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Achieving School Failure 1972–1997

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I spent much of 1972 working on what was right about minority students in my class “choosing” to fail in school. The work was based on two years of teaching grade school in New York City and two years as a graduate student reading about children, learning, and social structure. By now, twenty-five years later, the question has been redefined, and new concepts and methods have been applied to analyses and applications. Has there been progress? Yes and no: No, for the country continues to bifurcate into the few who have and the many who have not, and the problem of recorded school failure gets worse; but yes, because we have better concepts to work with, and, if we are diligent and tough, they might prove helpful.

George Spindler kindly included a version of the work in the first edition of *Education and Cultural Process* (1974). Now, for that book's grandchild, he has offered a more terrifying opportunity, namely, to use that paper, *Achieving School Failure* (McDermott 1974), as a benchmark for identifying any subsequent progress in addressing and confronting school failure. In another twenty-five years, I expect him to offer me still another chance to expose the role of school failure in the mystification of social structure in the United States. Barring major social change in the direction of democracy and equality, I suspect I will have to try again.

By current standards, *Achieving* had a great title, a flawed analysis, and a weak conclusion. If we hold onto the title and reframe the analysis, the conclusion takes on a new strength that says more about the world than did the first effort. The new framing also shows how the ethnography of schooling has moved forward in developing concepts that better capture and confront our present circumstances. There have been some surprises over the past twenty-five years, and it is pleasure to identify some of them.

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The Title

The title (and the portions of text consistent with it) have real merit. School failure is an achievement of a kind. School success is also an achievement, of a related kind, and they must be understood in terms of each other. School failure is not a simple absence of school success but an actively constructed option for all children, an option taken by about half of them before the end of high school. Together, success and failure are the two perfectly normal ways to go through school. To understand the relationship between success and failure, we must learn to appreciate the sensible efforts of all the participants, of those who achieve success *and* those who achieve failure, of those who orchestrate the designation and interpretation of school failure *and* those who are orchestrated by it.

To consider failure an achievement is more than semantically playful. It harbors three serious claims:

1. School failure takes work on the parts of everyone in the system.
2. School failure makes sense to most participants at most levels of the system.
3. In ways depending on one's place in the system, school failure is in various ways adaptive.

Each claim deserves a turn.

Work: Who is involved in the production of school failure? A better question would be: Who is not? Every Monday morning through to every year's graduations, it is part of most every U.S. citizen's work to help make school failure a cultural fact that is attended to, worried about, avoided, tested, resisted, paid for, remediated, explained, and condemned. The list of participants, the full *dramatis personae*, is exhaustive, a roster that covers most everyone in the culture:

- the children, of course, although they would seem to be least responsible, even if they are the most highlighted;
- their teachers, only a little more responsible and a little less highlighted, and their administrators—perhaps above all;
- the parents with strong investments in having their children do better than others;
- the testing agencies that document who is doing better than whom;
- the researchers who study school failure;
- the receiving institutions (colleges, entry-level jobs) that keep the sorting system so commonly sensible;
- and finally all those juggling their degrees to negotiating job markets and the inequalities of the wider system.

After all these school-failure workers are seen in place, we can analyze the success and failure of individuals as mere nodes in a wider network of activities that remake the social order of yesterday into the social order of tomorrow, a network of activities that moves yesterday's social structure into today's drama and back again into tomorrow's social structure.

Making sense: The near ceaseless renewal of what for the most part has been *always already there* not only takes work, but it makes sense at most levels of the system. In fact, school success makes so much sense that it can be carried out by almost all the persons caught inside the assumptions of the system. Right after *Achieving* was published, I was asked to speak to school principals about how cultural differences between teachers and children might cause misunderstandings and result in misbehavior on the part of the children. During the presentation before mine, the principals, lined up in rows and being spoken to as students, were chewing, rolling, and spitting wads of paper at each other. More than miscommunication was at play; something more systematic was occurring. The instructions to act inappropriately were in the air: Treat them like kids, and even principals can act up.

A focus on individual motives does not reveal the configurations of which we are all a part. The message to act up does not come from kids alone. It is a symptom of the system, and even the bad performances of principals can be understood as having made sense. After worrying all week about the absurdities of spitball management, it was *their* turn to have someone worry about *their* attention deficits. Making sense as a principal requires many people in the system to lend a hand. Everyone in a school must help construct the environments that allow principals to do a proper job, to interpret and constrain their behavior as principal appropriate. On Monday morning, schools supply strong instructions that principals not get caught playing with spitballs, just as the Saturday morning workshop with lecturing researchers can fill the air with instructions to act like children.

Adaptive failure: In addition to implying that school failure takes work and makes sense, the *Achieving* title suggests that failure is, at various levels of the system, adaptive—so adaptive that sensible people can be found working hard on its daily reproduction. I thought it was my job twenty-five years ago to show failure as a sensible adaptation for children in school. As a teacher, I had watched many teachers, me included, standing in front of children asking them what they were going to do when they grow up and imploring them to understand the importance of education in carving out a good life. There was no shortage of “get-your-education” speeches, and I watched many kids reject such talk. As children, they believed in the words, of course. They could repeat them and did so to those younger than them, but they did not

live the words. I had watched many kids reject future talk in favor of the far stronger contingencies of the present. I had adored the children in my classes and thought they were enormously bright, even if they were doing terribly at school. Two years in the library had given me the tools to make a case. Sociolinguists and cross-cultural psychologists had taken aim at the myth of the culturally deprived child, and I had only to add a dash of ethnomethodology, ethnoscience, and kinesics to claim that there was complexity and wisdom everywhere available in the lives of the children, at least to observers who knew how to look. Not only were the kids smart, said I, but the perfect measure of their smartness was how much they had embraced school failure: they figured out the odds against their doing well in school, went the opposite direction, and worked at actively achieving school failure.

