

Accommodating Cultural Differences and Commonalities in Educational Practice

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Taking account of diversity in schools is a major challenge in a multicultural society. On one level the issue is simple: Everyone's heritage is due respect, and differences should be regarded as strengths on which to build rather than deficits to be stigmatized or overcome. But on another level there is an often unrecognized paradox: too exclusive a focus on group differences can "all too easily become the basis for creating stereotypes..." that blind educators to qualities that students have in common (Fillmore, 1982, p. 24).

How can educators be responsive to cultural differences and avoid stereotypes that mask commonalities shared by different cultural groups? One way is to distinguish between different functions of culture. In this essay we distinguish between the group-defining function and other adaptive functions to show why educators need to accommodate cultural commonalities as well as differences.

Some Functions of Culture

Culture evolves over time in response to adaptive challenges. One result of this evolutionary process is beliefs and practices that help us adapt to persistent as well as changing circumstances. These beliefs and practices are organized as models or schema about how things work, what

is ideal, and which practices are proper and help individuals or groups survive and prosper (LeVine, 1977). Cultural models are so familiar and mundane that their functions and effects are often unseen, invisible, unnoticed. The evidence of their workings are often most apparent in everyday routines in communities, homes, workplaces, play yards, and schools. What activities are carried out, why they are valued, who should participate, and the rules of interaction are coded into our cultural models.

Cultural features—models of belief and practice and their associated activities—are neither static nor rigid. As circumstances and environments change, our understanding of how things work and how to respond are modified and changed to meet new challenges. We change just enough to make things work—we are satisfiers rather than maximizers, happy with just good enough. The more our environments change, the more we try to keep things the same. The more we try to keep them same, the more we have to change (Edgerton, 1992). Beliefs and practices are borrowed from others with whom we come in contact or share an ecological niche; alternative ways of organizing daily activities are tried, adapted, and adopted.

In the modern world this process is accelerated by technologies that amplify direct contact, distanced communication, and social and commercial exchange. Changes are made slowly, gradually, and are built on existing beliefs and practices.

For example, natives of Spain, Turkey, and Morocco gradually adopted beliefs and practices encountered in Northern Europe after migrating to obtain employment (Roosens, 1994). Culture is not a straitjacket or a cake of custom, it is a storehouse of adaptive solutions to the challenges of existence (Weisner, Gallimore, & Jordan, 1988).

Some cultural features—beliefs, practices, and everyday activities—mark boundaries among groups—clans, tribes, ethnic, and reference groups. Which features mark boundaries are a product of many different historical circumstances. Sometimes two groups occupied the same ecological niche, or monopolized different territories or resources. In some cases ethnic boundaries arose from the interdependence of two groups, with each providing services or goods to the other, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes coerced by the more powerful group. A critical function of boundary markers is to distinguish between "us" and "others."

For example, some scholars have concluded that the function of kosher dietary laws was to differentiate the Jews from their "gentile" neighbors (Harris, 1985, p. 337). Ethnic boundaries help an individual identify who is a fellow member of the "in" group, who is and is not a person with shared perceptions and understandings. (Barth, 1969, p. 15). The borders between ethnic groups define both self and group identity, feelings of belonging, and conti-

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nunity through time; shared meanings and traditions; self-ascribed genealogical and social filiation, including related forms of family and group bonds (Roosens, 1994).

In contemporary human history, an important function of boundaries is the political and economic advantage that ethnic unity can achieve. In the United States, for example, ethnically defined groups succeeded in building coalitions to pass legislation requiring equity in school funding, hiring, mortgage granting, etc. **The unified political action which ethnic groups can muster means, paradoxically, using ethnic categories to rid society of inequities arising from ethnic distinctions** (Wright, 1994). Ron Edmonds, advocate of effective schools for minority students, wrote that poor and ethnic groups "are far more likely to be served by politics than by any equity interests to be found in the educational research establishment" (Edmonds, 1978, p. 34). To unify a group for effective political action, ethnic identity must remain relatively impervious to changing circumstances. Otherwise, membership would wax and wane, and the advantages of collective action would be threatened.

