

Perspectives in Understanding the Schooling and Achievement of Students from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds

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The U.S. is comprised of many different cultural and linguistic groups, and this diversity is reflected in every state and local school district. However, the ongoing underachievement and high dropout rate of some racial/ethnic groups is still of major concern. This paper focuses on a discussion of three powerful factors related to the schooling and achievement of students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, including racial gap, social class, and cultural-ecological factors associated with involuntary minority status. Through a review of theoretical frameworks, this paper gives perspectives regarding factors related to CLD students' academic outcomes. In an effort to address the issue of CLD students' underachievement, culturally responsive teaching practices are considered as being central in facilitating those students' learning. This paper then concludes with implications for future research, policy, and/or practice.

Keyword: diverse learners; underachievement; socio-cultural perspectives; culturally responsive teaching

Rationale

Currently, the number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds attending public schools is approaching 40%, nearly twice that of such students during the 1960s (Darling-Hammond, 2006). A substantial number of schools have emerged which serve CLD populations (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003). However, schools in the United States have been structured to only serve students who speak English and are acculturated to mainstream society. Traditionally schools are ill-prepared to ensure academic success to students who are CLD. At the same time, the most serious and explosive issue is how to meet the educational needs of these students (Frankenberg et al., 2003; Mehan, 1991). Thus, many CLD students experience academic difficulties and are often referred for either bilingual, English as a Second Lan-

guage (ESL), or special education services (Ortiz & Yates, 2001).

Scholars (e.g., Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) believe that the general lack of achievement among students of color and the discontinuity between home and school cultures are closely interrelated. The longer some students from CLD backgrounds (e.g., those from low-income minority families) stay in school, the greater the discrepancy between their educational performance and that of White and middle-class students (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In reality, CLD students have limited opportunities to develop their intellectual identities and identification with academics. CLD students are more likely to have poor grades and high rates of suspension (Meyer & Patton, 2001). If current trends in educational achievement continue, the ongoing underachievement and high dropout rate of students of color (e.g., African-American, Latino, and Native American) will be a major political concern (Meyer & Patton, 2001; Yosso, 2005).

Major Factors Influencing Achievement for Students Who Are CLD

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To meet this paper's goal (i.e., provide perspectives regarding the major factors contributing to achievement for students who are CLD), two concerns should be defined. First, in this paper, CLD students are defined as (a) those whose home language is not English; and/or (b) their race/ethnicity is not White/Caucasian. Secondly, the paper not only discusses these students' learning outcomes, but specifically focuses on the performance of those students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds.

Understanding how differences in culture and language affect students' learning can help educators understand what schools can do to improve outcomes for many of this nation's students (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997). Furthermore, poor performance of a student who is CLD could be attributed to reasons other than cognitive and linguistic deficits (Gay, 2002). Reasons for poor performance could include racial gap, social class (or socio-economic factor), and cultural-ecological factors associated with involuntary minority status (Meyer & Patton, 2001).

Racial Gap

In most schools, there is a disparity between the race of the students and the race of the teachers (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). Many teachers have low expectations shaped by inaccurate assumptions regarding the relationship between race, academic ability, and intelligence (e.g., African-American students are uncooperative and unmotivated) (Gay, 2002; Meyer & Patton, 2001). Teachers also often do not question assumptions about the way their students work in the classroom (Bondy & Ross, 1998). From a policy standpoint, educational practices often have the effect of favoring privileged students and hindering the educational opportunities of students of color. As a result, students of color receive an education inferior to that of White students (Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001). For example, Ladson-Billings (1998) agrees

that teachers view African-American students more negatively due to the devaluation and denigration of blackness in the culture at large. The racial achievement gap reflects the inequality in educational experience (Dixson & Rosseau, 2005). In other words, students of color are more likely to be excluded from gifted programs, honors courses, and advanced placement (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997; Meyer & Patton, 2001; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008).

Social Class

Classism contributes to conflicts between schools and students from poor and minority backgrounds (Bowman, 1994). For example, when schools represent a middle-class viewpoint, students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds and their families often feel devalued. Students from a lower SES background do not receive the quality of education a student from middle or high SES background does. Poor conditions negatively affect their literacy and academic achievement. Students of lower economic status come to see themselves as unintelligent, and lacking confidence and competence when it relates to education (Meyer & Patton, 2001).

