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ABSTRACT

Although research exists which links gender to classroom participation, the connection between ethnicity and classroom participation has been minimally studied. Evidence suggests that ethnicity is a factor in whether a student feels comfortable asking teachers to explain information. Cooperative learning has been used successfully to attack the legacy of underachievement which is prevalent in urban schools. Research has also suggested that some culturally different students find rules of classroom behavior prohibitive to classroom participation because the rules are not compatible with the students' cultural rules of behavior. Such incompatibility has been studied among one tribe of Native Americans--the Choctaw--who dislike individual response and frequently use choral speaking in the classroom. Teacher immediacy serves different functions for students from different backgrounds, and different cultural backgrounds foster different attitudes about classroom participation. The matter of looking at classroom participation and ethnicity is not a simple challenge. There are many variables that need to be studied such as the teacher's ethnicity, how questions are patterned and timed, relevancy of the examples to the student, and the size of the school and class. Extensive, more issue-specific research is necessary to answer the many questions raised by ethnicity and classroom participation. (Contains 47 references.) (RS)

WHEN DOES A STUDENT PARTICIPATE IN CLASS?

ETHNICITY AND CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION

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"When Does a Student Participate in Class?

Ethnicity and Classroom Participation."

The linkage between classroom participation of students and academic achievement is undeniable. Research has shown that participation in classroom activities is important in order for effective learning to take place (Finn and Cox, 1992; Gay, 1992; Kennedy, 1992; SooHoo, 1993). In addition to verbal interaction with the teacher and other students, class attendance is crucial to participation. Students need to attend on a regular basis in order to participate in instructional classroom activities.

However, because of the high dropout rate of minority students, the public schools are still failing to successfully educate minorities. According to Sher and Weast (1991), only 71 percent of the nations' 9th graders complete their high school education. Additionally, they argue, "Estimates suggest that 40 percent of Hispanic students and, in some districts 75 percent of Puerto Ricans, leave school before graduation and forty-eight percent of Native Americans do not complete their schooling" (p. 10).

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) aver that a disproportionately low number of ethnic minority students are successfully educated by American schools and colleges.

This matter is of concern since, as a result of the demographic changes in the nation, more and more students of color are entering our schools. These students need to be trained adequately if they are to be prepared for the workforce

of the future. The challenge then, is for schools to provide the requisite education for a student population that is becoming more and more culturally and ethnically diverse (Journal of Educational Research, May/June 1993, Vol. 86, no. 5).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss ethnicity and classroom participation. Although research exists which links gender to classroom participation, the connection between ethnicity and classroom participation has been minimally studied. For example, Finn and Cox (1992) conducted a study of the relationship between active participation in learning activities for students of different races, genders and socioeconomic groups and achievement. In this study they identified three groups: nonparticipants, passive participants and active participants. This study consisted of 21.8 percent minority students of which 29.2 percent were identified as nonparticipants, 22.0 percent as passive participants and 19.2 percent, as active participants. They found that patterns of nonparticipation could be identified in the early grades, and if it continued into the higher grades, could result in truancy and eventually dropping out of school altogether. Finn and Cox (1992) noted "Many programs for students at risk focus on ways to increase students' involvement in school, whether in the academic, vocational, or extracurricular/social spheres" (p. 144). They suggested that efforts should be made to reach students identified as nonparticipators during their early years, then help them to become involved in learning activities, in order to avert the possibility of their becoming at risk of prematurely dropping

out of school.

Another study was conducted by Kennedy (1992) to "assess the impact of academic participation on student achievement and to determine the influence of school characteristics on this relationship" (p. 105). The study focused on a large sample (over 5,400) of third grade Black and White male students. Also considered were such characteristics as socioeconomic background, race and educational expectations.

This study indicates that ethnicity played an active role as shown in the following:

> "The results suggest that the educational experiences of White males may be heavily influenced by socioeconomic background, whereas those of Black males may be more responsive to the particulars of a given school setting. That is, although involvement in the educational dynamics of a class or school (as indicated by classroom participation) appear important academically for both groups, for Black males the link is stronger than for White males who appear successful at translating socioeconomic background into achievement" (p. 107).

The evidence suggests that ethnicity is a factor in whether a student feels comfortable asking teachers to explain information.

In an examination of why some students remain silent in class, Fassinger (1995) looked at the college classroom climate

as constructed by both students and professors. Scale items included traits of the class, students and professors. Class traits included: interaction norms; (pressure from peers not to speak, pressure to keep comments brief, peer discouragement of controversial opinions, peers' inattention, peers' lack of respect); emotional climate (friendships, students' supportiveness of each other, students' cooperation). Students' traits fell into three categories: confidence (fear of appearing unintelligent to peers or instructor, lack of organization skills, communication apprehension, fear of offending, intimidation); preparation and comprehension. Traits for professors also fell into three categories: welcomes discussion, approachability and supportiveness.

