Ethnic Minority Empowerment

Ethnic minority students throughout the world have experienced disproportional school failure in education systems organized, administered, and controlled by members of the dominant group. This pattern is common to minority groups in most western countries who have been conquered, subjugated, segregated, and regarded as inherently inferior by the dominant group. Educational failure is regarded by the dominant group as the natural consequence of the minority group's inherent inferiority. This process of blaming the victim is legitimized by pointing at high rates of alcohol abuse, poor hygiene, and lack of middle-class child rearing practices, all of which are viewed as manifestations of the minority group's deficiency. It is not difficult to recognize in this picture the operation of racism that is embedded inextricably in the workings of the society itself. The process of blaming the minority group for its own failure effectively screens from critical scrutiny the way in which the educational system produces school failure among minority students.

It is striking that in the United States context, the Black, Hispanic, and Indian minority groups that most often experience school failure have all experienced a long history of subjugation and overt racism at the hands of the dominant European society. In schools, the racism has often been expressed through physical violence. We cannot understand the causes of minority students' academic difficulties or plan effective ways of reversing these difficulties unless we see that the issues are more complex than a simple mismatch between the language of the home and the school language or lack of adequate English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching. The roots of school failure lie in the ways well-meaning
educators inadvertently reinforce children's conflicting feelings about both their own culture and the majority culture. This "bicultural ambivalence" is the result of generations of overt racism. Minority groups that maintain a strong sense of pride in their own language and culture or who have not internalized mixed feelings about their own culture and the dominant group tend not to experience school failure.

Two questions follow from this analysis. The first is how is the historical pattern of overt racism continued in more subtle forms in our schools today? And the second is how can this institutionalized racism be eliminated so that educational growth becomes a possibility for minorities students? In schools today there is usually no intent on the part of educators to discriminate against minority students; however, often in the name of equality, their interactions with minority students are controlled by unquestioned assumptions that reflect the values and priorities of middle-class culture. It is in these interactions that minority students are educationally disabled.

**Four factors affecting minority student school success**

A considerable amount of data shows that power and status relations between minority and majority groups exert a major influence on school performance (Cummins 1984; Ogbu 1978). Minority groups that tend to experience academic difficulty (for example Finns in Sweden, Hispanic, Black, and Indian groups in the United States, and Franco-Ontarian, Black, and Indian groups in Canada) appear to have developed an insecurity and ambivalence about the value of their own cultural identity as a result of their interactions with the dominant group. A central proposition of this chapter is that minority students are disempowered educationally in much the same way that their communities are disempowered by interactions with societal institutions (see also Cummins 1986). The converse of this is that minority students will succeed educationally to the extent that the
patterns of interaction in schools reverse those that prevail in the society at large. In short, minority students are "empowered" or "disabled" as a direct result of their interactions with educators in schools. These interaction are mediated by the implicit or explicit role definitions that educators assume in relation to four institutional characteristics of schools (See Figure 1). These characteristics reflect the extent to which:

- Minority students' language and culture are incorporated into the school program;
- Minority community participation is encouraged as an integral component of children's education;
- Instruction (pedagogy) is used that promotes intrinsic motivation on the part of students to use language actively in order to generate their own knowledge; and
- Professionals involved in student testing (assessment) become advocates for minority students by focusing primarily on the ways in which students' academic difficulties are a function of interactions with and within the school context rather than legitimizing the location of the "problem" within the students.

**Figure 1. Empowerment of Minority Students**

Each dimension can be analyzed along a continuum, with one end reflecting an anti-racist orientation and the other reflecting the more traditional assimilationist (Anglo-conformity) orientation. The overall hypothesis is that the assimilationist orientation often results in school failure while inter-cultural, anti-racist orientation leads to school success as students develop the ability, confidence, and motivation to achieve academic success.

