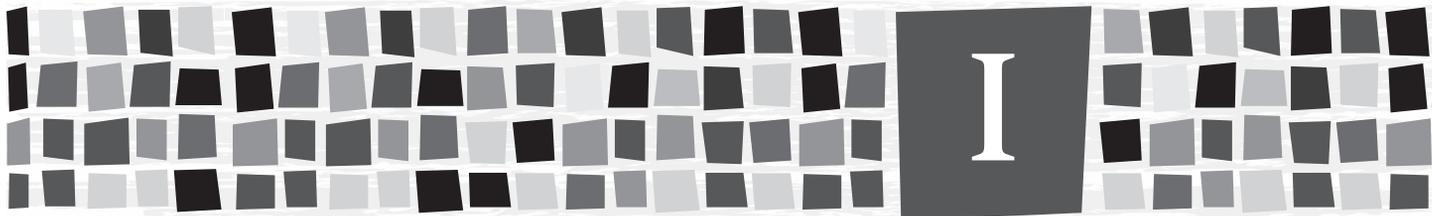
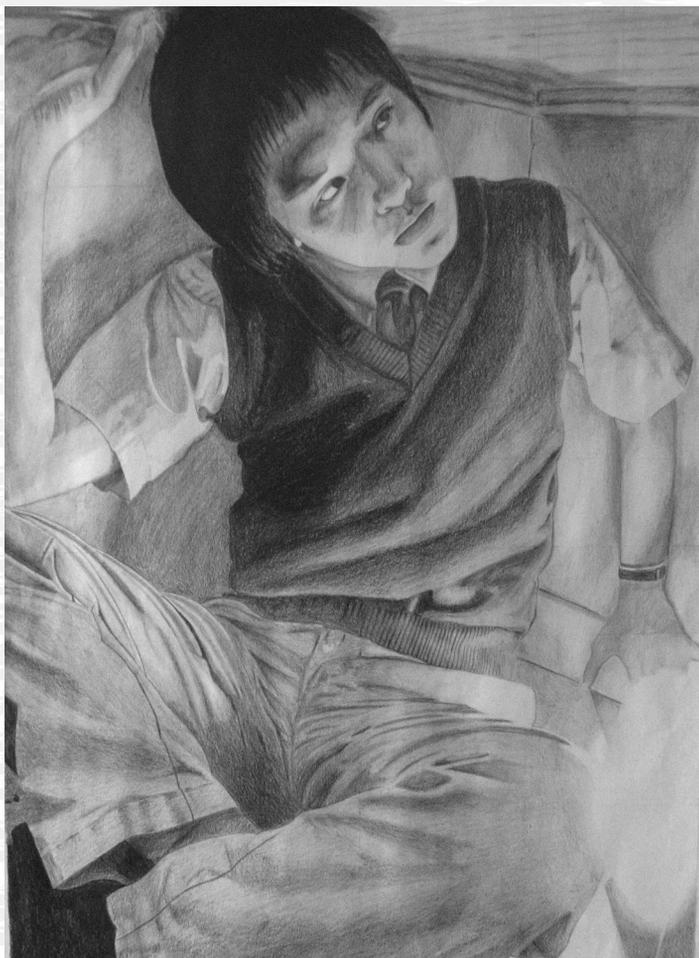


# Affirming Diversity



# Setting the Stage

## Multicultural Education Within a Sociopolitical Context

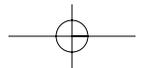


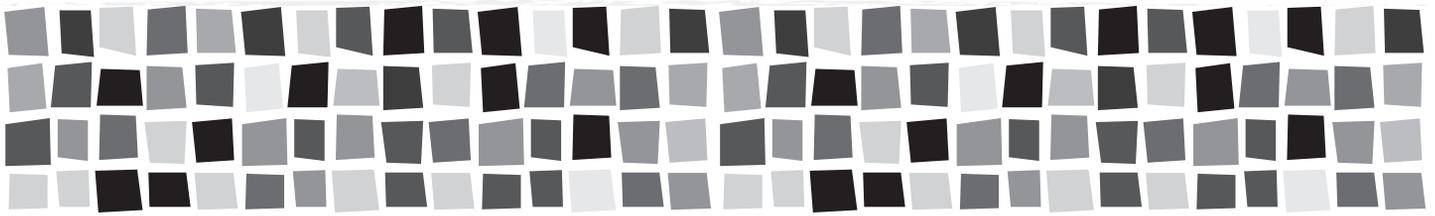
*“At its best, multiculturalism is an ongoing process of questioning, revising, and struggling to create greater equity in every nook and cranny of school life . . . It is a fight for economic and social justice. . . . Such a perspective is not simply about explaining society; it is about changing it.”*

—*Rethinking Schools*

15, no. 1 (Fall 2000)

Picha Choopojcharoen, in Catherine Lea’s art class at Bishop Feehan High School, Attleboro, Massachusetts. *Self-portrait*. Graphite drawing, 2010.





To set the stage for understanding multicultural education within a broad societal context, and to help you think about the implications of this context for students of diverse backgrounds, the two chapters in Part 1 introduce a number of foundational concepts. In Chapter 1 we describe key assumptions that undergird this text and define what we mean by the *sociopolitical context of education*. Chapter 1 also introduces other fundamental definitions and parameters of multicultural education and then presents demographic data about both the general population and the population in U.S. schools, with implications of these data for education. We briefly describe a key approach we have employed in this text, namely, the use of *case studies* and *snapshots* that reflect some of the tremendous diversity that currently exists in our schools.

Using the discussion in Chapter 1 as a foundation, Chapter 2 defines *multicultural education* and describes its essential components. Because we view multicultural education as far more than simply altering the curriculum to reflect more Brown and Black faces or adding assembly programs on diversity, Chapter 2 provides examples of what we mean by a *critical* multicultural perspective.

## 1

# Understanding the Sociopolitical Context of Schooling

Decisions made about education are often viewed as if they were politically neutral. Yet as we hope to make clear in this chapter and throughout the text, such decisions are never politically neutral. Rather, they are tied to the social, political, and economic structures that frame and define our society. The *sociopolitical context* of society includes laws, regulations, policies, practices, traditions, and ideologies.

*“Desegregated schools . . . offer the single most powerful way to reach and prepare the coming generation, which will be the first to live in an America that is truly multiracial and has no racial majority group. It is imperative that we take feasible steps to foster and sustain integration and to deal with the deeply rooted harms of segregation.”*

—Gary Orfield,

*Reviving the Goal of an Integrated Society:  
A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenge, 2009*

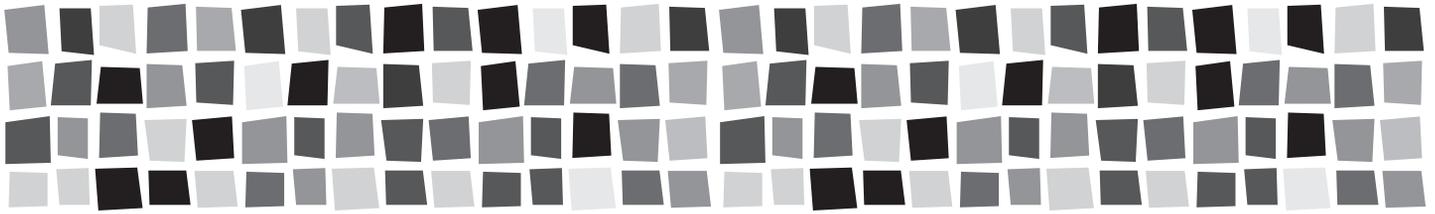
To put it another way, multicultural education, or any kind of education for that matter, cannot be understood in a vacuum. Yet in many schools, multicultural education is approached as if it were divorced from the policies and practices of schools and from the structures and ideologies of society. This kind of thinking often results in misguided practices such as a singular focus on cultural artifacts like food and dress, or on ethnic celebrations

that exaggerate exotic attributes of groups. It can become “fairyland” multicultural education, disassociated from the lives of teachers, students, and communities. This is multicultural education *without* a sociopolitical context. In this book, however, we are interested in how the sociopolitical context of the United States, and indeed of our global society, shapes schools and therefore also shapes the experiences of the children and adults who inhabit schools.



## Assumptions Underlying this Text

It is important that we begin by clarifying four major assumptions underlying the concepts described in this book. These assumptions advance our goals to (1) connect



identity, difference, power, and privilege; (2) include many differences in multicultural education; (3) counter the argument of “teachers as villains;” and (4) defend quality public education.

### **Identity, Difference, Power, and Privilege Are All Connected**

Race, ethnicity, social class, language use, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and other social and human differences are major aspects of the sociopolitical context that we will address in this book—that is, one’s identity frames (although it does not

necessarily *determine*) how one experiences the world. Identities always carry some baggage; they are perceived in particular ways by a society and by individuals within that society. Language identity as interpreted by a spoken accent, for instance, may invoke positive or negative images, depending on one’s social class, race, country of origin, and variety of language. As a consequence, in the context of U.S. society, someone who is French and speaks with a Parisian accent, for example, is generally viewed more positively than someone from Senegal who also speaks French.

Yet multicultural education does not simply involve the affirmation of language, culture, and broader aspects of identity. Multicultural education not only affirms issues of identity and difference but also assertively confronts issues of power and privilege in society. This means challenging racism and other biases as well as the inequitable structures, policies, and practices of schools and, ultimately, of society itself. Affirming language and culture can help students become successful and well-adjusted learners, but unless language and cultural issues are viewed critically

through the lens of equity and the power structures that impede the goals of social justice, these perspectives are unlikely to have a lasting impact in promoting real change. Making explicit connections among identity, difference, power, and privilege can move education toward such transformation.

### **Multicultural Education Is Inclusive of Many Differences**

This book’s framework and approach to multicultural education are broadly inclusive: They are based on the belief that multicultural education is for *everyone*



Larsan Gobeh Korvili, in Catherine Lea’s art class at Bishop Feehan High School, Attleboro, Massachusetts.

*The Face of Success.* Batik & Mixed Media, 2010. Printed here in respectful memory of Larsan, 1993–2010.

regardless of ethnicity, race, language, social class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or other differences. Multicultural education as a field and in practice is not directed at only one group or certain kinds of students. One book, however, cannot possibly give all of these topics the central importance they deserve. For that reason, this book *uses race, ethnicity, and language as the major lenses* to view and understand multicultural education. While we address other differences in one way or another, we give special emphasis to these. The inceptions of both multicultural and bilingual education were direct outgrowths of the civil rights movement, and they developed in response to racism (discrimination based on race), ethnocentrism (discrimination based on ethnicity and national origin), and linguicism (language discrimination) in education. These inequities continue to exist, especially for American Indian, Latino, African American, Asian and multiracial youngsters, and they are central to this book's perspective and approach.

Nevertheless, we believe that multicultural education includes everyone, and we have made an attempt in this text to be inclusive of many differences. Having a broad definition of multicultural education raises another dilemma. One reason that multicultural education is such a challenging topic for some educators is that they have a hard time facing and discussing the issues of race and racism. For example, whenever we bring up racism with a group of predominantly White teachers, we find that, too often, they want to move on immediately to, say, sexism or classism without spending much time on racism. Sexism and classism are certainly worthy of study and attention—in fact, they must be part of a multicultural agenda, and many books are dedicated to those topics—but the discomfort of many White teachers in talking about race and racism is very evident. Racism is an excruciatingly difficult issue for many people. Given our nation's history of exclusion and discrimination, this is not surprising, but it is only through a thorough exploration of *discrimination based on race* that we can understand the genesis as well as the rationale for a more inclusive framework for multicultural education that includes language, social class, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, religion, and other differences. For these reasons, this book aims to include all students and all teachers in these challenging yet hopeful discussions.

### Teachers Are Not the Villains

Another belief that informs this book's perspective and approach is that teachers cannot be singled out as the villains responsible for students' academic failure. Although some teachers bear responsibility for having low expectations because they are racist and elitist in their interactions with students and parents and thus provide educational environments that discourage many students from learning, most do not do this consciously. Most teachers are sincerely concerned about their students and want very much to provide them with the best education possible. Nonetheless, because of their own limited experiences and education, they may know very little about the students they teach. As a result, their beliefs about students of diverse backgrounds may be based on spurious assumptions and stereotypes. These things are true of all teachers, not just White teachers. In fact, a teacher's identity from a non-White ethnic group or background does not guarantee that he or she will be effective with students of diverse backgrounds or even with students

of his or her own background. Teachers are often at the mercy of decisions made by others far removed from the classroom; they generally have little involvement in developing the policies and practices of their schools and frequently do not even question them.

Teachers also are the products of educational systems that have a history of racism, exclusion, and debilitating pedagogy. As a consequence, their practices may reflect their experiences, and they may unwittingly perpetuate policies and approaches that are harmful to many of their students. We cannot separate schools from the communities they serve or from the context of society in general. Oppressive forces that limit opportunities in the schools reflect such forces in the society at large. The purpose of this book is not to point a finger, but to provide a forum for reflection and discussion so that teachers take responsibility for their own actions. The book aims to support teachers in their efforts to assert their intellectual and creative prowess in challenging the actions of schools and society that affect their students' education, and in helping bring about positive change.

### Quality Public Education Is a Cause Worth Fighting For

Another key assumption of this book is that public education that ensures all students full participation in a democratic society is worth defending and fighting for. In spite of all its shortcomings, and although it has never lived up to its potential, public education remains a noble ideal because it is one of the few institutions that at least articulates the common good, even if it does not always achieve it. Public education remains the last and best hope for many young people for a better life. Yet the public schools have often been a target of scorn and disrespect in the press and among politicians. In spite of this, the public still believes in the promise of public education. The *Public Education Network* conducted a public opinion survey that reported on voter concerns about major issues facing our nation and local communities. A substantial majority of voters agreed that every child has a right to a quality public education and that we owe it to our children to provide them with one (93 percent and 97 percent agree in both cases).<sup>1</sup> The California Teachers Association noted that in the June 2010 primary elections, in a state suffering widespread repercussions of the economic downturn, voters endorsed candidates who supported public education through local taxes and school bonds.<sup>2</sup> Given this unambiguous and overwhelming support for public education, it is clear that public schools can provide all children with a good education and it is within the ability of teachers, administrators, and the public at large to ensure that they do so.



### Defining the Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education

Now that we have explained some of the assumptions underlying this text, we want to define what we mean by the *sociopolitical context of education*. As you will see in the remainder of this chapter, understanding this terminology and the research that undergirds it is crucial to the critical view of multicultural education asserted throughout our book. In what follows, we illustrate five significant tasks of understanding the

sociopolitical context: (1) clarifying the goals and key terms of multicultural education; (2) dissolving myths about immigration and difference; (3) naming the social, economic, political, and ideological underpinnings that influence educational structures; (4) studying the current demographic “mosaic” of our nation; and (5) examining the political struggles of legislation and policy in public education.

### **Clarifying Goals and Terms of Multicultural Education**

Depending on one’s conceptualization of multicultural education, different goals may be emphasized. In this book, we want to make clear from the outset how we define the goals and key terms of multicultural education, the first task of understanding the sociopolitical context. The major premise of this book is the following: *No educational philosophy or program is worthwhile unless it focuses on the following three primary goals:*

- Tackling inequality and promoting access to an equal education
- Raising the achievement of all students and providing them with an equitable and high-quality education
- Providing students with an apprenticeship in the opportunity to become critical and productive members of a democratic society

#### ***Tackling Inequality and Promoting Access to an Equal Education***

We believe that multicultural education must confront inequality and stratification in schools and in society. Helping students get along, teaching them to feel better about themselves, and sensitizing them to one another are worthy goals of good educational practice, including multicultural education. But if multicultural education does not tackle the far more thorny questions of stratification and inequity, and if viewed in isolation from the reality of students’ lives, these goals can turn into superficial strategies that only scratch the surface of educational failure. Simply wanting our students to get along with and be respectful of one another makes little difference in the life options they will have as a result of their schooling. Students’ lives are inexorably affected by economic, social, and political conditions in schools and society—that is, by the sociopolitical context in which they live and learn—and this means that we need to consider these conditions in our conceptualization and implementation of multicultural education. (Further elaboration on the terms *equality* and *equity* is provided in this section under “Defining Key Terms in Multicultural Education.”)

#### ***Raising Achievement of All Students***

*Learning* is an equally central goal of multicultural education. Unless learning is at the very core of a multicultural perspective, having “feel-good” assemblies or self-concept-building classroom activities will do nothing to create equitable school environments for students. Considering the vastly unequal learning outcomes among students of different backgrounds, it is absolutely essential that achievement of all students through an equitable and high-quality education be placed at the center of multicultural education. (See the subsequent discussion of the “achievement gap”

under “Defining Key Terms in Multicultural Education.”) Otherwise, if they are not receiving a high-quality, rigorous education, too many young people will continue to face harrowing life choices.

### ***Providing Apprenticeships As Critical and Productive Members of a Democratic Society***

Learning to take tests or getting into a good university cannot be the be-all and end-all of an excellent education. A third and equally crucial goal of multicultural education is to *promote democracy by preparing students to contribute to the general well-being of society, not only to their own self-interests*. Multicultural educator Will Kymlicka has asserted this goal of providing apprenticeships in the following way: “We need to continually remind ourselves that multiculturalism is not just about expanding individual horizons, or increasing personal intercultural skills, but is part of a larger project of justice and equality.”<sup>3</sup> (This is further discussed in the section on “Social Justice” under “Defining Key Terms in Multicultural Education.”)

### **Defining Key Terms in Multicultural Education**

In addition to asserting these goals, the first task of understanding the sociopolitical context also includes defining key terms. These definitions help explain the approach we use in this book and support the three primary goals listed above. These four key terms include: (1) equal and equitable, (2) social justice, (3) the “achievement gap,” and (4) deficit theories.

#### ***Defining Equal Education and Equitable Education: What’s the Difference?***

Two terms often associated with multicultural education are *equality* and *equity*, which are sometimes erroneously used interchangeably. Both equal education and educational equity are fundamental to multicultural education, yet they are quite different. As educator Enid Lee has explained, “Equity is the process; equality is the result.”<sup>4</sup> That is, *equal education* may mean simply providing the same resources and opportunities for all students. While this alone would afford a better education for a wider range of students than is currently the case, it is not enough. Actually achieving educational equality involves providing an *equitable education*. *Equity* goes beyond equality: It means that all students must be given the *real possibility of an equality of outcomes*. A high-quality education is impossible without a focus on equity. Robert Moses, who began the highly successful Algebra Project that promotes high-level math courses for Urban Black and Latino middle school and high school students, has advanced that quality education for all students is a civil rights issue.<sup>5</sup> The work of Moses exemplifies what James Banks calls “equity pedagogy,” which he includes in his description of *five dimensions* of multicultural education. Banks explains that an equity pedagogy exists when teachers modify their teaching to include a variety of teaching styles and approaches that are consistent with the wide range of learning styles and cultural groups.<sup>6</sup> In summary, *equal* education implies we are giving every student the *same* thing and an *equitable* education provides students with what they *need to achieve equality*.

## About Terminology

### What Should We Call People?

Language is always changing. It is a key barometer of a society at any given time because it mirrors social, economic, and political events. Terms in a language may become obsolete; it could not be otherwise because language is a reflection of societal changes. Throughout the years, the shift in terminology related to groups of people (for example, from *Negro* to *Black* to *Afro-American* and more recently to *African American*) is a case in point. Such changes often represent deliberate attempts by a group to name or rename itself. This decision is political as well as linguistic, and it responds to the need for group self-determination and autonomy. Terms also evolve as an attempt to be more precise and correct. In this sense, the term *African American* implies an identity that includes culture rather than only color. It recognizes that the notion of race, in spite of its significance in a society rigidly stratified along these lines, is not accurate and does not capture the complexity of a people. On the other hand, the term *Black* is more comprehensive because it includes people of African descent from all around the world. Recently, more inclusive terms such as *African Diaspora* or of *African heritage* have been used as well. It is not that one term is always right or wrong, but rather that various terms may be appropriate depending on the situation. This is why we need to think carefully about the context before we use any particular term.

Terminology is particularly important in multicultural education. In our society, we have not always been appropriate or sensitive in our use of words to describe people. In its most blatant form, this insensitivity is apparent in the racial and ethnic epithets that even our youngest children seem to know and use. In more subtle ways, words or expressions take on connotations that may seem positive but in the end may categorize an entire group of people. Such is the case, for instance, with *Blacks* and *rhythm*, or with *Asians* and *science*. Although words per se may not be negative, they can become code words for stereotyping or belittling the experience of an entire group of people and, hence, are disparaging.

### How We Made Choices about What Terms to Use in this Book

Language carries great weight in education because it affects the lives of students. As educators, we need to be careful about what terms we use and how because our choices may send negative messages that can have long-term effects. Therefore, we need to pay close attention and be sensitive to the connotations and innuendos of our talk.

We generally use terms related to specific ethnic backgrounds; however, if an overarching term is needed for so-called minorities, we prefer to use *people of color*. The term *people of color* encompasses those who have been labeled *minority*, that is, American Indians, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, and it emerged from these communities themselves. It also implies important connections among the groups and underlines some common experiences in the United States. We prefer the term *people of color* because *minority* is a misnomer; it is never used to describe groups such as Swedish Americans, Albanian Americans, or Dutch Americans, although, strictly speaking, these groups, which represent

numerical minorities in our society, should also be referred to in this way. Historically, the term has been used to refer only to racial minorities, implying a status less than that accorded to other groups. Conversely, using the term *people of color* might imply that Whites are somehow colorless, yet as we know, almost everyone is mixed, including many Europeans. In fact, some individuals who identify as people of color may actually be lighter in color than some European Americans, reinforcing the fact that such terms are political rather than descriptive.

The term *people of color* is not without its problems, however. In spite of the wide acceptance of the term and its use by many people (and by us in this book), we find it increasingly unsatisfactory on several counts. One problem is the implication of a common historical experience among all groups and individuals included under this designation. Aside from a mutual history of oppression at the hands of those in power (not an insignificant commonality), a shared historical experience among these disparate groups is an illusion. A presumed common experience also suggests that there is no conflict among these groups. As we know, such conflicts not only exist; they have resulted in periodic outbreaks of serious interethnic violence. These have emanated not only from a shared oppression and the competition for scarce resources that result from political domination, but also from deep-seated cultural and social differences among the groups themselves.

