ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF MINORITY STUDENTS: A COMMENTARY

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The issue of academic achievement among minority students has a significance beyond the concerns of contemporary educators. In this century, generations have been raised to believe the United States a "melting pot", subjecting new comers to a rough welcome lasting a generation but leaving subsequent generations "socialized and assimilated", poised to pursue their own idea of "The American Dream". There is, however, ample evidence suggesting that as we glory in the success of some groups, others with long histories in this society, experience little mobility.

Public debate about the Melting Pot is often emotionally laden, and to many strikes directly at the American creed. Like the Culture of Poverty Theory, emotionally satisfying because of the correspondence between "observed" behavior and supposedly generalizable "fact", the Melting Pot Theory predicts mobility for contemporary immigrants drawn from experiences of immigrants in earlier periods. The ideological vision remains one set in the late 19th century for an expanding, industrializing society. At a time when basic educational skills and advanced training are increasingly important for the workforce, large numbers of minority students are leaving school, with calamitous results for themselves and ominous implications for the society.

In his thoughtful paper[1], George Iber presents the issues of acculturation, assimilation, ethnicity and their relation to academic success. Offering the perspectives of John Ogbu and Henry Trueba, both educational anthropologists, readers are offered structural (Cultural Ecology) and social-symbolic (Cultural Discontinuity) models of interpretation.

We are asked first to consider whether the structural features of

society effectively block minority-immigrant acculturation. Ogbu argues that failure of the Melting Pot leads to marginal assimilation, and the development of alternative definitions of success and failure, grounded in a societal critique with premises drawn from group experience. Such alterrnative definitions may contain some truth but they may also be self defeating. Social prohibitions against following mainstream values may be termed "selling out", being a "tio taco" or "acting white."[2] We next consider Trueba's social symbolic or social interaction perspective suggesting that while acculturation and assimilation may indeed be incomplete - or blocked, it is the interaction between students, teachers and the school, that short circuits academic achievement. Embodying middle class values, the school itself generates alienation born of frustration and "cultural discontinuity". Ogbu might argue here that the school is the site where competing values are easily testable. And in the face of discrimination, poor employment prospects, and a mass media which equates personal worth with wealth and distorts images of ethnicity, the values of the school lose out to those derived from social experience or ethnic solidarity.

Dr. Iber now sets about illustrating how we might examine the competing claims of Ogbu and Trueba, offering data collected by Amada Padilla and Susan Keefe, who in addressing the pluralistic nature of American society, postulate that acculturation and ethnic identity are separate processes. Padilla and Keefe operationalize "acculturation" by identifying **Language Preference**, **Respondent's Cultural Heritage**, **Parents Cultural Heritage**, and **Cultural Identification**, as variables. **Ethnic Social Orientation**, **Ethnic Pride**, and **Perceived Discrimination**, are variables they derive from "ethnicity". The issues they raise are intriguing since Padilla and Keefe address intergenerational differences. They ask what happens in acculturation and ethnicity over time, and how does it affect school achievement?

The data identify generational differences in academic performance supporting Ogbu's contentions. Their sample of Mexican born

immigrants did better in school than American born Chicanos in the study. It is also true however that a marked cultural acclimatization had taken place, with **Language Preference** and **Cultural Heritage** declining the most. **Parent's Cultural Heritage** and (general) **Cultural Identification** declined the least. This suggests that ethnic identity is influenced in the first instance by functional issues. English is of immediate importance (especially in school) and exposure American culture influences cultural identification, especially during one's formative years. But does it necessarily follow for minorities that acculturation leads to discrimination and poor school achievement as a manefestations of rejection?

In his recent book *Beyond the Classroom* (1996), Laurence Steinberg, relying on a large heterogenous sample of secondary school students, found stable differences between ethnic groups in the area of school achievement.[3] Controlling for socioeconomic status and taking account of within group variations, Steinberg and his colleagues found a now familiar pattern of descending achievement; Asians, Whites, Latinos and Blacks. Causal explanations relying on innate different were rejected, indeed, the data confound such explanations.

Steinberg and his associates too found that immigrants outperformed nonimmigrants on measures of school achievement.

> On virtually every factor we know to be <u>correlated</u> with school success, students who were not born in this country outscore those who were born here..when we look only at American-born students, we find that youngsters who parents are foreign born outscore those whose parents are native Americans.[4]

In brief, Steinberg suggests that acculturation has a negative relationship to school performance for all ethnic groups. Students brought up in the United States "..achieve less, are less interested in school, and are more likely to engage in problem behavior, and are more interested in socializing than their nonnative counterparts from the same ethnic group.."[5] The smoking gun is social environment,

and here Steinberg's discussion of peer group influences is revealing.

Asian students are strongly directed (from the home) toward high achieving peer groups. (Achieving peers even compensate for a less than optimal home life.) Citing Ogbu, Steinberg notes that the mass media singles out and glorifies low-income Black culture which denigrates school achievement. With peer groups in many high schools ethnically segregated, Black and Latino students often have difficulty gaining admission to (or forming) achievement oriented peer groups. But he says that in general many students (except Asians) regard identification with school "brains" stigmatizing, suggesting that one dimension of the issue of "acting white" is merely an extreme extension of a common social prohibition -"acting smart".

Steinberg and his colleagues suggest that "getting by" without showing off is the dominant mode of thinking among teens of all groups -except Asians. Students recognize that there is a "trouble threshold" for academic performance and grades. If they fall below the threshold they can expect sanctions from parents. For Asians it was A-, for Whites it was between a B and a C, and for Blacks and Latinos it was a C-. It is disturbing that Steinberg concludes that for Black and Latino students, parental efforts in the home to encourage achievement, may be overpowered by peer group values antithetical to achievement. Recognizing that discrimination remains a constant in many aspects of American life, early decisions to ignore mainstream standards of achievement may have lifetime consequences, defying the predictions of the melting pot.

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ENDNOTES

1. George Iber, "Academic Performance of Minority Students: Two Alternative Theories," *Educational Change* (Spring, 1996), pp. 83-94.
2. Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, "Black Students' School Sucess: Coping with the Burden of 'Acting White' ", *The Urban Review*,

(Vol.18., No.3. 1986), pp.176-204..

3. Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom*, Simon & Schuster, 1996.
4. "Ethnicity and Adolescent Achievement", Laurence Steinberg, *American Educator,* (Vol.20., No.2., Summer 1996). pp.28-35, 44-48. (This article is a discussion of the findings in *Beyond the Classroom*.)
5. Ibid.