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IS THE CLASSROOM ANOTHER RASHOMON?

Conflicting Views of Teachers, Parents and Students

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Is the Classroom Another Rashomon?

Introduction

Children in school are a captive often unwilling audience. As such they are particularly vulnerable to the opinions of school personnel. Those adult opinions are particularly important at certain points of interaction between educators and students which lead to decisions generating different educational opportunities.[1] A teacher's decision to classify a student as "at-risk" is one such decision. It represents a preliminary step in the acknowledgement of classroom difficulties. This acknowledgement precedes, and is often followed by a more formal process of referral, testing, labeling, and placement in special classes. Learning about the school experiences of "at-risk" students helps us to understand the meaning of that term as used in the school context, and the immediate instructional consequences that such a designation may have for the child.

The Japanese film Rashomon told the story of a crime from the perspective of the criminal, the victims, and a bystander. By using this strategy the film maker recognized how reality is mediated by one's perceptions. The research findings discussed in this paper are derived from a study based on a similar strategy.[2] The purpose of the study was to describe the school experiences of children considered to be "at risk." We recognized that those experiences were likely to be viewed differently by each contributor, that is, parents, teachers, school specialists, and the students themselves. In order to be faithful to this guiding concept we chose the case study method for our research.[3] Six case studies of second and third graders at each of two schools were constructed through the use of classroom observations, examination of school records, and interviews with the students' teachers, other school specialists, the students mothers. and the students themselves.

The resulting data appeared to be well deserving of the 'Rashomon' appellation. Although overlaps could be discerned among the descriptions

collected for each child, it was evident that each of the participants was seeing a different child. As in Rashomon, reality was elusive. However, further reflection indicated that perhaps Rashomon was not an entirely appropriate metaphor. Although there were many different views, perhaps they were not all equally valid. In this paper I will present a set of contrasting views about two of these children -- Gilberto and Carmín. To the data collected from different sources I will add our own observations. The reader will therefore have an opportunity to consider these different views and their relative weight. The writer's own perspective and the policy implications that may be derived from this study, will be considered at the end.

Method

We selected the case study method for this study because we wanted to understand the school experiences of children perceived to be "at-risk" by their teachers. We believed that close observation, and interviews with those most closely concerned would give us a better understanding of these children. As Smith suggests, we studied first-hand, and at length, and without intervening in the natural flow of events, the school life of these twelve children. In addition, we attempted to become close enough to those affecting and affected by the phenomenon to understand it from their different points of view. As. we expected, and as demonstrated below, contextual and personal meanings modified the phenomenon from place to place."[4]

School Records. School personnel such as the nurse and the speech therapist saw these children regularly, and the school psychologist had also met with, tested and passed judgment on them. They were all interviewed formally but their perceptions were also available through the school records. Through the cumulative records we were able to examine changes through time in attendance, student achievement, and school personnel perceptions, as well as diagnostic and standardized test data.

Teachers. Three teachers -- homeroom, learning disabilities, and ESL-- were in almost daily contact with the student? to be discussed below. The

children were observed in all their classes and each of the teachers was interviewed.

The homeroom teachers were formally interviewed twice, once at the beginning of the study, and again at the end. During the first interview the teachers were asked first to provide examples of "at-risk" children in their classrooms. In the second interview they were then asked to explain what the term "at-risk" meant to them, and then to match their perceptions to the children named earlier. In Keeping with Erickson's notion of socially constructed labels, this process allowed us to identify the teachers own construction of "at-riskness" and its manifestation.[5] Twelve students, at each of two schools, were selected through this process. Gilberto and Carmín, whose cases 1 discuss below, were among these children.

Parents. The parent data was collected through two interviews. The first interview was informal and designed to gain the mothers permission for the children's participation in the study. Some preliminary information was also obtained, as well as an impressionistic view of the child's home situation.

The second interview was conducted towards the end of the study also at Gilberto's home and with the aid of a semi-structured instrument. That interview lasted over an hour. Gilbertos mother was interviewed in Spanish, her language of preference.

The children. Twelve children were selected for this study on the basis of teacher identification. They were all interviewed for varying lengths of time. The length of the interview depended on the instructional constraints and on the children's own wilingness to participate. While none of them rejected the interviewers, some of them were more talkative than others. The two children described in this paper were among the most talkative and expressive.

Both of the children were in the same third grade classroom. They were both Mexican-American, and native speakers of Spanish. They were also considered to be "at-risk" by their teachers. That is. within the school context, these children did not perform according to the expectations of the adults charged with their care.

Gilberto

<u>The school records</u>

Gilberto entered and withdrew four times, and attended four different schools, between kindergarten and the end of first grade. A kindergarten form indicates that Gilberto had no learning problems but the first withdrawal form indicates that Gilberto was an "ESL student below grade level due to language barrier." The note suggests that the language of instruction at that time was English.