*People of color* is also inaccurate when referring, for example, to Latinos of European background, as is the case with many Argentines and Cubans, and light-skinned Latinos in general. When these Latinos refer to themselves in this way, they risk implying that they have experienced the same level of virulent racism as their darker-skinned compatriots.

The point we want to make throughout these segments is that language is always tentative, as are the terminology choices we have made here. New terms evolve every day. Language can capture only imperfectly the nuances of who we are as people, and like multicultural education itself, it is in constant flux. Such is the inexactitude of language that it can never completely capture the complexity of our lives. To be both sensitive and appropriate in the use of language, we prefer some words or terms over others. We are not suggesting that the terms we have chosen to use are “politically correct” or that they are the only ones that should be used, nor do we want to impose our usage on others. Rather, in the About Terminology features throughout the text, we explain our thinking to help you reflect on and decide what terminology is most appropriate for you to use in your context.

Our choice of terms used in this book is based largely on the answers to two questions:

1. What do the people themselves want to be called?
2. What is the most accurate term?

The terms used stem from the answers to these questions, based on our conversations with people from various groups, our reading of current research, and our listening to debates regarding the use of terms.

### ***Defining Social Justice***

Frequently invoked but rarely defined, *social justice* is another term associated with an equitable education. In this book, we define it as *a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity*. On a societal scale, this means affording each person the real—not simply a stated or codified—opportunity to achieve her or his potential and full participation in a democratic society by giving each person access to the goods, services, and social and cultural capital of a society, while also affirming the culture and talents of each individual and the group or groups with which she or he identifies.

In terms of education, in particular, social justice education is not just about “being nice” to students, or about giving them a pat on the back. Nor does a social justice curriculum merely ask students to make posters about “their favorite social issue.” Social justice education includes four components:

1. It challenges, confronts, and disrupts misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences. This means that teachers with a social justice perspective consciously include topics that focus on inequality in the curriculum, and they encourage their students to work for equality and fairness both in and outside the classroom.
2. A social justice perspective means providing all students with the resources necessary to learn to their full potential. This includes *material resources* such as books, curriculum, financial support, and so on. Equally vital are *emotional resources* such as a belief in all students’ ability and worth, care for them as individuals and learners, high expectations of and rigorous demands placed on them, and the necessary social and cultural capital to negotiate the world. It also includes a school environment safe from discrimination. These are not just the responsibilities of individual teachers and schools, however. Beyond the classroom level, achieving social justice requires reforming school policies and practices so that all students are provided an equal chance to learn. This entails critically evaluating policies such as high-stakes testing, tracking, student retention, segregation, and parent and family outreach, among others.
3. Social justice in education is not just about *giving* students resources, however. A third component of a social justice perspective is *drawing on* the talents and strengths that students bring to their education. This requires embracing critical pedagogy and a rejection of the deficit perspective that has characterized much of the education of marginalized students to a shift that views all students—not just those from privileged backgrounds—as having resources that can be a foundation for their learning. These resources include their languages, cultures, and experiences.
4. A fourth essential component of social justice is creating a learning environment that *promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change*. Creating such environments can provide students with an apprenticeship in democracy, a vital part of preparing them for the future. Much more will be said throughout the text about how to create such a learning environment.

These four components of social justice in education are woven throughout the remaining chapters of the book.

### *Defining the “Achievement Gap”*

Another term that needs defining is *achievement gap*. This term has evolved over the past couple of decades to describe the circumstances in which some students, primarily those from racially, culturally, and linguistically marginalized and low-income families, achieve less than other students. Although research has largely focused on Black and White students, the “achievement gap” is also evident among students of other ethnic and racial backgrounds such as Latino and American Indian students.<sup>7</sup>

The problem with the term *achievement gap* is that it suggests that students alone are responsible for their learning, as if school and societal conditions and contexts did not exist. The result is that the problem is defined as a “minority” problem rather than as a problem of unequal schooling. For all these reasons, we use the term *achievement gap* with caution and always in quotation marks.

Yet there is no denying that the “achievement gap” is real: In 2009, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that White students had higher scores than Black students, on average, on all assessments. While the nationwide gaps in 2007 were narrower than in previous assessments at both grades 4 and 8 in mathematics and at grade 4 in reading, White students had average scores at least 26 points higher than Black students in each subject, on a 0–500 scale.<sup>8</sup> Reports on Hispanic student achievement are also dispiriting overall. Patricia Gándara’s research reveals that by fourth grade, 16 percent of Latino students are proficient in reading, compared to 41 percent of White students, with a notably similar pattern at the eighth grade level, where only 15 percent of Latinos are proficient in reading compared to 39 percent of Whites.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the gap between African American, American Indian, Hispanic, and some Asian (particularly Laotian and Cambodian) students compared to White students remains very large. Specifically, the gap is the equivalent of two grade levels or more, almost what it was in 1992. For example, while 41 percent of Whites are reading at grade level, only 15 percent of Hispanics and 13 percent of African Americans are at grade level. The gap worsens through the years: Black and Hispanic twelfth graders perform at the same level in reading and math as White eighth graders.<sup>10</sup> The gap is not only deplorable but is also an indictment of our public education system.

In spite of the fact that the “achievement gap” is a reality, sometimes this term is a misnomer because it places undue responsibility on students alone. As a result, we believe that what has become known as the *achievement gap* can also appropriately be called the *resource gap*, the *opportunity gap*, or the *expectations gap* because student achievement does not come out of the blue but is influenced by many other factors—that is, student achievement is related directly to the conditions and contexts in which students learn. For instance, because some schools are well endowed in terms of materials and resources, the students in these schools have multiple means to help them learn. On the other hand, schools that serve students living in poverty tend to have fewer resources and frequently employ more inexperienced teachers, and thus they provide fewer opportunities for robust student learning.

Gloria Ladson-Billings has argued that the focus on school performance gaps is misplaced and that what must be considered are the historical, economic, socio-political, and moral components of racial stratification that have accumulated over time, amounting to what she has dubbed the “education debt.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite the struggle over appropriate terminology, research on the “achievement gap” cannot be ignored because it has uncovered salient differences in the learning outcomes for students of various backgrounds. According to Joseph D’Amico, the two major causes of the “achievement gap” are *sociocultural* and *school-related factors*. Sociocultural factors include poverty, ethnicity, low level of parental education, weak family-support systems, and students’ reactions to discrimination and stereotyping.<sup>12</sup> School-related factors include low expectations, particularly in schools that serve students who are both economically disadvantaged and from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds, as well as other practices and policies that jeopardize student learning.

A common response among educators and the public has been to focus on the first set of factors (that is, on sociocultural “problems” and “deficits”) more than on school-related factors. Turning this thinking around would be a better policy because educators can do little to change the life circumstances of students but can do a great deal to change the context of schools. For example, some schools are successful with students of color, students living in poverty, and students who live in difficult circumstances. What makes the difference? Karin Chenoweth’s recent book, *How It’s Being Done: Urgent Lessons from Unexpected Schools* (2009), provides examples from eight different schools throughout the nation that were selected for the Education Trust’s Dispelling the Myth Award, which is given to high-achieving, high-poverty, and high-minority schools. Chenoweth’s research shines a light on successful school practices such as teachers’ and administrators’ collaborative work to set standards and goals, as well as their notable, palpable belief in their students’ capacity to achieve. She refers to these schools as “ruthlessly organizing themselves around one thing: helping students learn a great deal.” These schools also focus on eliminating teacher isolation by providing time for teacher learning through research-based discussions, which in turn spawns teacher collaboration that expands successful practices to create a collective culture of high achievement for teachers and students.<sup>13</sup>

Chris Zurawsky also examined several school models and programs that have proven consistently successful for most students of color. These programs share two common traits: a demanding curriculum and a strong social support system that values and promotes academic achievement. Zurawsky’s research underscores that a rigorous curriculum is not enough. Attention also must be given to the social environment. The role of significant people in students’ lives who communicated their value of academic success and effort were evident in the successful programs cited in his study. For elementary students, this translates into committed parental involvement. For older students, the support network expands to include peer groups and mentors.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, addressing school-related issues alone will not completely do away with the “achievement gap” because life experiences and conditions such as poverty play a large part in the differential learning of students. Paul E. Barton and Richard J. Coley

synthesized many research studies and reported on 16 “correlates of achievement” that fall into three categories: school factors, factors related to the home-school connection, and factors that are present both before and beyond school.<sup>15</sup> Recently, this argument has been made convincingly by several noted scholars, including Jean Anyon, who cites a wealth of research and other data to come to the following chilling conclusion:

Thus, in my view, low-achieving urban schools are not primarily a consequence of failed educational policy, or urban family dynamics, as mainstream analysts and public policies typically imply. Failing public schools in cities are, rather, a logical consequence of the U.S. macroeconomy—and the federal and regional policies and practices that support it.<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, in a comprehensively researched article on the effects of poverty on learning and achievement, David Berliner makes the argument that out-of-school factors (OSFs) caused by poverty *alone* place severe limits on what can be accomplished through educational reform efforts. He points out that “[i]n the U.S. today, too many OSFs are strongly correlated with class, race, and ethnicity, and too many children are in schools segregated by those very same characteristics.”<sup>17</sup> His conclusion is that, to improve our nation’s school achievement, a reduction in family and youth poverty is essential. Berliner’s recommendation to address the impact of poverty on schooling reflects the complexity and urgency of the problem. He includes the following 11 efforts:

1. Reduce the rate of low-birth-weight children among African Americans
2. Reduce drug and alcohol abuse
3. Reduce pollutants in our cities and move people away from toxic sites
4. Provide universal and free medical care for all citizens
5. Ensure that no one suffers from food insecurity
6. Reduce the rates of family violence in low-income households
7. Improve mental health services among the poor
8. More equitably distribute low-income housing throughout communities
9. Reduce both the mobility and absenteeism rates of children
10. Provide high-quality preschools for all children
11. Provide summer programs for the poor to reduce summer losses in their academic achievement.<sup>18</sup>

The suggestion that poverty and other social ills negatively affect learning is unsettling and a reminder that schools alone cannot tackle the inequality and stratification that exist in society. Richard Rothstein, an economist who has studied this issue extensively, has also suggested that school reform efforts alone will not turn things around. He advocates three approaches that must be pursued if progress is to be made in narrowing the “achievement gap”: (1) promoting school improvement efforts that raise the quality of instruction; (2) giving more attention to out-of-school hours by implementing early childhood, after-school, and summer programs; and (3) implementing policies that would provide appropriate health services and stable housing and narrow the growing income inequalities in our society. He contends that

only by implementing all these measures would poor children be better prepared for school.<sup>19</sup>

Although it is true that the “achievement gap” is strongly related to poverty, race and ethnicity are also prominent issues to consider in understanding the gap. Joseph D’Amico found that the gap may be even greater among students of color with *high* socioeconomic status. In addition, he found that, although the “achievement gap” between Black and White students was reduced by about half between 1970 and 1988, there has been a marked reversal of this trend since 1988, no doubt due to the retrenchment for the support of the education of children through federal and state policies.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the “achievement gap” can be found in high school dropout rates. Researcher Gary Orfield has cited a few hundred high schools in the nation—all overwhelmingly “minority,” low income, and located in urban centers—where the dropout rate has reached catastrophic proportions. He calls these high schools “dropout factories.” According to Orfield, the dropout rate of African American and Latino students is a civil rights crisis because it affects these communities disproportionately. Less money per student is spent in these “dropout factories” than in schools in other areas—sometimes a difference of over \$2,000 less per student.<sup>21</sup> In his recent research, Orfield points to failed policies of the recent past that have dismantled civil rights policies and calls for “reviving the goal of an integrated society.”<sup>22</sup> The facts that these resegregated “dropout factories” are, for the most part, located in economically strapped communities that serve African American and Latino students, that they employ more inexperienced teachers than those in wealthier districts, and that less money is spent in them cannot be dismissed as coincidence.<sup>23</sup> This is also a significant part of the sociopolitical context of education.

### ***Deficit Theories and Their Stubborn Durability***

Why schools fail to meet their mission to provide all students with an equitable and high-quality education has been the subject of educational research for some time. As the “achievement gap” grows, theories about cultural deprivation and genetic inferiority are once again being used to explain differences in intelligence and achievement, and the implications of these deficit theories continue to influence educational policies and practices. Deficit theories assume that some children, because of genetic, cultural, or experiential differences, are inferior to other children—that is, that they have deficits that must be overcome if they are to learn. There are many obvious problems with such hypotheses, one being that they place complete responsibility for children’s failure on their homes and families, effectively absolving schools and society from responsibility. Whether the focus is on the individual or the community, the result remains largely the same: blaming the victims of poor schooling rather than looking in a more systematic way at the role played by the schools in which they learn (or fail to learn) and by the society at large. All these factors need to be explored together.

Another problem with deficit theories is their focus on conditions that are outside the control of most teachers, schools, and students. Deficit theories foster despair in educators because they suggest that students’ problems are predetermined and thus there is no hope for changing the circumstances that produced them in the first place. Teachers

and schools alone cannot alleviate the poverty and other oppressive conditions in which students may live. It is far more realistic and promising to tackle the problems that teachers and schools *can* do something about by providing educational environments that encourage all students to learn. This is why school policies and practices and teachers' attitudes and behaviors, rather than the supposed shortcomings of students, are the basis for the kinds of transformations suggested in this book.

### Dissolving Myths About Immigration and Difference

The second major task of understanding the sociopolitical context of multicultural education emphasizes that immigration is not a phenomenon of the past. It remains one of today's most contentious issues and offers a particularly vivid example of the sociopolitical context, despite its mythological influence on U.S. identity and social ideologies. The current contention is graphically illustrated by legislation such as S.B. 1070, Arizona's law of 2010.<sup>24</sup> One of the strictest measures in years. Even though U.S. District Judge Susan R. Bolton suspended portions of the law while a federal lawsuit challenges its constitutional integrity, this and similar legal struggles illustrate the fervor of anti-immigration sentiment across the nation. President Obama decried Arizona S. B. 1070, which he said threatened "to undermine basic notions of fairness that we cherish as Americans."<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, media reports scream about "illegal aliens" and electric fences along the U.S.–Mexico border, and describe self-appointed vigilante Minutemen adamant about guarding our borders, albeit illegally. Many families entering the United States as refugees—who arguably deserve the greatest amount of support and most sincere welcome—may find their children in schools where they endure mockery and intimidation regarding many aspects of their lives, including clothing, food, language, religious observance, and family structure. These oppressive acts and attitudes apparently stem from a certain amount of the sad and ironic social amnesia surrounding the protected, legal status of refugees, which was defined in 1951 by the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. According to the formal definition of a refugee in article 1A of that convention, a refugee enters the United States legally for protection from persecution "for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." While refugee status was initially limited to protecting European refugees after World War II, the concept of a refugee was expanded by the convention's 1967 protocol and by regional conventions in Africa and Latin America to include persons who had fled war or other violence in their home country. It is worth noting that while European refugees after World War II were not universally welcomed on U.S. soil, the experiences of more recent groups of people of color entering the United States, such as El Salvadorans, Cambodians, Somalians, and Sudanese, have sometimes been punctuated by racially motivated atrocities.

Negative individual perspectives and social ideologies about immigrants, especially those from Latin America, Asia, and Africa, often influence school policies and practices. It is critical for school curriculum and teacher education programs to

underscore that the United States is not just a nation of past immigrants (who are often romantically portrayed) but also a nation of new immigrants who daily disembark on our shores, cross our borders, or fly into our metropolitan areas and are deserving of full participation in a democratic society.

Yet romantic myths about U.S. immigration die hard, and these myths influence some teachers' views of students and their families. For example, the widely accepted notion that immigrants came to North America and "made it," never to return to their countries of origin, is not entirely true. According to Irving Howe, one-third of European immigrants who came to the United States between 1908 and 1924 eventually made their way back home, thus shattering a popular myth.<sup>26</sup> In addition, and in spite of common assumptions to the contrary, most European immigrants did *not* succeed academically. In his research, Richard Rothstein found that, during the immigration period from 1880 to 1915, few Americans succeeded in school, least of all immigrants; immigrants of all backgrounds did poorly.<sup>27</sup> Instead, it was the children and grandchildren of European immigrants who fared well in school, but the myth that first-generation immigrants "made it," at least in terms of academics, is firmly established in the public psyche. Because schools have traditionally perceived their role as that of an assimilating agent, the isolation, rejection, and failure that have frequently accompanied immigration have simply been left at the schoolhouse door.

Facing the ugly fact that U.S. history is also steeped in conquest and slavery, or forced immigration, is essential in developing a multicultural perspective and understanding its sociopolitical context. Millions of descendants of Africans, American Indians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and others colonized within and beyond U.S. borders have experienced political and economic oppression and, in schools, disparagement of their native cultures and languages. But the history of racism and exploitation experienced by so many of our people is rarely taught. Instead, conventional curricula and pedagogy have been based on the myth of a painless and smooth assimilation of immigrants, thereby contributing to the stubborn infrastructure that perpetuates institutionalized racism.

The research reported in our book argues that we need to make the history of all groups visible by making it part of the curriculum, instruction, and schooling in general. By highlighting the complexities of struggle and survival, we do not aim to cast a negative pall on all of U.S. history. Rather, multiple perspectives about the immigrant experience highlight the frailty as well as the heroism in current and historic events. The words of the students in the case studies and snapshots included in this book provide eloquent testimony for the need to do so.

These student examples throughout the book provide a critical understanding of immigration and colonization experiences, which are significant points of departure for our journey into multicultural education. This journey needs to begin with teachers, who themselves are frequently uninformed about or uncomfortable with their own ethnicity. By reconnecting with their own backgrounds and with the suffering as well as the triumphs of their families, teachers can lay the groundwork for their students to reclaim their histories and voices. This book invites you to cultivate a critical perspective on these issues unencumbered by mythology and romanticism.



## What You Can Do

### Explore Your Own Heritage and the Heritage of Others

No matter what subject matter you teach in schools, your perspectives on American history and of your own heritage influence the ways in which you view your students' heritages and cultural identities. Reading some books and viewing videos that offer points of view often overlooked or covered up in traditional American history books can expand your understanding of your ancestors' experiences *and* the experiences of others. You can approach this as a personal goal for summer reading or by pacing these books throughout the school year.

Allow yourself some introspective time by keeping a journal, a sketchbook, or a blog about your thoughts and questions that bubble up in this journey into rethinking historical understandings. Another approach is to create a teachers' reading group with a cluster of colleagues. Recruit your teacher-friends to develop a book club to discuss your reflections about your own histories and the histories of your colleagues and students. Pay particular attention to the ways in which common

assumptions or previously held beliefs are challenged by these well-researched texts. Suggested books and videos: *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* by Ronald Takaki (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008), with a video on BookTV.org at <http://www.booktv.org/Watch/10271/In+Depth+Ronald+Takaki.aspx>; *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present* by Howard Zinn (New York: Harper, 2005); *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, Second Edition, edited by Howard Zinn and Antony Arnoe (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009). For film resources, see a documentary called *The People Speak*, produced by the History Channel from the texts edited by Howard Zinn, that weaves archival footage and reenactments of speeches performed by many popular celebrities; it can be found at <http://www.history.com/shows/the-people-speak>. Also, for inspiration, resources, and guidance for teachers using these ideas in the classroom, see Zinn Education Project at <http://www.zinnedproject.org>.

## Naming the Underpinnings of Educational Structures

The third task of defining the sociopolitical context of multicultural education names the ideologies underlying educational structures. These exemplify how the sociopolitical context is operational at the school level. Schools' and the larger society's assumptions about people form a belief system that helps create and perpetuate structures that reproduce those assumptions. For example, if we believe that intelligence is primarily inherited, we will design schools that support this belief. On the other hand, if we believe that intelligence is largely created by particular social and economic conditions, our schools will look quite different. Likewise, if we believe that some cultures are inherently superior to others, our schools will replicate the cultural values that are assumed to be superior while dismissing others.

At a personal level, we take in the ideologies and beliefs in our society and we act on them—*whether we actively believe them or not*. In the case of the ideology of racism, for example, Beverly Daniel Tatum has aptly described racism as “smog in the air.”

Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in. None of us would introduce ourselves as “smog-breathers” (and most of us don’t want to be described as prejudiced), but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air?<sup>28</sup>

The “smog” is part of the sociopolitical context in which we live and in which schools exist. This context includes not only racism but also other biases based on human and social differences, including social class, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and other factors. Pretending that the smog doesn’t exist, or that it doesn’t influence us, is to negate reality. A good example can be found in school funding: In their yearly report on funding of public schools, the Education Trust has consistently shown that low-income students and students of color are badly short-changed by most states, proving once again that race and social class still matter a great deal in our nation. In their 2010 report, the Education Trust argued that Congress could promote funding equity within school district budgets if the political will was demonstrated by closing loopholes in the comparability provisions of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.<sup>29</sup> Another investigation by the Center for Reinventing Public Education reveals how school funding policies have consistently given more resources to students who already have more, and less to those who have less.<sup>30</sup> The *Christian Science Monitor* found that the difference in annual spending between the wealthiest and the poorest school districts has grown to a staggering \$19,361 per student.<sup>31</sup> Surely, no one can pretend that this difference does not matter.

### ***School-Level Policies and Practices***

School funding is generally a state- and district-level issue. How does the sociopolitical context affect policies and practices at the school level? Let’s take a very concrete example: States that mandate that their schools enforce an “English-only” policy are, unwittingly or not, sending students a message about the status and importance of languages other than English. In some of these schools, students are forbidden to speak their native language not only in classrooms, but even in halls, the cafeteria, and the playground. To students who speak a language other than English, the message is clear: Your language is not welcome here; it is less important than English. (From a multicultural perspective, it goes without saying that if your language is not welcome, your affiliation with your family and culture are also not welcome.) While the policy may have been well intentioned and created out of a sincere effort to help students learn English, the result is deprecation of students’ identities, intentional or not. In some instances, these kinds of policies are not innocent at all but instead reflect a xenophobic reaction to hearing languages other than English in our midst. In either case, the result is negative and an example of how ideologies help create structures that benefit some students over others.

