DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 325 UD 032 525

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TITLE Confronting Culture with Culture: Creating Optimum Learning Environments for Students of Diverse Sociocultural Backgrounds.

PUB DATE 1998-04-00

NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April, 13-17, 1998).

PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; *Diversity (Student); Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnicity; *Goal Orientation; *School Culture; Self Concept; *Student Motivation; Teaching Methods; Urban Youth

ABSTRACT

Years ago the prevailing assumption was that there was something wrong with "unmotivated" minority children, but gradually educators have come to realize that there may be something wrong with the schools, and that it is possible to do something to engage children in learning. Theories of motivation are shifting from thinking about motivation as an internal disposition that differentiates individuals to thinking of motivation in context, with an increasing recognition of the role of purpose in determining how and whether a person invests in a task. The recognition of goals as constructions in context, and the acknowledgment that school policies and practices are critical sources for goal definition lead to goal theory in a cultural perspective. Research on school environments and student goals have indicated that school environments, and possibly psychological environments in general, that stress task goals minimize the negative effects that may be associated with social diversity. Ability goal stresses tend to enhance the negative effects. The principle is that as one puts the focus on self, including one's ethnic and cultural identity, bad things may happen, but putting the focus on the task tends to reduce the role that perceptions of self, over which the teacher has little control, may play in the learning process. The operative advice that emerges is to put the focus on the culture of the school and not the culture of the child. Changing focus on self to focus on task needs and deserves cross-cultural testing, but it seems promising for creating optimum school cultures for children of diverse sociocultural backgrounds. (Contains 2 tables and 51 references.) (SLD)

# Confronting Culture With Culture: Creating Optimum Learning Environments for Students of Diverse Sociocultural Backgrounds.

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# CONFRONTING CULTURE WITH CULTURE:
## Creating Optimum Learning Environments for Students of Diverse Sociocultural Backgrounds

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Issues of "culture" and "achievement" have been a perennial if not a persistent interest of social scientists (e.g., McClelland, 1961; Weber, 1930; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). From time to time, they have been the object of alarm on the part of economists, government officials and the business community (e.g., Thurow, 1992). Currently, these twin issues seemingly present an almost insurmountable challenge to educators. It is not the surfeit of cross-national comparisons that causes one to consider these issues, in the main. The immediate cause is the diversity that schools confront in their students. In almost any country, region or community, educators increasingly point to problems confronted by having to deal with children who diverge from a presumed cultural norm. We live in an age of world-wide immigration and migration that more and more makes cultural diversity within any country---or community---the rule rather than the exception. We also live in a world in which, more and more, all want, demand and increasingly are gaining access to a publicly supported education.

The good of this is easy to denote; the challenges, sometimes difficult to overcome. While demanding across-the-board national standards, we fail to recognize the several challenges that culturally diverse schools confront in applying them, let alone meeting them (cf. Maehr & Maehr, 1996). The problems posed here are of course not only multiple but multidimensional. It is questionable whether schools qua schools can handle the array of social, medical, economic, legal and other problems that are often associated with this diversity---and still retain a central concern with learning (though some are trying (e.g., Comer, 1980; 1997)). But engage children in the process of learning they must. For arguably, this is the raison d'être of school. And, in this they are confronting the severest of challenges.

How does one elicit school engagement, a personal investment in school learning, from children---regardless of sociocultural background? By providing special programs that meet their "needs"? Maybe. Perhaps it is possible to do this---at times. Most of the time it cannot be done. Teachers deal with thirty or so students of differing social, cultural and ethnic background---and with as many sets of "needs" as there are children. Schools as a whole deal with even larger groups and with no less diversity. For such reasons of economy as well as for at least one other more important reason we have increasingly given thought to an alternative approach.

Two decades or so ago, I (cf. Maehr, 1974) was working in several inner city, culturally diverse schools in which a major complaint was that 'these children simply were not motivated.'

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[1] A paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA, April, 1998.