A T-Test was done on students' perception of faculty by gender of faculty. Variables included: favors a few students, makes offensive comments, expert, competent, welcomes discussion. Results showed that interaction is not explained by professor traits. Data suggest that developing student confidence could be an instructor's first step in promoting class participation. Also, inviting classes to design their own norms for classroom interaction might enforce the belief that we all learn by making mistakes. Class traits and student traits seem better predictors of students' silence or involvement. Chilly climates may at times be created by the students themselves (p. 94).

Morgenstern (1992) observed undergraduates in a technological university. Many opportunities were provided for student speech, but a core of five to six students seemed

to monopolize these opportunities. Through interviews it was revealed that some students function under the assumption that only those with the most knowledge should participate, thereby assuming a hierarchy of knowledge. These findings indicate a clear gap between student and teacher perceptions of the value of participation.

Cooperative learning has been identified as an educational strategy that would be useful in fostering classroom participation (Gay, 1992; Hodson, 1993; Swisher, 1992; Larkin, 1993; Strommen, 1995; SooHoo, 1993, etc.). According to Strommen (1995) "Cooperative methods stress interpersonal interactions as a powerful force for learning. And when viewed in light of the skills necessary for jobs in the future economy, cooperative learning seems even more appropriate. Teamwork, problem-solving, and the ability to successfully manage diversity are all fostered by the collective efforts that arise out of cooperation" (p. 25). Cooperative learning, also referred to as collaborative learning, may be defined as an educational system involving small, structured groups of students working together to promote intellectual as well as social achievement. Strommen (1995) contends that in addition to developing leadership qualities, instilling a sense of teamwork, and improving self-esteem, "cooperative efforts yield superior results in almost every content area when compared with other techniques" (p. 27). He also subscribes to the view that cooperative methods are singularly effective in the development of higher order thinking skills.

Pipkin and Yates (1992) emphasize the use of cooperative methods in their curriculum in order to secure "increased academic achievement, greater self-esteem, mutual respect for different ethnic groups or races, and more positive intergroup relations" (p. 39). This type of classroom involvement has had an impressive effect in other areas as well.

Pipkin and Yates (1992) report:

> "Overall suspension rates have decreased by nearly 50 percent, while out-of school suspensions have dropped by more than 30 percent. Academic performance for both black and white students has improved significantly in recent testings; nearly 55 percent of students in grades 6, 7 and 8 scored at or above the national median on the California Achievement Test for portfolio writing in Language Arts. Reading scores rose from 30 percent to 39 percent in a two-year time span" (p. 40).

These authors report that they have seen many encouraging signs of improvement in relations between teachers, students and parents who have also become involved in the academic achievement of their children.

Larkin (1993), another proponent of cooperative learning, uses it as a means to successfully attack the legacy of underachievement which is prevalent in urban schools. Cooperative learning methods have been successfully used to help students engage the content of classroom instructions which they integrate with their own life experiences and thus appropriately apply classroom skills and knowledge to actual

day-to-day situations. At the same time, students are developing and using higher-order cognitive skills. The success of this new way of learning is evident in that at-risk students have been taught to master complicated forms of logical reasoning and in the process, improve basic skills (Larkin, 1993).

Goldman and Newman (1993) promoted Quality Student Leadership (QSL) as an innovative student empowerment program. They recommended QSL as an effective strategy in building student involvement in an inner city school. This program is patterned after Demmings' Total Quality Management (TQM). The authors report many benefits related to the institution of this program, most notably, improved attendance, reduction in the number and severity of discipline referrals, and increased participation in a variety of school activities.

Andrade and Hakim (1995) recounted a program launched in an elementary school where the students are predominantly Spanish-speaking and have traditionally had low norm-referenced test scores. The "play learning" program was developed with the goal of preventing the students from dropping out of school by providing a sound education, while at the same time, keeping them interested in school subjects. The authors attribute their involvement in this innovative teaching program to their having participated in the Educational and Community Change Project. In this program "Students take the initiative in organizing, presenting, and sharing. We assess our lessons--and life--alone, with a partner, or all together" (p. 24). As a result, the students continually engage in an enjoyable method of problem

solvling, estimating and predicting, developing number sense, data collection and analysis, detecting patterns in abstract and tangible symbols used in the games they invent and play, etc. They note the "children learn using their own language, unique learning styles and thought processes; and at their own levels of development" (p. 24).

