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Cultural Differences and the Construction of Meaning: Implications for the Leadership and Organizational Context of Schools

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Abstract The relationships between student achievement, student culture and practitioners' attitudes and expectations were investigated. Student achievement was defined as academic performance but also included perceptions, rationales and explanations for student behaviors and conduct. Student culture described student's Mexican American origins, customs and beliefs. Practitioners' attitudes described how middle school personnel perceived Mexican American high and underachieving students generally, and practitioners' expectations described how personnel interacted and behaved toward Mexican American students. Results indicated that Mexican American students perceived themselves and school personnel perceived these students as different from Anglo students. Mexican American cultural traditions were also perceived as inferior and disadvantageous by high achieving Mexican American students and by personnel. Underachieving Mexican American students generally valued their cultural traditions more positively than high achieving students becoming resistant to learning when these traditions were marginalized in school. Student achievement was also related to student compliance, student appearance, styles in written and verbal communication and practitioners' perceptions about the willingness of Mexican American students to practice and support Anglo norms. These findings are congruent with theories that discuss relationships between student achievement, student culture and practitioners' attitudes and expectations. Theories about school failure occurring less frequently in minority groups that are positively oriented toward their own and the dominant culture were contradicted and not supported in this research.

Introduction

Mirel (1993) notes that during the early 20th century, urban schools were the "jewel in the

crown" of the American public school system. Today, unlike their counterparts of almost 100 years ago, Mirel adds that urban schools epitomize the "pessimism and despair" (Edson, 1994, p. 34) of urban decay to the degree that some suggest that they are "not even worth saving" (p. 34).

High dropout rates and academic underachievement are particularly high among urban school students from minority groups according to Mirel. Student alienation due to discrepancies between school cultures and the attitudes and values found in students' homes (Banks, 1993; Brookover et. al., 1982; Edmunds and Fredereksen, 1979; Karweit and Madden, 1989; Weber, 1947) are cited as causes of student under performance. Coleman et. al, (1966) found for example, that academic success and the completion of schooling were due to the "supportive nature" of community life in homes and outside the school, and when a student's values and community relationships mirrored the values and social relationships within the school context. These findings seem deterministic, describing a hegemonic relationship between home and school cultures that frames schools as sacrosanct and student and family characteristics as conducive or not conducive to academic success in school.

In contrast, Peña (1994), Hewlett (1991) and Turnbull and Turnbull (1990) found that school structures that marginalized minorities also led to depressed outcomes for these students. Exclusionary curriculum, scheduling, disciplinary and instructional practices constrained student achievement, limited parental involvement and stimulated antagonistic student behaviors in schools according to these researchers. Scheurich and Imber (1991) also hypothesized that lacking broad community input, policies and practices implemented to benefit underachieving students may also have contributed to their attrition, alienation and underachievement in school.

Empirical and qualitative researchers both suggest that school structures can be deliberately created, maintained, and strengthened through specific approaches to leadership, management, and the manipulation of organizational factors (Bryck, Lee and Smithy, 1990; Newmann, 1989; Rosenholtz, 1989). There are, however, three important issues that require further research. The first calls for interviewing minority youth to learn about their self concept and its relationship to achievement in school. The second requires examining the home and school experiences of students in tandem to understand their beliefs about education and in particular, their feelings about social institutions like schools. This approach makes youth and communities rather than schools the primary unit of analysis. The third issue involves analyzing practitioners' behaviors and beliefs to understand how their expectations work with school structures to support and constrain the educational chances, cultures and traditions of minority urban school students.

Sociologists and anthropologists from Emile Durkheim (1984) in his treatise titled *The Division of Labor in Society*, to John Ogbu (1987) in his research on voluntary and involuntary minority groups have found that comparing external social experiences and school organizational characteristics yields information on the values and beliefs of specific groups and how these relate to institutional behaviors and expectations. Analyzing this information may also specify more precisely what organizational features relate most powerfully to the cultural attributes of minority students and to their enhanced achievement in school.

Review of the Literature

Educational theorists attempting to explain minority success and failure in school during the 1980s and 1990s point to what Deyhle (1995) calls "cultural difference" and "sociostructural theories." Deyhle labels James Cummins a cultural difference theorist for example, because of his work and body of ideas on empowering minority students. Cummins (1986) suggests that minority failure and failures in school reform have not significantly altered the relationships between educators and minority youths and between schools and minority communities in his writings. Cummins "central tenet" is that "students from dominated societal groups are

empowered or disabled as a direct result of their interactions with educators in schools" (Cummins, 1986, p. 21). His recommendations are that educators change their relationships with minorities to promote empowerment of students which in turn, can lead to success in school.

