

10

Constructing Cultural Difference and Educational Achievement in Schools*

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When culture and schools are talked about together in the United States, culture tends to be used as an explanation for why children from many nonmainstream homes—the culturally different—are less successful in school, on average, than mainstream children. Anthropologists of education have found important differences between the behaviors, communication patterns, and expectations of minority communities (the cultures of minority communities) and the culture of the school. Anthropologists have also found that when these cultural differences go undetected and unaddressed, minority children often have trouble understanding what is expected of them and how to interpret what happens to them at school. To these children, school is like a foreign culture, often including a different language or a different version of the language. Without help in translating between the two cultures, many minority children find themselves confused at the time they start school and behind their mainstream peers on achievement indicators from then on. Some educational anthropologists, investigating the differences between a particular minority culture and a school culture, have subsequently intervened to bridge the gap. They have found that even small in-school adjustments that are culturally sensitive to minority children's

We are grateful to Katharine Cutts and Cheryl Ray for their assistance in reviewing some of the materials discussed in this chapter. We would also like to thank Evelyn Jacob and Cathie Jordan for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

experiences at home can improve minority students' academic achievement and attitudes toward school (Heath 1983; Jordan 1985; Moll and Diaz this volume; Vogt, Jordan and Tharp this volume).

In this chapter we want to draw attention to another explanation for student performance at school. We will show that growing up a member of a minority family and living in a minority community—by virtue of skin color, native language, religion, and so forth—is not the only means by which individuals share similar characteristics or learn the behaviors and attitudes they exhibit at school. Groups form and flourish at and around school, too. From their responses to the school, these groups may develop distinctive “cultural orientations,” that is, more-or-less shared ways of interpreting the meaning of school experiences and their place in the school.¹

We will focus on two properties of school-related groups. First, we point out that school-related group boundaries and cultural orientations may not match those attributed to ethnic, or minority, groups outside school. In our first example, about the way parents talk about their children's “readiness” for kindergarten, we demonstrate that some parents who “look” the same, that is, share the same skin color, the same native language, and the same religious and ancestral background (or in other words, have the same ethnicity), may develop different cultural orientations to school. In our second example, about black and white women on two university campuses, we demonstrate that students who look different sometimes share cultural orientations related to school. These two examples are intended to show that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the way individuals look and the things they believe; individuals may look the same and not share some beliefs, or alternately, they may look different and share some beliefs.

Our second major point is that processes of school-related group formation and cultural differentiation occur around the things that happen in school. Using another set of examples, we show that groups and cultural differences may arise from the policies, labels or curriculum offerings of the school (Borko and Eisenhart 1986; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Further, we suggest that school-related groups and orientations can be produced by students as they attempt to identify and distinguish themselves from their peers (Eckert 1989; Willis 1977). When students are identified or identify themselves at school, the groups that emerge can divide and reorganize ethnic groups in ways that families or communities do not. The particular dimensions of

group formation and cultural differentiation in school will vary depending on local conditions and interests, and though influenced in important ways by family and community, school-related groups and cultural orientations can take on a life of their own, with important implications for school achievement.

Our perspective will lead us to argue that those wishing to improve the academic achievement and school outcomes of minority students must investigate how students are placed or place themselves in the groups that arise in relation to school and what cultural orientations toward school these groups hold. Interventions should accommodate school-related groups and cultural orientations, as well as those associated with ethnicity.

SCHOOL-RELATED GROUP BOUNDARIES AND CULTURAL ORIENTATIONS

One Ethnic Group/Different Cultural Orientations

Among American social scientists, it is common to read that black Americans are “culturally different” from white Americans, Hispanic Americans from black or white Americans. Often, an assumption follows that *within* each group, members share many cultural characteristics, and that between-group differences are greater and more significant, especially when it comes to school performance, than within-group differences.

But studies of subgroups reveal a different picture. Subgroups of whites, for example, are recognizable in their relation to schools because they do not share knowledge and attitudes about schooling. Nor do they have equal power to affect their children's schooling. In their interactions with each other and with the school, they construct different interpretations of schooling. This process may begin very early in children's school careers.

