THE COLOR OF SUCCESS

RACE AND HIGH-ACHIEVING URBAN YOUTH

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CHAPTER 1

The Racial Dichotomy and Challenges Confronting Students in American Schools

Toward a Conceptual Framework of Urban School Success

> We . . . argue . . . that the discussion of schooling be expanded to recognize the growing heterogeneity within the "Black" and "White" communities and the wide range of additional communities, many of them Latino or Asian whose children are in American schools today. (Seller & Weis, 1997, p. ix)

There is a long history in the United States of investigating the causes of poor academic performance. Usually, a group that performs below the norm is examined to determine the cause of the poor performance. For example, studies have focused on the reasons that girls generally score lower than do boys on standardized mathematics tests (Holmes, 1991; Kaplan & Aronson, 1994; Mulryan, 1995; Newman & Goldin, 1990; Pollina, 1995). Gender differences are one example of a reason that a particular group may score differently than another.

Another area that has drawn much attention is social class. Studies have found that social class has a profound impact on academic achievement (Anyon, 2005; Chmelynski, 1998; Kozol, 1991; Rothstein, 2004; Slavin, 1997), partly because students from higher socioeconomic groups attend better-funded schools. Still another area receiving attention has been classroom structure. The way classrooms are organized and classes conducted

has been found to have a significant impact on student achievement (Castaneda, 1997; Johnson, Johnson, Hodne, & Stevahn, 1997; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1994). Social class, socioeconomic status and its relationship to school attended, and classroom structure help explain much of the variation in educational achievement. However, to date, much of the explanation has been circumscribed by a rigid Black and White dichotomy.

This chapter focuses on setting forth a conceptual framework for what follows. The theoretical goal is the linking of cultural-ecological explanations of minority schooling with institutional explanations of success beyond a Black and White perspective. This chapter considers issues associated with educational inequality in schools, as well as cultural-ecological explanations for such disparities. Relevant institutional issues and the role of segregation also are addressed. Importantly, the voices of high-achieving minority students are considered in a comparative perspective.

ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

A voluminous literature exists concerning race and ethnic educational inequality. Drawing primarily on a Marxist analysis of the political economy of educational institutions, this literature provides a critical interpretation of how some racial and ethnic groups benefit from schooling while others do not (Anyon, 1997, 2005; Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy, 1974; Darder & Torres, 2004; Foley, 1990; Grant, 1988; Heath, 1983; Kozol, 1991; Macleod, 1995; Oakes, 1985; Romo & Falbo, 1996; Willis, 1981). Schools are understood in terms of capitalism's need to methodically produce reserve armies of skilled labor, legitimate the notion of meritocracy, and reinforce unequal class relations in the larger social organization of life. This literature describes the theoretical tradition of social and economic reproduction and emphasizes how the American educational system is subordinate to and reflective of the needs of capitalism.

Reproduction theory concludes that schooling reproduces hierarchical class relations in American society and culture. Some scholars, such as Bowles and Gintis (1976), view the social and economic reproduction in schooling through a purely structural lens. Others, like Paul Willis (1977), see it in terms of culture. Structuralists place analytical significance on economic processes that are devoid of human agency, while culturalists concentrate on an individual's own actions and inactions. Despite conceptual differences between the two camps, the majority of research concludes that schools train the wealthy to take up places at the top of the economy, and condition the poor to accept their subordinate class position. These

works contribute to a greater understanding and appreciation of the relationship between structural and cultural forces in the maintenance of inequality.

Social and economic reproduction paradigms downplay the importance of race in their theoretical schema (Conchas, 2001; Noguera, 2003). They construe racial and ethnic inequality in schooling as byproducts of class relations in society. The various studies place race and ethnicity as meaningful indicators, but not necessarily as the central responsible dynamic. Racial and ethnic structures of inequality are explained in terms of historical and economic processes that involve class struggles between various groups. Race and ethnicity are not autonomous categories of analysis in the social class reproduction theory.

