MOTIVATIONAL and CULTURAL FACTORS IN LEARNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR POOR AND MINORITY CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES

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The education of poor and minority children continues to be of great concern to child and youth care workers, particularly in light of recent demographic projections indicating that this segment of the childhood population is expected to increase dramatically into the next century (Pallas, Natriello & McDill, 1989). The problem before these professionals is that, barring serious learning disabilities or mental retardation, all young children have the basic cognitive skills and the potential to learn (see Ginsburg & Russell, 1981), yet many poor and minority children are failing to reach their intellectual potential. This poses a challenge to child and youth care workers who, increasingly, find themselves working in school settings and collaborating with teachers in overall planning and program implementation.

In recent years, research on motivational factors in learning has provided an important lens through which children's school performance can be better understood. There is a very important benefit to studying how high achievers are motivated. Motivation research has established that achievement beliefs (i.e., attributions for success and failure) are critical to school success (see Nicholls, 1989). For example, students who believe that ability is malleable are more likely to choose challenging over nonchallenging tasks, and display greater persistence in the face of difficulty (Bempechat, London & Dweck, 1991). Indeed, in many cases, achievement beliefs appear to be better predictors of school performance than are IQ or achievement tests (see Bempechat, et al., 1991).

Amidst a backdrop of generally poor performance, as indicated by lower average achievement scores and higher average rates of high school dropout (see Dossey, Mullis, Lindquist & Chambers, 1988), there is substantive evidence that poverty and minority status do not necessarily predict negative academic outcomes (e.g., Clark, 1983). Yet, high achievement among children at risk for school failure is a relatively neglected research area (Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanashi & Johnson, 1990). For practitioners, this is regrettable, because we stand to learn much from the experiences of "at-risk" high achievers that can help us help low achievers reach their intellectual potential.

The purpose of this paper is to examine research that has sought to understand high achievement in children and youth ordinarily assumed to be at risk for school failure. Specifically, we will investigate the research on attributions for success and failure, perceptions of parental educational socialization strategies, and the relationship between these factors and actual achievement. Our overall goal is to shed light on factors that can enhance or inhibit high achievement. Further, we will focus on cultural factors that affect school performance. As the field of child and youth care work becomes increasingly family-centered, it is important to understand the ways in which culture guides parents' educational socialization strategies. Further, as our school population becomes increasingly diverse, it is critical for child and youth care workers to understand how culture may influence students' approaches to learning.

Attributions for Success and Failure

According to attribution theory, children are propelled to action when they believe that failure is caused by an internal, unstable, and controllable factor, such as effort. In contrast, children are less inclined to persist when they believe that failure is due to an internal, uncontrollable, and stable cause, such as ability (Weiner, Graham, Stern & Lawson, 1982). Graham (1984) has noted that there is very little information on attributions for success and failure in poor and minority youth. Researchers have demonstrated that African-American students are no more likely than their white counterparts to display maladaptive motivational tendencies (such as attributing failure to lack of ability) (Graham, 1984), that African-American children are no more likely than Latino and Anglo children to attribute success and failure to external sources, and that Latino children show a greater tendency to attribute failure to lack of ability, relative to Anglo and African-American children (Willig, Harnisch, Hill & Maehr, 1983).

Our research on diverse samples of low-income fifth and sixth graders (African-American, Latino, Indochinese, and Caucasian) has shown that, regardless of ethnicity, high achievers are remarkably similar to one another in their patterns of attributions. The same is true for low achievers across ethnic groups. Specifically, we have repeatedly found that high math achievement is associated with the tendencies to attribute success to high ability and *not* to attribute failure to lack of ability. In contrast, low achievement is associated with the tendency to attribute failure to lack of ability (Bempechat, Graham, & Jimenez, 1996; Bempechat, Nakkula, Wu, & Ginsburg, 1996). These findings do not discount the importance of effort in high achievement. Rather, they suggest the possibility that students may need to feel that they have some math ability in order to find it worthwhile to invest effort in learning (see Stipek & Gralinski, 1991).

