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CO-CONSTRUCTING  
THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

*Reframing the Novice Versus Expert Roles of Children,  
Parents, and Teachers from a Cultural Perspective*

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Researchers have long recognized that the transition to school for young children is one of the most important steps in their development (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993; Mangione & Speth, 1998; Ramey & Ramey, 1994). Beyond the educational process, children also must learn to negotiate which attitudes and behavior habits are most adaptive to the school culture (Beery, 1984). School represents one of the first formal settings in which children are faced with new ideas and ways of doing things. Although this process may appear unilateral, sociocultural factors such as race/ethnicity,<sup>1</sup> region of origin, and social class play important parts in shaping how the transition to school is perceived, how children are prepared for it, and how easily the transition is made (Doucet, 2000; Swick, Brown, & Boutte, 1994). This chapter presents the argument that the transition to

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<sup>1</sup>Our use of race/ethnicity (or racial/ethnic) denotes our perspective that race, used alone to distinguish among people based on perceived hereditary characteristics (most often skin color), is socially constructed and limiting in its ability to help us understand the complex nuances of identity and cultural variability. Ethnicity is a more helpful construct because it encompasses shared cultural traits, with national origin or ancestry as the point of reference (Betancourt & López, 1993). However to deny the powerful role that race (i.e., skin color) plays in everyday life in the United States would be misguided (Appiah & Gutmann, 1998). Thus, we use race/ethnicity to acknowledge that, as a social construction, race is a meaningful concept that has an impact on everyday life, but because we are interested here in cultural variation, ethnicity captures more accurately the way in which we frame shared values and beliefs based on ancestry.

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<sup>2</sup>The authors use the term “of color” to refer to U.S. native and immigrant groups with ancestry in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania.

school is a cultural process, one that is experienced differently by different groups of people based on cultural characteristics, expectations, and goals. Specifically, there is a strong case for the importance of reframing current constructions of parents' and teachers' roles in facilitating the transition to school to account for the ways in which culture informs and shapes developmental processes.

Children of color<sup>2</sup> comprise close to half of the age 0–4 population in the United States today (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). One in five children in the United States is a child of immigrant parents (Rong & Preissle, 1998). According to He and Hobbs (1999), by the year 2030, minority children ages 5 and younger will outnumber their nonminority counterparts by a half million. He and Hobbs (1999) *define minority* as

The combined population of people who are Black, American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, Pacific Islander, or of Hispanic origin (who may be of any race [sic]). Equivalently, the Minority population comprises all people other than non-Hispanic Whites (who are termed the 'non-Minority' population when compared with the combined Minority population group). (p. 1)

Whether of newly arrived immigrants or of groups with multiple generations of residence in the United States, these children represent the future of the changing racial/ethnic landscape in this country, whereby groups once referred to as minorities are slowly becoming the majority (Doucet & Hamon, in press; He & Hobbs, 1999). These tremendous changes have brought tremendous challenges for the U.S. educational system, one of the most significant of which is the training of teachers (the majority of whom are White and middle class) to work effectively with children of color. Given the extraordinary numbers of very young children from diverse backgrounds entering formal schooling in the United States, it is clear that researchers and practitioners involved in teacher training and education must invest in the preparation of kindergarten teachers who are equipped to engage these young minds in ways that are meaningful and respectful of the diversity present in their classrooms (Broussard, 2000; Davidson Locke & Phelan, 1993; Fuller, 1992a, 1992b; Scrimsher & Tudge, 2003; Wiggins & Follo, 1999).

Ramey and Ramey (1994) described the transition to school as a developmental and transactional process—developmental in that children's concerns evolve and change as they move from preparing for and then entering school to being adjusted to the school environment, and transactional in that schools, families, children, and communities all are involved in creating a supportive educational experience for children. Much of the literature focusing on the transition to school examines the issue from one of these two perspectives. Thus, a number of studies examine the links among specific types of preschool experiences and the children's subsequent degree of success after they enter school (Field, 1991; Gullo & Burton, 1992, 1993; Haskins, 1989; Howes, 1988, 1990; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD] Early Child Care Research Network, 2000). Much of the work on the quality of child care and the impact of Head Start and other similar programs falls into this category (Barnett, 1995; Lee, Brooks-Gunn, & Schnur, 1988; Lee, Brooks-Gunn, Schnur, & Liaw, 1991; Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004; Ramey et al., 1999; Ramey, Lanzi, Phillips, & Ramey, 1998; Takanishi & DeLeon, 1994). An extensive portion of the literature deals more with home-school links, with the most attention paid to these links after the child has gone to school (Epstein, 1986; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Ramey et al., 1998).

Research on the impact of parental involvement with children's teachers and teachers' attempts to show parents how they can help their children make an easy and successful transition to school fall into this category (Berger, 1995; Comer, 1993; Gelfer, 1991; Honig, 1979; Leeper, Witherspoon, & Day, 1984; Mangione & Speth, 1998; Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999; Read, Gardner, & Mahler, 1993; Swick, 1992). An alternative approach to home-school links is one that focuses on aspects of the home environment that make the transition to school more or less easy (Bradley, 1995; Christian, Morrison, & Bryant, 1998; Clarke & Kurtz-Costes, 1997; Parker, Boak, Griffin, Ripple, & Peay, 1999). This is the approach adopted by Philip and Carolyn Cowan and their colleagues (Cowan, Cowan, Ablow, Johnson, & Measelle, 2005).