Certainly there was a price to pay for taking such a route. Teenage toughs may be successful at rejecting school and giving teachers a hard time, but they pay in the long run. Still we can appreciate their effort and the ingenuity they bring to it. There is reason to appreciate how, in their terms, they were doing the best that could be done for their personal identities as kids in a system that was stacked against them. In terms of peer-group prestige, there was no doubt that doing well at school was not going to pay off as well as confronting the system.

In the spring of 1969, while teaching my first sixth-grade class, I heard Labov (1972) present linguistic data from Harlem street gangs. He convinced me, and I remain convinced, that the same children who could be made to look stupid at school and utterly without self-esteem at the counselor's office could defend themselves in ritual insult games in ways as clever and self-possessed as any children ever on record; more importantly, we could see the same competencies at hand if we looked inside their families, where they carried responsibilities that would dwarf those of a middle-class child (Burton, et. al., 1995; Stack 1974). How could we have not seen their strengths? How could we not be aware of the limitations of our own vision as part of the problem, part of the environment to which they had to adapt?

Same Title with a New Cultural Emphasis

There is a theoretical and political edge that separates the above paragraphs from my past effort. The older paper was designed to show how the *children* failing in school were being fully adaptive to local circumstances. The above paragraphs suggest instead how much *everyone* in the system is involved in making sense in ways that produce failure. If the first effort relied on a motivational analysis of the individual, albeit in a social context, the present phrasing emphasizes the world in which individuals are interpreted by others using the concepts available in the wider culture. Not only are children being fully adaptive

in taking up the invitation to fail, so is the rest of the system in organizing the means to make failure possible, apparent, certifiable, and explainable.

This is a significant difference. By offering a more inclusive tally of how many people are involved and in what ways, we invite a more cultural account of school failure. In a cultural account, we seek not so much to explain the behavior of individuals as we seek to describe the interpretations to which individual behavior is made subject. For school failure, we seek not so much an account of why this child and not that child fails in school, but an account of how failure is an interpretation to which so much U.S. behavior is assigned. My question in the early effort was: "How could smart kids get fooled into thinking that school failure is going to help them?" My question now is: "How could 240 million people in the United States get fooled into thinking that producing so much failure is going to help them?"

As anyone who has ever filled out a school report card knows, the U.S. school asks how much better one child is doing than another. Culturally and institutionally it is the only question, and it spurs a fierce competition that leaves us with a school system that hands out credentials that mirror the sorting of the political economy: a few experts with access to the rewards of the system and a growing majority who eventually, thoroughly, and for all to see, fail. As a people, what are we thinking when we celebrate success? Do we know we systematically degrade the less successful as failures? A few points on this test or that—as if education were the Olympic Games—are enough to separate a child, regardless of potential, from success. In such a system, it is those who interpret test results so harshly—test-makers, school administrators, competitive parents, college admission officers—who achieve school failure for the rest.

The analytic transition from children and their characteristics to culturally designated characteristics and their children, a *major theme* in all social thought, has developed slowly in the anthropology of education. George Spindler told me then and tells me no less often now that the successful but tortured student, Beth Anne (see chapter 12), and the successful but lethal teacher, Roger Harker (Spindler 1974, 1982), did not simply emerge through their own peculiar adaptations to socialization in the United States in the 1950s. Rather, they emerged with the help of others; they were continually maintained in their successes and failures by all around them. Forty years after Spindler (1959) and Jules Henry (1963, 1973) started exposing school success and failure as a cultural sham, the transition from studying the characteristics of children to studying of the characteristics of culture continues to develop slowly even in the anthropology of education.

Symptoms of the slow transition from a focus on characters and their characteristics to a focus on cultures and their heuristics still dominate the anthropology of education. The original *Achieving* paper is an example. Although the title announces a cultural perspective, the analysis maintains the perspective on only an every-other-line basis. Yes, the paper argues that failure is not just an individual trait and that it takes a world—more than a village—to construct failure as something to be achieved by a kid. Still, *Achieving* harbors assumptions that stiffen the analysis and resist a more fully cultural analysis.

The Analysis

A number of claims made in the original *Achieving* paper need reframing. Essentially, the argument was that:

1. Children raised in different cultural, ethnic, racial, and class groups develop different procedures and expectations for communicating with others.
2. In cross-group school settings, these differences in turn produce miscommunication, which, if not repaired, causes enough discomfort and misunderstanding to make minority children inattentive to learning and the rewards of schooling (there is even the suggestion that the patterns of inattention become physiologically based to such an extent that minority children can appear neurologically disabled).
3. This negative spiral develops to the point that minority children embrace school failure as a way to celebrate themselves.

Each step of the argument is based on a problematic assumption that interferes with the paper delivering on its promise of a cultural analysis. They are:

- Named ethnic/racial groups are easy-to-use units of analysis that successfully gloss the behavior of their members;
- The motivated, thinking individual is the only unit of analysis for the study of learning; and
- Individual failure and success can be documented and explained without an account of the work people do to make failure a category applicable to children who in other circumstances would be kids growing up the way kids have regularly grown up.

Each assumption still has a life in the anthropology of education and must be challenged forcefully if we are to make progress. I knew vaguely about the problems twenty-five years ago, and I tried to say then what I can say a little better now. A group of friends and coworkers has

pushed me along, but my stumbling efforts can be used still as a mirror of mistakes.