John Ogbu is described as a sociostructural theorist by Deyhle (1995) because of his writings on economic and political structures, and the academic under performance and dropping out of voluntary and involuntary minorities. Voluntary minorities are described as immigrants "who are doing better in school" and "who have moved more or less voluntarily to the United States because they believed that this move would lead to more economic well-being, better overall opportunities, or greater political freedom" by Ogbu (1989, p. 187). Involuntary minorities describe nonimmigrants who initially were brought to the United States through "slavery, conquest or colonization" (p. 187).

The reasons Ogbu gives for the success and failure of voluntary and involuntary minorities are that immigrants possess a positive dual frame of reference that they use to interpret the "economic, political, and social barriers against them as more or less temporary problems, as problems they will overcome." Involuntary minorities interpret the same obstacles differently and without this frame of reference. Ogbu (1987) suggests that because "they do not have a *homeland* situation to compare with the situation in the United States, they do not interpret their menial jobs as better" or "temporary" (p. 188). For involuntary minorities discrimination is permanent and institutionalized forcing them to look outside of schools and individual effort to collective effort for overcoming barriers to getting ahead. Deyhle (1995) labels Ogbu a "sociostructural" theorist because he argues the reasons for minority student failure lie in the racial, social and economic stratification found in the United States.

In her recent longitudinal study of Navajo students and families on Native reservations, Deyhle (1995) writes that she hopes to "represent the specific Navajo experience" (p. 6). She implies that Cummins' and Ogbu's theories are inadequate because neither addresses "racial warfare" in "both the schools and society" (p. 6).

Deyhle also contends that Anglo teachers and Navajo students engage in "racial conflict," and that Navajos "have substantial ethical disagreements with the Anglo values manifested in the schools and greater economy" (p. 6). This racial conflict also stands for what Deyhle sees as a representation of the integrity of the Navajo culture and figures into the discrimination, subordination, exploitation and to the manufacture of deficit explanations that Anglos create to account for Navajo behaviors in majority dominated schools and businesses.

For Deyhle, the school failure of Navajo youth comes as they have little identity as Navajos and because they are not accepted by Anglos. Deyhle also supports Cummins' (1986) belief that "widespread school failure does not occur in minority groups that are positively oriented toward their own and the dominant culture, that do not perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant group, and that are not alienated from their own cultural values" (p. 32). Deyhle (1995) writes that "Navajo youth who are better integrated into their home culture will be more successful students, regardless of the structural barriers they face" (p. 8). She concludes by asserting that "the more Navajo students resist assimilation while simultaneously maintaining their culture, the more successful they are in school" (p. 8).

These three theories on the success and especially the failure of minority students frame understanding the relationship between minority and majority cultures as crucial to building academic success. Each theory also describes community involvement and acquiring an understanding of the student's community as playing pivotal roles in enhancing school reform and student access and achievement in school. Finally, the authors of each theory insist that what goes on inside the schools, including instructional methods and the kind of curriculum taught, are very important for minority student success.

Where each of these theories lingers is in explaining the success and failure of minority students with similar cultural, community and school backgrounds. These theories do not account

for students who reside together in the same community, share the same cultural background, have the same teachers and like schedules of classes, experience the same instructional methods and curriculum in the same school, speak a version of English at home, whose home language and culture differ from those of the school and wider society yet who also show high and underachievement in their classes .

Cummins (1986) posits that minority language incorporation, community participation, enhanced intrinsic motivation and the professional acting as an advocate for minorities are four key dimensions that operate on a continuum and promote the empowerment of students on one end while contributing to the "disabling of students" (p. 21) on the other. Ogbu (1987) suggests that variability in minority school performance at the individual level can be traced to differences in cultural models: to the initial terms by which the minorities were incorporated into U.S. society; and by the way minority students interpret their initial incorporation and their subsequent treatment by white Americans. Deyhle points to the importance of reservation life and to the preservation of traditional culture for Navajos as contributing to failure in public schools that stress competitiveness and individuality.

In each discussion, these theorists neatly explain how the dominant culture diverges from and seizes the weaker less traditional culture. Cummins, Ogbu and Deyhle also suggest that superior integration in the school and community is necessary for increasing minority academic achievement and greater success overall. This study consequently tests these theories by attempting to understand why students unable and able to maintain their cultural connections nonetheless contradict and prove successful and unsuccessful respectively in the Anglo world of schooling. This study hopes to expand previous understandings by analyzing the success and underachievement of twenty Mexican American students that live in the same feeder neighborhoods and are enrolled together in a single public middle school in a state located in the Southwest.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the studies described earlier, minority student achievement may be improved by making school factors more relevant to student backgrounds. School attempts to enhance school membership, teacher expectations, educational engagement and school support presumably yield improved student performance and outcomes (Peña, 1995; Wehlage, 1989; Wehlage, 1986). Researchers also agree that school traditions that do not agree with students' cultural attributes will adversely effect membership, instruction and the disciplinary climate in schools (see Erickson, 1987, McNeil, 1986 and Willis, 1977). Consequently, this researcher proposes to examine the school and community experiences of high and under achieving first generation Mexican American working class students to understand how these students define themselves, education and success in schools and in their community. This examination may generate understandings on how attitudes and school cultures support and constrain the achievement and behaviors of these students and members of their ethnic and racial peers. Mexican American pupils describe first generation students who have some English proficiency skills and have taken up permanent residence in the United States.