Additionally, studies on racial and ethnic inequality in schools, as Seller and Weis (1997) remind us, employ a narrow Black and White model. This dichotomy distorts the experiences of other racial minority groups in schooling; often, these experiences are ignored altogether. While these studies contribute enormously to our understanding of race, class, and gender in schools, in one way or another they limit their analysis for they are not critical of the shortcomings of the Black and White paradigm.

Within a White and Black dichotomy, the intricacy of between- and within-group variations is lost (Conchas, 2001; Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Conchas & Pérez, 2003). Studies that focus on a Black and White framework generally present school failure as a common phenomenon among low-income Black youth. Racial minority school performance becomes synonymous with a preconceived and often misunderstood characterization of Black youth underachievement. The experience of Black and other racial minority students who are successful in school is overwhelmed by the abundance of studies that concentrate on failure (Lightfoot, 1983). The nuance, fluidity, and range of schooling experiences among diverse groups of students are overlooked.

Research needs to augment the study of schooling through a comparative racial and ethnic approach in order to capture the reality and complexity of the American educational system. A comparative racial and ethnic analysis expands our understanding of urban public schooling for minority youth by exploring intergroup as well as intragroup variations in students' schooling experiences. A holistic understanding of school achievement entails elaborating on the patterns of failure and success among diverse groups of students.

School success is specifically in dire need of further exploration (Conchas, 2001; Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Lightfoot, 1983). The aim is to learn why and how some racial minority students overcome the odds and perform well in school, as a means to inform educational research, policy,

and practice. This chapter conceptually takes us toward understanding the sociocultural factors in school that shape the experiences and perspectives of minority youth in a comparative racial and ethnic perspective beyond a Black and White dichotomy.

CULTURAL-ECOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF MINORITY SCHOOL FAILURE

For almost 3 decades, John Ogbu (1978, 1987, 2003) and his associates (Fordham & Obgu, 1986; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Matute-Bianchi, 1986) have attempted to understand the academic failure of racial minority youth. The cultural-ecologists, as they are called, argue that differences in academic achievement result from minority groups' initial incorporation into U.S. society and minority groups' perceptions of the limited opportunity structure. They distinguish between voluntary and involuntary minorities and suggest that each grouping interprets the American social order differently (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

Voluntary minorities (such as Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, Cuban Americans, Filipino Americans, and West Indians) are immigrant groups who historically have moved to the United States of their own free will, usually for economic, social, or political reasons. Although voluntary minorities may face subordination and exploitation, they perceive and react to schooling positively because they regard their current situation in the United States more favorably than their situation in their country of origin. This perception contributes to high levels of immigrant optimism that often result in higher levels of school achievement.

Involuntary minorities (African Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans), on the other hand, are groups who historically have been more or less involuntarily and permanently incorporated into American society through slavery, conquest, or colonization. Ogbu refers to these groups as "caste-like" because their incorporation often resulted in social and economic subordination. For instance, African Americans were enslaved through force, and Chicanos were incorporated through conquest.

Involuntary minorities, as the paradigm suggests, are unlikely to work hard in school because they do not wish to assimilate, and because they recognize that, relative to Whites, they have limited opportunities to benefit from education. These unique historical and social experiences relate to high levels of pessimism toward the opportunity structure and toward schooling in particular. Ogbu (1987) concludes that "these minorities know that they cannot easily escape from their birth-ascribed membership in a subordinate and disparaged group by 'passing' or by returning to 'a homeland'" (p. 324). In general, involuntary minorities are believed to develop oppositional subcultures and resistant identities against the assimilation process prevalent in schooling.

It is important to note that cultural-ecologists posit that involuntary minorities who succeed in school adopt a "White" persona (Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1987). Successful involuntary minorities must act "White" in order to succeed. Here, school success equals acting White; culture determines academic performance. This line of reasoning makes a strong case, albeit incorrect, for the relationship between assimilation and positive school achievement (Carter, 2005).