Achieving ethnicity: The defining characteristic of any group is its borders. In any kin group, ethnic group, or corporation, it is crucial for people inside a group to know not only who is inside, but who is specifically outside, immediately on the other side of the border. Although this has been the main principle of structural anthropology since early Levi-Strauss (1969) and a main tenet of the work I was reading on ethnic groups while writing *Achieving* (Barth 1969; Moerman 1974; Suttles 1974), it is a difficult notion to use carefully and consistently. In the United States, we are invited to ask about the content of cultural (and subcultural) ways of being alive rather than to focus on the surrounding groups that help keep each group seemingly locked inside itself. As U.S. citizens, we are invited to ask what Jews, African Americans, Vietnamese, and Hispanic Americans look like and how they behave. Sometimes we are invited to know how their behavior explains their position inside U.S. social structure, and stereotypes are available to guide our explanations. Only rarely are we invited to understand the conditions for a group being recognized, stereotyped, analyzed, diagnosed, and condemned. Only rarely are we invited to examine the role of mainstream bias in the organization of borders, stereotypes, and the social structural outcomes that maintain the borders.

In *Achieving*, the temporal and emergent dimensions of ethnicity, although stated, were muted by the assumption that once socialized into a group, people were stuck in the habits of that group. This violated not only the theory of how ethnic groups shaped each other at the borders, it violated my own experience. In New York, I grew up in an Irish house in a "changing"—that is to say, increasingly African American—neighborhood and went to a mostly Italian high school before attending a mostly Jewish college (where I spent most of my time studying Chinese). *Ad seriatim*, I have been a honky, mick, goy, *yanggweizeren* (the last is a foreign devil), and the list can now be expanded considerably. For each group I had a different body, a different walk, talk, and agenda. At my best, I was a tribute to the changes people could make in the face of difference, but I was no doubt also a tribute to how much a member of one group, be it specifically Irish or generically white (or my favorite, a New Yorker), could help to redefine once again, and never for the last time, the borders of the other groups. I must now take my identity from being "a not yet dead white male" and, my least favorite, a "Euroamerican." I would not have created these identifications for myself, but few have ever been allowed to weave a recognizable identity from patterns not prescribed by others. Neither "not yet dead white male" nor "Euroamerican" are designations of glory, I understand, but they at least have the power of pointing to my half of the equation that

delivers the traditional divisions of U.S. social structure. I may not like them, they may not speak for all of what I am trying to accomplish in life, but they carry well some of the responsibility I owe our shared situation.

In 1973, when I returned to an elementary school to study children learning how to read, I realized immediately that ethnic differences must be studied at the sites of ethnic conflict and in terms of the conditions that turned mere ethnic differences into ethnic borders. I also read a sterling paper that summer by Fred Erickson (1973; see also Erickson and Shultz 1982; Erickson 1997), in which he described people from different groups who put aside their differences to achieve "pan ethnic" amalgams that seemed to be better predicted by local allegiances across class and race lines than by the troubles of talking across the different communicative patterns developed inside ethnic groups. Thus, Polish and Irish students, on the one hand, and African American and Hispanic students, on the other hand, found it easier to communicate with each other than across those combinations.

Once I had videotapes from classrooms, it was immediately apparent that the children were more complex than a simple designation of their ethnicity could begin to cover. The borders separating African American children from white or Hispanic children were both porous and invisible, and my search for the characteristics of children from different groups was transformed into a more interesting effort to document *when* race or ethnicity occurs, under what conditions, by virtue of what work performed by participants, and to what effect¹ (McDermott and Gospodinoff 1979).

In *Achieving*, I had argued that "because behavioral competence is differently defined by different social groups, many children and teachers fail in their attempts to establish rational, trusting and rewarding relationships across ethnic, racial or class boundaries in the classroom" (1974:118). The problem is not that this statement is sometimes untrue; the problem is that it is mostly uninteresting even when it is true. No sooner did I set out to make the case for miscommunication than the very groups I had predecided as my units of analysis disappeared *analytically*. I was still a member of the culture. I could always go into a classroom and separate white kids from black kids, and both of them from Hispanic kids, and any trip through the wider community would certainly show the salience of ethnic and racial borders in the organization of neighborhoods and access to material goods. But that only means that racism was at work, my own included. An analyst can join the rest of the United States with a high interrater reliability in separating African American and white children, but this does not give analytic permission for a claim that any behavior by any African American child is an instance of what African American children do.

In an ethnographic analysis, the identification of a behavior as African American requires that people identify it as such (the analysis of "things" that people, the anthropologist's natives, do not identify, but which are nonetheless crucial in their lives, takes greater attention to detail and more elaborate interpretative schemes). By this criterion, I saw little behavior in classrooms that was anything other than classroom behavior. Ethnic and racial behavior was rarely identified by the participants, and, when it was, because it occurred in interaction, I was forced to ask not how it was an instance of what is essential to one group or another, but how it came about *in situ*, across persons, at exactly that time, and to what end.

The great bulk of work in the anthropology of education continues to identify the characteristics of children from different groups as if such identifications constitute findings. We should stop this practice. Any proposed consistency between a group identity and particular ways of behaving should be the topic of our work and not a resource for analyzing some other problem (Garfinkel 1967). To any statement like:

Asian American children prefer . . .

Children from Hispanic families think . . .

You have to handle African American children by . . . ,

we must raise a suspicion. Stereotypes created by social scientists are still stereotypes, and they are not useful as explanations of the problems people face. Should we really call this stereotyping ethnography? In its stead, we should confront how ethnography can contribute to the ugly politics of creating hostile borders among peoples who could just as easily be understood as being the same.