Further, we have found that for Latino students, a greater tendency to attribute success to ability is associated with higher math scores. For reasons we do not clearly understand, it may be especially beneficial for these students' success in school to believe that they have ability. Interest-

ingly, for African-American students, our findings show that a greater tendency to attribute failure to external factors is associated with higher math scores. Such an external orientation towards failure is not ordinarily associated with high achievement (see Weiner, et al., 1982). It could be that, perhaps as a result of teacher or peer prejudice, these students may adopt a defensive motivational posture that is adaptive for learning. Both these findings need further examination.

Educational Socialization

We know that parents' beliefs about schooling and learning guide their educational socialization practices, which in turn have a causal influence on their children's developing achievement beliefs (Entwisle, Alexander, Pallas & Cadigan, 1987). Traditionally, researchers have tended to focus on two primary aspects of educational socialization. The first, cognitive socialization, refers to the ways in which parents influence the basic intellectual development of their children, including appropriate scaffolding (i.e., systematic, guided instruction, in which the adult gradually turns over the responsibility for completing a novel activity to the child; see Rogoff & Gardner, 1984). The second, academic socialization, refers to the ways in which parents influence the development of attitudes and motives that are essential for school success, including an effortful approach to learning (see Bempechat, et al., 1991).

Clearly, in some families, the socialization of achievement operates in ways that produce a relative match between the child's learning skills, attitudes and motives and the demands of the school (see Ginsburg, et al., 1992). In other families, achievement socialization operates in such a way that children have difficulty realizing their full potential, so that they fall behind in their school work and develop poor attitudes, low expectancies and maladaptive achievement behaviors, such as learned helplessness (i.e., the tendency to "fall apart" at the first sign of challenge or difficulty).

With regard to cognitive socialization, studies of mothers' teaching styles in high and low achieving children reared in poverty suggest that the former may have mothers who effectively "scaffold" information for their children (see Rogoff & Gardner, 1984). For example, Scott-Jones' (1987) study of poor high and low achieving first graders showed that mothers of high achievers integrated learning activities into daily household events, had more books available to their children, and maintained academic, as opposed to behavioral goals for their children in anticipation of later schooling. In contrast, mothers of low achievers seemed to take on a formal approach to teaching, yet often made statements to their children indicating low expectations. Scott-Jones argues that these otherwise well-intentioned mothers may not have had the skills to adequately help their children with schoolwork.

Interestingly, providing help with homework may not be a necessary component of the successful child's background, as several retrospective

and ethnographic studies have shown. Instead, these studies highlight the salience of academic socialization practices, such as parental and/or significant other support for education, future time orientation, and a belief in the education ethic, despite widespread evidence of discrimination in the workplace (Clark, 1983).

In an ethnographic study of low income high and low achieving African American elementary school children, Clark (1983) showed that high achieving children had parents who had prepared them from an early age for the role of student. They fostered a positive attitude towards learning through their teaching behaviors at home (reading, communication skills, problem solving and decision making skills). These parents sacrificed, both financially and socially, for their children's education, stressed the value of education for their futures, monitored their academic progress closely, and fostered an internal sense of control and responsibility over academic outcomes. According to Clark, their parenting style could best be described as authoritative, rather than authoritarian or permissive. Interestingly, authoritative parenting, in which parents are warm and loving, but firm in their demands for maturity, has been associated with positive social and academic outcomes (see Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992)

In contrast, parents of low achieving children were rather permissive in their parenting style. They had little or no involvement with their children's schools, were unaware of their children's day-to-day school progress, and maintained no consistent expectation that their children would engage in academic activities with any regularity. Not surprisingly, these parents reported having little sense of control over events in their own lives.

Our research has sought to understand ethnic differences in parental educational socialization strategies. Our studies of low-income poor and minority students (fifth and sixth graders) have found, for example, that relative to Caucasian students, Cambodian students report significantly greater parental control over their time and greater emphasis on the importance of education for the future (Bempechat, Mordkowitz, Wu, Morison, & Ginsburg, 1989).

The Influence of Culture

From a cross-ethnic perspective, there may be aspects of successful parental educational socialization that are both culturally universal and culturally specific. For example, as suggested by the above findings, all parents, regardless of ethnicity, may intervene to assist, or enlist outside assistance, when a child begins to experience difficulty in a given subject. However, given the cultural emphasis on maintaining family honor, Asian-American parents, for example, may be more likely than Caucasian parents to foster feelings of guilt or shame in the face of failure (Bempechat, et al., 1996).