Then, maybe yet now, the prevailing assumption was that there was something wrong with the child: their home background, their poverty, their lack of the "right values" made them lackadaisical, disinterested, unmotivated. But gradually it dawned on me (and thankfully a few others) that just possibly this was not a child problem, but a school problem. For, like Joan Duda (1980; 1981) in her observations of Navajo children, I found them often to be quite "achievement oriented" in certain extra-school contexts---like on the playground, among their groups and gangs, in the business, work and play of the streets. What was there about these different contexts that seemed to make a difference? Perhaps there was something that the school was doing that was wrong and something the school could do that would make it right so far as engaging children in learning is concerned. At the time, there was precious little of a practical nature that could be said in this regard. There is much more that can be said now. The purpose of this paper is to summarize what that "much more" is.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The definition and study of "Motivation" and "Culture" have both changed drastically in the past twenty or so years. Social cognitive theories of human behavior and development have eventuated in new perspectives on the nature, origins, and effects of motivation. Needs and drives are not the constructs of choice; purpose and self are. Consideration of the results of motivation is no longer largely limited to observations of the direction of behavior but increasingly focused on the "quality" of the action taken: The strategies employed in approaching a learning task, evidence of deep or shallow thinking, even creativity (for a recent review see Maehr & Meyer, 1997). Ways of conceptualizing the environment have also changed. For example, the concept of "Culture" has not only been applied in a variety of new ways (e.g., Denison, 1985; Hofstede, 1991; Maehr, Midgley et al., 1996), but has also been subjected to redefinition. It too has been influenced by the cognitive revolution, one result of which is that it is less site and artifact bound and more thought driven (e.g., Olwig & Hastrup, 1997). All of this has provided a basis for an as yet not fully realized shift from thinking about motivation as an internal disposition that differentiates individuals toward a consideration of the construction of motivation in context. That basis evolves especially though not exclusively out of an increasing recognition of the role of **purpose** in determining whether and how a person invests in a task.

### Purpose and Personal Investment

Purpose has been part and parcel of most if not all theories of motivation, past and present. But it is current work associated with "goal orientation theory" that leads me to suggest that we can and should now move away from thinking so exclusively about motivation as a feature of the individual to considering motivation as heavily a function of context (for reviews see Maehr & Pintrich, 1991; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Urdan & Maehr, 1995; Urdan, 1997). Within this now vast literature there are several findings that are especially important for the topic of 'Culture, Motivation, and Schooling.'

•**A Focus on Task and Ego Goals.** While one may imagine the existence of multiple goals, two appear to be of primary importance within achievement settings such as schools: Task and Ego.[2] These two purposes differ in a number of ways, as can be seen in Table 1. Briefly summarized, in the former, the focus is on the task per se; in the latter, focus is on self, in school settings often on performing competitively and demonstrating that one is "smarter" than others.

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Table 1 here

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•**Goals as Constructions in Context.** There is now an increasing body of information to indicate that a goal is not just a trait of the person, but often if not always a construction of meaning in a particular context (e.g., Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996). Thus, individuals come with views regarding what school is about, how one is to act there, etc. But they may also construct a particular view of a particular classroom, or adopt different orientations in reference to specific tasks.

•**School Policies & Practices** serve as important, critical sources for goal definition. That students are influenced in goal construction by school policies and practices was anticipated from the start. Indeed, goal theory in its present form is deeply indebted to earlier research on the effects of evaluation procedures (e.g., Hill, 1984; Covington, 1992), recognition and reward (e.g., Lepper & Cordova, 1992), cooperation and competition (e.g., Ames, 1984), time stress (Hill & Eaton, 1977; Plass & Hill, 1979), and the "interest value" of the task (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1989; Sansome et al., 1992; Harp & Mayer, 1997; Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). And, of course, it has more recently spawned attempts to change student goal orientations by changing school policies and practices (e.g., Ames & Ames, 1993; Maehr, Midgley et al., 1996).