At the very least, we should wonder how we get organized by those around us to clump people into received categories, to look for and find certain behaviors as markers of the so-called groups, and why it makes sense to others to deliver such descriptions (Gilmore, Smith, and Kairaiuak 1997). As a correction, we can always go to another culture or another era of our own and find different groups being called the same names or the same groups different names (for rich examples of the "genesis of kinds of people," see Frake 1980, 1997; for an update on the Japanese Burakumin, an important example in *Achieving*, see Rohlen 1978, 1983). Any proposed consistency between a group identity and particular ways of behaving should be the very point of fascination that raises questions about how we do identifications. Instead of asking why one group does better than others in school, we should ask how one group—white people, for example—forms environments that define other groups (for instance, African Americans as only, essentially, and irrevocably nothing more than African American) as the kinds of people who can be found failing in school. At the same time,

and in complimentary fashion, we must find ways to break through ethnic borders (Goldman, Chaiklin, and McDermott 1994).

Ethnicity is not an explanation of failure. Ethnicity is, like school failure itself, a product of people using U.S. culture to organize each other. It is an achievement.

Achieving learning: Essential to the arguments in *Achieving* is the assumption that the thought processes and decision making of the motivated individual child are the key to understanding school failure. The problem, I thought then, is that many minority children do not learn how to read. This lack of learning is what had to be explained. Instead of taking the mainstream stand that they did not learn to read because they were developmentally impoverished, I argued that they learned how not to read. Alienated from school as an institutional setting where they were misunderstood and put upon by the standards of the white middle class, they embraced an alternative life celebrating noncompliance. My effort was to reframe their not learning as an institutionalized, social event rather than as a one-by-one failure in psychological development. I was headed in the right direction, but I left their non-learning analytically intact. I did not challenge, and had few grounds to challenge, the common-sensibly obvious fact that many individual minority children were not learning in school. There is a reality in the test scores that arrived every June—there still is in fact—but not as stated (on the complexity of what tests do deliver, see the extraordinary work of Hill and Parry [1994]). The school system said that this individual failed and that one didn't, and I should not have believed them.²

In the mid-1970s, two events greatly complicated my understanding of learning and the difficulties of analyzing it in the real world. First, after a year of fieldwork in a school and a second year analyzing films taken from one first-grade classroom, I could not find anyone learning to read. Certainly children worked on reading tasks occasionally, and certainly some seemed to read much better than others. Mostly they talked with each other and handled classroom procedural demands (Mehan 1979). Chit chat is the site of most learning, even in classrooms, but I did not know that then.³ Learning, then and now, is hard to see; it develops over time and is embedded in myriad activities that hold a child long enough for something to change enough that the next day's activities look different.

There is a reason why psychologists moved the study of learning into the laboratory: learning is difficult to see. But there is a price to leaving it in the laboratory; clean, experimental results have little to do with the messy lives of people in the world. Ethnography, even the kind that focuses on the organization of individual behavior one film frame (24/second) at a time, does not make learning easily available analyti-

cally. Maybe we are all looking for the wrong thing. Maybe—and this is an important shift—learning is less about the individual than it is about the world that others hold together, the world in which individuals learn again and again about the usefulness of the knowledge that they once gained elsewhere (see Rohlen 1992 for the Japanese case). Take away the world, and most of our learning becomes hard to maintain—mere useless memories. Keep the world in the analysis, and the unit of learning becomes many people over time, arranging circumstances for things to be done and for individuals to take their place in relation to these doings. With such a focus, there is no one who is not learning, only people with a well organized and systematic relation to the doings of the wider culture. With such a focus, those made to appear as if they are not learning are *not* not learning, but learning in relation to ongoing arrangements that keep them locked in yesterday's social hierarchies. With such a focus, it is clear that the doings of the wider culture are not seriously arranged to offer equal opportunity for all, but to keep everyone learning how to remain in the same place one generation after another.

The second event that changed my understanding of learning occurred in my next fieldwork, again in a school, but this time as part of a team of psychologists interested in understanding children in their sociohistorical context. We set out directly to find various kinds of thinking—attending, remembering, problem solving—in their natural state in classrooms, the very place where learning is supposed to happen. After a month of fieldwork, we had nothing in our notes, and we instead organized our own environments—cooking clubs, for example—where we hoped to see children thinking their way through recipes and making their learning more analytically available to us. The great excitement of this work was the erasure of individual learning as the necessary focus of any inquiry into how learning was organized (Cole, Hood, and McDermott 1978; McDermott and Hood 1982; for current efforts, see Cole 1996; Hutchins 1995; Lave 1988; Lave and Wenger 1991; Newman, Griffin, and Cole 1989; McDermott 1993; Suchman 1987).

In the clubs, the children and their adults did things together. Analysts could call subsets of their behavior attending, remembering, and problem solving, but it was not easy to know which individual was working on what version of what problem. Contributions came from all sides as the participants performed tasks and then defined, recorded, worried about, and remediated their performances. Life in the world, unlike life as it is assumed to be when whittled down in laboratory settings, does not often require individual learners each poised to make the right move as much as it requires participants creating and solving problems that address the contexts that brought them together and that

constrain the conditions for their entrance back into subsequent social events.

