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Chapter Three

Sociocultural Factors Affecting School Reform in Culturally Diverse Settings

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Introduction

The Spring 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk* propelled the American people into a state of alarm about American education, and served as the first step in a new educational reform movement (Doyle *et al.*, 1991; Finn, 1990; Murphy, 1990; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984). Prior to 1983, demands for reform were cyclical and categorical events whose ultimate impact on student achievement was minimal. Concerns over school reform and school effectiveness are even more relevant today, as society is demanding sweeping reform that will ensure an intellectually, linguistically, mathematically, and functionally literate populace capable of assuming both cooperative and competitive leadership roles in a global society.

The call for educational improvement led to four distinct and well-documented waves of reform which have impacted the structural and curricular components of schools. However, despite well-intentioned efforts, these waves of educational reform have not been effective in addressing the needs of *all* students, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

The literature on school reform is rich with information about the change process and classroom reform. One observation from the literature is that systemic

reform and effective leadership efforts are rooted in middle class, Euro-centric cultural frames of reference and organizational structures. A Euro-centric perspective omits alternative frames of reference, experiences, and *funds of knowledge* (Floyd-Tenery, González & Moll, 1993; González *et al.*, 1993; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Moll, Vélez-Ibáñez & González, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez, 1988; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) that many students bring to the educational process. The work presented in this paper attempts to reconceptualize systemic reform and empowering leadership using the lens of sociocultural theory in order to facilitate more inclusive and effective school reform.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are used to help explain and to integrate the work of systemic reform and empowering leadership as explored through the lens of sociocultural theory:

Sociocultural Theory

Although there is no absolute consensus on the terminology on which sociocultural theory is based, the authors utilize the conceptual framework that Wertsch, Del Rio, and Alvarez (1995) set forth. In discussing terminology, Wertsch *et al* acknowledge the various terms for this approach, such as socio-psychological, cultural-historical, socio-cultural-historical and sociohistorical, which all refer to the Vygotskian heritage. They argue, however, that the term *sociocultural* is the preferred term to describe the appropriation of the Vygotskian heritage.

The primary aim of the sociocultural approach is to provide understandings as to the social and cultural factors which impact teaching and learning in school settings in order to improve educational outcomes for all students, especially for ethnic and linguistic minority students. This approach utilizes qualitative analysis to understand the various complex factors that affect school success and failure. Of particular importance is the way specific contexts affect learning. The strengths of this approach are that it is inclusive, recognizing culture as an important variable in learning, and is flexible and adaptable to individual contexts. The limitations of this approach are that it is sophisticated and requires educators, particularly those in leadership positions, to rethink their basic philosophy of education, and also requires making changes in the structure and culture of the school.

Tenets of the Sociocultural Approach

1. Anthropological Basis of Culture/Context: Although there is divergence as to an exact definition of the word *culture*, anthropologists generally emphasize that culture is: (1) learned rather than innate; (2) shared by a group of people which creates a context for individual activity; (3) an adaptation to new and challenging

conditions ranging from the environment to power relationships within society; and (4) a dynamic system that has permeable and changing boundaries (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994)

Of particular importance to education are the ideas that culture is learned and shared. Children usually first learn their culture from their parents, families and home communities. Because culture is shared, it creates a context in which human activity makes sense. The context is especially powerful because of the familial connections. Generally speaking, a child comes to school with a certain set of assumptions concerning what is appropriate in terms of behaviors, values and beliefs, and also the *meaning* of those behaviors, values and beliefs.

The anthropological notion of culture implies that all human activity, including learning, occurs in a particular context.

2. Mediation/Assisted Performance: According to Tharp and Gallimore (1988), learning in the sociocultural perspective is assisted performance. Using scaffolding techniques, more competent others guide novice learners in problem solving and tasks. Following the traditional apprenticeship model, the task is not diminished for the novice learner, but the level of assistance moves from being substantial in early stages to minimal and none at all in later stages. In this view, teachers facilitate learning and serve as guides to students. Teachers must be aware of students' unassisted performance level and assisted performance level, and gear mediation and assistance to the level in between the two, which Vygotsky (1978) referred to as the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZoPD). The ZoPD is in flux and moves for each child and task; as the child grows and develops, so does the ZoPD.

3. Motivation: From the sociocultural perspective, motivation is inherent in the human condition. Motivation for learning occurs when learning experiences are structured to be authentic and meaningful, and related to real-life tasks and problem solving. Motivation is enhanced in the social relational dimension of learning, including the relationship between the learner, the more competent other, and the task at hand. Motivation is also enhanced by utilizing learners' funds of knowledge and using culturally responsive pedagogy.