An example comes from work on school readiness in three white Colorado communities located within 20 miles of each other (Graue 1990). Although “school readiness” is often thought to be reliably determined by following an established set of developmental indicators of a child's maturity, we began to suspect that the interpretation of readiness might vary by community as Graue began to conceptualize a study of academic redshirting.² In a descriptive study of age patterns in Colorado kindergartens (Shepard, Graue, and Catto 1989), it was found that the age ranges in these districts varied widely, with as many as 70% and as few as 0% of the children being overage for their grade placement. These variations were apparent not

² Academic redshirting occurs when children are held out of kindergarten although they are legally eligible to enroll according to their chronological age.

¹ Our use of the term “cultural orientations” may be unfamiliar to some readers. By it, we mean shared (collective) ways of interpreting the world that are associated with social groups in a particular setting (Holland 1986). Later in the paper, we will use the term “cultural differentiation” to refer to the processes by which distinct orientations arise and are maintained. From this perspective, cultural differences are fundamentally ideational differences (with behavioral and attitudinal correlates) about the things that matter to a group (Eisenhart 1989).

only across districts but across schools within a district. Taking kindergarten enrollment patterns as an indication of orientations to readiness, we found that the meaning of readiness was not the same everywhere, that features of the community and local school figured into decisions about whether a child was enrolled when eligible or held out for an additional year.

Analysis of Graue's data suggests that parents, teachers, and students in the three communities develop location-specific sets of ideas about when children are ready and what constitutes readiness. Their interpretations of early childhood education, its purposes and goals, vary. Differences in the meaning of readiness could be heard in the language used by participants in each setting. For example, parents were differentially articulate in the language of "school readiness." Parents of children about to enter one of the schools, Norwood, were anxious to talk with teachers and the researcher about the "facts" of their children's ages and school-related skills. One said about her daughter:

She'll be 5 September 4th and I've talked to the teacher and she seemed to think that Katie was plenty ready because she can say her alphabet or most of it and count and her name and stuff.... I don't know if she'll be one of the youngest kids in the class—the other kids will have already been five. The preschool she goes to—they have a prekindergarten class and she didn't get to go in that because she wasn't four yet.... I thought that she seemed plenty ready to go into kindergarten. I went ahead and enrolled her and I thought going 3 years in preschool was a little much.

In contrast, white parents about to send their children to another school, Fulton, did not discuss "readiness" in terms of birth date, relative age or requisite skills. When asked about what she was thinking as her child approached kindergarten, one mother in this community focused on the possibilities that the school experience would provide:

Because we live in a small town and I stay home with her, she doesn't have a lot of friends her own age. We're real excited about it as far as social reasons go. And then, of course we may be prejudiced like a lot of other parents, but we think that she's pretty smart for her age. We are looking forward to it because we think she'll do real good.... She's real willing to learn and we're just real enthusiastic about it.

Because it is in these uses of language that the meanings of readiness are developed and communicated in interaction among parents and with the school, ways of assisting and assessing readiness come to be different in each place. The parents at Norwood have one version of the language of readiness

which focuses on age, sex, academic skills, and pressures to excel at school work. This meaning system corresponds with the one used at Norwood School and allows the parents to talk about and prepare their preschool children in terms of the academic indicators and attitudes valued by the school teachers and administrators. Parents and school personnel make decisions about whether to hold a child out based on their assessment of the child's relative position on their readiness scale. Fulton parents are much less able, by their language at least, to make this kind of assessment or decision. While their ideas about readiness also correspond to their school's ideas, they focus on the school as an opportunity for their children, like a gate that is open and waiting for the children to walk through. Holding out is not a strategy used by these parents, at least in part because they do not have a scale of academic skills to measure their children, and because they hope their children will enjoy, more than compete in, school work.

In sum, the cultural orientations—in this case the meaning of "readiness"—for interpreting, conducting, and negotiating school business—differ among these American whites. These differences exist even though they share many "background" characteristics and live very close together.³

Two Ethnic Groups/Same Cultural Orientation

Holland and Eisenhart (1988a,b, 1990) have written about the "culture of romance"—a meaning system of student peer groups at two universities. Derived from a cultural system of the wider society, the campus culture of romance flourished at both the black university, Bradford, and the white school, SU. On both campuses, the culture of romance was used by students to categorize women into groups according to their physical attractiveness and their ability to attract appealing men as romantic partners.

