This chapter discusses current theories in educational anthropology that attempt to explain Chicano low academic achievement and changes in achievement as a result of successful educational interventions. Educational researchers have not been able to present adequate justification for the differential achievement levels of minorities. Recent studies of English literacy acquisition analyzing the use of culturally and linguistically congruent instructional approaches reveal the intimate relationship of language and culture to the school adjustment of minority students. In addition, research indicates strong relationships between culture and both cognitive development and literacy acquisition. The South San Diego Writing Project illustrates some difficulties in creating culturally congruent literacy activities in the school setting and their successful outcomes. This project collected ethnographic data over a 4-year period in the San Diego South Bay area along the U.S.-Mexican border. The intent was to explore more effective ways of teaching Chicano youth how to write in English. Classes were organized into small groups, and these work teams took full control of their writing activities. Results of the study suggest that the writing groups empowered Chicano students within the school environment and offered them a unique opportunity to express their collective feelings and to reinforce cultural values acquired in the home. Research of this nature demonstrates that culture is closely related to the acquisition of knowledge and to motivation to achieve, both at the social level (as it affects the family, school, and society) and at the personal level. In addition, students' perception of school activities as enhancing cultural goals and values acquired in the home can be instrumental in converting failure into success. Implications for literacy and dropout research are discussed. Contains 54 references. (LP)
Chapter 6

From Failure to Success: The Roles of Culture and Cultural Conflict in the Academic Achievement of Chicano Students

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The emphasis on minority school failure has been pervasive in the educational research literature. The theoretical approaches employed in order to make sense of apparent low achievement of some linguistic minority students attempt to persuade readers that there is something fundamentally wrong with minority cultures, and that there is nothing one can do to change it.

This chapter discusses current theories in educational anthropology attempting to explain Chicano low academic achievement and its change achievement as a result of successful educational interventions. I present first a theoretical discussion of our current thinking on minority achievement and culture, and then offer an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literacy development for Chicano students. Second, I describe the Southern San Diego Bay area literacy project. As other previous studies (Spindler and Spindler, 1987a, 1987b; Trueba, 1989a, Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan, 1988), this project had important implications for applied research because of its empowering effect on minority students.

Achievement Theories in Anthropology

The continuous arrival of new Hispanic immigrants over the last four decades, resulting from war-torn Central America and poverty in Mexico and Latin America, contributes to create an impression of permanence and stagnation in the state of poverty and isolation of Hispanic groups. There does not seem to be an adequate way of measuring upward mobility of Hispanic individuals, though some serious attempts have been made (McCarthy and Buriaga Valdes, 1985, 1986). Government reports on the socioeconomic conditions and school achievement of Hispanics reinforce negative attitudes about Hispanic populations.

According to the US Department of Commerce:
The Roles of Culture and Cultural Conflict in Academic Achievement

Educational researchers have not been able to present adequate justification for the differential achievement levels of minorities. Some have presented controversial theories pinpointing genetic (Dunn, 1987; Jensen, 1981) or cultural ecological arguments (Ogbu, 1978, 1987a, 1987b) to explain low achievement. Attempts have been made to analyze these explanations (Trueba, 1987a, 1988b, 1988c) and consider their application to teacher education (Trueba, 1989a).

Culture plays a similar role in both successful learning and the 'social accomplishment' of academic failure and minority alienation very similar (Florio-Ruane, 1988). Culture provides the motivation to achieve either success or failure. That is particularly true of the ultimate failure of dropping out and rejecting educational institutions and their knowledge, norms and values. How is this possible? Why is there such a conflict of cultural values? The explanation must be found within the larger sociocultural and political contexts of the minority participation in mainstream institutions. The indiscriminate use and application of minority group taxonomies (designations of caste-like, autonomous, and immigrant types) by cultural ecologists for entire ethnic or minority groups may have objectionable theoretical and practical consequences (Trueba, 1988b). These taxonomies are based on theories of differential school achievement which do not allow for either individual or collective change in status, and therefore they tend to stereotype entire ethnic groups. Furthermore, these theories do not explain the conversion of failure into success among 'caste-like' minorities described as follows:

Caste-like or involuntary minorities are people who were originally brought into United States society involuntarily through slavery, conquest, or colonization. Thereafter, these minorities were relegated to menial positions and denied true assimilation into mainstream society. American Indians, black Americans, and Native Hawaiians are examples. In the case of Mexican Americans, those who later immigrated from Mexico were assigned the status of the original conquered group in the southwestern United States, with whom they came to share a sense of peoplehood or collective identity. (Ogbu, 1987b, p. 321; emphasis in original)

For example, the task of empirically documenting that all or most Mexican Americans were colonized or entered this country involuntarily, or that they have been denied true assimilation into mainstream America is enormous. There is abundant evidence of fairly rapid assimilation of many, while many more continue to arrive of their own free will seeking economic and educational opportunities. Thus, while we can seek in the home culture an explanation for the response of a minority to the academic demands placed by school and society, we must search for explanations that do not stereotype minorities or preclude our search. An interdisciplinary approach — as seen in this book — may be one solution.

