

## Commentary

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# Commentary on Conceptualizing Cultural and Racialized Process in Learning

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### Key Words

Culture · Learning · Race

I am grateful for this opportunity to rethink the intertwined issues of culture and race in the production and reproduction of social inequalities among children and youth. When I began active engagement in these issues in the mid-1960s, desegregation of public schools was seen as a social tool for implementing the agenda of the Civil Rights Movement and its closely related War on Poverty. Undoing a long legacy of legally sanctioned racial segregation and economic inequality was seen as both economically essential and morally appropriate.

At the same time that Supreme Court-mandated desegregation was providing children access to less segregated, better funded schools, resources were also being poured into the academic community to figure out ways to improve classroom instruction with a heavy emphasis not only on basic literacy and numeracy but also on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines in particular. The current preoccupation to increase the overall population of adults who are ‘STEM literate’ was clearly already then evident; we were a nation at risk.

Affirmative action programs opened up postsecondary and higher education to marginalized populations that had long been excluded from the halls of academe. Money for research and postgraduate training was plentiful, and a new generation of researchers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds began to make their presence felt in the study of the cultural organization of classroom instruction. The consequent outpouring of research, focused on multiculturalism, social class, and developmental processes, found its way into innumerable publications including *The Handbook of Child Psychology* [Fischer, Jackson, & Villarruel, 1998] and became one of the foundations of teacher preparation [summarized, for example, in Banks & Banks, 2009, or Richardson, 2001].

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However, even as the ranks of professionally trained scholars from marginalized populations were increasing at the upper ends of the ‘educational pipeline,’ the wave of enthusiasm for socially inclusive educational policies was receding. The rhetoric of a nation at risk and concomitant focus on fields necessary to US economic well-being has not gone away. If anything, it has grown more intense. What *has* gone away is the national consensus on the social justice side of the equation and its focus on achieving diversity *and* quality. Publicly funded higher education is rapidly disappearing and, in the current economic hard times, funding for elementary and secondary education along with health services for the poor are the leading targets for elimination.

Especially relevant to the theme of this special issue is the fact that, in spite of a national consensus on the need to dramatically increase the technological expertise of the society as an integrated whole, American schools have become resegregated, with precisely the negative social consequences that the Civil Rights Movement aspired to eradicate. Summarizing the current situation with respect to Latinos and African Americans, Orfield, Kucsera, and Siegel-Hawley [2012] describe the situation as follows:

... segregation has increased seriously across the country for Latino students, who are attending more intensely segregated and impoverished schools than they have for generations. The segregation increases have been the most dramatic in the West. The typical Latino student in the region attends a school where less than a quarter of their classmates are white; nearly two thirds are other Latinos; and two thirds are poor. California, New York and Texas, all states that have been profoundly altered by immigration trends over the last half-century, are among the most segregated states for Latino students along multiple dimensions.

In spite of declining residential segregation for black families and large-scale movement to the suburbs in most parts of the country, school segregation remains very high for black students. It is also double segregation by both race and poverty. Nationwide, the typical black student is now in a school where almost two out of every three classmates (64%) come from low-income families, nearly double the level in schools of the typical White or Asian student (37 and 39%, respectively). New York, Illinois, and Michigan consistently top the list of the most segregated states for black students [Orfield et al., 2012, p. 7].

Instead of the steady progress envisioned by the major education actors in the War on Poverty, we have to acknowledge that the situation has gotten worse under our intellectual stewardship.

Consequently, when contemporary developmentalists focus on the role of education in the developmental trajectories of marginalized ethnic groups and the poor, it makes perfect sense that while building upon insights accrued in earlier decades, they should feel compelled to focus on what was not accomplished. The essays in the current issue of *Human Development* manifest this push for rethinking prior research and the search for more powerful analytic tools. As the editors point out the articles presented here build upon, but seek to extend, two earlier research traditions:

(1) The interdisciplinary study of the internal dynamics of classrooms and other environments designed for enculturating the young, using the methods of micro-ethnography, discourse analysis, cultural psychology, and allied disciplines.

(2) Large-scale, population-level studies of the devastating impact of poverty on human development in general and educational achievements in particular.

In light of current, depressing trends in educational achievement, neither of these research traditions, by itself, seems adequate to the task of understanding how the documented socioeconomic disparities and ethnic antipathies evident in society at large get restaged and reproduced in classrooms. So it seems only natural that researchers should seek theoretical concepts and associated methods of research that will make visible how continued, pervasive societal racism intertwined with growing economic inequalities is reproduced through mundane, taken-for-granted classroom practices. How does education, with all of its virtuous intentions, become a part of the problem?