By the first grade his teacher noted that Gilberto needed to improve in all areas, and also that he should be observed the following year. His second grade teacher referred him to the Child study Team. Her referral was based on "difficulty working independently, especially in tasks in reading, writing and spelling." She added that he reversed letters, "had trouble remembering visual cues" and "focusing on written work."

The school psychologist decided that Gilberto was indeed learning disabled due to severe auditory and visual deficits. Remediation in Spanish four times a week was recommended, including intensive work in the development of visual processing, memory and attention, and perceptual motor skills.

The speech and language teacher also evaluated Gilberto and decided that he suffered "verbal developmental dyspraxia." He was assigned to receive language therapy twice a week in order to improve his "coarticulation skills" for "maximally intelligible speech." The boy was also assigned to ESL classes.

<u>The teachers</u>

According to his teachers Gilberto is a "sweetheart" who has a "sparkling" personality and "tries very hard." He is a foster child and one of ten sibling? from more than one father. He is not well cared for at home and his love of school treats suggests that he lacks such things at home.

Gilberto's reading is "labored" and at the "sound level." Although he tries hard, and is enthusiastic about school Gilberto is not learning well and is considered by his teacher to be "at-risk." This may be due to his "dyspraxia." One teacher defined dyspraxia as his inability to fully express his thoughts in language. The diagnosis originated with the speech and language therapist.

The mother

Gilberto is the middle child in a family of seven, and the youngest child of his mother's first husband. She says he was a healthy baby who walked and talked early, climbed everywhere and was "tremendo." He could say anything he wanted very early, she remembers, but refused to let her know when he needed a bathroom until late. Her mother used to cover up for him.

Gilberto is clever, friendly, daring, and enterprising. He is always sure of himself and will start a conversation with anyone, whether rich or poor. He will also take off after whatever interests him and this has caused her no end of difficulties. She tells a story of Gilberto taking off one day in Mexico to show a man a hole through which he could cross the border. What if he meets up with crazy people who like to hurt children?" That is her worry.

At home Gilberto likes to watch TV and play with his younger brother, his favorite member of the family. He will often bring him little trinkets and treats from school and also protects him from punishment.

Mrs. G. does not understand why Gilberto has any problems at school since he is so quick and clever at home. The teachers have told her that he has trouble remembering things but she does not quite accept this. At home he is always repeating all the jokes, jingles, and stories he hears on the radio or TV. She says that last year he used to struggle really hard to decode words but she has noticed a lot of improvement this year. He now reads all kinds of books, she says, and she has started preparing him for his First Communion.

She has always wanted her children to do well in school and her male companion, the father of the two youngest children, also insists on rules for bedtime and homework. Mrs. A. thinks that maybe Gilberto gets distracted at school, or maybe his current teacher is too easy on him. he needs a "short

rein," she claims. However, she is confident that Gilberto does love school and the teachers tell her that he behaves and is respectful.

Gilbertos view

"I start with Spanish language, later come back and go to recess, then...I go to music, then I go to this class to talk...English, and then to lunch. After lunch I go to play and then I go to another class, Ms.---'s class [learning disabilities], and then go back to another class, a little one [language therapy], and then go back to the classroom to do some work and then go home."

Gilberto says that in English "we play games;" in music, "[we learn] a bunch of stuff;" in LD he learns "how to read but 1 already know how to read;" and in math he's already doing those that have the two little sticks together, like this" [as he draws an 'X' on the ground].

He is learning in school so he "can pass grade." And he thinks he is the "worst in the class" because he only gets 'B' or 'C,' ...never... 100."

Gilberto became excited when he described a science lesson on magnets. He was fascinated with the way they attracted and repelled each other: "if you stick it to north it won't stick, if you stick it to west it will...you couldn't take them off...looked like they were married, they didn't want to let go."

Gilberto chose Spanish for the interview but he frequently and unconsciously shifted from Spanish to English and back again during the conversation. The interweaving of languages during the interview suggests we were both equally comfortable in either language. Sometimes he would stop in midsentence and point out that he was now speaking English while I was speaking Spanish, or viceversa. The situation always elicited a big smile from him, as though we shared a private joke.

The Gilberto we saw

The first day the observer visited the classroom, Gilberto greeted her with a smile and wanted to know what she was doing—if she saw someone hitting another person, would she tell? Another day, when both observers were present, the class lined up for recess and Gilberto called out:"Aren't you guys coming?" This type of familiar bantering, and ease with adults was characteristic of Gilberto throughout the study. Gilberto's poverty, more than

that of any child in the room, was evident in the condition of his winter jacket and shabby clothes, but he was always clean and seemed to have no self-consciousness about his appearance. On the contrary, he appeared to be a happy, self-confident child.

Gilberto appeared to be equally at ease in either Spanish or English. He often chose Spanish for the more formal communication with his teachers, and lapsed into English during informal conversation. One day he answered a teacher's question about beehives correctly in Spanish and then immediately asked the same teacher in English: "How do they live there?" His understanding of concepts seemed to cross languages. One day he helped a teacher translate the concept of "horseplay" into Spanish for the other children.