Although there is significant variability among first generation Mexican American students from working class families, individuals from these groups may nonetheless share "underlying cultural patterns that influence their behaviors and beliefs" (Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994, p. 156). Labeled "cultural boundaries" by Erickson (1987), studying these patterns may give evidence of different "ways of growing up," "raising children," and "evidence of different cultural standards of appropriateness" (Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994, p. 156). Studying the home and school experiences of high and under achieving Mexican American students then, may explain how they define themselves, how they interact with peers and school personnel, and what attitudes and

behaviors these students exhibit that enable them to succeed and fail in school and in their communities. Community in this context describes a specific external location where persons live, share daily interactions and a location that is contained by school boundaries and common to the students included in this study.

Methodology and Sources of Data

Data generated through depth interviews, document analyses, and participant observation were analyzed using constant comparison and methods taken from grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). Constant comparison describes the simultaneous collecting and analyzing of data for their refinement, categorization and integration into a coherent theory (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). High and underachieving Mexican American middle school students and school personnel who routinely interacted with these students were interviewed, while guardians and relevant members from the community were observed.

Data collection started upon acquiring the recommendations of administrators and teachers for "ten high achieving and ten underachieving Mexican American students" to interview. Decisions for expanding and including others were based on snowballing techniques where interviewees recommended additional participants, on the development of themes, and on the emergence of data saturation or the point at which information collected became redundant (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In total, 20 students were nominated (ten high achieving and ten underachieving Mexican American students) and participated to the completion of this study. Additionally, 12 teachers and two middle school administrators were interviewed and observed.

The formation of questionnaires, elements, themes and supplemental data collection instruments for document analyses and observations were guided by the theoretical framework described earlier and by prior social science and anthropological research (see Cummins, 1986; D'Andrade, 1984; Deyhle, 1995; Erickson, 1987a; Erickson, 1987b; Goodenough, 1981; Geertz, 1973 and Ogbu, 1987). Analyses of discussions with different respondents, documents and observation notes were also employed to understand Mexican American student self perceptions, their perceptions of schooling and how school policies, practices and practitioners' perceptions relate and contribute to their success and failure in a single middle school located in the Southwest.

Findings

Analyses of the data indicate that the ten high achieving Mexican American students demonstrated attitudes and behaviors that were distinct from their underachieving peers in and out of school. High achieving students were compliant with demands placed on them by teachers, middle level structures and other requisites for social acceptance and achievement in school. These students also framed meeting school demands as more important and personally satisfying than pursuing ethnic membership. High achieving students also viewed their cultures as embarrassing more often. These students described experiences in Mexico, at home and characteristics of language and culture as impediments to fitting in, gaining social acceptance and their achievement in school.

Underachieving Mexican American students in contrast, were generally less compliant and more resistant to school customs that agitated and marginalized their own cultural traditions. These students placed cultural membership before achievement in school more often, attaching greater import to cultural knowledge and integrity than to being compliant and making friends and grades in school. Social acceptance emerged for these students through relations with family members, close peers and community members with similar values in both informal and middle

school settings.

Analyses related to teachers' perceptions indicated that educators spent little time and possessed scant knowledge of their Mexican American students backgrounds. Practitioners also felt that higher achieving students possessed a clearer sense of personal identity than underachievers, and that these students were more willing to adapt to and prevail over different demands that might be perceived as culturally antagonistic by minority students. Teachers also agreed that high achievers demonstrated greater fluency in Spanish and English than underachievers, and greater mastery in transferring and adapting prior experiences and understandings to unfamiliar concepts and traditional instructional methodologies.

Teachers added that underachieving Mexican American students seemed less capable of expressing their thoughts and reasoning about prior experiences in a thorough and orderly way. They felt that underachievers demonstrated sporadic flashes of thought in school while demonstrating a cultural rift, unable to integrate their experiences on Mexican and US soil. Teachers also concluded that this cultural rift prevented underachieving students from applying prior educational experiences and knowledge for making meaning of instruction and expectations in traditional US schools. What follows is detail on higher and underachieving Mexican American students, the strategies they used to make sense in school and in their communities, and school and community factors that supported and constrained their school success. In this context, the nature of school success and failure is considered using two frames (Erickson, 1987b). These frames refer to the ways that students succeed and fail to achieve in school and in their community, and to the ways their school and community support and fail Mexican American middle school students.

