Cultural values in the home and school experiences of low-income African-American students

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Abstract. The present study examined the presence of specific cultural values within the preferred classroom and home activities of African-American upper elementary students. Written scenarios were constructed and used to determine whether students preferred their home and classroom activities carried out under specific cultural terms. Students also reported their perceptions of teachers and parents' cultural value-based preferences for classroom and home activities. With analysis of variance techniques, it was shown that students and their parents have significantly stronger preferences for communal and vervistic activities at home and at school than for individualistic and competitive activities. Perceived teacher classroom preferences, however, were significantly higher for individualistic and competitive activities. Such findings underscore the presence of cultural mismatch in the classroom experiences of African-Americans and illustrate a need to enhance school-based efforts to appreciate and utilize cultural value variation.

Key words: culture; African-American students; cultural discontinuity.

1. Introduction

The poor academic performance of many ethnic minority students – as compared to their majority students – continues to capture the attention of education researchers and practitioners (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Tucker et al., 2002). In particular, many have reacted to the prevailing achievement disparities between ethnic minority students and their mainstream counterparts by examining the link between several parental, teacher and school/community-based factors and academic performance (Ceballo, McLoyd, & Toyokawa, 2004; Garcia-Coll et al., 1996). Adding to this list of factors, some researchers have begun to more closely investigate the role of culture in the development of cognitive skills and its

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relation to academic performance (Gay, 2000; Rogoff, 2003). A common theme emerging from these works is that cognitive skills materialize in multiple contexts where specific and preferred cultural values are also observed (Betancourt & Lopez, 1992; Boykin & Ellison, 1995; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Gordon & Armour-Thomas, 1991; Greeno, 1997; Luria, 1976; Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995; Vygotsky, 1962). Such values are also believed to be fostered in the behaviors and activities of various ethnic minority groups (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003).

In particular, the behaviors of many low-income African-American students are believed to contain a set of cultural values and traditions consistent with a West African cultural worldview (Boykin, 1986). Certain cultural practices consistent with these themes have been shown to facilitate academic outcomes when incorporated into school-based learning contexts. Despite their potential to enhance the schooling experiences of many African-American students, these culturally thematic practices are not widely evident in the public schools serving this population. One reason for this is that these alternative ethno-cultural practices are believed to be inconsistent with the mainstream cultural values present in public school classrooms and therefore, are rightfully underutilized. Culminating from this is the belief that the public schooling experiences of many ethnic minority students maintain a rigid focus on socializing students towards mainstream cultural values while simultaneously disparaging those culture-based values and behaviors students prefer and employ outside of school (Gay, 2000). This purported cultural discontinuity is believed to be linked to the academic difficulties many African-American students face throughout their academic lives (Wong & Rowley, 2001).

Despite wide acceptance of such claims in the educational literature, little in the way of data exists to support them. Therefore, in this study, we are concerned with whether African-American elementary school students' reported preferences for and perceptions of learning in school and at home vary systematically by virtue of specific cultural themes. We are also interested in these students' perceptions of their classroom teachers' culturally based preferences for student classroom learning. What the former will discern is whether this population actually expresses alternative ethno-cultural practices and behavioral preferences linked to their socialization experiences outside of the school contexts. That is, we will uncover which culture-based values and corresponding behaviors are actually present and preferred in low-income African-American households. With the second research focus mentioned, we will determine which culture-specific values and behavioral orientations are sanctioned in these students' formal learning experiences (i.e., throughout classroom instruction). Examining the culture-based behaviors extant in both home and school environments from the perspective of low-income African-American students' will provide more insight into culture's role in their academic lives.

1.1. CULTURE, SCHOOLING AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN

Culture encompasses the values, traditions and beliefs that mediate a given social group's behavior (Parsons, 2003). While a focus on culture in human development can be traced back well over a century (Tylor, 1871), the focus on culture in the development of cognitive skills for African-American children began over 40 years ago with the emergence of the cultural deficit hypothesis (Weisner, Gallimore, & Jordan, 1988). During that time, African-American children's academic difficulties were linked to what were perceived as inadequate out-of-school socialization experiences. Such experiences were believed to promote activities and behaviors linked to poor intellectual functioning (Ausubel, 1966; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Glazer & Moynihan, 1963; Herrnstein, 1971; Hunt, 1968; Katz, 1985; McClelland, 1961; Moynihan, 1965; Passow, 1963; Rollins, McCandless, Thompson, & Brassell, 1971; Silverstein & Krate, 1975).