The size of the group seemed to make a lot of difference to Gilberto. In small groups he was almost always an active and eager participant while during large group lessons he often appeared to tune out the teacher. Independent work was particularly difficult for him. Sometimes he seemed tired and once even fell asleep while completing a worksheet in math.

Gilberto lagged behind many of his classmates in reading. He read haltingly in a sing-song style that seemed unrelated to the meaning of the passage. He confused some of the letters and was often accused by his teacher of making "careless errors." However, he also demonstrated good comprehension of his schoolwork, for example, he could accurately explain the concept of subtraction but then applied it carelessly; and great practical knowledge which he demonstrated in his conversations about money with his classmates. Gilberto was also heard to comment often "I already know-that" or he pointed out repetition among the lessons presented by his many teachers.

Fortunately, given his complicated schedule, Gilberto seemed to have an adult's grasp of school routines and rules. He knew how many children in his class went to ESL, when every one of his special classes began and ended, how the reward systems worked in every classroom, and the likes and dislikes of teachers.

That then is Gilberto. I will now describe Carmin, a third grade girl, in the same classroom.

Carmín

The School Records

Attendance at two different kindergartens, one in Arkansas, the other in a neighboring district, are recorded for Carmín. During pre-school, kindergarten, and first grade, she received all instruction in English. A note in her records, at the end of first grade, recommends that in lieu of retention, since she had not yet received instruction in her vernacular language, Carmín should be transferred to a bilingual classroom in the second grade. However, her records, at the beginning of the second grade, indicate English as the language of instruction. In the Spring of that year Carmín was referred to the Child Study Team and retention was recommended. Her mother refused that recommendation and instead transferred her to Freedom School, where we met her.

At Freedom Carmín was promoted to a bilingual third grade in spite of her low reading level. She did not participate in ESL because she had received the top score in a language assessment. She was being taught Spanish reading and other subjects bilingually. However, Carmín had made little progress and her teacher had again referred her to the school's Child Study Team.

She was declared Spanish dominant and also "learning disabled." Her difficulties, according to the psychologist, were in "information processing" and she was judged to be especially weak" in perceptual motor skills: visual sequencing, tracking, and organization; and auditory skills. Placement in LD for 30-60 minutes three times a week was recommended.

The teacher

Her teacher says that Carmín is small for her age but with a "lot of love in her heart." She cannot distinguish between Spanish and English and has a great deal of difficulty in both reading and math. She cannot concentrate for very long and often gets very frustrated with school, Ms. Santana wondered if Carmín's problems might be related to immaturity since she is so small for her age. Or perhaps she is suffering from all the changes

in schools and programs where she sometimes has been instructed in English and others in Spanish. At any rate, Carmín has a lot of trouble retaining what she learns, and often drifts away during lessons.

According to other school specialists Carmín is a "typical example of a learning disabled child" who is low in achievement but has good reasoning skills. She is also an example of "learned helplessness." Carmín lives in "a very weird family" where there is not really a nuclear family left." She is being "raised by an aunt" and is confused about whether her cousins are her siblings, that is, she seems to have a kind of "role confusion."

Mother's view

Mrs. Y appeared delighted to talk about her daughter. Although Carmín had been born subsequent to her mother s separation from her father, Carmín had been a very desired child. Her mother describes her as a healthy, active, sociable baby who walked and talked early and entertained the family by mimicking her relatives and dancing. Her comments were supported by a thick family album full of pictures of Carmín. Carmín dressed up in costume. Carmín caught in mischief, Carmín surrounded by relatives, etc.

Carmín's mother had always been her primary caretaker but the child's aunt and grandmother also helped to care for the girls (Carmín and a younger sister) while mother worked. Carmín was dropped off at her aunt's house every morning before school. She returned to that house after school and worked on her homework. Mother called every afternoon to find out about Carmín's schoolwork and to remind her to complete everything before going out to play. After a day's work as a bank cashier, Mrs. Y picked up her daughters (the younger child from a day-care center) and came home to take care of her homemaking duties. Mrs. Y. worried about the long days and about the limited time she had to help Carmín with her schoolwork.

The mother's fiancee had assumed the father figure role in the household. He was very interested in Carmín's progress in school and had promised her a new bicycle if she was promoted to the fourth grade. He took Carmín to sandlot baseball games where her enthusiasm had led her to become the team's unofficial cheerleader.

