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Adding Diversity

The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education

F O U R T H E D I T I O N

Sonia Nieto

University of Massachusetts Amherst



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*For Celsito, Tati, Monique, Terrance, Corissa, and Jazmyne,
my most recent reasons to care
about children, education, and the future*

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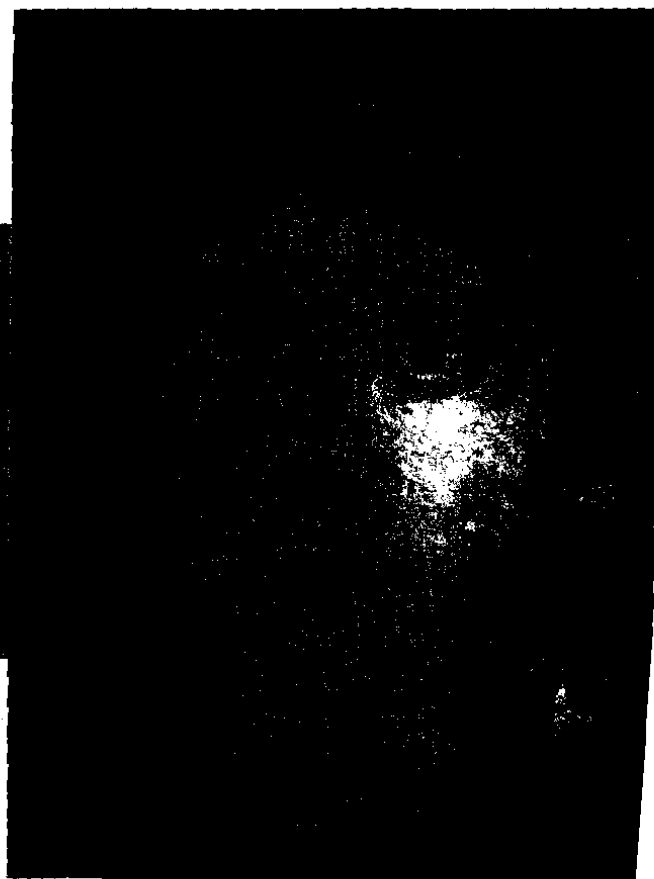
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Toward an Understanding of School Achievement

C H A P T E R

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As improbable as it might sound, the quote on the previous page is the words of a young man who was suspended and expelled from school on many occasions. A gang member with a difficult family life, Paul had managed to be accepted into an alternative school, where he was experiencing academic success for only the second time in his life. As you will see in his case study, which follows this chapter, Paul is resolute about continuing his education and becoming a teacher or counselor in order to help young people like himself. However, given his background and experiences, few people would have believed that he was capable of learning. Conventional theories of academic success or failure do not explain cases such as Paul's.

The simple dichotomy traditionally used to explain the school failure of students, particularly those from culturally diverse and poor backgrounds, can be summarized as follows. School failure is the fault either of the students themselves, who are genetically inferior, or of the social characteristics of their communities, which suffer from economic and cultural disadvantages and, thus, are unable to provide their children with the necessary preparation for academic success.¹ Alternative explanations are that school failure is caused by the structure of schools, which are static, classist, and racist and represent the interests of the dominant classes, or it is caused by cultural incompatibilities between the home and the school.²

This chapter reviews a number of theories about the complex conditions that may affect school achievement, and then considers how these conditions, acting in tandem, may influence the academic success or failure of students. With this discussion as a basis, case studies of two students who have not been successful in school, Ron Morris and Paul Chavez, will be presented. Both of these young men were written off by their respective schools and teachers as incapable of becoming successful students. Their cases demonstrate that learning can take place even in the most difficult personal and societal circumstances.

Deficit Theories Revisited

The theory that genetic or cultural inferiority is the cause of academic failure has been a recurrent theme in U.S. educational history. Throughout the past half century, much of the research on school failure has focused on the inadequacy of students' home environment and culture. In an early review of research concerning the poor achievement of Black children, for instance, Stephen and Joan Baratz found that most of the research was based on the assumption that Black children were deficient in language, social development, and intelligence. This assumption resulted in blaming students' failure to achieve on their so-called deficits; singled out for blame were children's *poorly developed language* (more concretely, the fact that they did not speak standard English); an *inadequate mother* (the assumption being that low-income Black mothers were invariably poor parents); *too little stimulation* in the home (that their homes lacked the kinds of environments that encouraged learning); *too much stimulation* in the home (their homes were too chaotic and disorganized or simply not organized along middle-class norms); and a host of other, often contradictory hypotheses. Baratz and Baratz found that the homes and backgrounds of Black children and poor children in general were classified in the research as

"sick, pathological, deviant, or underdeveloped."³ Such caricatures, which continue to exist, are of little value to teachers and schools who want to provide all children with a high-quality education.

The case studies of Ron Morris and Paul Chavez that follow this chapter are compelling examples of life in difficult circumstances: Both live in poverty with large families headed by single mothers; both have been involved in antisocial and criminal behavior; and both have had negative schooling experiences. One might be tempted to write them off because of these circumstances, but, as you shall see in their case studies, both Ron and Paul are now learning successfully in alternative schools. Deficit explanations of school achievement cannot explain their success.

The popularity of deficit theories has waxed and waned during the past three decades as newer and more comprehensive explanations for school underachievement have taken root. But, these viewpoints held great sway during the 1960s, and they were responsible for much of the social and educational policy in the following decades. Genetic and cultural inferiority arguments have left a legacy that is still apparent, as we saw in the previous chapter, for example, in the way that bilingual education continues to be conceptualized as a "compensatory" program. The rationale for compensatory education was that children from so-called "deprived homes" needed to be compensated for their genetic, cultural, or linguistic deprivation.

As an early critic of deficit theories, the late William Ryan turned the argument of cultural deprivation on its head by claiming that it was a strategy to "blame the victim." In a book that had a great impact in challenging the theory of cultural inferiority during its heyday in the 1960s, he stated the following:

We are dealing, it would seem, not so much with culturally deprived children as with culturally depriving schools. And the task to be accomplished is not to revise, amend, and repair deficient children, but to alter and transform the atmosphere and operations of the schools to which we commit these children.⁴

Theories of genetic inferiority and cultural deprivation popularized during the 1960s have left their mark on the schooling of poor children and children of color. These theories are not only classist and racist but also simply inadequate in explaining the failure of so many students. Although the social and economic conditions of their communities and families *can* be significant contributing factors in the academic failure of students, they alone are not the cause of student failure or success. Moreover, students' home and family situations are seldom subject to change by the school. Because schools cannot change the poverty or living conditions of students, the challenge is to find ways to teach children effectively in spite of the poverty or other disabling conditions in which they may live.

