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Behavioral Style, Culture, and Teaching and Learning

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For more than a year a bitter debate raged in the state of New York over a 1988 State Department of Education school dropout report that focused on minority children. The New York report cited certain passages from Hale's (1982) work, *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles*, and a document I prepared for the California State Department of Education entitled *Alternatives to IQ Testing: An Approach to the Identification of Gifted "Minority" Children* (Hilliard, 1976). The controversy stemmed from the position that unique behavioral style factors could be identified among African American populations. However, the discussion about these citations, both by those citing Hale's and my work and by those who disagreed with our conclusions, failed to take into account the context of the passages. Moreover, few people who cited my study actually read the document itself. As a result of the controversy, the New York State Department of Education decided to convene a meeting of researchers in Albany, New York, to present the state-of-the-art in research on cognitive and behavioral style. The present article is adapted from a position paper presented at that conference.

One aspect of the work I did in California involved taking a close look at the matter of behavioral style, which included but was broader than cognitive style. I was exploring the idea then that behavioral style might help to explain the gap in test performance between White and Black students (or between any two groups of students, for that matter). The assumption was that two groups of students with the same intellectual potential would, because of diversity in cultural socialization, develop habits and preferences that would cause them to manifest their mental powers in somewhat different ways.

The research I was doing at that time was focused on testing and assessment issues. It did not focus direction on the use of testing and assessment data for the design of instruction in settings that could be characterized as culturally diverse. However, I fully expected then, just as I do now, that diversity in behavioral style, which also is correlated to group behavior among cultural groups, would be a meaningful phenomenon to be considered in the delivery of instruction. Naturally, the utility of behavioral style for instructional planning is dependent upon systematic study of the nature and potential of that style for teaching and learning.

Since 1976, abundant and overwhelming data have accumulated in a variety of academic disciplines to show that distinct behavioral styles exist among individuals. Abundant and overwhelming data also exist to show that cultural groups vary with respect to behavioral style. The academic disciplines confirming this evidence include anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and other disciplines (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Cohen, 1969; Cole & Scribner, 1974; Erny, 1968; Hilliard, 1976; Kochman, 1981; Ramírez & Price-Williams, 1974; Shade, 1981, 1982; Smitherman, 1977; Vass, 1979).

My research in California contrasted African and African American culture with European and European American culture. As I indicated in my technical report, I could have selected any one or more dimensions of human experience for closer study for the purpose of revealing this contrast. However, I chose to review the literature that would allow for a comparison between African American and European Americans in the areas of religion, language, and music. In undertaking this study I fully recognized that efforts to attribute precise cultural identities to individuals are certain to be fraught with error. Thus, I focused instead on central tendencies within groups.

As I indicated in my report, a given individual in many ways may be very much like most of the members of his or her historical groups of reference. For example, most individual African Americans are very much a part of a core African American culture, yet some may operate on the behavioral margins of their historical group of reference. Some others may operate in ways that are quite outside the norms of that group. Behavior, however, is nonetheless dependent upon the nature of the cultural socialization process to which individuals are exposed. (I refer to culture here rather than to race or class, even though there may be some correlation among all three variables due to political and economic realities. For example, African Americans in general have long been segregated and confined to common spaces and common economic conditions. This has resulted in a high degree of within-group socialization among African Americans.)

In 1976 I reported, and I have seen nothing since to challenge my findings, that a unique African American core culture could be empirically described. I concluded that most African Americans, and even a few European Americans, shared in this core culture to a greater or lesser degree. However, the very idea of an African American culture seemed to threaten some European American and some African American commentators, who strove to deny African Americans any culture other than a "culture of poverty."

Realizing that students of political and economic problems are seldom students of history and cultures, I countered then and now that such a position could only be taken by those who had not systematically studied African American history and culture. As I noted then, because few, if any, penalties (such as business profit loss) exist for the failure of teaching, educators have enjoyed the luxury of ignoring such meaningful phenomena as cultural diversity. By contrast, advertisers in the private business sector were well aware of cultural diversity, for without such awareness they would fail miserably in many ethnic markets.

