

BEYOND THE LANGUAGE NEEDS OF CHILDREN FROM MINORITY CULTURES

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Although it is widely recognized that the lack of proficiency in English is a primary cause of low achievement in American schools, it is also becoming accepted that language is only one dimension of school problems. Low achievement is caused by the cultural discontinuity of experiences between the home and school.¹ In their widely known "Theory of Incompatibilities," Jose and B. Cardenas identify five basic sources of discontinuity between home and school experiences: poverty, culture, language, mobility, and societal perceptions. While not minimizing the language problems, it is the purpose of this article to focus on the problems of cultural discontinuity. In more specific terms, this article will attempt to show that it is the lack of understanding of the acceptable conventions in the day-to-day classroom interactions that cause great difficulty. This is a factor of considerable significance because it results in a form of handicap for the uninitiated student.

Research in schooling indicates that children come to school not only to learn academic subject-matter content, but also to learn of socially acceptable forms through which the expressions of the learning process is manifested.² What students need to know and do in order to be effective participants in the community of the classroom require competencies beyond the mastering of academic subject-matter. They must know "with whom, when and where they

can speak and act"³ for a given classroom recitation or task. Action or inaction is often interpreted incorrectly and is very likely to result in unfavorable judgement of the person in the subordinate position. The following incident demonstrates:

A kindergarten teacher shared a recent experience about a child who, she said, refused to talk to her for months except during the times when she asked her direct questions, or singled her out for a response. The child, at these times, would answer briefly and to the point. Further inquiry revealed that the child did not have a language problem and was observed to be friendly and normally sociable with her peers. One day, toward the end of the school year, this child suddenly began to initiate verbal contacts with the teacher and spoke in class like the rest of her highly verbal peers. The teacher was relieved and concluded that the child had "a head on her shoulders." An implication seems to be that one who does not speak is incapable of thought. To this teacher, thinking was synonymous with speaking. What to say, when to speak, who to talk to are culture-related behaviors. In this teacher's culture, it is obvious that talk is valued.

Interpreted in the Philippine context, this incident brings out a fact that what is functional behavior in one setting may be dysfunctional in another. Children, although chatty and friendly, are taught to be

reserved and respectful in the presence of an adult. This particular cultural rule is embodied in the notion, "Speak only when spoken to." Therefore, in the case of the ethnolinguistic minority child, there is a potential handicap because not only will such a child need to learn certain specialized skills and conventional forms in school, he or she will also need to unlearn previously learned behavior, or must shift from culturally patterned ways of approaching a learning task to those which the school prescribes. Otherwise, the child will suffer unpleasant consequences, usually in the form of denial of encouragement and praise, two critical types of reinforcers that are important to one's sense of well-being and competence.⁴

A study conducted in the American southwest by Jackson and Cosca⁵ shows that disparity in teacher behavior toward Anglo- and Mexican-American children is most significant in this area. They maintain that cultural variables are factors of influence in teacher behavior. For example, Anglo-American children were praised more often than the Mexican-American. The inference from this study is that the type of interaction between teacher and Mexican-American children was characterized as awkward. This, in turn, affected the teacher's responses. The teacher preferred the comfortable and smoother flow of interaction with the Anglo-American children.



A similar observation was made in relation to teachers of black children.⁶ A repeated history of discouraging experiences weakens a student's desire to participate. Since success in the classroom depends very largely on effective participation, such students are penalized. The teacher should provide equal chances for participation from all students. There exists, in fact, no greater inequity for educational opportunity than in the classroom situation where the teacher conducts activities based on a set of rules not shared by all students. Such rules are little understood, if at all, by many children through no fault of their own.

Studies on children of Polynesian ancestry, specifically the Hawaiian, indicate that Hawaiian culture exhibits a preference for working together. Students get help from each other, sometimes indirectly and subtly, as opposed to a preference for doing independent work or for directly soliciting help from the teacher or adult.⁷ Differences of perceptions between the teacher and student regarding this behavior can

cause frustration on both sides. The difference of perceptions is culture-related and certainly exists in the classroom.

Another study describing differences of perceptions regarding culture-related behaviors has been done with Filipino children.⁸ "Hanging around" behavior was considered a problem by the Caucasian teacher, but the same behavior was considered by the mother of the child as "good." To the teacher, the behavior meant an "involved" and "withdrawn" attitude. To the mother, it was acceptable and commendable because, in the Philippine context, observing the adult and modeling after the adult are desirable.⁹

In the exploratory study of Filipino limited-English speakers' help-seeking behaviors,¹⁰ data through observation show that the non-verbal mode of behavior was frequently used by Filipino youngsters. When interviewed about this coping behavior, the teachers' responses included the following: no

response because they were not aware of the behavior; no response because they did not recognize its meaning; or, delayed response because of perceived lack of urgency that a subtle plea for assistance carries as much significance as one that is verbally expressed.

There are no studies available to this author on Samoans in relation to specific problems encountered in the school. However, in discussions with teachers, it is apparent that Samoan students challenge the teacher's effectiveness because of cultural discontinuity.