At least three of these four dimensions of cultural/linguistic incorporation, community participation, instruction (pedagogy), and testing (assessment) are integral to most statements of "multicultural education" policy. Although language policy as
compared to cultural preservation has tended to be vague, the language component is central to the present theoretical framework because a multicultural education policy that ignores linguistic diversity is empty. Considerable research shows the importance of language for school achievement. The inclusion of instruction as a central dimension of the framework derives from the fact that genuine inclusion of students' non-school experiences, their community's culture, into the school program requires that educators abandon assumptions about teaching that focus primarily on transmission of pre-determined knowledge and skills. The four dimensions are explained below:

**Cultural/Linguistic Incorporation.** Considerable research data suggest that for minority groups experiencing above average levels of school failure, the extent to which students' language and culture are incorporated into the school program constitutes a significant predictor of academic success (Cummins 1984). In programs where minority students' home language (L1) skills are strongly reinforced, school success appears to reflect both the more solid cognitive/academic foundation developed through intensive L1 instruction and also the reinforcement of their cultural identity.

With respect to the incorporation of minority students' language and culture, educators' role definitions can be characterized along an "additive-subtractive" dimension (see Lambert 1975 for a discussion of additive and subtractive bilingualism). Educators who see their role as aiding their students to add a second language and culture to supplement rather than supplant their native language and culture are more likely to empower students. Educators who see their role as getting their students to replace their home language and culture with English and white values to assimilate them into the dominant culture are more likely to create the conditions for student failure. Students who develop skills in two languages have been found to have cognitive advantages over monolingual students (Hakuta & Diaz 1985).
Community Participation. Minority students school performance is also helped when the children's communities (especially their parents and extended family) are involved with running their children's school. When educators involve minority parents as partners in their children's education, parents appear to communicate to their children a positive attitude towards education which leads to the students having higher academic achievement (see for example Tizard, Schofield, & Hewiston 1982 and Ada 1988).

The teacher role definitions associated with community participation can be characterized along a collaborative to exclusionary continuum. Teachers operating at the collaborative end of the continuum actively encourage minority parents to participate in promoting their children's academic progress both in the home and through involvement in classroom activities (Ada 1988). A collaborative orientation may require a willingness on the part of the teacher to work closely with mother tongue teachers or aides in order to communicate effectively and in a non-condescending way with minority parents. Teachers with an exclusionary orientation, on the other hand, tend to regard teaching as their job and are likely to view collaboration with minority parents as either irrelevant or actually detrimental to children's progress. Often parents are viewed as part of the problems since they interact through their first language with their children at home.

In the case of Indian students, it is obvious that our failure to build education around the enormously rich human heritage of this continent is depriving students of the sense of pride in their own cultures that is crucial to their academic growth. Students can only become empowered when education becomes a truly community enterprise involving an equal partnership between educators in the school and educators in the home, the children's families. It is not enough to focus only on students' classroom experiences, although
this is a central component of the change from an Anglo-conformity orientation. In addition, the collective historical experience of the community must be used as the context for all learning in the school. There are no easy formulas for implementing these changes; patience, ingenuity, and a spirit of committed experimentation are necessary.

**Instruction (Pedagogy)** Several investigators have suggested that the learning difficulties of minority students are often caused by the way we teach children designated "at risk." These students frequently receive intensive instruction that confines them to a passive role and induces a form of "learned helplessness" (see Cummins 1984 & 1989 for reviews). On the other hand, instruction that can empower students, such as the Whole Language approach described in this book, aims to liberate students from dependence on instruction in the sense of encouraging them to become active generators of their own knowledge.

Two major orientations can be distinguished with respect to teaching. These differ in the extent to which the teacher retains exclusive control over classroom interaction as opposed to sharing some of this control with students. The dominant instructional model in most western industrial societies has been termed a "transmission" model (Barnes 1976; Wells 1982 & 1986). This model can be contrasted with an "experiential interactive" model of teaching. The basic premise of the transmission model is that the task of teachers is to impart knowledge or skills they possess to their students who do not yet have these skills. This implies that teachers initiate and control the interaction, constantly orienting it towards the achievement of instructional objectives.