To counter such beliefs, some researchers began to observe, record and critically examine low-income African-American students' out-of-school socialization experiences for evidence of cognitive skill development (Clark, 1983; Gay, 1975; Hill, 1972). Several emerging theoretical frameworks guided such efforts. An overarching premise throughout these theoretical frameworks was that substantive understandings of the realities faced by African-Americans could be better established by holding an integral rather than deficit view of African-American socialization experiences. From these gathered observations emerged the finding that African-American students' out-of-school experiences not only contained evidence of appropriate cognitive skill development, but were also linked to the worldviews and specific cultural values governing social interactions, behavioral preferences and daily activities of many African-Americans (Akbar, 1979; Boykin, 1983; Franklin & Fulani, 1979; Gay, 1975; Hill, 1972; Levine, 1977; Morgan, 1980; W. Simmons, 1979, unpublished).

Many of these same researchers became increasingly more critical of the public school enterprise in the U.S., namely because of the perceived simultaneous promotion of mainstream cultural values in procedures, structures and activities which, oftentimes, trumped any recognition of the cultural assets brought to the classroom by many ethnic minority students, particularly African-Americans. Early work by Geneva Gay (1975), Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Judith Katz (1985), Frederick Erickson (1982, 1984, with G. Mohatt, 1987), Norris Brock Johnson (1976, 1982) and others (Delpit, 1988) corroborated the claim of mainstream cultural hegemony throughout qualitative and conceptual means. Yet, little in the way of quantitative data exist to more fully discern the presence of specific cultural values throughout the formal learning experiences of ethnic minority students, particularly African-Americans.

This study seeks to fill this void. Specifically, we are interested in whether African-American students from low-income backgrounds hold preferences for culture-based learning practices during class time. We are interested in whether such preferences may be fostered in students' out-of-school socialization experiences, namely by their parents' socialization activities. Finally, we are also interested in whether students believe that their classroom teachers accommodate their culture-based learning preferences. Specifically, by determining students' perceptions of their own, their parents and their teachers' preferences for culture-based classroom learning behaviors, a preliminary, albeit data-driven, picture of the perceived cultural discontinuity between student preferences and teacher practices will be captured. Based on previous research (Tyler, Boykin, Boelter, & Dillihunt, 2005), we believe that students will indicate that they and their parents will have greater preferences for the identified alternative ethno-cultural value-laden behaviors than for the mainstream cultural value-laden behaviors. We also hypothesize that students will perceive their teachers as preferring mainstream value-based classroom practices more than alternative ethno-cultural practices. Finally, we believe students will report getting in more trouble for employing alternative ethno-cultural practices in class than for mainstream cultural-value practices. Conversely, students will report less trouble for employing such behaviors at home.

2. Methodology

2.1. SAMPLE

This study employed 81 fourth grade (46 female, 35 male) African-American elementary school students from two schools located in the Midwestern region of the United States. Each of the schools was located in predominantly African-American and lower-income neighborhoods. Two fourth grade classes were selected from the fourth grade roster by the assistant principal at each school. All of the students present in each class participated in the study. None of the participating students were tracked in an advanced academic curriculum nor participated in special education programs. Ninety-five percent of the students were from low-income backgrounds as determined by their participation in the school system's free and reduced lunch programs.

2.2. INSTRUMENT

2.2.1. *Cultural Activities Instrument*
The Cultural Activities Instrument was designed to determine students' preferences for and practices of mainstream and alternative ethno-cultural learning and working behaviors at school and at home. The instrument

was also created to determine students' perceptions of their teachers' and parents' preferences for mainstream and alternative ethno-cultural learning and working behaviors. In addition, the instrument determined the extent to which students are punished for employing mainstream and alternative ethno-cultural practices during school learning and at-home activities. The scenarios used in the instrument are neutral with regard to physical location, thereby allowing reference to either a classroom or at-home context. The wording of the scenarios was also adjusted to make it more appropriate for the developmental level of the student participants. There were separate versions of the instrument for boys and girls. In each, gender-specific, culturally neutral names are used.