Students' identities—that is, their sense of self based in part on their race, ethnicity, social class, and language, among other characteristics—can also have an impact on their academic success or failure, but it is not these characteristics *per se* that cause failure. Rather, it is the school's *perception* of students' language, culture, and class as *inadequate* and *negative*, and the subsequent devalued status of these characteristics in the academic environment, that help to explain school failure. In Paul Chavez's case study, his early gang affiliation had a decided effect on the academic

expectations that teachers had of him. Teacher and author Linda Christensen provides another compelling example. Christensen, a talented high school teacher of students of diverse background, describes how she helps her students understand the power of their language patterns *while at the same time* they learn standard English without humiliation. Christensen recalls her own painful experiences as a working-class child in the classroom of Mrs. Delaney, her ninth-grade English teacher, who taught her to be ashamed of her language, something that Christensen refuses to do with her own students:

For too long, I felt inferior when I spoke. I knew the voice of my childhood crept out, and I confused that with ignorance. It wasn't. I just didn't belong to the group who made the rules. I was an outsider, a foreigner in their world. My students won't be.'

That the behaviors of middle-class parents of any race or ethnic group tend to be different from those of poor parents is amply documented. Parents living in poverty may be either unaware of the benefits of what middle-class parents know by experience or unable to provide certain activities for their children. Middle-class parents, for example, usually speak standard English. They also tend to engage in school-like prereading activities much more regularly than do working-class parents. Schools deem other activities in which middle-class parents and their children participate as essential to educational success: going to the library on a consistent basis, attending museums and other cultural centers, and providing a host of other experiences that schools and society have labeled "enriching."

Whether these activities are, in fact, enriching is not in question; the problem is that the activities of poor families, some of which may be just as enriching, are not viewed in the same way. For example, many poor families travel either to their original home countries or to other parts of the United States from where they originally came. Children may spend summers "down South" or in Jamaica or Mexico, but what they learn on these trips commonly is ignored by the school in spite of its potentially enriching character. It never occurred to me, for example, that my own experience of visiting family in Puerto Rico between my fifth and sixth grades might be of interest to my teacher or classmates. Mind you, my teachers never told me this directly, but I had already gotten the message that issues of consequence to my family carried no great weight in school. That I perceived this to be the case is a shame: When I think of the giant tarantula I caught, froze, and brought home, or of the many things I learned about living on a farm, or of how my Spanish substantially improved that summer, I can only conclude that these things might have been as interesting to my teacher and classmates as they were enlightening for me.

Students' ability to develop literacy and other academic skills as traditionally defined by schools is necessary for academic success, but, if defined only in this way, academic success is dysfunctional because it encourages students to abandon part of their identity in the process. Students' abilities to use the skills, talents, and experiences learned at home and in the community to further their learning must *also* be included in a definition of academic success.

Shirley Brice Heath's classic research with a Black community that she called "Trackton" is a persuasive example. She found that the kinds of questioning rituals

in which parents and other adults engaged with children were not preparing the children adequately for school activities.⁶ In observing the White middle-class teachers of these children, she found that the questions they asked the students were qualitatively different from the kinds of questions to which the children were accustomed at home. Teachers' questions, for example, concerned pulling attributes of things out of context and naming them (e.g., to identify size, shape, or color). In contrast, in their homes the children were asked questions about whole events or objects as well as about their uses, causes, and effects. The questions their parents asked them often required the children to make analogical comparisons and understand complex metaphors. These questions frequently were linguistically complex, and they required a sophisticated use of language on the part of the children. Usually, there was no one "right" answer because answers involved telling a story or describing a situation.

The result of the different kinds of questions asked in the different contexts was a perplexing lack of communication in the school: Normally communicative students were silent and unresponsive to teachers' questions, and teachers assumed that their students were deficient in language or were unintelligent. There was nothing wrong with the questions asked by the families in Trackton. They were simply different from those asked in school, and, therefore, they placed the children at a disadvantage for school success.

Through a research project with Heath, the teachers became aware of the differences in questioning rituals, and they began to study the kinds of questions that adults in Trackton asked. Some of these could be called "probing questions," and teachers began using them in their school lessons. Teachers were then able to use these kinds of questions as a basis for asking more traditional "school" questions, to which children also needed to become accustomed if they were to be successful in school. The results were dramatic. Children became active and enthusiastic participants in these lessons, a dramatic change from their previous passive behavior.

This fortuitous example of learning to use the culture of students in their education contradicts the scenario of failure in many schools, where parents are expected to provide help in ways they may be unable to do. Some parents are unaware of how to give their children concrete support in areas such as homework, but this lack of support in itself does not necessarily produce school failure. For example, in her landmark research with Punjabi students, Margaret Gibson reported that most parents were not able to give their children the kinds of support generally deemed as essential for academic success by schools,⁷ yet the majority of students she studied were academically successful. The parents' articulated support of education, their use of discipline, and the faith they had in the rewards of education were all crucial to the success of their children. The same is true of most of the case study students in this book. The parents of many of these young people were either unable or unaware of how to help them in school-related matters. Nevertheless, the parents expressed great faith in the benefits of education, and, in many ways, they motivated their children to stay the course.

Blaming parents or children for academic failure begs the question, for the role of schools is to educate *all* students from all families, not only the most academically gifted students from economically advantaged, mainstream, English-speaking,

European American families. Because schools can do nothing to change a student's social class or home background, it makes sense to focus on what they *can* change: themselves. As we saw in Chapter 6, schools sometimes think that they must start out with poor children or children of color as if they were blank slates. In effect, this means tearing down the building blocks the children already have in order to start from a middle-class foundation. School-related skills are, of course, necessary for academic success, but there is no reason why they cannot be built on the linguistic, cultural, or experiential foundation that children already have. The fact that some children come to school with a rich oral tradition is a case in point. Perhaps their parents never read stories to them but instead *tell* them stories. This experience can either be dismissed by schools as trivial, or it can be used as the basis for learning.