Understanding High and Underachieving Mexican American Students

Explanations for success in and out of school were organized under three domains. The first, or personal domain fixes explanations to the students, their families, their backgrounds and to students' lifestyles. The second or interpersonal domain attaches success and failure to students' peer and social relations. The third category labeled formal and informal domains contains fixes student success and failure to power configurations and the interplay between school and community characteristics.

Personal Domain

Students explanations for their high and underachievement in school were based upon assimilationist and cultural resistance ideologies. The high achieving students understood they were different from Anglo teachers and students and that academic achievement required them to "work harder to prove we all aren't dumb and we could do it [achieve] too." These students also perceived they "have to be better than everybody else all the time because you want to be like them when you're in school," because they needed "to fit in," and because "you want your teachers to like you" and "have teachers help you out." One high achieving student noted that "everyday you remember you're not from here even if you are, and then your mother and father talk different and are not from here and that you're really not as good and maybe don't look like you belong in this school." Another student recalled concealing her anger and embarrassment over Mexican American students being singled out and treated unfairly in class:

"Mrs. Thomas likes to put the Mexican's against the Anglo kids all the time and I really hate when she does that because it's not that right. For recess she treats us like little kids and she makes us go to the door and line up and be quiet. The kids with the green eyes go first, then the kids with the blue eyes then if you got brown eyes you go last sometimes. Then another time in spelling Lucinda got marked down because she didn't spell her word loud for Mrs. Thomas to hear her. Then when the students said they didn't hear Judy talking loud enough either then Mrs. Thomas told

everybody to be quiet and then she said to Judy to spell her word over again and louder this time. I said that wasn't fair and Mrs. Thomas looked angry at me and I could feel my face turning all red inside you know because everyone was looking at me. Then she said we weren't at home and if we didn't behaving right she was gonna cancel everything for the spelling contest and pick the winner for class by herself."

Underachieving Mexican American students in contrast were less interested in demonstrating compensatory behaviors and making a positive impression on their Anglo teachers. Like the ten high achievers, the ten underachieving students understood they were different and did not measure up to Anglo teachers, students and school norms. These students also felt they could achieve and excel in school, but they were more often unwilling and resistant to provide answers in class when they perceived they were being singled out because they were Mexican, Mexican American and different.

One student recalled being "picked on by the teacher to say who was Jackie Robinson and what was Jackie Robinson famous for." This student correctly explained to the interviewer that "50 years ago he [Jackie Robinson] was the first Black man to play in baseball" but added that he "didn't answer" and "went like this [raised his shoulders] like I didn't know" because he perceived "he [the teacher] asked me because I'm Mexican and we're supposed to know about sports and who was first and shit like that."

Another student recalled when he and his classmates were "pressed on" or "hassled during PE [physical education] because we were hanging and talking in Spanish on the side and laughing and we didn't want to get into it [play basketball] and all dirty and everything." This student explained that he believed "the teacher got mad because he thought we was talking about him" and "we weren't ready for class." When asked to tell what happened next, the student answered that "they [his teachers] forgot about me" and that he "had to sit in the office for making a face at him [the teacher] or some other shit for over a hour."

Finally, a third student said that "everybody knows you have to give up being Mexican to do good in this school." When asked to explain this student added:

"...it starts right at the beginning of the year when everybody tries to be real nice. They hook you up in the same homeroom with the same teachers because they think you don't know nothin and you're stupid and you don't speak English the right way or something. And they talk real loud and slow so you understand what they're saying just because we're from Mexico. It's like the school already made up their mind about us even before we got here that we're dumb and if we change in school like they tell us then we'll stay out of trouble and we'll make it okay. I guess they want us to act different like our families didn't come from Mexico or something and we should be like we're American in school like that's something right or whatever."

Explanations by school personnel for the success and failure of Mexican American students that were also attributed to the personal characteristics of students related to congruities and incongruities in individual versus formal (school) styles of learning. Teachers believed that high achieving students jockeyed for high grades, praise and recognition in school more often than underachievers for example, because these students attached greater significance to school and personal recognition than to benefits that might accrue from cementing cultural membership for themselves.

Underachievers, according to administrators and teachers also demonstrated loyalty to their cultural traditions and origins more often, becoming upset and resistant to learning in school when cultural characteristics were ignored, did not match and were handled negatively by educators. Finally, teachers also believed that higher achievers were more pleasant, willing to please teachers and demonstrate positive behaviors than their underachieving peers who seemed

less trusting and more cynical about how "Mexican" and "Mexican American" traditions were treated in school.

Evidence of compensatory and resistant student behaviors emerged during interviews with teachers and during observations of instruction and observations of classroom patterns of interactions. Teachers explained that it was "very important," "real important" and "more important for high achieving Mexican American students to get [good] grades in school" for "getting into college," "for making some money," "for making lives for themselves," and for these students "to be liked by their teachers." Two teachers added that "high achievers and their guardians concur that it is important to succeed in school in the United States" and "they understand it's real important to make the effort to get along with people."