In addition, students from low SES backgrounds usually attend low-income schools. The specific characteristics of low-income schools in terms of facilities, curriculum, personnel, and instruction impact students' achievement (Meyer & Patton, 2001). For example, facilities that are in poor condition or do not receive needed upgrades communicates the student lacks worth or importance (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Curricula that contains few cultural similarities to the student, of poor quality, or are out of date leave a gap in student's academic involvement and contribute to marginalization of CLD students. Where there are sub-par facilities or a lack of resources, personnel have the ability to make up in many areas with commitment to and concern for students; however, faculty and staff who are

themselves depressed by their environment only further feed hopelessness to students (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005). The result is that many students who are CLD and poor become unwilling participants in school culture (Meyer & Patton, 2001; Nasir & Hand, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Cultural-ecological Factor

Are all environments equally good for helping all students reach their learning potential and future academic achievement? The answer is no. When students from CLD backgrounds enter schools, they need to adjust to the difference between home and mainstream school settings (Gay, 2002). A major concern is whether students' previous knowledge and skills prepare them for the tasks of a new setting—the school. In order to succeed in school, students who are CLD may need to acquire new standards of social engagement (i.e., a supporting system to maintain the students' status) (Gay, 2002; Nasir & Hand, 2006). In addition, developing cultural capital allows students to connect to adults and adult values within larger communities such as school settings (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Yosso, 2005).

However, students from CLD backgrounds are unlikely to have adequate cultural capital for language and academic learning than their peers from mainstream society. The most common form of cultural capital used by students from mainstream backgrounds includes buying social-related materials, hiring tutors, and participating in extracurricular activities. Students from CLD backgrounds do not receive the same levels of social support as those in mainstream culture (Farkas, 1996). In other words, environmental effects (e.g., social support systems) may affect their achievement (Fram, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Yosso, 2005).

Significance of Theoretical Frameworks

It is critical to understand CLD populations' academic and schooling experience

within a multicultural and theoretical framework. The theoretical frameworks can clarify the academic failure of these students. Additionally, theoretical frameworks can explain the relationship among educators/schools and CLD populations and their communities that would empower these students and increase academic achievement. Through looking at theoretical frameworks, practitioners should reframe assumptions when working with CLD populations. In this paper, two theoretical frameworks will be discussed, including socio-cultural theory and cultural and social capital framework.

Socio-cultural Theory

The socio-cultural approach, building upon Vygotsky's historical theory of a higher psychological process, focuses on how school-age children learn and develop concepts in collaboration with other adults and peers in and out of school (Mahn, 1999). Within this sociocultural tradition, scholars emphasize the importance of cultural resources in the formation and development of thinking. In addition, the theory focuses on how the social interaction leads to change in children's thoughts and behaviors that may vary greatly from culture to culture (Mahn, 1999; Walqui, 2006).

When educators view the learning process of students from CLD backgrounds, the sociocultural theory implies that school success for them cannot be viewed separately from their social contexts (e.g., their interaction with persons, environments, and resources) (Walqui, 2006). At the same time, educators need to consider the differences in cultures by the way in which parents teach children at home, and the ways in which adults and children interact at school. In other words, these students have to adjust to the differences once they attend school (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997; Garcia & Guerra, 2004).

However, schools in the U.S. currently do not adequately appreciate the differences in the way CLD students express competence

and achievement (Valencia et al., 2001). Indeed, in school, behaviors characteristic of middle-class White children have been seen as the only valid representation of competence—the standard by which all students are judged. Schools have ignored or rejected different cultural expressions of development that are normal and adequate and on which school skills and knowledge can be built (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Nasir & Hand, 2006). Consequently, students from CLD backgrounds, especially from poor and minority backgrounds, have been judged inadequate because they do not already know nor do they easily learn the school curriculum (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Valencia et al., 2001).

In line with sociocultural theory, teachers need to develop new strategies of instruction that engage students from CLD backgrounds and motivate them to learn (e.g., how can we help them learn English and other subjects to a high level of achievement). If U.S. schools are to meet the challenge of increasing numbers of CLD students, the teachers' strategies need to focus on active learning and fundamental learning concepts (Mahn, 1999; Nasir & Hand, 2006). Furthermore, teachers and students should redefine their roles and work together in creating a community of learners. Because many of these students are from families wherein parents value education but lack instrumental knowledge about how to succeed academically, from which these students and parents need special attention (Walqui, 2006).

Cultural and Social Capital Framework

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1977) and Stanton-Salazar's theory of social capital framework (1997) also serve as the theoretical bases to better understand CLD students' achievement outcomes. Bourdieu's theory provides an ideal framework for studying cultural poverty and affluence in dynamic contexts and pointing to a more politically-engaged policy practice. In addition, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital asserts that

students from privileged SES backgrounds tend to acquire a background in high culture (i.e., cultural capital) that they invest in scholastic pursuits and thereby obtain returns in the form of academic achievement and degree attainment (Fram, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). A social capital framework reflects the value of social relationship "from which an individual is potentially able to derive institutional support, particularly support that includes the delivery of knowledge-based resources" (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p119). Furthermore, social capital is the value available to an individual through his or her social ties and networks (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Yosso, 2005).