For decades before us, philosophers and psychologists tried to enlarge our conception of the many points of contact necessary over time between a person and the world if any sustained learning is to occur. In essays written in the 1930s, Kurt Lewin (1951) asked us to think in terms of "fields" and "topologies," and Lev Vygotsky (1987) pointed to the necessity of postulating a "zone of proximal development" that guides a child's reflexive alignment with the social world. And in the first decade of the century, albeit in a quite different idiom and as part of quite different political circumstances, John Dewey (1899) and George Herbert Mead (1964) were urging us to understand the communicational and communal contexts for all learning. Yes, it is true that learning can be broken down into many little pieces and children can be measured absorbing them at varying speeds. But it is a foolish culture that allows such measures to become the measure of the person. Learning is not ultimately a piecemeal enterprise, but a cumulative process that requires continuities in the organization of persons, continuities that allow participants to make use of their learning in various settings over time. Instead of asking what individuals learn, we should be asking what learning is made possible and necessary by social arrangements. Instead of asking about how individuals acquire a culture, we should be asking about how a culture acquires its individuals.

This shift in perspective is more than rhetoric, for it allows a new approach to school failure. Instead of asking why half the individuals in a culture do less well than the others, we can ask why a culture would acquire so many individuals in failing positions. Instead of asking why so many individuals do not learn what they need to get around in the culture, we can ask why a culture would organize opportunities for individuals to learn to behave in ways that would make them look like failures.

By now I have been to hundreds of schools in United States, and there is something amazingly consistent about them. In varying proportions relative to the socioeconomic status of the people they serve, they all have some who succeed and some who fail; and those who fail look amazingly the same across the system. Albeit with variations across race, class, and regional lines, they have the same culturally well-defined problems across the system. They curse the same adults, listen to the same genres of music, complain about the same injustices, express the same dreams of how to beat the system, and get crushed by the same lack of a future. This is learned behavior. This is a cultural pattern. This is an achievement. Instead of focusing on what individuals do not learn, if we focus on what is collectively learned by various groups, and how what each group learns is related to what the other

groups learn, we might begin to understand failure as a systematic product of the collective background we build for it. We might begin to grasp what it means to achieve school failure.

Achieving failure: Ten years after writing *Achieving*, I realized I had been the butt of a joke. I had started an analysis of school failure with a focus on the individual, and I was proud of myself for moving to an account of why whole groups had consistently failed. Self-congratulations were not warranted. There is little progress in moving from individuals to collections of individuals for an explanation of a behavior pattern if in fact the behavior to be explained is not what it appears. I had never questioned the reality of a failure. I really believed that the African American children in my classes were not only failing to learn school skills, they were failing to learn life. They were already and would continue to be failures. It was my job to explain their failure with rigor and respect. I would explain it to those who created the system, the powers that be, and they would fix the problem. The joke was on me. The failure was not what I had thought it was. I never found the powers that be; or worse—they were me. For accepting minority school failure as an established fact, I was the powers that be.

Fortunately, the grounds gave way. Unfortunately, they gave way slowly. First I learned that African Americans, or any other group on the U.S. scene, must be understood in terms of all other groups, all mutually defined and caught up in a battle for access and resources. Then I lost the traditional theory of learning and had to start grappling with an alternative that stressed everyone's learning as part a distributed system for politics and economics as much as education. The final challenge comes with the realization that there is no such thing as school failure with everyone in the culture organizing such a thing. The very thing I was trying to explain, school failure itself, was a fabrication, a mockup—a massively consequential one, of course—but a sham nonetheless. Harumi Befu arranged for me to spend 1980 in Japan, where it is hard to find school failure of the type we organize.⁴ At Teachers College, I started working with Hervé Varenne for whom all things American, like all things cultural, stand in a complex, constitutive, and often contradictory relation to the pressing realities of daily life. Baseball and apple pie, racism and democracy, education and failure, they are arbitrary conventions—attractive enough to keep everyone in the game and relentlessly consequential to anyone on the same field of play—but conventions nonetheless and distorting mystifications to any who take them as realities in their own terms (Varenne 1977, 1983, 1992; Varenne and McDermott, in press).

Fifty years ago, it was not possible to be learning disabled, although now it defines the school experience for one of every seven children in the United States; Japan and Denmark, on the other hand, have

highly successful school systems with no learning disabilities. Similarly, whole countries get by without too much attention to school failure. In January 1942, there was no school failure problem in the United States (Berg 1969). Some people knew more than others, and some had gone to school more than others, but everyone was needed. The game had changed. Failure was not an option. Everyone had to learn new machinery. Everyone, including women and African Americans, had to up the ante on learning what had been systematically unavailable to them only months before. Everyone was mobilized. Doing a job had become more important than doing it better than others.

My father turned 80 in 1984. "I learned something about myself this week," he told me at the party we gave him. "I am a dropout." He had quit high school sixty-five years before to go to work, and he labored all his life as a handyman. He was not a dropout in 1919. He was a worker, eventually a husband, a father, a grandfather, and for his last twenty years a retired worker. These were all labels he liked. "Work will save us," he always said, often to no one in particular. By the late 1970s, the United States was going through a "dropout crisis." Anyone who did not finish high school for any reason but early death—so says the governmental agency that counts such things—was called a dropout. By the numbers, the United States had too many dropouts, and they were going to cost the country money. Those problem kids had become something to worry about, count, build policy for, and remediate. So it came to be that my father had been reclassified. What had once been a normal and responsible act had become exactly the wrong thing to do. "So Dad," I asked, "how long have you been a problem child?" Never one to answer a question directly, he should have replied with one of the double-edged, mostly true half-jokes with which he kept us organized—something like, "I was so busy taking care of you guys, I never had any time to have any problems of my own." I had missed his mood. He was more serious and said, as he had rarely said before, "Maybe I would do it different if I had to do it all over again." He read six New York papers (all but the *Times*) every day, voted in every election, and hardly missed an opportunity to work hard for sixty-four years, but, on his eightieth birthday, none of that counted. He had been reading about the dropout problem in the newspaper, and, for a moment, he knew himself only and perhaps totally as a dropout.