Given the diversity of our student population, it is not surprising that researchers are looking increasingly to culture and ecological context to

explain ethnic differences in achievement (Ogbu, 1995). Greenfield (1994) has suggested that independence/interdependence are contrasting developmental "scripts," or belief systems that can help us understand child socialization. Independence tends to characterizes the cultural origins of Euro-American socialization goals, which focus on autonomy, individual achievement, and the primacy of individual rights. Interdependence, or collectivism, tends to broadly characterize the cultural roots of Latino-American, African-American, and Asian-American socialization goals, which focus on harmonious group relations, respect for elders, sharing, and caring.

In this connection, Greenfield (1994) has argued that, for groups for whom school based education was imposed by slavery or conquest (such as some Latino and African-American groups), socialization for interdependence and socialization for achievement may operate at cross-purposes. From this cultural perspective, education, by its competitive nature and its focus on individual development, has the potential to undermine interdependence and the role of the family as an educational institution. For example, in a study of mothers and daycare workers in Mexico, Holloway, Gorman, and Fuller (1988) noted that harmonious group relations were valued over independent achievement.

At the same time, Greenfield (1994) notes that it is possible to integrate socialization for schooling with an interdependence orientation. In East Asian societies, where school based learning is indigenous to the culture, educational socialization emphasizes the social skills and social relations that are necessary precursors to learning. Thus, families and communities operate to prepare children for the role of student; the major goal of achievement is to bring honor to the family.

However, recent research has established that, under certain circumstances, Latino families also integrate schooling within an interdependence orientation. For example, Valenzuela and Dornbusch (1994) argue that familism, which is often viewed as inhibiting achievement in Latino children, is quite similar to Coleman's (1988) notion of social capital, in that it encourages "networks of interaction and resource exchange that facilitate the transfer of physical (material resources), cultural (cultural and linguistic backgrounds acquired to meet the demands of the school), and human (educational attainment) capital" (p.21). These researchers found that high familism in combination with high parent education (at least 12 years of schooling) was associated with higher achievement. It could be that the higher levels of parent education contributed to more effective cognitive and academic socialization. That is, as Valenzuela and Dornbusch (1994) argue, these parents' successful school experiences may have served to provide their children with positive social capital that helped them negotiate the school system and its agents.

In our work, we have found that, relative to African-American and Caucasian students, Latino and Indochinese students hold very similar

views of their parents' educational socialization strategies (i.e., greater emphasis on effort), adhere to similar, adaptive beliefs about the causes of success and failure (i.e., failure not due to lack of ability), and share similar affect with regard to parental sacrifices (i.e., guilt) and poor school perfor-mance (i.e., shame). These beliefs are consistent with an interdependent orientation towards socialization. Yet, the differences between these groups in achievement outcome are striking, with the Indochinese students being the highest and the Latino students being among the lowest math achievers (Bempechat, et al., 1996). Why would adaptive achievement beliefs be associated with high achievement in one group, and low achievement in another? The cultural and ecological contexts in which these students strive to achieve offer several possible explanations for the apparent paradox between the achievement beliefs and outcomes of these two groups in our samples.

Following DeVos (1978), Indochinese families, as typical refugees, may be more resilient to the "adult status degradation" that is experienced by minority group members. As such, they may be more able than the Latino families, who are more similar to involuntary minorities (i.e., groups who were incorporated into American society through slavery or conquest), to ease the "permeability of educational experiences", that is, to accept and trust in the school and its agents.

Relatedly, Ogbu (1995) argues that cultural models of education must be taken into account in understanding the contradictions between stu-dents' achievement beliefs and practices. While involuntary minority students may voice their concerns about the importance of a good educa-tion, Ogbu argues that, because of discrimination and job ceilings, these students ultimately do not believe formal schooling will pay off. In his comparative study of voluntary (Chinese) and involuntary (African-Ameri-can, Latino) minorities, he found that African-American students were very distrustful of the school as an institution and its personnel. In interviews, all students reported believing in the value of education and hard work as a means of getting ahead, and the majority of all students had high aspirations for their grades. However, more so than the other groups, African-American students believed in "alternative sources of knowledge" (i.e., street knowledge, common sense) and "alternative avenues to success" (i.e., sports, entertainment).