I take it to be the general goal of the papers in this special issue to answer that question and then to go on to suggest how reformulating our understanding of the links between social inequality and race that are forged during the school years might result in educational programs that more effectively address the issues. To begin with, however, I need to deal with the following problem. As the editors note, each paper appears to introduce its own toolkit of concepts, drawing upon a variety of academic disciplines, objects of research, and theoretical frameworks. This importation of unfamiliar, interlocking concepts, makes it difficult to identify similarities in theoretical assumptions across the papers. After reading back and forth through the essays, I believe that a number of common assumptions are referred to in overlapping vocabularies that share a great deal in common.

(1) Every essay seeks to understand how racism and social class differences operate to limit the academic development of stigmatized groups.

(2) There is agreement that it is insufficient to restrict one's analysis entirely to individual classrooms, schools, or out-of-school institutions with educational aspirations.

This urge to expand the field of investigation is evident in the insistence of Hand, Penuel, and Gutiérrez [2012] that we need to study how 'race and power play out [both] in moment-to-moment activity and across scales of time and space' (p. 251) by attending to 'multilevel and cross-level' scales of educational activity (p. 264).

(3) Both processes operating proximally in educational settings and those operating distally in the larger social context need to be part of the analysis if they are to be part of the solution. In the terms of Hand et al., we must be concerned with access to, and access within, the systems of activity that bestow the desired educational effects on their participants.

Bell, Tzou, Bricker, and Baines [2012] make the same point: 'learning associated with life-course outcomes' must be studied in 'the extended social and material conditions under which learning happens over extended time scales, across disparate settings, and in relation to varied value systems' (p. 277).

(4) It is essential to trace the processes by which racial stereotypes make their way into educational settings in order to make them visible, and thus addressable by new modes of organizing instruction. This process of 'making visible' is at the center of articles by Nasir, Snyder, Shah, and Ross [2012] and Varelas, Martin, and Kane, which focus on the ways that racial stereotypes and their associated impacts on students' identities restrict the educational opportunities made available to children in a manner that is so deeply internalized by the participants that it is invisible to them.

(5) There is a common assumption that educational practices are not set in concrete: each article provides examples of practices that can be marshaled to create positive, successful academic experiences that render neutral the corrosive effects of racism and economic inequality characteristic of marginalized children's everyday life experiences.

(6) The authors all ascribe to the idea that success in dealing with the subject matter and modes of knowing demanded by educational institutions, the modes of participation that are privileged, and success in forming an agentive personal sense of self, an identity, are all closely linked.

(7) There is a conspicuous tendency throughout these papers to reach out beyond the discipline of experimental, cognitive psychology to embrace ideas ranging from discursive, cultural psychology to critical race theory, and varieties of symbolic interactionism. The authors offer us a variety of conceptual tools to guide the adoption and diffusion of more acceptable and successful ways to combat the current wave of bureaucratically mandated, 'color-blind,' and 'objective' educational policies that perpetuate the problems of the past even as they declare the need for accountability measured in standardized terms in order to ensure that 'no child is left behind.'

Against this background of shared assumptions and a sense of acute societal crisis in which educational achievement plays a central role, I now turn to consider some of the key concepts that each of the papers introduces, indicating, where I can, similarities across papers that are somewhat masked by the choice of specific concepts, theoretical inspirations, and associated methodologies. My basic point is to suggest that despite the variety of specific concepts brought to bear in individual cases, the various concepts share a great deal of 'semantic space' and lead to similar lines of research using common methodologies.

The notion of 'frames,' which plays a dominant role in the discussion of Hand, Penuel, and Gutiérrez [2012] of the way that power shapes struggles to achieve both educational equity and quality, is adopted and adapted from the work of the American sociologists Irving Goffman and Kenneth Burke, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, and linguists Lakoff and Johnson among others.

As Hand et al. [2012] put it, 'frames draw their power to influence social action because they are not 'merely local.' Local frames, that enable participants to answer the question, 'what is going on here,' draw upon values, symbols, and ideals that are pervasive in society as a whole. Frames provide a language for intimately connecting the micro and the macro. Hand et al. give as an example the work of Nasir, who found that successful African American high school students employed the broadly available notion that their less successful peers fail because they lack the motivation to succeed in schooling – a framing of the issue that explains success and failure in terms of individual motivation.