An "experiential-interactive" model of instruction focuses both on giving students hands-on (context-embedded as described in Chapter Four) classroom experiences that give students a basis for understanding more abstract (context-reduced) academic
In addition, a transmission model of teaching contravenes central principles of language and literacy acquisition, and a model allowing for reciprocal interaction between teacher and students represents a more appropriate alternative (Cummins 1984; Wells 1982 & 1986). This interactive model incorporates proposals about the relation between language and learning made by a variety of investigators, most notably in recent years, in the Bullock Report (1975) and by Barnes (1976), Lindfors (1987), and Wells (1982). Its applications with respect to the promotion of literacy conform closely to psycholinguistic approaches to reading as advocated by Goodman and Goodman (1977), Holdaway (1979), and Smith (1978 & 1988).

A central tenet of the experiential interactive model is that "talking and writing are means to learning" (Bullock 1975, 50). The major characteristics of the interactive portion of the model are:

- genuine dialogue between student and teacher in both oral and written modalities
- guidance and facilitation rather than control of student learning by the teacher
- encouragement of student-student talk in a collaborative learning context
- encouragement of meaningful language use by students rather than correctness of surface forms
- conscious integration of language use and development with all curricular content rather than teaching language and other content as isolated subjects
- a focus on developing higher level cognitive skills rather than factual recall
- task presentation that generates intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation

In short, instructional approaches that empower students encourage them to assume greater control over setting their own learning goals and to collaborate actively with each other in achieving these
goals. These approaches reflect what cognitive psychologists such as Piaget and Vygotsky have emphasized about children's learning for more than half a century. Learning is viewed as an active process that is enhanced through interaction. The stress on action (Piaget) and interaction (Vygotsky) contrasts with behavioristic learning models that focus on passive and isolated reception of knowledge.

The relevance of these two instructional models for multicultural education derives from the fact that a genuine multicultural orientation is impossible within a transmission model of pedagogy. To be sure, content about other cultural groups can be taught, but appreciation of other cultural groups can come about only through interaction where experiences are being shared. Transmission models entail the suppression of students' experiences and consequently do not allow for validation of minority students' experiences in the classroom. The human resources, represented by students' cultural backgrounds, can be utilized in the classroom only when educators have 1) an additive orientation to students' culture and language such that they can be shared rather than suppressed in the classroom, 2) an openness to collaborate with community resource persons who can provide insight to students about different cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions, and 3) a willingness to permit active use of written and oral language by students so that students can develop their literacy and other language skills in the process of sharing their experiences with peers and adults.

**Testing (Assessment).** In the past, both classroom and psychological testing have had the effect of disempowering or disabling minority students. Academic achievement and intelligence (IQ) tests have located the causes of minority students' educational difficulties within students, thereby screening from critical scrutiny the interactions that students have experienced within the educational system. This process of blaming the victim led to massive overrepresentation of Black and Hispanic students
in classes for the educable mentally retarded until the early 1970s (Mercer 1973). Litigation and legislation such as Public Law 94-142 during the sixties and seventies appeared, on the surface, to rectify this situation insofar as there is no longer overrepresentation of minority students in classes for the retarded. However, the disabling structure has preserved itself simply by shifting the overrepresentation of minority students to classes for the "learning disabled." Ortiz and Yates (1983), for example, reported that Hispanic students in Texas are overrepresented by a factor of three hundred percent in learning disability classes. It seems implausible to conclude that three times as many Hispanic as Anglo children suffer from intrinsic neurologically-based learning disabilities; rather, it is more plausible that these children's learning difficulties are caused by the kind of educational interactions they have experienced and that one of the functions of psychological assessment has been to deflect attention away from the ways minority children have been, and still are being, disabled in school. Specifically, away from the fact that traditionally schools have attempted to eradicate minority children's language and culture and minority parents have been excluded from any meaningful role in their children's education. In addition, the curriculum has reflected, both overtly and covertly, the racist values of the dominant group, and children have not been permitted to express and share their experiences within the classroom.