Unfortunately, cultural and social capitals are unequally distributed within U.S. capitalist society. For example, Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) examine how minority students' academic success relates to the development and functionality of ties to institutional agents (e.g., teachers and guidance counselors). Their study sample of Mexican-American high school students includes youth who speak different languages at home and school. Those minority students brought a primary discourse of home and neighborhood to the school environment, but their linguistic differences were not appreciated by school agents. Moreover, these students' linguistic disadvantages resulted in the limitation of accessing institutional supports. This mismatch not only lead to superficial communicative difficulties but also caused those students' to disengaging from the school (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

Students from CLD backgrounds, especially those from low SES backgrounds, are excluded from the mainstream (Valencia et al., 2001). CLD students are more likely to avoid learning skills associated with White middle and high class culture, since their efforts will not pay off with the same opportunities (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). Consequently, minority students develop

oppositional practices that lead to the loss of peer affiliation and institutional support. Due to above concerns, research has attempted to promote the idea that student cultural capital can account for the positive effects of socioeconomic status on education success (e.g., grades, degree attainment) (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). Stanton-Salazar (1997) suggests that minority youth would benefit from direct education in “decoding behavior” (p. 14) or skills that would allow them to translate between the primary discourse of home and secondary discourses, such as those of school or the dominant culture. Teaching such skills could grant equal access to social capital and other resources in the school environment (Fram, 2004).

The Need of Implementing Culturally-Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices are seen as being central in improving outcomes for students from CLD backgrounds (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The essence of CRT lies in acknowledging and understanding the role that race, language, and ethnicity play in teaching and learning. The use of experiences, perspectives, traits, and contributions of different ethnic/racial groups are seen as tools for teaching academic and social knowledge, values, and skills (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In other words, CRT uses the child’s culture to build a bridge to success in school achievement. Building a bridge requires a degree of cultural literacy often absent in many classrooms (Gay, 2000). Gay (2002) further conceptualized a framework for CRT in terms of instructional reforms needed to bring about desired outcomes for CLD children. These reforms are: critical cultural consciousness, culturally responsive classroom climates, learning communities, multicultural curriculum content and culturally-congruent instructional strategies.

Critical cultural consciousness. Building a cultural knowledge base and engaging

in self-reflective activity are crucial steps for teachers of students from CLD backgrounds (Phuntsog, 2001). This awareness step requires teachers to examine their own beliefs, values, and behaviors that hinder or facilitate the process of student learning. Once self-awareness becomes apparent, teachers are better able to recognize different cultural elements in students’ behaviors and use those insights to moderate teaching strategies (Gay, 2000).

Culturally-responsive classroom climates. The physical environment, emotional tone, and quality of interactions among students and between teacher and students have a tremendous impact on whether learning occurs (Ware, 2006). A growing body of literature supports the importance of caring teacher-student relationship to academic success of students from CLD backgrounds. Classrooms that are cold, hostile, stressful, and isolative, are not conducive to the best learning climate for students of color (Gay, 2000; Ware, 2006). Gay (2002) states that the most effective teachers are “warm demanders,” that is, they simultaneously demand and facilitate high academic performance while demonstrating warmth, personal caring, and concern for students.

Learning communities. The concept of learning communities emphasizes the interdependence of all classmates (Brown, 2003). In these communities, students pull their intellectual resources and help each other learn. The assumptions that individuals learn by their own volition is false. A great deal of cooperation and collaboration are involved in virtually every learning situation (Brown, 2003; Gay, 2002). Gay (2002) further reports that research on cooperative learning indicates that students from all ethnic/racial groups and ability levels benefit from it in many ways, including higher academics, feelings of personal efficacy, greater satisfaction with school, and improved interpersonal relationships across ethnic/racial groups.

Multicultural curriculum content and

culturally congruent instructional strategies. Learning styles are derived from cultural values, characteristics, and socialization (Gay, 2000). Students are able to learn better when content is familiar, has high interest appeal, is challenging and linked to prior knowledge. Information about the histories, cultural contributions and experiences of different ethnic/racial groups can be inserted into any part of the curriculum (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003).

Although researchers used slightly different language when describing the essential components of CRT, certain common themes and ideas emerged. CRT relies on the development of certain dispositions toward learners and a holistic approach to curriculum and instruction (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). Teachers need to engage in self-reflective analysis of their attitudes and beliefs, building upon the background experiences and strengths children bring to school, and the creation of a safe, caring, and inclusive classroom environment.