## CONFRONTING "CULTURE" WITH "CULTURE"

Now, we come to the ultimate issue in this paper: What does this work have to do with cultural diversity and student achievement?

### Goal Theory in Cultural Perspective

As with any perspective in psychology, there are obvious reasons for conducting cross-cultural research on the essential constructs---their measurement, sociocultural origins, and varying relationships to behavior patterns of significance. Constructs and conceptual schemes that emerge largely out of a specific cultural context need to be examined more broadly to determine

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[2]Multiple terms have been used in reference to these two goals. For Task one often finds Mastery and Learning. For Ego one often finds Performance and Ability. In spite of such variation in labeling there is considerable convergence vis-à-vis the nature and function of the purposes referenced.

their generalizability. Are task and ego goals, for example, constructions that exist in substantially the same form in widely different cultures? When task and ego goals are held or adopted, do they have basically the same effects regardless of culture? Is the emergence or presence of task and ego goals prompted by essentially the same antecedent conditions?

While goal theory in some small part grew out of a consideration of the vagaries of motivation associated with culture (e.g., Maehr & Nicholls, 1980), it has hardly exceeded other theories of motivation---and motivational research generally---in promoting cross cultural research (cf. Graham, 1984; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996).[3] Nevertheless goal theory has, I believe, made a significant contribution to an enduring practical issue associated with culture, motivation and achievement: How does one neutralize the negative and debilitating effects of being different?

The work of Claude Steele and his colleagues has indicated that the achievement of members of an "under-represented minority" (such as African Americans and women in his research) is often undermined by a "stereotype threat" that is triggered under certain circumstances (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995; Osborne, 1995). Aside from dealing with the salient and oft-confronted prejudices extant within society, there are other instances in which one's sociocultural identity is, so to speak, under attack. A number of commentators have called attention to the subtle and some not so subtle ways in which this happens in schools (e.g., Kozol, 1991). But it is almost inevitable in many instances that children will see a larger culture gap between their school and extra-school experiences. Conceivably, these serve to prompt a range of problems as well as their own special kinds of identity ambivalence---and occasionally crisis (see for example, Arunkumar, 1998).

Standard programmatic answers to these "problems," it is probably fair to say, often involve emphasizing the value of "different-ness." But in so doing may only succeed in making not only different-ness, but disadvantage-ness, an issue for the child---especially so, in schools and classrooms where social comparisons, competition and focus on being the smartest and the best is the order of the day.

A major, perhaps ultimately the major, contribution of goal theory to date is to suggest an alternative strategy in dealing with individual differences, the perceptions associated therewith and their profound and enduring effects on motivation and achievement.

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[3]That having been said, it may be noted that significant work has been conducted in this regard---and this promises to be a fruitful area for research in the future. Aside from research with varied sociocultural groups in the U.S. (e.g., Maehr & Fyans, 1989; McInerney, 1995; and in European societies (see for example, Rogers, 1998; Skaalvik, 1997), there is an increasing interest in cross-cultural research (see for example, Salili, 1995; Maehr, Shi, Kaplan, Xiaotong, & Liu, 1997). Broadly speaking, this research suggests that the general goal theory framework has substantial applicability across widely divergent groups.

**Student Diversity and the Cultures of School**

While goal theory has been little concerned with cultural comparisons per se, it has been heavily and deeply concerned with student diversity and with how schools exacerbate or neutralize/minimize the negative effects on students that this can have.

Yes, one often finds that children from different backgrounds come to school with a range of abilities, orientations, beliefs, values and identities. The school cannot significantly affect many of the extra-school influences that impinge on the thinking, believing and learning of the child. It will not make all children equally competent. What the school can do, however, is create an environment that influences how children feel about school, about themselves as learners and members of the school community. At least that is the hypothesis that emerges out of recent research on effects of task and ego goals. The hypothesis consists of two parts. First, task and ego goals are differentially associated with ***self-awareness***. Ego goals essentially serve to focus the person on who she is, what she can do and be. Such self awareness, as ego goals prompt, carries risk in that it may evoke feelings of incompetence, worries about self-presentation, and "stereotype threats." In contrast, task goals put the focus on something other than self: A task. Presumably, when the task, not the self, is focal, certain major inhibitions are removed.