One reason ethnic boundaries persist is that they are marked by only a limited set of cultural features the particularities of which are often a product of historical and ecological circumstances (Barth, 1969). What features mark boundaries do not depend on their persistence, or their resistance to change in many domains of belief and practice. This allows for very substantial differences among individuals within an ethnic group—differences that do not affect those features that define the boundary between "us" and "others."

This flexibility regarding most beliefs and practices permits a group to remain unified around core features while allowing great variation within the group on thoughts, feelings, and behavior (LeVine, 1984, p. 68). Individuals within a group can maintain their group identity and still enjoy the adaptive advantages of many beliefs and practices, even those borrowed from the "others." The borrowing and loaning of cultural features are often a two-way process between groups.

This brings us to a key idea. Two well-differentiated ethnic groups living in the same ecological niche are likely to share many cultural beliefs and practices in common (Barth, 1969; Edgerton, 1971; LeVine, 1977). For example, many individuals emigrated from Spain, Sicily, Morocco, and Turkey to work in the factories and mines of Northern Europe (Roosens, 1994). Many

in these groups sharply differentiate themselves, and are treated as different by co-resident Northern Europeans, as distinct ethnic groups. Yet the boundaries between groups, that is, what differentiates them, are limited cultural features such as tastes in clothing and food, home furnishing styles, male and female role norms, and

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religious beliefs (Roosens, 1994). These immigrants come to share, however, many other cultural features with their new Northern European neighbors.

Even those who intend to return to their native land adopt cultural beliefs and practices which give them an adaptive advantage in their new, even if possibly temporary, Northern European homes: They use modern medicines and technologies, take new kinds of jobs, learn new skills, aspire to higher education for their children, seek and attain material abundance, and subscribe to public social security systems, some of which entail adoption of beliefs and practices not present in their native lands.

Adapting Instruction to Culture

The behavior of immigrants to Northern Europe reflects a fundamental principle: Individuals living in the same ecologies will adopt cultural models of adaptation if they offer advantage. What has this principle to do with adapting instruction to cultural variability within groups? It suggests that educators may expect to find many **commonalties** as well as **differences** among the ethnic groups that attend America's schools.

Our two-pronged argument is this:

(1) Schools must deal with students from many different groups and should

therefore be aware of potential discontinuities between home and school—e.g., attitudes toward discipline, beliefs about how children learn, the nature and quality of learning experiences in the preschool years and beyond—and design programs that will foster common understandings and complementary efforts.

(2) But at the same time, schools should not assume that ethnic diversity always implies broad-based cultural differences among groups, or conversely homogeneity within groups. Different groups living in the same ecological niche can be expected to have **many** cultural features—beliefs and practices—in common. Schools therefore should also build on commonalties between schools and families—e.g., beliefs about the value of formal schooling, school achievement, good behavior, and parent support and involvement. Building on commonalties is no less important than being sensitive to differences in forging productive relationships with families.

Discontinuities and Complementarities

Families who emigrate from Mexico to the United States are ethnically different and distinct from other families in this country. Racially, historically, psychologically, they identify with other whose families hail from central and northern Mexico who also speak Spanish and share Indian and Spanish ancestors. These are the people Carey McWilliams (1948, 1968) wrote about a half-century ago. Our longitudinal studies in a California community suggest that on some dimension of belief and practice immigrant Mexican parents are different from their fellow residents (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995).

For example, they subscribe to a cultural model of preschool child development that places a higher emphasis on moral development than on school readiness skills, a pattern exhibited by group with origins in small-scale agrarian communities where earning a living depend on face-to-face interactions and the cooperative work of family members (LeVine & White, 1986). For the immigrant Mexican parents, it is vital that a child learn the difference between right and wrong, obedience and respect for elders, and to be a full participant in family life. They place less emphasis in the preschool years on the uses of language and print than families in which literacy is both a means of earning living and an important child develop-

ment goal (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995). This difference matters because the amount of preschool literacy experience is a significant precursor of early reading development in early elementary school. Children with lots of preschool literacy experience have an advantaged in early elementary school (Adams, 1990).

