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Cultural Values in Learning and Education

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By the time children enter school, most of them have mastered modes of interpersonal engagement through interactions with their families and communities. Yet U.S. families and communities are culturally diverse, particularly in urban settings. And their customary modes of activity and interaction often differ from those favored by the mainstream Euro-American culture in public schools.

Empirical research generally focuses on how differences in children's cultural backgrounds affect their acquisition of skills in school (Heath 1983). Such studies identify facets of school curriculums that are culturally biased and that contribute to the urban achievement gap. However, reductionist views of development that focus on isolated dimensions—such as the acquisition of specific skills or the design of curriculums based only on cognitive functioning—do not go far enough. It is just as important to recognize that the cultural value systems in which children grow up also influence their development.

In this chapter, we consider how cultural history and values shape developmental goals of immigrant and minority children in the United States and how those values may conflict with the goals and values favored in public schools. We explore two primary value orientations: collectivism and individualism, often termed interdependence and independence (Markus and Kitayama 1991). We begin with a theory about the role of cultural history and cultural values in minority children's development. Next, we review how the cultural value orientations of individualism and collectivism shape children's developing competencies. We follow with concrete examples of how individualism and collectivism can conflict when children of minority, collectivistic cultures encounter individualism in U.S. schools. The chapter ends with implications for schools and teaching practices, models of minority children's education, and a theory for multicultural development.

Development in Cultural Contexts

Developmental psychology has undergone something of a paradigm shift. A decade ago it isolated the individual's development from various social influences; today it focuses on how varying social interactions affect development (Greenfield 1984, Rogoff 1990, Vygotsky 1978).

According to this view, children develop competencies through social interactions. These social interactions, in turn, reflect cultural values and standards for appropriate behavior. In other words, children's social interactions are culturally constituted. This shift in thinking needs more exploration, particularly in regard to how cultural values shape development and which dimensions of culture may be particularly salient for minority children in U.S. urban schools.

Minority Child Development and Cultural History

Vygotsky highlighted the importance of cultural history as a dimension in understanding individual development within various ethnic groups (Scribner 1985). Ethnic groups grow out of the interaction of a heritage culture with a dominant culture (Kim 1991). Minority research up to now has focused mostly on the contact culture. Less attention has been paid to the culture of origin (Berry 1987). We believe that both aspects of cultural history are a central component of minority children's development.

Different ethnic groups have different perspectives on the role of ancestral cultural history. These perspectives vary with a group's traditions and the time and manner in which the group becomes incorporated into a dominant society. For example, Japanese Americans are at one extreme in the United States, placing so much importance on ancestral history that they call every generation since emigration from Japan by its own distinct name. At another extreme are African Americans, among whom the significance of African roots is quite controversial. One view holds that the experience of slavery and subsequent discrimination entirely wiped out a distinctive African American culture. Yet some practices from that culture remain. For example, African American handclapping games are practically identical to games played in West Africa (Merrill-Mirsky 1991). Sudarkasa (1988) acknowledges the historical influence of slavery, but posits that the prior culture of Africans who adapted to and survived slavery affected the nature of their adaptation.

Value Orientations: A Key Aspect of Cultural History

Development and socialization take place as people adapt to different ecological and economic conditions (Berry 1967, 1994; Draper and Cashdan 1988). This adaptation accounts for the material side of culture. However, human beings have an intrinsic need to create meaning from their experiences as well (Bruner 1990). How they do so becomes reflected and rationalized in different value orientations. We call this the symbolic side of culture. Kim (1991) brings these two sides together in a view of culture as a collective way to attach meaning to ecological conditions.

The social ecology and economic circumstances of minority children in the United States (or in other Western countries) often differ from those of children growing up in the societies of their ancestral origin. The ways in which these children adapt to ecological conditions (the material side of culture) are less likely to demonstrate their ancestral cultural roots than are their value orientations (an aspect of

symbolic culture). Value orientations are the major source of ancestral continuity in minority children's development.

Viewing behavior and thought processes from a values perspective makes it possible to go beyond the mere identification of cultural or other group differences. It enables us to understand the adaptive function and the meaning of cultural differences for the groups involved (Kim and Choi 1994).

The Acquisition of Culture

Culture in this discussion means a group's knowledge and expectations about appropriate modes of interaction and the patterns of activities that are common to that group. As children develop, they construct these modes of appropriate behavior by participating in a variety of social interactions. Interaction in each setting is based on and reflects an "invisible culture" (Phillips 1972). Invisible culture involves the implicit communication of values, norms, and aspirations through social interaction and every day routines (Cazden 1988).