Another obvious example is the curriculum: If the content of school knowledge excludes the history, science, art, culture, and ways of knowing entire groups of people, these groups themselves are dismissed as having little significance in creating history, science, art, culture, and so on. The sociopolitical context also undergirds other school policies and practices, including pedagogy, ability grouping, testing,

parent outreach, disciplinary policies, and the hiring of teachers and other school personnel.

To correct the educational shortchanging of diverse student populations, the curriculum and pedagogy needs to be changed in individual classrooms. But on a broader level, changes must go beyond the classroom: Schools' policies and practices and the societal ideologies that support them must also be confronted and transformed. That is, we need to create not only affirming classrooms but also an affirming society in which racism, sexism (discriminatory beliefs and behaviors based on gender), social class discrimination, religious oppression, heterosexism (discriminatory beliefs and behaviors directed against gay men and lesbians), ableism (discriminatory beliefs and behaviors directed against people with disabilities), and other biases are no longer acceptable. This is a tall order, but if multicultural education is to make a real difference, working to change society to be more socially equitable and just must go hand in hand with changes in curricula and classroom practices.



## Studying the Demographic Mosaic of U.S. Schools and Society

In the fourth task of understanding the sociopolitical context of multicultural education, we need to study the changes in the United States in the recent past and how these changes have transformed our schools. In what follows, we present a mosaic of the rich diversity of the population in the nation as well as in our public schools as a framework for understanding this context. We focus on population statistics, immigration, language diversity, and other differences that characterize U.S. schools and society in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

We begin with an overview of the U.S. population in terms of race and ethnicity. The U.S. total population from the U.S. Census Bureau in 2010 was 308,745,538. The nation's Hispanic population increased by 3.1 percent from 2008 to 2009, to 48.4 million, making it both the largest and fastest growing "minority" group (more on this terminology throughout the text and in the Book Resources section in MyEducationLab). The next largest group is Blacks or African Americans, at 39,059,000 million (see Table 1.1). Growth among different segments of the population has not, however, been proportionate: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, from 2000 to 2008, the number of Whites increased by 6.4 percent and the African American population increased by 9.4 percent. By far, the largest increases were in the Latino population, which grew by 33 percent, and the Asian population, which grew by 28 percent.<sup>32</sup>

Even more dramatic than current population statistics are projections for the coming years: The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that from 2000 to 2050, the total population will have grown from 282.1 million to 419.9 million. Again, however, the growth will not be even: The White population is expected to grow to 210.3 million, an increase of 7 percent, although it is expected to *decrease* in the decade from 2040 to 2050. Minorities, now roughly one-third of the U.S. population, are expected to become the majority in 2042, with the nation projected to be 54 percent minority in 2050. By 2023, minorities will comprise more than half of all children. Whites are

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**TABLE 1.1** Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic-Origin Status: 2000 to 2008

Characteristic	Number (1,000)					Percent change, 2000 to 2008
	2000 <sup>1</sup> (April 1)	2005	2006	2007	2008	
Both sexes						
<b>Total</b>	<b>281,425<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>295,561</b>	<b>298,363</b>	<b>301,290</b>	<b>304,060</b>	<b>8.0</b>
One race	277,527	290,891	293,533	296,292	298,893	7.7
White	228,107	237,204	238,999	240,882	242,639	6.4
Black or African American	35,705	37,732	38,160	38,622	39,059	9.4
American Indian and Alaska Native	2,664	2,918	2,972	3,028	3,083	15.8
Asian	10,589	12,512	12,865	13,211	13,549	28.0
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	463	525	538	550	562	21.5
Two or more races	3,898	4,669	4,830	4,998	5,167	32.6
Race alone or in combination <sup>2</sup>						
White	231,436	241,228	243,168	245,203	247,113	6.8
Black or African American	37,105	39,534	40,047	40,599	41,127	10.8
American Indian and Alaska Native	4,225	4,613	4,694	4,779	4,862	15.1
Asian	12,007	14,244	14,662	15,075	15,480	28.9
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	907	1,035	1,061	1,087	1,112	22.7
Not Hispanic	246,118	253,032	254,378	255,818	257,116	4.5
One race	242,712	248,987	250,201	251,504	252,664	4.1
White	195,577	198,037	198,518	199,060	199,491	2.0
Black or African American	34,314	36,068	36,422	36,809	37,172	8.3
American Indian and Alaska Native	2,097	2,240	2,269	2,299	2,329	11.0
Asian	10,357	12,232	12,574	12,910	13,238	27.8
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	367	410	418	426	435	18.4
Two or more races	3,406	4,045	4,177	4,314	4,452	30.7
Race alone or in combination <sup>2</sup>						
White	198,477	201,514	202,114	202,780	203,336	2.4
Black or African American	5,499	37,591	38,015	38,477	38,916	9.6

Characteristic	Number (1,000)					Percent change, 2000 to 2008
	2000 <sup>1</sup> (April 1)	2005	2006	2007	2008	
Black or African American	5,499	37,591	38,015	38,477	38,916	9.6
American Indian and Alaska Native	3,456	3,686	3,732	3,781	3,828	10.8
Asian	11,632	13,781	14,179	14,572	14,957	28.6
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	752	845	863	881	899	19.6
Hispanic <sup>4</sup>	35,306	42,529	43,985	45,472	46,944	33.0
One race	34,815	41,904	43,332	44,788	46,228	32.8
White	32,530	39,166	40,480	41,822	43,148	32.6
Black or African American	1,391	1,664	1,738	1,813	1,887	35.6
American Indian and Alaska Native	566	679	703	729	754	33.2
Asian	232	280	290	301	311	33.9
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	95	116	120	124	128	33.7
Two or more races	491	624	654	684	715	45.6
Race alone or in combination <sup>3</sup>						
White	32,959	39,714	41,054	42,423	43,777	32.8
Black or African American	1,606	1,943	2,032	2,122	2,211	37.7
American Indian and Alaska Native	770	927	962	998	1,034	34.4
Asian	375	463	483	503	523	39.6
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	155	190	198	205	213	37.4
<i>Male</i>						
<b>Total</b>	<b>138,056</b>	<b>145,465</b>	<b>146,946</b>	<b>148,466</b>	<b>149,925</b>	<b>8.6</b>
One race	136,146	143,163	144,563	145,997	147,370	8.2
White	112,478	117,397	118,374	119,375	120,326	7.0
Black or African American	16,972	17,973	18,189	18,418	18,640	9.8
American Indian and Alaska Native	1,333	1,461	1,488	1,517	1,545	15.9
Asian	5,128	6,065	6,238	6,408	6,574	28.2

(Continued)

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TABLE 1.1 Continued

Characteristic	Number (1,000)					Percent change, 2000 to 2008
	2000 <sup>1</sup> (April 1)	2005	2006	2007	2008	
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	235	267	273	279	286	21.5
Two or more races	1,910	2,302	2,384	2,469	2,555	33.7
Race alone or in combination <sup>3</sup>						
White	114,116	119,387	120,438	121,516	122,545	7.4
Black or African American	17,644	18,849	19,109	19,384	19,651	11.4
American Indian and Alaska Native	2,088	2,284	2,325	2,368	2,410	15.4
Asian	5,834	6,931	7,137	7,341	7,541	29.2
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	456	520	534	547	560	22.7
Not Hispanic	119,894	123,514	124,235	124,981	125,670	4.8
Hispanic <sup>4</sup>	18,162	21,951	22,712	23,485	24,254	33.5
<i>Female</i>						
<b>Total</b>	<b>143,368</b>	<b>150,096</b>	<b>151,417</b>	<b>152,824</b>	<b>154,135</b>	<b>7.5</b>
One race	141,381	147,728	148,970	150,295	151,523	7.2
White	115,628	119,806	120,625	121,506	122,313	5.8
Black or African American	18,733	19,759	19,971	20,203	20,419	9.0
American Indian and Alaska Native	1,331	1,458	1,484	1,512	1,539	15.6
Asian	5,461	6,447	6,626	6,803	6,975	27.7
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	227	258	264	270	276	21.6
Two or more races	1,987	2,368	2,447	2,529	2,612	31.4
Race alone or in combination <sup>3</sup>						
White	117,321	121,841	122,730	123,686	124,568	6.2
Black or African American	19,461	20,685	20,939	21,215	21,476	10.4

Characteristic	Number (1,000)					Percent change, 2000 to 2008
	2000 <sup>1</sup> (April 1)	2005	2006	2007	2008	
American Indian and Alaska Native	2,137	2,329	2,369	2,411	2,452	14.7
Asian	6,173	7,313	7,525	7,734	7,940	28.6
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	451	514	527	540	553	22.6
Not Hispanic	126,224	129,518	130,143	130,837	131,446	4.1
Hispanic <sup>4</sup>	17,144	20,578	21,273	21,987	22,689	32.3

<sup>1</sup>See footnote 3, Table 7.

<sup>2</sup>281,425 represents 281,425,000. As of July, except as noted. Data shown are modified race counts; see text, this section.

<sup>3</sup>In combination with one or more other races. The sum of the five race groups adds to more than the total population because individuals may report more than one race.

<sup>4</sup>Persons of Hispanic origin may be any race.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2008 (NC-EST2008-03)" (released May 14, 2009); <http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/NC-EST2008/NC-EST2008-03.xls>.

thus expected to comprise only 46 percent of the total U.S. population by 2050, compared with 66 percent in 2008 (see Table 1.2), becoming the new minority.

The African American population is expected to grow to 65.7 million, increasing from 14 percent in 2008 to 15 percent of the total population in 2050. In contrast, the Latino population is projected to nearly triple, from 46.7 million to 132.8 million during the 2008–2050 period. Its proportion of the nation's total population is projected to double, from 15 percent to 30 percent. If these projections bear out, nearly one in three U.S. residents would be Hispanic. Asians are also expected to increase substantially in number, from 15.5 million to 40.6 million. 10.7 million to 33.4 million, an increase from 5.1 percent to 9.2 percent of the total U.S. population. While American Indians and Alaska Natives are projected to climb from 4.9 million to 8.6 million (or from 1.6 to 2 percent of the total population), the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander population is also expected to increase: from 1.1 million to 2.6 million. While there is already a substantial jump in the number of people who identify themselves as being of two or more races, it is projected to more than triple: from 5.2 million to 16.2 million.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the growing U.S. population, legal immigration has grown enormously in the past three decades, as is evident in Figure 1.1. As we can see in this graph, legal immigration hit a peak in 1991 in terms of numbers (although not in terms of percentage of total population, which peaked at the beginning of the twentieth century), reaching more than 1.8 million. By 2009, a total of 1,130,818 persons became legal permanent residents (LPRs) of the United States, still a sizable number.<sup>34</sup>

**TABLE 1.2** Projected Change in Population Size by Race and Hispanic Origin for the United States: 2000 to 2050 High Net International Migration Series

<b>(Resident population as of July 1. Numbers in 1000)</b>						
<b>Race and Hispanic Origin<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>2000–2050</b>		<b>2000–2025</b>		<b>2025–2050</b>	
	<b>Numerical</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Numerical</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Numerical</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>175,971</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>82,350</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>93,621</b>	<b>26</b>
One race	163,322	59	77,539	28	85,783	24
White	109,001	48	52,362	23	56,639	20
Black	22,857	64	11,397	32	11,460	24
AIAN	2,948	110	1,421	53	1,527	37
Asian	27,678	259	11,987	112	15,691	69
NHPI	837	180	372	80	465	55
Two or more races	12,649	322	4,810	122	7,839	90
<b><i>Race alone or in combination<sup>2</sup></i></b>						
White	120,600	52	56,705	24	63,895	22
Black	30,354	82	14,054	38	16,300	32
AIAN	4,564	108	2,174	51	2,390	37
Asian	32,682	270	13,910	115	18,772	72
NHPI	1,798	197	777	85	1,021	60
<b>Not Hispanic</b>	<b>68,097</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>38,421</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>29,676</b>	<b>10</b>
One race	57,904	24	34,457	14	23,447	8
White	10,338	5	12,006	6	-1,668	-1
Black	18,950	55	9,801	28	9,149	21
AIAN	1,268	60	732	35	536	19
Asian	26,865	257	11,684	112	15,181	69
NHPI	484	131	235	64	249	41
Two or more races	10,193	297	3,964	115	6,229	84
<b><i>Race alone or in combination<sup>2</sup></i></b>						
White	19,694	10	15,585	8	4,109	2
Black	25,215	71	12,045	34	13,170	28
AIAN	2,201	63	1,218	35	983	21
Asian	31,019	264	13,335	114	17,684	71
NHPI	1,162	154	543	72	619	48
<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>107,873</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>43,928</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>63,945</b>	<b>80</b>

<b>(Resident population as of July 1. Numbers in 1000)</b>						
<b>Race and Hispanic Origin<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>2000–2050</b>		<b>2000–2025</b>		<b>2025–2050</b>	
	<b>Numerical</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Numerical</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Numerical</b>	<b>Percent</b>
One race	105,418	300	43,083	123	62,335	80
White	98,663	300	40,356	123	58,307	80
Black	3,907	278	1,596	114	2,311	77
AIAN	1,680	294	689	120	991	79
Asian	813	346	303	129	510	95
NHPI	354	369	138	144	216	92
Two or More Races	2,455	494	846	170	1,609	120
<b><i>Race alone or in combination<sup>2</sup></i></b>						
White	100,905	303	41,118	124	59,787	80
Black	5,140	317	2,010	124	3,130	86
AIAN	2,363	304	956	123	1,407	81
Asian	1,662	439	575	152	1,087	114
NHPI	636	405	234	149	402	103

<sup>1</sup>Hispanics may be of any race.

<sup>2</sup>'In combination' means in combination with one or more other races. The sum of the five race groups adds to more than the total population because individuals may report more than one race.

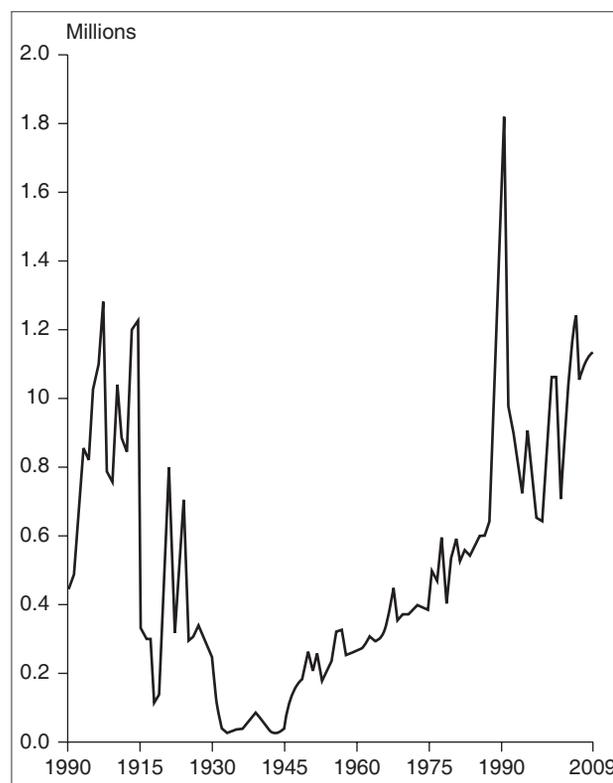
Abbreviations: Black = Black or African American; AIAN = American Indian and Alaska Native; NHPI = Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander

Note: The original race data from Census 2000 are modified to eliminate the "some other race" category. This modification is used for all Census Bureau projections products and is explained in the document entitled "Modified Race Data Summary File Technical Documentation and ASCII Layout" that can be found on the Census Bureau website at <http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/files/MRSF-01-US1.html>.

Table 7-H. Projected Change in Population Size by Race and Hispanic Origin for the United States: 2000 to 2050 High Net International Migration Series (NP2009-T7-H)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division Release Date: December 16, 2009.

Another noteworthy indication of the growing diversity in the United States is the current number of foreign-born or first-generation U.S. residents, which in the year 2000 reached the highest level in U.S. history—56 million, or triple the number in 1970. And unlike previous immigrants, who were primarily from Europe, more than half of the new immigrants are from Latin America, and 25 percent are from Asia. In 2009, the following five countries accounted for 35 percent of all new LPRs (in ascending order): Mexico, China, the Philippines, India, and the Dominican Republic.<sup>35</sup>

**FIGURE 1.1** Legal Permanent Residents Flow to United States

The growth in immigration has been accompanied by an increase in linguistic diversity. Currently, 20 percent of the total U.S. population speaks a language other than English at home. As of 2008, 10.9 million school-age children (ages 5 to 17) spoke a language other than English at home; 7.8 million of these children spoke Spanish at home.<sup>36</sup> While Spanish is clearly the language spoken by well over half of linguistically diverse students, there are also many other languages spoken in U.S. homes. (More information on linguistic diversity is given in Chapter 6.)

The impact of the growing cultural, racial, national origin, and linguistic diversity is clearly visible in our nation's public schools in several ways. First, the sheer number of students in U.S. public schools is growing: In 2010, 56 million students were enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in the United States, and 89 percent of those were in public schools, an increase of more than 2 million since 2001.<sup>37</sup>

Second, the nature of the student population is quite different from what it was just a few decades ago. In 1970, at the height of the public school enrollment of the baby boom generation, White students comprised 79 percent of total

enrollment; followed by African Americans at 14 percent; Hispanics at 6 percent; and Asians, Pacific Islanders, and other ethnic groups at 1 percent. These statistics have changed dramatically: As of 2008, 43 percent of elementary through high school students were students of color. The Census Bureau's population projections indicate that the student population will continue to diversify in the coming years. Third, our public schools' growing diversity is clearly evidenced by the number of students who are foreign-born or have foreign-born parents. As of 2009, over 49 million students, or 31 percent of those enrolled in U.S. elementary and secondary schools, were foreign-born or had at least one parent who was foreign-born.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time that diversity in schools around the country is growing, racial and ethnic segregation has been on the rise. That is, students in U.S. schools are now more likely to be segregated from students of other races and backgrounds than at any time in the recent past. Indeed, according to Gary Orfield, much of the progress made in integrating the nation's schools during previous decades was eradicated by the end of the 1990s. For Blacks, the 1990s witnessed the largest backward movement toward segregation since the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the trend is continuing. For Latinos, the situation has been equally dramatic: Latinos are now the most segregated of all ethnic groups in terms of race, ethnicity, and poverty.<sup>39</sup> Despite this trend, there is growing evidence that schools with diverse student populations are good for students of all backgrounds.<sup>40</sup>

Race and ethnicity have a strong link to poverty due to the history of institutionalized racism. The percentage of all people in the United States living below the poverty level is currently 12.5 percent. The number of children living in poverty increased by 21 percent from 2000 to 2008, which means there are at least 2.5 million more children living in poverty now than a decade ago. Research shows that compared to White families with children, Black and Latino families with children are more than twice as likely to experience economic hardships. About 11 percent of White children live in poverty, while 35 percent of African American, 31 percent of American Indian, 31 percent of Hispanic, and 15 percent of Asian children live in poverty. The poverty rate does not tell the whole story because the equations for the federal poverty level have not been adjusted for inflation since the 1960s. It bears noting that research demonstrates that families require about twice the federal poverty level to make ends meet, and that families who do not meet that figure are considered low-income. In terms of the school-age population, 41 percent of all U.S. children live in low-income families, and over 20 percent live in poor families, which translates into the sobering reality that *more than half of all children in the United States live in some degree of poverty*. It is well documented that food insecurity, lack of affordable housing, and other hardships affect millions of American children, not just those who are officially poor. Even more disturbing, although the number of children living in poverty had declined from 1990 to 2000, it has been rising steadily since then.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time that the number of students of color, those who speak languages other than English, and those who live in poverty has increased,

the nation's teachers have become more monolithic, monocultural, and monolingual. For example, as of 2003, 90 percent of public school teachers were White, 6 percent were African American, and fewer than 5 percent were of other racial/ethnic backgrounds.<sup>42</sup>

One implication of the tremendous diversity previously described is that all teachers, regardless of their own identities and experiences, need to be prepared to teach effectively students of all backgrounds. One way to do so is to heighten awareness of the sociopolitical context of students' lives by learning about the social, cultural, and political circumstances of real students in real schools. At the end of the chapter, we briefly discuss the case study approach used in this book to help readers think about how they can best translate the information into their classroom practices.



## Examining Political Struggles: Multicultural Education, Backlash, and Legislation

Since its beginnings in the 1970s, multicultural education has been criticized for many reasons. While some of the criticisms have been warranted and have, in fact, helped the field develop a more solid foundation, many of the arguments against multicultural education have been deeply ideological and have ignored both educational research and actual practice. That is, multicultural education has come under fire precisely because it has challenged the status quo, encouraged the emergence of previously silenced and marginalized voices, and championed the transformation of curriculum and the use of alternative pedagogies. The criticisms and detractions of multicultural education are also embedded in the broader sociopolitical context. Three common strategies for trying to destabilize multicultural education include (1) calls for going back to basics, (2) claims of erosion of the educational canon, and (3) political struggles of legislation and policy.