4. Learning Communities: Learning does not occur in isolation from the community. A learning community is based on the core-belief that all members of the community are learners, and that the context of learning has no boundaries. The members of the community work collaboratively to support the learning process and value life-long learning.

5. Constructivism: Based largely on the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), this approach views all learning as social, in which expert learners mediate new learning experiences for the novice learner. The theoretical framework has been most recently applied in educational settings through classroom strategies such as instructional conversations and identifying learners' zones

of proximal development. Learning situations, curricula and activities are constructed through a process of dialogue and mediation. The strength of this approach is that students are actively involved in the learning process and contribute to the construction of knowledge. The limitation is that there is no precise formula for knowledge construction, and therefore the actual implementation of this approach needs to vary in different activity settings. This can be frustrating for classroom teachers who are not well grounded in its theory and methodology. Additionally, constructivism does not fit traditional modes of assessment.

6. Authenticity: Authenticity from the sociocultural perspective means that *all* aspects of education—the curriculum, school environment, materials, assessment, interactions, and relationships—are rooted in real life. All teaching and learning must be authentic and meaningful. Authenticity refers to the connections between structured learning activities and every day problem-solving tasks, mediated by the particular culture and context of the learner and the teacher. Learning is holistic, concrete, and contextualized, as opposed to fragmented, abstract and decontextualized.

7. Teaching and Learning as a Process: Process is the on-going series of actions, events, operations, and relationships that lead to value-added knowledge and growth. All learning is seen as a process, and the process is as important as the product. Additionally, the process of learning is transformational, not merely additive. That is, learning is not simply the sum of various parts. Because learning is social and relational, learners come to new questions and tasks with an entire history of experiences that relates with problems to be solved, new ideas, new tasks, and other persons involved in these. The interaction between and among the above transforms the individual parts (the learner, the question, the other) in a holistic, integrative and constructivist manner that creates something new. The process of transformational learning is on-going and life-long.

8. Funds of Knowledge: The funds of knowledge construct maintains that every student enters school with an individual and community-based history and a set of experiences which combined are that particular student's funds of knowledge. It can be described as the totality of experiences and home-based knowledge that each student brings to school from the home culture (Martin, 1996).

Such an approach is especially significant for ethnic minority, language minority, and immigrant students because they may bring very different funds of knowledge than the dominant majority of students in a school. Using the existing funds of knowledge that students bring from their families is important for teachers. This helps to build a bridge between the home culture and the school culture, and enhances student motivation.

Systemic Reform

Schools are considered by many to be the most complex of all social inventions because of the interplay among organizational structures, management processes, instructional activities, and student achievement (Hanson, 1991). "Our peculiar way of organizing public education in the United States has made change even more difficult and less apt to yield results" (Finn, 1991, p. 184). Chubb and Hanushek (1990) observe the layer cake organization pattern of public schools as part of the problem. The hierarchical nature of school organizations and the three separate levels of government—local, state, and federal—all compete to set educational policy and govern local schools.

By the late 1980s, reform attention was directed to the entire education system, focusing on such change variables as leadership, decision making, and organizational culture (Fullan, 1991; Goodlad, 1984; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sizer, 1984). "Yet eight years after being proclaimed a 'nation at risk,' we've eliminated virtually none of the hazardous practice, dangerous ideas, or pointless customs of the education system" (Finn, 1991, p. 185).

The current need for systemic reform demands change and dramatic improvements in student achievement as necessary components of the education agenda in the 1990s (Odden, 1995). The school is at the center of change in the educational system. However, while the local school is a unit of organizational change, the local district, together with the state, are units of systemic change (Murphy *et al.*, 1985; Odden, 1991). In order for change to occur at the classroom level, change must also occur up and down the entire educational structure. Sociocultural theory suggests that collegial social systems generate greater productivity in change efforts and opportunities for student learning (Joyce *et al.*, 1990). In order to realize lasting change, all members of the school community need the support of the entire school, the school needs the support of the district, and the district needs the support of the county, state, and federal government structures (Odden, 1991). The entire system needs to support and form the scaffolding necessary for the change to occur in the classrooms with teachers, students, and parents as partners.

Michael Fullan (1993) suggests that what is needed is a set of coherence-making strategies at the local level, not the appearance of coherence at the state and national levels. Building communities of learners calls for change in school systems and cultures built on learning for teachers and students—the development of professional school cultures (Fullan, 1991; Goodlad, 1990; Joyce, 1990; Joyce & Murphy, 1990; Loucks-Horsely & Stiegelbauer, 1991). The key issue of systemic reform however, must remain excellence in education for all students (Finn, 1991; Tyne, 1992).