This essential point regarding task and ego goals vis-à-vis self-awareness is at most only a small step beyond standard goal theory work to this point. It certainly was implicit in the earliest theorizing associated with goal theory (e.g., Nicholls, 1979; 1984). The very use of the term "ego goal" is tangible evidence in this regard. However, the implications of this have not, to this point, been fully pursued, especially in regard to issues of social and cultural diversity and schooling.

The second part of the hypothesis is also standard fare: Task and Ego Goals are situated in a context. More than that, the context can and will play a significant role in whether task or ego goals will prevail. The implications here are profound---and not really as yet fully explored. There is strong evidence that schools and classrooms are differentially oriented around these two goals. Students perceive this and act accordingly: More adaptively when tasks goals are stressed, less adaptively when ego goals are stressed (for reviews see Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Urdan & Maehr, 1995; Urdan, 1997). The evidence is in accord with the hypothesis that something about schools influences, creates - ***causes*** - students to adopt task or ego goals. Additionally, as Ego goals dominate the life of school, students will likely find it difficult to resist focusing on who they are and what they can and cannot do---***in comparison to their peers***. Their background differences will be salient, their identities in focus, their competencies stressed. Stressing task goals in a school, however, is likely to change the focus away from self to task---and that is in almost all instances a change for the better so far as the creation of an inclusive learning community is concerned.

But the ultimate point, of course, is that the Task-Ego character (or "culture") of school is not necessarily a matter of chance nor inevitably inherent in the nature of school. While the subtleties regarding how school environments contribute to the adoption or construction of student orientations in a given case are deserving of further consideration, certain policies and

practices largely under the jurisdiction and potential control of leadership and staff are likely determinative. Considering more specifically and concretely the policies and practices that are critical in this regard (see Table 2) may make this point more credible. There is also the experience of a few (e.g., Ames & Ames, 1993; Maehr, Midgley et al., 1996) who have found some small success in school interventions of this nature.

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Table 2 about here

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Most of the foregoing work on school environments and student goals has not considered, directly and at length, the issues of cultural diversity that are the special topic of this paper. The implications for this topic however, may be self-evident. Moreover, recent and ongoing research is beginning to spell out the nature and implications of this perspective for coping with the challenge of diversity. Permit me to cite two examples from current and ongoing research at the University of Michigan. In a soon to be completed study, Arunkumar (1998) finds that the dissonance that students experience between their world at home and their experiences at school is reduced if and as task goals are experienced in the school setting. In a recently completed paper, Arunkumar & Maehr (1998) have shown the overall positive effects for task goals in enhancing the sense of competence and self-esteem in an ethnically and socially heterogeneous sample of middle school students. In the case of both African American and EuroAmerican students, school task goal stresses were positively (and ego goal stresses negatively) associated with sense of school belonging, competence, self-esteem---and ultimately, achievement. Path analyses confirmed that school stresses were prior to, a likely cause of, how students felt about the school, themselves---and how they met academic objectives.

The "bottom line" to this ongoing series of studies is that school environments, possibly psychological environments more generally,[4] that stress task goals minimize the negative effects that may be associated with social diversity. Ability goal stresses tend to enhance negative effects. Again, the abiding principle is that as one puts the focus on self, including one's ethnic and cultural identity, bad things *may* happen. Putting the focus on the task, tends to reduce the role that perceptions of self---over which the teacher has very little control at any given moment ---may play in the learning process. Basically, the operative piece of advice that emerges in this regard is, simply put: focus on the culture of the school and not the culture of the child. Emphasis on the extra-school sociocultural background carries risks and, at best, unpredictable benefits.