All teachers were also impressed with the "industry" and "more pleasant demeanors" of high achievers mentioning that these students were "appropriate" in dress and "neat" when completing assignments. These teachers also explained that underachievers were "more demonstrative," "insubordinate," "less neat," "messy" and that their assignments were "not always finished or handed in on time." Higher achievers also completed "work early" on occasion even doing additional work while underachievers behavior and attendance was described as "less reliable" and "not as friendly" by teachers.

Analyses of field notes, specific verbal exchanges and samples of students' writings similarly indicated that teachers praised students for style in the forms of precise language skills and in writing mechanics. Teachers also described their appreciation for students who "knew things," "were always in class" and for students that "did not interrupt" and apparently placed fewer demands on teachers.

In contrast, underachievers were described as students "who constantly needed supervision and guidance" with "poor mechanics in writing." These students were described as "silent," "unmotivated" and "car[ing] less about standard pronunciation." Teachers also felt that underachieving Mexican American students made "less effort to correct errors," "to learn from their mistakes," and that these students were less skilled in "transferring and applying knowledge," "synthesizing information" and "using analytic and upper level thinking skills" than their high achieving peers.

Interpersonal Domain

Students descriptions of their interpersonal relations with teachers, peers and members from their community were similarly influenced by their inclinations toward assimilation and resistance, and their beliefs about the supportive and non supportive characteristics of their Mexican American culture. The high achieving students actively pursued recognition in school for example, choosing to associate with other high achievers and recipients of school accolades regardless if they were Mexican American or not Mexican American students.

These high achievers also seemed more eager for competition for praise, higher test scores and higher averages on first term report cards than for affirming their cultural identities. For them, academic achievement and positive social relations in school became hard earned wages that took on a transactional significance. Each A or B grade and word of praise was like another dollar adding up to a rite of passage for membership in a student association or "college Greek house" with other high achieving students. Their cultural background on the other hand, was a constant impediment; a reminder to these students that they were different and not wholly accepted in the formal order of school.

One high achieving student explained that "we [Mexican students] have to be better all the time to show we're good as Anglos and we belong here." A second student said "I try and be the best in everything I do. In school, in PE [physical education] too." This student explained that "sometimes the kids tease me because of my hair or my skin or something, or another time when my mother spoke Spanish and she came to get me... so I get good marks and everything and that

I'm nice and just like they are so I get along better with them."

Other high achievers said that classmates were "nice," "ask[ed] for help," "think you're smart," "walk together" and "pick you for doing things" if they earned high grades and praise. Finally, one high achieving fair complexioned student shared his strategy this way for fitting in with others:

"When I'm alone and not with anybody I don't tell people that I'm a Mexican right away. My last name is Mexican but a lot of people don't know my name before so I don't say nothing and they think I'm American or Italian sometimes. Then sometimes when my friends in school get on me about my shoes or my clothes or what I bring to lunch or whatever, I pretend like it doesn't bother me and I make fun too. Then sometimes I shift what we're saying and talk about another thing or another classmate or whatever. I never had too many people come over my house because they always say my mother talks too fast so they don't understand what she said."

Underachieving students in contrast, neither pursued recognition for academic performance nor did they seek association with high achieving students. For them, high achievement was like "being Anglo" or Anglocanized with negative consequences for their Mexican identity. Additionally, underachievers more often gravitated rather than actively moving toward peer and social relations in school. Their social circles seemed to include fewer students and to include more trusted peers from their local neighborhoods and community.

Specific data on social patterns for underachieving Mexican American students emerged during interviews and especially during observations of these students in school, their homes and in their surrounding neighborhoods. These students seemed uncomfortable in school more often than high achievers yet more comfortable out in their neighborhood communities. Pregnant with expectation as though they were waiting for someone or something to change their lives, these underachieving students often belonged and fit best in tight knit social circles. For these students, school was a challenge where their personal faith and cultural loyalty was regularly tested while life in their homes and neighborhoods brought predictability and ease. Interactions with Anglos and high achieving Mexican American students were usually guarded and suspicious while their noncompliance in school was also proof of their cultural integrity and loyalty to their Mexican roots.

One student described routinely "go[ing] late [to school] to get out of confrontation with [the mathematics teacher] during first period." This student explained that the mathematics teacher "...gives homework everyday even on the weekends then when you're in school she makes you get it out so she could come to your desk and give you a hard time if you don't have it." This student added that she did not know "why you should have to do the homework all the time if you get it," and that "doing homework" and "being good in class is for the Anglos and the wanna-be's."