It is one thing to determine that behavioral style distinctions exist and that cultural behavioral style distinctions also exist. It is quite another thing to make valid pedagogical applications of the information about these styles. An argument could be made that distinct styles (behavioral, cultural, and learning styles, for example) exist without drawing any meaningful implications for instruction. On the other hand, an understanding of style may very well help us to solve some of the stubborn pedagogical problems that exist today.

I included the following comments at the end of my 1976 article under a section entitled "Cautions and Interpretation":

It is critically important that those who use the information presented here be aware of the following points:

1. We do not regard style as in any way equivalent to IQ or "intelligence." We simply regard style as the vehicle through which intelligence is expressed.
2. We do not posit the notion of style as an excuse to explain why some children do not learn in some subjects. In fact, we believe that there is evidence to indicate that any content may be learned by any style user. The question is simply one of *how* a given style user will approach the task and whether the approach that a given style user uses is compatible with that of the teacher or the institution which provides instruction.
3. Finally, it is our opinion that the evidence indicates that style *is*. However, there is no intent here to take sides in any debate over whether style should or should not exist. That would be a separate discussion and would be resolved in terms of the aims of society and education. (p. 84)

What are we to do with the information about style in the instructional process? I believe that it is useful to think of the possible responses to this question as falling into two general categories: first, those responses about which we may feel a reasonable degree of certainty; and second, those about which we may feel less certain, and where more information is needed.

CLEAR PEDAGOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Three clear problem areas exist that can be informed by what we presently know about style. Misunderstanding of cultural behavioral style has been shown to lead to errors in the estimation of a student's or a cultural group's: (1) intellectual potential (the consequences of which—mislabeling, misplacement, and mistreatment of children—are enormous); (2) learned abilities or achievement in academic subjects such as reading¹; and (3) language abilities (Hilliard, 1983, 1987).

In general, the literature on teacher expectations is clear. The images that teachers and others hold about children and their potential have a major influence on the use by teachers of their full range of professional skills. For example, research has shown that if a teacher believes that a student's intellectual potential is low, research shows that the teacher will "teach down" to the estimated level (Chun, 1987/88). They will

¹It has been shown that some teachers who are unfamiliar with the storytelling style of African American children are actually unable to follow or detect the inherent order of the story, even to the extent of teachers' believing that the children's orderly stories have no order at all (Taylor & Lee, 1987).

simplify, concretize, fragment, and slow the pace of instruction, or fail to offer abstract, conceptually oriented instruction to the child. Thus, we see that it is not the learning style of the child that prevents the child from learning; it is the perception by the teacher of the child's style as a sign of incapacity that causes the teacher to reduce the quality of instruction offered.

Students can master any style of instruction, provided they are given full opportunity to develop the new repertoire of stylistic behaviors or cognitive skills. In my experience, expanding students' stylistic or cognitive repertoire to include learning academic content within a new style of instruction can be accomplished within a reasonably brief period of time. Styles are more like habits, values, and preferences or predispositions than they are like biological dispositions. All students have an incredible capacity for developing the ability to use multiple learning styles, in much the same way that multiple language competency can be accomplished.

POTENTIAL PEDAGOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

The issue associated with culturally based behavioral style is not at all a matter of students' capacity to accommodate to the style of their schools. The real question is: What is the pedagogical value to all children and teachers of providing stylistic diversity in the schools? As shown in Table I (taken from my 1976 report), the traditional American school is quite rigid and encapsulated in a style that mimics the particular cultural style of most European Americans. Yet, this is not the only way to teach. Even more importantly, it may not even be the best way to teach European American children.

Table I contrasts the characteristics of schools as they appear to be in the majority of cases today with some alternative characteristics. Over the years, many educators have had occasion to examine the two lists of characteristics presented in this table. Almost without fail, educators tend to verbalize a preference for school systems to operate on the basis of the relational principles listed in the second, "as it could be," column. Indeed, the list of potential characteristics for schools is usually associated with the image that most educators hold about the operation of "gifted" programs. Additionally, the educators I interviewed tended to favor personal and professional behaviors more like those in the second column than those in the "as it is" list.