### *The Back-to-Basics Argument*

The backlash against multicultural education has been evident in claims that a focus on diversity is a diversion from the “basics.” This has been the case for almost three decades: since the educational reform movement that began in 1983 after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*.<sup>43</sup> One vivid example of the back-to-basics argument is E. D. Hirsch's 1987 book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, which he initially developed to combat the “multicultural threat.” The book includes a list of several thousand terms and concepts that the author considers essential for every educated person to know or at least to recognize and be familiar with.<sup>44</sup> Many critics have charged that both the book and the list are provincial and Eurocentric, with little attention given to the arts, history, or culture of those from groups other than the so-called mainstream. Yet since the publication of Hirsch's book 25 years ago, several hundred schools around the nation have been structured and organized according to what has been dubbed “core knowledge”

and the “cultural literacy” model. Hirsch’s work further promulgated a notion of so-called cultural literacy that flies in the face of the rapidly changing demographics—not to mention the rich multicultural history—of our nation. Numerous spin-off publications are targeted toward parents and guardians and focus on different grade levels, making Hirsch’s cultural literacy model and ideas a cottage industry that is hard to ignore. In contrast to Hirsch’s work, Kristen Buras analyzed the neo-conservative evolution and contradictory ideology of this core knowledge school reform movement. She uncovered the conservative leaders and their financially powerful backers, as well as the strategies, and campaigns to politicize school curriculum in order to develop a permanent conservative majority—which she dubs the rise of “Rightist Multiculturalism.”<sup>45</sup>

The pitfalls of Hirsch’s assertions of what counts as literacy are multifold. While many of us might welcome a generally agreed-upon definition of the educated person, this is a complex issue that cannot be solved by a prescribed list, or even a prescribed curriculum. Eugene Provenzo has challenged Hirsch’s views by publishing his own book, *Critical Literacy: What Every American Ought to Know*, a critique of both Hirsch and the simplistic ideas behind the cultural literacy model that he promotes.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Eroding the Traditional Educational Canon***

The call for back to basics falls under the broader conservative argument against multicultural education as a liberal movement that erodes the traditional educational canon. The claim is that multicultural education can slide into a separatist monoculturalism that pits Europeans and European Americans against people of other backgrounds, creating a divisive “us versus them” mentality. This argument makes two assumptions: that no “us versus them” mentality existed previous to multicultural education and that there already is unity among all people in our country—both clearly erroneous assumptions. There are tremendous divisions among people in the United States, many of which have become increasingly visible since the election of the first person of color to the U.S. presidency, and glossing over these differences will not make them go away. The notion that multicultural education has separatist goals could not be further from the truth. On the contrary, supporters of multicultural education assume that a more pluralistic curriculum is also more complicated and truthful and will, in the long run, help develop citizens who think critically, expansively, and creatively and therefore be actively engaged in a democratic society.

In terms of its impact on schooling, opponents have been especially nervous about how a multicultural perspective might translate into curriculum changes. Those who fear that the traditional educational canon is being eroded have vociferously criticized it because, they claim, a multicultural curriculum will do away with our “common culture.” The ramifications of this stance can be seen in efforts to do away with specific courses at high schools and universities. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, multicultural education opponents claim that it is now more important than ever to focus on a rigidly defined version of American

history. An example of this can be found in the actions of the Texas State Board of Education, which in the spring of 2010 adopted a set of social studies and history standards that dilutes the teaching of the civil rights movement and slavery, while directing teachers to examine America's relationship to the United Nations as a threat to U.S. sovereignty.<sup>47</sup> Another alarming example during the spring of 2010 is the legislation in the state of Arizona, HB 2281, which did away with ethnic studies courses under the claim that such courses promoted "the overthrow of the United States government or promote resentment toward a race or class of people."<sup>48</sup>

In countering these arguments, we need to remember that the history of all groups in the United States is not foreign; it *is American history*. Our history was never exclusively a European saga of immigration and assimilation, although that is, of course, an important part of the American story. But our collective consciousness began with—and continues to be influenced by—indigenous Americans as well as by those who were forcibly brought from Africa into slavery. No one in our nation has been untouched by African American, Native American, Mexican American, and Asian American histories and cultures (among many other groups, including women, European American immigrants, and working-class people). The influence of these groups can be seen throughout our history in scientific discoveries, technological advances, popular culture, civic engagement, and the arts. The expansive globalization of communication, commerce, and cultural experiences will continue to increase, and it behooves us to educate our students to participate more fully in multicultural and global social exchanges.

### ***Political Struggles of Legislation and Policy***

The sociopolitical context is vividly revealed in struggles over power and privilege in the heart of U.S. policy making. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has been law for nearly 50 years; since 1965, it has been the federal government's primary legislative vehicle for supporting and influencing K–12 public education in more than 16,000 local school districts across the country. The most recent iteration of the back-to-basics argument has occurred since the passage of the version of ESEA called No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, particularly because, along with higher standards, the law required that each state have an annual testing program of children in reading and math.<sup>49</sup> When the NCLB version was enacted, it was particularly damaging on several levels. It marked the most extreme reach of federal policy into state and local school districts in the history of U.S. public education, and that scope was also the most punitive to students and their schools. While NCLB was originally enacted in response to several issues plaguing our educational system, including the deplorable history of educational inequality in our nation, its single-minded focus on standardized tests as the primary criterion for viewing academic progress, as well as the dismal results this focus produced, revealed many flaws in the policy.

In the spring of 2010, the Obama administration released its "Blueprint for Reform," an updated Elementary and Secondary Education Act to overhaul No Child

Left Behind. President Obama pronounced that “while the federal government can play a leading role in encouraging the reforms and high standards we need, the impetus for that change will come from states, and from local schools and school districts.”<sup>50</sup> This statement directly addressed the overreach of No Child Left Behind and a promise to return more power to states and local school districts. The blueprint also set forth a plan to eliminate the current accountability system, which requires public schools to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in raising student achievement as measured by state tests and other indicators and replace it with a more comprehensive strategy of measuring growth. The Center on Education Policy also recommends eliminating AYP, one of several recommendations in its 2010 paper, “Better Federal Policies Leading to Better Schools.”<sup>51</sup> Yet there are concerns that much of the new blueprint springs from some of the same misguided assumptions that plagued NCLB.

The conveners of the Forum for Education and Democracy, a group of highly respected educators and researchers, have argued that it is necessary to work from a different set of assumptions.<sup>52</sup> They suggest five assumptions based on research and supported by the conveners’ experience in the field of education and in the classroom. These assumptions set a foundation for a compelling list of specific recommendations concerning the reauthorization of ESEA. Their assumptions also support the central goals of this book, so they are worth examining here:

1. *Equity*: First and foremost, all public policy must work to ensure that every child has equal access to a high-quality public education. This is a fundamental matter of civil rights.
2. *Teaching*: A high-quality teaching profession is our best guarantee that our schools will be places of excellence. The provision of such is the rightful role of federal and state policy.
3. *Culture*: Young people will do their best work in schools where the culture is one of academic challenge, support, and engagement. Public policy should promote—not hinder—the establishment of such school cultures.
4. *Evidence*: Using multiple sources of evidence to measure student success will help every school community improve its work, and create an environment where what matters is not simply data—but how well we respond to it to improve the learning conditions for children.
5. *Community*: As public trusts, our schools work best when the community is engaged, valued, and involved in meaningful decision making.<sup>53</sup>

In light of those five assumptions, their report recommends a range of specific policies and practices and asserts that

we must restore an appropriate balance of authority, with the federal government taking a more pro-active role in ensuring equitable educational opportunity, and a less heavy-handed, more productive role in supporting states and localities to focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. This agenda would reclaim and extend the historic federal role in public education: first, by acknowledging education as a

civil right that should be made available to all on equal terms; and second, by taking on the critical tasks that demand a strong central role in building the capacity of schools to offer high-quality opportunities responsive to our fast-changing world.<sup>54</sup>

As you will see in demographic data, research studies, and our own case studies throughout this text, educational inequality has been a fact of life for many children in our schools, but especially for students of color and poor children. Parents, educators, and other defenders of public education have long advocated for addressing this inequality through legislation. It is not surprising, then, that many advocates of equal education initially supported NCLB and, while debate continues to broil about its benefits or injuries to schools, it remains popular with some.

At the same time, conspicuous among the most ardent supporters of NCLB are those who support privatization of schools through techniques that include, among others, vouchers, charter schools, and so forth, that frequently exclude the most vulnerable children from their classrooms. Thus, the goals of various groups promoting NCLB are not the same and, in some cases, may be contradictory. In the years since NCLB was first passed, it has lost favor with a great many people for a spectrum of reasons. Researchers Heinrich Mintrop and Gail L. Sunderman of the Civil Rights Project provide an analysis of why the NCLB policy is failing, and also, despite the counterintuitive indicators, why it continues to reap support from policy makers. Their evidence indicts NCLB for causing serious costs to the U.S. education system by keeping schools mired in low-level intellectual work. They reveal how teachers get stuck in test-driven basic skills remediation, pointing out how this is particularly destructive for students who are in the schools NCLB identifies as failing: schools that have overwhelmingly poor students and students of color.<sup>55</sup> They go on to explain that there are powerful “secondary beneficiaries”<sup>56</sup> of NCLB such as testing agencies, segments of the school improvement industry and others deriving economic and political benefit from the system—even when it is failing.<sup>57</sup>

These conflicting views and contentious debates are part of the reason that, as this book goes to press, the ESEA has yet to be reauthorized by the U.S. House and Senate. In the interim, while waiting for the new reauthorization of the Obama administration’s blueprint of ESEA, other initiatives were launched such as the 2010 Race to the Top (RTTT). RTTT provides competitive grants to encourage and reward states that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform as defined by the U.S. Department of Education. The grants from RTTT tap the resources made available through the Education Recovery Act under the broader umbrella of the economic stimulus funding American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009.<sup>58</sup>

Some of these initiatives have created concern that the overemphasis on and misuse of standardized testing will continue and may even be buttressed by funding to pay teachers based on student test scores. Calling for revisions to the Race to the Top Fund Guidelines, the research and advocacy organization FairTest has taken a strong stand in opposition to the overemphasis on standardized testing: “By encouraging states to make student test scores a ‘significant factor’ in teacher

and principal evaluation, RTTT will intensify the damage.”<sup>59</sup> Educators have turned their attention to the Obama administration’s blueprint with particularly focused concentration on how it addresses *teaching to the test* and *high standards*.

**Teaching to the Test and High Standards** In the past decade, there has been immense pressure on teachers and administrators to “teach to the test” and to devote a lion’s share of the school day to reading and mathematics. The effects have been mixed, at best. While test scores are rising in some districts, the law’s pressure on school districts has reduced instructional time for other subjects to make more time for reading and mathematics.<sup>60</sup> Subjects that are not evaluated on high-stakes tests have been reduced or eliminated in some schools. Recess and physical education have also been curtailed in many schools. Although multicultural education is not a subject area, it too has been one of the casualties of this pressure. As a consequence of NCLB, the testing frenzy has had a chilling effect on schools’ and teachers’ autonomy to develop and implement curricula, and this includes multicultural curricula. NCLB mandates have also funneled professional development funding away from any goals that are not test-score driven, further eroding opportunities for teachers to learn about or expand multicultural goals.

Most state standards do not preclude the possibility of including multiple perspectives in the curriculum. In fact, there is no contradiction between high standards and multicultural education. Quite the opposite is the case: Since its very beginning, one of the major arguments in support of multicultural education has been that some students—particularly students of color and poor students of all backgrounds—have been the victims of an inferior education, often based on their race/ethnicity, social class, first language, and other differences. Multicultural education, through a rich curriculum and rigorous demands, was an antidote to this situation. Nonetheless, the pressure that teachers and administrators are under to meet AYP, as defined by standardized tests, has resulted in little support for the arts and even for subjects such as social studies and science, much less for innovation and creativity in curriculum and instruction. The potential disaster on the limitations of knowledge for future generations is frightening, and the U.S. standing in the international community is at risk both economically and politically.

For example, Common Core conducted an international analysis of policies related to curriculum standards and the findings revealed that, in their national curriculum, high-achieving countries have an in-depth focus on several topics that the United States has been ignoring. These topics include comprehensive, content-rich education in the liberal arts and sciences such as history, civics, geography, literature, music, visual arts, and sciences. Common Core cautions that this report is “not intended to be an endorsement of the idea of national standards or a national test” because not all of these countries have written national standards and many do not require national tests.<sup>61</sup> Rather, this study focuses on the content taught in schools and found that the common ingredient across these nations “is a dedication to educating their children deeply in a wide range of subjects.”<sup>62</sup> The study drew information from nine nations that consistently have outranked U.S. schools on

the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA): Finland, Hong Kong (a territory), South Korea, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.<sup>63</sup>

The undue attention on test scores in the United States also has devastating effects on teachers' sense of professionalism. Many teachers are now reluctant—and in some cases forbidden—to engage in projects outside the prescribed curriculum with their students, or even to collaborate with peers due to possible criticisms, or job-security threats they are likely to receive from administrators who are also under tremendous pressure to keep their schools out of the headlines for failing to meet AYP. The result in many schools around the country is that teachers are expected to follow a rigidly prescribed curriculum, particularly in reading and math, with little room for innovation or collaboration. What are teachers to do?

**Teachers' Responsibilities Within NCLB** In terms of teachers' responsibilities, we must once again consider the sociopolitical context of education. Curriculum and pedagogy, along with other school policies and practices, as we shall see in Chapter 4, are as much *political* issues as they are educational issues. The same is true of standards. State standards and curriculum frameworks are not going to disappear, and most recommendations about how to change NCLB include references to strong standards.<sup>64</sup> We make the assumption here that all educators want to hold their students to high standards. Yet every curriculum decision also says something about the values, expectations, and dreams that teachers hold for their students. If this is the case, it becomes the responsibility of teachers to help define the curriculum and not simply to be automatons who implement a rigidly prescribed curriculum.

Christine Sleeter suggests that there is a difference between a *standards-driven* and a *standards-conscious* curriculum. A standards-driven curriculum, according to her, begins with the standards and draws the “big ideas” from them for further design and implementation. A standards-conscious curriculum, on the other hand, uses the standards as a *tool* rather than as either the starting point or the underlying ideology for the development of big ideas. In her book, *Un-Standardizing Curriculum: Multicultural Teaching in the Standards-Based Classroom*, Sleeter provides powerful vignettes of teachers who face the same pressures to “teach to the test” as do all teachers. In spite of this pressure, rather than following the standards uncritically, these teachers developed standards-based curricula that are both creative and critical.<sup>65</sup> Another example of using the standards in inventive ways is Mary Cowhey's *Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades*.<sup>66</sup> A first- and second-grade teacher, Cowhey uses the standards to develop curriculum that is inspiring, demanding, and multicultural.

These books, and a growing number of others, are challenging the notion that standards will necessarily lead to standardization. They provide vivid examples of how powerful learning and imagination can be promoted even within a testing and accountability context that tends to leave little room for these things.



## Qualitative Research and Choices in Methodology

An essential element of the sociopolitical context of education concerns students—who they are, how they identify themselves, what their families are like, how they live, the values they hold dear, what helps them learn, and their desires and hopes for the future. Because of the importance of student voices in understanding the sociopolitical context of education, our research in this book includes case studies and snapshots that provide descriptions and stories of students of diverse backgrounds. (See the Appendix in the Book Resources section of MyEducationLab for more information about the selection of students for the case studies and snapshots and the approach to selecting the themes illustrated by these students.)

### What Are Case Studies?

The case study approach fits within the social sciences general framework of qualitative research. Sharan Merriam describes the essential characteristics of a qualitative case study as an intensive, holistic description and analysis. She further explains case studies as *particularistic* (focusing on one person or social unit), *descriptive* (because the result is a rich, thick portrait), and *heuristic* (because it sharpens the reader's understanding, leading to discovering new meanings).<sup>67</sup> A case study is also *inductive* because generalizations and hypotheses emerge from examination of the data. In this book, we use *ethnographic case studies*, which include a sociocultural analysis of each of the students, all of whom are presented contextually, that is, within their cultural and social environment.

The case studies and snapshots differ in terms of length and treatment: Snapshots are short and written mostly in the words of the young people, with a brief analysis, while case studies are longer and offer more in-depth analysis. Case studies are placed at the ends of Chapters 3 through 8, and snapshots are placed within various chapters to highlight particular issues discussed in the chapters.

The young people in the case studies and snapshots are actual students who were interviewed about their experiences in school; the importance of ethnicity, race, culture, and language in their lives; what they like and dislike about school; teachers who made a difference in their lives; and what they expect to get out of school. The students are described within a variety of settings—home, school, community, and city or town in which they live—because, by looking at each of these settings, we gain a clearer, more complete picture of their lives.

The students represent multiple communities and identities. As young men and women from a number of racial, ethnic, linguistic, social class, and cultural groups, they have had many different life experiences. They live in various geographic locations, from large cities to small rural areas and to native reservations. They are first-, second-, or third-generation Americans, or their ancestors may have been here for many hundreds of years or even since the first humans populated on this continent. Some are from families in economic difficulty, while others are from struggling working-class, middle-class, or well-to-do families. Most are heterosexual, and others

are gay and lesbian. They range in age from 13 to 19. When first interviewed, some of them were almost ready to graduate from high school, a few were in middle or junior high school, and the others were at various levels of high school. They range from monolingual English-speaking youths to fluent bilinguals. Their families vary from very large (11 children) to very small (one child) in both one- and two-parent households. Their parents' educational backgrounds vary as well: from no high school education to postgraduate degrees.

In spite of the vast differences in their experiences and backgrounds, most (although not all) of the students in these case studies share one characteristic: They are successful in school. Although there may be disagreements about what it means to be successful (research by Michelle Fine, for example, suggests that, in some ways, the most "successful" students are those who drop out of school<sup>68</sup>), most of the students have been able to develop both academic skills and positive attitudes about themselves and about the value of education. They generally have good grades, most have hopes (but not always plans) of attending college, and they have fairly positive perceptions of school.

### Beyond Generalizations and Stereotypes

We did not include these case studies and snapshots for the purpose of generalization to all students in U.S. schools. No educational research, whether qualitative or quantitative, can do so. The students in the case studies and snapshots in this book are not *samples*, as might be the case with quantitative research, but *examples* of a wide variety of students. Case studies can help us look at specific examples so that solutions for more general situations can be hypothesized and developed. For example, James Karam, the Lebanese Christian student whose case study follows Chapter 6, does not reflect the experiences of all Lebanese students in U.S. schools. However, describing James's experience within its sociocultural framework can help us understand many experiences of other Lebanese students. Whereas quantitative methods can yield some important data about Lebanese students in general (for example, their numbers in the United States or their relative levels of achievement), it is only through a qualitative approach that we can explore more deeply, for example, the impact on James of "invisible minority" status.

No case study of a single individual can adequately or legitimately portray the complexity of an entire group of people. (Neither, of course, can any quantitative approach claim to do this.) Although some Mexican Americans prefer to learn collaboratively, and some African American students may perceive school success as "acting White" (these issues are discussed further in Chapters 7 and 8), many do not. To reach such conclusions contradicts one of the very purposes of case studies, which is to challenge stereotypes.

The case studies and snapshots are meant to encourage you to ask questions rather than to make assumptions about what it means to be from a large family, to be raised by two dads, to be Vietnamese, middle class, lesbian, African American, Cape Verdean, or anything else. It is far easier to pigeonhole people according to our preconceptions and biases, but the deeper struggle is to try to understand people on

their own terms. Some of the experiences, feelings, and statements of the young people described in the case studies and snapshots may surprise you and shake some deep-seated beliefs. So much the better if they do. On the other hand, they may reflect some of your own experiences or your knowledge of young people of diverse racial and sociocultural backgrounds. In either case, what these students say should be understood within the context of their particular school, family, and community experiences.

### Learning from the Case Studies and Snapshots

We hope that you will read each of these stories critically and with the goal of understanding how the experiences and thoughts of young people can influence classroom discourse and strategies as well as school policies and practices in general. These young people challenge us to believe that all students in our nation's classrooms are capable of learning. Although their stories demonstrate the indomitable strength of youth, they also reveal the tremendous fragility of academic success, which is so easily disrupted by a poor teacher, misguided policies, a negative comment, or an environment that denies the importance of one's experiences. In the end, all their voices challenge us as teachers and as a society to do the very best we can to ensure that educational equity is not an illusion but an achievable goal.



### Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted to provide a definition and description of the *sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. As described, comprehending the sociopolitical context requires the following: (1) clarifying the goals and key terms of multicultural education; (2) dissolving myths about immigration and difference;

(3) naming the social, economic, political, and ideological underpinnings of educational structures; (4) studying the current demographic “mosaic” of our nation; and (5) examining the political struggles of legislation and policy. This fifth effort was considered through a topic that is both current and controversial in schools and communities around the nation: the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act and its implications for education in a multicultural society. By rooting these challenges in qualitative research, these issues can be studied through ethnographic “lenses,” specifically through case studies and snapshots of students who reflect the tremendous diversity of our school-age population. Such research can help

us understand the effect of the sociopolitical context of schooling on various segments of the population as well as on the nation as a whole.



To check your comprehension on the content covered in Chapter 1, go to the Book Resources in the MyEducationLab for your course, select your text, and complete the Study Plan. Here, you will be able to take a chapter quiz; receive feedback on your answers; and then access review, practice, and enrichment activities to enhance your understanding of the chapter content.



## To Think About

1. Can you describe the sociopolitical context of your own education? For you to become college-educated and to pursue a career in education, what circumstances cultivated both success and challenges for your family and your ancestors?
2. Consider the academic accomplishments of two of your current students: one who earns high marks in school and one who is struggling with grades. Compare what you know about the OSFs described by David Berliner's research. Does this influence the ways in which you and the school might support each student?
3. Consider the various iterations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Compare the more recent Blueprint for Reform of ESEA to the former version, No Child Left Behind. Look specifically at Title I funding and consider how it influences the teaching and learning in your school. Does it influence your school differently than a school in a neighboring district? Does it seem to provide your students with more resources or fewer? What are the implications of federal policy on your local school?



## Activities ... for Personal, School, and Community Change

1. Increase awareness in your school culture of the rich mosaic of diverse backgrounds and languages in U.S. society by developing a classroom activity that draws upon the wide array of resources available from the U.S. Census Bureau developed specifically for teachers at <http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/teachers.html>. Compare the U.S. demographics to your school's demographics. Place emphasis on diversity as an asset rather than as a "problem." Make your students' thinking visible to the entire school through bulletin board displays, presentations during morning announcements, school Web spaces, multimedia projections in the lunchroom, and the like.
2. Has your school responded to test preparation and budget constraints by cutting programming that supports students' multiple ways of knowing and expressing, such as art, music, clothing design, cooking, physical education, technology curriculum, theater, and so on? If so, help organize students, families, cultural workers, community artists, and other educators to provide after-school activities to increase students' multiple intelligence engagement as well as to maintain their attachment to the school environment.