Genetic and cultural inferiority theories are not a thing of the past. As recently as 1994, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray resurrected the argument that genetic inferiority was the root cause of the academic failure among African American students.⁸ Although widely discredited by serious scholars as both ethnocentric and scientifically unfounded (see Note 21 in Chapter 4), genetic and cultural inferiority theories survive because they provide a simplistic explanation for complex problems. Moreover, by accepting theories of genetic and cultural inferiority, the detrimental effects on student learning of structural inequality, racism, and poverty do not have to be considered.

But we also need to understand the power of what has been called the *cultural capital* of dominant groups. According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital can exist in three forms: dispositions of the mind and body; cultural goods, such as pictures, books, and other material objects; and educational qualifications. In all three forms, transmission of cultural capital is, according to Bourdieu, "no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital."⁹ That is, the values, tastes, languages, dialects, and cultures that have most status are invariably associated with the dominant group. As a consequence, the weight of cultural capital cannot be ignored. To do so would be both naïve and romantic because it would deny the reality that power, knowledge, and resources are located in the norms of dominant cultures and languages. To imply that working-class students and students from dominated groups need not learn the cultural norms of the dominant group is effectively to disempower the students who are most academically vulnerable. But the curriculum should also be relevant to the cultural experiences and values of students from subordinated groups. A complete education needs to include *both* the norms and canon of the dominant and of the dominated cultures because including culturally relevant curriculum is a valuable way to challenge a monocultural canon.

Economic and Social Reproduction Revisited

The argument that schools reproduce the economic and social relations of society and, therefore, tend to serve the interests of the dominant classes, articulated first during the 1970s by scholars such as Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, and Joel Spring, placed schools squarely in a political context.¹⁰ According to this theory, the role of the schools was to keep the poor in their place by teaching them the proper

attitudes and behaviors for becoming good workers, and to keep the dominant classes in power by teaching their children the skills of management and control that would presumably prepare them to manage and control the working class. Schools, therefore, reproduced the status quo and not only reflected structural inequalities based on class, race, and gender but also helped to maintain these inequalities.

Economic and social reproduction theorists maintain that the "sorting" function of schools, to use a term coined by Spring, is apparent in everything from physical structure to curriculum and instruction. For example, the schools of the poor are generally factory-like fortresses that operate with an abundance of bells and other controlling mechanisms, whereas the schools of the wealthy tend to be much more "open" physically and emotionally, allowing for more autonomy and creative thinking on the part of students. Likewise, relations between students and teachers in poor communities reflect a dominant-dominated relationship much more so than in middle-class or wealthy communities. The curriculum also differs. More sophisticated and challenging knowledge is generally taught in wealthy schools, whereas the basics and rote memorization are the order of the day in poor schools. The "sorting" function of the schools results in an almost perfect replication of the stratification of society. Although the theories generally concerned the United States, they are true of all societies.

This thinking revolutionized the debate on the purposes and outcomes of schools and placed the success or failure of students in a new light. The benign, stated purpose of U.S. schooling to serve as an "equalizer" is seriously questioned by these theories. For example, following the logic of this thinking, it is no accident that so many students in urban schools drop out; rather, it is an *intended outcome* of the educational system. That is, some students are intentionally channeled by the schools to be either fodder for war or a reserve uneducated labor force. Schools do just exactly what is expected of them: They succeed at creating school failure.

The arguments of the social reproduction theorists are compelling, and they have had a tremendous impact on educational thinking since the 1970s. However, by concentrating on the labor market purpose of schooling, these theories tend to fall into a static explanation of school success or failure. School life, according to this analysis, is almost completely subordinated to the needs of the economy, leaving little room for the role that students and their communities have in influencing school policies and practices. Put in its most simplistic form, this analysis assumes that schooling is simply imposed from above and accepted from below. But schools are complex and perplexing institutions, and things are not always this neat or apparent.

Economic and social reproduction theories provide a more persuasive analysis of academic failure than either genetic and cultural inferiority or cultural incompatibility theories because they place schools in a sociopolitical context. Nevertheless, these analyses are also incomplete. They can fall into mechanistic explanations of dynamic processes, assuming a simple cause-effect relationship. Such theories fail to explain why students from some culturally dominated communities have managed to succeed in school, or why some schools in poor communities are extraordinarily successful in spite of tremendous odds.

Another problem with economic and social reproduction theories is that, in emphasizing the role of social class, they almost completely neglect gender and race. Social class alone cannot explain why schools are also inequitable for females and for students of racially and culturally subordinated communities.

An additional problem is that the lengthy struggles over schooling in which many communities have been historically involved—including the desegregation of schools, bilingual education, multicultural education, and access to education for females and students with special needs—are not taken into account. If education were simply imposed from above, these reforms would never have found their way, even imperfectly, into the school. Some theorists such as Michael Apple have suggested that schools are a product of conflicts among competing group interests, and that the purposes of the dominant class are never perfectly reflected in the schools, but resisted and modified by the recipients of schooling.¹¹

Economic and social reproduction theories help explain how academic failure and success are not unintended outcomes but rather are logical results of differentiated schooling. They also help remove the complete burden of failure from students, their families, and communities to the society at large, and they provide a macro-analytic, or societal, understanding of schooling. Social reproduction theories, however, generally fail to take cultural and psychological issues into account. They are therefore incomplete.

Cultural Incompatibilities Revisited

Another explanation for school failure is that it is caused by cultural incompatibilities; that is, because school culture and home culture are often at odds, the result is a “cultural clash” that produces school failure. According to this explanation, it is necessary to consider the differing experiences, values, skills, expectations, and lifestyles with which children enter school and how these differences, in being more or less consistent with the school environment, affect their achievement. The more consistent that home and school cultures are, the reasoning goes, the more successful students will be. The opposite is also true. The more that students’ experiences, skills, and values differ from the school setting, the more failure that they will experience.

This explanation makes a great deal of sense, and it explains school failure more convincingly than simple deficit theories. That some students learn more effectively in cooperative settings than in competitive settings is not a problem *per se*. What makes it a problem is that many schools persist in providing competitive environments *only*. Given this reality, cultural differences begin to function as a risk factor. This reasoning turns around the popular conception of “children at risk,” so that the risk comes not from within the child, but develops as a result of particular school policies and practices.

Likewise, the fact that some students enter school without speaking English is not itself a satisfactory explanation for why they fail in school. Rather, the interpretation of their non-English speaking status and the value, or lack of value, given to the child’s native language also matter. Whereas in some schools a student might

be identified as *non-English speaking*, in another school that same child might be called *Khmer speaking*. The difference is not simply a semantic one. In the first case, the child is assumed to be missing language, but, in the second case, the child is assumed to possess language already, even if it is not the majority language. This was the case with my daughter Marisa, as I mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 6. And because language ability is the major ingredient for school success, how schools and teachers perceive children's language is significant.