Empowering Leadership

"The school is an organization, and organizations change more effectively

when their heads play active roles in helping to lead improvement" (Fullan, 1991, p. 152). Educational change is a socio-political process and a fact of life that involves loss, anxiety, and struggle; change is a process, not an event (Fullan, 1991; Hall & Hord, 1987). Significant change is accomplished through empowering leadership in which the leader takes an active role in empowering the players in the change process, taking a developmental approach, and pursuing multiple lines of involvement simultaneously (Anderson, 1989; Fullan, 1991).

The effective schools research indicates that school personnel will be successful agents of change if the following are in place: strong leadership, safe climate, academic achievement, high expectations for students and teachers, and a monitoring and reward system (Finn, 1991; Lemlech, 1990). The site principal is a central player in school change efforts: a manager of the school culture, a disseminator of vital information, a resource gatherer, and a power and reward broker (Fullan, 1991; Hall & Hord, 1987; Hanson, 1991; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Marsh, 1988; Odden, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Schlechty, 1990). Teacher networks, collaborative cultures, supportive administrators, and high-quality ongoing assistance all need to be established to bring about systemic change. Leadership is a critical function in the change process that combines consistent pressure, monitoring, and support, along with ongoing assistance and proper resources to build the scaffolding necessary to further the learning of all community members. By sharing in empowering leadership, teachers are more involved in running and managing schools and equally accountable for results. Information, knowledge, power, and rewards must be developed and shared at the school level and set within a systemic reform context in order to create the schools the children need (Odden, 1995).

Learning Community Model

In order to create educational communities that link systemic reform and empowering leadership with the sociocultural theory, we developed a matrix that discusses the connections between the sociocultural approach, systemic reform, and empowering leadership (see Table 1) and the Learning Community Model (see Figure 1). The model serves as a construct for decision making, resource gathering, and program planning for educational communities in which every member is a learner. The main goal of the learning community is success for all in a social context in which learning is a life-long process. The major support for the learning community comes in the form of providing ongoing mediated assistance or scaffolding, and developing a dynamic and holistic construct of culture and context.

The components of the model link the tenets of sociocultural theory with effective leadership strategies. The matrix describes how leadership strategies and systemic reform can be informed by the tenets of sociocultural theory.

In order for educational reform to take hold and address the needs of *all* students, the entire system must change. We suggest that one way to insure systemic

Table 1
Matrix of Sociocultural Factors
Affecting School Reform in Culturally Diverse Settings