Failure to learn may be better understood as related to communication skills which develop in the context of culturally congruent and meaningful social exchanges. It is not an individual failure; it is a failure of the sociocultural system that denies a child the opportunity for meaningful social intercourse, and thus for cognitive development. As such, academic failure is fully understandable only in its macro-historical, social, economic and political contexts (see Pearl, this volume). Failure in learning is not caused by a single social institution, such as the school or the family (Cole and Griffin, 1983).

Both academic success and academic failure are socially constructed phenomena. Failure to learn is a consequence of a given sociocultural system:

Working within pre-existing social norms and role relationships, teachers and students collaborate to create the linguistic and social conditions under which students fail to learn ... Misunderstandings of one another at that time can lead to assessment of students as less than able or interested learners. (Florio-Ruane, 1988, p. 1)

The acquisition of academic knowledge is not necessarily any more difficult than the acquisition of the concrete knowledge required for effective everyday social interaction. Thus, some researchers believe that resistance to learning should be viewed as students' rejection of cultural values and academic demands placed on them by school personnel. For example, Erickson (1984) discussed resistance to academic achievement on the part of alienated students in cultural transition.

Recent studies on English literacy acquisition have analyzed the use of culturally and linguistically congruent instructional approaches that smooth the transition from the home to the school learning environment (e.g., Au and Jordan, 1981; Tharp and Gallimore, 1989, in the Kamehameha Schools of Hawaii and Southern California; Delgado-Gaitan, 1987a, 1987b, with Mexican children in Northern and Central California; and Trueba, 1989a, with Hispanic and Indo-Chinese). In contrast, other studies have shown the consequences of the use of approaches which are culturally incongruent or meaningless (e.g., Richards, 1987, among the Mayan children of Guatemala; Hornberger, 1988, among the Quechua children of Peru; Macias, 1987, among the Papago; and Deyhle, 1987, among the Navajo). What is significant about these studies is that they show the intimate relationship between language and culture in the adjustment of minority students in the schools.
to School Failure and Success

George and Louise Spindler (1982), who have consistently viewed education as a phenomenon of cultural transmission—implying the inculcation of specific values—have recently called our attention to educators’ need for reflective cultural analysis in order to take into account unconscious biases and cultural ethnocentrism.

In the tradition of the Spindlers’ cross-cultural comparisons (1982, 1987a), Fujita and Sano (1988) have compared and contrasted American and Japanese daycare centers, using the Spindlers’ reflective cross-cultural interview technique. They elicited and analyzed videotapes of Japanese and American teachers; then they asked one group of teachers to interpret the behaviors of the other group. This study has permitted us to reflect on the ethnocentrism and projection of cultural values reflected in day-care activities; that is, socialization processes whereby groups make decisions or at least it facilitates a conscious, collective choice of communicative strategies. Thus, if we want to study memory, thinking, attention, or higher mental functions is a necessary condition for school achievement. That reality, however, is determined by cultural knowledge transferred from one generation to another and by universal psychological principles which go beyond the individual. Furthermore, both linguistic and social skills are viewed as developing within the microsociological units in which children grow, such as the family, school and the peer groups.

Culture and Literacy

One can argue that effective English literacy instruction requires the transmission of cultural values and skills as much as the academic knowledge associated with mainstream American culture (Spindler and Spindler, 1982, 1987b). The work by Gumperz and Hymes (1964), Gumperz (1982, 1986), and Cook-Gumperz (1986), has forced us to reconceptualize the interrelationships between communication, literacy, and culture that form a single symbolic system used in adapting to new cultural contexts and changing with the cumulative experiences in people’s lives. As such, literacy is seen as a ‘socially constructed phenomenon’ (Cook-Gumperz, 1986, p. 1) consisting of culture-specific symbols developed for communicative purposes. As such, literacy depends on the economic and political institutions that determine power hierarchies and access to resources; technological, industrial and military complexes not only depend on overall levels of literacy in a given society, but they also determine the quality of instruction in schools and the nature of curriculum.

According to Goodenough, culture ‘is made up of the concepts, beliefs, and principles of action and organization’ that a researcher finds enacted in the daily experiences of the members of that society (1976, p. 5). However, as Fraker points out, the problem is not ‘to state what someone did but to specify the conditions under which it is culturally appropriate to anticipate that he, or persons occupying his role, will render an equivalent performance’ (1964 p. 112).

It follows, therefore, that a good understanding of a culture requires a good theory predictive of behavior in a particular social setting. In other words, cultural knowledge and cultural values are at the basis of reasoning, inferencing and interpreting significations. There is an important distinction between cultural knowledge and cultural values in the acquisition of literacy skills. The task is to make sense of text as a message whose content takes meaning within the ‘concepts, beliefs and principles of action’ alluded to by Goodenough (1976). To accomplish this task we must have knowledge of the codes of behavior (th...
The Roles of Culture and Cultural Conflict in Academic Achievement

Students finally realized that their individual and collective voices can make a difference in public opinion and in the quality of life at school. Thus, Chicano high school students not only significantly sharpened their communicative skills but realized that these skills are a powerful instrument in voicing individual and collective concerns. Teachers would often express their surprise: 'I am impressed. Look!' they said as they shared their students' compositions. A teacher wrote in her diary: 'This [the unexpected high performance of students] was a very successful lesson for me in many ways. It furthers my belief that if what is taught is important in the mind of the learner, much more will truly be learned' (Trueba et al., 1984, p. 131).

