty to the black cause and risk isolation from their peers. Even in the absence of peer pressures, some non-immigrant minority students may avoid serious academic attitudes and persevering efforts in their school work partly because they have usually internalized their groups’ belief that such attitudes and behaviors are “white”.

CONCLUSION

I suggested above that immigrant minorities are relatively more successful in school than involuntary minorities because the cultural and language adaptation of the former facilitates their ability to cross cultural and language boundaries. This does not mean that all immigrant minority students succeed in school and all non-immigrant minority students do not. What I have described are the dominant patterns of academic orientations and strategies of the two types of minorities. Within each type there are several culturally available strategies that enhance school success; there are also strategies which do not enhance school success. Individuals who adopt the strategies that enhance success do succeed among the immigrants and among the non-immigrants. But the two types of minorities differ in the degree of support, especially peer support, for individuals utilizing the strategies that enhance school success.

The two types of minorities need help in school. However, their cultural problems are different and of a different order. The recognition of the differences in the kinds of cultural problems faced by these minorities should guide the design of intervention programs to help them adjust better and perform better in school.

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