As a means of showing how 'framing' can be applied at different levels of scale, Hand et al. point to the work of Oakes and her colleagues who use frame analysis to challenge inequalities in public funding of education, which obviously impacts children's local learning environments. This group sought, successfully, to reframe the problem of 'the achievement gap' that dominates American policy discourse about unequal school outcomes and its attendant focus on basic skills with a formulation that focuses on 'opportunities to learn' that are denied children owing to unequal funding of schools. Instead of achievement scores derived from standardized tests

presumed to tap enduring properties of individuals, the focus of public attention is directed toward unequal opportunity, thus tapping into social rhetoric about America as a land of opportunity.

This example provides a rare case where reframing at the social level was successful in changing the laws of a major state with respect to school funding, although there is scant evidence that the law has been widely implemented: funding to improve ‘opportunities to learn’ in poor neighborhoods has gotten worse, not better, reminding us that passing laws and implementing their provisions should not be confused.

It seems no accident, given their common concerns, that the term ‘opportunities to learn’ appears in several of the current papers, a shared strategy for reframing the sources of unequal educational outcomes. Evidence that this reframing has had an impact well beyond the classroom can be found at the level of nationwide educational reform movements (see, for example, <http://www.otlcampaign.org/>).

Closely related to the notion of framing is the concept of ‘social positioning,’ which refers to the local system of rights and duties of people engaged in some form of social interaction. Frames position people with respect to each other, shaping what they are permitted and expected to do. Frames and positions in turn circumscribe the stances that people take vis-à-vis each other and the topic at hand. (A stance is here understood as the position that a person takes in an argument, the ‘stand’ that they take on the issue at hand.) For example, Bang, Warren, Rosebery, and Medin [2012], who use the term ‘settled expectations’ to deal with the nexus of race and culture in the classroom, also use position, frame, and stance in a manner that is symptomatic of more similarity among the concepts being deployed in these essays than the plethora of individual terms might lead one to expect. Settled expectations, according to Bang et al., ‘restrict the content and form of science valued and communicated through science education’ [e.g., they have the functions attributed to frames by Hand et al. [2012], and they ‘locate students, particularly those from nondominant communities, in untenable epistemological positions that work against engagement in meaningful science learning’ (p. 248). Later, Bang et al. [2012] invoke the notion of a ‘positional frame’, which appears to be a rephrasing of the notion of ‘social positioning.’ The similarities in underlying notions of the process at work can be seen when, for example, they write about a student discussing water by telling us that she ‘assumed a different stance. She contrasted people in the USA who waste water with “other people elsewhere who can’t find any”’ (p. 310). It would not seem out of place to rephrase this example by saying that the student re-framed the discussion of water to reposition herself with respect to the discourse of the dominant community.

The use of the term ‘identity’ also fits into the general line of argument made throughout these papers. For example, Nasir et al. [2012] write that racial storylines current in society, when invoked in school settings, make certain identities available, impose others and close down still others. This mode of conceptualizing the operation of racial stereotypes leads them to seek out counter-narratives that ‘open new spaces for identity and learning’ (p. 285). This formulation seems very similar to that offered by Hand et al. [2012], citing Lakoff, that ‘frames guide our attention towards, interpretation of and response to situations, through the systems of categorization upon which they are constructed. As events and people get categorized in particular ways, we develop expectations for how the emerging activity should unfold and the

roles that different individuals will take within it' (p. 251). Similarly, Varelas et al. [2012] refer to identities as 'lenses through which people make sense of, and position themselves' with respect to the problem at hand, while at the same time they provide lenses for understanding how they are positioned by others.

I could expand this list of terminological comparisons but in doing so I might mislead the reader. My somewhat perverse conclusion is that, despite the ambiguity in the choice of terms as vehicles for complex concepts and their apparent overlap in many cases, when it comes to choosing concrete examples, the commonality and complementarity of the vocabularies of the different articles are clearly marked. To use the authors' terms, they are successful in making implicit racial frames visible, and they ring true.

For example, the transcript of Esmeralda being invited by her teacher to lead a class discussion of a mathematical problem repositions (reframes) the teacher as the instrument of the child's problem solving efforts and the child as a bona fide mathematical thinker, producing a 'productive disciplinary engagement' [Hand et al., 2012, p. 255].