Children come to school acting in accordance with the invisible cultures of their homes and communities. Conflict arises when their behavior differs from the invisible culture of the school. The school may sometimes devalue and even punish, albeit inadvertently, children for behavior that their parents value. Because the cultures are invisible, such conflicts often are not even recognized as cultural. Ironically, teachers may conscientiously try to create culturally sensitive environments for their students (e.g., through multicultural displays and activities) while simultaneously structuring classroom interaction patterns that violate invisible cultural norms of various minority groups. Teachers also may inadvertently criticize parents for adhering to a different set of ideals about children, families, and parenting.

Individualism and Collectivism

Recent theory and research have distinguished the cultural value orientation of individualism and collectivism (e.g., Greenfield and Cocking 1994, Kagitcibasi 1989, Triandis 1989). Harking back to its Anglo-Saxon and European immigrant origins, mainstream culture

in the United States is generally individualistic (Lebra 1994). It encourages independence and individual achievement as important goals of development (Markus and Kitayama 1991). The public school system is one cultural-institutional setting that highlights these aspects of individualism.

In contrast, many non-Western immigrant and minority groups now living in urban areas of the United States have a cultural history of collectivism. Collectivism is a cultural value orientation that emphasizes interdependence as well as the preservation and permanence of prescribed relationships that are hierarchically structured around family roles and multiple generations. This history is part of the cultural and cross-cultural roots of Native Americans, Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians (Greenfield and Cocking 1994).

With different developmental goals that are shaped by different patterns of social interaction, children from individualistic and collectivistic value orientations become adept at different modes of activity, and they have different conceptions of appropriate behavior.

Preschool Socialization of Individualism and Collectivism

Conceptualizations of intelligence in individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ. In collectivistic cultures, infants spend most of their time with other human beings. The value of physical objects is primarily that they mediate social relationships, as gifts do, for example (Greenfield, Brazelton, and Childs 1989; Rabain-Jamin 1994). Individualistic cultures, on the other hand, tend to emphasize technological knowledge of the physical world as a way of facilitating independence. Parents are likely to hope and believe that their children will be verbally competent and able to construct knowledge of the physical world from observing and manipulating toys that stimulate independence. To that end, a parent in the United States might provide a baby with toys so that the baby will amuse himself or herself and not require constant attention. Similarly, parents in individualistic cultures tend to emphasize distal modes of communication through linguistic means, as opposed to proximal modes of communication such as touching and holding (Greenfield 1994).

Because knowledge of the physical world and linguistic communication by and large define children's early cognitive development,

parents from independence-oriented, individualistic cultures place a high value on them. In contrast, parents from interdependence-oriented cultures are likely to promote their children's social intelligence.

Individualism Versus Collectivism and the Schools

Schools in the United States emphasize individualism and independence as a goal of development. Many classroom interactions and activities aim for individual achievement, encourage autonomous choice and initiative, and develop logico-rational cognitive skills (Delgado-Gaitan 1993, 1994). Unless part of socially structured and identified collaborative activities, cooperation in school activities is called "cheating" (Whiting and Whiting 1973, 1994). Student evaluations are based on independent work.

These characteristics of schooling contrast with the collectivistic traditions of many minority and immigrant cultures in urban schools (e.g., Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, and African American). The ancestral cultures of these groups emphasize interpersonal relationships, respect for elders and tradition, responsibility for others, and cooperation (Blake 1993, 1994; Delgado-Gaitan 1993, 1994; Ho 1994; Kim and Choi 1994; Suina and Smolkin 1994).

Encouraging children's individual achievements in school can stimulate an independent sense of self that undermines a sense of self based on social affiliation and responsibility for others. For example, hierarchical relationships and respect for elders and authority are important elements in collectivistic cultures (Triandis 1989). They contrast with the individualistic view of egalitarianism. However, the development of critical thinking requires children to articulate and even argue their views with older family members on a relatively egalitarian basis (Delgado-Gaitan 1993, 1994). This practice can become a source of conflict between these two value orientations because the academic performance of children who are not vocal and adept at logico-rational modes of argumentation is likely to be evaluated negatively.