On a formal level, assimilation is a "process of interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them into a common life" (Gordon, 1964, p. 65). There is a great deal to be said for such a process in that, if it works, the result is a united population. What is neither good nor justifiable about such a process, however, is that it is a one-way street—one group is expected to do all of the adapting. A just assimilation, by contrast, would be one in which the cultures of the different groups were shared, and in which the unifying of peoples was the result of adaptation on both sides. Assimilation in American society has never accorded a great deal of significance to the culture and ethos of the people being assimilated. It has always been a situation wherein immigrant cultures were expected to adopt the prevailing American culture and ethos during assimilation.

In spite of all of the complexity implied in the assimilation process, immigrants in the United States typically are considered to be assimilated at the point where they have mastered the language sufficiently, have learned American behavioral customs sufficiently, and have sublimated their own behavioral customs sufficiently to permit them to function in American society with a minimum of difficulty. It is at this level of assimilation that American public schools have served to facilitate or impede the assimilation of immigrant groups in the United States.

While American public schools have functioned to facilitate the assimilation of immigrant groups at the basic level of the meaning of the term, they also have served as institutional devices to preclude meaningful assimilation on a broader scale (Valenzuela, 1999). The neighborhood school concept, which is dear to most Americans, ensures that minority groups, for the most part, will have limited social intercourse with the majority population in the United States. Thus, while American public schools provide the language training and indoctrination on social behaviors acceptable in the United States, they often fail to provide immigrant students with opportunities for full social intercourse in American life. The result of this

action often is to ensure that minority group students either are not sufficiently prepared, or will not be socially acceptable, for complete assimilation into American society. In this manner, the American public schools, as an instrument of society, discriminate against minority group members, by ensuring that they are not likely to be assimilated into the broader majority society in the United States.

There is really nothing inconsistent about the statement that public schools in the United States serve to both assimilate and discriminate against minority group children. The seeming contradiction is even logical at one level. The majority population in the United States wants immigrants to learn to speak the English language as it is spoken in this country and to behave in socially acceptable ways. What they generally do not want is for minority groups to become a part of the mainstream social life of the American majority. This complex and nuanced approach to the assimilation process among voluntary and involuntary minority groups is lost in the cultural-ecological paradigm.

COMPLICATING THE CULTURAL-ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Recent scholarship complicates these cultural explanations of school success by showing that the minority group categories developed by the cultural-ecologists do not allow for the variations between and within racial minority school experiences (Carter, 2005; Conchas, 2001; Gibson, 1997; Mehan et al., 1996; Noguera, 2003). While many minority student populations attain school success, others do not; and while many involuntary minorities are placed academically "at risk" of school failure, some do well (Carter, 2003; Conchas, 2001; Gibson, 1997). For instance, Mehan and colleagues (1996) found "accommodation without resistance" among involuntary Mexican-descent and African American students. Foley (1990, 1991) also suggested that middle-class, Mexican-descent youth responded to schooling like voluntary minorities. Similarly, Lee (1996) found resistant behavior among voluntary immigrant Asian students. In her ethnography of an urban high school, Lee found a diverse Asian American community divided among four self-identified groups. In turn, each group had particular reactions to the "model minority" stereotype, to themselves, and to one another.

The voluntary and involuntary dichotomy becomes even more problematic as we assess generational differences among racial minority groups. Several studies suggest that Latino school performance, for example, may decline across generations (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995, 2001). In their comprehensive study of Latino immigration and school achievement, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) reported that recent Mexican immigrants have a stronger desire to learn English, acculturate, and partake in American society, while second-generation Latinos develop an oppositional identity against "making" it in school (p. 6). They stated that "many second-generation Latino youth reject . . . schools . . . that violently reject them, and they seek refuge with their peers," sometimes through youth gangs (p. 67). The achievement paradox between immigrant and acculturated Latinos is explained as a function of racial stratification in society. The structural and ideological racism confronted by more-acculturated Latinos contributes to their eventual ambivalence toward schooling.