Carmín s school career worried her mother. She could not understand the contrast between Carmín's cleverness at home and her failure at school. The girl was a capable helper for her mother. She cooked breakfast and attended to her younger sister on week-ends and holidays so that her mother could rest. And Carmín's social skills and understanding made her wise beyond her years. Mrs. Y. related many stories to substantiate her perception. For example, she related how Carmín's natural father had called one day. when Carmín was about three and after months of neglect, to offer to take his daughter shopping. Mrs. Y. acceded only on condition that she could accompany the girl. They agreed and went on a shopping trip. He was carrying Carmín on his shoulders as they left the store when she thanked him: 'Gracias Chino,' she said, addressing him by his nickname. Her father reacted: 'What did you call me?" Carmín immediately responded:"Gracias papa." as she winked from her father's shoulders at her mother who could barely contain her laughter.

Mrs. Y. had been actively involved in her daughter's education. She sent her to Arkansas with her aunt during her kindergarten year and was proud of Carmín s ability to learn English quickly. However, separation was hard for both mother and daughter and Carmin returned home before the end of the school year. When the first grade teacher recommended retention, Carmin's mother intervened and she was placed in a bilingual second grade instead. Her school problems did not disappear, however, and Mrs. Y. returned to the school prodded by her daughter's complaints that the teacher did not pay any attention to her. She found that this was indeed the case. Since Carmín was not up to the class level in Spanish, the teacher had her working independently in a corner. When the teacher and the principal again insisted on retention, mother moved Carmín to Freedom School where we met her.

Mrs. Y explained that she was "demoralized" by Carmín's school difficulties, although she still had high hopes for her future. Carmín s mother rejected school recommendations that she should reward her daughter with the dancing or gymnsaslic lessons she wanted. Mr.s Y. thought such rewards inappropriate since, according to her. Carmín was not working hard enough

at her school work. If she only stopped playing and paid attention, her mother reasoned, Carmín would do well and then she would be glad to reward her.

Carmín s own perceptions.

Carmín chose to be interviewed in Spanish. She said she spoke both languages but preferred Spanish. Carmín's responses were either evasive or an attempt at mimmickmg adult responses. For example: ' What is school like?" "Está bonita." ("It s pretty") "What do you do in school?" "Muchas cosas." ("Many things") The latter response was her favorite and she used it repeatedly. Her descriptions of school activities focused, as did Gilberto's, on her movements from one setting to another: "Primero voy con Ms. Santana y le traigo todas las tareas y hago 'cursive.' Luego me voy con la otra maestra. Luego vengo pá atrás a jugar. Luego comemos lunche y escribimos y me quedo con Ms. Santana."("First I go with Ms. Santana and I bring all my homework and I do 'cursive.' Then I go with the other teacher. Then I return to play. Then we eat lunch and we write and I stay with Ms. Santana.")

Carmin described the LD lesson in the following way:"Ella nos enseña palabras de 'che,' 'cha', leemos, tenemos una prueba y la pase, me dio una 'A,' la hice bien..." ('She teaches us words of 'che,' 'cha,' we read, then we have a quiz, and I passed it and she gave me an 'A.' I did it right...")

During the lesson preceding an interview, Carmín had become frustrated and cried. I asked her why, "SÍ, porque tenía miedo no iba a pasar. Mi mami quiere buenos grados..." ("Yes, because I was afraid I wasn't going to pass. My mommy wants good grades...") To questions about her behavior in school. Carmín responded:"A veces poquita mala...Porque lloro...[Why?'] Porque no lo puedo hacer...Porque no estudio." ("Sometimes a little bit bad ..Because I cry...Because I can't do it...Because I don't study.")

Carmín s favorite topic was cursive" which she said she liked because it is 'bonito', ("pretty") She liked to show off her work in the practice book. However, although Carmín was accurately copying lengthy sentences in handwriting, she was unable to read them. She admitted to problems in

reading and then showed the interviewer how she could help by covering up portions of words so that only one syllable was exposed at a time.

Our observations

To the observers Carmín appeared younger than most of her classmates, though in fact she was one of the oldest children in the room. Nevertheless, she appeared healthy and energetic rather than frail There was a tension about her, and her nerves and emotions always appeared to be on the edge. She almost never seemed relaxed or content.

Informally, Carmín spoke both English and Spanish with her classmates but she seemed more comfortable with Spanish. Her English seemed immature, like the language of a much younger native speaker. In contrast, her Spanish was adult-like and formal.

Carmín was very talkative in the classroom and an eager participant during whole group lessons. She would almost rise out of her seat in her eagerness to answer and, when her answer was correct, openly expressed her pleasure. Her eagerness remained unabated in spite of her tendency to be wrong about half the time.

Being "in charge" of tasks in the classroom was important to Carmín. When performing these duties she became serious and officious, sometimes to the point where other children complained. However, in the cafeteria and playground Carmín was playful and did not lack for companions.

Carmín was very dependent on the teachers' attention for both motivation and assistance. When the teacher was not nearby, she might get up from her seat to socialize. However, she almost always complied with classroom rules and routines and reminded other students when they forgot. This talent for "studenting" behavior masked Carmín's great academic deficiencies. She seemed to have mastered the form but not the substance of student life. When, during the course of a lesson her weaknesses were revealed, Carmín became very anxious and often resorted to tears.