Finally, in considering the cultural and ecological context of schooling for the students in our sample, the importance of peers may play a role in the achievement-attitude paradox that we have documented. It has been noted that high achieving African-American students report little peer support for academic pursuits (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steinberg, et al., 1992). Ogbu's (1995) recent study showed that involuntary minority youth (African-American and Latino) reported much more stigmatizing of high achieving students than did voluntary (Chinese) students.

This lies in stark contrast to the achievement beliefs and behaviors

revealed by black South African adolescents in our latest study, a qualitative examination of their emic or native concepts of achievement (Bempechat & Abrahams, 1996). Over a series of three interviews with 11 students, we probed their conceptions of education and opportunity in post-apartheid society. We learned that, despite having come of age in a system that was designed to oppress, they have maintained a very positive outlook on their futures. Their involvement in the struggle against apartheid seems to have given them a sense of purpose and strengthened their resolve to better their lives and the lives of those around them. It is clear that the context in which they were living influenced their meaning making (i.e., the construction of personal meaning) in important ways. From an individual perspective, these students constructed meaning in a way that reflected realistic optimism. That is, they believed that life was going to change for the better, but change would take time.

    From an interpersonal perspective, their meaning making was influenced by ongoing negotiations with peers, family members, and "heroes" (ranging from family members to political leaders, such as Nelson Mandela). That is, those who had struggled against apartheid provided these students with an understanding of what persistence, determination, and hard work entailed. They seemed to be embracing for themselves the lessons they had gleaned from their mentors — that success in any endeavor will ultimately result from sacrifice, hard work, and resilience in the face of even major obstacles.

    From a cultural perspective, the struggle against apartheid became these students' cultural inheritance, and a cultural resource available to them for meaning making. They shared common beliefs about opportunity and achievement, pre- and post- apartheid, and often described, in remarkably similar ways, their strategies for achieving their future goals. They all expressed, for example, their determination to become highly educated and to delay gratification in the pursuit of this objective. Thus, despite extreme conditions of prejudice and oppression, these South African adolescents demonstrated remarkable resilience, efficacy, and a sense of purpose. Our findings suggest that future research on achievement motivation in poor and minority students in the United States may benefit from an approach that takes into account both culture and context in achievement.

Implications for Practitioners

    Taken together, the research literature does not support a popular view that poor and minority parents are uninvolved and unconcerned about their children's schooling. Indeed, there are multiple pathways to the same developmental outcome, in this case, high achievement. Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned for child and youth care workers is that one cannot impose one successful method of educational socialization on all children. Cultural differences in conceptions of achievement most likely play a vital role in the ways in which families organize their homes around

issues of schooling. There is no doubt that child and youth care workers must be sensitive to cultural nuances in the value that different families place on intellectual pursuits, and the ways in which they strive to achieve their academic goals for their children.

For example, a recent ethnographic study of 32 Latino families revealed that parents articulated the concept of education, or "educaciòn" as a blending of both moral and educational behavior. Accordingly, parents saw their primary responsibility as raising a moral child, teaching respect for elders, and guiding children down the right path in life. However much they valued education, these parents made it clear that they would sacrifice educational opportunities if it meant that their children might come into contact with others who could possibly be a negative influence (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore & Goldenberg, in press). They noted the particular case of a gifted adolescent girl whose parents, fearing negative influences, refused to give her permission to attend an advanced mathematics class at another school.

We argue, however, that attempts to be culturally sensitive must not be realized in the lowering of standards. Rather than focusing on authoritarian behavioral goals, more progress may be made in the field of child and youth care work if practitioners turn their attentions to academic goals. Specifically, motivational approaches to learning that support high achievement can have a very positive impact on academic outcomes. For example, in the face of failure, interventions that stress the importance of effort over lack of ability may eventually foster beliefs in ability. As illustrated above, such beliefs are associated with high achievement.

Furthermore, motivation research has shown that children are very attuned to the implications inherent in the structure of schooling (i.e., tracking). That is, students know when they are being assigned "easy" work relative to other students, and this tends to undermine their confidence and beliefs in their abilities (see Nicholls, 1989; Weiner, et al., 1982). Additionally, to be culturally sensitive is not to pity students who are, for example, struggling to learn a new language or adapt to a new environment. Weiner's research suggests that when child and youth care workers communicate pity in the face of poor performance, either verbally or nonverbally, those as young as seven years of age infer low ability as the cause of their affect (Weiner, et al., 1982). In contrast, when they communicate anger in the face of poor performance, children as young as five years of age are more likely to infer lack of effort as the cause of their affect. The latter is more likely to propel students to try harder, while the former is more likely to foster learned helplessness (see Bempechat, et al., 1991).