In addition, the impersonal text rather than the knowledge and wisdom of older family members is the basic source of learning in U.S. schools. But in the Pueblo Indian world view, for example, parents and grandparents are the repositories of knowledge. This provides a social connection between the generations. The introduction of encyclopedias, reference books, and the like undermines "the very fiber of the connectedness" (Suina 1991, p. 153). Along with teachers, such books displace family elders as the authorities for knowledge. Collectivistic or interdependence-oriented societies, such as in Japan and China, adhere to strong collectivistic practices in their classrooms, including learning from other children and teaching the whole class rather than attending to individual students (Stigler and Perry 1988). These practices moderate the individualistic bias intrinsic to school-based formal education.

Conflicts Between Individualism and Collectivism in the Schools

Conflicts between individualism and collectivism play out in urban school settings, often without the teacher being aware of it. A real-life incident from Los Angeles serves as an example. A preschool boy is playing with a toy. A girl, the daughter of Mexican immigrant parents, takes the toy to play with it. The boy hits her. The teacher's response is to tell the girl that she should not take other children's toys. The Mexican American mother, looking on, becomes upset that the teacher did not reprimand the boy for his act of aggression. After all, this mother commented, in her extended family, material objects are shared. Possession or personal property is a negative concept akin to selfishness. Her interpretation of the incident comes from her collectivistic view: The boy showed selfishness in refusing to share the toy with her daughter, and then he compounded his undesirable behavior with physical aggression.

In contrast, the teacher's reaction is consonant with individualistic values of independence. Objects are the property of a single individual, even if only temporarily, as in school. Hence, the teacher treats the girl as the primary transgressor because she took away a toy "belonging" to another child. Clearly not all teachers from the mainstream U.S. culture would respond as this teacher did. Many would focus on the undesirability of physical aggression. But, those with an individualistic orientation—and its valuing of private property—would probably see the boy as the original victim and the girl as the first encroacher. Because the girl would not be seen as a victim

of the boy's selfishness, her own legitimate need for rectification would go unrecognized.

If the teacher and the parent were familiar with each other's value systems, dialogue and compromise on how to respond to such incidents would be possible. However, with no understanding of the other party's value system, misunderstanding and frustration are likely to result, forcing the child to struggle with mixed messages about social behavior. The implication for education is that teachers and parents need to understand and respect each other's value systems, and they should seek ways to harmonize them for the benefit of children, families, classrooms, and communities.

Other examples of conflicts between individualism and collectivism exist as well. A teacher in Los Angeles described a situation in which Hispanic students formed groups at every opportunity, despite the teacher's insistence that students work alone. The primary purpose of these groups was not necessarily to work on the task together but simply to be together and to talk while working. However, from the teacher's point of view, this social interaction was a problem, if not outright cheating.

During one of our observations of a Los Angeles prekindergarten class made up of mostly Hispanic children, the teacher was showing a real chicken egg that would soon hatch. While teaching the physical properties of the egg, she asked children to describe eggs by thinking about the times they had cooked and eaten them. One child tried three times to talk about how she cooked eggs with her grandmother, but the teacher disregarded these comments in favor of a child who explained that the insides of eggs are white and yellow. The Hispanic member of our research team noted that the first child's answer was typical of the associations that her invisible home culture encourages. That is, objects are most meaningful when they mediate social interactions. But in this case, the teacher expected students to describe eggs as isolated physical entities. Eggs as mediators of social relationships and behavior were irrelevant.

This incident has a number of implications for urban education. First, because she did not even see the invisible culture that generated the description of cooking eggs with grandmother, the teacher devalued the child's contribution and, implicitly, the value orientation it reflected. Second, because she did not consider the collectivistic value orientation, she did not realize that her question was ambiguous. Children who share the teacher's value orientation will assume she is interested in the physical properties of eggs, even though she has not explicitly said so. Those children who do not share the teacher's value orientation will assume differently. In a culturally sensitive school environment, the teacher both validates the social relationships of children from collectivistic backgrounds by showing interest in their family experiences and is explicit about her expectations for a topic of study. This approach facilitates a process of bidirectional cultural exchange at school: Some collectivistic values become part of the classroom while, at the same time, children from collectivist cultures get practice in the cognitive operations necessary for school success.

The different value placed on cognitive and social development was again illustrated during conferences between a teacher and Hispanic immigrant parents of 4th graders. To the teacher, the conference was a forum for discussing the children's academic performance—the children as independent achievers with unique capabilities and potential. In contrast, parents wanted to talk about their children's social behavior and role in the family. The result was miscommunication and frustration on both sides. Neither party seemed to be aware, however, that the frustration and dissatisfaction stemmed from fundamental differences in their views of the children themselves. That is, the teacher saw the children as independent learners, but to parents they were family members. Mutual understanding of invisible cultures could open up dialogue about both cultural views.

