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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Educational achievement of ethnic minorities

Panagiota Sotiropoulou

University of Patras (Greece)/University of Bristol (UK)

Abstract

The educational achievement of ethnic minorities has been a matter of great concern for a long time. Several studies show that students from certain ethnic minority groups underachieve when compared to the majority student population. The cultural misalignment between school and home culture faced by some ethnic minority students is cited, amongst others, as a reason for their underachievement. While cultural elements have not been sufficient to fully explain the underachievement of ethnic minorities, this poster will attempt to show that they play a major role in this phenomenon. We argue that no simplistic answer can be given to the question of whether ethnic minority students are bound to achieve poorly in an educational system that does not reflect their culture. A presentation of both theoretical claims and empirical examples will serve to offer and expound upon the suggestion that ethnic minority students tend to perform poorly, when their culture is not reflected in the schooling process. However, what can be stated more or less unequivocally is that the absence of representation of ethnic minority cultures in an educational system plays a negative role in these minorities' achievement.

Keywords: *ethnic minorities, achievement, representation, culture*

Introduction

A basic tenet of democracy is that all children, independent of ethnic or cultural background, should be able to achieve their full educational potential (DFES, 2003, p. 4). However, many students hailing from ethnic minority backgrounds still seem to lack this opportunity (ibid). Several studies show that students from certain ethnic minority groups underachieve, when compared to the majority student population (Strand, 2013; Modood, 2005a, 2005b; Luciak, 2004; NAEP, 2007). This deviation in educational attainment between ethnic minorities and the majority has constituted a matter of great concern for traditional multicultural settings, such as the USA (beginning in 1960s) and the UK (beginning in the 1970s), for several years. In the intervening years the cultural misalignment between school and home culture faced by some ethnic minority students is cited, amongst others, as a reason for their underachievement (Erickson, 1993; Ogbu, 1996; Vogt et al, 1993; Modood, 2005a; Gibson, 2000, p. 73). While cultural elements have not been sufficient to fully explain the underachievement of ethnic minorities, this essay will attempt to show that they play a major role in this phenomenon.

Research Question

Do ethnic minorities perform poorly in an educational system if it does not reflect their culture?

Defining terms

Culture: a broad and complex concept that shapes both individuals' behavior and their practices; which 'consists of the values, traditions, social and political relationship and worldview created, shared and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and/or religion' (Nieto, 2000, p. 139).

Ethnic Minority: a) a group of people which originate from a different cultural and societal background than the one they currently live in (Kahanec, Zaiceva & Zimmermann, 2010, p. 5); b) people bound to each other with and differentiated from the majority population by 'myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of a common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity' (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996, p. 6); c) share a minority group status, entailing 'a history of race or ethnic relations, a history that has affected interpersonal interactions, expectations, and performances' (Sue, 1996, p. 8); and d) do not necessarily comprise a homogenous group (Dobbernack & Modood, 2011, p. 21).

Educational system: is 'the system of formalized transmission of knowledge and values operating within a given society' (Social Science Dictionary, 2008). The operation of this system is regulated by state policies. These policies in turn define the content of knowledge and the kind of values transmitted, as well as the norms according to which both students and teachers should behave.

Looking at various factors

Salient Point: Every child coming to school has his/her own unique experiences on which teaching is supposed to build on – it's on this that learning begins.

Root of the Problem

Liberal democratic ideals claim that the educational system, like every other civic setting, is and should remain neutral (Schlesinger, 1992; as cited by May, 1999, p. 18). However, this ideal neutrality is by no means supported by even the simplest empirical observation. As many of critics of liberalism claim, the civic realm reflects the interests of the dominant group in any given society (Young, 1993, p. 133; May, 1999, p.18). As many researchers

claim, this is also the case for education, as educational systems reflect the dominant culture and its norms (May, 1999, p. 31; Delpit, 1988/2004, p. 227). The choice to exclude the cultures of ethnic minorities from the educational process communicates the message that these cultures are unimportant, inappropriate and of lower value (ibid). An educational process choosing this exclusion cannot help but be based on the premise of a hidden curriculum established to 'promote the acceptance and perpetuation of existing social structures' (Ricento & Cervatiuc, 2012, p. 21). In other words, under such circumstances, education will act so as to produce citizens of a minority status out of ethnic minority students. Rather than embracing their difference and trying to unlock their potential, the system will judge them as de facto low achievers.