An editorial that appeared in one of Hawaii's major newspapers entitled, "Samoan Problems Require Attention," underscores the concerns of and for Samoans. "Ancient Hawaii would not have seemed like a strange place to immigrants from Samoa, another Polynesian society, but modern Hawaii . . . is very different and the Samoans frequently have trouble adjusting. It is important that we understand these people and their problems better and curb the tendency to stereotype unfavorably."¹¹

The examples cited and others that the reader might bring to mind, lead us to conclude that what we generally do when we stereotype is "short-circuit" the awareness of events by acting on the basis of an interpretation we make. Often it is not the actual behavior we respond to but our perception of it. Perception is culture related, but the perceptions often lie hidden to us.

Even the best well-intentioned teachers can unconsciously convey rejection by favoring some children over others. The children that respond to a teacher's accustomed cues in class get the attention, even if subtly. By favoring students that seem more compatible, whatever might be the basis of that compatibility, the teacher discriminates. The teacher may not always be aware of it, but the

students will take note. For example, a new and dedicated teacher of British ancestry reminiscing over his early experiences with Maori children drives this point home. He recalls that in trying to get his students involved with their learning, he started them in the habit of discussing topics which he framed through questioning. After a few days of this, he noticed that fewer and fewer hands were raised in response to his questions. He sensed something was wrong and decided that on the next day he would ask them a question they all knew the answer to. Only one hand was raised. It was the hand of the fairest-skinned among them and a highly verbal student. This teacher then asked the class why he was not getting the eager responses he used to get. The answer was simple: "Why bother," said one student, "you always call on. . . ." The teacher suddenly realized that the student he had been favoring unconsciously was the student who was most like him. The class had reacted to a case of unconscious discrimination—the result of cultural differences not perceived by the teacher.

In listening to teachers in Hawaii, one hears a variety of statements and questions—some of concern and others of complaint—regarding behaviors and learning difficulties of students whose everyday contact at home or in the community are with friends and relatives whose language is not English. This generally means that these children are taught, most often unconsciously, the values and customs of their cultural heritage.

The critical questions teachers really need to ask are: (1) Will I be able to recognize the difference between culture-influenced behavior and idiosyncratic ones; and (2) having recognized a pattern of

behavior that differs from my own learned patterns, will I have the skill to elicit more useful information from the child so I can understand the situation a little better, and (3) will I have the courage to try alternative ways of dealing with differences that cause learning difficulties rather than dismiss these as student deficiencies?

A larger and more basic question, however, remains: Can this skill of discernment be learned? am I willing to be taught to recognize culture-based differences? dare we say "no" and still believe we are partners in a learning enterprise?

Teachers of children who come from diverse cultures need intercultural skills if they wish to be effective. Just as it is imperative for the students to recognize the ground rules underlying acceptable operations in the class as a cultural system, so should the teachers be cognizant of the influence that the home culture bears upon the student's interactive styles. This idea has been emphasized by Bernstein who says, "if the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teachers."¹²

Footnotes

¹Cardenas, Jose A. and B. Cardenas. *The Theory of Incompatibilities*, San Antonio, Texas : IDRA, 1977.

²Mehan, Hugh. *Learning Lessons, Social Organization in the Classroom*, Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 1979.

³Ibid.

⁴Taba, Hilda. *Curriculum Development, Theory and Practice*, New York : Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962.

⁵Jackson, Greg and Cecilia Cosca. "The Inequality of Educational Opportunity in the Southwest: An Observational Study of Ethnically Mixed Classrooms," in *American Research Journal*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1974.

⁶Byers, Paul and H. Byers. "Nonverbal Communication and the Education of Children," in C. Cazden, ed., *Functions of Language in the Classroom*, New York : Teachers College Press, 1972.

⁷Boggs, Stephen T. "The Meaning of Questions and Narratives to Hawaiian Children," in Courtney B. Cazden, Vera P. John and Dell Hymes, eds., *Functions of Language in the Classroom*, New York : Teachers College Press, 1972. Also, Ronald Gallimore, "Variations in the Motivational Antecedent of Achievement Among Hawaii's Ethnic Groups," in W. Lebra, ed., *Mental Health Research in Asia and the Pacific*, vol. 2, Honolulu : East-West Center Press, 1969; Alan Howard, *Ain't No Big Thing: Coping Strategies in a Hawaiian-American Community*, Honolulu : University Press of Hawaii, 1969; and, Cathie Jordan, "Culture and Education," in A. Marsella, ed., *Perspectives on Cross-Cultural Psychology*, New York : Academic Press, 1979.

⁸Forman, Sheila. "Cultural Differences in Responses to Filmed Child Sequences," unpublished master's thesis, Department of Psychology, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1972.

⁹Sanchez, Rebecca. "Understanding the Filipino Child in an American Classroom," mimeo, HCTE, University of Hawaii, 1971.

¹⁰Pablo, Josephine. "Coping Behavior Patterns of Students of Limited English Proficiency in a Classroom," unpublished master's thesis, College of Education, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1980.

¹¹Editorial, "Samoan Problems Require Attention," in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, Hawaii, 1972.

¹²Bernstein, Basil. "A Critique of the Concept of Compensatory Education," in *Functions of Language in the Classroom* (see Boggs, footnote 7).

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