A final example of conflict between individualism and collectivism demonstrates the struggle immigrant Hispanic families are going through as they try to reconcile their collectivistic home cultures with the individualistic orientation of the public schools. In this study, we analyzed how children, parents, and teachers respond to scenarios of interpersonal situations that may occur in home and school settings (Raeff, Greenfield, and Quiroz in press). Each scenario involved an interpersonal dilemma that could be solved individualistically or collectivistically. Analyses of pilot data indicate that teachers responded overwhelmingly individualistically (80 percent), whereas Hispanic immigrant mothers responded collectivistically almost all of the time

(90 percent). Hispanic children responded in between the two, with an average of 64 percent collectivistic responses. Let us illustrate with the following scenario.

Erica tells her mother that she got the highest grade in the class on her math test. She says she is really proud of herself for doing so well and for doing the best in the class. She says she guesses she is really smart. When asked how the mother should respond, a teacher said: "Agree emphatically that 'yes' she certainly is smart and that the test proves that she is capable of doing virtually anything if she applies herself. Erica has done well and needs the appropriate recognition. It will obviously enhance self-esteem and increase her chances of success in life." In contrast, an Hispanic immigrant mother answered, "She should congratulate her, but tell her not to praise herself too much. She should not think so much of herself." Moreover, this mother worried that too much praise could make the student see other children as less worthy.

This example demonstrates the teacher's view of the child as a self-contained, independent achiever. As far as the teacher is concerned, there is no conflict in this scenario because if the student did her best on the test, she is entitled to feel proud of herself. However, the mother perceived a conflict; namely, the student deserved credit for doing well but she should not separate her achievement from her relationship to the group. An implication for educational practice is the need to incorporate both cultural orientations into criterion-referenced tests. That would allow the whole group to meet a standard instead of making one child's gain in academic achievement another child's loss, as is the case in curved assessments.

Historical Power Relationships Between Majority and Minority Groups

Ancestral roots are only one part of minority children's culture. Ogbu (1993, 1994) points out that minority children must also cope with another important factor in their development: the history and nature of power relationships between minority and majority cultures.

Minority groups fall into two major classifications: involuntary minority groups (those who become incorporated into a nation through conquest, slavery, or colonization) and voluntary minority groups (those who become incorporated into a nation through voluntary immigration). Involuntary groups tend to oppose the cultural values of the majority (Ogbu 1993, 1994) to keep the conquerors, enslavers, and colonizers from wiping out their indigenous cultures. They feel they cannot adopt any of the ways of the majority without giving up parts of their own culture. Involuntary minorities differ from voluntary minorities in that the societies to which voluntary minorities immigrate generally tolerate their culture. African Americans (through slavery), Native Americans (through conquest) and, to some extent, Mexican Americans (through conquest of the U.S. Southwest from Mexico) are classified as involuntary minorities (Ogbu 1994). Involuntary minorities see schools as majority institutions. Therefore, academic achievement challenges their group loyalties and ethnic identities.

Voluntary minorities are secure in their ethnic identities, but they want to learn new ways that will enable them to succeed in their new country (Ogbu 1994). For them, schooling is a new way that leads to opportunity. Asian Americans constitute voluntary minorities; they use schooling as a path to achievement in the broader society. Unlike the experience of involuntary minorities—such as African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans—the dominant culture has never actively tried to eradicate the culture and language of voluntary immigrants.

Because U.S. society has actively attempted to eradicate the culture of every involuntary minority group, involuntary minorities find historical justification for believing that their ancestral or ethnic culture and Euro-American culture, including its schools, are mutually exclusive. For example, Native American children were forcibly put into government boarding schools whose major goal was to eradicate Native American culture and languages. For this reason, the most successful schooling for Native Americans has been in their own community-run institutions. Being separate from, and even opposing, the dominant culture are important for involuntary minorities to retain their culture.

The bottom line is that the cultural history of minority groups creates two kinds of value diversity that are relevant to urban education. The first is the diversity of values that comes from the various ancestral cultures that make up the United States. The second is the diversity of values that comes from the various ways in which groups become part of our nation, the values that are a function of the history of relations between minority groups and the wider society (Ogbu 1993, 1994). Urban education can benefit by expanding its efforts to take both kinds of value diversity into account.

Implications for Educational Practice

Acquiring more knowledge about the cultural roots of involuntary minorities by minorities themselves, as well as by members of the dominant society, is one step toward recognizing positive bicultural identities. Schools should encourage and help urban children from involuntary minority groups explore their ancestral cultural roots so that they can develop a positive cultural identity. Positive identities can ultimately replace the cultural conflicts that hold so much power over involuntary minority children in urban areas.