A single measure of achievement for all

In an educational system not reflecting their culture, minority students' achievement may be crucially influenced by their lack of (host nation majority population) cultural capital (May, 1999, p. 31). This means that if ethnic minority children's knowledge does not correspond to the linguistic and cultural competencies that the educational system holds as prerequisites for success, minority students will be negatively evaluated (Terry & Irving, 2010, p. 116; Mortimer et al, 2010, p. 109). Furthermore, it is important to note that developmental competence is strictly bound to cultural manifestations (Bowman, 1994, p. 14). This means that specific behaviours, potentially tied to a cultural heritage and ethnically traditional learning scheme, correspond to different levels of developmental maturity (ibid). Standardised tests are used to evaluate students rather than cross-cultural development factors.

Role of standardised tests

The criteria regularly used by schools to judge students' competence are the results of standardised tests. As Vang (2006, p. 23) presents, such tests include language codes and make assumptions that are unknown by many if not most minority students. Students' answers are based on their experiences, which in turn reflect their cultural heritage. Thus, if the evaluator does not bear in mind the cultural relativity factor involved, ethnic minority students' answers may be evaluated as wrong (Terry & Irving, 2010, pp. 115-6).

Where do teachers factor into the equation; comprehension and communication?

Teachers bring their worldviews into the classroom, as based upon their prior experiences as teachers as well as members of society. But as Bowman (1986; as cited by Bowman, 1994, p. 15) mentions, when teachers and students 'do not share common experiences or hold common beliefs about the meaning of experience, they are apt to misunderstand culturally encoded interchanges' (also Darling-Hammond et al, 2003, p. 106). In this way it becomes

apparent that teachers' biased behaviour towards ethnic minority students, may be unintentional, based simply on incomplete or incompatible social and cultural experience.

Teachers believe that the discourse practices they use in class are 'culturally universal'. However, 'manner of speaking' and the schema through which it is both understood and shaped are culturally specific (May, 1999, p. 31). So, if ethnic minority students are not familiar with the cultural and linguistic standards of school's dominant culture, they will fail to effectively communicate with and make themselves understood by their teachers.

Two cases to illustrate the point:

CASE 1: Terry & Irving (2010, p. 116) present the manner in which African American children can be poorly evaluated in linguistic competence simply because they are accustomed to the use of contextualised language (Vernon-Feagans et al, 2001; as cited by Terry & Irving, 2010, p. 116). Succinctly, in an educational system that only praises the use of decontextualised language in both oral and written narratives; African American students will do worse than their white counterparts simply because their narrative style is devalued (ibid).

CASE 2: Heath (1983; as cited by Darling-Hammond et al, 2003, pp. 112-3) explained how teachers unfairly evaluated African American students as delayed or less able learners, based on the fact that they did not reply to questions with obvious answers (e.g. How many fingers do I have?). As she indicates, such questions do not have a place in African American culture, where questions are made only when the answer is genuinely unknown to the person posing the question. Consequently, African American students offer no response to simplistic questions, as they are convinced that teachers already know the self-evident answer. In contrast, such questions were a part of everyday life for children of a white middle-class background. Teachers, lacking this cultural awareness and being confined to white middle-class children as their sole benchmark, attributed their African American students' behaviour as a developmental disorder.

When difference is perceived as deficit, ethnic minority children can easily be mistaken for disabled learners (Bowman, 1994, p. 15). Accordingly, Burnette (1998) claims that ethnic minority children have a disproportionately higher chance of being placed in special education programs. Luciak (2004) states ethnic minority children's overrepresentation as a factor accounting for their poor educational achievement in EU countries. As Terry & Irving (2010, p. 118) point out, teaching instruction inappropriate to one's ability can lead to underachievement as well as decreased motivation and participation in the schooling process. Thus, placement of ethnic minority children in such classes based on inappropriate or false criteria can hinder their educational progress.