Cowan et al.'s study of 100 children and their two-parent families began in the year prior to kindergarten entry and followed the children through the first 2 years of school, using a five-domain model (individual psychological adjustment; family relationships, both with the child and as a couple; the ways in which the parents themselves had been raised; and stresses and supports outside the family) to explain the children's successful adaptation to school. The research also involved an intervention component that attempted to alleviate risk factors ("unresolved marital conflict [and] ineffective parenting"; Cowan et al., 2005, p. 14) that might make adaptation to school more difficult. As the authors point out, there is a glaring need for longitudinal studies that deal with the transition to school from the perspective of the home, rather than that of the school, and their research does a fine job in showing clear links connecting children's adaptation to school with such household dynamics as authoritative parenting, children's autonomy, the quality of the parents' relationship (both with one another and with their children), and the children's perceptions of those relationships. A major weakness of this research is that the sample is overwhelmingly White (84%) and relatively wealthy (79% above the median family income in the area from which the participants were drawn [the San Francisco Bay area]).

The goal of this chapter is to examine children's transition to school from a broader perspective than those listed above by framing this developmental transition as a cultural process. To understand the links between children's experiences in the years before they go to school and their transition to school, it makes most sense to take a cultural perspective, given that culture is powerfully implicated in (among many other things) the types of settings that are made available to children, the experiences the children have in those settings, the types of interactions that are encouraged and discouraged, and beliefs about what count as competent behavior habits. This argument is one that is rooted in theory, particularly the contextualist theories of Lev Vygotsky and Urie Bronfenbrenner.

## THEORIZING CO-CONSTRUCTION

As we have written elsewhere (Tudge, Doucet, & Hayes, 2001; Tudge & Hogan, 2005), contextualist theories take an interactionist and ecological view of human development, paying particular attention to everyday activities that are influenced both by characteristics of the individuals involved and the context (proximal and distal) in which those activities are taking place (see Goldhaber, 2000; Pepper, 1942). Bronfenbrenner's theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, 1993, 1995, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) illustrates this nicely; at the center of this theory are proximal processes, the regularly occurring activities and interactions with other people, objects, and symbols in the developing individual's environment. For Bronfenbrenner,

these proximal processes are the “engines of development” (1993); it is by engaging in them that individuals learn what is expected of them, which activities are considered appropriate or inappropriate for them, how they are expected to engage in these activities, the ways other people will deal with them, and the ways in which they are expected to deal with others. People initiate activities themselves and try to draw others into those activities, and it is in the course of these activities that they try out different roles and observe the roles of others, both with regard to themselves and with others.

As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) point out, however, these proximal processes are influenced both by characteristics of the individuals involved and by the environment. Age, gender, temperament, motivation, experience with the activity, experience with the other or others who are also engaged in the activity—all are implicated in the processes by which any activity is altered by the characteristics of the individuals involved. As for the environment, activities are only possible within contexts, and although the contexts can have an impact on the activities that go on within them, the contexts themselves are also transformed in the course of engagement in the activity. Context is partially represented by the settings in which individuals engage in activities, settings to which Bronfenbrenner referred as *microsystems*. Children always develop in more than a single microsystem, and Bronfenbrenner (1979) coined the term *mesosystem* to highlight the match or mismatch of children’s everyday experiences across different microsystems such as home and school.

To understand the nature of experiences in any microsystem—why children are encouraged to be in some settings and not others; why the settings are established in the ways they are; or why adults encourage some activities, discourage others, and never even consider the possibility of yet other activities—can be explained in part by the specific characteristics (values, beliefs, resources, and so forth) that individuals possess. However, such questions relate even more importantly to the social group (e.g., class, race/ethnicity, religion) of which the individuals are a part.

In this context, *culture* refers to any group that has a shared set of values, beliefs, practices, access to resources, social institutions, and a sense of identity, and that communicates those values, beliefs, and so forth to the next generation. According to this definition, different societies constitute different cultural groups, but it is clearly important to recognize that culture is far from a unitary construct. To the extent that Americans share values, beliefs, practices, access to resources, and a sense of identity as Americans, they may be thought of as members of a culture distinct from Angolans or Japanese. However, within the United States, it is clear that different racial/ethnic or social-class groups also qualify as different cultures to the extent that the definition also applies to them. Blacks and Whites in the United States may share the past 200 years of history, but they have experienced the same events in markedly different ways. Not surprisingly, although they may share a sense of identity as Americans (when contrasting themselves with people from other societies), they also have distinct identities and differing values, beliefs, and practices.

Similarly, a good case can be made for different social classes within any society being considered different cultures on the grounds that, as Kohn and others have argued, members of different classes have different values and beliefs about child rearing that stem from their different life experiences and that are linked to different ways of raising their children (Kohn, 1979, 1995; Luster, Rhoades, & Haas, 1989; Tudge & Putnam, 1997). Although Whites and Blacks may be considered different cultural groups when focusing on racial/ethnic patterns, to the extent that middle-class Whites and working-class Whites have

different access to resources; differing values, beliefs, and practices; and differing identities of themselves, they also constitute different cultures. The same argument, of course, applies to Blacks or members of any specific ethnic group from different social classes.