Whole societies have done without a dropout problem (Spindler and Spindler 1989), and whole societies can go without fabricating a constant concern for failure. In chapter 8 in this book, Varenne and his colleagues document life in a highly successful middle school where everyone has to worry daily about new competitions, new occasions for sorting out—as if once and for all—those who will succeed and those who will fail. Imagine that for twelve-year-olds. Imagine that for six-year-

olds. Imagine a country where the latest middle-class fad is to send children to school as late as possible in order to increase their competitive powers. Instead of having their children in the younger half of their first grade class, U.S. parents are increasingly "red-shirting" their children for another year of growth and development relative to their peers. Education in the United States is all strategies. School failure is not a matter of disruptions in growth and development but a matter of strategic planning, some of which can be taught with good effect (Mehan, et. al., 1996). Without everyone in the system being so anxious to show everyone else's failure, without everyone in the system creating the competitive situations around which everyone else must strategize, we would not have a school failure problem in the United States.

There is a reason why it takes so long to move from mainstream to alternative theories of school failure. Common sense is easy to use but hard to escape. *Achieving* was written after four years of my trying to escape commonly sensible ideas about the factual reality of group membership, individual learning, and school failure. It took a full decade before these categories could be reframed and momentarily liberated from helping to create the very realities they would feign only to describe. It is difficult to confront and reframe key categories for problems that had seemed only in need of description and tinkering, for all the categories reinforce each other. I knew early in life that theories of racial inferiority did not describe the world and that their statement made things worse. But as long as I thought individual African American children were really not learning and were really failing in school (as different from merely participating in larger social patterns organized precisely to give different people differential access to the appearance of knowledge and other resources that make their success or failure documentable), then I was immersed in a system that was racist—unconsciously so, but racist nonetheless.

Stages in the Explanation of School Failure, 1960-1997

In this section I offer three theories of school failure that have emerged over the past thirty-seven years. The first, Deprivation theory, developed with the work of Martin Deutsch in 1960 (see his essays collected in 1967). The original *Achieving* paper can be read as an unsuccessful attempt to get beyond Deprivation. By 1980, after fifteen years of critique by linguists and anthropologists, Deprivationist thinking had become so unfashionable that I thought we were rid of it forever. By the late 1980s, it was back stronger than ever. Even anthropologists have been contributing to it. The second theory, Difference theory, was the immediate context for writing *Achieving*, although I was trying to develop, again unsuccessfully, an answer to the more political question

of how various groups could have made each other so different. The third theory is a more Political account built around ideas of reproduction (Bowles and Gintis 1975; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) and resistance (Willis 1977; Apple 1982; Giroux 1983; Gilmore 1984; Scott 1984; see Wexler 1982, for the best single essay in the field). Theoretically obtuse, ethnographically impoverished, practically inarticulate, and institutionally undeveloped, the Political account still represents a major advance in our understanding of schooling. It is necessarily and likely forever under construction. Nothing less than equal education for all would complete its course.

The point is that one cannot move simply from one theory to another without reformulating ideas on a wide range of issues. For each of the three theories, I have listed nine interlocking areas of concern, namely: the diagnosis of the problem, the population under scrutiny, the disciplines used in a description of the problem, the theory of learning that supports both the definition of the problem and the proposed solution, the theory of culture that circumscribes the stated problem, the epistemology that guides an analysis, the implications for policy, the visions of success, and the drawbacks of doing the work. *To move from one theory to the next, it is necessary to change one's mind about all nine* (and the list could be expanded considerably). No wonder there is so much confusion in the field. No wonder most writers slide conceptually between positions.

A full elaboration of the theories would take a volume. The abbreviated treatment I offer here is meant to be a clarifying grid against which papers dealing with school failure can be read. In *Achieving*, I tried to write a Political account in the idiom of a Difference account, and I slid conceptually in and out of a Deprivation account. Most papers in the field fit such a description. As a field, we are angry about how schools work; look for easy and make-nice solutions, such as urging everyone to respect cultural differences; and, to the extent that we work with mainstream categories and audiences, fall once again into wondering what is wrong with minority populations. This is a bad mix and requires constant vigilance against taking our assumptions as realities. After presenting the charts, I use them as a grid for locating the assumption sliding that guided *Achieving*.

Three Theories of School Failure⁵

I. The deprivation stand that will not go away, 1960-

Diagnosis: Children not learning in school have been broken by impoverished experiences; in addition to suffering a restricted environment, they are now restricted kids.

Target Population: Minorities (who need to be explained)

Disciplinary Resources: Cognitive and educational psychology, with an explicit reliance on a theory of individual differences defined against a background of supposedly stable, well defined standardized tasks

Theory of Learning: Knowledge enters heads and makes kids ready for adaptive behavior, just in case they are ever engaged in the real world.

Theory of Culture: A collection of traits and skills developed and nurtured by the members of a society. Some individuals may own more culture than others. Those without a full share can be said to be deprived, disadvantaged, or even deviant.

Method: The categories necessary to an adequate description of social realities are available for the asking; the commonsense categories we use to organize each other can be trusted to make our activities clear.

Policy Implications: Intervene, the earlier the better.

Rewards: Much government research and remediation money

Drawbacks: Unfair to the children labeled and disabled. Descriptively inadequate and ecologically (institutionally and historically) invalid. Remediation does not work well.

II. The difference stand that begs the most important questions, 1970-

Diagnosis: Children not learning in school are not broken, although they can appear that way because of constant miscommunication organized by cultural and linguistic differences.