Unfortunately, educationalists tend to treat the stylistic mismatch between some students and schools as a student deficiency, that is, as a problem that requires students to change. As a result, we fail to see the potential for enriching the school experience for all children. Moreover, we fail to see that the traditional school style has severe limitations.

By contrast, leaders in the corporate sector are well aware that it takes a great deal more than the educational processes found in the typical public school to produce the kinds of flexible and creative risk takers that competitive business and industry often require. That is why American corporations today are spending many millions of dollars trying to expand the stylistic and cognitive repertoire of rigidly educated salespeo-

TABLE I
Contrasting Institutional Styles of American Schools

| "AS IT IS" | THE SCHOOL | "AS IT COULD BE" |
|---------------------------------|------------|----------------------------------|
| Analytical | | Relational |
| Obsessive-compulsive | | Hysterical |
| Rule-driven | | Freedom-loving |
| Standardized | | Variation-accepting |
| Conformist | | Creative |
| Memory recall of specific facts | | Memory recall of essential ideas |
| Regularity | | Novelty |
| Rigidity, order | | Flexibility |
| "Normality" | | Uniqueness |
| Difference = Deficit | | Sameness = Oppression |
| Preconceive | | Improvise |
| Precision | | Approximation |
| Logical | | Psychological |
| Atomistic | | Global |
| Egocentric | | Sociocentric |
| Convergent | | Divergent |
| Controlled | | Expressive |
| Meanings are universal | | Meanings are contextual |
| Direct | | Indirect |
| Cognitive | | Affective |
| Linear | | Patterned |
| Mechanical | | Humanistic |
| Individualistic | | Individual within group |
| Hierarchical | | Democratic |
| Isolation | | Integration |
| Deductive | | Inductive |
| Scheduled | | Targets of opportunity |
| Thing-focused | | People-focused |
| Constant | | Evolving |
| Sign-oriented | | Meaning-oriented |
| Duty | | Loyalty |

ple, managers, researchers, and supervisors. The justification for doing something about style in teaching is not merely a question of equity for poorly served groups, it makes good business sense. Because business people have a "bottom line," they are forced to acknowledge the reality of cultural diversity.

The diverse cultural groups that make up the school population are a rich resource. They have much to teach the schools that are dominated by the handcuffs of traditional practice about which we have done too little reflection.

CONCLUSION

Attention to culturally based behavioral style variations in the schools will most certainly create the potential for significant problems in commu-

nication between teachers and some of the children that they serve. These communications problems are likely to be most acute when it comes to standard approaches to testing and assessment and the interpretation that is made of results. They may also manifest in other aspects of the teacher/student interaction. For example, the ability of a teacher to establish rapport and the desired teacher/learner bond may be affected by the way in which incongruent behavioral styles are managed. At present, we have much more data on style and assessment in education than we have on style and communication. Anthropologists have gone much farther than educators in developing an understanding of the meaning of style in human communications (see Hall, 1977; Kochman, 1981).

The overriding issue in general pedagogical practices in American schools today is less a matter of style influencing learning than it is one of style influencing teaching and then teaching influencing learning. Perhaps the most significant feature of the discussion of style and learning is that it provides the opportunity to raise issues pertaining to general pedagogy that would not otherwise be raised. If African American and Hispanic children were not performing at too low a level, educators might be tempted to leave the school situation as it is, believing it to be adequate for the European American students who seem to be doing well. Yet, a look at the American workplace and at the way many Americans generally tend to live their lives suggests that there is cause for deep concern.

Clearly, if for no other reason than that the image of the schools that teachers and school leaders want is different from the schools we now have, we can use the situation in New York as a springboard for far-reaching reforms. Such reforms can serve the needs of poorly served cultural minority groups; and, as usual, any reform that benefits those students who are poorly served always works to the benefit of all.

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