CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Two major institutions have the most influence on students' learning—the family and the classroom.

THE FAMILY

That parents are the children's first and most important teachers goes without saying. Teachers and educators have misinterpreted this to the point of relegating the parental role to one of supporting the school's role. But there's more to children's home culture than meets the eye. While teachers do not have the time to visit children's homes and observe the parent-child interactions and other daily-life activities to get the full impact of students' family life, children's home culture enters the classroom with the children and is ever present.

Little attention is paid to the totality of how family culture shapes students' academic life. Yet on the question of student underachievement, teachers tend to hold the students' family life responsible assuming that the family values differ from those of the school. Schools have been described as institutions that reproduce society's culture and social inequity (Apple, 1986; Bernstein, 1986; Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Carnoy & Levin, 1985). Children's academic achievement is sometimes equated with their families' educational background, their socioeconomic conditions, and their level of involvement in the school. This perception assumes that families who live in lower socioeconomic conditions are less educated and provide fewer opportunities for their children. But although working-class and ethnically different families often have fewer resources, precluding their involvement with their children's schooling in the way that teachers expect, they nevertheless care

a great deal about their children's academic success. Generally, they have to overcome more to remain connected with their children's education (Lareau & Shumar, 1996).

To know the impact that parents have on their children's schooling necessitates taking a look at how parents support their children's learning in explicit and tacit ways. Some culturally different families may find it difficult to participate in the mainstream culture because they aren't familiar with it. Mainstream culture, with respect to the educational setting, commonly describes a classroom culture that expects certain things of students, such as to know, without being told, to remain quiet when the teacher is giving instructions. Also, they are expected to know to walk, not run, inside the classroom, to turn in their homework at the beginning of the day, and to use soft voices inside the classroom (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001).

The ways families from diverse cultural groups learn U.S. mainstream culture vary, depending on their opportunities to have contact with the majority culture. For example, ethnic groups that are native to the country or long-time residents have frequent contact with mainstream European American culture, using the same community services, stores, movie theaters, churches, and the like. Some ethnic communities are more isolated from the mainstream as a result of poverty. Recent immigrants also comprise culturally diverse communities that may be distant from the mainstream culture until they become more familiar with their new society. Some families have knowledge about the social systems in the United States prior to immigrating because they have family members who have preceded them. For those with no welcoming and orienting persons, the social and cultural adjustment may take longer.

Regardless of the length of tenure in the United States, families have their own ways of relating to their children through their cultural languages and knowledge. Few generalizations can be made about the way that parents and children relate in the privacy of their homes and how those interactions impact the children's learning. But one true thing is that the more that parents and children interact critically and positively, the better it is for children's intellectual development (Heath, 1983).

THE CLASSROOM

The school context consists of all of the individuals involved in the learning setting, the school policies that govern it, and its material resources, including the classroom furniture. The school culture encompasses the way that visitors are welcomed, how school personnel communicate with each other and the rules enforced for the students. The classroom can be described as a microcosm of society. It is composed of physical space (the

arrangements, the people) and emotional space (a system of rules and expectations and interactions).

As previously mentioned, cultural manifestations in the classroom are embedded in multiple components: the teacher's cultural background, the students' cultural backgrounds, the school policies that govern the classroom, the formal textbook curriculum, the teacher-student interaction, and the language used to conduct the business of learning. How culture is learned varies on the traditions of the particular culture, and in schools, teachers have historically been the dominant figures in passing on the culture to students. This process is called *cultural transmission* and the teacher is the cultural transmitter. With the teacher in this role, the classroom is organized according to certain values, symbols, and beliefs.

Teachers are carefully trained to fulfill the role of official cultural transmitter, and professional training institutions are also organized according to certain values and beliefs. The notion of independence governs much of the classroom cultural pedagogy. For example, students are expected to do their own work without consulting others. In this way, teachers design classroom rules and pedagogy that value independence. How values are interpreted and organized varies according to each teacher's professional preparation, personal experience, and cultural beliefs.

In a setting where the teacher assumes a position of sole authority, students implicitly get the message that their ideas only matter when the teacher requests them to recall the information that was provided. At one point in the history of education, it was possible for students to learn a set of facts and a body of information and to reflect that knowledge in a single test. However, in recent decades, access to information has vastly increased through technology, as we've all experienced, making the world seem smaller and the body of knowledge overwhelming. This change has myriad implications for the classroom: the way that teachers arrange seating, what students are expected to learn, and the kinds of interaction between teacher and students and between peers. Requiring individual students to recall a single body of facts is incongruent with the changing world of complex ideas. Instead, students can learn that their ideas are valued and contribute to the collective knowledge of the classroom. Crafted correctly, pedagogy can appropriately utilize the students' voices to promote awareness and understanding of their reality as much as possible so as to create personal and collective transformation.