Leadership Perspectives of Future Implication

There continues to be a significant gap between the achievement of learners from CLD backgrounds and their White peers. Educators' efforts (e.g., desegregation, providing resources for programs designed to teach basic skills, and reducing class size) still have not been successful in closing this gap. Making developmental practices responsive to cultural differences presents a significant challenge for teachers, requiring them to adopt role definitions, curricula, and teaching practices that challenge rather than reflect the values of the wider society and themselves (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997; Nasir & Hand, 2006). Educating CLD students will require a multifaceted approach to school change (Frey & Fisher, 2004). By analyzing factors related to their achievement, recommendations for school change to close the gap would be suggested.

Recommendations for Educational Policies

Politicians should recognize that society is deeply concerned about improving the quality of education for all students. There is a need to raise issues related to inequality in funding as well as a focus on expanding educational opportunities as a way of reducing social inequality (Nasir & Hand, 2006). At the same time, educators need to consider two major questions: (a) how educational policies closely relate to students from CLD backgrounds; and (b) what school leaders can do for CLD students when facing educational policy change. Even though current educational policies are beginning to consider CLD students (e.g., NCLB pays much more attention to closing the gaps of particular groups of students such as ELLs and student with disabilities) (Jennings & Rentner, 2006), there is still room for improvement about what works for students from CLD backgrounds.

For example, from an early childhood perspective, young children's school readiness can be increased by high-quality preschool education and daycare. Policies that raise the quality of early learning environments will increase the probability of school readiness for students from CLD backgrounds, particularly poor children. Policies would include raising licensing standards for early childhood programs, providing more family resources and support services, and stimulating better collaboration between schools and the other human service organizations (Copland, 2003; Garcia, 2002). In addition, educational policies should focus not only on improving achievement for CLD students, but also consider their unique needs. "One size fits all" should not apply to the whole educational process. When following legal requirements, school leaders should provide flexibility for students from CLD backgrounds.

Recommendations for Practical Implications

Providing support services for all CLD students emphasizing the total integration

of school improvement efforts into the school programs is crucial. Therefore, one must consider leadership roles in reform and improvement of programs and services for these students. These roles should be viewed as sharing responsibilities involving principals, teachers, parents, and other community members. School leaders should: (a) share leadership with teachers and others in the community; (b) commit to school improvement and learning for all students; (c) support and empower teachers as capable and accountable professionals; (d) maintain positive relations with students, parents, and community; (e) maintain continuous communication with the home; (f) improve team plans for improvement in all areas of curriculum; and (g) improve a school-wide commitment (Copland, 2003; Frey & Fisher, 2004). School leaders need a framework to guide practitioners in understanding the needs of CLD students and families, and the barriers of providing effective education to these students (Copland, 2003). By doing so, educators can ensure that adequate services can assist CLD students with and without disabilities in reaching their maximum potential.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are gaps between researchers and practitioners, especially a lack of relevant educational research on CLD populations. Lisi and Chinn (2002) suggest that those involved in research need to move beyond traditional research programs that place emphasis upon children's learning and developmental processes. Instead, more emphasis needs to be placed on including all of those whose goal it is to improve education for CLD students and consider multiple perspectives.

More research is still needed to determine what works for improving CLD students' achievement outcomes. Both theoretical, applied research and evaluation studies must be supported in the future (Greenwood & Abbott, 2001). Descriptive, ethnographic, and quasi-experimental evaluation studies

are needed to determine the characteristics of effective schools and instructional practices for CLD students (Lesaux, 2006). Descriptive research is often neglected, but this research is needed to identify the impact of social and health issues on at-risk students from CLD backgrounds, their families, teachers and their instruction. For example, researchers need to explore the impact of racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, classism, and discriminatory behavior on the students' educational experience (Yosso, 2005). Finally, researchers need to share research in a timely manner and provide a linkage with school reform efforts to increase students' achievement (Lesaux, 2006).

Closing Thoughts

Those responsible for the education of an increasingly diverse student population can no longer hold the attitude that it is the culturally and linguistically different students and families who must change and be made to fit existing school environments. As educators, we can no longer hold children and families solely responsible as students from CLD backgrounds continue to underachieve and drop-out of school. Collectively, as teachers and administrators, we must be willing to acknowledge that far reaching, profound effect that attitude has on achievement.

Closing the gap and putting research findings into practice takes time and effort. There needs to be a strong, systematic, and ongoing research agenda on basic and applied issues for the achievement and schooling experience of students from CLD backgrounds (Lesaux, 2006). This will require the utmost skill and effort from all involved in the educational process (including policy makers, school leaders, teachers, and the students and families) to make it happen.

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