## CONCLUSION

Attending to issues of culture, motivation and achievement is clearly an important challenge in the world in which we live. It looms as critical for education and all social service agencies---here and abroad. Research on goals has hardly paid much attention to the cross-cultural

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[4] This possibility has been explored in sports environments (e.g., Meyer, Paris & Maehr, 1998) and also in a preliminary way in work environments (e.g., Maehr & Braskamp, 1986).

generalizability of measures and constructs (but see McInerney, 1995; McInerney, Roche, McInerney, & Marsh, 1997). Maybe it should. But maybe it should follow an alternate route and concentrate on creating optimum school cultures for children of diverse sociocultural background. Clearly there is a need for that---and it is not being met. Of course, intervening to change focus on self to focus on task has largely originated in a cultural context too---and needs and deserves cross-cultural testing. But that is and remains a future task, maybe a task for a future generation.

**TABLE 1. Contrasting Perspectives of Task and Ego Goals***

| | TASK | EGO |
|---|---|---|
| ***Success defined as . . .*** | Improvement, progress, mastery, innovation, creativity | High performance compared to others, relative performance on standardized measures |
| ***Value placed on . . .*** | Effort, attempting difficult tasks, "venturesomeness" | Avoiding failure |
| ***Focus . . .*** | Progress, mastery | Being the best; success relative to effort |
| ***Work/performance context . . .*** | Growth of individual potential; learning | Establishing performance hierarchies |
| ***Reasons for effort . . .*** | Intrinsic and personal meaning of activity | Demonstrating one's worth (to others in particular) |
| ***Evaluation criteria . . .*** | Absolute criteria; evidence of progress | Norms; social comparisons |
| ***Errors viewed as . . .*** | Part of a growth process; informational | Failure, evidence of lack of ability or worth |
| ***Competence viewed as . . .*** | Developing through effort | Inherited and fixed |

*This table builds on earlier analyses by Ames and Archer, 1988.

## Table 2

## Toward the Development of a School-Wide Mastery Orientation: General Framework to be Employed in Development of Tactics

| TARGET Area | Focus | Goals | Strategies |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Task** | Intrinsic Value of Learning | Reduce the reliance on extrinsic incentives<br><br>Design programs that challenge all students<br><br>Stress goals and purposes in learning<br><br>Stress the fun of learning | Encourage programs that take advantage of students' backgrounds and experience<br><br>Avoid payment (monetary or other) for attendance, grades, or achievement<br><br>Foster programs which stress goal setting and self-regulation/management<br><br>Foster programs which make use of school learning in a variety of non-school settings (internships, field experience, co-curricular activities) |
| **Authority** | Student participation in learning/schooling decisions | Provide opportunities to develop responsibility, independence and leadership skills | Give optimal choice in instructional settings<br><br>Foster participation in co-curricular, and extra-curricular settings<br><br>Foster opportunities to learn metacognitive strategies for self-regulation |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Recognition** | How recognition affects students' sense of competence and motivation | Provide opportunities for all students to be recognized for progress in attaining compatible goals<br><br>Recognize progress in goal attainment<br><br>Recognize for idiosyncratically/individually appropriate goals<br><br>Recognize for a broad array of goals | Foster "personal best" awards<br><br>Foster policy in which all students and their achievements can be recognized<br><br>Recognize and publicize a wide range of school-related activities of students |
| **Grouping** | Social interaction, social skills and values | Build an environment of acceptance and appreciation of all students<br><br>Broaden range of social interaction, particularly of at-risk students<br><br>Enhance social skill development<br><br>Encourage humane values | Provide opportunities for group learning, problem solving and decision-making<br><br>Allow time and opportunity for peer interaction to occur<br><br>Foster the development of subgroups (teams, schools within schools, etc.) within which significant interaction can occur<br><br>Encourage multiple group membership to increase range of peer interaction |

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