Go to Topic 1: Ethnicity/Cultural Diversity and Topic 6: Class in the MyEducationLab ([www.myeducationlab.com](http://www.myeducationlab.com)) for your course, where you can:

- Find learning outcomes that address ethnicity, cultural diversity, and class and the impact of those factors on multicultural education.
- Complete Assignments and Activities that can help you more deeply understand the chapter content.
- Apply and practice your understanding of the core teaching skills identified in the chapter with the Building Teaching Skills and Dispositions learning units.

- Examine challenging situations and cases presented in the IRIS Center Resources.
- Check your comprehension on the content covered in the chapter by going to the Study Plan in the Book Resources for your text. Here you will be able to take a pre-test, where you can test your knowledge of the content you are about to read and receive hints and feedback for your answers; then access Review, Practice, and Enrichment activities to enhance your understanding of chapter content; and finally, take a post-test to ensure you have a thorough understanding of the content of the chapter.
- On the Book Resources site, you will also view additional student art and have access to additional case studies.

### **Companion Website**

For access to additional case studies, Web links, concept cards, and other material related to this chapter, visit the text's companion website at [www.ablongman.com/nieto6e](http://www.ablongman.com/nieto6e).

## 7

# Understanding Student Learning and School Achievement

As improbable as it might sound, the words in this quote are those of a young man who was suspended and expelled from school on many occasions. A gang member with a difficult family life, Paul Chavez 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

*“There’s so much to learn and that’s all I want to do is just learn, try to educate my mind to see what I could get out of it.”*

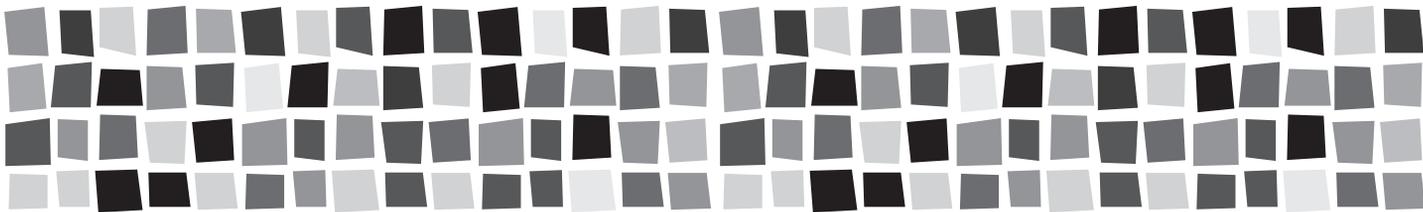
—Paul Chavez, interviewee

chapter, Paul was resolute about continuing his education and becoming a teacher or counselor to help young people like himself. Given his background and experiences, however, 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.

This chapter examines a number of theories about the complex conditions that may affect school achievement and then considers how these conditions may collectively influence the academic success or failure of students. After the discussion of these theories, the case studies of two students who have *not* been successful in school, Paul Chavez and Latrell Elton, are 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.

In what follows, we review explanations of school success or underachievement through theories that address the following issues: *caring, deficit perspectives, economic and social reproduction, cultural incompatibilities, out-of-school factors, resistance and the school-to-prison pipeline, cultural-ecological theories, and complicating theories of identities within school structures*. The chapter concludes by pointing out the need to develop a comprehensive understanding of student learning, rather than relying on only one theoretical explanation.



## Caring

An essential component in promoting student learning is what Nel Noddings has called the “ethic of care.”<sup>1</sup> Noddings’s impressive contribution to the conversation concerning student engagement with schooling cannot be overemphasized. For her, educators’ caring is just as important—and in some cases, even more so—than larger structural conditions that influence student learning. Noddings postulates that whether and how teachers and schools care for students can make an immense difference in how students experience schooling. Her research is corroborated by a nationwide survey of several hundred 13- to 17-year-old students who were asked whether they work harder for some teachers than for others. Three out of four said yes, and they explained the reason was because these were the teachers who cared most for them. The survey authors concluded that effective schooling relies almost entirely on creative and passionate teachers.<sup>2</sup>



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.<sup>3</sup> Teachers showed they cared through close and affirming relationships with their students, high expectations for students’ capabilities, and respect for 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 equate the problem of “underachievement” not with students’ identities or parents’ economic situation but with school-based relationships and organizational structures. Nilda Flores-Gonzales, in a study among Latino students in Chicago, came to similar conclusions.<sup>4</sup> For these researchers, care was of immense significance.

More examples of the ethic of care can be found in the burgeoning body of research on the topic. Rosalie Rólon-Dow, in a study of Puerto Rican middle school girls, proposes that what is needed is *critical care* that responds to historical understandings of students’ lives and to the institutional barriers they encounter as members of racialized groups. In this way, Rólon-Dow examines caring at both the individual and institutional levels.<sup>5</sup> In another study Rubén Garza investigated the

perceptions of Latino and White high school students' reporting on teacher behaviors that convey caring. He found five dominant themes that described what students appreciated about the strategies their teachers used: Teachers (1) provided scaffolding during a teaching episode, (2) reflected a kind disposition through actions, (3) were always available to the student, (4) showed a personal interest in the students' well-being inside and outside the classroom, and (5) provided affective academic support in the classroom setting. Garza examined both the similarities and the unique experiences between the two student ethnic groups and suggested ways that teachers can evaluate their own practices of culturally responsive caring.<sup>6</sup>

Another example comes from a study that focused on students of Mexican descent in California. In this migrant-education program, researchers Margaret Gibson and Livier Bejinez discovered that staff members facilitated 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, 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 important, 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.<sup>7</sup>

In research focused on African American communities in a southeastern state, Mari Ann Roberts investigated how the ethic of care was practiced among a group of eight African American teachers of African American students. She found that expressing concern for students' future with candor and support dispels the color-blind equal opportunity myth that is often perpetuated in schools. She posits a framework of *culturally relevant critical teacher care* that provides a counternarrative to current discussions of teacher care as color-blind actions that try to help all students or are considered just part of good teaching.<sup>8</sup> 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.

These ideas resounded in two distinct research projects we (Sonia and Patty) each conducted. When I (Sonia) asked teachers to explain why they teach, I found five qualities that describe caring and committed teachers: *a sense of mission, solidarity with and empathy for students, the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge, improvisation, and a passion for social justice.*<sup>9</sup> All of these qualities are rooted in caring and committed practices, but here we focus on the second quality: *solidarity with and empathy for students*. Solidarity and empathy can also be described as love, although *love* is not a word that one hears very often when discussing teaching. Within the context of schools, love means that teachers have genuine respect, high expectations, and great admiration for their students. *Solidarity* means remembering what it was like to be a child, and forming a community of learners. The combination of empathy and solidarity is demonstrated in numerous ways, including

valuing students' families, understanding what life is like for children of diverse backgrounds, and anticipating the various worlds they encounter.

Patty's study echoed Sonia's. When I (Patty) interviewed students in urban schools, I asked them what teachers needed to know to be effective in diverse classrooms. Their answers consistently pointed to solidarity with, and empathy for, students. One of the implications that my study asserts is that reconceptualized multicultural teacher education may need to consider ways to educate preservice teachers in what were previously called *unteachable qualities* such as solidarity, empathy, and compassion to influence high academic achievement.<sup>10</sup> Frameworks on care that require teachers to take a positive, proactive approach to their students' achievement provide a useful backdrop when examining the other hypotheses about causes of academic success or school failure discussed in this chapter.



## Deficit Perspectives

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 several decades, much of the research on school failure focused on what was assumed to be 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 Black children's 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."<sup>11</sup> Such caricatures, which continue to exist, are of little value to teachers and schools who want to provide their students with a high-quality education.

The case studies of Paul and Latrell, which follow this chapter, are compelling examples of life in difficult circumstances: Both lived in poverty with families headed by single mothers, both had been involved in antisocial and criminal behavior, and both had had negative school experiences. One might be tempted to write them off because of these circumstances, but as their case studies demonstrate, both Paul and Latrell began achieving academic success in alternative schools. Deficit explanations of school achievement cannot explain their success.

Although more comprehensive explanations of academic achievement have been proposed in recent decades, theories of genetic inferiority espoused the 1920s eugenics movement and theories about cultural deprivation popularized during the 1960s have left their mark on the schooling of children living in poverty and of children of color. These theories are not only classist and racist but are also simply inadequate

in explaining the schooling experiences of 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. 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 and 1970s, Ryan was eloquent in his critique:

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.<sup>12</sup>

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* success or failure. Rather, it is the school’s *perception* of students’ language, culture, and class as *inadequate* and *negative*, and thus the devalued status of these characteristics in the academic environment, that help explain school failure. In Paul Chavez’s case, his early gang affiliation had had a decided negative effect on teachers’ academic expectations of him. To underscore the essential role of teachers’ perspectives, Ronald Ferguson describes two instructional conditions that are especially significant in classrooms where children of color are in the majority and are academically successful. These are teaching styles that he calls *high help* and *high perfectionism*. High help is when the teacher communicates convincingly that she likes it when students ask questions and that she loves to help them when they are confused or making mistakes. High perfectionism is when the teacher consistently and continually presses students to strive for both understanding and accuracy in their assignments.<sup>13</sup> Ferguson points out that the combination of *high help* and *high perfectionism* communicates high expectations to students. Unfortunately for many children of color and those in economically strapped communities, deficit perspectives have dominated how they are viewed. The result has been low expectations on the part of educators.

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 may be 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 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 also be 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 is usually ignored by the school, in spite of its potentially enriching character.

I (Sonia) recall, for example, that it never occurred to me that my own experience of visiting family in Puerto Rico between fifth grade and sixth grade might be of interest to my teacher or classmates. 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. 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. I never shared them, however, believing that they were not related to school life.

Learning to affirm the culture of students in their education can make the difference between failure or academic achievement in many schools, especially 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. 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. Students’ home and family situations are seldom subject to change by the school. Because schools cannot change the 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. Instead of focusing on students’ life circumstances, it makes sense for schools to focus on what they *can* change: school culture and school structure.

However, genetic and cultural inferiority theories are unfortunately not a thing of the past. While these misguided notions are closely related to the history of the 1920s and 1930s eugenics movement, which asserted a biological basis for white supremacy, remnants of such ill-founded theories were evident as recently as the 1990s. For the past 20 years the writings of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray have been resurrecting the argument that genetic inferiority was the root cause of the academic failure among African American students.<sup>14</sup> Although widely discredited by serious scholars as both ethnocentric and scientifically unfounded, genetic and cultural inferiority theories have survived because they provide a simplistic explanation for complex problems.<sup>15</sup> That is, by accepting theories of genetic and cultural inferiority, the detrimental effects of structural inequality, racism, poverty and inequitable schooling on student learning are left unexamined.

To examine such structural inequities, we 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.”<sup>16</sup> That is, the

## What You Can Do

### Rely on Research to Expand Perspectives of Success

In conversations with fellow teachers—both casual chats and formal faculty meeting discussions—the topic of children’s family lives frequently arises. Too often these comments link family home life and culture to underachievement. Often made with an air of authority, or by people in positions of authority, these statements are difficult to challenge and confusing to understand. However, you can challenge prejudicial assumptions without alienating yourself from your peers or losing your job. Rely on research. In a conversational tone that is both courteous and professional, ask about the research that shows evidence linking family culture to

underachievement. Simultaneously, offer to share research that affirms students’ cultural identities and cites strategies for teachers to promote school achievement. Use the wide range of scholarship cited in this chapter to assist you.

Teachers are smart and intellectually curious by nature. Their intellectual prowess deserves to be cultivated and supported. Teachers may also be overworked and have too much to read, so finding ways to integrate the most current research into school discussions can be helpful. Some strategies are described in two other What You Can Do features in this chapter.

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 ignore the weight of cultural capital would be both naive and romantic because doing so 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. However, Bourdieu’s concepts of reproduction are useful to counter the notion that cultural inferiority is the cause of academic failure; 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 culture and those of the dominated cultures because including culturally relevant curriculum is a valuable way to challenge a monocultural canon.

## Economic and Social Reproduction

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.<sup>17</sup> 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; they 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 psychologically, allowing for greater 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 of the economic and social reproduction theorists 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 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 school failure.

The arguments of the social reproduction theorists are compelling, and they have had an enormous impact on educational thinking since the 1970s. By concentrating on the labor-market purpose of schooling, however, these theories tended to offer static, oversimplified explanations of school success or failure. According to these theories, school life 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. These analyses assume that schooling is simply imposed from above and accepted from below but, in reality, schools are complex and perplexing institutions, and things are not always this neat or apparent.

Because they place schools in a sociopolitical context, economic and social reproduction theories provide a more persuasive analysis of academic failure than either genetic and cultural inferiority or cultural incompatibility theories. Nevertheless, these analyses are incomplete because they can fall into—or can be misinterpreted as—mechanistic explanations of dynamic processes, assuming a simple cause-and-effect relationship. Such theories fail to explain, for example, 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. By emphasizing only the role of social class, these social and economic reproduction theories fail to explain why schools are also inequitable for females and for students of racially and culturally subordinated communities who do not necessarily live in poverty. In addition, these theories overlook the lengthy struggles

over schooling in which many communities have been historically involved, for example, struggles about the desegregation of schools; bilingual education; multicultural education; and access to education for females as well as for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students and students with special needs. If education were simply imposed from above, these reforms would never have found their way, even imperfectly, into schools. Some theorists, such as Michael Apple, have suggested that schools are the product of conflicts among competing group interests and that the purposes of the dominant class are never perfectly reflected in the schools but, rather, are resisted and modified by the recipients of schooling.<sup>18</sup>

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 move 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 are also incomplete, however, because they generally fail to take cultural and psychological issues into account.



## Cultural Incompatibilities

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 children have when they 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. This line of reasoning asserts that the opposite is also true: The more that students’ experiences, skills, and values differ from the school setting, the more failure 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 *only* competitive environments. Given this reality, cultural differences begin to function as a risk factor. This reasoning turns around the popular concept of “children at risk” so that the risk comes not from within the child but develops as a result of the interaction between the sociopolitical realities of some students and particular school policies, practices, and structures.

Likewise, the fact that some students enter school without speaking English is not, itself, a satisfactory explanation for why some of them 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. 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 teachers need to know about their students' realities, the late Paulo Freire eloquently described their 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

Although the cultural mismatch theory is more comprehensive than deficit theories and is without their implicit racist and classist overtones, the cultural mismatch theory is also insufficient to explain why some students succeed and others fail. The extraordinarily high dropout rate 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 a comprehensive report by Susan Faircloth and John Tippeconnic from the Civil Rights Project, this crisis demands immediate action at the federal, state, local, and tribal levels. Providing "opportunities for students to be immersed in their Native language and culture and develop and implement culturally appropriate and relevant curricula" is one of the twelve strategies recommended in the report. This recommendation emphasizes that addressing cultural discontinuities through the curriculum can help, but this strategy alone is just a partial solution because the structural inequality that produces enormous poverty is left untouched.<sup>21</sup> The report includes cautions about making assumptions about what it means to be culturally relevant and culturally appropriate because of the wide range of cultural and linguistic diversity represented among the American Indian and Alaska Native student population, as well as diversity in the size, location, and type of schools they attend. Such diversity lessens the effectiveness of a one size fits all approach. Rather, a variety of comprehensive yet flexible approaches are needed to decrease the dropout rate and in turn increase the number and percentage of Native American students who graduate from high school.<sup>22</sup>

Newer research points to a major weakness in the theory of cultural discontinuity: Insufficient attention is given to cultural accommodation, biculturalization, and hybridity experienced by immigrants and by multi-ethnic and multiracial students. No culture exists in isolation, and a rigid interpretation of the theory of cultural



## What You Can Do

### Build Collegial Relationships for Solidarity Rooted in Research

You may have the experience of a colleague saying something that rings of stereotyping and misinformation, for example, “Well, you know, Puerto Ricans, as a culture, do not value education.” As upset as you may be, a full-blown confrontation will not solve the problem. Let your colleague know that you are uncomfortable, but that you want to talk more about the issue. Her perspective has been developed over time and thus will take some time to change. It is also unlikely that any single retort or conversation will change her view, so start with little things, such as, “Oh, I am surprised to hear that point of view. It doesn’t match up with the families that I know. Did you read about that somewhere? Because I would like to know more.”

Try to keep your conversations rooted in research and experience. For example, at an opportune moment, share some anecdotes about your positive experiences with Puerto Rican families in the school. At another time, share your excitement about, for example, the children’s literature and cultural resources created by Edwin Fontánez of Exit

Studio as great curriculum supplements.\* Many teachers learn a great deal of cultural information from the children’s resources they use in their classrooms. At another time, bring up some educational research that helps teachers support the academic achievement of Puerto Rican students, such as the book *Puerto Rican Students in U.S. Schools* edited by Sonia Nieto.<sup>†</sup> Also refer to work that examines the education of Latinos more broadly, for example, *Latino Education: An Agenda for Community Action Research*, edited by Pedro Pedraza and Melissa Rivera, and *The Handbook of Latinos and Education*, edited by Enrique Murillo.<sup>‡</sup>

\*See Edwin Fontanez’s Web site, at <http://www.exitstudio.com/>, for books, CDs, and videos about Puerto Rican culture from Exit Studio.

<sup>†</sup>Nieto, S. (Ed.) (2000). *Puerto Rican Students in U.S. Schools*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

<sup>‡</sup>Pedraza, P. & Rivera, M. (Eds.) (2005). *Latino Education: An Agenda for Community Action Research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.; and Murillo, E. G., Jr. (Ed.) (2010). *Handbook of Latinos in Education: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Routledge.

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 a cultural discontinuity perspective is that individual and family differences, school conditions, and the broader sociopolitical context that also influence learning may be disregarded. In fact, a rigid interpretation of this theory hovers dangerously close to stereotyping students from particular cultural groups, resulting in *limiting* views of them and thus *limited* educational opportunities for them. These constructed meanings have evolved from notions such as “the culture of poverty” asserted by Oscar Lewis and Michael Harrington in the 1960s.<sup>23</sup>

Gloria Ladson-Billings notes that the way the concept of culture is used by some teachers and students in preservice teacher education can exacerbate the problem and perpetuate stereotypes. She points out that a growing number of teachers use the term *culture* as a catch-all for a wide variety of behaviors and characteristics when discussing students and parents who are not White, not English speaking, or

not native-born U.S. citizens. For example, some teachers muse that “maybe it is part of their culture” for groups of students to be noisy or for parents to be absent from open house night. Not only are these assessments inaccurate, they also turn attention away from socioeconomic reasons or school policies and practices that might precipitate such behaviors. Parents may be absent from open house night for any one of a number of reasons. For example, they may be working a night shift or caring for younger children, they may have no transportation, they may feel isolated or unwelcome in the school, or they may not have had a translation of the open house information into their language. Groups of children may be loud simply because they are groups of children, not because of their skin color or another reason related to “their culture.”<sup>24</sup>

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 of these theories, one might assume they should not be. This reality has been well documented by many scholars,<sup>25</sup> which leads us to other explanations, some of which we discuss below.



## Out-of-School Factors (OSFs)

Examining social and economic inequities, and their resulting negative educational consequences, can assist in ascertaining how schools are effective or ineffective within the broader social picture. Richard Rothstein’s research asserts that, outside school, myriad factors related to social class and how families in some groups are stratified in society profoundly influence learning in school. He advocates three approaches to pursue if progress is to be made in narrowing the “achievement gap”: (1) promoting school improvement efforts that raise the quality of instruction; (2) giving more attention to out-of-school hours by implementing early childhood, after-school, and summer programs; and (3) implementing policies that would provide appropriate health services and stable housing and narrow the growing income inequalities in our society.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, David Berliner makes the argument that out-of-school factors (OSFs) caused by poverty *alone* place severe limits on what can be accomplished through educational reform efforts. His comprehensive list of eleven recommendations are made in light of the fact that “America’s schools are so highly segregated by income, race, and ethnicity, problems related to poverty occur simultaneously, with greater frequency, and act cumulatively in schools serving disadvantaged communities.”<sup>27</sup> Making the case that schools in these economically depressed communities face greater challenges than schools in economically stable communities, Berliner asserts that efforts to improve educational outcomes are unlikely to succeed unless policies are implemented to address six OSFs that significantly affect learning opportunities: (1) low birth-weight and nongenetic prenatal influences on children; (2) inadequate medical, dental, and vision care; (3) food insecurity; (4) environmental pollutants; (5) family relations and family stress; and (6) neighborhood characteristics.<sup>28</sup>

An example of addressing OSFs simultaneously with school achievement can be found in the work of Geoffrey Canada, president of the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ).<sup>29</sup> HCZ, which is funded mostly by private donations, infuses social, medical, and educational services available for free to the 10,000 children and their families

who live within the 100 blocks of the HCZ. The specific intent of HCZ is to raise academic achievement for every child. Canada's reluctance to wait for governmental funding for comprehensive reform led him to integrate private funding with public programs. The HCZ's rates of success have been a model to public social service and public school reformers throughout the nation and point to what the possibilities can be for government officials with the will and the resources to back such programs.<sup>30</sup>

Undeniably, many students face a multitude of difficult problems, and the school cannot be expected to solve them all. To address this reality, the Economic Policy Institute convened a task force that drafted a statement titled *A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education* to inform legislators and the general public. The task force concluded that "school improvement, to be fully effective, . . . must be complemented by a broader definition of schooling and by improvements in the social and economic circumstances of disadvantaged youth." To continue to close achievement gaps, their report calls for (1) continued school improvement efforts; (2) developmentally appropriate and high-quality early childhood, preschool, and kindergarten care and education; (3) routine pediatric, dental, hearing, and vision care for all infants, toddlers, and schoolchildren; and (4) improvement of the quality of students' out-of-school time.<sup>31</sup> Pedro Noguera consistently argues that, because poor children typically attend schools that are overcrowded, underfunded, and staffed by inexperienced teachers, schools need to be viewed as an integral part of social solutions. Noguera emphasizes that "reducing poverty and improving schools should not be treated as competing goals."<sup>32</sup>

The research on OSFs is helpful in explaining how the lack of health care, inadequate nutrition, inadequate housing, and unstable family life impinge on school experiences. These arguments assertively address social supports that are required for schools to be successful in educating all children. This scholarship ties social and economic factors together *with* effective school reform rather than separating social reform efforts from school reform agendas. Graphically illustrated in his aptly titled book, *Five Miles Away, A World Apart*, James E. Ryan, a scholar of education law, presents a comprehensive case comparison of two schools in Virginia that exemplifies the multifaceted historical missteps in policy that have led to ingrained segregationist mind-sets and practices, creating the crisis of high-poverty schools. Ryan urges reform efforts to address *simultaneously* both educational policies to support schools *and* social policies to support families.<sup>33</sup>

The conclusions of the research reviewed in this section emphasize the powerlessness of schools to achieve educational equity on their own without concomitant massive social reforms. The research concurrently argue that educational reform efforts that do not take into account the social and economic conditions outside schools can be only partially successful. Considered in this way, OSFs must be addressed in order to affect student learning and school achievement.