On the other hand, some of the cultural models of child development held by the immigrant Mexican families differ little from other Americans: The Mexican immigrant parents value schooling, are available to the children, and are interested in and capable of providing literacy-enhancing experiences, particularly when children are younger. Activities involving literacy are more frequent than suggested by many stereotypes of low income Spanish-speaking families.

Indeed, we found in our studies that the within group variability was substantial. While some families, by their own report and researchers' observations, do not always provide certain experiences, they are motivated to help their children, and eagerly adopt new models of and opportunities for child development and learning. With few exceptions, parents eagerly respond to materials, activities, and suggestions from their school. In one study, over 40 percent of all observed learning activities involved use of materials from school. Once their children entered school the range and frequency of literacy was greatly increased by parents' taking advantage of new materials and ideas the children brought home. In short, many have already adopted beliefs and practices available in the ecological/cultural niche of urban United States and exhibited adaptive flexibility (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995).

Yet for all their variability and willingness to adopt new beliefs and practices that benefit their children, the families are not abandoning their ethnic identity. Almost without exception we found a strong endorsement of what the families consider traditional Mexican values of *educación*, that include family solidarity, knowing right from wrong, and obedience, and respect for elders. These parents are strongly identified with their heritage.

One father said: "We Mexicans come from an old tradition, a tradition of the *ranchos* where the father and mother are respected. Regarding siblings, the younger ones respect the older ones" (Reese, *et al.*, 1995). One mother complained that in the United States children are given too much freedom which results in gangs, drugs, and other urban woes. She said "One cannot tell [young people] anything because [they say] they are going to call the cops on you....

We Mexicans are not like that. This is one of the customs that I don't want them to learn." She described immigrant Mexican families who have educated their children in the same way that they had been educated in Mexico. The result were hard-working young adults who stayed out of trouble, which she said was not always true when parents gave their children too much freedom and autonomy. For many of the families in our study, their adherence to traditional values is a boundary they believe distinguishes them and their group from other groups in their communities.

Yet, even as ethnic identity remains strong, changes in cultural belief and practice were evident in the more than ten years we have been interviewing and observing in homes of immigrant Latino families:

...*educación* for these immigrant parents has a much stronger component of "formal schooling." The immigrant parents in our sample clearly wish to maintain many of the traditional family values of responsibility and respect taught to them by their own parents, our target children's grandparents. But with its greater emphasis on formal schooling—for both boys and girls—these immigrant parents' cultural model of *educación* is itself undergoing change. It is adapting to the exigencies of life in a society where education—in the English sense of the word—[both matters and is more available]. (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995)

As they adapt to a new society they may be reaching out and adopting cultural models and practices that provide advantages to themselves and their children. But they are not abandoning all they brought with them.

Commonalities and Collaboration

Ethnic differences, therefore, should not obscure cultural compatibilities. In a study of Latino immigrants and their kindergartners, we found that teachers' attempts to involve parents in children's literacy development led both to greater parent satisfaction and to enhanced student achievement (Goldenberg & Arzubiaga, 1994 April; Goldenberg and Gallimore, 1995), suggesting again that parents and teachers shared many values and beliefs about educating children. The more teachers attempted to involve parents in children's academic learning—by sending home activities or through messages or phone calls home—the more satisfied parents were with both the academic content of their child's classroom and with the extent to which they felt involved in their children's learning.

In addition, teacher attempts to in-

volve parents also predicted children's literacy development at the end of kindergarten. The more teachers attempted to involve parents in children's learning, the higher were children's end-of-year literacy scores. There was no relationship between teacher parent-involvement efforts and beginning of year achievement, so we ruled out the explanation that teachers involved were more likely to reach out to parents of higher achieving students. Furthermore, there was a striking relationship between teachers' parent involvement attempts and changes in child achievement in relation to other kindergartners across the year ($r=.58$; $p<.01$).

In other words, the more the teacher attempted to involve a child's parents in his or her academic learning in kindergarten, the more a child gained in relative achievement standing from the beginning of the year to the end. Students whose teachers took the initiative to involve parents in children's learning gained ground in comparison to peers; students whose teachers did not take the initiative to involve parents, slipped back in their relative achievement standing.