A second student described high achieving Mexican American students as "trying to be so white they're squeaky clean." This student explained that high achievers worked for grades and "try to talk English good because they want people in school to like them because they don't like being Chicano." This student added that "people think it's bad because we're dumb and don't have no friends in school but they [high achievers] don't have no friends in the [neighbor]hood." This student went on to explain that "they [high achievers] don't know what's going on" and that "you never see them outside or in church with anybody or with any friends out of school because they turned their back and forgot who they are for real." Finally, this student also warned that "when something happens and they aren't doing good... then we'll see what Anglo friends they got because they won't have any."

Other underachieving Mexican American students echoed these statements, explaining that high achievers were "fools," not "liked," "disrespected," "chumps," "dogs" and "ghosts" in their

communities because they "disappeared," were "invisible," did not "come outside ever," were "not respected" and "never did anything in the neighborhood except for go to the store once in a while." These students further explained that they preferred making and having friends in their community because "there's no front," "you could be yourself," "there's more trust," "people [in the neighborhood] know what's going on," "everybody's the same," because these students "like the neighborhood" and because "you could see someone [from the neighborhood] in the eye and know what's goin on with them."

Finally, one underachieving student said that:

"...it's real hard to be good in school and in the neighborhood at the same time. It seems like it starts real early like when you're in third grade or second. Your mother and your father they're on you all the time to do good in school and to get make better grades than they did, but then you're torn up. You see the way the Anglos treated better in school better and how when you do the same thing but it doesn't make matter. Then you come home and all your mother and father tell you is you have to do this and it's gonna be okay or whatever and then you start to hate it and that you know because it isn't. You go with your friends and your friends come over and they hate what happened in school just like you do too. And then it's all bullshit all over again like you're dirty or something and the good [Mexican American] students are dirty too except they don't know it or something and their clean on the outside and the Anglo's are the only ones that are good. It's like everyday they [teachers] already made up some secret about us and that we're Mexican so we got to remember that everyday wherever we go in school. I remember it because I want to because I'm proud to be Chicano. I don't need nobody to tell me. I want to be proud and my mother and father and sisters they're proud too, but not the teachers... It's like they have some problem or something before they even know who you are and then your mother and father want you to do good too."

Explanations provided by school personnel for students' social patterns were similarly attributed to the compliance and resistance of students and to students' attitudes about their Mexican culture. Teachers generally believed that high achieving students were "more pleasant," "sweeter," "comfortable" and "at peace" with their Mexican culture for instance, than were underachievers who were "less forgiving," "bitter," "angry" and "more combative" when they perceived their cultural traditions were being insulted.

Teachers also described high achievers as "happier" and from "better more supportive homes." These teachers added that high achieving students had "more desirable" and "greater numbers" of "white and Mexican American" friends than underachievers who tended to associate with "other poor performers" and "less friends" who are "usually Mexican" and "friends that are usually in trouble too." Finally, teachers also believed that higher achievers were more likely to "succeed" and "make something" of their lives than were their underachieving peers who "seemed less trusting" and experienced "more trouble making more than their few friends."

Data supporting teachers' accounts of the compliant and resistant nature of students emerged when teachers described the attitudes of their Mexican American students. One teacher commented that "it's easier to enjoy students with a more pleasant attitude than those who behave suspiciously." Another teacher explained that high achieving students "have more friends because they apply themselves more and have more to offer in school." A third teacher added that "high achievers extend themselves and are willing to meet others half way" while a fourth said students "learn at home it's real important to make the effort to get along with people inside and outside of school."

All teachers also agreed that making friends was "more important" for high achieving students. According to these teachers underachieving students more often "drifted" from one

friendship to another." These teachers added that underachieving Mexican American students "spoke less to adults and other children," were more often "introspective" and "mysterious," and that these students "have low self concepts," "low confidence" and "immature social skills." Underachievers were also described as "awkward" and "uncomfortable" when being addressed by teachers.

Analyses of field notes compiled largely through observations revealed that teachers touched and responded pleasantly more often to high achieving than to underachieving Mexican American students. Like their students, teachers also seemed more comfortable and at peace with high achievers and more awkward and less forgiving with underachieving students. Analyses of notes indicated that high achievers were left unsupervised more frequently for instance than were underachievers, and that teachers were more hasty and severe when disciplining underachieving students.

Teachers scolded, showed their appreciation and attempted to correct high achieving Mexican American students who they felt behaved inappropriately in class on occasion while choosing to talk loudly, yell, crowd, become physical and remove underachievers for interrupting classroom instruction.

Formal and Informal Domain: Formal and Informal Cultures

The formal and informal domain is also labeled formal and informal culture in this manuscript. Formal cultures describe the customary beliefs, social forms and institutional structures that a particular group of students or individuals encounters in school. Informal cultures describe the same characteristics, groups and individuals but as they intermingle, create meaning and are defined and redefined in an informal setting.