In the classroom Carmín s favorite activity was handwriting. The neatness and clarity of her writing was often praised by the teacher. But Carmín could not read what she copied. In fact, Carmín's reading competence did not reach an accomplished pre-primer level. She could barely decode words of more than one syllable. She also appeared to have problems in comprehension. After listening to a brief passage from a story in Spanish. Carmín was unable to summarize it with any degree of accuracy in either language. She also seemed unable to make inferences. However, she showed how very quickly she could learn the routine followed by the interviewer by predicting her next question: ¿Ahora en inglés?" ("Now in English?")

Discussion and analysis

After considering all the different views of these children one may be tempted to say "Will the real Gilberto or Carmin please stand up?" It is of course much easier to attempt an answer from the priviledged position of outside observers. We were privy to all the data and had the luxury of time to analyze it. What follows is an attempt at making sense of these different views and deriving from them an integrated view of each child. We cannot claim that our integrated view is the real one. Reality is going to vary according to each individual's perception. But we think our interpretation, derived from careful analysis of what we learned, makes sense.

All those interviewed, including his mother, agree that Gilberto has not achieved well in school. Most have also commented on Gilberto s social competence. But school specialists, through their statements in the cumulative records, indicate that Gilberto's lack of achievement is due to a ¡anguage problem as well as to serious perceptual problems which impair his ability to communicate, to see, and to hear. According to these specialists he is learning disabled." These comments ignore the social and communicative skills so highly praised by Gilberto s mother and teachers, and confirmed through our own observations.

Gilberto's teachers, while acknowledging his charm, believe that his home life is a detriment to his progress. This judgment was made on the basis of one home visit by a school specialist. In addition, most of his

teachers, in spite of their own observations, accept and cite the specialists diagnosis of dyspraxia as a possible cause for Gilberto s problems. Only his classroom teacher expressed some doubt:" I dont' know about this dyspraxia thing."

In spite of her problems with Gilberto, his mother is clearly admiring of his social competence and cleverness. It is hard for her to understand why he would have any problems in school. She acknowledges that he was slow in learning to read, but adds that he is a much more competent reader now. Ms.G. acquiesced to the specialist's diagnosis of Gilberto's memory problem (dyspraxia), but she is not convinced. Gilberto's behavior at home does not suggest to her any problems with memory and she describes it only as a matter of selective attention. She goes along because she believes the school staff is trying to help her son.

Gilberto describes his school experience as though it were a commuting trip. But he has mastered the process and also seems to enjoy it. His opinion of himself as a student, however, is not as self-confident as his handling of his schedule. Gilberto's marks are not the lowest, yet he considers himself to be the worst student in the class. Although some of Gilberto's comments indicate that he is beginning to question the reasons for his special classes and the repetitiveness of his programs, he has apparently internalized adult injunctions that his problems are due to his lack of application.

We saw Gilberto as an articulate student, a competent commuter, and a socially adept young man. His deficiencies in reading were obvious but his contributions to class discussions, his command of both languages, and his practical knowledge, did not indicate to us any cognitive or perceptual deficiencies. Gilberto often appeared to be tired during the school day. This tendency was almost always displayed when he was a part of a large group, particularly when he was doing independent work.

How then can we bring together these different perceptions? Perhaps we can find a clue in the school records. The reader may recall that between kindergarten and first grade, Gilberto changed school four times. Although

early comments about Gilberto indicated no learning difficulties, by the end of the first grade he was flagged as one who needed to be "observed." And he was referred to the Child Study Team in the second grade.

The possible impact of these repeated school changes on Gilberto was not mentioned by any of the teachers or specialists we interviewed at the school. While we have no details on Gilberto's school experiences during those two years, based on recent research it is reasonable to assume that each of these changes required social and academic adjustments on Gilberto s part.[6] It is likely then that such changes would make it difficult for Gilberto to sustain steady academic progress. In addition, we do not know the language of instruction in these different schools. It is possible that Gilberto might have faced additional obstacles if each school change was accompanied by comparable changes in the language of instruction.

The diagnosis of Gilberto as perceptually impaired, having language difficulties, and "dyspraxic" must be questioned under the circumstances. Gilberto s behavior did not indicate any problem with language. On the contrary, his ability to communicate in both languages was one of his strengths. There was no time, during the three formal interviews, or during many informal exchanges with Gilberto, that we could discern any difficulty he might have in expressing his thoughts. We agree with his mother that his conversation is, if anything, adult-like and witty, rather than impaired. Although we did not test him, there was nothing in his behavior, except for the occasional reversal of letters, that suggested visual impairment. And our observations, as well as his mother s comments, suggest that if he has any problems with his memory, these are more likely due to selective attention than to a cognitive deficiency.