The interesting thing about this example is that the culture of romance was almost identically constructed by the black and white women. Their racial difference made little difference when it came to romance.⁴ On both campuses, the women arrived at college with strongly expressed interests in school work and a career later. However, for all the women, interest in

³ As might be anticipated, on average the two communities differ by social class: Fulton's families are predominantly working class while Norwood's are predominantly middle class. They do not, however, differ by ethnicity (by physical characteristics, native language, or religion; nor are they afforded a special status or identity in the U.S. sociopolitical system). Because of their shared ethnicity, we think that U.S. school officials, reformers, and researchers often (though not always) overlook or diminish any differences in cultural orientations, and their implications for schooling, in favor of those associated with ethnic groups. We raise this last point again later in the chapter.

⁴ A few differences in the ideational systems of the black and white women were identified. See Holland and Eisenhart (1989) for a discussion of them.

romance came to take precedence over interest in school work. Although the black and white women had different ideas about the purposes and value of their college coursework (Holland and Eisenhart 1988a), the majority of women on both campuses ended up devoting the bulk of their time and energy during college to their romantic affairs. By graduation, most had little of themselves invested in school work and were not inclined to pursue additional schooling or the careers they had once envisioned.

To forestall stereotypical thinking about the origins and sources of school groups and the cultural orientations they exhibit at school, we think it is quite important for teachers and other observers of schools to realize that the distinction between minority and mainstream groups and their cultural orientations is not sufficient to account for some major ways in which school-related groups and cultural orientations affect the school performance of students. Using the familiar model of cultural difference, the groups and cultural orientations described in the examples given above would likely have been ignored because they exist in the absence of ethnic minority groups (the readiness example) or because they cross-cut ethnic group boundaries (the romance example). We believe that these emergent school groups and the meanings associated with them, in addition to students' background or demographic characteristics, must be understood as contributing in important ways to what students do at school and to their attitudes toward school and academic achievement (Eisenhart 1989).

To understand *how* such groups and cultural orientations affect student academic achievement, it is necessary to turn to the processes by which differences arise in and around schools. This is the topic of the next section.

THE PROCESS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENTIATION AROUND AND IN SCHOOLS

In social interactions in and around school, such as when people talk about when children should start kindergarten, differences like those between the Norwood and Fulton parents are much more than a casting of phrases. The orientation of the Norwood parents permits them to get their children ready for school in a way that the Fulton language does not and vice versa.

We cannot say, of course, what the eventual effect of these differences will be on the academic achievement of students from Norwood and Fulton. But we think their potential implications are important to draw out. The differences may anticipate what the children at each school have learned after a year of school, how much of it they know, and the feeling they have toward school. (Is it "felt" as a pressure cooker or a good time?) Should the differences persist over time, we would expect the gap between what the two sets of children know to increase. If these children were later to meet at

the same middle or high school, to take the same standardized tests of academic achievement, or to compete for admission to college or for a job, we think that their differences could quickly become salient, with positive outcomes and the designation of "high academic achievement" more likely to go to Norwood students.

In this hypothetical example, we can speculate that a process of cultural differentiation may develop as people who interact about school readiness learn, use, or have access to different cultural or linguistic resources to think about and act with regard to the school. These differences would be drawn from and serve to reinforce different activities at school and different orientations toward schooling. They could eventually lead to quite different school outcomes, especially if students from different school-related groups are ever judged in relation to each other.

With the next set of examples, we examine processes of cultural differentiation in and around schools. The examples suggest that the process can take several forms.

Differentiating by Ability Group at School

Once children enter school, the school itself can extend or even initiate the process of cultural differentiation. For example, Borko and Eisenhart (1986) reported how reading experiences were differentiated in four second grades housed in a school with a fairly homogeneous population: mostly white, middle class from a small rural Appalachian county.³

In all four second grades at the school, students were officially divided according to reading ability into four reading groups. Research in these classrooms revealed that the high and low ability students came to differ in their experiences with and conceptions of reading. Each reading group, together with the teacher, seemed to be operating with a distinct and closed informational system. Each system had its own set of mutually supportive and reinforcing reading activities, student and teacher behaviors, student understandings of reading, and criteria for successful performance. For example, *learning* to read for low ability students was defined in terms of behavior and using correct procedures, while for high ability students it was related to global reading and comprehension strategies. Teachers focused on these group-specific meanings of reading in their instruction.