Target Population: Minorities (who still need to be explained, although now against the background of dominant group powers)

Disciplinary Resources: Cross-cultural psychology, sociolinguistics and social interaction analysis. Each has been good at showing how inarticulateness is rarely a linguistic problem, how stupidity is rarely a psychological problem, and how misbehavior is rarely a moral order problem. Each one has helped to socialize competence.

Theory of Learning: Knowledge enters heads and organizes a specific set of skills that can be used in situationally specific ways.

Theory of Culture: A collection of traits and skills developed and nurtured by the members of a society or its subgroups. Although all members can be understood as fully acculturated to some part of the culture, different subgroups might differ-

entially prepare their members for participation in the dominant cultural strand.

Method: The world is hard to see, and the discovery of appropriate categories for description and analysis requires long-term observation.

Policy Implications: Make better use of the know-how available in local communities and take the pressures off the children and the school system to be so homogeneous.

Rewards: The celebration of cultural differences, moderate research money

Drawbacks: Dominant groups do not give up their powers easily. Minorities resent being explained by outsiders. Results are minor.

III. The political stand that is gradually emerging, 1975-

Diagnosis: Children not learning in school are not so much broken or different as they are made to appear that way. Competition is endemic to our society, and the search for inherent intelligence organizes the school day and its children around the issue of successful and unsuccessful competence displays. School failure is a cultural fabrication and is constantly looked for, noticed, hidden, studied and remediated.

Target Population: Labelers and labeled alike—all of us

Disciplinary Resources: Ethnography and critical theory. Movements to a psychology of situated learning, a linguistics of contextual interpretations, and a sociology of events and sequences in which persons become moments and social realities are collusional.

Theory of Learning: Learning is not an individual possession, but a change in the relations between persons and their situation in a way that allows for the accomplishment of new activities. The focus of school management and research must be on the conditions of the system that make learning possible, and not on specific learners.

Theory of Culture: A collection of practices for idealizing certain traits and skills as goals of individual development and status and for recognizing and making institutionally consequential any occasion in which such traits and skills might be missing.

Method: The categories necessary for an adequate description of the organization of social life are fundamentally well hidden. The only way to learn about the world is to try to change it.

Policy Implications: Stop explaining school failure and confront the social conditions that organize apparent learning differences.

Rewards: Moral indignation and, with great effort, a sense of direction

Drawbacks: People will resist you with all their strength.

These descriptions circumscribe the clarity and confusions in *Achieving*:

- The *diagnosis* seems confused. Mostly, I tried to understand the children as Politically set up and abused by the system; in other passages, I describe the children as only Different; and in still other passages, particularly where I "wetwire" the differences into a biological account of their attention patterns, I wander into a Deprivationist perspective.⁶
- For a *target group*, I used the Difference stand: both we and they were necessary to an analysis. When I looked at how different groups define their differences, I engaged the more interesting Political perspective.
- For *disciplinary resources*, I relied heavily on cognitive versions of all the social sciences. Sometimes, this had me in the Deprivationist camp, where tasks are tasks, skills are skills, and task-skill combinations are a good way to describe individual capabilities. More often I was trying to get beyond this to an account of how all the individuals described were smart in their Different contexts, but I had little idea of how to do this.
- For a *theory of learning*, I was limited to an understanding of culture as an environment and the individual as a recipient who could absorb more or less of what they were offered. With such a theory of learning, it is hard to imagine a theory of schooling that would not be Deprivationist.
- For a *theory of culture*, I relied on two mistakes that support both the Difference and Deprivationist stands: on the one hand, culture was the surround for individual behavior; on the other hand, culture, once internalized, was a personal characteristic of the individual. A more Political formulation would deliver an account of the many people involved in putting together settings where specific behavioral patterns can be recognized, interpreted, reused, repressed, confronted, and transformed (for a theory of culture complete with a theory of agency, see Varenne and McDermott 1997). In the years between *Achieving* and the Political stand, I mostly avoided the use of the term culture.

- Almost invariably, the biggest barrier to a progressive theory of anything social is *methodology*. *Achieving* offers no relief from this generalization, for it offers no systematic means for developing categories to make the world visible in new ways. Without a sustained method for making the world strange to the observer—or better, without a sustained method for showing the world as stacked against those without access to power—little progress can be made in the analysis of outcomes as highly predictable and institutionally overdetermined as minority school failure. In the years following, for methodological intrigue, I tried exhaustively detailed analyses of behavior (a year of analysis for a minute of behavior), living in other cultures, and trying to change the one in which I live. They all help. There are no guarantees.
- For policy *implications*, *rewards*, and *drawbacks*, *Achieving* is completely in the Difference camp.

A New Conclusion: Beyond the Explanation of School Failure⁷

There is a preoccupation among "us." Because "we" claim to offer good education to many minority people who seem to reject it, we are plagued with the question of "What's it with 'them' anyway?" or "What's 'their' situation that school goes so badly?" *Their* situation! Should we really try to explain "their" situation as if it were separate from "our" situation? Do we have warrant to talk about "their situation" and "our situation?"

There are more productive questions, for example: How do we in the United States keep making minority groups so visible? Why is it part of the situation of every minority group that it has had to be explained? If minority persons from the bottom of the socioeconomic scale are daily led to discomfort, why do they have to put up as well with people explaining their situation? Perhaps there is something better to do with social science. We must be wary of powers of articulation and explanation that can keep us so systematically dumb about our own behavior and its consequences.