Learning in the classroom involves active interaction between the teacher and students. The intricate relationship between teachers and students centers around the decisions made regarding the type of instruction, the choices of curriculum, the methods of delivery of knowledge, and the way that students are challenged to think critically. Implicit and explicit values are imparted in the process.

Context: Configuring the Classroom for Academic Equity

A typical learning context is composed of individuals, including teachers, students, and parents, and the verbal and nonverbal engagements in which learning occurs. Context is teacher constructed. It is how teacher-student and peer interaction is organized. In a culturally responsive classroom, student work groups are arranged so that they provide all students the opportunity to engage in shared inquiry and discovery. It crafts the physical and visual intersection between culture and learning.

Bulletin Boards. . .

Represent current news

Show photos of community leaders from culturally diverse backgrounds

Classroom Books and Materials. . .

Include a variety of fiction and nonfiction books

Include culturally diverse computer programs

Interactive Classroom Learning Involves. . .

Students with different academic skills working together

Students of different genders, cultures, and language backgrounds sharing in activity completion

Central to academic performance is the process of incorporating students' experience in the day-to-day instruction. In the classroom, teachers arrange and manage their settings to accommodate and maximize students' abilities. Context also involves creating cultural discontinuity and continuity in supporting learning. By setting high expectations, teachers may create appropriate discontinuity. Or teachers may also create appropriate continuity by incorporating the home languages and cultures of new students and educating their parents about the school culture.

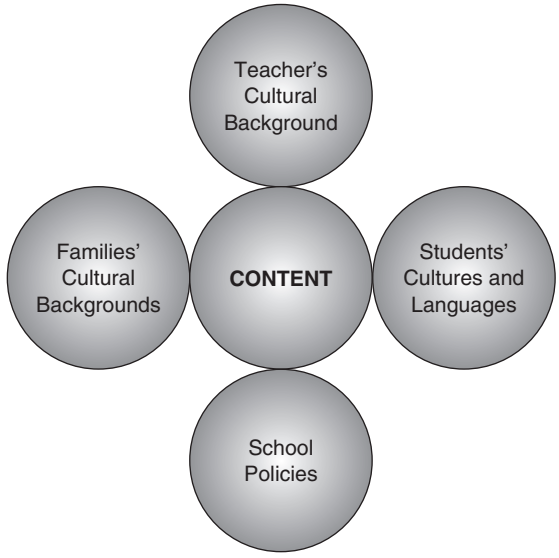
Creating culturally responsive classrooms involves allowing students to maximize their language and other intelligences. Bulletin boards and books can carry visual representations of students' ideal cultures.

Therefore, in order to create culturally inclusive classrooms, the students' family and community contexts need to be integrated into the instructional context. When this occurs, students are better able to participate more meaningfully in the learning process and succeed academically (Beals & Hoijer, 1965; Heath, 1982; Moll, 1990; Moll & González, 1997; Spindler, 1987; Trueba, 1999).

Content: Learning Subject Matter Through Culture in the Classroom

Figure 1.1 shows how content can use and unify the various cultural elements found in every classroom. Generally, the subject matter and how it is taught in the classroom embodies a set of values and beliefs that play

Figure 1.1



a role in students' learning. Differences in learning are a fact. Research tells us that how those differences manifest in a classroom varies, depending on the students, their home socialization, and peer groups. The language that children learn to speak before they enter the classroom, the values they learn in home interactions, and peer play activities all contribute to children's knowledge and skills that bear on how they learn in the classroom. Before students even step foot in a school, they have lived as part of a family, a community, and a social group. From them, children learn attitudes, norms, beliefs, experiences, and aspirations which they express and practice. Some students have participated in the larger mainstream culture while others have been more socially, culturally, socioeconomically, or geographically isolated.

Although cultural similarities exist among people from the same cultural group, gender, social class, regional, and individual differences also exist. It's important not to stereotype children's behavior.

Knowledge of other cultures broadens perspectives of diversity in the classroom. Students' cultural background provides teachers with a fuller picture of students' multiple skills that contribute to their learning. Incorporating culturally different approaches in instruction calls for understanding the cultures represented in the classroom and the ways of learning that take place in the children's homes.