The cultural mismatch theory is more hopeful than deterministic explanations such as genetic inferiority or economic reproduction theories because it assumes that teachers can learn to create environments in which all students can be successful learners. It also respects teachers as creative intellectuals rather than as simple technicians. Teachers are expected to be able to develop a critical analysis of their students' cultures and to use this analysis to teach all their students effectively. In terms of the kind of knowledge they need to know about their students' realities, the late Paulo Freire eloquently described teachers' responsibility:

Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it.¹²

Gloria Ladson-Billings, in coining the term "culturally relevant teaching," has suggested that this kind of pedagogy is in sharp contrast to "assimilationist teaching," whose main purpose is to transmit dominant culture beliefs and values in an uncritical way to all students. In the same vein, Geneva Gay's work in defining and explicating what she calls *culturally responsive teaching* has also been tremendously significant.¹³

Although the cultural mismatch theory is more comprehensive than the cultural or genetic deficit theories and is without their implicit racist and classist overtones, the cultural mismatch theory, too, is insufficient to explain why some students succeed and others fail. The extraordinarily high dropout rates among American Indian and Alaska Native students, higher than all other racial or ethnic groups in the United States, is a case in point. According to Richard St. Germaine, addressing cultural discontinuities through the curriculum can help, but this strategy alone is only a partial solution because the structural inequality that produces enormous poverty is left untouched.¹⁴

Olga Vasquez, Lucinda Pease-Alvarez, and Sheila Shannon studied the role of language and culture in an immigrant Mexican community. Although they recommend that teachers learn to take advantage of students' linguistic and cultural experiences and their families' resources for learning, their research also led them to conclude that the cultural discontinuities theory alone is inadequate in predicting the school success or failure of an entire group of people. They suggest, for instance, that an emphasis on cultural differences can result in overshadowing other conditions that influence learning, including school climate and teaching styles. In their research, they found a good deal of linguistic and cultural flexibility among the children and families they studied. Some used language in ways similar to middle-class homes, others used language that reflected their Mexican heritage, and some used

unique speech patterns depending on the situation. According to these researchers, the Mexican culture in the United States exists within "an intersection of multiple cultures and languages rather than isolated and impenetrable to outside influences."¹⁵

The research by Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, and Shannon points to a major weakness of the theory of cultural discontinuity: Insufficient attention is given to cultural accommodation or biculturation, just to mention two responses to cultural diversity experienced by immigrants. No culture exists in isolation, and a rigid interpretation of the theory of cultural discontinuity presupposes that all children from the same cultural background experience school in the same way, yet we know this is far from true. The result of this kind of thinking is that individual and family differences, school conditions, or the broader sociopolitical context that can also influence learning may be disregarded. In fact, a rigid interpretation of this theory can hover dangerously close to stereotyped and limiting views of students from particular cultural groups.

Another problem with the cultural discontinuity theory is that it cannot explain why students from some cultural groups are academically successful, even though, by all indications, they should not be. Margaret Gibson's ethnographic research has documented that, although culturally very different from most of their peers, Punjabi students have been quite successful in school.¹⁶ Their grades and high school graduation rates equal or surpass those of their classmates in spite of severe handicaps: Their families are primarily farm laborers and factory workers, and many are illiterate and speak little or no English. They generally have to become fluent in English in nonbilingual settings, very few of them have received any special assistance, and they have been subjected to tremendous discrimination by both peers and teachers. Also, their home values and the values practiced by the school are in sharp contrast. Given this situation, their cultural background should predispose them to school failure. That this is not the case leads us to other explanations, one of which concerns the differences between voluntary and involuntary immigrants.

The Immigrant Experience Versus the "Minority" Experience

A traditional argument to explain differences in academic achievement is that it will take students who are not doing well in school a generation or two to climb the ladder of success, just as it took all other immigrants to do so. This argument is a specious one because the educational and historical experiences of African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Latinos are markedly different from those of other ethnic groups. For one, American Indians, African Americans, and many Mexican Americans can hardly be called new immigrants. Many have been here for generations, and some for millenia. Furthermore, some Asians have been here for four or five generations, and, although many do well in school, others are not as successful.

It is clear that certain peoples represent unique cases of subjugation in U.S. history. This is true of American Indians, who were conquered and segregated on reservations; African Americans, who were enslaved and whose families were torn apart; Mexican Americans, whose land was annexed and who were then colonized within their own country; and Puerto Ricans, who were colonized and whose country is still under the domination of the United States. In addition and probably not incidentally, they are all people of color, and the issue of race remains paramount in explaining their experiences.

In an alternative explanation of school failure and success, John Ogbu developed a theory that goes beyond cultural discontinuities. He has suggested that it is necessary to look not only at a group's cultural background but also at its situation in the host society and its perceptions of opportunities available in that society.¹⁷ Ogbu classifies most immigrants in the United States as *voluntary immigrants*, and racial minority group immigrants as either *voluntary* or *involuntary minorities*, that is, those who come of their own free will as compared with those who were conquered or colonized. The latter groups have been incorporated into U.S. society against their will: American Indians, Africans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans, among others. According to Ogbu, voluntary immigrants include all European and some Asian, African, and Central American immigrants, among others. The distinction is not always easy to make, because those who appear on the surface to be voluntary immigrants may not be so at all, but it remains a crucial distinction in explaining the present condition of many groups, including their educational experiences.

Ogbu has concluded that students from particular backgrounds experience a great variability in academic performance, and such variabilities often can be explained by the sociopolitical setting in which they find themselves. These students are not always racially different from the dominant group in a society, but they have lower social and political status. Other differences may also help explain their marginal status, especially their social class, gender, and native language. It is not their differences that make them marginal but rather the value placed on those differences by the dominant society. Several extensive reviews have documented that socially and politically dominated groups have experienced the most severe academic disadvantage.¹⁸ In Japan, for instance, students of Korean descent and students from the Buraku caste tend to do quite poorly in Japanese schools because both are perceived in Japan as less valued than the majority population. When they emigrate to the United States, however, they are equally successful in school as are students from the Japanese majority. In addition, their IQ scores, a supposedly immutable indication of intelligence, also rise when these children emigrate to another society. Their dominated and devalued status in their home country seems to be the deciding factor because those who are in minority positions in their own countries are not subject to the same castelike status in another society and may, therefore, be more successful in school.