Implicit in these reading systems were differences in their definition and criteria of success. While the high ability group could apply its rules to other class activities with a positive payoff, the low ability group could not. Beyond

³ This study has been described at length in Borko and Eisenhart (1986) and in Eisenhart (1989). The reader is referred to those articles for details omitted here.

their instructional uses, the groups for reading became the basis for the development of distinct views of reading success and its relationship to more general school success. These views, in turn, made movement between groups difficult because students had to construct a new meaning system to become part of the other group. Working harder would not be enough; they must come to think about reading in a different way, attending to a different set of information and skills. The closed system of the reading groups reduced low ability students' access to the opportunities given to the high ability group. Further, it encouraged one group to see itself as distinctly different from the other and to begin to apportion prestige and status, as well as knowledge, accordingly. Consequently, the students were internalizing differences among them, using the categories supplied by the school.

Differentiating by Activities at School

Another example of a similar process comes from Fordham and Ogbur's (1986) study of a black high school in Washington, D.C. The Capitol High student peer group appropriated school activities as a means of defining what it meant to be "black" versus "white." In this case, the school did not make this distinction for students; the students used the school setting and school arrangements to make the distinction meaningful in their everyday school activities. Certain activities, such as studying hard, excelling, and making good grades were singled out as evidence of "acting white." Speaking standard English, reading poetry, or trying out for the It's Academic Club were also categorized as "white." Other activities, such as being good at sports or cutting up in class, were interpreted as evidence of acting black or as oppositions to acting white, and thus were viewed as more desirable for blacks.

In a school that was 99% black, the influence of this black peer cultural orientation on students' orientation toward academic achievement was profound. Black students who acted "white" in school risked being ostracized by their peers, and few of the activities associated with school success were deemed appropriate for blacks. Thus, the majority of students gave up any interest they might have had in excelling at school work. The few black students who wished to do well in school despite their peers had to keep their academic achievements hidden behind school pranks or athletic ability, if they wanted to have any friends. In other words, school achievement came with a high price: give it up and fit in with one's peers or pursue it and risk losing one's peers. Not surprisingly few of the school's students excelled at school work.

In this example, the process of differentiation is developed by the students, not primarily to distinguish among themselves at school but to establish their collective identity as a group in relation to others in the larger society.

Unfortunately from the standpoint of school achievement and attainment, success in school is a devalued part of the identity these students construct for themselves.

Differentiation by Student Groups at School

Several studies illustrate how informal student groups differentiate themselves by the nature of their response to cultural features of their home communities and of the school. From the conjunction of cultural elements from home and school, at least some of these groups actively create their own cultural categories at school. Paul Willis (1977), for example, describes how some British, white, working-class boys at Hammertown School drew on certain ideas and practices from their white working-class community to forge a particular, oppositional response to their schooling. Beginning during the age period of American middle schools, a student group known as the "lads" emerged at the school. When they were at school, members of the group demonstrated behaviors such as having a "laff," smoking, drinking, and boasting of sexual exploits. They expressed attitudes such as a preference for manual (rather than mental) labor and an irreverence for formal authority. All these behaviors could be found in the homes and shop floors where adult members of this primarily working-class community lived and worked. By reproducing these behaviors in school where everyone knew they were inappropriate, the lads constructed and expressed their disdain for the school, its authority, and credentials. In this confrontation of selected community norms with the norms of the school, the lads produced, for themselves, a cultural system based on privileging some cultural orientations of the working class and opposing some school-sanctioned behaviors and norms.

At the same time, other working-class boys in the school, who would not or could not join the lads, drew on their orientations from the same white working-class community—orientations that were more consistent with middle class orientations. This group, dubbed "ear'oles" by the lads, had a peer group identity and associated cultural orientations at school too, but they conformed more closely to school norms than did the lads. Although drawing from the same working-class community, the lads and ear'oles took up different elements and used them to oppose each other at school.