For Bronfenbrenner, then, research on any aspect of human development, including development across important ecological transitions such as the transition to school, requires focusing on the mutual interplay of individual activities and interactions on the one hand and cultural contextual features on the other. A similar claim can be made in terms of Vygotsky's theory. Vygotsky is probably best known, at least in educational circles, for his concept of the zone of proximal development, which is typically equated with scaffolding (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Brown & Ferrara, 1985). However, Vygotsky never meant for this concept to stand alone, nor did he view it as central to his theory. Rather, it is a theory in which the types of interpersonal interactions that occur within a zone of proximal development can only be explained through reference to aspects of the individual and to the broader context, specifically the cultural-historical context, that gives meaning to the interactions (Hogan & Tudge, 1999; Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003).

However, given that teachers often try to scaffold children's learning and, although the term is not typically used in this context, scaffold parents' understanding of what is expected of their children in the classroom, it is worth examining Vygotsky's view of the zone of proximal development in more detail. As has been pointed out elsewhere (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991), it is important to note that *obuchenie*, the key Russian word Vygotsky used to describe the concept, has been translated in very different ways by different translators. Some have translated this word, in the same sentence, to mean "instruction" (e.g., Vygotsky, 1934/1987) and others to mean "learning" (e.g., Vygotsky, 1935/1978) although these words have quite different meaning in English. The problem stems from the fact that, in Russian, *obuchenie* means "teaching/learning," treating this phenomenon as an integrated whole. Vygotsky (1934/1987) wrote that:

[Teaching/learning] is only useful when it moves ahead of development. [When it does,] it impels or wakens a whole series of functions that are in a stage of maturation lying in the zone of proximal development. (p. 212)

Clearly, the meaning varies greatly if either "instruction" or "learning" is substituted for "teaching/learning." When translated as "instruction," the concept lends itself well to a more teacher-focused unidirectional flow, the sort of process that is often found in teacher-directed scaffolding. When translated as "learning," the concept appears to markedly reduce the role of the teacher. However, when translated more appropriately, the concept carries the idea of both teacher and child engaged in a joint activity that can create a zone of proximal activity:

We propose that an essential feature of [teaching/learning] is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, [teaching/learning] awakens a variety of developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in collaboration with his peers. (Vygotsky, 1935/1978, p. 90)

In other words, what Vygotsky was calling for was neither a didactic approach to teaching, in which the teacher's job is to discover what the children's zones of proximal developments are and provide appropriate instruction, nor an approach that put the onus on children, but, rather, a collaborative process between teachers and children.

From this perspective, teaching children also involves learning from them, to understand not only the more specific skills and concepts they need to advance their current level of thinking (something that interactions that create a zone of proximal development share with scaffolding) but also the way in which the children think about learning, their learning styles, their views about school, their lives at home, and their differing cultural backgrounds. This is not simply a matter of teachers gaining more information about their children as a way to teach them more effectively, although this may be one consequence. Just as many teachers realize that they learn new material best while teaching it. The children, while teaching their teachers about themselves and their ways of thinking, are likely to become more drawn into the process of learning.

There are two main ways in which these theories are relevant to the transition to school. The first and more obvious way is that the more teachers try to create zones of proximal development in those who are just entering school by encouraging the process of teaching and learning, the more likely children are going to feel comfortable and accepted in school. Children's high levels of comfort and acceptance may not be the ultimate goal, but they certainly make for a convenient start. The second way is more relevant to the aims of this chapter because precisely the same argument that has been made with regard to teacher-child relationships can be made regarding teacher-parent relationships.

## FRAMING THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: CURRENT TRENDS

Taylor, Clayton, and Rowley (2004) reviewed the literature on parents' influences on their young children's academic development and concluded that much of what is known comes from one of two perspectives. The first is focused on "what parents do," that is, the behavior habits in which parents engage that help or hinder their children's school-related success. The second examines "who parents are," or the attitudinal, cultural, socioeconomic, and other personal characteristics that are believed to influence parents' academic socialization practices. Our own examination of the transition to school literature suggests that underlying reports of "what parents do" with respect to preparation for school are some important assumptions about "who parents are." Although not explicitly described as such, reports of transition practices among parents suggest one of two approaches: 1) parents [read White and/or middle-class parents], having taught their children their ABCs and 123s and having read to their children from infancy, talk to their children about the upcoming change, visit the school both to orient the children to the new classroom and to meet the teacher, and send their children on their way, confident that the children will adapt to the new environment with relative ease; or 2) parents [read Black/dark-skinned and/or poor parents] who do not own and/or do not read books to their children realize that the time has come for their children to begin kindergarten and, assuming they have learned enough in preschool, send them on their way with little thought to developing a relationship with the teacher and with no plans or time to be actively involved in the children's schooling. Although the summary above is overly simplistic, it does capture some of the underlying assumptions regarding who is prepared for school (and who is not) and why this is the case. Along these lines, some research on the lack of preparedness of working-class and poor, (mostly) minority children (Connell & Prinz, 2002; Stipek & Ryan, 1997; Wright, Diener, & Kay, 2000; Zill & Collins, 1995) fails to acknowledge the mainstream values dictating the behavior habits that are deemed

appropriate for school preparation (Taylor et al., 2004). There is thus a lack of continuity between home and school values.