## Resistance and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Resistance theory, as articulated by scholars such as Henry Giroux, Jim Cummins, and Herbert Kohl, adds another layer to the explanation of school failure.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

Resistance theory is helpful because it attempts to explain the complex relationship between disempowered communities and their schools. Students and their families are not only victims of the educational system, they are 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 be self-defeating and counterproductive in the long run. On the other hand, 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.”<sup>36</sup>

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. However, rather than venerate self-destructive or delinquent behavior, Giroux’s research distinguishes between resistance that is oppositional (deviant behavior) and resistance that is strategic (conscious and meant to achieve a common good).<sup>37</sup> We see many of these manifestations of resistance in the case studies of Paul Chavez and Latrell Elton, which follow this chapter.

Students who develop a critical consciousness may end up resisting education. Such students are often branded and punished as loudmouths and troublemakers. Although some drop out, others choose to stop participating actively 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 coming to class 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 apparently 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.<sup>38</sup>

The lifelong deleterious effects of schools’ responses to resistance can have irreversible consequences in these times of hypersurveillance of youth, resulting in what has come to be known as the school-to-prison pipeline. Marian Wright Edelman and the Children’s Defense Fund have thoroughly documented that young Black men in the United States are incarcerated in the juvenile justice system at four times the rate of White youth.<sup>39</sup> Several studies have pointed out how school disciplinary policies such as zero tolerance have contributed to the astonishing rate at which young people are funneled from classrooms into incarceration.<sup>40</sup> The situation has only worsened in the past decade, since 2000, when the Harvard Advancement Project and Civil Rights Project, in consultation with attorneys,

psychiatrists, academicians, educators, and children's advocates, published a multidiscipline review that reported that zero tolerance is unfair and contrary to the developmental needs of children and often results in the criminalization of children.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to studies that examine the discipline policies of K-12 schools, Sabina Vaught articulated the constellation of forces in schools and courts that place blame on the youth, their families, and their communities.<sup>42</sup> John Raible and Jason Irizarry reach beyond critiquing the K-12 school structure; for example, they argue that pre-service teachers need to be educated about the crisis and to examine the role of teacher surveillance of youth through classroom management strategies as one of the factors that pushes students out of school and into the penal system.<sup>43</sup> Johanna Wald and Daniel J. Losen cited three specific themes that emerged in the research about the connections between school-life and prison-life for youth. These three themes are summarized here: (1) Failure to provide appropriate behavioral interventions [in schools] may be contributing to delinquency among students with disabilities; (2) following removal from school, many students experience enormous difficulty in reentering; and (3) effective interventions and programs that reduce risk and enhance protective factors for youth at risk for delinquency [do] exist. The conclusions of Wald and Losen point to the political will urgently required to expand and replicate models of preventive measures for youth.<sup>44</sup>

Pedro Noguera and Chiara M Cannella address such preventive measures by analyzing youth agency and activism and by suggesting public policy that would support youth civic activism. By examining the various ways in which youth who have been marginalized and maligned have taken action to resist—against all odds—the forces that have constrained their lives, Noguera and Cannella (following Giroux) emphasize *strategic resistance* and distinguish it from some forms of delinquency and defiance that may not only be self-destructive, but may also be a form of conformity to societal norms and reinforce stereotypes perpetuated by the media and marketplace. They call for five principles for public policy to advance as social justice youth policy: (1) a bill of rights for young people, (2) representation of young people in the formulation and development of policy, (3) investment in the capacity of youth leaders, (4) increased accountability of public institutions to disenfranchised youth and communities, and (5) counteracting the prevalence—and impact—of misconceptions and distortions about youth. They admit that developing such policy might be complicated, but they also point to the urgency with which these issues must be addressed, particularly when seen in the light of the cumulative effects of past policies that have divested attention away from youth.<sup>45</sup>

What causes students to resist education and otherwise engage in behaviors that might ultimately jeopardize their chances of learning or increase their chances of involvement with the law? There is no simple answer to this question, but one element that contributes to the constellation of reasons is a school climate that rejects students' identities and fails to engage them in meaningful work. This is nowhere more evident than in the case studies that follow this chapter. Both Paul and Latrell were eloquent in describing how their backgrounds were not reflected in the school structures and curriculum. Latrell, especially, had perceived few positive messages in his school experience.



## What You Can Do

### Collaborative Research to Honor Teachers as Intellectuals

In addition to building personal, collegial relationships, take action for building schoolwide awareness among your peers. Suggest to your principal, department chair, or curriculum director that a forthcoming faculty or department meeting be dedicated to reading some educational research about student achievement. It is most effective to allow time for reading and discussion within in the meeting time frame because many teachers may not have time to read in preparation for the meeting. This chapter is filled with citations of books, chapters, and articles about particular topics. You may choose a single article or a book chapter. For a more comprehensive view, such as the one provided by this chapter, break the faculty into small groups and assign each group a short article or portion of a chapter to read. Regroup the whole faculty and ask each group to report on the findings of the

article or chapter section and what the implications may be for your particular school community, thereby co-constructing a wider range of group knowledge.

Even if this seems like an untenable request of your administration, ask anyway. How do you know unless you try? If the first level of administration, let's say, the principal, rejects the idea, try another level (department head, grade-level chair, team leader, districtwide curriculum director, or superintendent). If your attempts to organize "sanctioned" in-school study-group discussions fail, try an after-school voluntary group. Whether the study groups are voluntary or assigned, be sure you document the time and get professional development points or credits for all participants. These strategies may be applied to a range of educational research topics.



## Cultural-Ecological Theory: Immigration, Minorities, and "Acting White"

A traditional argument used to explain differences in academic achievement is that (in the common parlance of public schools) it takes students from certain cultural groups 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. While this argument may be true for some European immigrants (but by no means for all), it is a specious argument for others because it fails to explain the educational and historical experiences of African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Latinos, which are markedly different from those of European ethnic groups. For one, American Indians, African Americans, and many Mexican Americans can hardly be called new immigrants. Many have been here, on U.S. soil, for generations, and some for millennia. Some Asians have been here for four or five generations, and although many do well in school, others are not as successful.

In an alternative explanation of school failure and success, the late John Ogbu and colleagues developed what he called the cultural-ecological theory, which goes beyond cultural discontinuities. Ogbu and Herbert Simons 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> The latter groups, including American Indians, Africans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans, among others, were incorporated into U.S. society against their will. According to Ogbu, voluntary immigrants include all European and some Asian, African, and Central American immigrants, among others. The distinction is not always true, of course, because those who appear on the surface to be voluntary immigrants may not be so at all, and vice versa. Witness, for example, the current situation of millions of Mexicans who not only come to the United States voluntarily, but risk their lives to do so. Those who arrive here as refugees, whether from Cambodia, Sudan, Somalia, or Afghanistan, do not fit neatly into voluntary or involuntary categories because they were forced from their homelands. Nevertheless, the categories, imperfect as they are, are used in cultural-ecological theory to explain the present condition and educational experiences of some groups.

Ogbu concluded that students from particular backgrounds experience a great variability in academic performance, and this variability can often be explained by the sociopolitical setting in which they find themselves. 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: They see 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, and their children can experience even more success if they work hard in school, largely because these immigrants have great faith in the “American dream.” As a result, they apply themselves to achieve it. They understand that, to achieve success, they may have to endure, for example, 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. Immigrants coming from war-torn countries or refugee camps and those who have experienced the death of loved ones may not consider living in an economically depressed neighborhood and engaging in backbreaking work to be a severe hardship.<sup>48</sup>

Also, according to Ogbu, because of the long history of discrimination and racism in U.S. schools, involuntary minority children and their families are often distrustful of the educational system. Children in these communities have routinely been subjected to what Jim Cummins calls identity eradication,<sup>49</sup> whereby 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. Given this situation, Ogbu claims that it is not unusual for students from what he called caste-like minorities to engage in *cultural inversion*, that is, to resist acquiring and demonstrating the culture and cognitive styles identified with the dominant group. He asserts that these behaviors, considered “White,” 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—that is, to demonstrate what Ogbu calls oppositional behavior. Such behaviors include language, speech forms, and other manifestations that help to characterize their group but are contrary to the behaviors sanctioned and 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, according to Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, “with the burden of acting White.”<sup>50</sup> These students, assert Fordham and Ogbu, 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 research conducted in a predominantly African American high 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 (for example, by being class clown) to hide their academic achievement. According to Ogbu, involuntary minority parents, who themselves have 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.

Cultural-ecological theories have been helpful in explaining differences in the school experiences of students of various backgrounds. But the theories have also come under great scrutiny and criticism for 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.

Some scholars and educators have found Ogbu’s 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. Also, recent studies—most notably, one by Margaret Gibson—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 like their parents did. They are also less likely to perceive the long-term benefits of hard work and study.<sup>51</sup>

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 Ogbu’s theory. David Gillborn, who has studied youths of



## SNAPSHOT

### *Nini Rostland*

*Nini Rostland<sup>1</sup> is a 15-year-old freshman at Avery High School in a midsize college town in the Midwest. She describes herself as racially and ethnically mixed. Her mother is Black South African and her father is Polish American. Her family moved from South Africa to the United States when she was in kindergarten, so most of her education has been in U.S. public schools. This Snapshot of Nini emphasizes that many students of mixed heritage negotiate labels, assumptions, and expectations with friends and teachers in school settings.*

*It kind of makes me mad that they always try to put people into a certain box. You have to check a box every time you fill out a form. I don't fit in a box. Especially these days, more people are getting more and more racially mixed. I don't identify myself as Black or as White. I usually put "both" or "other," because I'm not either; I'm both.*

*My cultural identity is really important to me. It makes me mad when people say, "Oh, you are not White." Well, I know I'm not White. I'm not Black either. People automatically assume that I'm not Caucasian, and they are automatically, "You're Black." And I'm, like, "Not necessarily." It makes me mad sometimes.*

*Being of mixed heritage is kind of difficult sometimes because it's hard finding where you fit in. For me, for a while I didn't really know what kind of people would accept me. Now I find people who accept me just as I am, not for trying to be like them. Now I try to hang out with people who are of all different races. I hang out with the Black people, the mixed people, the White people, Asian, everything. I don't like to*

*be classified as a certain thing. The Black people treat me like I'm one of them. I find that Black people are more accepting of people in their group. More of the White people are, like, "You're not rich and you're not White, so you can't be in our group." Most likely, if you are mixed with some Black, the group of Black people will accept you.*

*Some of my friends would say that you can be attracted to both, that White people can like you, mixed people can like you, and Black people can like you. My closest group of friends, there's a foursome of us, and we all became really close over the summer at this camp for people of mixed heritage or of other ethnic backgrounds. And over that camp we have become really, best friends. That was in seventh grade. So for two years now, we've all been really close. And three of my friends are . . . like me: mixed with Black and White, and my other friend is African.*

*It's difficult because you don't really fit anybody's expectation. I think expectations may be holding me back a little bit. I think when people see me, they assume, "Oh, she's Black." They automatically assume, "Oh, she's not going to achieve well." That is kind of holding me back because it's sort of like a psychological thing where you think, "Well, if that's what people expect you to achieve," then you kind of think, "Oh, I might achieve that." I'm trying to turn that around, and be, like, "Well I can achieve anything I want to."*

*I think school in some ways is kind of like mainstreaming. It's what we are all forced into doing when we're young: You have to go to school, you have to get an education, you have to go to college so you can get a good job. But really, I think if you look back at*

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,

history, the people who went out of the way of the expectations of society, they were the ones who went on to be really great. I understand that there is a good reason why I should go to school because I don't want to be working at McDonald's my entire life. But I also think that it's important that I be able to explore other things.

School's really not that challenging to me. One of the classes that I actually learn something in and enjoy is art class because I am learning a lot of new techniques. But most of my other classes are just memorization, and I'm really not learning anything from it. I have found very few teachers who actually teach classes in an interesting way that makes me really want to work. But when I see all the stuff that my mom did, it makes me feel like my mom went through a lot harder stuff than I have ever went through, so I should try my hardest at what I'm doing right now. One way that I think school is really important is through my mom. Because I have seen that to get to where she came from, she had to put in a lot of effort and go through a lot of high-level schooling just so that she could come to the U.S.

Both of my parents taught me about each of their heritages. I can just identify with that because that's me. I learned about my dad's Polish background because his parents are Polish and they make a lot of Polish dishes. We even went to a traditional Polish dinner where they made Polish meals and stuff like that. My dad has told me about some of the traditions they had when he was younger. Also, from my dad I've learned about social issues and what's going on in the world. I learn so much about government and that kind of stuff from my dad. From my mom I've learned ethnic pride. I'm really proud of my heritage. My mom is South African and she came through a lot just so that she could be here. I know a lot of history about what happened in South Africa and what my mom and

my brother both lived through. They've told stories about what happened to them and stuff like that. But my parents don't really know what it's like to be of mixed heritage.

### Commentary

Racial, ethnic, and cultural identities are constantly under construction, and adolescence is an especially vulnerable time for this formation. Messages from peers, family, popular culture, and school strongly influence a young person's perspectives on his or her cultural heritages, identities, and school engagement. In spite of the challenges presented by mixed heritage, Nini appears to possess a strong sense of identity and an appreciation for her background. Her parents provide her with familial, historical, and cultural knowledge, and she has formed powerful bonds, through a summer camp experience, with a small group of peers with similar roots. Simultaneously, she struggles with feelings of acceptance within certain groups and the threat of negative anticipations. The tensions she experiences around racial identity extend beyond peer groups and are felt in teacher expectations, too. Can schools offer the level of affirmation that the summer camp provided while simultaneously creating a robust academic atmosphere? Can we develop learning communities that help students and teachers cross racial boundaries to cultivate more full individual selves within deeply connected communities? If, as Nini says, "[t]hese days, more people are getting more and more racially mixed," what are the implications for developing learning communities that affirm multiple histories and multiple forms of cultural knowledge?

<sup>1</sup>We appreciate the work of Dr. Carlie Tartakov, who interviewed Nini and provided background information for the Snapshot, and that of John Raible, who helped transcribe the interview.

opposition does not necessarily lead to failure.<sup>52</sup> To understand these issues more clearly, we advise examining the complexity of students' identities and developing a broad perspective of the many factors that may influence learning and achievement within schools.

## *About Terminology*

### *Mixed Race/Multiracial/Multicultural/Multiethnic*

Many young people and their families are refusing to accept rigid categorizations based on one culture, race, or other kind of social grouping. The hybridity that we discussed in this chapter is a growing phenomenon in the United States and, indeed, around the globe. The great increase in the number of mixed race, biethnic, multiethnic, biracial, and multiracial people, and their insistence on identifying as such, is a reminder that words cannot totally describe the multifaceted identities of human beings. Of the 2010 estimated U.S. population of 308,745,538, approximately 1.7 percent reported two or more races in their responses to the U.S. Census.

While racial, ethnic, and cultural groups have been intermingling throughout history, in the recent past it was common to hear biracial and multiracial labels applied only to individuals of African American and European American heritage, and often those labels were demeaning and oppressive. Institutionalized racism and the social stratification of race embodied in the one-drop rule dictated that individuals with any African ancestry be categorized as Black. Now, as a result of the civil rights movement and subsequent legislation, it is much more common for students and families to proudly claim their multiple ancestries. In the Snapshot about Nini Rostland, she refers to herself as “racially and ethnically mixed,” with her Black South African mother and her Polish American father. Elsewhere in this book, we have featured other students who illustrate the porous boundaries of racial labels and identify as racially mixed. Linda Howard describes herself as biracial, naming her parents as “Black and White American.” Also, Yahaira León identifies as “half and half,” referring to her Dominican and Puerto Rican heritage. She points out how important it is to recognize both portions of her ancestry. Liane Chang calls herself Eurasian, and Jasper Quinn describes his combined Native American ancestry as “Paiute, Swinomish, [and] Visayan.” Yet the 2000 U.S. Census was the first one in history where individuals were instructed to “mark one or more boxes” when identifying their racial heritage, even though laws against interracial marriage were struck down in 1967. While teachers should always take cues from their students on what language is most descriptive and precise to describe the students’ identity, it is especially critical that teachers listen carefully to students of mixed heritage. Many multiracial students and their families have been discouraged from embracing their multiple heritages or, at worst, have been made to feel ashamed. Acknowledging students’ multiple backgrounds allows students to be more fully themselves and to be affirmed in totality. Choosing terminology that students and their families claim is a step in affirming their entire identity.



### **Complicating Theories of Identities Within School Structures**

Dissatisfied with the cultural-ecological explanations of school failure such as those of Ogbu and Fordham on “acting White,” and likewise unconvinced by resistance explanations, some alternative theories are emerging from scholars such as Prudence

Carter, Gilberto Conchas, and others.<sup>53</sup> These scholars present research in which students' perspectives, voices, and experiences are centered. Both Conchas and Carter take a sociological view of the ways in which culture and identity are understood and enacted by urban students. Conchas warns, for example, that minority group categories used in cultural-ecological theoretical frameworks do not allow for variations in the school experiences of racial minorities.<sup>54</sup>

Likewise, Carter cautions against creating master narratives that try to speak about all members of involuntary minority groups as if each student in these groups had identical experiences and perspectives.<sup>55</sup> For instance, she points out that recent research has shown that African Americans subscribe to the basic values of education as much as Whites do, or in some cases, even more so. Nearly all of the participants in Carter's study agree that education is the key to success. They believe in the so-called American dream that education may bring good jobs, home and car ownership, and intact families.

By interviewing 68 youth from low-income communities who identified as African American or Latino/Latina, Carter challenges the framework of oppositional culture. She pays close attention to the ways in which culture is discussed and how it influences student engagement and achievement:

Students use culture as a vehicle to signal many things, ranging from the stylistic to the political. The oppositional culture framework, however, ignores the full spectrum of why and how culture becomes a social and political response to schooling by discounting the positive values and functions of these students' culture.<sup>56</sup>

Carter highlights the positive cultural assertions of youth that contribute to their success, and she argues that their ethno-racial cultures are not adaptations to the limits created by a dominant culture. She maintains that focusing on a student's culture as a maladaptive response to social marginalization ignores the roles and values of nondominant cultural practices in the lives of minority youth.

Carter also found that gender is enacted in specific ways that affect school achievement within the lives of female and male students in marginalized communities. So much of the focus has been on disparities among racial and ethnic groups that the gender story *within* the groups has gone untold. That girls and boys take up academic achievement by developing attachment and committing to engagement in differing ways is often ignored in research about low-income students of color. The students, both girls and boys, in Carter's study did not equate academic achievement with "acting White." Instead, students recognized the unfairness in, and were critical of, the representation of what counts as knowledge, and the linking of intelligence (or what it means to be smart) with certain styles that are defined in "White" middle-class ways.

Asserting that culture *does* matter in the achievement of African American and Latino students, Carter notes that students draw upon both dominant cultural capital and nondominant cultural capital to construct academic success. Three forces—race/ethnicity, class, and gender—dictate much about how "acting Black," "acting Spanish," or "acting White" is integrated into the identities of students. She is clear that African American and Latino students need tools to make them literate, self-sufficient,

politically active, and economically productive. Educators cannot disregard the value of different groups' cultural repertoires; instead, they need to build on the powerful cultural dynamics permeating the school.<sup>57</sup>

Conchas's study also holds implications for how educators address the cultural identities within schools. He is emphatic about the different ways that students (in his study, those who identified as African American, Latino, and Vietnamese) embraced and asserted their cultural and academic identities within and between groups. By examining and comparing specific programs that follow the structural model of school-within-a-school, Conchas addressed institutional mechanisms that create alienation among some successful students of color. Examining students' ideology in such programs revealed that they "embraced the importance of individualism and meritocracy, while simultaneously downplaying the significance of race, class, and gender equity."<sup>58</sup> Conchas found mechanisms in some programs that acted as a "mediating force against racial disparity," specifically by supplying youth with both cultural and social capital, and encouraging cooperative experiences of academic achievement.<sup>59</sup>

Nurturing, mentoring relationships within schools are significant for students' development of multiple forms of social capital that may contribute to educational success. As such, Conchas suggests that concentrated efforts are needed to reduce ethnic segregation and equalize the access that all students have to mentoring and encouragement. He also points to structural models that support sociocultural processes that can develop a high-achieving academic culture of success, citing the benefits of smaller, intimate school-within-a-school structures and small learning communities. His findings note that school structures directly contribute to differing patterns of school adaptation within and between racial groups. Some institutional arrangements are much better at creating a supportive cross-ethnic community of learners, while the sense of exclusion and competition in other programs contributes to racial tensions in schools.

Conchas's description of a culture of academic achievement, the social capital created by school relationships, and the call for small learning communities echo the assertions made by D. Bruce Jackson. Jackson points out that students who are successful in school take on and sustain what he calls academic identity.<sup>60</sup> Academic identity is an understanding of self within the context of school, in which intellectual activities within and outside school are valued. Jackson acknowledges that many forces influence student identity but argues that, despite the range of theories about student success or failure, success depends on what students decide to do or not do. Although teachers can influence those decisions, ultimately it is students who really direct how they spend their time. They are critical agents in their own education.