Breakthrough comes when we realize that "their" situation is "ours" as well. Those who are successful in school make possible—and are made possible by—those who fail. This being so, what would an ethnography of minority school failure be, but an account of everyone? Would it have to account for anything more than the self-congratulatory explanations of the successful and the role of other people's apparent failures in the maintenance of the successful and their explanations?

And what would a policy for educational change look like, other than a call for a realignment of all groups in relation to each other and to the marketplace?

The fatal flaw in U.S. schooling will not be found in supposed reasons for individual persons or groups failing. Failure is waiting every morning in every classroom in the United States. Before children or their teachers arrive, failure is there. Somebody is going to fail. It is a cultural rule. As citizens, as teachers, even as reformers, we have been fooled into thinking it is a law of nature, that there is only so much success and so much failure to go around. If we take seriously that failure is an institutional fabrication, a mockup for scapegoating, a mystification, a culturally mandated foolishness that keeps us in our respective places, what would an explanation of failure be? And why would we bother to explain failure when we could be confronting it? By making believe failure is something kids do, as different from something done to them, and then by explaining their failure in terms of other things they do, we likely contribute to the maintenance of school failure.

The fact that school failure is an institutionalized event means that it will be staged, and then noticed, documented, and worried about, without regard for the more obvious intentions, desires, and actions of any participants. What would have to happen for us to stage a schooling event that ruled out failure *a priori*? There are such schools in the United States, but they are often small, experimental, and in desperate need of an alternative credentialing system. As a culturally well-defined part of the U.S. school scene, failure does not need explanation, it needs confrontation. Analytically, it is available only as a background expectation until we do battle with it; explaining it will only keep it at a distance, making us its slaves.

The ethnographer's work is better focused on how we in the United States have become so preoccupied with failure and its ascription to particular (kinds of) children. Grade-school failure in the United States is a fragile flower, no less fragile than school success, and both are perfectly normal ways of growing up. School success and failure rely on little more than an institutionalized willingness to allow small and generally uninteresting differences in test-defined learning to become unduly factual. It is in this sense that every failure belongs to us all. Until we focus on how we all achieve school failure, the ethnography of school failure will remain a failure in its own right.

Doing ethnography inside one's own culture commits a person to the study of phenomena that, upon analysis, seem to disappear. In *Achieving*, I tried to explain that a phenomenon is not what it appeared to be. The sentiments that brought me to that problem remain, but the problem has changed. In the ethnography of schooling, we must resist accepting our culture's own definition of its problem. To do this, we

must work against our culture in order to study it, and every study must be directed by a vision of change and renewal. Ethnography is radical activity and, as such, difficult to achieve—but it beats achieving school failure.

Notes

¹The transformation in social theory from a dependence on "who did what" questions to an inquiry into "when and how" has been most relentlessly called for in ethnomethodology. Harold Garfinkel's first publication (1946), a little known and surprisingly well written short story analyzing a single event, recorded a racial confrontation between a bus driver and an African American couple having to ride in the back of a bus. Only a few years later, he was distinguishing Talcott Parsons and Alfred Schutz in terms of their ability to account for the temporal organization of single events lived out by real people (Garfinkel 1953). A similar emphasis was developed in cognitive anthropology of the type offered by Charles Frake (1980; see also his recent papers on when is time and space? (1994, 1996a,b)). Others have followed their lead to address the issues of this paper, for example: when is an ethnic group? (Moerman 1968); when is a context? (Erickson and Shultz, 1977; McDermott, Gospodinoff and Aron 1978); when is a disability? (McDermott 1993; McDermott and Varenne 1995; Mehan 1993; Mehan, et. al. 1986).

²The assumptions from which I was trying to escape are still embraced at the heart of most educational anthropology. John Ogbu (1990), for example, consciously assumes what I then unconsciously assumed and now find embarrassing. He starts out with my old question and, like me twenty-five years ago, he tries to answer it: "Why do some minority groups continue to experience difficulty in acquiring literacy?" And what is literacy, but the "ability to read, write, and compute in the form taught and expected in formal education?" In other words, literacy is "synonymous with academic performance" (1990:520). This is accepting too much from mainstream categories. Literacy is much more than "academic performance," and, if he took into account the many kinds of literacy people use when not in schools—and sometimes precisely *because* they have been rejected from schools—he would have no "difficulty in acquiring literacy" phenomenon to explain (for one among thousands of examples, see Gundaker 1997). The relentlessness with which people in a culture create standardized formulations of problems that others can then explain in ways that can make things worse must be understood and confronted (Smith 1986, 1993).

³For an early paper on the learning accomplished in between formally organized classroom events, see Griffin (1977); for a current account showing high school students learning physics while in the course of doing social life with each other, see Goldman (1996).

⁴All rumors that I called George Spindler in the middle of the night from Japan to tell him that I had discovered culture might just as well be true.

⁵The charts are updated and expanded from McDermott and Goldman (1983).

⁶The biology seems to me now as foolish as everyone advised me twenty-five years ago. There was a good instinct behind it. In answer to the question, "what is organized in a social organization?", one good answer is "behavior." In the early 1970s, this was not a dominant position, but I was using it as a nascent claim for a theory of agency. There were people alive in every social organization, and I wanted to know what a minute of it looked like; I wanted to know how people behaved the

social order. For that purpose, I was reading biology, neuropsychology in particular, and, for any theory of how the social world worked, I wanted to know if a body, any body, could act in a way consistent with its claims. Most social science continues to theorize about people without bodies. Staying close to biology now looks like a weak idea, but staying close to the body as a testing ground for social theory still seems essential.

⁷Much of this final section is heavily adapted from McDermott (1987).

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