The school outcomes for the boys were different too. The lads renounced the value of the school and thereby the credentials (good grades, a high school diploma) that might have permitted them to leave the working class. The ear'oles, in accepting the school's program including the need for good grades and a diploma as the best preparation for work, paved a way toward some social mobility by meeting the requirements for supervisory jobs, for higher education, and for middle-class consciousness. Although the seeds of

disappointment, radicalism, and conformity were present (and later enacted) by some members of each group, the interpretations of later events and possibilities were quite different.

Willis emphasizes that the "class cultures" that came to distinguish the lads and ear'oles at Hammertown were in many ways peculiar to that site. Thus, there was no reason that working-class students in other locales or in the next generation would produce meaning systems exactly like those of the lads or ear'oles; the outcome was locally determined and always in doubt from one generation to the next. However, because other working class students would share *structural* characteristics with the lads and ear'oles, certain themes could be expected to persist across sites.

Class cultures are created specifically, concretely in determinate conditions, and in particular oppositions. They arise through definite struggles over time with other groups, institutions, and tendencies. Particular manifestations of the culture arise in particular circumstances with their own form of marshalling and developing of familiar themes. The themes are *shared* between particular manifestations because all locations at the same level in a class society share similar basic structural properties....[and] face similar problems. (Willis 1977:59)

Eckert's recent (1989) account of "jocks and burnouts" in an American high school makes some similar points. In it, she describes how a social division into jocks (who had a cooperative relationship with the school) and burnouts (who had an adversarial relationship with the school) emerged in daily interactions at Belten High. Like the lads and ear'oles, Eckert's jocks and burnouts drew selectively on their neighborhood and family experiences to turn ways of talking, behaving, dressing, identifying territories, and using illicit substances into indicators of distinct peer orientations at school. Also like Willis, Eckert emphasizes that community-based behaviors and norms were only the starting point for social-class differentiation within the school. Once outside norms and behaviors were brought to school by students, they became the focal points for further differentiation and competition between jocks and burnouts.

Similar to Willis, Eckert found that although the jocks drew upon middle-class cultural orientations while the burnouts drew upon working-class orientations, membership in each group was not consistently determined by class background (16% of self-identified jocks came from working class backgrounds; almost 50% of burnouts from middle-class backgrounds). Further, the students' career aspirations were more closely related to whether they identified themselves as a jock or a burnout than to their class backgrounds.

In Eckert's interpretation, the jock/burnout distinction is not primarily a matter of actual group membership; in fact, the majority of students said they belonged to neither group. Eckert views the distinction as a social organizational principle—a cultural dimension—for interpreting behavior and social identity at the school.

Thus Jocks and Burnouts do not constitute clear groups or cliques; they are cultural categories, which define and unify collections of groups and cliques. The Jock and Burnout categories organize the ideologies of the groups within the social network of the school, aligning groups at different parts of the network according to key issues in the adolescent society. They are cultural foci rather than clearly defined groups, and their differences are organizing principles within the community rather than definitions of individuals or groups of individuals. (Eckert 1989:20)

In sum, cultural differences may arise from students' needs to locate themselves in their social worlds at school. Forging their own identities from the resources available to them and in response to their experiences of school, they reconstruct and sometimes create for themselves school-related groups and distinctive orientations toward school work.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

From the examples we have given, it is clear that familiar indicators of cultural difference—skin color, native language, religious and ancestral background—are not the sole determinants of the behaviors, attitudes, and performance of students. Group boundaries and cultural orientations emerge in and around schools, organized around the factors that are or become salient there. Groups formed at school may divide ethnic or minority group members in different ways than do families or communities. And the cultural orientations of a school group may encourage members to think about school and act at school in ways that distinguish them from their ethnic counterparts in other school groups. Further, similar cultural orientations toward school can be produced in more than one ethnic group, such that members of various ethnic groups come to share orientations toward school. Such situations do exist, as our research has shown, and they are important to recognize because they affect how students feel about school and what they do there.

