

*J. John Harris III and Donna Y. Ford*

*An ecological point of view helps educators understand that significant experiential, contextual, and cultural differences exist between minority and white populations at their various stages of development. These differences tend to create dissonances in the educational ecology because many practices and policies are based on the norms, values, experiences, and opportunities of middle-class white students. Educators sensitive to the effects of context on minority students can help to reduce these dissonances by paying more theoretical as well as practical attention to designing strategies appropriate for the developmental patterns of racial minorities.*

# Dissonance in the Educational Ecology

Devastating educational problems confront our minority and poor populations in primary and secondary schools and, to a considerable extent, in higher education as well. Strategies for improvement must be based on an ecological perspective on human development and education, which recognizes that different environments produce different kinds of opportunities and problems, and obviously influence people in many ways. People, in turn, also influence the environment by bringing to it different abilities and experiences. An ecological approach views individuals as part of the social milieu in which they function and examines how this reciprocal relationship affects the human development of poor and racial minorities. A comprehensive ecological orientation can address the nation's changing demographics and can lead to the design of integrated strategies of education for poor and minority populations while respecting individuality. It represents a systematic appraisal of individuals relative to their context and helps to identify the social and cultural determinants of dissonance in the educational ecology. An ecological perspective of human development and education, moreover, offers an evocative departure from the decontextualized, nonsocial approaches of earlier viewpoints.

The key questions ecologists ask include: What personal and cultural factors do individuals bring to the developmental process? How do these experiences influence their development? What personal, situational, or environmental factors affect their educational development? What social determinants contribute further to dissonance in the educational ecology?

When school and university faculty consider questions like these, they become more effective at

outreach, prevention, and intervention and at identifying developmental processes among poor and minority populations. Such work provides the underpinnings for effective educational programs and helps educators understand and then address more effectively various causes of dissonance that form barriers to educational progress.

### Dissonances in the Education Process

John Ogbu attributes many educational problems among minorities to what he calls *structured inequality* resulting from racism, discrimination, job ceilings, and the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and status. According to Ogbu, structured inequality tends to deny many minorities adequate opportunities to enter the labor force and to advance according to their educational qualifications and abilities. Such historical differences in the opportunity structure available to racial minorities have produced among them ambivalent attitudes toward education. A group's theory of success develops out of past experiences with social rewards and relative costs. Among middle-class whites, education has been the prerequisite for maintaining, if not improving, social and economic status. For them, the benefits of education are clear.

On the other hand, racial minorities, and African-Americans in particular, have seen unpredictable and unequal returns from educational attainment. They tend to experience higher levels of unemployment and underemployment than their white counterparts with comparable education, a disparity that tends to be particularly pronounced for the best educated. Because blacks see most other blacks laboring in inferior positions and occupying the lower socioeconomic strata, many of them come to believe that education may have few benefits. As a result, they, like many other minorities, do not always view education as the key to success and prosperity as readily as middle-class whites do. Indeed, their peer groups often denigrate education. As a result, some racial minorities find their self-concepts challenged when school and community compete for their loyalty. For some black students, the mere act of attending school entails a rejection of their black culture and an acceptance of a dominant culture that requires children to exchange their racial identification for a chance at economic success. To reinforce their claim to be "legitimate" members of their community, black students may sabotage any chance of success outside that community.

This anti-achievement ideology invariably produces dissonance in the educational ecology for many poor black and other minority youths. Even when they seize educational opportunities, they incur loss because they find themselves rejecting the values of their peer group. Many educators and psychologists consider self-concept and group identity critical variables in human well-being, affecting all areas of personality and functioning. Both are threatened when young people are forced, without proper guidance and support, to choose between identifying with their background and fitting the norms of a dominant culture.

That amounts to miseducation. It is likely to result in high dropout rates, lack of motivation to achieve, a disbelief in the efficacy of schooling, and rejection of the American achievement ideology.

Divergent attitudes toward education constitute only one of several factors creating cultural dissonance. Wade Boykin maintains that structured inequality also results when black children come to school and are expected to adopt styles, values, and beliefs of the majority white middle-class culture, which may differ from their own. Black communities retained much of the African culture even after slavery, with distinctive characteristics that include strong elements of spirituality, harmony, and community, reflected in a commitment to social connectedness and an awareness that social bonds and responsibilities transcend individual privileges. Black culture also includes a propensity toward the energetic and lively, with much use of movement, rhythm, and music; the cultivation of a distinctive personality with a proclivity toward spontaneous personal expression, and a preference for oral modes of communication in which both speaking and listening are treated as performances, with oral virtuosity—alliterative, metaphorically colorful, graphic forms of spoken language—emphasized and cultivated. One finds, as well, a special sensitivity to emotional cues and an inclination to be emotionally responsive.