Teachers' cultural bias

It is not only the educational system as a whole, but also individual teachers who have their own archetypal ideal of what they consider a successful student (Mortimer et al, 2010, p. 109). This archetype is used so as to divide students into those corresponding to the ideals standards and those diverging from them (Mortimer et al, 2010, p. 109). If this ideal archetype's standards are based upon the dominant culture and fail to recognise diversity as a positive prospect, teachers will, by extension, identify ethnic minority children as bound to fail (Bowman, 1994, p. 15). Valdes (1996) tells us that teachers are prejudiced against ethnic minority children because they fail to meet their expectations of the ideal of the successful student. Consequently, educators are persuaded that such students have lower educational potentials and expect them to achieve poorly or worse (as cited by Mortimer et al, 2010, p. 109).

Not a causal relationship

The relevant literature also provides several examples of ethnic minority students performing well, even in educational systems not reflecting their culture.

Specifically, Chinese rather than achieving poorly, outperform majority students and the rest of their peers in every school grade in both the UK (Dustman et al, 2008; Modood, 2005, 2003; Wilson et al, 2006) and the USA (Fryer & Levitt, 2004, 2006). The same is true of Indians (Dustman et al., 2008; Modood, 2005a, 2005b; Wilson et al. 2006; Bradley & Taylor, 2004). Related implications have been made for Africans, who, according to Modood (2005, p. 302), appeared to be the most frequent holders of higher educational credentials in the UK. According to Modood (2005b, p. 302-3) what accounts for the better educational paths of those groups are the strong aspirations they have concerning education as the fundamental means of social mobility. Those aspirations can be fostered by the family environment as well as by the community (ibid). These two seem to suggest that there is at least one generalised subset of ethnic minority student who is unaffected by, or at least able to overcome, such difficulties as may be provided by an educational system indifferent to culture. It appears that this subset is characterised by an overwhelming drive toward educational excellence as a means of social mobility. However, this subset has philomathia as an inextricable part of their culture, and thus, would make any educational system an ipso facto reflection of a core element of their culture, distinguishing them from the ethnic minorities who do not have this as part of their culture.

Conclusion

It appears that, to a greater or lesser extent, many but not all ethnic minorities tend to perform poorly in an educational system if it does not reflect their culture. An educational system by default reflects, represents and aims to reproduce the culture of the dominant, majority culture that dictates its standards and practices. In many cases, these educational

systems fail to take into account cultural attributes of their ethnic minorities, excluding such students from a neutral educational environment which would offer them equal educational opportunities and passing onto them feelings of exclusion, possibly inequality and almost certainly unfair judgment. An educational system which does not take into account minority students' cultures will also, almost invariably unfairly evaluate them, based on standards that do not take into account their heritage, as evidenced by frequent negative outlooks for ethnic minority students based upon their marks in culturally biased standardised tests.

The teachers' role as a potential deterrent for poor academic achievement of minority students is critical. Lack of cultural awareness and its relevant expressions can lead to miscommunication between teachers and their students. In such cases, cultural differences in written or spoken language are often interpreted as developmental delay, and may lead to erroneous placement in special education programs. This, in turn acts as a catalyst for further poor educational achievement of ethnic minority students. Moreover, teachers lacking relevant cultural education can misinterpret culturally encoded behavior as a sign of disrespect, leading to disciplinary action, fostering anti-school behavior. Finally, in some cases, teachers' cultural biases lead them to have lower academic expectations of students from certain ethnic minorities, placing them in lower ability environments. Instruction provided in those settings, lacking both in quality and quantity, almost invariably leads to a lower academic path.

To answer the initial question: No simplistic answer can be given in the question of whether ethnic minority students are bound to achieve poorly in an educational system that does not reflect their culture as ethnic minorities are not a single, either individually, nor as a whole, homogenous group, thus making generalisations dangerous, at best. However, what can be stated, is that the representation of ethnic minority cultures in an educational system does play a role in these minorities' achievement.

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