Similarly, Devin, an African American beginning debater who is characterized as having a learning disability, is positioned by his teacher and classmates as too incompetent to be on the debate team. Owing to his own strong identity (and presumably the support of others), he obtains outside instruction, and his subsequent success re-positions him as a valued debate team member [Bell, Tzou, Bricker, & Baines, 2012].

In a complementary fashion, Nasir et al. [2012] present several cases in which racial stereotypes are deployed in classrooms to position African American students as incompetent learners, undermining their identities as legitimate members of a classroom community and limiting their access to meaningful learning opportunities. They cite Lee's cultural modeling approach [2007] as an example of a practice that repositions learners as the bearers of academic knowledge, providing the kind of identity-changing experiences that open up opportunities for learning.

Varelas et al. [2012] provide a useful trichotomy of relevant identities (racial identity, academic identity, disciplinary identity) which intersect with each other and the content of the material to be learned to limit or expand students' learning of curricular content. Their framework produces a variety of means for interrogating and making visible to participants the mixture of identities that come into play in different configurations of content-focused teacher-student interaction.

A characteristic of most of these papers is that, while generally focused on STEM-related content domains, the specific nature of the domain is not a matter of contention. In each case, the validity of the subject matter as an example of 'good science' is taken for granted. By contrast, Bang et al. [2012], who explicitly draw upon the work of their fellow authors in their discussion of 'desettling expectations,' differ in their approach because they question the underlying scientific concepts that are taken for granted in the other papers and are assumed to be beyond question in American schools. The domain of concern is the relation between nature and culture, and the foundational assumption they want to interrogate is the settled scientific assumption that the nature-culture relationship is best understood in the context-independent classification of the intrinsic attributes of things. Based on their own prior research with indigenous peoples in the upper Midwest, they know that their children come to school imbued with an ecological systems

understanding of the nature-culture relationship. This ‘deviant’ epistemic position promotes a relational view of the world that cuts across the settled categories of Western science.

Bang et al. [2012] also take the essential next step of seeking to engage students in STEM research by designing science curricula that build upon a relational epistemology and include involvement of community adult experts and *in situ* investigation as a part of the educational process. Their approach allows the children first-hand experience of dwelling in the ecologies whose nature is the subject of classroom teaching.

These authors are careful to make the point that, in urging serious engagement with alternative epistemic systems concerning the nature-culture relation, they are not advocating an ‘anything goes’ cultural relativism. Because of canonical Western science, human beings are confronting an ecological crisis that threatens the continued development of our species. So they turn to areas of contemporary science which appear to support the relational scientific view they are seeking to teach the children to use. In this case, the task of obliterating destructive stereotypes about a marginalized cultural group goes hand in hand with the need for deep reconsideration of the relationship of humans to the world in which they live. Good science and culture-inclusive pedagogy are part of a single process.

### **Concluding Comments**

Taken as a whole, the articles under discussion offer new challenges to the study of human development as children encounter the social sphere of schooling, which occupies such a large proportion of their life experiences from early childhood into adulthood. Once one begins to treat classroom performance as reflective of more than an arena for the display of individual abilities cultivated through a value-neutral exposure to basic academic skills and discipline-specific, scientifically validated knowledge, issues of adult, state-sanctioned authority are put into question. The current articles stand as existence proofs that it is possible, under some circumstances, to reframe educational engagements and improve learning outcomes by repositioning the teacher and students as collaborators in inquiry.

What is much less certain is whether it is possible, on a mass scale, to so reform schooling that the kinds of exceptional interactions that appear to unleash student creativity become the norm, not the exception. However persuasive the arguments for reframing and desettling educational practices may be, they run directly against the powerful forces that seek to amplify the effectiveness of a scientific world view in which triumph over nature, and over other humans considered less-than-human, is considered an economic and political imperative.

Moreover, like it or not, the leveling of adult authority in the school classroom, encouraging children to question long-standing beliefs, is not likely to receive a warm reception from the vast majority of American parents who send their children to school. Nor does the adult population of the USA, in the aggregate, appear to support changes in economic policies that would provide all children with quality education. My concern is that the recommendations growing out of this line of work will routinely meet resistance when they escape the classroom and infringe on the settled expectations of parents and policy makers.

Despite these challenges, one has to start somewhere. I look forward to reading of the spread of educational practices of the kind held up here as exemplary ways to overcome the destructive effects of racism and extreme economic disparities on our children's development.

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