*Structured inequality results when black children are expected to adopt values and styles of the white middle-class culture.*

In many ways these characteristics differ sharply from white middle-class values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior. Differences often exist, as well, in learning styles, which also create much dissonance in the educational ecology. An analytical learning style is valued most in schools, and is most likely to lead to high achievement according to commonly used criteria. It uses a specific, linear approach to selecting and sorting information, and relies mostly on concrete, quantitative learning material. By contrast, many black youths are more inclined toward what is usually called a relational learning style, which is more descriptive and qualitative. They tend to concentrate on relationships between and among objects as a way of understanding various phenomena, rather than to focus on the details that are so important for the analytical approach preferred in most schools. Analytically inclined students may be so detail oriented that they may miss viewing a situation as a whole: they may miss the forest for the trees. On the other hand, relationally inclined students may see the entire forest but miss many trees. An educational setting that allows children to progress at their own rate in a nongraded, continuous way provides a way of accommodating both learning styles. In its absence, the mismatch in learning styles may be poor adjustment to school, underachievement, and lack of motivation.

Important too is how race and ethnicity affect psychological health. The issue of color may be more salient for blacks and Native Americans than any other minority groups. White youths are less likely to experience the chronic stress and problems associated with racial iden-

tity. James Comer, the well-known psychiatrist at Yale University, maintains that those blacks without a strong, constructive racial identity mask their discomfort with a "big black front" that incorporates no effort to demonstrate excellence in academics. This stance reduces vulnerability but inhibits educational progress.

Black adolescents discover a need to develop a racial identity by undergoing a transformation that requires them to reject white dependence. The process entails, as a consequence, conflict with the educational expectations of the dominant culture. Charles Thomas and William Cross outlined a generally similar five-stage journey such students undertake:

1. At Thomas's first stage, "withdrawal," blacks resist relationships with other racial or cultural groups. As Malcolm X said, "There can be no Black-white unity until there is first Black unity." Cross's first stage, called "pre-encounter," depicts blacks as conforming in various ways—the implication is resentfully—to the dominant culture.
2. Thomas next observed that blacks go on to "testify" to the anguish of denying their blackness, but they express anxieties about being black. Cross suggested that such an overt realization of vulnerability leads to an "encounter stage" in which a sense of a black identity begins to emerge.
3. At the third stage, blacks start to "elevate all that is black," which is to say they "immerse" themselves in black culture and symbols. They tend to become keenly receptive to evidence of their history and cultural heritage. Cross also sees them at that stage as ready to promote or defend their newly won identity with such activities as protest and demonstrations.
4. At the fourth stage, "internalization," blacks have acquired this sense of identity and now begin to seek connections with a larger, more communal black experience; they tend to regard themselves positively; and they appear more at ease with the dominant culture, sometimes achieving academically without acquiescing to the culture's dictates.
5. Thomas called his fifth step "transcendence"; Cross called his "internalization-commitment." At this stage, Thomas sees blacks as finally free of concerns about race and social class. They are now "part of humanity."

These theories of racial identity development help explain why some black students resist the educational process. This resistance can take various forms, but dropping out and underachievement are prominent among them. Educators aware of the issues that attend racial identity development at its various stages can help students begin to overcome such problems.

Problems of achievement in our urban schools not only reflect social and cultural influences, but are also significantly related to poverty. Many minority students grow up in poverty, in unlivable housing, with inadequate diets, with insufficient clothing, and with restricted access to health care. We ask them to survive in an environment of indifference that denies them opportunity to fulfill talents and to actu-

alize dreams. If they confront constant failure, they will see themselves as failures—failures with no sense of self-worth and numerous manifestations of fatalism.

The impact of educational underachievement is often aggravated by the heavy reliance that many schools place on standardized tests. Racial minorities tend to score poorly on tests for which the norm is middle-class whites because they rarely share the experiences and opportunities the normative group enjoys. Yet such racially biased tests are then used as criteria for tracking or ability grouping. The result, all too often, is the separation of children by class and race so as to maintain social and economic stratification. When Binet invented his intelligence test, he recommended that it be used for diagnostic purposes only and that programs be designed to reduce any discovered deficiencies. Instead, we routinely use such tests to categorize students, to place them on tracks, and to consign them to special education classes.

The Governors' Commission on the Status of Disadvantaged Black American Males in 1989 reported that black males score lower than any other group on standardized tests and are three times more likely to be (mis)placed in mental retardation or slow learning classes than white males. In the years 1984 and 1985, the *Carnegie Quarterly* and the College Board revealed that black males were three times as likely as white males to be in classes for the educable retarded but only one-half as likely to be placed in classes for the gifted. The literature, considerable empirical evidence, court decisions, and reform proposals all suggest that tracking serves no overall positive purpose, principally because lower-track students receive less attention and achieve less than students on the higher tracks. Too often, the lower tracks become what has been called "educational ghettos" for black children.