The theories developed by Carter, Conchas, and Jackson stem from a range of research projects conducted from diverse perspectives, but they share a concern for the ways in which students' identities intersect with school cultures. They all maintain that, while sociocultural factors and discriminatory histories may influence students' perception of their academic identities and their academic achievement, these factors do not *predetermine* academic success. These scholars are optimistic about the opportunity to tap into youths' dynamic, multiple ways of shaping self and their diverse means of expressing cultural identities. Given the complexity of adolescent

identity, which researcher John Raible has documented in writings with Sonia, it is imperative that educators note how race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, and other markers of identity are intricately entangled while profoundly influencing students' school lives.<sup>61</sup> Within this lively interplay lies the potential for taking up academic identity and multiple strategies for success. It would be simpleminded to assert that simply wanting to succeed magically grants one an academic identity. That is why the focus of these theories holds particular promise: Rather than designing a particular road map to success, their focus is more like a global positioning system for teachers and students to view the multifaceted aspects of identity and the web of structures that support academic achievement.



## Conclusion

No simple explanation accounts for student achievement or failure. As we have seen in this chapter, each theory holds helpful analysis, but 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, and the role that schools play in reproducing existing societal inequities do not fully explain school failure.

The significance of caring relationships among students and their teachers has taken on great significance in the recent past. Awareness of the tremendous difference that teachers—and the school climate in general—can make in the lives and futures of young people is growing. Teachers and schools that affirm students' identities, believe in their intelligence, and accept nothing less than the best have proved 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 one of the most important elements of student learning.

The discussion in this chapter leads us to the conclusion that school achievement can be explained only 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; students' multiple and dynamic ways of asserting ethno-racial, gender, and cultural identities; teachers' relationships with the communities they serve; and the political relationship of particular groups to society and the schools. It is tricky business, however, to seek causal explanations for school success and failure. Understanding how numerous complex conditions are mediated within the school and home settings can also help explain students' academic success or failure. Understanding all these conditions contributes to a more comprehensive explanation of the massive school failure of many students.

It is clear that no single explanation of academic achievement is sufficient to explain why some students succeed in school and others fail. Rather, we need to



To check your comprehension on the content covered in Chapter 7, go to the Book Resources in the MyEducationLab for your course, select your text, and complete the Study Plan. Here, you will be able to take a chapter quiz; receive feedback on your answers; and then access review, practice, and enrichment activities to enhance your understanding of the chapter content.

understand school achievement as a combination of *personal*, *cultural*, *familial*, *political*, *relational*, and *societal* issues, and this requires an understanding of the sociopolitical context in which education takes place.



## To Think About

1. What did William Ryan mean by “culturally depriving schools”? Can you give some examples?
2. Think about schools and classrooms with which you are familiar. Have you noticed examples of student resistance in these contexts? If so, what are they, and what is their effect?
3. You and a group of your colleagues need to determine why a particular student has been doing poorly in your classes. What will you examine? Why?



## Activities ... for Personal, School, and Community Change

1. 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 within their communities. If you teach in a middle or high school class in which you have many students, thus making home visits difficult, 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?
2. 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 she or he influenced you, and ask for advice on how you can have the same impact on your students. How can you apply what you have learned from this to your own teaching?
3. Get together with a group of colleagues to discuss how students in your school display “resistance” behaviors. Describe these behaviors exactly. Are these behaviors getting in the way of students’ engagement with school? Are students displaying *strategic* resistance that makes efforts toward social change? Decide on a plan of action for your classrooms to assist students in civic action to help them accomplish their goals in a productive way.



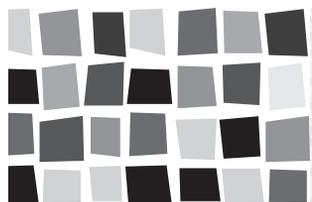
Go to Topic 9: Immigration; Topic 11: Strategies; and Topic 12: School-wide Diversity Issues in the MyEducationLab ([www.myeducationlab.com](http://www.myeducationlab.com)) for your course, where you can:

- Find learning outcomes for instructional strategies and school-wide diversity issues
- Complete Assignments and Activities that can help you more deeply understand the chapter content.
- Apply and practice your understanding of the core teaching skills identified in the chapter with the Building Teaching Skills and Dispositions learning units.
- Examine challenging situations and cases presented in the IRIS Center Resources.

- Check your comprehension on the content covered in the chapter by going to the Study Plan in the Book Resources for your text. Here you will be able to take a pretest, receive feedback on your answers, and then access Review, Practice, and Enrichment activities to enhance your understanding of chapter content, take a post-test to make sure you've understood what you've read
- On the Book Resources site, you will also view additional student art and have access to additional case studies

### Companion Website

For access to additional case studies, Web links, concept cards, and other material related to this chapter, visit the text's companion website at [www.ablongman.com/nieto6e](http://www.ablongman.com/nieto6e).



## Case Studies

### Paul Chavez

*I don't want to speak too soon, but I'm pretty much on a good road here.*

Speaking in an earnest and intense tone, Paul Chavez<sup>1</sup> thought carefully before sharing his thoughts about the importance of school, the “hood,” and his family. Paul was 16 years old at the time of his interview, and he had already lived a lifetime full of gang activity, drugs,

and disappointment. The signs were evident, from his style of dress to the “tag” (tattoo) on his arm, to his reminiscence of “homeboys” who had been killed. Describing himself as Chicano and Mexican American, Paul was the third generation in his family to be born in Los Angeles. He did not speak Spanish but said that both his mother and grandmother did, even though they too were born and raised here.

Paul lived with his mother, two brothers (ages 19 and 9), and two younger sisters. Another brother, 21, was not living at home. His mother was trying to obtain her high school equivalency diploma; she had failed the test once but was studying hard to pass it the next time. She and Paul's father had been separated for about four years, and Paul described the entire family as “Christian.” His mother was a church leader, and his brother was a Bible study leader. Even his father, a recovering alcoholic, who had lived on the streets for years and spent time in prison, was living in what Paul called a “Christian home,” probably a halfway house.

The one-family homes in Paul's East Los Angeles neighborhood mask the poverty and despair that are easier to see in other economically depressed neighborhoods, with their high-rise tenements and projects. Here, the mostly Latino families struggle to maintain a sense of community in the well-kept homes on small lots. However, signs of gang activity are apparent in the tags on buildings and walls. Paul said that an outsider suspected of belonging to another gang was likely to get jumped merely for walking down the street.

School problems began for Paul when he was in third or fourth grade, and he had been suspended on numerous occasions for poor behavior. The problem was not lack of ability (his teachers always felt that he was smart) but rather lack of interest. He was more interested in belonging to a “school gang,” a group of young boys looking for boys in other classes to fight. In spite of the lure of gangs, he remembered fifth grade as the best year he had had in school, and he attributed this to Ms. Nelson, the most caring teacher he had until he went to his current school. Paul already wore gang-affiliated attire, and he had a reputation as a troublemaker, but she did not let this get in the way of her high expectations of him. It was in her class that he became interested in history, and he recalled being fascinated by the American Revolution.

By the time Paul began junior high school, peer pressure, family problems, and street violence brought the situation to a head. Seventh and eighth grades were his worst years. He was expelled in eighth grade, and he was told by school authorities to attend an alternative school in another district. But he refused to go and instead stayed home for six months. By ninth grade, he was heavily involved in gang activity, joining the 18th Street Gang, a gang with thousands of members not only in Los Angeles but also in other cities and even in other states. Thirteen of his cousins were or had been in the same gang, as was his older brother, so the role of gang as “family” was even more relevant in his case. An uncle and a cousin had both been killed as a result of their gang activity.

Encouraged by his mother, Paul tried to enroll in another program but was again expelled after a few months. Then he heard about and applied to the Escuela de Dignidad y Orgullo (School of Dignity and Pride), a high school for students who had dropped out of other schools. With a large Chicano population, the school was characterized by a multicultural curriculum with a focus on Chicano history, and it relied on student and staff involvement in its day-to-day operations. All talk of gangs was discouraged, and the staff tried hard to create a different kind of community, one not affiliated with gang culture. The staff included counselors, a psychologist, a probation officer, and several teachers. Paul had not been formally arrested, but because of his previous problems, he agreed to a voluntary placement with the probation officer, just to “keep me on the right road,” he said.

The new road Paul had taken was far from easy for him, however. He had also been expelled from Escuela de Dignidad y Orgullo, and it was only after trying another program and then spending several months on the street that he had realized he wanted to return. All of his friends had quit school, and he feared ending up like them. He had been accepted at Escuela once again and had done well since returning two years before. At the time he was interviewed, Paul was spending most of his time at school, doing homework every day when he got home, and working after school at the local city hall, a job that the school had found for him. Paul described Escuela as different from any other he had attended because all of the staff members cared about and encouraged the students and because Chicano culture and history were central to the curriculum, making it a more exciting place to learn.

Paul’s philosophy at this point was to take life one day at a time because the lure of gang life was still present. He had not yet quit the gang, and it was obvious

that he was at a crossroads in his life. The next several months might determine which direction his life would take: either an escalating life of crime on the streets or a promising future of education and work.

Paul's case study highlights two goals he had had for a long time: *to be respected* and to make something of himself, two goals that are frequently at odds. Another theme is his determination to "*make it better*," and the third is the *importance of family support*.

### *"Everybody's Gotta Get Respect"*

I grew up ditching school, just getting in trouble, trying to make a dollar, that's it, you know? Just go to school, steal from the store, and go sell candies at school. And that's what I was doing in the third or fourth grade. I was always getting in the principal's office, suspended, kicked out, everything, starting from the third grade.

My fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Nelson, she put me in a play and that, like, tripped me out. Like, why do you want *me* in a play? Me, I'm just a mess-up. Still, you know, she put me in a play. And in fifth grade, I think that was the best year out of the whole six years [of elementary school]. I learned a lot about the Revolutionary War, you know? The fifth grade was a grade I'll always remember. Had good friends. We had a project we were involved in. Ms. Nelson was a good teacher. She just involved everyone. We made books, this and that. And I used to like to write, and I wrote two, three books. She did pretty nice things. She got real deep into you, just, you know, "Come on, you can do it." That was a good year for me, the fifth grade.

My most troubled years [were] my junior high years. Seventh grade, first day of school, I met this guy and then, from there, we started to form. And every junior high, you're gonna have a group, okay? You're gonna have a group that you hang around with. And it got to we just started always starting trouble in classes. Whatever period we had, we just started trouble in. And me, I have a great sense of humor, right? I can make people laugh a lot. So then I was always getting kicked out of the classroom. And so what that got me was kind of, I guess popular, right? Where girls were always around me. I had a big group. But I was always the one clowning, getting in trouble. So it kind of like set a path for me where I was, like, all right, so I clown and get popularity. All right, I understand now the program.

I [wasn't] in a gang, but I was dressing pretty . . . still gang affiliated. And so people looked like, "Well, where you from?" "I ain't from nowhere." And that kind of like got me to want to be from somewhere so I could tell 'em, "Well, I'm from here. . . ." Those were the years in seventh grade, and I was fighting with eighth graders. I'd be in a dance, a little Oriental kid would come up to me and she goes, "I know you, you're Paul," this and that. They would know me. It made me feel good.

Being in a gang, you think about who you're retaliating, you know, just another Chicano brother. And that's kind of deep. Well, why you're gonna be from a neighborhood [gang], have pride, this and that, and take out your own *Raza*,<sup>2</sup> you know? So that kind of always caught me in my mind. You see a lot of your own people just going down because of your neighborhood. And it's a trip. And you got a lot of homeboys that come out from the system, the jails, and it's real segregated in there, you know, the Blacks and Chicanos. And they even got the border brothers, the ones from Mexico who don't speak no English. They're even separated from the Chicanos, the Sureños, that's right from South L.A. Okay, they're paranoid in there, and everybody is, like, "What's up with the Blacks? It's on, it's on. We're gonna have a war." And everybody, then they turn little

things into big things. So it's really just a race war going on in the inside, and they bring it out to us.

It has a great hold on you, and it's, like, I talk to my cousin. He's still into it real deep. I'm not really. Don't get me wrong: I'm from the neighborhood, but I'm not really deep into it. You know what I mean? But it's, like, I talk to 'em. "Yeah, we were with the homeboys on the Eastside, blah, blah, blah, this and that," and I'll be like, "Damn," and I think, "I wish I was there getting off on drinking and shit."

I had a cousin, he was 16 when he passed away. He was my cousin . . . family . . . from [the] 18th Street [gang], too. And what happened, see, he passed away and that's another tragedy. It's just, you see so much. I'm 16, and I see so much. First his dad passed away and then my cousin . . . my uncle and my cousin. And you think, "Man, all this because of a gang!" And there's times when you just sit and you think, you sit and you think, and you say, "Why? Why? Why? What is this?" But you don't know why, but you have it so much inside of you. It's hard; it's not easy to get rid of. I don't want to get rid of it, but you just got to try to focus on other things right now. I'm from a gang and that's it, and just 'cause I'm from a gang doesn't mean I can't make myself better.

But me, I *do* care. I have a life, and I want to keep it. I don't want to lose it. I have two little sisters, and I want to see them grow up, too, and I want to have my own family. So, I got the tag. I got a big 18 on my arm where everybody could see it, and that's the way I was about a year ago. You know, man, if you would be talking a year ago I'd be, like, "I'm from the neighborhood." I'd be talking to you in slang street, all crazy, you know? Now I'm more intelligent.

I try not to get influenced too much . . . pulled into what I don't want to be into. But mostly, it's hard. You don't want people to be saying you're stupid. "Why do you want to go to school and get a job?" I was talking to my homeboy the other day, so [he said] "[S]chool? Drop out, like. . . ." "Like, all right, that's pretty good. Thanks for your encouragement" [*laughs*]. See, they trip like that, but they just mess around. That's just a joke, but it's, like, you just think about things like that. I guess your peers, they try to pull you down and then you just got to be strong enough to try to pull away.

I got to think about myself and get what I got to get going on. Get something going on, or else nobody else is going to do it. It's where you're starting to think a little different. You sort of know what's happening. All they're thinking about is partying. Nothing wrong with it, but I got to try to better myself.

### *Making It Better*

I guess in a lot of ways, I *am* [successful] . . . a lot of things I'm trying to achieve. Starting something, already you're successful, you know? But finishing it, it's gonna make you more complete . . . successful and complete. Got to have your priorities straight. Get what you got to get done, and get it done, and just be happy when you're doing something.

I came to this school, and it was deep here. They got down into a lot of studies that I liked, and there was a lot going on here. But see, I was me, I was just a clown. I always liked to mess around, so they gave me chance after chance. I took it for granted, and they kicked me out. They booted me out, right? So I went back to that other school and it was like, "This thing is boring. Nothing going on." And so I called over here and I go, "I need another chance to get back into school." So they gave me another chance and that's why I'm here right now, 'cause they gave me a chance.

They get more into deeper Latino history here, and that's what I like. A lot of other, how you say, background, ethnic background. We had even Martin Luther King. We had Cesar Chavez. We had a lot of things. I never used to think about [being Chicano] before. Now I do . . . being Brown and just how our race is just going out. You know, you don't want to see your race go out like that.

[Mexican American], it's what you make it, you know? Let's say I'm Chicano and I dress like a gang member. They're gonna look at you like one of those crazy kids, you know, Mexican kid, Chicano kid. But if you present yourself nice or whatever, it really depends how your outer appears. Like, people say it's just *from the inside*, but it's really what's *on the outside* . . . how you look on the outside, like tattoos and that. So it's, like, I get discriminated because of a lot of things, and I can't really pinpoint it. So it's, like, I don't really know if it's 'cause I'm Brown or if it's 'cause of my gang tattoo, so I can't really pinpoint. But for me, as far as me being Chicano, it's prideful, it's pride of your race, of what you are.

[Chicano young people] have some pretty trippy insights of life. It's like they know how to talk to people, and they know how to give presentations, you know what I mean? Like what we're doing right now [*referring to the interview*]. A lot of the things they say is pretty deep.

[In this school], they just leave the killings out and talk about how you can make it better, you know what I'm saying? Try to be more of the positive side of being a Brown person, that's what I'm talking about. A lot of the other alternative schools you can't go because of your gang. It's all gang affiliated. Every single alternative school is gang affiliated. This is the only one where it's all neutral.

[To make school better I would] talk about more interesting things, more things like what I would like, students would like. And I would just get more involved . . . get more people involved. Get things going, not just let them vegetate on a desk and "Here's a paper," . . . teach 'em a lesson and expect them to do it. You know, get all involved.

Put some music in the school. I mean, put some music and get some like drawings. Get a better surrounding so you feel more like the 'hood, you could learn more, you'll feel more comfortable. This [school] is pretty good, but if you had somebody kicking it, put like a character on the wall of something . . . yeah, like a mural or something, it would be more like a more comfortable setting to work.

Try to find out what we think is important. Try to do the best you can to try to get it. The kids want it, they're gonna use it. If they don't want it, they're not. I remember the *Diary of Anne Frank*. I was pretty deep into the Nazis and Jews, and so that was pretty cool.

I think [multicultural education] is important because that goes back to segregating. You got to get to know everybody more better. If you understand them better, you're gonna get along better. So, yeah, I think that would be good.

I'm getting out all I can get out [from this school]. There's so much to learn and that's all I want to do is just learn, try to educate my mind to see what I could get out of it. Anything I can, I'm gonna get out of it.

I was here when they barely opened this school. I brought my mom and my dad, and we had a couple of kids here and the staff here. What we did was wrote all the rules, just made an outline of how the school was gonna be: People are gonna get treated right, what you could wear. Everything was done with each other, you know? It wasn't just talked about with the staff and brought to the students. It was the students *and* the staff.

[*What would have made school easier for you?*] If you had asked me that question a year ago, I would have said, "No school!" School would have been made easier if it wasn't so early in the morning [*laughs*]. But school, it will be better if more activities [are] going on. People wouldn't just think of it as a routine. People got into it really where it

really meant something. But it's both on the students' part and the teachers' part. It takes both.

The classes [should have] more better learning techniques. It's an advanced age. We got a lot of computer things going on. Get a lot of things going with computers and a lot of things that are going to draw the eye. Catch my eye and I'm gonna be, "Oh, all right," and gonna go over there and see what's up.

I think they should get more of these aides, assistants, to be parents, okay? 'Cause the parents, I notice this: A parent in a school is more, like, they got love. That's it, they got love and they give it to you. They give it back to more students. I think they should get more parents involved in the school to teach. Get more parents involved in the classroom, too. Parents have a lot of things to say, I would think, about the schools.

[Teachers should] not think of a lesson as a lesson. Think of it as not a lesson just being taught to students, but a lesson being taught to one of your own family members, you know? 'Cause if it's, like, that they get more deep into it, and that's all it takes. Teach a lesson with heart behind it and try to get your kids to understand more of what's going on. And don't lie to your students, saying, "Everything is okay and 'just say no to drugs'; it's easy." Let them know what's really going on. Don't beat around the bush. Let them know there's gangs, drugs. "You guys got to get on with that. That's for kids. Do what you got to do and stay in education." They're starting to do that more now. Try to get a dress code going on. I never used to like that, but that's a pretty good idea, you know? But not really a strict dress code, but just where you can't wear gang attire.

Now I take every chance I get to try to involve myself in something. Now it's like I figure if I'm more involved in school, I won't be so much involved in the gang, you know? . . . It's what you put into it, what you're gonna get out of it. That's just the kind of person I am, where if I can't do something just to trip myself up, I want to do this. You know, just so I can learn it more real good and show 'em that I can . . . try to make an example out of myself, of everything I do.

[Good grades] make you feel good, getting A's. See this gang-member-type man getting A's. I get pretty good grades. I get A's, B's, and C's. That's better than all F's on report cards that I used to get, all failures in all six subjects.

After, when I get my diploma, it's not the end of school; it's the beginning. I still want to learn a lot more after that. I basically want to go to college. That's what I want to do. Get more schooling so I could learn more.

Probably I would want to be either a teacher, a counselor, something like working with youngsters to share my experience with them, you know? 'Cause I know there's a lot of people out there who talk down to youngsters, you know what I'm saying? Instead of talking *with* them. And just try to understand what they're going through.

I mean, you can't get a teacher, put 'em in a classroom with a bunch of kids from the neighborhood, and the teacher lives in [another neighborhood] and expect to understand. I have problems at home, a lot of problems. And to come into school and for a teacher to come with a snotty attitude, I'm gonna give it back. That's the way it is.

I don't want to speak too soon, but I'm pretty much on a good road here. I'm pretty much making it. Trying to make something out of myself. I'm on that way, you know . . . I'm going that way.

You can't talk about next month, at least at this time. I'm just today, get it done. That's it. The best I can.

And I just, I'm tripping out on myself. I don't believe I'm doing this. But I don't really like to build myself too high . . . because the higher you are, the harder you're gonna fall. I don't want to fall.

### *Family Support: "I Had a Love That Kept Me Home"*

I like kids. I like kids a lot. They see me and, "Gee, that guy is scary. He's a gang member. . . ." This experience the other day when I was at work: I was working in [a daycare center], and I walked in and the kids were looking at me like and whispering. And this one kid, this Oriental kid, came up and we started playing. The next thing I know, she was sitting on my lap and all these kids just started coming towards me. And they know: They could feel I love kids.

You need to educate your mind. Somebody gets born and throw 'em into the world, you know, they're not gonna make it. You get somebody, you born 'em, you raise 'em, you feed 'em and encourage 'em, and they're gonna make it. That's the reason for going to school is. A lot of it, of my going to school, is 'cause of my mom. I want her to be proud and her to say that I made it.

My mom used to run with gangs when she was young. My mom and my father both belonged to gangs. They're out of it. They don't mess around no more.

I learned a lot of morals from my mother. Respect, how to respect people. If my mom wasn't in church, she wouldn't be there for us, I don't think. She would be trying to find a way to seek to comfort herself, you know what I mean?