According to Mangione and Speth (1998), continuity is an important feature of successful transitions to formal schooling. This continuity includes links between home, school, and community services—which they term *horizontal continuity*—as well as service linkages across time (e.g., preschool to school, elementary school to middle school)—which they term *vertical continuity*. Although both are important, the literature on the transition to school is limited when it comes to evidence of horizontal continuity. Much more work exists at the theoretical and conceptual level (Brown, Amwake, Speth, & Scott-Little, 2002; Decker, 2001; Decker & Decker, 2002; Early Childhood Laboratory Network Program, 1995) than in real-life examples of successful models, particularly for early childhood education. One outstanding exception is the well-known School Development Program created by Comer in the 1970s (Comer, 1993; Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996, 1999; Haynes & Comer, 1996; Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1988). As Haynes and Comer (1996) explained,

Education, in our view, is a holistic process in which significant adults—parents, school staff, and responsible members of the community—work together to help children develop well along multiple pathways. We have established mechanisms and procedures through which school staff, parents, and members of the wider community participate in a collaborative process of making critically important decisions that impact children's lives. (p. 501)

Another twist on the school–community partnership links schools with a local university that collaborates with schools to meet mutually constructed goals, such as Chicago's Erikson Institute School Project (Chen & Horsch, 2003). The project involved teaming up with nine public elementary schools, focusing on enacting change in the early years of schooling (prekindergarten through third grade).

With respect to vertical continuity (Mangione & Speth, 1998), the issue that has received by far the most attention is that of children's readiness for school. In 1989, United States President George H.W. Bush, along with the state governors at the time, instituted six goals for American education, the first of which declared that “by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn” (Action Team on School Readiness, 1992, cited in Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998, p. 128). As Meisels (1999) pointed out, much has been made about the meaning of school readiness since that time. Numerous scholars have questioned the validity of the readiness concept because it has very definite political overtones and thus provokes questions about whose interests are met by such a concept. An obvious problem with the readiness concept is that it is not concrete or easily defined (Hitz & Richter, 1993; Lewit & Baker, 1995). This is problematic in general, but it becomes especially troublesome when considering the multiple variations in children's contexts. In a study of elementary schools in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States, Cooney (1995) found that “the teachers, parents, specialists and principals all tended to reinforce White middle-class values, interest, and concerns” (p. 164) despite the multiethnic composition of the area. Thus, the rhetoric of school readiness fails to acknowledge that schools and teachers, first and foremost, want children to be ready for school *culture* (Cooney, 1995). By not acknowledging this overarching goal, practitioners make invisible a process that clearly prioritizes the goals and values of one very specific cultural group (i.e., both White and middle class). As a consequence, the strengths that children from varying backgrounds bring to the educational table cannot be recognized.

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) argued that the lower achievement scores of many children of color could be related to the cultural dissonance between schools' structures and home cultures. As Swick, Brown, and Boutte (1994) asserted, because teachers are not educated about African American children's learning styles, and, more importantly, because variations in these children's learning styles often are framed as weaknesses, Black children are less likely than their White counterparts to be considered "ready" by teachers and other assessors. However, the problems do not rest only at the level of race/ethnicity. Social class is also powerfully implicated in one's life experiences, and research has shown that working-class and poor children experience cultural dissonance in mainstream classrooms (Boutte & DeFlorimonte, 1998; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 1987, 2000). In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) terms, this is a classic case of a mesosystem mismatch. Of course, White middle-class children's experiences do not precisely mirror those they have in school; the only time children at home engage in the particular instructional style so commonly found in school is when they are "playing school," and having "show-and-tell" sessions rarely, if ever. Instead, the cultural expectations of home and school are such that children from the same cultural group as the teacher are likely to have a far easier time making the adjustment to school than when those expectations are out of alignment (Scrimsher & Tudge, 2003). Moreover, intersections among race/ethnicity and class further complicate relationships between teachers and their students (Graue, 1999; Graue, Kroeger, & Prager, 2001; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 2005).

Hitz and Richter (1993) outlined the two major perspectives on school readiness: the educational and the legal. Theoretically, from the educational standpoint, readiness has to do with how prepared children are to perform tasks such as reciting the alphabet, counting, and writing their names. The legal aspect of readiness, on the other hand, has to do with every state's duty to provide all children with equal access to educational services regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. As the researchers pointed out, however, this comparmentalization is actually a false dichotomy. Legal requirements to have all children in school by a certain age are confused with educational readiness, and school systems, researchers, and policy makers work to create measures to assess exactly when children are intellectually ready to begin learning school material (Lewit & Baker, 1995). As the age for school entry, which varies by state, increases, kindergarten curricula become more demanding, and even when the age stays the same, middle-class and affluent mothers retain their children for an extra year in hopes of giving them a developmental advantage over their younger classmates who are judged to be less ready or less prepared (Graue, 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Shepard, 1997). As Morrison's work has shown, however, holding children back does not ensure they will learn better or be in less danger of academic risk (Morrison, Griffith, & Alberts, 1997).