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### Reducing the Dissonances

Structured inequality, cultural differences, the struggle for racial identity, and tracking based on what may be racially biased tests are among the most important factors creating the existing dissonances in the educational ecology for poor minorities. Fully eliminating them will require drastic changes in American society, including the elimination of many existing socioeconomic injustices. That is not likely to happen soon or easily. But the dissonances can be substantially diminished if collaborating educators in schools and universities become more sensitive to the harmful impact of many existing policies, programs, and practices, and join together actively in the quest for educational equity. This quest requires a new respect for cultural differences, increased minority recruitment and retention efforts, cross-cultural training programs, and more valid assessment procedures.

### *A New Respect for Cultural Differences*

Multicultural education implies procedures, policies, and programs that meet the unique educational and cultural needs at hand and that are sensitive to *cultural differences* rather than perpetuate the paralyzing paradigm of *cultural deficits*. This old concept flourished during the 1960s when scholars like Daniel Moynihan and James Coleman examined educational achievement from the perspective of the "culture of poverty." Cultural deprivation, inadequate socialization, cultural practices, antisocial behaviors, lack of male role models, exposure to crime, undisciplined home life, and other such factors were proposed to explain poor achievement among black students. Black children were seen as growing up in a web of social pathology and inadequate life experiences, and the black culture was labeled the culprit, was unfairly denigrated, and stood accused of retarding the educational achievement of black children. In effect, too often, a blaming-the-victim mentality pervaded the educational ecology such that if African-Americans, or other racial minorities, did poorly in school, the goal was to discover what "the matter is with them."

Addressing issues of dissonance means eliminating or altering practices that appear to work against, rather than help, minorities, including standardized testing and tracking. At the same time, educators must come to recognize differential learning styles and how they hinder achievement or otherwise contribute to dissonance. New research should focus on the perceptions racial minorities hold regarding determinants of dissonance in the educational milieu. This task includes generating more relevant definitions and theories of achievement, which is possible when educators willingly collaborate with, for example, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists. Finally, an educator's mission must include a deep abiding concern for the well-being of the young people and the opportunities afforded them to flourish and mature.

### *Cross-Cultural Training Programs for Teachers and Counselors*

Programs that prepare educators to work with minority students—regardless of their circumstance—tend to raise teacher expectations and, by extension, student achievement. During such training, teachers learn to fit the curriculum to the child, rather than mold the child to the curriculum. They learn to overcome the cultural deficit mind-set that persists in our K-12 schools. Stated differently, educators must encourage self-expression, problem solving, and critical thinking so as to capitalize on every student's strengths and individuality.

Cross-cultural training is very important as well for counselors. The challenges of multicultural counseling have only recently become part of counseling curricula. Many counselors still need to learn how to take into consideration the unique ways in which cultural differences can affect the counseling process. They must become sensitive to the fact that individuals with different backgrounds respond in different, often unique, ways to guidance and advice. Counselors in multicultural settings must be willing to discuss openly issues of race and the prob-

lems that attend being a racial minority, to explore racial and cultural differences, to monitor their own biases, to listen, and to ask for clarification in order to correct misperceptions and to seek better understanding. One potentially effective question is: "In my culture this means. . . .What does it mean in yours?"

### *Valid Assessment Procedures*

Testing procedures should preserve rather than discount the real capabilities of minority students. Fair standardized testing and assessment procedures would take into consideration cultural and experiential differences. Robert Sternberg and Howard Gardner recommend such culture-fair tests as the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS), the Black Intelligence Test of Cultural Homogeneity (BITCH), the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA), the SOI-Learning Abilities Test, and the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking. In response to the general failure of intelligence theories to explain intelligence, Sternberg (Triarchic Theory of Intelligence) and Gardner (Multiple Intelligences) developed theories of intelligence thought to capture the "intelligences" of all people. The notion of different types of intelligence brings us face to face with the concept of individual differences.

We conclude by reiterating that the challenge now confronting educators is to become contextually and culturally aware and then alert to the implications for educating racial minorities. Only then can we address more adequately the dissonance that currently exists in the educational ecology for many of our racial groups. The implicit research agenda is clear: to gain a better understanding of how social and cultural environments affect developmental processes and how both individual and group differences interact with environmental experiences. But enough is already known so as to be able to embark on an immediate agenda for action, carried out jointly by school and university faculty with strong, pro-active administrators in both sectors helping to direct the process of change. Perhaps, then, the dissonance that aggravates the difficulties racial minority populations continually encounter—the bias that favors majority norms and standards in most of our educational institutions—will diminish.

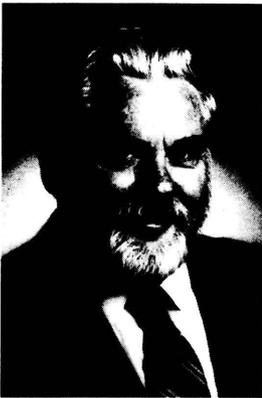
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