Gilberto's tiredness was also not mentioned in his records or by his teachers. We puzzled about this behavior and considered three alternative explanations: lack of enough sleep, possible nutritional deficiencies, or perhaps, simply boredom. Each of these alternatives can be partially supported. Gilberto's mother had commented that they had strict rules at home regarding bedtime. But both she and Gilberto also commented on his early rising. He said he got up very early to come to school and would then

get tired by midday. His mother also commented on his eagerness to go to school and his early rising, even on holidays. It is possible that in the crowded home conditions in which he lives, Gilberto is not getting enough sleep, even when he is required to be in bed by a certain time. Or perhaps those same conditions motivate him to get up and out of the house very early.

As noted before, Gilberto s family appeared to be very poor. Although the home was neat and orderly, it is likely that family resources are strained. It is therefore possible that Gilberto s diet may not be sufficient for a growing, active boy. Interestingly, this possibility was not raised by any of the specialists either.

Finally, our observations of Gilberto in different classes, and our interviews with him, suggest that just plain boredom may be implicated in his tiredness. Gilberto was never inattentive in small group lessons. He was also active in the schoolyard and during lunchtime His main problem was maintaining his attention in a large group, and particularly, working independently. Working "independently" in this third grade classroom meant filling out worksheets. It was during these activities that Gilberto's tiredness was most clearly a problem.

From our perspective then, Gilberto is a bright boy who is suffering the consequences of repeated changes early in his school career. His academic progress while slow, appears to be reasonable given the likely impact of these changes. Specialists diagnoses of Gilberto's problems appear to have overlooked the contribution of these changes to his progress. In addition, school staff comments on Gilberto's home appeared to focus on the 'problem of size and supposed neglect of the boy. Our inquiries discovered poverty but not neglect, crowdedness. but not disorder. We believe that the physical consequences of Gilbertos home environment are of more importance. Is his diet adequate? Is he getting enough rest? The search for an explanation for Gilbertos school problems might be better served by attention to these rather pedestrian needs, rather than by the scientific sounding but dubious labels of perceptual and cognitive deficiencies.

In looking at the data in Carmín's case study we find again conflicting views of the same child. The school records suggest that Carmin's progress in school was noticeably slow from the first grade on and that "Language", both English and Spanish, was considered by her teachers as a contributing factor to her low achievement." According to the school psychologist, Carmín is learning disabled. She has difficulties in information processing" and weaknesses in all perceptual-motor skills.

Carmin's teacher asserts that Carmin cannot distinguish between Spanish and English. She gives Carmín credit for the effort she expends on her schoolwork and wonders if perhaps it is immaturity that keeps her from progressing. She also wonders if all the changes in schools and language of instruction have contributed to her problems. Other school specialists see Carmín as typical of a learning disabled child. They also consider the problems created by Carmin's "role-confusion" as a member of a family which is not nuclear.

Meantime, Carmin's mother cannot understand what has happened to her bright, competent child. She has taken strong stands in her behalf when necessary but in the end sees the problem as one created by Carmin's lack of application to her schoolwork. How else can she explain the huge discrepancy between the child she knows and the one they tell her about in school?

Carmm seems to agree with her mother. She is not a good student because she does not work hard enough. She desperately tries to mask her problems and falls apart when she is finally discovered. She works hard, almost too hard, to overcome her problems. Ironically, given the psychologist's diagnosis, her only rewards so far are in handwriting which she seems to approach as an exercise in esthetics.

We saw a tense little girl who seemed more adept at playing the student s role than at learning the student's tasks. We saw no indication of a language confusion in Carmín. She knew which language she was speaking when, and could move from one to the other without difficulty. She did confuse the vowel sounds in the two languages, e.g., the sounds of a & e, and of e e & i. But this confusion is not uncommon in transfers from Spanish to

English or viceversa. Carmín also seemed to have achieved a less mature development in English conversation. Her Spanish, on the other hand, reflected her early upbringing among adults. There was a formal, almost prim quality about it.

We saw a Carmin who was highly dependent on her teacher and who also loved responsibility. She was also popular in the playground and quick to learn the appropriate rules and procedures.

Again, we find large discrepancies among the adults who know, or presume to know, Carmin. Most people seem to agree that Carmin works hard and is bright enough, and also that her progress in school is much too slow. The disagreement arises in regards to the reasons for her slow progress. And once again, the school records are informative. We know that Carmin began her school career in a kindergarten in Arkansas and that by the third grade she had been a student in seven different classrooms in three different schools. Once promoted to the third grade, Carmín was referred to the Child Study Team and declared learning disabled as a result of severe perceptual deficiencies.

We found that Carmin's problems appeared to be worsened by several factors. One, since her classroom included students who ranged from Spanish monolinguals to English monolinguals and every stage in between, Ms. S. instructed her class bilingually. This meant continuous phrase by phrase translation on the part of the teacher. While this might work for most children, it probably contributed to Carmin s difficulties since there was little opportunity for elaboration in either language.