For all of the attention that has been given to children's readiness for school, it is striking how little has been made of the necessity for schools and teachers to be ready for children (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Graue, 1992; Hitz & Richter, 1993). Rather than putting the onus on children's readiness to learn, President George H.W. Bush's declaration might have read, "By the year 2000, all schools will be ready to learn about the children who populate their classrooms and the families that raise those children." In fact, few researchers have written about the National Education Goals Panel's (NEGP) recommendations for "ready schools" (for notable exceptions, see Murphey & Burns, 2002; Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999). In 1998, the NEGP assembled a group

of advisors to identify the characteristics of “ready schools” and to share useful strategies with school and community leaders (NEGP, 1998). According to the advisory group, there are 10 keys to ready schools:

1. Ready schools smooth the transition between home and school.
2. Ready schools strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools.
3. Ready schools help children learn and make sense of their complex and exciting world.
4. Ready schools are committed to the success of every child.
5. Ready schools are committed to the success of every teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day.
6. Ready schools introduce or expand approaches that have been shown to raise achievement.
7. Ready schools are learning organizations that alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children.
8. Ready schools serve children in communities.
9. Ready schools take responsibility for results.
10. Ready schools have strong leadership. (p. 5)

For the purposes of the current conversation, this section focuses on the first and the fifth items because they are the areas in which the role of culture has been neglected. Specifically, smooth transitions between home and school require that teachers understand and respect the home just as much as the parents understand and respect the school. For the teachers and school staff who interact with children to be successful, they must rethink their approach to children and parents (Doucet, 2002b). When it comes to teachers and parents, however, a clear gap in communication often emerges; in the same way that teachers tend to treat children in a top-down fashion, trying to scaffold children to fit the school rather than trying to learn from them and encouraging a mutual adaptation (thus creating zones of proximal development in which all children can learn), they tend to treat parents as novices to the educational “game.” In this top-down model, teachers take on the role of experts who own the knowledge about schooling (Doucet, 2002a, in press).

One area in which the top-down approach to parental roles is particularly evident is in the literature surrounding parental involvement, which narrowly dictates why, when, and how parents should play a role in their children’s education (Fine, 1993; Graue, 1993a, 1993b; Graue et al., 2001; Mapp, 2003; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005). Several dangers are associated with such a one-sided approach, or the “school-to-home transmission model” (Swap, 1993). One such danger is the ease with which teachers’ biases can inform not only their constructions of what is needed for a successful transition to school but also their perceptions of whether children and their parents even are capable of preparing for a successful transition. As Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, and Cox (2000) reported, nonminority teachers in schools with large minority populations reported higher rates of problems in the transition to kindergarten than did minority teachers in similar schools. Given the pervasive assumption that minority parents are not as involved

in their children's educational endeavors (Phenice, Martinez, & Grant, 1986), teachers' preexisting biases could set them up to engage parents less as partners in facilitating the transition to school.

The problem is not only that teachers might perceive children of color as academically unprepared. As researchers have reported, kindergarten teachers are more interested in children's social skills and self-reliance than in the academic knowledge with which they enter the kindergarten classroom (Heaviside & Farris, 1993; Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Social competence has been identified as an important characteristic of readiness for school (Carlton & Winsler, 1999), a successful transition to school (Huffman, Mehlinger, & Kerivan, 2000), and school achievement (Foulks & Morrow, 1989). Yet, teachers' perceptions of children's social skills are far from objective (Entwisle, Alexander, Pallas, & Cadigan, 1988). Mendez, McDermott, and Fantuzzo (2002) noted that perceptions of social competence can be impacted by a range of factors, including temperament, gender, race/ethnicity, and class. For example, in a comparison of teacher ratings of children's social competence using ECLS-K data, Idzelis (2005) found that teachers were more likely to rate immigrant children from African countries (as well as African American children of nonimmigrant origin) as having poorer social skills compared with other children in the sample. Variations in assessments of competence also emerge when comparing teacher versus parental evaluations of children (Gray, Clancy, & King, 1981).

A related risk is that of miscommunication and misunderstanding with teachers who are not familiar with the social interaction styles of children of color and their parents (Lareau, 1987, 2002; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Willis, 1992; Wilson & Banks, 1994). A clear example of this is the different ways in which White and African American adults ask questions of children (Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983). Specifically, White adults tend to give children directions by asking questions (e.g., "Brian, would you like to tell us about your project?") and to ask questions to which they already know the answer (e.g., "What color are my glasses?"), whereas African American adults tend to communicate requests to children directly ("James, it is your turn to tell us about your project.") and ask children questions to which they do not know the answer ("What color is your sofa at home?").

Similarly, Tharp (1989) reported on variations in communication style among Navajo, Hawaiian, and Anglo children and teachers. Among the Navajo people, a long period of silence after a person has asked a question is a sign that the listener is reflecting on the question and giving the speaker time to say all that needs to be said. White teachers, used to immediate responses from White children, could mistakenly assume that silence on the part of Navajo children is a sign of indifference or ignorance. For Hawaiian children, on the other hand, overlapping conversations are a common part of everyday communication, and White teachers unfamiliar with this "talk-story" style of conversation could mistake perfectly acceptable "interruptions" of other children as rudeness.

Gaps in communication also can arise when parents are not native speakers of English. Apprehension about navigating an unfamiliar educational system, insecurity that something may be "lost in translation" (Hoffman, 1989), and, for some, reliance on children to serve as translators can all engender a sense of powerlessness among parents (Doucet, 2005; Pérez Carreón et al., 2005; Trueba, 2004). Unfortunately, these parents' hesitation to contact or engage their children's teachers in conversations about the children's progress (or lack thereof) may be misinterpreted as lack of interest on the part of teachers (Doucet, 2002a).