Clearly, we are not advocating that child and youth care workers consistently adopt a stance of anger when students are experiencing difficulty, as this would not be in anyone's best interest. However, we highlight the above research findings as a way of suggesting that a firm, but warm, approach, reminiscent of authoritative parenting, may be more effective in fostering achievement.

One might well ask, what is cultural sensitivity in the context of child and youth care environments? We argue that cultural sensitivity is paramount in what researchers have recently begun to call the "family-school-community partnership" (National Educational Goals Report, 1995). Current research has shown that, when successful models of partnership are implemented, math and reading achievement tend to increase; the likelihood of truancy, suspension, and expulsion decreases; and students tend to participate more in extra-curricular activities (National Educational Goals Report, 1995).

As Comer (Anson, Cook, Habib, Grady, Haynes & Comer, 1991) notes, however, all parents need to feel that they are welcomed by the school and its agents. This only serves to strengthen the bond between child and youth care workers and parents, who are more likely to see themselves as working partners with these professionals towards a common goal of student achievement. Comer argues that, while the effective schools movement emphasized strong school leadership, strict discipline, basic skills and high achievement, it did not address the relationship between the children's school adjustment and their family and cultural background. He suggests that in an atmosphere in which the psychological and social needs of those who serve and are served by the school are met, a sense of shared goals prevails. Although Comer's work has primarily been focused on public schools, the implications for those who work in child and youth care environments are readily apparent. Here, too, our ultimate goal should be to increase child-parent-worker partnerships.

While our research has not directly addressed the issue of peer influence, there is a great deal of evidence suggesting that peers can play a very important role in inhibiting or fostering academic achievement. In their ethnographic study of African-American adolescents, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that high achievers felt compelled to mask their school performance in a variety of ways in order to avoid ostracism by peers. The possibility that they might be viewed as "acting white" by succeeding in school led some otherwise strong students to purposefully underachieve.

In contrast, Caplan and his colleagues (Caplan, Choy & Whitmore, 1992) have documented that in Indochinese refugee families, school nights typically revolve around homework and that parents free children of household chores to facilitate the completion of schoolwork. Their observations revealed that siblings took it upon themselves to help one another with their academic assignments (Caplan, et al., 1992). Similarly, Steinberg and his colleagues noted that, relative to African-American and Latino adolescents, Asian-Americans report receiving more academic support from peers than from parents (Steinberg, et al., 1992).

This research suggests that there may be promise in peer and community mentoring programs. For example, older peers could serve as role models and sources of information about the process of schooling for younger members of the community. Relatedly, business-school partner-

ships, which have become increasingly common in recent years, allow for a similar relationship to develop in a larger context, building the bridge between school success, higher education, and future career possibilities. It could very well be that such peer and adult mentors foster a future time orientation, which is associated with higher achievement (Nuttin, 1985). In other words, through such initiatives, child and youth care workers may help their clients to see a greater variety of educational and career options for themselves.

Conclusion

In sum, our findings demonstrate that when designing and implementing intervention programs, child and youth care workers need to take into account motivational factors in learning such as attribution of success and failure; and the importance of culture and context in this connection. Clearly, the needs of children and youth who are at-risk for school failure are best served by child and youth care workers who are sensitive to the nuances of individual families' cultural values. This can only serve to deepen interpersonal understanding between child and youth care workers and their clients. Children themselves will be the best beneficiaries of such partnerships.

Further, we have shown that there is little to be gained from holding at-risk children to low standards. Unfortunately, we live in a society that expects little from such children and youth. In our view, this is precisely why child and youth care workers should hold their clients to high standards. With appropriate academic support, all children and youth can fulfill their intellectual potential (see Levin, 1987).

Finally, we believe that the recent trend towards qualitative research in this area holds the best hope for increasing our understanding of how culture and context influence the choices that parents make around issues of achievement, and the impact that these choices have on children's perceptions of schooling in contemporary society. This knowledge would be most valuable to child and youth care workers, who, working increasingly in family-centered models, interact with an increasingly diverse population.

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