Vigil (1997) assesses the variations in acculturation and schooling achievement of two generations of Chicano students in the greater Los Angeles area. He classifies youth along an acculturation spectrum that includes Mexican-oriented, intermediate, and Anglo-oriented. Within the acculturation spectrum, he identifies four major profiles of Chicano youth in Los Angeles. The first profile includes low-income, first-generation Mexicans with high goals, but limited resources. The second profile comprises the children of the small segment of the petty bourgeoisie that were neither Mexican- nor Anglo-oriented. The third profile represents most of the at-risk Chicano youth who "fashioned a street Cholo style . . . identified with the local gang" (p. xii). Lastly, a large number of Chicano youth are the more Anglo and surfer-identified students known as the "Chic-Anglos." Vigil depicts not a "generic" Chicano youth population, but a diverse and complex one. A stable ethnic and cultural identity signaled positive school outcomes for many of these urban youth.

These studies, however, overlook school effects on academic engagement. The studies specifically neglect *sociocultural* processes at the school level that might help explain how the achievement paradox among minority groups is further perpetuated or circumvented. The intergroup and intragroup differences among racial minority youth in relationship to school processes need further exploration.

SCHOOL PROCESSES AND MINORITY ACHIEVEMENT

Research indicates that the school context has a tremendous impact on the poor school performance among minority students (Conchas, 2001; Conchas & Clark, 2002; Conchas & Goyette, 2001; Cummins, 1997; Gándara, 1999; Kozol, 1991; McQuillan, 1998; Oakes, 1985). Studies usually place the blame on the aesthetically unpleasant and ill-equipped surroundings, inadequate instructional materials, unmotivated teachers, and defiant peer

subcultures, such as youth gangs, that low-income urban students face (Vigil, 1998). Others specifically implicate school factors such as teacher expectations, lack of cultural awareness, and curriculum that does not reflect the lived experiences of minority youth as contributors to low academic performance (Gándara, 1995, 1999; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Mehan et al., 1996; Sizer, 1992; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Despite the all too familiar problems of unequal schools in ghetto neighborhoods and overall poor performance, many minority students are defying the odds (Conchas, 2001; Gándara, 1995, 1999; Gibson, 1997; Mehan et al., 1996). Few studies, as Lightfoot (1983) remarked, highlight the goodness in secondary schools that mediates student success.

Stanton-Salazar (2001) explored the microprocess of information networks as a source of social and cultural capital and eventual school success. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) argued that "supportive ties with institutional agents represent a necessary condition for engagement and advancement in the educational system and, ultimately, for success in the occupational structure" (p. 117). According to Stanton-Salazar (2001), low-income, Mexican-origin youth find supportive ties within schools. The development of successful supportive networks rests on youths' "social consciousness" developed by their assessment of the opportunity structure. Consequently, it is up to minority youth to forge the necessary relationships with key agents in the school.

While this research provides an important advancement in our understanding of how some minority youth become academically successful, we are still uncertain as to why certain minority youth form and seek out institutional agents while others do not. Other studies also expose the role of institutional support networks. In their study of minority school performance, Mehan and colleagues (1996) combined the network process articulated by Stanton-Salazar's (2001) and Vigil's (1998) call for more research on the institutional practices in school (see also Lucas et al., 1990; Sizer, 1992). These researchers examined African American and Latino youth in an "untracked" college-bound program for "at-risk" youth called "Advancement via Individual Determination," better known by the acronym AVID. The study investigated the features of AVID that made schools work for these youth, such as the curriculum, teachers, mentors, networking, and other social factors (see also Hubbard, 1995).

Mehan and colleagues (1996) employed the concept of "social scaffolding" as institutional support systems that AVID creates to increase school success for low-achieving students. The term refers to "the practice of combining heterogeneous grouping with a uniform, academically rigorous curriculum enhanced with strong supports" (p. 78). Concentrating on the organizational arrangement provided through AVID, Mehan and colleagues demonstrate how social scaffolding mediates student agency and positive academic outcomes. It is through social scaffolding that low-achieving youth attain the socialization required for academic success.