## REFRAMING THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: THE ROLE OF CULTURE

Parents and children should be allowed a place at the “experts” table so that parents can learn how to provide their children with experiences that prepare them for the transition (Delpit, 1995; Doucet, 2002a, 2002b). Teachers’ attempts to inform parents about what is going on in the classroom and what they are trying to accomplish with the children, as well as their efforts to involve parents in their children’s education, all deserve recognition. These efforts are extremely important in helping children make successful transitions to school. However, applying the theoretical perspective laid out in this chapter would be far more beneficial. Rather than providing parents with scaffolding to teach them how to help their children, teachers would make more of a long-term beneficial impact on their children’s development by applying the teaching/learning approach to their dealings with the children’s parents described in this chapter. In both cases, zones of proximal development can be created. Delpit (1995) wrote about the frustration teachers of color feel trying to communicate with White teachers about how best to serve the concerns of children of color in their classrooms. Calling it a “silenced dialogue,” Delpit described a process in which teachers of color shared their experiences with their colleagues, hoping to provide them with culturally nuanced insights, only to be met with responses about what *research* has shown are best practices or what progressive pedagogies suggest are better approaches for teaching. Teachers of color, unable to share their stories, experiences, and wisdom, felt silenced in conversations on how to teach children from their own cultural communities.

At this point, it might be helpful to return to the issue of culture, invoking both the fact that Vygotsky’s theory is a cultural–historical theory (not a theory of zones of proximal development) and Bronfenbrenner’s insistence that what goes on between individuals is profoundly influenced not only by the characteristics of the individuals concerned but also by the context in which those interactions occur, a context that is simultaneously proximal (the microsystem) and distal (the macrosystem, or culture). Cultures are distinguished by values, beliefs, practices, a sense of identity, and an attempt (explicit or implicit) to pass on those values, beliefs, and so forth to the following generation. Although cultures are transformed (and transform themselves) over historical time, the passing on of cultural ways of making sense of the world to the next generation also ensures a good degree of continuity over historical time.

In some cases, similarities between the teacher’s culture and that of the children are clear. This occurs when both teacher and children share ethnic, regional, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers and parents are then likely to have common values, beliefs, practices, and a sense of identity, although individual differences ensure that this commonality is likely rather than definite. Cultural compatibility is one of the central tenets of the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP, Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). The KEEP model requires teachers to work collaboratively with students and to understand the communication styles of Hawaiian children, which include multiple overlapping conversations and communication, or “talk-story” (Tharp, 1989). KEEP Schools fund a teacher-training program called the Preservice Education for Teachers of Minorities (PETOM), which actively recruits students to teach in their home communities (PETOM, 1993), believing that these students are best equipped to serve the children in their own communities.

However, in many other cases there is no such concordance, either because the teacher has a different cultural background than the students or because the student body is culturally

heterogeneous (Fuller, 1992b). In these latter cases, the children's transition to school and subsequent performance in school can only be enhanced if the teacher is both willing to teach and learn from the children and their parents. This is not to suggest that children should only be taught by teachers who share their cultural characteristics. Grant and Secada (1990) and Sleeter and Grant (1987) warned that, taken to the extreme, cultural compatibility models could be used to justify segregation of children and teachers of color and also to provide an "easy out" to White teachers who would not have to learn how to teach these children (Bloch & Swadener, 1992). Whether the teacher comes from the same community in which he or she is teaching, his or her first job should be to learn from the children and parents he or she serves.

One reason that this is important involves issues of social class. Although there is clearly a good deal of controversy about appropriate definitions of social class (Duncan & Magnuson, 2003; Ensminger & Fothergill, 2003; Holden & Edwards, 1989), Kohn (1977, 1979, 1995) argued convincingly that class differences in child rearing (among many other things) are related to parents' current conditions of life, particularly in the workplace, and their past experiences of education. Income also plays a role, but with the powerful exception of families living in or close to poverty, its role is less important than education and occupation.

Kohn (1979) argued that whereas all parents want their children to be successful, they differ in what strategies they believe will help their children attain success. If, based on a parent's educational experiences, success has required following the teachers' rules, regurgitating what the teacher has taught, and so forth, and if success in the workplace has required arriving on time and carefully carrying out the boss's instructions, it is not surprising that such a parent's approach to raising children might involve stressing doing what one is told, being neat and organized, and so forth. Whether this approach brings success or failing to take this approach inhibits success, parents with these types of experiences would most likely teach their children at home that these types of qualities will lead to success.

By contrast, parents who have gone to college are more likely to have progressed far enough in terms of education have been encouraged to think for themselves rather than simply follow what the teacher has said (something they may not have experienced in an educational setting since preschool or kindergarten). If their occupational success depends less on following instructions than on thinking for themselves, they are more likely to encourage their children to be self-directing, not simply following rules, as a likely way to become successful.

If families are defined as middle class when the parents have a college degree and a professional occupation and as working class when the parents have not been to college and when their jobs do not require a great deal of self-direction, teachers, by definition, are middle class. If some or all of the children in a kindergarten class are from working-class backgrounds, one can see an immediate clash of values, beliefs, and practices if the teacher tries to set up the classroom in such a way that the children are encouraged to choose which "center" to go to, expected to work relatively independently, or to do group work without much teacher direction. If working-class children have more difficulty doing these things than do middle-class children, this is no more of a limitation than the fact that middle-class children might have more difficulty than working-class children fitting into a tightly structured classroom in which they are expected to do just as the teacher wants. In both cases, home experiences and those experiences of the classroom are mismatched. Rather than argue that one way is correct and the other not, it would be helpful for teachers to know the prevailing

values, beliefs, and practices in the children's homes so they could find ways of bridging gaps between sets of expectations (the teacher's and the home's). This would require conversation between teachers and parents—not the teacher explaining what she or he wants and expects but an interchange in which both teacher and parents could learn from each other.