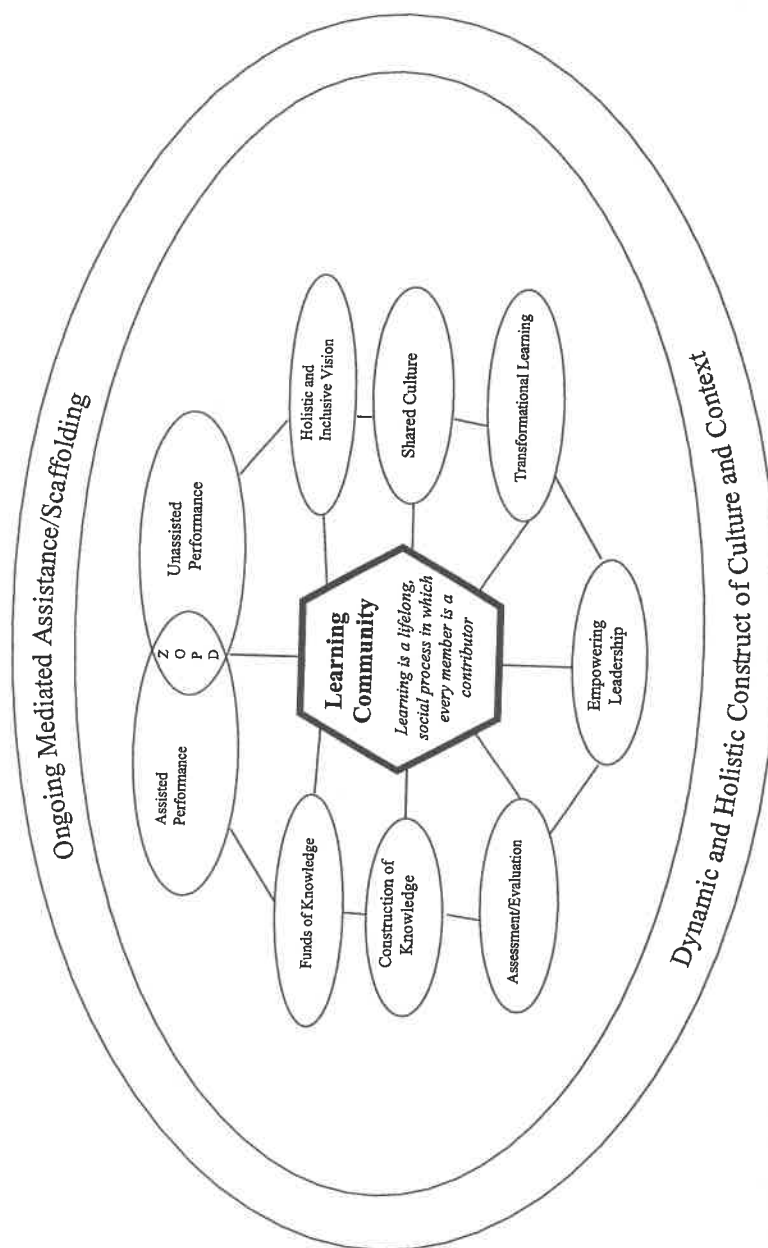
Tenets of Sociocultural Theory	Sociocultural Theory and Systemic Reform	Sociocultural Theory and the Role of the Empowering Leadership
anthropological basis of culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ the change process is dynamic, on-going, and systemic ◆ the change process is embedded in the local context and culture ◆ stakeholder input informs the process of building community ◆ sharing of values, rituals, symbols 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ collects and analyzes a variety of data to gain and share understanding of the learning community ◆ uses qualitative methods to gain the insider's perspective (elicits the voice of all stakeholders) ◆ shares leadership and decision-making
mediation/assisted performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ all planning is done collaboratively ◆ curriculum and pedagogy are responsive to diversity ◆ the apprenticeship relationship (more competent other and novice) guides the reform process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ communicates effectively ◆ seeks input and collaboration with staff, parents, community, and others ◆ empowers others to be leaders ◆ provides appropriate resources
motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ common purpose and vision engaged <i>all</i> stakeholders ◆ motivation is intrinsic to systemic reform when it is meaningful, authentic, and relevant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ emphasizes achievement for <i>all</i> students ◆ is animated by a vision that is inclusive, reflects the local context and culture, and is shared ◆ recognizes, understands, and acts on the belief that motivation is inherent in the human condition
learning communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ systemic, sustained reform is social and communal in nature ◆ reform applies to all stakeholders ◆ everyone is a change agent ◆ each component of the system reforms, supports, and empowers the others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ challenges and removes boundaries that prohibit the social and communal nature of the teaching/learning process ◆ transforms structures to be inclusive of all stakeholders

(Table 1 continued on next page)

Table 1
 (Continued from Previous Page)

Tenets of Sociocultural Theory	Sociocultural Theory and Systemic Reform	Sociocultural Theory and the Role of the Empowering Leadership
constructivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ change is a social process ◆ change process evolves and grows based on dialogue, inquiry, sharing of knowledge, and relationships between and among stakeholders ◆ incorporates pedagogic diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ promotes professional growth as mutuality ◆ is dialogic and collaborative decision-making ◆ facilitates a collaborative and collegial climate
authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ high expectations are relevant and based on real needs ◆ curriculum reflects and responds to real life issues, concerns, and experiences ◆ assessment is performance-based and needs-based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ practices value-added leadership resulting in higher levels of commitment and performance ◆ employs action research to effect real change
teaching and learning as a process	the change process: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ is transformative and additive ◆ is responsive to the needs of society ◆ is responsive to technological growth ◆ implements cooperative learning strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ establishes context for teachers and students to work together for continuous improvement ◆ is committed to the belief that change is a process and not an event ◆ continues to learn from others
funds of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ recognition and respect of all people ◆ reform process utilizes the individual and collective strengths of individuals and groups ◆ power for change is in networking, collaboration, and in critical friend relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ uses site-based decision making ◆ capitalizes and builds on the strengths of individuals and groups ◆ values and encourages networks of exchange between and among stakeholders

Figure 1
Sociocultural Factors Affecting School Reform



reform is to view it through the lens of sociocultural theory. Only in this blending of theory and practice, which recognizes the tremendous resource of funds of knowledge and the need for creating a dynamic and holistic construct of culture and context supported by ongoing mediated assistance, can reform thrive. The entire system must grow as a learning community in order to nurture and support all the students and other stakeholders.

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