The instructional activities in the class for learning disabled students further fragmented Carmin s instruction. Adherence to a district mandated curriculum by objectives, resulted in lessons where letters, vowels and words were taught in isolation of context. Carmín still did not seem to understand the purpose of reading. She was completely befuddled by print, including her own handwriting. Unlike other children who will mask their incompetence by making up stories, Carmin strung syllables together without concern for their meaning.

Lastly, Carmín was not helped by the perceptions school personnel held about her home situation. In spite of her mother's intervention, and assertiveness, she was left out of the meeting held by the Child Study Team. Carmín s teacher later asked for her permission to provide Carmín with additional reading instruction. Ms. Y., eager to see her daughter succeed, promptly agreed.

We conclude that Carmín is a bright little girl who has suffered extremely from the mistakes of educators. At present. Carmín would benefit from academic instruction in only one language, probably Spanish. She also seems to need a holistic approach in reading. An approach that would draw on her articulateness and social competence and emphasize comprehension, rather than simple decoding, of the written word.

Policy Implications.

What can we learn about policy from such close scrutiny of a few children s school lives? I would like to select just three areas of particular importance in the two cases described: The three policy issues most directly relevant to these two cases were language, parent involvement, and special education.

Language policy. The most pervasive policy issue affecting these children s school life is language. The lack of a clear and unambiguous language policy to guide the schools, and the lack of appropriate assessment, have placed these children, and others like them at a disadvantage from the time they enter school.[7] Both Gilberto and Carmín began their school careers in English classrooms. We do not know who made the decision, or on what basis. Neither of those processes has been standardized. In Carmin's case it is likely that Arkansas had no English/Spanish bilingual education program. In the case of Gilberto, initial instruction in English is more difficult to justify since he had only recently arrived from Mexico and he entered a district offering bilingual education programs.

Their problems were exacerbated by their frequent moves. However, in Carmin's case those moves were likely made by her mother in response to her desire to improve Carmin's school performance. Giiberto's moves were

more clearly due to family instability. Nonetheless, research tell us that each move between schools and/or classrooms requires any young child to make many adjustments, to a new social system, school, teacher, and curriculum.[8] In the case of these children an additional adjustment was necessary for language.

Carmín s situation is particularly poignant. It is likely that her mother's decision to send Carmín to Arkansas was based on her desire that her daughter learn English well so she would succeed in school. Unfortunately, the classroom English Carmín learned during those few months probably contributed to her being classified as English dominant later. Ironically, her mother's request for a change to the bilingual classroom, was denied by school officials on the basis that Carmín might get confused. The consequences of those early choices still haunt Carmin.

The example of these students provide powerful evidence for the need to clarify language policies in the schools. We need to provide a less ambiguous stand, clearer guidance for teachers, and more reliable processes to facilitate the assessment of language competence.

But language assumes an even more ominous significance when it interacts with special education policies.

Special education. The tendency to classify speakers of other languages (SOLS) as learning disabled (LD) is a common theme in the literature.[9] The overrepresentation of Hispanics within this category of special education has also been well documented. In Texas, for example, the overrepresentation of Hispanics in this classification amounts to 300%[10]. Several researchers have argued that one of the reasons for the misidentification of SOLS as LD is the lack of understanding, on the part of educators, of the process of language learning.[11] This confusion was evident in the comments made about these two students. For example code-switching, an accepted strategy among competent adult bilinguals, is characterized as language confusion in the case of these children.[12] Thus normal processes become characterized as permanent deficiencies of the child, such as dyspraxia, in Gilberto's case.

Parent involvement. The most extreme differences in perception emerged between the perceptions of the parents and the school specialists. The potential for these differences is recognized in the legal requirement that parents participate in any decisions leading to assigning their children

to any special education program. However, neither mother was present at what is commonly called the "staffing" conference for these two children. Both of them were notified after the fact. In Carmin's case the mother was told, not that her daughter was identified as 'learning disabled," but that she was going to be receiving additional help in reading.

The presence of the parent can be overestimated, however, it is not likely that even a comparatively well-schooled parent as was Carmin's mother (high school graduate, fully bilingual, bank cashier) would be able to sustain any serious objections to the arguments of school specialists.[13] Both of these mothers (and all the Mexican-American mothers we interviewed) tended to be trusting of the school staff, Carmin's mother was driven to drastic action only after repeated attempts at influencing her daughter s school experience. And Gilberto's mother, while expressing her doubts to us, was willing to go along and trust the "experts."

In the last few years we have heard a lot from various researchers about the importance of parent involvement.[14] But even these enlightened scholars continue to see the need from the point of view of the school. The school of course must communicate with the parents and involve the parents in any decisions, but the parent also has a lot to contribute.[15] It was interesting, in these cases, how little information the parents had contributed to the school. And how many false assumptions were made by school people about these children, assumptions that could have been easily checked with the parents; for example, both of these children were falsely assumed to be foster children.