Formal and informal cultures are conceived here not as static but as active as groups and individuals are routinely and significantly affected by environmental contingencies. These cultures may be marked by "underlying cultural patterns" (Deyhle and LeCompte, 1994, p. 156) that characterize group and individual behaviors and beliefs, and by environmental factors that collide and struggle with these patterns and against one another to establish social control and a sense of equilibrium in schools for example.

This notion of formal and informal cultures then is conceptualized as an inchoate number of variables leading to a particular result rather than as a postulated outcome or event. A similar description of culture as process is implied in Harrington's (1962) *The Other America: Poverty in The United States*. In this influential book (Spring, 1976), Harrington introduces the "culture of poverty" explaining that trapped within a "vicious circle" with inadequate nutrition, medical care and lost wages, the poor get sick more often while their sickness stays longer. This image synthesizes the characteristics of people and their lifestyles with environmental factors to establish that when combined, a culture of poverty is made. In short, the individual's personal characteristics and the characteristics of their environment conspire to economically disable them in this case. The individual's personal attributes in isolation are neither adequate to describe nor to confine them then to the culture of poverty.

The notion of formal and informal cultures and the process previously described is hypothesized to be violent and deleterious as nontraditional and weaker cultural orientations hide, adjust, resist or become trampled by stronger more traditional understandings in a formal or an informal setting. Additionally, informal understandings may not prosper and survive in a formal environment and formal knowledge may wither and die on the vine in more informal environs.

Taken together, this struggle for legitimacy, control and social equilibrium becomes a chaotic yet systematic attempt to establish order where threats to that order constantly emerge. This struggle between formal and informal cultures may also be imbued and bereft of morality and the human spirit at the same time, depending on the relationships and organization of groups

and individuals, and social, political and economic configurations of power.

This discussion comes from the previous research on high and underachieving Mexican American students who all together seem required to regulate formal and informal cultural understandings in a formal middle school setting, and who also are all required to weigh and manage these pursuits in their local communities. Further analyses of the data collected indicate for example that none of the 20 students interviewed was comfortable and flourishing in both their school (formal) and community (informal) environments. Based upon their sense of personal efficacy, students would seemingly achieve or resist in one setting, and struggle and flourish in the other. Success in school came more readily for those willing to understate, separate from or deny their Mexican culture. Students who emphasized their Mexican cultures on the other hand, experienced low expectations, failure and hardship in school while experiencing respect and fulfillment in their community more often.

Further analyses of interview and observation data collected also indicate that high achievers generally preferred school experiences to life in their neighborhoods while underachievers preferred the comforts found in the community. For high achievers, school appeared to provide rationality, a routine and to bring certainty to their daily lives. Expectations on thinking, dress, scheduling, behaviors and rewards were clear in school but muddled when high achievers returned to their neighborhoods. Expectations in school for underachievers on the other hand, were too severe requiring them to change their intellectual approaches and to cash in their cultural understandings for a chance at high grades and assimilation. At home in their neighborhoods, underachievers felt they could think and act for themselves, make sense of local activities, events and behaviors, detect and understand the glances of neighbors, and empathize with passers by on the street. Further analyses of data collected in the middle school indicate that teachers usually preferred higher achieving Mexican American students. Teachers often approved of these students more because they were compliant, hard working, reliable and because high achievers interrupted less and placed fewer disciplinary and book keeping demands on them. Teachers also judged high achievers as superior analyzers and evaluators of knowledge, more popular, better socially adjusted and more concerned about achieving a better future without necessarily testing students higher order thinking and without observing students in their neighborhoods. Finally, teachers also described the parents of high achievers as more supportive than the parents of underachieving students without talking to them or visiting their homes.

Discussion

Conclusions drawn from the data collected supports earlier assertions on the importance of understanding the relationship between minority and majority cultures while adding discourse on formal and informal cultures and on the importance of considering the school and home communities of students perceived to be different. Results from this study also gave no evidence that minority group members that are positively oriented toward their own and the dominant cultures are better prepared to resist failure in school. In contrast, students who viewed their Mexican American culture less favorably achieved in school and were less accepted in their communities. Those who emphasized their Mexican American culture underachieved in school and flourished at home. Finally, this study weighed the value of making school processes more culturally relevant finding that the promotion of cultural traditions in school held promise but did not benefit all members of a particular minority group equally.

Analyses of the data collected in this research suggest that it is equally important to understand the relationship between minority and majority cultures, and to understand the interplay of these in both the school and community. This means that educational leaders and school practitioners become knowledgeable of minority cultural traditions, and that these individuals become more reflexive in their thinking about culture. In other words, a fuller

understanding of cultural differences may require experiencing them in and out of the formal educational setting, and perhaps experiencing what it means to be different in a predominantly minority context.