The same phenomenon has been found among Finns, who do poorly in Swedish schools but quite well in schools when they emigrate to Australia. Their history of colonization and subsequent low status in Swedish society seems to be the key ingredient. In New Zealand, the native Maori perform less well in school than immi-

grant Polynesians (who share a similar language and culture), and the Samis in Norway and Irish Catholics in Belfast also do less well than their dominant-group peers.

Similar results have been found closer to home. For example, newly arrived immigrants tend to do better in school and have higher self-esteem than those born in the United States.¹⁹ Their self-esteem and school success depend not just on their ethnicity but also on their interaction with U.S. society and on the strength of the self-concepts they have developed in their home countries, where they are not seen as "minorities." Similarly, some research has concluded that American Indian students, especially in urban settings, are almost completely cut off from their tribal roots, and this has negative consequences both for their self-esteem and for their staying power in school.²⁰ Again, the differences in these situations seem to be the sociopolitical context of schooling.

The visions, hopes, dreams, and experiences of voluntary and involuntary minorities also need to be kept in mind. According to Ogbu, most voluntary minorities have a "folk theory" of school success that sees the United States as a land of opportunity, where one gets ahead through education and hard work. According to this view, even a relative newcomer with few skills and little education can succeed economically. Their children can experience even more success if they work hard in school, largely because they have great faith in the "American Dream." As a result, they apply themselves to achieve it. They understand that, in order to achieve success, they may have to undergo great sacrifices, including racism, economic hardships, and working at several menial jobs at the same time. These are accepted as the price they have to pay for success.

In the case of the Punjabis studied by Gibson, there were few employment and educational opportunities and sometimes even more discrimination in their home country than in the United States. Given their new situation, immigrants such as the Punjabis are happy to make great sacrifices for what they consider to be certain gains. Gibson found that they were more than willing to play the school game by the established rules.²¹ Immigrants coming from war-torn countries or refugee camps, or who have experienced the death of loved ones, may not consider living in an urban ghetto and engaging in backbreaking work to be a severe hardship. Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, for example, documents the extraordinary success of many Central Americans, who go to the same schools and live in the same impoverished and crime-filled neighborhoods as Mexican Americans, but who have been much more unsuccessful in the schools.²²

Ogbu claims that the major problem in the academic performance of children from what he calls "castelike" minorities is not that they possess a different language, culture, or cognitive or communication style. The problem lies instead in the nature of the history, subjugation, and exploitation they have experienced together with their own responses to their treatment. Castelike minorities in the United States tend to perceive schooling as providing unequal returns. In their communities, the children do not see their elders getting jobs, wages, or other benefits commensurate with their level of education.

Also, given the long history of discrimination and racism in the schools, involuntary minority children and their families are often distrustful of the educational

system. Children in these communities have routinely been subjected to what Cummins calls "identity eradication,"²³ where their culture and language have been stripped away as one of the conditions for school success. These negative experiences result in their perception that equal educational opportunity and the "folk theories" of getting ahead in the United States are myths. The "folk theories," however, are readily accepted by immigrants who have not had a long history of discrimination in this country.

It is not unusual for students from castelike minorities to engage in what Ogbu calls "cultural inversion," that is, to resist acquiring and demonstrating the culture and cognitive styles identified with the dominant group. These behaviors are considered "White" and include being studious and hardworking, speaking standard English, listening to European classical music, going to museums, getting good grades, and so on. Instead, involuntary minority students may choose to emphasize cultural behaviors that differentiate them from the majority and are in opposition to it, or what Ogbu calls *oppositional behavior*. Such behaviors include language, speech forms, and other manifestations that help to characterize their group, but that are contrary to the behaviors promoted by the schools.

Even extremely bright students from involuntary minority groups may try just to "get by" because they fear being ostracized by their peers if they engage in behaviors that conform to the mainstream culture. They must cope, in the words of Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, "with the burden of acting White."²⁴ They see little benefit from academic success, at least in terms of peer relationships. Those who excel in school may feel both internal ambivalence and external pressures not to manifest such behaviors and attitudes. In their research in a predominantly African American school, Fordham and Ogbu found that successful students who were accepted by their peers also were either very successful in sports or had found another way to hide their academic achievement. According to Ogbu, involuntary minority parents, who themselves have had a long history of discrimination and negative experiences at school, may subconsciously mirror these same attitudes, adding to their children's ambivalent attitudes about education and success.

Newer Perspectives About the Immigrant and "Minority" Experiences

The theories of John Ogbu and other educational anthropologists who were investigating the schooling experiences of immigrant students appeared together for the first time in the *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* journal in 1987, and they have had a profound influence on educational thought since then.²⁵ These theories have been enormously helpful in explaining the differences in the school experiences of students of various backgrounds. But the theories have also been criticized as being incomplete, ahistorical, and inflexible in allowing for individual differences. For example, Ogbu's theory may result in placing an inordinate responsibility on

students and families without taking into account conditions outside their control that also affect learning. In addition, Ogbu's theories do not explain the long struggle of African American and other involuntary minorities for educational equality, nor do they explain the tremendous faith so many of these communities have had in the promise of public education. His explanation of oppositional culture has been criticized as being dangerously close to the old concept of the "culture of poverty," a deficit theory developed by Oscar Lewis in the 1960s that has left its mark even today and that has been roundly criticized for its racist and ethnocentric overtones.²⁶

In 1997, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* again addressed the issue of ethnicity and school performance, returning to the theories of Ogbu and others that had been introduced a decade earlier. In this issue, the authors attempted to complicate the immigrant/involuntary minority typology presented in the 1987 issue.²⁷ According to Margaret Gibson, the editor of the newer issue, more recent studies in the United States posed a direct challenge to Ogbu's framework, especially because of its inability to account for intragroup variability. That is, why do some "involuntary" minorities do well in school while others do not? Some scholars and educators have found these theories too dichotomous and deterministic. For example, the typology does not neatly fit all groups, such as Mexican Americans, who share elements of both voluntary and involuntary minorities. Another major criticism discussed in the 1997 issue is the almost complete absence of gender and generational differences in the original theories.