My mom, she's real strong and real understanding. Not strict, but more understanding, you know? She don't really compromise with me. Usually what she says is what she says, that's it. My mom, I wouldn't change nothing, nothing [about her]. My dad, I would . . . just have him be there for me when I was younger. I could have turned out different if he was there, you never know.

It's hard for me to talk to my mom or my dad, but I talk to my mom about a lot of things like girlfriends, things that happen. Like when homeboys die, I don't go talking to nobody else but my mom. My homeboy just passed away about a month ago or two months ago, and I just remember I was in my mom's room. My mom was ironing and I just started crying, and I don't cry a lot. I started crying and I started telling her, "I hurt, Mom. I don't know why, but I hurt so much." 'Cause I had been trying to, how do you say, run from it, I'd been trying to put it off, like my homeboy's gone, 'cause we were pretty close. So I was like, "It hurts, Mommy." She said, "I know, in your gut." So we talked. We get pretty much into it.

She dropped out in the tenth grade, and she was pregnant. And she says, "I want you to do good. Don't be like me, going back to school when it's already kind of late, you know?" It's never too late, but you know what I'm saying. She was like, "Just learn now, Paul. Do it the first time right and you won't have to do it again."

My mom wants me to go to school basically so I could have a good house and home when I build up my family, and so we won't have to be five people living in a three-bedroom home, with not that much money to live on, you know?

My mom makes a good living, not in money but in moral standards. We're happy with what we've got and that's just the bottom line. So I go to school for my mom, try to help her and try to help me.

My mom, she's not really [involved in school]. She's too busy doing her own thing. She gets out of school, makes dinner, cleans the house, goes to church, comes home, irons for my two sisters. She doesn't really have time for all this. She'll come in and she'll talk to my probation officer, talk to Isabel [a staff member], different people, yeah, pretty much involved when she can be.

You're gonna realize that you got to learn from day one and education will never end. It's only when you stop it. I realize that now. But see, me, I never really had somebody to push me. My mother pushed me, and my mom, she just got tired. "Paul, you're too

much for me." My father, he never really pushed me. He talked to me. That was, like, "Education, Paul, education," you know? And getting letters from my dad in jail, "Stay in school," and that's all. He said some pretty deep things, understanding things to me. And my dad always knew the right words to say to me that kind of encouraged me. And my mom. They both encouraged me.

If it wasn't for the family, the love I get from my family, I would look for it in my homeboys. I never had to do that. I just wanted my homeboys to party. A lot of my friends, they go to homeboys to look for just to kick it with somebody. See, me, I had a love that kept me home, that kept me in my place.

I remember I used to just take off from Friday night to Monday morning, come home. My mom be worrying all night, "Where is this guy?" and I was in the street. And that was like every weekend. 'Til now, I stay home every day and I'm just going to school. . . . I come from work, do my homework, whatever. Go to work, come home, go to church, 'cause I go to church with my mother.

My mom, she's really proud of me. My friend was telling me that she was at church, at Bible study, a gathering at home of church people. And [my mom] was crying. She was proud. [My friend] said, "Your mom was talking about you, and she was crying. She's real proud." And that's my mom, she's real sensitive. I love my mom so much it's even hard to explain. And she thinks . . . she tells me, "You don't care about me, Paul," this and that, 'cause like it's hard for me. . . . It's hard for me to show my feelings.

### Commentary

Luis Rodríguez, author of *Always Running, La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*, whose experiences parallel Paul's in many ways, describes gangs as young people's search for a sense of belonging.<sup>3</sup>

Looking back on his own youth and fearing for the future of his son, who was following the same path, Rodríguez wrote his book to encourage people to understand that gangs, in spite of providing belonging, respect, and protection to their members, represent an unhealthy and self-destructive response to oppression. Gangs emerge when communities are deprived of basic human rights. According to Rodríguez, few young people would choose gangs if they were given decent education, productive jobs, and positive channels for social recreation.

Schools may unwittingly contribute to young people's gang involvement by failing to provide the strong cultural identity and support that students need. In fact, James Diego Vigil has suggested that neighborhoods and schools interact in ways that can interfere with the learning of many Chicano students. According to him, understanding this connection can help educators create a more positive school experience for Chicano students. Vigil suggests that schools can develop a balanced strategy of prevention, intervention, and suppression.<sup>4</sup> For example, *prevention* would focus on strengthening families and addressing some of the conditions that lead children to street life and gangs. *Intervention* would address students' behavioral problems, and *suppression* would confront the most destructive behavioral aspects of gang culture. However, suppression can also unintentionally lead to creating school dropouts. For instance, dress codes may appear to be neutral rather than targeted at only gang members, but these dress codes may drive gang members out of school.

Even in the early grades, when Paul began to dress like a gang member, teachers' negative reactions—if not specific dress codes—made him feel that school was not a place for him. That is why he so vividly remembered Ms. Nelson, the one teacher who treated him kindly despite his attire.

The yearning for respect, which is, after all, just another word for a sense of competence, is what Paul described when he talked about joining first what he called a “school gang” and later the full-fledged street gang. Young men and women in desperate economic straits are turning, in ever larger numbers, to *la vida loca*, or the crazy life of gangs. In 1991, when Paul was interviewed, Los Angeles alone was estimated to have 100,000 gang members in 800 gangs. In that peak year for gang activity, nearly 600 youth were killed, mostly by other youth.<sup>5</sup>

Constance L. Rice, co-director and civil rights lawyer for the Advancement Project, a policy, communications, and legal action group, has called for policies and actions to move away from suppression and incarceration-only approaches to a comprehensive public health approach that reduces the attractiveness of gang ideology and to holistic wraparound safety programs that keep children out of the reach of gangs and other dangers. As this book goes to press, however, the regions of Los Angeles neighborhoods that are gripped by gang activity, known as hot zones, are far reaching.<sup>6</sup> In Los Angeles County, of the 850,000 children living in hot zones, 90 percent report exposure to serious violence as victims or witnesses. Rice reports that “[a]fter spending \$25 billion in a thirty year ‘war on gangs,’ and after locking up 450,000 youth 18 and under in the last decade alone, Los Angeles had six times as many gangs and twice as many gang members. Estimates for the County are 800 to 1,000 gangs and anywhere from 70,000 to 90,000 gang members, only a small minority of whom are violent.”<sup>7</sup>

The rage felt by young people when their dreams are denied or suppressed is turned inward, resulting, for example, in drug abuse or suicide, or it is turned outward. The unspeakably violent actions of Chicanos against their own *Raza*, so poignantly expressed by Paul, is an example of the latter. Rodríguez describes this violence as emanating too often from the self-loathing that is the result of oppression: “And if they murder, the victims are usually the ones who look like them, the ones closest to who they are—the mirror reflections. They murder and they’re killing themselves, over and over.”<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, blame for gangs and for other manifestations of oppression in our society cannot be placed on schools. The issues are too complicated for simplistic scapegoating; they include massive unemployment, a historical legacy of racism and discrimination, and a lack of appropriate housing and health care, among others. In addition, families struggling to survive on a daily basis can seldom do much to counteract the lure of gangs and drugs, with their easy money and instant popularity, that influences so many of their children. As Paul said, his mother, try as she might, just got tired: “Paul, you’re too much for me,” she said.

Although schools can neither do away with gangs nor put a stop to the violence taking place in communities across the United States every day, they can make a difference. Paul was quick to place the responsibility for his past on his own shoulders rather than blaming teachers. When he thought more deeply about it, however, he also recognized that particular teachers and schools *did* make a difference. This

is nowhere more evident than in the case of Ms. Nelson or the teachers in his alternative school.

Chicano parents and their children often have high aspirations, but unless these are somehow incorporated into the culture of schools, they will make little difference. For instance, Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut, in their extensive research on various immigrant communities, found that the strengths of these communities are frequently disregarded by schools. In the specific case of Mexican Americans, they concluded that “[i]n many Mexican families, the *only* thing going for the children is the support and ambition of their parents. These aspirations should be strengthened rather than undermined.”<sup>9</sup> This finding compels us to shift the focus to the context and structure of schools rather than only on the shortcomings of students and their families. In other words, policies and practices need to be reviewed to make education more engaging and positive for all students. Schools need to develop strategies that use a more culturally congruent approach rather than an approach based on culture as a deficit.

Paul’s suggestion that his school hire more parents as school aides because they “got love and they give it to you” reminds us of the powerful influence of family on Hispanic/Latino culture. Even families in difficult circumstances want the best for their children but often are unaware of how to provide it for them. His father’s insistence on “Education, Paul, education,” if unaccompanied by structural support to help him stay in school, is of little help. Paul clearly understood this when he said that, although his parents supported him, they never really pushed him.

Paul Chavez was fortunate to be in the alternative school he was attending, and it seemed to be serving as a safeguard to keep him at some distance from his gang. The policies and practices of his school were geared toward creating a positive learning environment: There was no tracking, staff interactions with students were positive and healthy, students were involved in the school’s governance, there were high expectations and demanding standards of all students, and their languages and cultures were an integral part of the school’s curriculum. Nevertheless, an insightful observation by Vigil is worth noting here. Alternative schools, he says, may replicate street gang culture by concentrating a critical mass of gang members in one place. Thus, these schools can act as “temporary warehouses,” or in the words of some of the gang members quoted by James Vigil, as “preparation for prison.”<sup>10</sup>

One cannot help but remember, however, that at the time of his interview, Paul was only 16 years old, a tender age, and he had so many difficult situations and easy temptations still facing him. In spite of Paul’s strong motivation and eloquent insights, his school’s caring, his mother’s love and strict discipline, and his growing realization that gang life is no solution to the problems facing Chicano youth, he still had a long and hard road ahead of him.

### *Reflect on This Case Study*

1. What can teachers and schools learn from Paul’s fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Nelson? Give specific suggestions.
2. What support services do you think are needed in schools such as those in Paul’s neighborhood? Why?

3. Look at the recommendations that Paul made to improve schools. Which do you think make sense? Why?
4. Why do you think Paul never thought about being Chicano before? What kinds of ethnic studies would be important for students at different levels?

## Latrell Elton

*I wanna do positive stuff now. I wanna do something positive with my life.*

At the time he was interviewed, Latrell Elton,<sup>1</sup> a 16-year-old African American young man, was finishing his sophomore year of high school in Atlanta, Georgia. After starting at his local high school, the district transferred him to Bowden County Alternative High School, a school for students who had been expelled from their home schools. While the alternative school claimed to develop self-esteem, self-discipline, trust, lifelong learning, and respect for others, Latrell's description of his experience there raises many concerns about the gaping divide between a school's mission and the messages, both explicit and implicit, that students receive from the school's policies and practices.

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Latrell reported that the alternative school is 100 percent segregated: "The school is—all it is—is Black. The students are all Black and the teachers are all Black," aligning it with Jonathan Kozol's description of apartheid schools.<sup>2</sup> Within this environment, Latrell's narrative pointed to three distressing themes: *his school experience as resembling prison, the detrimental messages about his racial identity, and his low expectations for the future.*

### *Prison Analogy*

We're in school, but it ain't like the regular school. When you go in the school, they check you tucked in your shirt. And then you gotta go through the metal detectors. When you go through the metal detectors, they search you. After they search you, you go on to the cafeteria—you sit down. Goin' through metal detectors at school, I don't feel uncomfortable with it. Well, truly it shouldn't be happenin' but I don't be feelin' uncomfortable with it, you know what I'm saying? Every day we go in school, they searchin' us like we prisoners and stuff. I put my own self in a predicament to go to that school. I didn't really wanna go. But they were, like, "Well Mr. Elton, we can't let you in school until you go and do a year in there." And I was, like, "All right. I'll do what I gotta do." The main thing I'm focused on is trying to get up out that school. As soon as I get up out that school I'll be a happy person.

We ride on a bus that have two Bowden County motorcycle mans right here. They have marked police in the front, one in the middle, and one in the back, and they have each marked police on each bus. Man, make me feel like I'm in jail. Like I'm just a prisoner, like I'm a bad person. My bus have burglary bar windows. They got cameras on there. You can't get up out your seat.

### *Detrimental Messages and Racial Identity*

I'm African American. Y'all don't want to hear what I got in my blood. I got the N-word in my blood. 'Cause I'm just, I just don't like sitting down, I can't stay seated. I just wanna run around, get my energy out. It's negative. Right now I'm trying to control it at school.

When I was in [my previous] school, I used to run around, can't sit down in class, sit on top of the desk, cut. But now I don't. I sit down.

I feel like Black folk these days, we doin' stupid stuff, we wanna kill each other over little stupid stuff like a car. We wanna go out here and break into houses. To tell you the truth, the whole jail system is made for us only. That's why they build jails and welfare: for Black people. 'Cause they know what we're gonna do. [Black people] put themselves in a predicament. I ain't gonna lie.

Say, for instance, a Black person would have got shot right here and we call the ambulance. You know how long it's gonna take them? About an hour to 35 minutes just to come. Just to come. Oh, this Black person, they got shot. That's one less Black person we got to worry about on the street. One person we ain't got to do nothing for. But if it's like a mixed person being shot, they be on the scene in less than five minutes. You hear the sirens and everything. You got helicopter, news, and everything.

About my neighborhood, I would tell you: Be safe. Be careful. Don't trust nobody around here. People around here, they steal, they'll lie to you. Everything. They'll do everything around here. People around here, they just don't care. Like, you trying to cross the street, they won't slow down. They'll just keep flying by you. Just go on.

The community people are all Black folk. That's what all it is. That's what I said, nothing but black folks all on the street. They like this because they ain't been in no real life, you know what I'm saying? With people who got quieter streets, who like respect, like neighborhood watch. We ain't got no neighborhood watch. It's just people out there doing stupid stuff. Where I'm from, when we had neighborhood watch, they wouldn't be doing what they doing now.

### *Future Expectations*

I hope when I get out of Bowden Alternative School, I can go ahead and go back to regular school. And when I get on to regular school, first thing I'm gonna be looking for is basketball tryout. When I find out when they having basketball tryout, I'm gonna stay after school. I'm just gonna play basketball. And when I play basketball, I'm gonna try and go pro. I'm trying to go to the top. Trying to be the best I can be in basketball. My teacher told me I could be a comedian. I got jokes. I got some jokes. I could joke. I'm gonna try and be a comedian, too, if basketball don't happen.

I see all these folks out here, they be like, "Yeah cous', do this, selling drug gonna get money." Selling drugs ain't gonna get you nowhere. Drug money don't last long. And then drugs get you locked up and stuff. I wanna do positive stuff now. I wanna do something positive with my life. I don't wanna keep on doing no negative stuff. Can't keep on doing that. It just ain't right. 'Cause I see all this money, there's money out here. I tell people, there's money out here. You got cars you can wash—you even got—even yards to cut grass all day, you know what I'm saying? I don't like cutting yards, but I cut 'em. Only why I cut 'em is because, sometimes when I'm feeling broke and I got more to cut.

It make me feel good about myself [to have a job cutting grass] 'cause I know I ain't gotta go out here and ask nobody for no money, you know what I'm saying? 'Cause I don't want my momma see me in a couple more years on the street asking folks for 50 cents. I want her to see me coming in a car. So clean. With a big old house, with a bag full of money. Just say, "Momma, for all the years of hard work you put me through, there you go, right there. There you go, a brand new set of car keys, there go you some house keys, there you go." See my momma there, up in the house. I got big plans for when I get out of school.

'Cause if I keep on putting my mind on right things, positive things, I ain't got to worry about no nigga still trying to get through my brain and trying to make me mess up. 'Cause right now, since I been in these sports and stuff, it's helped me out a lot. Because I know I'm with safe people. People who I really can trust. People who I ain't gotta worry about got illegal drugs. I know I ain't gotta worry about all that. I'm on the right track. I can do this and that to make my life positive.

Now, since I'm in the alternative school, they've been helping me out a lot, a way, way lot. 'Cause I've got after-school tutorial, and we got more help after school. I'm a good student right now. I consider myself a good student. [What makes me a good student right now is] my behavior, the way I done calmed down. Going to school on time. Getting A's. Passing all my classes. I ain't got to worry about none of this. Last year, [at my previous school] I didn't have nothing but stress. I didn't know what to do with my work. Until I met this lady named Miss Kathy. So when I met her, I showed her my report card and I talked to her about getting me a mentor. And then when she had found me this mentor, and ever since, I been coming home with good grades, passing. Look, yo, I show her every Tuesday, look at my progress report. You see, I done did good. I done finally learned something. I don't worry about falling asleep in class, not doing no work. I used to fall asleep every day in class.

In literature class now, my average is a D. It's between a C and a D. By the end of the semester, I'm hoping to have A's, A's, A's, A's, A's by paying attention, doing what I'm doing every day all day. Working. Trying not to go to sleep.

The school I went to before, I went there and I just kept causing trouble. I had so many friends that I knew from middle school, you know what I'm saying? They trying to tell me, "Do that. Go do that, mess with that right there." But like I told my mom when I get out that school system and stuff I ain't got to worry about it. Gotta be a grown man. I can make my own decisions, do what I wanna do. I ain't gotta worry about people telling me what to do, and I just be free.

### *Commentary*

Latrell is a bright, perceptive young man who was painfully aware of the ravages of institutionalized racism in his community. His poignant comments address both the responsibilities of school structures and the limits of the school's reach within underresourced and overexploited communities. Latrell said he was "not uncomfortable" about entering the school through metal detectors, implying that he viewed it as a necessary reality.

He equated having the "N-word in my blood" with struggling to conform to classroom expectations, apparently having absorbed the bigoted message that staying seated and overcoming restlessness are racial traits. It is evident that Latrell's perspective of his racial identity and cultural group had become skewed by experiences of racism, marginalization, and violence.

While Latrell's hopeful outlook on the future was courageous, it also pointed to a lack of adequate guidance and academic preparation for professional goals. In the overwhelming shadow of American popular culture, it has become the norm for many young people, especially young men of color, to dream of becoming professional athletes or entertainers. While these are noteworthy possibilities that should not be dismissed, both are exceptionally competitive careers, considering the percentage of individuals who actually secure personal and financial success in such pursuits. Strong

guidance and career counseling services in some schools help students with such aspirations follow their hearts *and* prepare for a collegiate trajectory that supports their vision. For example, thoughts of pursuing a career that might be related to his interests in comedy and sports such as sports medicine, sports management, physical education, theater studies, entertainment management, or entrepreneurial endeavors did not even appear in Latrell's vocabulary. Regrettably, he is not alone.

In Gilberto Conchas's research of successful programs for urban youth of color, he found a common thread among the low-income African American males in the school that he studied. Even in a highly successful program that boasted strong graduation rates and consistent levels of matriculation into two- and four-year colleges, low-income African American males placed higher value on athletic fame than on their collegiate path. Conchas writes, "They knew college was important but they really wanted to play football or basketball or perhaps become entertainers."<sup>3</sup> Conchas's research illustrates that, although these particular low-income African American males were provided with the social and academic support systems essential for college, "their perceptions of social mobility were seemingly no different than the general stereotype."<sup>4</sup> Despite the tenacious power of negative stereotypes, Conchas concludes that schools can take steps to counteract the negative consequences of linking racial identity and academic performance. He insists, "We must remain critical of larger historical and structural forces that impact African American youth's perceptions of the opportunity structure."<sup>5</sup>

By indicting systemic social injustices, Latrell was perceptive about the opportunity structures that limit students' life options. He linked standard-of-living disparities to institutionalized oppression. In his daily life, he witnessed the slow response of emergency services as a reflection and reinforcement of the pervasive messages about the disposability of Black people. He perceived the lack of cooperation among members of his community as a response to the constraints of living immensely unequal lives.

Many urban schools recognize the toll that inhumane socioeconomic conditions have taken on minority students' perceptions of themselves and their racial identities. Some school administrations have implemented self-esteem programs and attempted to include culturally affirming curriculum. While such efforts may be commendable, they are insufficient shields against the forces of historically rooted racist beliefs and structures of racism. Reflecting on the myriad methods of self-esteem-building tactics that have become commonplace in many urban schools, Jonathan Kozol asserts,

We are in a world where hope must be constructed therapeutically because so much of it has been destroyed by the conditions of internment in which we have placed these children. It is harder to convince young people that they "can learn" when they are cordoned off by a society that isn't sure they really can.<sup>6</sup>

Kozol's assessment concurs with Latrell's: "They like this because they ain't been in no real life." Yet this *is* Latrell's real life, and it is the real life of his family, his peers, and his neighbors.

The poetic nuance of Latrell's phrase exposes his feeling that having a different kind of life was unrealistic or even otherworldly. Despite his indictment of institutional

inequities and community challenges, Latrell's perspective is explicitly hopeful. He recognized that mowing lawns pays less than selling drugs, but he deliberately chose cutting grass as a means of resisting the prevalent opportunities for drug dealing. He saw the analogies to prison in his school structures but yearned for academic success. He revealed an awareness of his responsibility in achieving higher grades, but it is unclear whether the adults in his world were hearing his hopeful voice. What will it take for Latrell and his peers to attend a U.S. urban school where the notion of metal detectors seems foreign and out of place? Why does it seem only imaginary for Latrell to engage in a rigorous curriculum that promotes fluency in multiple academic disciplines, with participation in co-curricular activities that promote healthy athleticism and artistic accomplishments and with teachers and guidance counselors supporting achievable, fulfilling academic goals?

### *Reflect on This Case Study*

1. Conchas's research suggests ways that schools can create structures to counteract the negative consequences of the linkage between racial identity and academic performance. How might a small group of dedicated teachers embark on changing structures in schools? Identify the stakeholders the group would have to bring on board to effect change.
2. What perceptions do you think most teachers would have of Latrell? What information would you share with those teachers to advocate for Latrell's participation in rigorous academics, arts, and athletics? What support structures would you build to help Latrell be successful?
3. Imagine you are Latrell's teacher. How does your memory of your high school experience compare to Latrell's? How do the communities and neighborhoods in which you grew up compare to Latrell's? What can you do as a teacher to learn about the realities of your students' daily lives? Does it matter?