Fluency in school policies and being an effective administrator of school procedures that reflect Anglo preferences solely is not conducive to supporting achievement and minority culture, and is akin to asking members of minority groups to support Anglo school structures and traditions they are unaware of and do not fully understand. On the other hand, neither does full immersion in formal and informal settings guarantee that one will become an insider or that changes in personal attitudes and patterns of discrimination will emerge. Conclusions on the relationship between full immersion programs and individual's perceptions of cultural differences requires additional research. Further study of district transportation and zoning policies are also needed to understand how these support and limit knowledge about what is appropriate and inappropriate in the school and community context.

As noted earlier, conclusions about minority students being better prepared to avoid school failure by holding positive orientations of both their own and Anglo cultures were also not supported in this research. Analyses indicated that the academic performance of students was value-laden and largely related to practitioner's judging habits. Grades appeared to be used as a means for rewarding, penalizing and separating students, while achievement was measured according to students' attention to detail, writing and speaking habits, physical appearance, and minority student's attitudes about Mexican American and Anglo cultures.

Teacher habits in assessment also led to untenable conclusions about the intellectual makeup of students and the supportive and non supportive nature of students' backgrounds. Teacher made tests and styles of questioning did not measure students' application, analytic and evaluation thinking skills for example, although underachieving Mexican American students were judged less competent in higher order cognition.

Errors about the readiness of students to benefit from learning and about the willingness of families to help students learn were also made as teachers decided that high achievers and their guardians naturally valued learning more than families with underachieving children. This is not to say that the readiness of the students in this study could not be benefited from compensatory programs. Instead, analyses suggest that because the range of student cognition was not adequately addressed, accurate decisions about effective pedagogy, curricula and school reform also could not be made. This finding means that administrators skills in instructional leadership and supervision need refinement so they can help practitioners become more competent in teaching and assessing students' higher order thinking. This also requires that district supervisors and researchers play a larger role in understanding possible relationships between culture, learning styles and student assessment.

Finally, while the practice of making school policies and procedures more culturally relevant appears to hold promise, analyses conducted for this study contradicted earlier writings by showing that the random promotion of specific cultural traditions in school did not benefit all members of a particular minority group equally. High achieving students generally viewed their cultural traditions as embarrassing and as impediments to their acceptance and achievement in school. Underachievers valued their cultural identity more producing resistance to learning, alienation from other students and conflict with teachers. In contrast, high achievers also enjoyed their home communities less feeling insecure and uncertain more often than underachievers who generally felt less scrutiny, more belonging and more comfortable at home.

Implications for theorists, education leaders and the organization of schools require that they become knowledgeable about the relationship surrounding student self concept, social acceptance, culture and the achievement of minority students in school. Analyses of the data collected indicates that minority students value fitting in with others in one setting or another, and that their self concept, willingness to participate and freedom to learn are constrained to the

extent they feel alienated from their peers, their community and their cultural understandings.

In this context, being Mexican American also meant being different in school and that this difference was perceived by students and educators to mean naturally inferior to Anglos. High achievers worked hard to gain school membership by deferring their cultural identities while underachievers worked hard to keep their cultural identities and membership at home. Understanding how to promote self concept, acceptance and belonging in school and in the external community seems important for improving students' academic achievement. This suggests that researchers and practitioners become more compassionate and knowledgeable of the relationship between formal and informal cultures, and the implications of this relationship for helping youths feel better about themselves, achievement and their place in school.

Conclusion

Like other research, this study ends prematurely probably raising more questions than it answers. Early on, it included highly general causal theories by Cummins, Ogbu and Deyhle that link school success and failure to cultural differences, sociostructures, and racial conflict. Then, it explained that these theories were inadequate demonstrating how students that fit these models nonetheless achieve in school and in their home communities. This inquiry consequently expands on the literature reviewed while also serving as a warning against simple explanations to challenging issues. It also asks that researchers think "more self-consciously about the philosophical and political implications and meanings" (Scott, 1988, p. 134) of the theories they endorse.

Next, results coming from this study reminded readers how classifications by culture, ethnicity and race may be based on delusions (Husband, 1982) as they lack scientific validity and are largely informed by socio, political and economic pressures. Students' attitudes on fitting in at school or in their home communities, and teachers' behaviors toward Mexican American students in this research, related to their perceptions of difference.

A positive definition of Mexican American culture rested on the desire and ability of high achievers to think and act "normally," or as the dominant Anglo group in the school believed they should. Negative definitions of Mexican American underachievers emerged because their behavior was perceived as resistant and antagonistic, and because their culture seemed antithetical to the dominant Anglo culture in school. This suggests that the Anglo culture was accorded primacy in school while the Mexican American culture was secondary. This also suggests that the educational experiences of the students included in this study were largely based on cultural contrast and subjugation rather than from some cultural interdependence.

Future research on student achievement and failure must continue with a deconstruction of cultural relations and how difference is constructed in school. Future research must also strive to assess the interdependence of cultures in and out of schools to determine how schools can foster cultural harmony and intellectual, social, political and economic gains for all.

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