We realize, however, that such situations blur ethnic boundaries and thereby complicate treatments and remedies conscientiously designed to help targeted groups. Because the statistical trends are clear—some ethnic group

members do consistently less well in school, on average, than their majority counterparts—explanations for the trend are sought, so that remedies may be proposed. Researchers find it easier to generate or test explanations if the group is assumed to be homogeneous. Similarly, schools and teachers find it easier to plan interventions, receive support for them, and implement them if the benefits of the program are thought to be generalizable to a large, “at-risk” group. However, these practices, as they are presently conducted in the United States, also contribute to stereotyping, in that they often lead to labeling, separating, and ranking of students by ethnic membership and to treating everyone within an ethnic group the same. Eisenhart experienced an extreme case of this when she worked at a black university. Because 99% of the students were black, the school could receive federal money for many remedial programs. Thus it set up an extensive program of remedial courses for freshmen. Within a few years, all freshman courses had become remedial, and all entering students, regardless of academic skills, were required to enroll in them. When remedies such as this one are applied across the board to members of ethnic groups, they may well miss their mark, or worse, they may depress, rather than encourage, students’ interest in school.

We have also demonstrated that the processes of cultural differentiation occurring at school take several forms. Some children arrive at school with little that differentiates them, yet the school’s policies of assessment, grouping, and ranking may create its own set of different groups and orientations. Other differences are produced primarily by the students, as they respond to the way the school treats them or they work out their own social identities among their peers.

There are several reasons why we think these processes of differentiation occur. First, different orientations are likely to arise in local communities because parents, teachers, and students negotiate the meaning of school primarily in their face-to-face dealings with each other; thus, the orientations formed in one setting will reflect its social organization. When members of one community encounter other orientations as a consequence of sending children to school (where they usually encounter other students from a larger and more heterogeneous area), a new social dynamic will be created and is likely to produce some new groupings of students and some changes in orientations.

Second, all schools use some form of student grouping and academic ranking system. Thus, every child finds him- or herself in some kind of school group, according to the school’s assessment of the child’s academic ability and potential. By this formula, some in-school groups are always disadvantaged relative to others: Some groups must be “low” groups; some must be “high.” The organization and policies of schools do not, for example, permit teachers consistently to put all their students in a high group or to

give everyone in the class an A. The requirement that schools group and rank students creates conditions in which school groups and distinct orientations toward school may form, regardless of ethnic group membership.

Further, students are affected in different ways by messages from home, their community, or the media about schooling. A few of the black students in Fortham and Ogbu’s study were persuaded by the view that school success is an important step toward a successful adulthood; they worked hard to do well in school despite the peer pressure to do otherwise. Most of the students, however, learned from the experiences of adults around them and from their peers to question the school’s claim that hard work and success at school translates into good jobs later. In other words, students’ responses to school may differentiate the cultural orientations of ethnic group members, too.

Finally, students may need, for psychological or sociological reasons, to identify like-minded peers and distinguish them from others in order to develop their own social identities. This process may result in the cultural differentiation of an otherwise homogeneous group, as occurred among the working-class boys Willis studied and the mostly middle-class students in Eckert’s study.

If these are the reasons, they are unlikely to go away any time soon, as they are deeply rooted aspects of American life and schools. We are optimistic, however, that the processes of differentiation can be recognized if we do not settle for the taken-for-granted markers of group membership. Further, we believe that if we can identify the groups that form within schools, we can work to create the conditions that foster more positive school outcomes. Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) work, for example, illustrates how teachers who understand some of the cultural orientations held in the communities from which their students come can create classroom activities that disrupt the normal pattern by which some children tend to be labeled “behavior problems,” assigned to low ability groups, and come to dislike school. In her examples, a few teachers were able to raise both young students’ and their parents’ interest and enthusiasm for school. Similarly, the work of Cathie Jordan and her associates to understand and change the pattern of disinterested school performance among Hawaiian and Navajo children is encouraging. While their work is based on a more conventional definition of groups and cultural difference, the steps they took show that attempts to make education more culturally compatible work: When ethnic groups and their cultural orientations are accommodated by teachers, student achievement improves. Our appeal is to enlarge the scope of such interventions so that groups formed in schools and their cultural orientations also become the subject of research and intervention efforts. We want to apply the anthropologists’ tools for understanding groups and cultures beyond familiar categories for distinguishing children at school so we can

know more about students and hopefully produce more responsive environments for their education.

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