More specifically, educators applying the AVID program "explicitly teach aspects of the implicit culture of the classroom and the hidden curriculum of the school" (Mehan et al., 1996, p. 81). AVID provides low-achieving Latino and African American youth with both the "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986) and the "social capital" (Bourdieu, 1986; Goyette & Conchas, 2002; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995) essential for social mobility. Mehan and colleagues (1996) argued that the organizational support must be introduced early in youths' high school experience and then slowly removed as the students internalize "the help their guides provided" (p. 79). Once socialized, the students are capable of performing on their own. Similarly, Conchas (2001) found that social scaffolds within career academies foster Latino student identities and peer cultures responsible for academic success. It is still unclear, however, how these processes function for other minority groups in similar urban school contexts.

The case studies in this book explore whether social scaffolds institutionalized in a large urban high school equally impact high-achieving Black, Latino, and Vietnamese students across distinct structural arrangements. The case studies delve into how these high-achieving racial minority youth interpret and respond to the social scaffolding institutionalized in the various school programs imbued with college-culture ethos.

VOICES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING MINORITY YOUTH

This book contributes conceptually to this important new direction by capturing the institutional and cultural processes that promote school success. At the heart of this comparative racial and ethnic framework are the voices of high-achieving minority youth who speak about the "goodness" that shapes their positive school experiences.

The conceptual framework guiding this book provides a theoretical link between cultural-ecological explanations of minority school engagement and institutional explanations. In the case of a specific urban high school, this book shows how school structures and practices can contribute to optimism among immigrant and native-born minority students in the United States. Various institutional mechanisms create opportunity structures within a school that students navigate and interpret optimistically. These mechanisms also divide the students into different peer groups that have different subcultures and support networks.

Particular attention is paid here to how distinct units within the school may be reinforcing the patterns of student engagement laid out by the cultural-ecological model, while others may be disrupting these patterns and accounting for some of the variation in high-achieving minority student engagement.

CONFRONTING SEGREGATION AND STEREOTYPES

As pointed out earlier, recent studies provide important empirical evidence that racial groups are not monolithic, but complex and diverse (Conchas, 2001; Noguera, 2003; Pollock, 2004). While many have begun to explore how within-group variations affect student success (Conchas, 2001; Gándara, 1995; Mehan et al., 1996; O'Connor, 1997; Suárez-Orozco, 1987; Vigil, 1997), only a few educational studies have applied a comparative racial and ethnic analysis (Davidson, 1996; Goyette & Conchas, 2002; Mehan et al., 1996; Ogbu & Gibson, 1991; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995, 2001). A comparative approach helps to explain group differences and challenge "the notion of unified racial and ethnic identities grounded in single shared cultures" (Davidson, 1996, p. 215). In so doing, we are able to better unravel variations in school engagement among minority youth.

In this study, Baldwin, an urban high school in California, provided the venue to explore the factors and influences that positively impact social inequality in education. The aim was to acquire firsthand knowledge of how students experienced distinct school structures and cultures within a school.

Programs and conditions in school unwittingly can construct failure and success for urban minority students. This book identifies three broad areas of minority students' experience of school that affect their engagement: racial segregation in school; divisions within the racial groups; and the variance of institutional support the students receive. When and only when we deal with race and equity issues, will we be able to say truly that no child has been left behind.

Racial Segregation in School

Structural and cultural processes at Baldwin High School divided students by race and distribute opportunities among students in a way that reproduced social and academic inequities. These racial hierarchies reinforced pessimism among some youth, such as U.S.-born Mexican American students. This book points to three ways this segregation was reproduced in the school.

First, adult and youth perceptions of ability were based on race. As we will notice in Chapter 2, racial stereotypes influence how teachers and students view different groups and their academic abilities.

Second, teachers' attitudes and expectations were influential in how students experienced school. Teachers can operate consciously or subconsciously on such stereotypes, which influences how they treat students. Students suggest that teachers have been exposed to stereotypes for so long that they "help in making stereotypes come true." In other words, teachers are both passive and active agents in perpetuating inequality. They are passive in that they adhere to common perceptions of racial and ethnic groups, and at the same time they are active in that they structurally and ideologically reinforce racial and ethnic divisions.