It is also important for the mental health of voluntary minorities that schools help maintain pride in their culture of origin, as Kim and Choi (1994) demonstrate for Korean Americans and Korean Canadians. When pressure from an individualistic environment leads people from collectivist cultures to surrender their way of living and child rearing, what is the psychological price? This question has only recently received attention because educational research and practice have generally been from the perspective of the dominant society.

Our ultimate goal in examining how individualism and collectivism differentially shape children's learning and socialization is to influence classroom practices and school policies toward urban families and communities. We want to encourage schools to better understand and appreciate the modes of behavior that children bring to the classroom from their invisible home and community cultures. Just acknowledging the existence of another culture validates it. School may be less threatening to minority parents, particularly immigrant parents, if they feel there is some attempt to validate and understand their values.

Recognizing the positive sources of learning and cognitive development in diverse cultural groups can help schools to appreciate, utilize, and adapt to the strengths that minority children bring with them into the classroom. Increasing their knowledge about cultural history will enable members of the dominant society to understand and appreciate the distinctive styles of cognitive socialization and learning of minority children and vice versa. This knowledge would open up communication between schools and homes and ultimately benefit parents, teachers, and, particularly, students.

The most constructive approach for schools may be to accommodate select socialization practices and values from children's home and community cultures (Tharp and Gallimore 1988). Such a cultural compatibility model stresses the simultaneous promotion of children's home/community cultures and adjustment to the mainstream culture. We further suggest that classroom practices that include both minority culture and mainstream U.S. culture can benefit all children, majority as well as minority, in terms of learning, social behavior, attitudes, and classroom climate (Kagan 1986). In more general terms, an understanding of cultural roots creates pride in oneself and one's group, as well as appreciation of other groups. Indeed, this is the significance of Jesse Jackson's suggestion that the term "black" be replaced by "African American." The latter emphasizes the influence of African roots on black psychology and society (Njeri 1989).

One specific intervention is to gear teacher workshops toward expanding the values of interdependence and responsibility for others. This would help teachers of urban minority or immigrant children make their students feel that they are part of their school community. Another method might be to establish day-care centers for preschool children in elementary schools so that elementary children can help as caregivers. Such activities could develop a sense of social responsibility in the young caregivers (Whiting and Whiting 1994). Such interventions would also test the idea that all children, not just immigrant or minority children, benefit from a better balance between social responsibility and independence in school.

Continuing efforts to create a feedback loop that involves parents, students, and teachers is an important strategy. Many parents, as well as teachers, may not know that children's success in school partly depends on their ability to master modes of activity and interaction that

are very different from and may even conflict with value orientations that are emphasized at home. Collectivistic-oriented parents may perceive the school's emphasis on developing each child's potential as encouraging undesirable selfishness. When the collectivistic or interdependence-oriented immigrant parent keeps a child home from school to help take care of a sick baby, he or she sees the child as both learning and enacting a responsible prosocial role. In contrast, the school, with its individualistic perspective, sees the parent as interfering with the child's independent educational development. Parents and teachers must continue to work together to find strategies to incorporate and encourage individually oriented school achievement and development while maintaining valued forms of interdependence, such as family unity, aid, and sharing. For parents, as well as teachers, to know about each other's expectations facilitates communication and enables urban parents from collectivistic cultures to participate more actively in the schools.

Toward a Multicultural Model of Development

The implications of developmental and educational theory by and large revolve around one major theme: The need to recognize that patterns and norms of development and education previously thought to be universal are often specific to Euro-American culture, and Euro-American culture is the culture of the schools. We hope that further understanding of the historical roots that influence minority children's development will help urban educators move away from a model of minority children's development that views differences as deficiencies (Cole and Bruner 1971) and beyond a coping model of minority children's development that sees differences simply as adaptations to unfavorable conditions in the dominant society (McLloyd 1990, Ogbu 1994). Even more fundamental for educators is a diversity model (Cole and Bruner 1971, Rogoff and Morelli 1989) that recognizes that learning differences are rooted in historic cultural values that, instead of being assimilated out of existence, can make an important contribution to a diverse society.

The U.S. ideal of the self-fulfilled individual has turned into an extreme of widespread isolation, alienation, and violence. An emphasis on family responsibility and solidarity so intrinsic to collectivist cultures can infuse a moderating influence of great importance in our society.

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