The idea that typical sets of experiences (whether the parents' experiences in their own schooling or in the workplace, or the child's experiences in the typical settings in which they are placed) should be counted as cultural practices can be taken further by examining the types of literacy experiences that middle-class and working-class children have in the home. As Heath (1983, 1986) demonstrated, White children from these two types of backgrounds engaged in many early literacy activities, but the manner of engagement was quite different in the two groups, with working-class children being encouraged to say the words in the books correctly and the middle-class children being drawn to make connections between what was in the books and what was in their own experiences. When these children enter school, their past experiences with books and literacy fit relatively well or relatively poorly with the teachers' expectations for reading. It is not a question of one or another group being deficient, but the likelihood of a mismatch of expectations will only make the transition to school that much more difficult. Only when the teacher has learned about the children's past experiences can she or he best help the children. The fact that the teacher has made the effort to discuss those experiences and learn from the parents can only help strengthen the connection between children and school.

For historical reasons, all of the issues that have been raised in this chapter regarding social class are likely to be magnified when talking about cultural differences that stem from ethnic or racial differences. This should not be confused with a cultural relativity approach—it is not reasonable to argue that some schools are right for working-class children but not middle-class children any more than it is reasonable to condone school segregation on the basis of race/ethnicity or national origin, particularly because this is a society in which middle-class White values link much more clearly to status, power, and wealth (Delpit, 1988, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001). Certainly, culturally sensitive pedagogical practices should be incorporated into the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2001), but beyond that, as others have argued (Bloch & Swadener, 1992; Delpit, 1988; Fine, 1993; Grant & Secada, 1990; Graue et al., 2001), issues of power and access to educational capital must be addressed if diversity in U.S. classrooms is to become a source of strength rather than an excuse for failure.

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH

Some research has considered the unique contributions of culture and the wealth of knowledge offered by parents; such research suggests that there is indeed cultural variation in expectations, beliefs, and practices with respect to children's schooling. For example, Okagaki and Sternberg (1993) found that immigrant parents from Cambodia, Mexico, the Philippines, and Vietnam placed a higher value on conforming behavior habits than did their Anglo American and Mexican American counterparts, among whom autonomous behavior habits were regarded more highly. In terms of their beliefs about markers of intelligent first graders, Asian parents in the sample rated motivation and self-management higher than social skills, whereas social skills were highly important to Hispanic parents' conceptualizations of intelligent first graders. Ruth Chao (1994) explored the parenting styles of Chinese immigrant and European

American mothers of preschoolers to illuminate why Chinese children seemed to perform so well in school considering that, according to research, “authoritarian” parenting leads to negative outcomes, including poor academic achievement, and that traditionally Chinese parents have been identified as authoritarian. Challenging the description of Chinese parenting as “controlling,” Chao argued that the Chinese concept for what researchers have described as “authoritarian” parenting includes the notion of “training”—an important distinction.

In terms of practices related to schooling, Gallimore and Goldenberg (2001) found that immigrant parents of Hispanic origin rarely engaged their children in reading before the age of 5 because it was not believed that children had reached the “age of reason” before that time. Instead, parents focused on their children’s moral development and the development of good social skills (such as politeness), which, from these parents’ frame of reference, were important even for the youngest of children. Along similar lines, Doucet (2000) found that African American parents framed preparation for the transition to school more broadly as preparation for the real world and thus highlighted skills that would serve children in this comprehensive endeavor. For these parents, children’s ability to take care of themselves (from physical self-care to knowledge of basic safety), to demonstrate curiosity and intelligence, to display social competence (good manners, kindness), and to negotiate race relations were just as important for being prepared to go to school as were basic skills in literacy and numeracy.

Tudge and colleagues (Tudge & Doucet, 2004; Tudge, Otero, Hogan, & Etz, 2003; Tudge, Tammeveski, Meltsas, Kulakova, & Snezhkova, 2001) have approached the issue of the links, if any, between the preschool years and what happens after children enter formal schooling from the perspective of the regularly occurring activities and interactions in which young children from a variety of different cultural contexts are involved. Working from a theoretical framework that views the intersection of culture and everyday practices as key to development, Tudge et al. conducted ethnographic observations of how and with whom young children spent their time. Tudge et al. also interviewed the children’s parents to understand, among other things, their values and beliefs. The children were observed and the parents were interviewed when the children were between 3 and 4 years of age, and more data (interviews and questionnaires) were gathered during the first few years the children were in school. Data using the same methodology have been gathered from a single city in each of Russia, Estonia, Finland, Korea, Kenya, and Brazil, as well as in the United States with equal numbers of European American and African American families (Tudge, 2005). In each city, equal numbers of middle-class and working-class families were recruited, with class membership being determined by education and occupation criteria.