Third, students promoted self-segregation. Social relations in the school were highly segmented along racial lines. In classrooms, White students tended to sit with White students, Asians with Asians, Blacks with Blacks, and so on. This pattern held true throughout the school. A student's friends tended to come largely from his or her own racial group. Very little social mixing occurred among students in different programs. However, career academies did much better at integrating students across distinct racial and ethnic lines.

Divisions Within Racial Groups

Deep divisions existed between high-achieving students and those in remedial classes. This is a significant problem since past research has shown that integrated students tend to do better in school. If students from remedial programs have little opportunity to interact with high-achieving students, they will lack role models and social encouragement to perform better.

U.S.-born minority students were at the bottom of the ladder, overwhelmingly located in remedial programs. First-generation and immigrant students were more often found in the advanced programs. The high-achieving minority students preferred not to associate with the students from remedial classes.

The result of such hierarchies and attitudes is a lost sense of community among many students. Even in some of the advanced programs in the school, student groups were not closely knit. Students reported strong feelings of competition that prevented them from helping one another and building support networks.

Variance in Institutional Support

Still, though, the high-achieving minority students had some degree of institutional support by virtue of belonging to the advanced school programs. These supports gave students a more rigorous education, the desire and chance to attend college, and a head start on a career. These students belonged to programs imbued with a college-bound culture.

As Chapter 2 demonstrates, for minority students at the bottom rung of the ladder—U.S.-born Mexican Americans above all—such supports were almost totally lacking. They were the most marginalized and the most pessimistic about their opportunities.

The racial segmentation in the school as a whole, divisions within the racial groups themselves, and the variance of institutional support all help determine how minority students perform in school. Racial stereotypes hamper students' opportunity structures, depriving them of the institutional support that could improve their academic trajectory.

FINDING GOODNESS IN URBAN SCHOOLING

Despite insidious racial phenomena, this study identifies a college-preparatory program established at an urban high school in California as a pocket of hope. The program, the Medical Academy, was designed to provide interested students with a head start in both curriculum and work experience for pursuing a future career in the medical profession. It also proved to be successful in providing the social and institutional supports that promoted strong academic engagement among minority students. In many ways, the program began to confront social inequality in education.

An argument of this study is that such supports are crucial ways of improving minorities' experience of schooling, despite social inequality in education. It is fundamental that we understand what works and what does not work in promoting urban school success. Three significant factors are identified that account for this particular program's success, despite larger issues or urban school inequality. As will be explained in Chapter 2, the program (1) was racially well integrated, (2) fostered a sense of community and teamwork, and (3) provided valuable educational and career opportunities.

Programs such as the Medical Academy establish institutional mechanisms to build students' skills and help them navigate social difficulties related to their minority status. Although they cannot eliminate the disadvantaging effects of race, such programs assist students to overcome those

disadvantages. The program successfully attempts to circumvent social inequalities in education and begins to manufacture hope.

CONCLUSION

Institutional processes within schools are important for understanding variations among minority student achievement. This study shows that programs based on successful integration, community building, and access to opportunities, serve as a model for how institutional mechanisms can promote the social mobility of urban minority student populations. This book conceptually highlights how distinct structural and cultural mechanisms can begin to challenge social inequality in schools.

Institutional processes matter. Evidence suggests that minority students in urban schools can achieve academic success with support from specific institutional programs. Building close networks of support with teachers and other students is one significant way that researchers have found to boost students' achievement. Such programs engage students in schooling and provide positive motivation. Moreover, such institutional processes begin to challenge racial inequality in education.

This study argues that researchers ought to more closely examine how institutional factors interact with cultural-ecological factors. In particular, we need to know why some minority students seek out processes and form supportive institutional relationships, while other students do not.

This book, through in-depth case studies of Black, Latino, and Vietnamese youth, brings us closer to being able to identify and productively manipulate the sociological links among cultural-ecological factors and institutional factors that explain social mobility of urban student populations. The purpose is to confront social inequality in all social domains of life and further the promise of the American dream.