Specifically, the newer issue of the journal compared some countries in Europe to countries such as the United States that have large immigrant populations in order to determine whether or not Ogbu's model can be applied in other contexts. Gibson concluded that Ogbu's typology works better in "new nations," that is, traditional immigrant-receiving countries such as the United States, Canada, and Israel, and less well in the "old nations" of Europe that once were colonizers and now are receiving large numbers of immigrants. However, even in the United States, Ogbu's model does not explain generational differences. Recent studies have found that the second generation of "voluntary minorities" is experiencing as much school failure as more established "involuntary minorities" because they do not wholeheartedly accept the "folk theory" of success as did their parents. They are also less likely to perceive the long-term benefits of hard work and study.²⁸

Another criticism has to do with the role and influence of oppositional culture. As viewed by Ogbu, oppositional culture is detrimental to academic success because, in rejecting behaviors and attitudes that can lead to success, students are in effect jeopardizing their own futures. The possibility that African American students could be both oppositional *and* academically successful is not presented as a possibility in this theory. In contrast to this viewpoint, in research with six highly successful African American high school students, Carla O'Connor found that a collective orientation had the effect of facilitating a sense of hope and promoting academic achievement. The six students she studied were acutely aware of racism and other injustices, and they were oppositional to the extent that they actively resisted injustice. Their opposition, however, did not mean that they rejected the strategies they needed to become successful students.²⁹

O'Connor concluded that opposition is not always damaging to students. When

it leads to the active resistance of oppression, it can actually motivate students to learn so that they can change. Likewise, David Gillborn, who has studied youths of various backgrounds in Great Britain, suggests that the dichotomy between resistance and conformity is too simplistic because it overlooks the great complexity of students' responses to schooling. That is, accommodation does not guarantee that success will follow, nor is it the only way to be academically successful; similarly, opposition does not necessarily lead to failure.³⁰

To understand this process more clearly, I now turn to a consideration of the concept of resistance.

Resistance Theory

Resistance theory, as articulated by scholars such as Henry Giroux, Jim Cummins, and others adds another layer to the explanation of school failure.³¹ According to this theory, *not-learning* what schools teach can be interpreted as a form of political resistance. Frederick Erickson maintains that, whereas cultural differences may cause some initial school failures and misunderstandings, it is only when they become entrenched over time that *not-learning*, a consistent pattern of refusing to learn, becomes the outcome of schooling.³²

Resistance theory is helpful because it attempts to explain the complex relationship of disempowered communities and their schools. Students and their families are not only victims of the educational system but also actors. They learn to react to schools in ways that make perfect sense, given the reality of the schools, although some of these coping strategies may in the long run be self-defeating and counterproductive. Herb Kohl, describing *not-learning* as the response of students who refuse to learn, has concluded, "Over the years I've come to side with them in their refusal to be molded by a hostile society and have come to look upon not-learning as positive and healthy in many situations."³³

There are numerous examples of students' resistance, and they range from innocuous to dangerous: inattention in class, failure to do homework, negative attitudes toward schoolwork, poor relationships with teachers, misbehavior, vandalism, and violence are all illustrations of students' resistance. We see many of these manifestations of resistance in the case studies of Ron Morris and Paul Chavez that follow this chapter. Ron, for example, stated that he would actually decide *when* he was going to be destructive in school. He did this, he said, because he was not learning anything new, and what he did learn mattered little in his daily life.

Students who develop a critical consciousness may also end up resisting education. Such students are often branded and punished as loudmouths and troublemakers. Although some drop out, others choose to no longer actively participate in the "game" of school. They might still show up, but they may adopt a passive or passive-aggressive stance. Others end up cutting many of their classes. Students who do continue entering the classroom may "dumb down" their own critical responses to the curriculum or to their teachers' pedagogy because they know instinctively that being seen as too critical or too much of a leader is potentially dangerous. Teachers, on the other hand, are often frustrated by appar-

ently disinterested youth, even in honors classes, who look bored and disengaged, or who allow themselves to engage only minimally and only with the more interesting and inventive strategies used by creative teachers. As a result, many capable and critically aware students are intellectually "on strike" even though they may be physically present in school.³⁴

An extreme form of refusing education is dropping out. Michelle Fine's study of a large urban school found two major reasons for students' decisions to leave: a political stance of resistance and disappointment with the "promise of education." Many of the students she spoke with were articulate in their resistance to school; even some of those who stayed were unsure what benefits they would derive from their education.³⁵ In the past decade, we have seen a small number of other extreme and deadly ways of refusing to participate in schools (Colombine, Colorado, and Paducah, Kentucky, come to mind). Although such violent displays of rage are rare, they are a warning that something is terribly wrong, not just in schools but also in families and society in general.

But what causes students to resist education and otherwise engage in behaviors that might ultimately jeopardize their chances of learning? There is no simple answer to this question, but one probable element is a school climate that rejects students' identities. This is nowhere more evident than in the case studies that follow this chapter. Both Ron and Paul were eloquent in describing the difference it made when their backgrounds were reflected in the curriculum. The first time Ron found his people in the curriculum, his reaction was to want to come to school every day because, as he said, "This is real!"

The nature of teachers' identities is also important. For example, in his research among Yup'ik students and teachers, Jerry Lipka found that resistance was virtually nonexistent, and he concluded that resistance theory "makes much less sense in a classroom where the teacher is your uncle or your aunt and where most of the school employees come from your community."³⁶ This being the case, what are the implications for students of culturally dominated backgrounds? Does it mean that they always need to be taught by teachers from their own cultural communities? This response might be appropriate in some situations, but it is untenable and unrealistic in others. Moreover, believing this to be the case would imply that teachers can never be successful with students of backgrounds different from their own. This is not true, as we have seen in much of the literature cited, and as you will also see in the case studies of Ron and Paul, both of whom had some caring and respectful teachers who did not share their ethnicity. Further, in a society that claims to be democratic and pluralistic, believing that only teachers of particular backgrounds can teach students of the same background is unacceptable. A more comprehensive view of students' academic success or failure is needed.

Care

Another essential component in promoting student learning that has received great attention in the past decade is what Nel Noddings has called the "ethic of care."³⁷ Noddings's impressive contribution to the conversation concerning student engage-

ment with schooling cannot be overemphasized. For her, care is just as important—and in some cases, even more so—than larger structural conditions that influence student learning. In this theory, whether and how teachers and schools care for students can make an immense difference in how students experience schooling. Angela Valenzuela, in a three-year investigation of academic achievement among Mexican and Mexican American students in a Texas high school, provides compelling examples of care among a small number of teachers.³⁸ Teachers showed they cared through close and affirming relationships with their students, high expectations for students' capabilities, and respect for their students' families. This was the case in spite of the general context of the school that provided what Valenzuela called "subtractive schooling," that is, a process that divested students of the social and cultural resources they brought to their education, making them vulnerable for academic failure. Her research led Valenzuela to locate the problem of "underachievement" not in students' identities or parents' economic situation but in school-based relationships and organizational structures. Nilda Flores-Gonzales, in a study among Latino students in Chicago, came to similar conclusions.³⁹ For both of these researchers, care was of remarkable significance.