This study reveals that children in different cultural communities engage in different types of activities. For example, in the U.S. sample, and just focusing on those activities that Tudge and colleagues felt might be relevant to school, middle-class White children were far more likely than their working-class peers to be involved in activities involving verbal interaction with adults. This was true of conversation (defined as the more cognitively sophisticated talk about the past or future) or the exchange of information (i.e., lessons) about literacy, numeracy, or about the world in general (whether specific skills or about nature). In Black communities, the differences between the social-class groups were not as marked, although middle-class children were more likely than their working-class counterparts to be involved in more discussions about literacy, numeracy, and the world. However, children

from both groups were less likely to be involved with conversation with adults than either group from the White community. Middle-class children in both the White and the Black communities were more likely to be involved in pretend play and to engage with objects that might help with literacy (such as looking at books or being read to) and numeracy than their working-class peers (Tudge & Doucet, 2004). It is interesting to note, however, that those working-class Black children who attended formal child care centers were far more likely to participate in school-related lessons than those who did not (Tudge, Doucet, Odero, Sperb, Piccinini, et al., 2006).

There is thus good evidence that young children's school-relevant experiences differ by virtue of the specific cultural community of which they are a part. What, if any, are the implications after they enter school? In three of the four communities, children who had engaged as preschoolers in more school-relevant lessons (about literacy, numeracy, and so forth) were much more likely to be perceived as academically competent by their teachers when they were in second or third grade (correlations ranging from .49 to .55). The exception was White working-class children, who had participated in almost no such lessons. Similarly, children in three of the four communities (middle-class Black children were the exception) who had had more lessons about the world (skills, nature, and safety) were more likely to be viewed as more competent (correlations from .3 to .5). Middle-class children who had had more interpersonal lessons (about politeness, getting along with others, and so forth) were also more likely to be viewed as more competent (.58 for the White children, .21 for the Black children). The remaining activity that involved verbal interaction with others, namely, conversation with adults, was also clearly linked to teachers' perceptions of competence 4 years later in three of the four groups, strikingly so in the case of the working-class White children (.87), less so for the middle-class children (.4 in the White community, .23 in the Black community). Interestingly, those activities that did not necessarily involve interaction with an adult (pretend play and playing with school-relevant objects) were only positively related to later competence for working-class White children (pretend play, .39) and middle-class Black children (play with school-relevant objects, .43); working-class Black children who had been involved in more pretend play were actually viewed as less competent by their teachers (-.37).

These data reveal that middle-class children are more likely than their working-class peers, during the years before they go to school, to engage in the types of activities that are linked to school success, and these differences are magnified in the case of White children. These results are in agreement with the literature on children's early language and literacy experiences (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Hart & Risley, 1995, 1999) showing how those early experiences are related to both class and race/ethnicity and having clear implications for the transition to school.

There are two ways of looking at this issue. The traditional way is to simply view members of groups that are not White and middle class as having an impairment that needs to be made up if success is to occur. An alternative position is that schools have privileged the goals and practices of one particular group without considering ways of building on the more typically occurring experiences of other groups. For example, as Serpell et al. (2005) found in their research on early literacy experiences, the Black children in their study were more likely to play word games and to draw and write than Whites, and middle-class Blacks were far more likely than children from the other communities to engage in oral storytelling. A similar point can be made regarding parents' beliefs about educationally relevant activities. For example, although 70% of the parents in Serpell et al.'s Early Childhood

Project focused on decoding skills as one of the major signs of their children starting to read, middle-class parents, both Black (82%) and White (42%), were far more likely to mention motivational factors as being important than were working-class parents (fewer than 20%). These different views reflect different strengths on which teachers could build. But without talking to children and parents about the parents' beliefs and the children's prior experiences, teachers are unlikely to know what they can build on.

## CONCLUSION

The transition to school is a cultural process, although the complex roles that culture plays in this critical developmental juncture often is not recognized. The theoretical bases for these claims come from two contextual theories. First, Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective encourages a viewing of culture from the broadest level (i.e., the macrosystem) to the most proximate (i.e., the microsystem). Thus, schools operate within a specific cultural framework, but this framework does not always reflect the values and beliefs of the families the schools serve. Furthermore, Vygotsky's cultural-historical model, with its focus on education and relationships among teachers and students, demands that teaching and learning be seen as a transactional process—that is, teaching/learning.

Recognizing the transition to school as a cultural process means moving away from models that try to generalize a universal (or even national) model for how children experience the transition to school as well as for how parents conceptualize this transition. Projections suggest that the U.S. population will continue to increase in racial/ethnic diversity (see He & Hobbs, 1999) and that economic changes related to globalization, outsourcing, and wage stagnation will further the gap between asset owners and wage earners (Collins, Leonard-Wright, & Sklar, 1999). It is crucial that teachers be trained to appropriately address diversity in their classrooms (Fuller, 1992b) and, by extension, to address diversity among these children's parents. For children to make the transition to school successfully, current conceptions of the roles children and their parents play in informing the schooling process also will need to be expanded to make room for diverse approaches (Graue, 1993a). This "transition as cultural process" perspective also means that teachers will need to suspend their expectations that children will experience the transition in the same way, just as they must suspend expectations that all children learn to read the same way (Delpit, 1988), communicate the same way (Tharp, 1989), or behave the same way (Wilson & Banks, 1994). Finally, schools themselves must be made more appropriate for adapting to the concerns of an ever-changing child population. To do so, all of the relevant players must actively construct schooling experiences together.

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