The alternative role definition that is required to reverse the traditional "legitimizing" function of testing can be termed an "advocacy" role. The teacher's, psychologist's, and special educator's task must be to "delegitimize" the traditional functions of psychological testing in the educational disabling of minority students. In other words, they must be prepared to become advocates for the child in scrutinizing critically the cultural, social, and educational contexts within which the child has developed.
Psychologists are often not conscious of the fact that minority children's culturally-specific experiences effect their test results and see minority languages as negative influences on children's lives. Within the institutional structure which psychosocial assessment takes place in regard to legal and policy requirements and training and certification programs, psychologists tend to locate the cause of academic problems within minority children themselves rather than with the school and its curriculum. This has the effect of hiding a variety of other possible contributors to children's school failure such as the teaching methods and curriculum to which the children have been exposed. Because the psychologist is only equipped with psychoeducational assessment tools, students' school problems are assumed to be psychoeducational in nature. The psychologists' training has resulted in a tunnel vision that is out of focus with respect to the experiential realities of minority children.

A related way in which racism creeps into psychological assessment relates to the fact that a psychologist's professional credibility depends on providing a satisfactory interpretation of children's difficulty and making reasonable placement or intervention recommendations. To admit that assessment reveals nothing about causes of minority students academic difficulties jeopardizes the status and credibility of the psychologist.

How can assessment play a role in challenging rather than legitimizing the disability of minority students within the educational system? The first step is to broaden the conceptual basis for testing so that it goes beyond psychoeducational considerations towards focusing on the child's entire learning environment. It is virtually inevitable that assessment will contribute to the disabling of minority students when the only tools at the psychologist's disposal are psychological tests whatever the language in which they are given. Since tests focus only on psychological processes, minority children's educational
difficulties will, of necessity, be attributed to psychological dysfunctions. To challenge the disabling of minority students, the assessment must focus on the extent to which children's language and culture are incorporated within the school program, the extent to which educators collaborate with parents as partners in a shared enterprise, and the extent to which children are encouraged to use language (both tribal and English) actively within the classroom to amplify their experiences in interaction with both children and adults. In other words, the primary focus should be on remediating the educational interactions that minority children experience.

In order to broaden the focus of educational and psychological testing, it is necessary to reduce the territorially between the roles of teachers and testing specialists. Formal testing has an important role to play, but its impact is considerably greater if it is combined with informal assessment. The longitudinal observation and monitoring of student progress throughout the school year by classroom teachers also yields valuable data. Teachers have more opportunity to observe children tackling academic and cognitive tasks than do psychologists, and teachers can also observe how children react to various types of interventions. In other words, the teacher has the opportunity to observe what Vygotsky calls "the zone of proximal development" defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (1978, 86).

It is important to note, however, that not all forms of instruction are equally capable of contributing to the assessment process. When the instruction is "transmission-oriented" in that the teacher views her task primarily as transmitting a body of knowledge and skills to the student, students often tend to be reduced to passive roles of responding to "display" questions (to which the teacher already knows the answer) and filling out worksheets focussed on
rote recall (memorizing) or mechanical application. Typically, this type of instruction mirrors the biases of standardized tests. Instruction that is empowering, on the other hand, is experiential and interactive.

**Conclusion**

Reversing the legacy of generations of subjugation and overt racism is a formidable challenge. Recent events in the United States and Canada in relation to the recognition of the rights of what John Ogbu has termed "involuntary minorities" do not encourage optimism in regard to the dominant group's commitment to acknowledge or redress this legacy of racism. Thus, if the institutionalized racism in schools is going to be challenged, it can only be done by teachers and by ethnic minority parents themselves. A first step is effective control, or at least a genuine partnership, in relation to children's schooling experiences. The general directions for change outlined above are obviously "generic" in that they are formulated to apply to a range of minority groups that have experienced systematic school failure. The appropriateness of these directions and the specific applications must be worked out by each community. The change process, however, will inevitably involve a consciousness-raising on the part of the community and at least some educators and will represent a challenge to the status quo that is likely to be strongly resisted by the dominant group.