These results illustrate an important continuity between Latino parents and children's teachers: An interest in children's academic achievement and a belief in the importance of parents' playing a productive role in promoting it. When teachers take advantage of this continuity by facilitating parent involvement, the results are greater parent satisfaction and improved learning by children. When children move on to first and second grade, we have found the relationships hold between teachers' parent involvement efforts and parents' satisfaction. For these older children, parents are more satisfied when their child receives homework they feel is of high quality and that promotes learning and motivation.

Parents are also more satisfied when they feel informed of their child's progress and when the academic content of the classroom is high. This is clearly in keeping with the values and beliefs we have heard parents express for the past ten years. They want their child's school experience to be academically challenging. Indeed, as we have reported before, on occasion parents will comment that United States schools are less demanding than those in their native countries (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Reese, *et al.*, 1995).

Surface and Reality in Cultural Commonalities and Differences

In the introduction to this essay we developed the idea that only a few cultural

beliefs and practices mark the boundary between groups. Yet in many contexts these limited differences are so compelling at first analysis that they may obscure substantial commonalities. Indeed, the perspective we presented in the first part of this essay would predict this—that all of us are inclined to notice those differences that mark boundaries between groups, because of the social and political functions they serve. But as Fillmore (1982) and Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986) warned, this very predictable human response can, when allowed to operate freely in educational settings, produce a surface response that is insensitive to underlying realities.

In the study on the effects of kindergarten teachers' parent involvement efforts on parent satisfaction and children's achievement (Goldenberg & Arzubiaga, 1994 April), half the teachers were Latinas who spoke Spanish fluently, and the other half were Anglos with varying degrees of skill in Spanish. When we compared the achievement change of children taught by Latinas and Anglos, there was a significant difference. Those taught by the Latina teachers improved from fall to spring, whereas the Anglo teachers' children declined. At first glance this suggests the bridging of discontinuities between child and school cultures (in the form of Latina, fluent-Spanish teachers) improved children's achievement—a result that is inconsistent with previous findings that teacher ethnicity is **unrelated** to Latino children's achievement (Vierra, 1984).

However, further analyses of our data suggested a more complex interpretation was required. Because they were rated much higher at promoting parent-involvement, Latina teachers were benefiting from this powerful effect on children's achievement. When we statistically removed the contribution of parent-involvement, the effect of teacher ethnicity disappeared. The critical variable affecting student progress was teachers' parent-involvement efforts, not teacher ethnicity and language *per se*. No doubt teacher ethnicity and language contributed to communication and rapport between teachers and parents, but it was not the fact of these shared qualities. It was how teachers behaved that mattered, not their ethnic status.

The importance of teacher action over teacher status was also the argument of one the Latina teachers, Ms. Delgado—an argument she presented to us **prior** to the study. While she recognized that many children have less access to academic learning opportunities than others, Ms. Delgado also maintained a strong belief (supported

by educational research) that children of immigrant Latinos, like other children, can be taught what they need to know in order to be successful in school:

[Some] teachers think these kids are deprived so [they think] all we need to let them do is play all day here. That really makes me mad because I came from [an immigrant Latino] background like this.... These kids can learn but they have to be taught. If more teachers realized this and did what they were supposed to do, more of these kids would go on to college (Goldenberg, 1994, p. 185).

Conclusion

Our examples and analyses raise an intriguing possibility: Is accommodating to culturally different children a matter of making changes in teaching, staffing, or curriculum that are sensitive to differ-

ences? Or can we also accommodate to culturally different children by recognizing similarities and consistencies, as well as differences and discontinuities, across groups? Cultural accommodation cuts both ways—making changes if needed but recognizing similarities when they exist and not allowing ourselves to see only the cultural features that distinguish a group from others. Ignoring one kind of accommodation over the other is not in the best interest of children or families.

As we confront the challenges posed by this most recent wave of immigrants to the United States, educators must be aware of discontinuities that must be skillfully and sensitively handled. At the same time, they must be equally sensitive to what the families, children, teachers, and administrators share.

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