The problem is that educators sometimes think of caring as outward shows of affection—something that teachers might find difficult or even inappropriate. Hugging students, however, is not the only way to demonstrate care. I remember the case of a parent who once described a teacher who loved her students but did not hug them. "She loves them with her eyes!" she explained. She went on to say that this teacher also loved her students with her encouragement, her demands, and her expectations. Hence, *care* does not just mean giving students hugs or pats on the back. Care means loving students in the most profound ways: through high expectations, great support, and rigorous demands.

Another example comes from Susan Roberta Katz in research done among Central American and Mexican immigrant students in a California high school. Exploring the tensions between these students and their teachers, she found striking differences in the perceptions of each. Although teachers felt they were doing their best under difficult circumstances, students described these same teachers as racist and uncaring. Katz's analysis was that students' perceptions may have been linked to structural conditions in the school such as rigid ability tracking and high teacher turnover, conditions that assisted in making the possibility of consistent caring relationships remote. She found that both caring and high expectations were essential in fostering positive learning outcomes. Specifically, Katz concluded:

High expectations can result in setting goals that are impossible for the student to reach without adult support and assistance. On the other hand, caring without high expectations can turn dangerously into paternalism in which teachers feel sorry for "underprivileged" youth but never challenge them academically.⁴⁰

A further example comes from a study that also focused on students of Mexican descent in California. Here, too, the climate of the educational program was found to influence students' engagement with learning. In this migrant education program, researchers Margaret Gibson and Livier Bejinez discovered that staff members facili-

tated students' learning in various ways: caring relationships, access to institutional support, and activities based on students' cultural backgrounds. The researchers concluded that caring relationships were at the very heart of the program's success. Specifically, in spite of students' vulnerable status (including their migrant status, poverty, and the fact that only 7 percent had parents who had completed high school), there was a remarkably high degree of school persistence. Nearly halfway through their senior year, an amazing 75 percent were still attending high school. As in other research highlighted here, the researchers explain "caring" not just as affection but as close and trusting relationships that, most importantly, create a sense of *belonging* in the school community. This sense of belonging is especially meaningful, they conclude, for Mexican American and other students of color because of the power differential that exists between them and people of the dominant society. Specifically, Gibson and Bejinez state that "students who feel they can bring their whole selves to school and have their multiple identities affirmed, or at the very least allowed, are more likely to feel they belong in school and are more likely to engage with the schooling process than those who do not."⁴¹

Another theory closely connected with the ethic of caring is described by Ricardo Stanton-Salazar as a *social capital networks framework*. This theory focuses on the centrality of social relations and networks between adults and youth, particularly vulnerable youth who rarely have access to the social capital that more privileged students take for granted. According to Stanton-Salazar, these networks function to reproduce or deny privilege and power. In the end, Stanton-Salazar argues, it is through the power of institutional agents, such as teachers, counselors, and other adults who can manipulate the social and institutional conditions in and out of school, that can determine who "makes it" and who doesn't. What exactly are the kinds of networks and institutional supports to which he refers? As examples, he cites various kinds of knowledge, including particular discourses and social capital: *bridging* (i.e., providing access to gatekeepers and to other opportunities usually closed to disenfranchised students), advocacy, role modeling and emotional and moral support, and advice and guidance.⁴² These supports are linked with caring because it is only through trusting and close relationships with teachers that some students will gain access to such networks. Through these networks, students can learn to "decode the system" and to participate in power at the same time that they continue to honor their identities. In turn, these networks provide students with the skills and resources they will need to navigate the broader society successfully.

Developing a Comprehensive Understanding of Student Learning

No simple explanation accounts for student achievement or failure. As we have seen in this chapter, most explanations have been inadequate or incomplete. Some have failed to consider the significance of culture in learning; others have not taken into

account the social, cultural, and political context of schooling; and still others have placed all the responsibility for academic failure or success on students and their families. Even the persistence of racism and discrimination, the presence of unjust policies and practices in schools, or the role that schools play in reproducing existing societal inequities do not by themselves explain school failure.

Broad societal structures, for instance, make a difference in student learning. Newer perspectives concerning the education of new and old immigrant groups of color in the United States have emerged in the past several years, and they add significantly to our understanding of the achievement of these groups. For example, Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut, in a series of long-term, comprehensive studies of immigrant families of various backgrounds, conclude that the process of "growing up American," in their words, "ranges from smooth acceptance to traumatic confrontation depending on the characteristics that immigrants and their children bring along and the social context that receives them."⁴³ Portes and Rumbaut found that race is a paramount factor in whether and how groups are accepted into the mainstream, and it can overpower the influence of other factors such as social class, religion, or language. In addition, the context of their arrival is also consequential.

Portes and Rumbaut suggest that immigrants fleeing from communism are received more favorably than those fleeing economic exploitation. As examples, they cite the case of Haitian, Nicaraguan, and Mexican immigrants, who have significantly lower earnings than Cubans and Vietnamese, even after controlling for level of education, knowledge of English, and occupation. Also, no matter how long they have been here, the earnings of Mexicans, Nicaraguans, and Haitians remain flat, while those of Vietnamese and Cubans increase for each additional year of residence in the United States. Portes and Rumbaut come to this astonishing conclusion: "Hence, no matter how educated a Mexican or Haitian parent is, his or her chances of moving ahead economically are significantly constrained by the social environment in which his or her group has become incorporated."⁴⁴ Thus, for these groups, a college degree yields no improvement in earnings. This conclusion flies in the face of conventional wisdom that education equals economic advancement. Clearly, other factors—race, context of incorporation, and others—are at work here.

Even in the face of these larger structural conditions, however, the school context *can* make a difference. Underachievement, as Jim Cummins has suggested, is also the result of the interactions between teachers, students, and their families.⁴⁵ When teachers respect and affirm the identities and experiences of students and their families, they also change the nature of the interactions they have with them, and this can help promote student achievement. In the case studies of both Ron and Paul, the staff's closeness with students and their families has paid off in the students' growing association with school and learning.