Analytical Reflections

The analysis of the project was limited to a theoretical discussion of Vygotsky's cognitive development in the context of writing curriculum, without attempting to account for the psychosocial factors that generated the strong motivation leading to high achievement and literacy levels. The importance of the peer group as a working unit providing moral support during the learning process, especially for young Chicanos undergoing rapid changes at home, would have required more systematic study of the Mexican families' cultural knowledge and values, as well as the processes of integration of school knowledge and values.

Writing gradually became easier and more rewarding to students. Teachers and researchers learned more about students' home life and their aspirations through the English compositions. Then, we celebrated our success and enthusiastically assumed the role of 'experts' on writing focusing on technical matters. As one teacher noticed: 'The more controversial and relevant they make the topic, the more willing the students are to unite and write well. The more complicated the assignment is, the better the responses' (Trueba, 1987b, p. 246). In our analysis we forgot an important psychological principle advanced by anthropologists: that in order to understand motivation behind expressed values, 'one must deal with the universal emotions of love, fear, and hate' and that 'culture, from one psychological viewpoint, is a mode of expressing, in all their complexity, these primary emotions, which are aroused by inner biological urges or occur as reactions to specific outer stimuli' (DeVos, 1973, p. 63).

It has taken several years to realize that it is precisely in young Chicanos' need to express their feelings of love, hate and fear that their motivation to write began to develop. More importantly, this need was most appropriately met within the peer group, because cooperation and team work is culturally the preferred mode of academic activity for Mexican-origin youth. Writing groups offered Chicano students a unique opportunity to express both their collective feelings and to reinforce a cultural value acquired in the home. Furthermore, there was a positive side-effect: high academic performance in an English writing class impacted positively their overall performance in school, thus stimulating student motivation to produce better English compositions.

In the end, writing became a vehicle for restoring the credibility Chicanos lacked among other students, and, further, a means for gaining political representation in the school. Violence or other gang activities, low-riding and other conspicuous activities of 'cholos' or 'vatos locos' which had been the common
The Roles of Culture and Cultural Conflict in Academic Achievement

We know that some of the discontinuers are doing well economically and plan to return to school later on. There is a profound difference between pushedouts and discontinuers with regard to their degree of alienation and their views of school. The cycles of alienation, marginality, and illiteracy for some minority students are clearly related to their experience and interpretation of cultural conflict within the school, which are also guided by parental perceptions of schools (Wilson, 1989).

Culture is closely related to the acquisition of knowledge and motivation to achieve, both at the social level (as it affects the family, school and society), as well as at the personal level (as it affects the structure of participation in learning events within specific contexts). The role of culture in students' perception of school activities as enhancing cultural goals and values acquired in the home is instrumental in converting failure into success. But students' cultural perceptions of school as oppressive and destructive of the home culture can have devastating effects (Wilson, 1989). Therefore, culture must be recognized by researchers as a key factor in the study of Chicano achievement.

Implications for Literacy and Dropout Research

What should be the focus of dropout research? Where and how should we explore the role of culture in literacy and dropout phenomena? What is the expected impact of such research? Researchers are often overwhelmed with these questions and opt for a detached and safe position; they become 'pure researchers' and reject applied research as unscientific. Others explore intervention-oriented research convinced that science can also grow from the study of interventions. The work of many anthropologists and psychologists suggests that intervention and explanatory research are complementary and that the dichotomy between basic and applied research was the result of a political and historical accident more than the logical distribution of research activities (Trueba, 1988a).

Applied and basic research must be conducted in both formal and informal learning settings where students manipulate symbolic systems within their sociocultural environment. The immediate as well as the broader contexts of academic activities in specific learning settings must be studied. They are essential in understanding the organization of behavior and the type of student participation in learning activities. The analysis of literacy activities, for example, and the patterns of student participation should lead us to a more comprehensive view of the 'cultural embeddedness' of Chicano dropout and alienation problems. Teacher's knowledge of the home language and culture of Chicanos can be highly instrumental in understanding any communication gaps between the parents or students and school personnel. The school cultural environment and the organization of classroom work should reflect sensitivity to the ethnic cultures of minority students and this way maximize their participation in learning activities. Chicano and other minority children can generate their own text materials based on their home experiences as a bridge to engaging in the school culture (Trueba, 1989b). The analysis of learning activities in the home is most important because there are inquiry strategies, logical inferencing and cultural congruence occur naturally (see studies by Delgado-Gaitan, 1987a, 1987b, 1989). This analysis can provide insights into possible linkages between self-empowerment efforts on
The Roles of Culture and Cultural Conflict in Academic Achievement


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The Roles of Culture and Cultural Conflict in Academic Achievement