Institutional Press

I choose this, tern: to group together certain tendencies that seem to underlie the policies described above and define it as the aggregation of tacit expectations held by the institution, in this case the educational establishment. These expectations are not discussed except indirectly, they are amorphous but powerful.

In the case of language policy the institutional press is for English. According to Kjolseth. the traditional policy of "Speak only English, has been amended to: "We will speak only English just as soon as possible and even sooner...if we begin with...(the) vernacular. "[16] The importance for children to learn English as quickly as possible overshadows consideration of alternative optimal instructional strategies. And children who do not learn English as

quickly as expected, even when they may be competent speakers of Spanish, are considered to be deficient. This was the case even for these Chicano teachers who were themselves competent bilinguals. As successful products of a system which exercises that pressure, these teachers assumed a compatible stance. They did this at the same time that they assumed an advocacy role on behalf of their Chicano students and of bilingual education.

In the case of special education, specifically learning disabilities, the institutional press is for describing a child s learning problem as neurological. Contrary evidence notwithstanding, problems in learning were located within the child, rather that as outcomes of complex interactions between child, adults, and materials within a historical context. Smith also found this tendency in her study of learning disability decisions. She argues that this phenomenon is an outcome of the increased professionalization of schools. The quasi-scientific language of test scores is one way to achieve a higher status within the system.[17] More mundane but logical causes, such as frequent moves, and changes in the language of instruction, are set aside in the search for more esoteric labels.

Finally, in the case of parent involvement, the press seems to be towards "normal" families. That is, nuclear families with both parents present and perhaps the traditionally acceptable 2,3 children. By these measures the children described here did not come from 'normal' families. Gilberto s family was too large. Carmín s family too complicated with cousins and aunts. In both cases the child's natural father was absent and another man was present in the home, another cause for concern. The lack of a "normal" family was often assumed to contribute to the child's problems, even when there was no indication of unhappiness on the child's part.

In addition, there is the "school knows best assumption. Parents are to be involved in the **support** of school policies, not as intelligent informants of their child's home life. This is an instrumental view of parents which allows the traffic to be all one way, from the school to the parent, but not vice-versa.

Conclusion.

This study was informative because it assumed a perspective that moved outward from the child. Rather than looking at the reasons why these children were considered to be failures, we tried to get a multidimensional view of each child. These multiple perspectives allowed us to see the

disjointedness between the child at home and the child at school; the child in the classroom and the child described in the records. We were able to see how social constructions of failure resulted in the labeling of these children and how at this point in their school careers they are beginning to internalize the perceptions of those charged with their care.

One of the most disturbing facts about this study is that these case studies were conducted in a school with caring and hard-working staff. The school principal as well as all the teachers involved in the study are Mexican-American. They are themselves the product of a bicultural experience and are all bilingual. They are all also strong advocates of the educational needs of Chicano children. These teachers, and their principal, all work extremely hard at creating a positive school environment for their students. The apparent misguidedness of some of their actions appears to be the result of district and state imposed requirements, as well as their own unconscious acceptance of hegemonic practices. As Erickson[18] has pointed out. the ubiquitousness of the dominant culture, and of the institutional arrangements that are consonant with it, leads dominant and subordinate alike to act routinely in concert with the cultural assumptions and interests of the dominant culture. In their promotion of the benefits of a nuclear family, or of English as opposed to Spanish, or in their acceptance of a quasi-scientific basis for learning difficulties, these teachers were all acting within a set of unexamined assumptions subliminally promoted by the dominant culture.

These case studies demonstrate McDermott's point that failure is a fabrication. Making believe that failure is something that kids do, rather than something that is done to them, leads us to look for explanations and therefore contribute to the maintenance of school failure[19]. To avoid this syndrome we need to look at children as competent learners. We need to sensitize ourselves as educators to the lenses we bring to the task of observing and/or teaching children. And we need to accept our own responsibility for contributing to an environment where only some may succeed while others must fail.

Findings from this study are reminiscent of Miller's arguments against "poisonous pedagogy." Her target is Freud's drive theory, specifically the Oedipal complex. She argues that acceptance of that theory, and societal

taboos, contribute to transfer the guilt of sexual abuse to children as the "seducers." She finds an analogy between this psychotherapeutic view and that of educators who are "convinced that their pedagogical methods are necessary for the child's present or future well-being. Miller is an advocate for the child in the patient. The child within the patient whose anger must be understood as the proper reaction to past adult cruelty.[20] We also advocate for the child. In our case it is the child in the classroom, whose behavior—apathy, anger, distraction--may well be an appropriate reaction to pedagogical mismanagement.

Thus, our initial presentation of these studies as Rashomon-like, may be faulted. Although we found, as in Rashomon, different perceptions expressed by those in different relationships to the children, those varied perceptions cannot be excused as merely equally valid points of view. The weight of the school's official perception is likely to determine not only each child's present academic opportunities, but also future ones and eventually his or her life chances. We cannot practice "poisonous pedagogy, we cannot betray the children in our classrooms.

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