Also, how students and communities *perceive* and *react* to schools is another consideration in explaining school achievement. However, in spite of the perceptions and reactions of particular groups to schools, there are always individual exceptions. Not all African American students, even those from economically oppressed communities, fail; some do not see school success as "acting White;" likewise, not all voluntary immigrants are successful in school. Unless we look at indi-

vidual cases as well as at entire groups, we fall into rather facile, but not always accurate, explanations of failure. These can lead to stereotypes and inappropriate educational expectations.

School climate makes a difference in other ways as well. When teachers and schools believe their students are capable learners and they create appropriate learning environments for them, young people are given a clear and positive message about their worth and abilities. The policies and practices of schools, and the hopes and expectations they have for students, are also key variables in explaining student academic achievement. In Paul's case study, you will see the positive effect that participating in developing the school rules had on him. In the case of Ron, he characterized the curriculum in his former schools as meaningless because it "is not gonna let us know who we really are as people." On the other hand, he described the curriculum in his new school as respecting his identity and experiences.

Looking beyond just cultural and social class characteristics as determining school achievement can be empowering because it means that teachers and schools can do something about student learning. As we saw in Chapter 4, school characteristics that make a positive difference include an enriched and more demanding curriculum, respect for students' languages and cultures, high expectations for all students, and encouragement of parental involvement.

Reforming school structures alone will not lead to substantive improvement in student achievement, however, if such changes are not accompanied by profound changes in what we believe students deserve and are capable of learning. In short, changing policies and practices is a necessary but insufficient condition for improving academic achievement. As we have seen in the discussion about care, the nature of the relationships among students, teachers, and schools also matter a great deal. This is where the issue of caring and mentoring matter most.

Learning environments that may seem at first glance to be totally culturally inappropriate for some students can in fact be effective. The so-called "Catholic school effect" is a case in point. In some ways, nothing seems more culturally incompatible for African American and Latino students than a Catholic school. Bilingual programs are usually unavailable; classes tend to be overcrowded; and formal environments that stress individual excellence over cooperation are common. In spite of these conditions, Catholic schools have been successful environments for many Latino and African American children, especially those from poor communities. The literature points to the fact that Catholic schools, because of restricted resources, tend to offer all students a less differentiated curriculum, less tracking, and more academic classes. They also have clear, uncomplicated missions and strong social contracts.⁴⁶ What may at first glance appear to be incongruous in terms of cultural compatibility is explained by school structures that imply high expectations for all students.

This discussion leads us to the conclusion that school achievement can only be explained by taking into account multiple, competing, and dynamic conditions: the school's tendency to replicate society and its inequities, cultural and language incompatibilities, the unfair and bureaucratic structures of schools, the nature of the relationships among students, teachers, and the communities they serve, and the po-

litical relationship of particular groups to society and the schools. It is tricky business, however, to seek causal explanations for school success and failure. How numerous complex conditions are mediated within the school and home settings can also explain students' academic success or failure. All of these conditions help explain in a more comprehensive way the massive school failure of many students. This is the sociopolitical context of multicultural education, and it forms the basis for the conceptual framework that has been developed here.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have explored a number of theories regarding conditions that influence school failure and success. The deficit theories popularized in the 1960s were responsible for much of our educational policy during that time and into the present. These theories assumed that children from families whose cultural backgrounds differed from the majority, or from poor neighborhoods, were either genetically or culturally inferior to culturally dominant children from the middle class.

An alternative explanation developed during the 1970s was that schools were responsible for school failure because they reproduced the economic and social relations of society and, therefore, replicated structural inequality. During this time, the cultural mismatch theory was also developed. According to this theory, schools are unsuccessful with a substantial number of students because there is a mismatch between their home cultures and the culture of the school. The argument by John Ogbu and others that there is a crucial distinction between caste-like minorities and immigrant minorities was developed during the late 1970s. This theory argues that cultural differences alone cannot explain the differential school achievement of distinct "minority" groups.

Resistance theory has also helped us understand that students and their families are frequently engaged in some form of resistance to the education to which they are exposed. Resistance may be either passive or active, and it may have consequences that are counterproductive to the interests of the students who engage in it. Alternatively, resistance can lead to a critical awareness of structural inequality and a desire to succeed academically in order to make change, as we shall see in both case studies that follow this chapter.

Finally, the significance of caring relationships among students and their teachers has taken on great significance in the recent past. There is a growing awareness of the tremendous difference that teachers—and the school climate in general—can make in the lives and futures of young people. Teachers and schools that affirm students' identities, believe in their intelligence, and accept nothing less than the best have proven to be inspirational for young people, even if they live in otherwise difficult circumstances. In fact, the case can be made that such relationships are *even* more important in these cases.

I have attempted to develop a comprehensive view of school achievement by providing an analysis and critique of a number of theories. It is clear that no single explanation of academic achievement is sufficient to explain why some students

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succeed in school and others fail. Rather, we need to understand school achievement as a combination of *personal, cultural, familial, interactive, political, relational, and societal* issues, and this means understanding the sociopolitical context in which education takes place.

THOUGHTS TO THINK ABOUT

- ◆ What did William Ryan mean by “culturally depriving schools”? Can you give some examples?
- ◆ Think of your own students. How accurate do you think John Ogbu’s classification of voluntary and involuntary minorities is? Consider both the advantages and disadvantages of this theory.
- ◆ Think about schools and classrooms with which you are familiar. Have you noticed examples of *student resistance*? If so, what are they, and what is their effect?
- ◆ You and a group of your colleagues need to determine why a particular student has been doing poorly in your classes. What will you look at? Why?

ACTIVITIES FOR PERSONAL, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL LEARNING

- ◆ If you teach in an elementary school, plan a visit to the homes of your students to get to know their families. Use the occasion to find out about the children—what they like and what motivates them to learn. Ask the families about some of the culturally enriching activities they are engaged in with their communities. If you teach in a middle or high school where you teach too many students to make home visits feasible, ask students to describe some of the activities they do with their families. How can you use what you’ve learned to create a more culturally affirming classroom?
- ◆ Think about a teacher who has made a difference in your life. Try to get in touch with her or him. Tell that person how he or she influenced you, and ask for advice on how you can have the same impact on your students. What can you learn from this for your own teaching?
- ◆ Get together with a group of colleagues to discuss how students in your school display “resistance behaviors.” What exact behaviors are they? Are these behaviors getting in the way of their engagement with school? If so, what can you do about them? You may also want to visit one another’s classrooms to lend a pair of “fresh eyes” to the situation. Decide on a plan of action for your classrooms, and come together again to talk about the results.

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