The studies mentioned have included programs which have been beneficial in helping students become more involved in the classroom. A specific study which related ethnicity and classroom participation was found by Duran and Weffer (1992.) They looked at the academic aspirations of high school students who were recent immigrants. Both the families' educational values and length of U.S. residence were seen as important contributors to academic success.

Although not specifically related to ethnicity and classroom participation, Gahala (1986) found significant elements which contribute to students' participation in foreign language classes. She identified four factors under the teacher's control: 1) teacher expectations and modeling; 2) classroom atmosphere; 3) instructional format; and 4) teaching activities. Some of Gahala's findings suggest that, because participation is a performance in which students risk embarrassment and failure, providing a low-stress environment and positive reinforcement are essential.

Garcia (1992), when researching the difficulties in language learning, found major differences in the concept of communication competence in general and in the classroom setting in particular.

It was concluded that teachers can help bridge the differences between home and school by empathizing and understanding.

Diaz (1986) placed responsibility for classroom discourse with the teachers. Of significance is the fact that most teachers assume that a single set of rules governs the participation across all students in all situations. Among the rules are: 1) serialized turntaking with only one speaker at a time; 2) students raising hands and waiting to be recognized before talking; 3) maintaining eye contact with the teacher as a sign of paying attention; 4) posing questions to specifically targeted individuals instead of to the group as a whole; and 5) creating a dichotomous relationship between speaking and listening in which the listener assumes a passive, receptive posture.

Some culturally different students find these rules of behavior prohibitive to their classroom participation because they are not compatible with their own cultural rules of communication.

Diaz suggested that the nature of material being presented also has an effect on how and if a culturally different student responds. For example, the theory of probability, a literary analogy, a moral dilemma, or the concept of interdependence become meaningful to students to the extent that the examples used to illustrate them reflect the experiences, perspectives and frames of references of a variety of cultural, ethnic and social groups. It is necessary to understand how cultural conditioning affects the behaviors of both students and teachers.

The author looked further at the relationship between culture and learning styles. For example, if sharing, generosity, and cooperation are respected cultural values, children will be socialized accordingly, and their approach to learning may reflect a preference for shared-group learning or decision making, rather than independent learning.

Among some of the Native cultures, (Navajo, Oglala Sioux, and Yaqui), competence should always precede performance (p. 78). Observation and self-testing in private, are important steps that must be taken before one demonstrates competence.

Philips (1983) looked into communication in the Native American classroom. She compared classrooms in grades 1 and 6 at Warm Springs Reservation with classrooms in the nearby off-reservation town of Madras, Oregon. The study contends that the children of the reservation are enculturated in their preschool years into modes of organizing the transmission of verbal messages that are culturally different from those of Anglo middle-class children. It further maintains that this difference makes it more difficult for them to comprehend verbal messages conveyed through the American school's Anglo middle-class modes of organizing classroom interaction.

Another study which explored learning styles of Native American students was done by Swisher (1989). Her findings support those of Philips in the areas of the need for a visual approach to learning, field dependence, public versus private demonstrations of learning, and cooperation versus competition in the classroom.

In a study by Greenbaum (1985), culturally learned nonverbal behaviors were found to be associated with classroom interaction. Fifth and sixth grade classes in Mississippi Choctaw Indian and predominantly white, middle-class public schools were compared. Using a switchboard participation structure, class sessions were videotaped. Specific measures included the duration of teacher and student utterances and turn-switching pauses, student listener-gaze, and turn-taking patterns (i.e., butting-in interruptions and "choral" vs. individual speaking.) These behaviors are directly related to commonly reported observations that Indian students (a) speak very little in class (e.g., Dumont, 1972; Dumont & Wax, 1969: Philips, 1983; Wax et al., 1964), and (b) are especially reluctant to engage in individual competition or performances, preferring more peer oriented, cooperative activities (Bigart, 1974; Brown, 1980; Cazden & John, 1971; King, 1967; LeBrasseur & Freark, 1982; Miller & Thomas, 1972; Peterson, 1975), (p. 105).

The overall pattern of results tended to support the ethnographically derived hypotheses (that observed differences in the Choctaw student behavior would be in the direction of decreased classroom participation and increased violations of the turn-taking rules of switchboard participation.) Choctaw students, at approximately twice the rate of the non-Indian students, exhibited shorter utterances when speaking individually, spoke individually (compared to chorally), less frequently, and interrupted the teacher more often in unsuccessful floor-taking attempts. Indian students also spent

more time gazing at peers when the teacher was talking. Taken together, these findings seem to reflect cultural differences that could well involve functional difficulties in classroom interaction between Indian students and non-Indian teachers (p. 110).

The study further explained that reduced duration and frequency of individual speaking by the Choctaw students is in line with prior ethnographic reports that have indicated that Indian students avoid individual participation. Furthermore, increased choral responding and higher rates of peer-directed listener gaze are consistent with an affinity for group rather than individually oriented behavior. This tendency has been cited as characteristic of Indian (specifically Choctaw) cultural values and tribal life (e.g., Bigart, 1974; Brown, 1980; Dumont, 1972).

King (1967), in an ethnography of an Indian boarding school in Canada, described a similar relatively high incidence of student choral speaking and a dislike for individual response.

> "A group conversation can be initiated among them if the children are allowed to speak in unison or several at a time, in disconnected spurts of utterances (or in more formalized choral speaking). As soon as attempts are made to narrow such discussions down to one speaker, silence and embarrassment prevail...As a result, teachers come to be satisfied with simple, minimal, recitations. (p. 81)" (p. 110).

Greenbaum cited Peterson (1975), who based on her experiences as a speech teacher of Mississippi Choctaw adults, noted a similar preference for group, rather than individual, orientations in classroom behavior. Unlike Anglos, Choctaws would neither compete against each other for grades nor criticize their classmates.

Also discussed was the fact that the higher rate of failed floor-gaining interruptions and choral responses among the Choctaw students, which gave the classroom a somewhat chaotic atmosphere, would appear to contradict typifications of Indians as being overly polite or shy. On the other hand, disorderly classrooms are commonly associated with minority education.

As reported by Au and Mason (1981), disorder and silence may both represent characteristic student responses to cultural discontinuities in the rules of interaction (p. 111).

Greenbaum goes on to caution that efforts to generalize about "Indian" classroom behavior are complicated by the fact that there are more than 300 tribes, which probably exhibit various differences in conversational etiquette, as opposed to a single pan-Indian pattern. Tribes also vary in the extent to which they control their own school systems. He reports that currently, no systematic research had been done on the extent of intertribal variation in nonverbal cues and conversational etiquette.

The study referenced Mohatt and Erickson (1981) who suggested that the amount of time the teacher allows for students to respond is an important aspect of culturally patterned teacher

behavior, which reflects the tempo and directiveness of classroom interaction.

The effect turn-allocation procedure may have on Puerto Rican students in mainland classrooms is the subject of a study by McCollum (1989). She analyzed and compared turn taking in third grade classrooms in North America and Puerto Rico. Results of the study showed that significant differences in classroom participation and discourse have roots in different social interaction patterns in the two cultures and have implications for the success of the Puerto Rican student in mainland classes.

Collier and Powell (1990) conducted a series of studies investigating how students' ethnic backgrounds relate to their views of instructional communication processes. Paired measurements of teacher immediacy, effectiveness and course utility were taken from Anglo-American, Latino, African-American and Asian-American students at the middle and end of a ten week term. Results suggested that Anglo-Americans viewed the course as less useful toward the end of the term, and immediacy and effectiveness appeared to be strongly related throughout the course. For Latinos, immediacy was important earlier in the course, while views of teaching effectiveness dropped. An evolutionary perspective was proposed to interpret the findings for African-Americans, in that their views of immediacy, effectiveness and course utility became more positive, and their judgments earlier in the course appeared to be causally related to later judgments. For Asian-Americans, stable relationships emerged between immediacy and effectiveness, and effectiveness

and course utility.

The authors noted that results of the study pointed to the emergence of certain trends. Immediacy serves different functions for students from different ethnic backgrounds at different times in the course. Therefore, research which focuses on the classroom process as it unfolds is necessary along with research which describes how the rules and goals are negotiated, and the outcomes experienced (p. 347). They saw also that more detailed information and research is needed about students' ethnic backgrounds in order to make comparisons of subgroups such as Chicanos/ as and Mexican-Americans. Also, both generation and length of time in the United States need to be considered as they may influence ideas about the instructional process.

Collier and Powell concluded that students' and instructors' conduct in the classroom, rules in use, the effectiveness of particular behaviors and student impressions at the completion of a course, may provide a valuable perspective to the emergent classroom culture. As the demographics of our classrooms change, it is essential to pay attention to the instructional communication processes in the multicultural classroom.

Training educators to successfully interact with a diverse student body is the thrust of an article by Higuchi (1993). Multicultural education is a means of enabling students to feel comfortable in America (p. 69). Without a comfortable climate in the classroom, in particular when there are students from various backgrounds, participation cannot be assessed fairly

across ethnic and racial boundaries.

Sato (1982) looked at the relationship between ethnicity and patterns of student classroom participation in two university English as second language classrooms. Students were categorized as Asian and non-Asian. One class was taught by a Caucasian; the other by a Japanese American. Interactions were coded in terms of teacher-to-class solicitations, teacher-to-individual solicitations, responses, waiting time for responses, student initiated participation, and teacher feedback for student initiated participation. The study found that Asian students took significantly fewer speaking turns than did non-Asian students. Asian students always responded to individually-directed teacher solicitations but did not take initiative in class discussions. Consequently their participation was largely dependent on teacher solicitation, which was found to be unevenly distributed in favor of non-Asian students. Sato concluded that the students' perceptions of teachers' speaking rights may be an important factor and suggested that teachers need to provide explicit guidelines for the conduct of classroom discourse.

Nordquist (1993) found that different cultural backgrounds foster different attitudes about classroom participation. She teaches English to Japanese students in Japan and noted that they are traditionally trained by rote memorization. They are expected to silently listen to the teacher's explanation of text material. There is no need for analysis, synthesis, creativity or even application. Should the student of this

discipline emigrate to an American school, it would not be easy to give a fair assessment of classroom participation.

Racial attitudes are important in establishing an environment and climate in which students can feel comfortable. The effect of racial attitudes on classroom participation was examined by Molnar (1993). He gave specific actions educators can take to narrow the divisions among races. Billy Mills, a Native American Indian who won the gold medal in the 10,000-meter run at the 1964 Olympic Games, in a CBS interview, April, 1989 captured the paradox that educators confront as they develop school programs:

> "I'm 50 years old today and every day in my life, directly or indirectly, I'm led to feel different from society in general. Society also led me to feel inferior, and I struggled with a feeling of inferiority for five to six years of my life until I realized the strength and beauty of being different."

Cross (1993) surmised that simply putting academic content and field experience together is not enough. Future teachers need ongoing professional development that is systematic and focused on problems of racism. They need additional means beyond college classes to examine their values, beliefs, and prejudices. Without this continued systematic examination, the fear is we will be condemning more culturally diverse urban children to being taught by teachers who very often do not understand them.

Scollon (1981) developed a model for making higher education more culturally sensitive. Among the factors identified which

were designed to help professors achieve participation at the University of Alaska were: instructors' expectations, relationship between instructors and students, professors' efforts to increase reticent students' participation, domination of class discussion by a few individuals, attitudes of respect for elders and teachers, spatial arrangements of classrooms, eye contact, and different values held by different Native groups. Factors which contributed to role distancing were: the use of problematic words, intonation and nonverbal cues, and students' and professors' different expectations.

The specific needs of Chinese students in American graduate classes were examined by Portin (1993). She first focused on attitudes toward questioning in the Chinese educational system, then looked at the effect the classroom environment could have. Another factor of concern was the categories of questions according to their linguistic form, type and function, and cognitive and affective domains. In her study she found it necessary to give a pedagogy for teaching non-native English-speaking students how to ask questions in American classrooms.

As is evident, the matter of looking at classroom participation and ethnicity is not a simple challenge. There are many variables that need to be studied. For instance, Seaborn Thompson (1992) compared student achievement based on size of family. Children from larger families were found to be lower achievers. She also took into consideration the mother's age and found that children of single mothers, who

tended to be younger than those who were married, do not do as well.

Even though the literature yields minimal information which specifically addresses classroom participation and ethnicity, much work remains to be done in this area. To undertake a study of students' participation by ethnic groups entails the consideration of many other variables. In addition to the teacher, classroom and student, the nature of the course and school are all essential. What is the teacher's ethnicity? Is the teacher sensitive to the effects of racism? Is the classroom climate supportive? How are questions patterned and timed? Are examples relevant to the student? Does the teacher recognize culturally different learning and communication styles? What is the size of the school and the class? What is the seating arrangement? Is the course lecture style or does it encourage student interaction and discussion? How long has this class been together? What is the size of the family and is that relevant in the classroom? What is the age of the parents? Are they involved in school programs? What is their socioeconomic level? Are they immigrants, if so, how long have they been in the country? What is the first language? What is the ethnicity of the student? What is his or her learning style?

Analyzing ethnicity and classroom participation is not an easy task. Research in the field is sparse and not focused. Extensive, more issue-specific research is necessary to answer the many questions which this study has yielded. For example,

many of the studies cited in this paper, while addressing classroom participation, have not always considered the relationship of that participation to ethnicity.

It is predicted that by the year 2,000, an explosion of immigrants of various ethnicities will predominate our society; therefore, the importance of this type of study can not be over estimated.

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