The Cultural Activities Instrument consists of four culturally thematic scenarios, each followed by a set of 12 questions. Each scenario consisted of approximately 12 statements illustrating either a hypothetical male or female child character engaged in activities reflecting one of four cultural themes. The two mainstream cultural themes included in this investigation are competition and individualism. Individualism refers to a person's predisposition towards autonomy and the importance of solo accomplishments (Boykin, 1983; Gaines et al., 1997). Competition refers to a person's striving toward surpassing the performance of others in order to be seen as the best in the given achievement domain (Deutsch, 1963). These values are considered greatly present in instructional practices, learning activities and curriculum materials used in public school classrooms serving predominantly minority populations (Apple, 1990; Hilliard, 2001; Hollins, 1996; Johnson, 1982; Pai & Adler, 1997; Parsons, 2003; Rogoff, 2003; Spring, 1994).

Research by Boykin and colleagues has identified two cultural themes as salient in the out-of-school contexts of many African-American students and therefore, influential in the development of cognitive skills (Boykin, 1986). Communalism is referred to as a fundamental interdependence of people, wherein there is a focus on sharing and performing tasks for the good of the group (Boykin, 1983). Verve is considered an especial receptiveness to and orientation towards high levels of sensate and physical stimuli. Other studies have used similar constructs to capture the heightened activity levels present in the homes of minority youth (Wortham & Contreras, 2000).

To construct the scenarios, the authors carefully explored the literature for definitions and conceptualizations of the cultural themes. Several characterizations from the psychological literature were retrieved and used to operationalize the cultural theme constructs (Akbar, 1979; Boykin, 1983; Boykin, Jagers, Ellison, & Albury, 1997; Hofstede, 1980; Howard & Scott, 1981; Mbiti, 1970; Sampson, 1977; Spence, 1985; Tuck & Boykin, 1989). Once dimensions and definitions of the cultural themes were gathered from the literature, the author with several graduate students, post-doctoral

research associates and professors with extensive knowledge in the culture and socialization patterns of African-Americans constructed the scenarios.

Over a series of meetings, the research team for this investigation paired the cultural theme descriptions with school-related academic and home-related non-academic behaviors found in the literature on academic achievement and parent socialization (Arnett, 1995; Maccoby, 1992). Once behaviors in the scenarios were deemed consistent with the cultural themes, the scenarios were given to a panel of five judges who had experience and formal knowledge in the study of culture, as it pertains to African-Americans. The judges reached consensus (5 of 5) that the content of the scenarios represented the cultural themes in question and therefore, content validity was established. Flesch–Kincaid readability indices for the scenarios ranged from 3.1 to 4.2, indicating that participants with third and fourth grade reading levels should not have trouble reading the instrument. Each scenario was presented so that one was completed (i.e., read completely and each following question responded to) before the students proceeded to the next one. Scenario presentation was predetermined by a counterbalancing sequence which minimized potential order effects.

The 12 questions immediately following each scenario were used to determine students' judgments of the cultural thematic behaviors present. The questions were arranged randomly on the instrument in accordance with a random numbers table. Responses to the questions on the instrument were in yes/no format. A response of "yes" was coded as a "1" while a response of "no" was coded as a "0". Questions on the instrument were categorized into three areas of inquiry: student preference, student perception of parent and teacher preference and student report of trouble and punishment. Four of the questions determined students' preferences for the culturally themed behaviors presented in each scenario. Two of these asked whether students prefer employing the culturally themed behaviors at school while the other two asked whether students prefer employing the culturally themed behaviors at home.

Another set of four questions assessed students' perception of their teachers' and parents' preferences for the culturally themed behaviors. Specifically, two questions ascertained students' perceptions of culturally themed behaviors their teachers would prefer for them to use in the classroom. The remaining two questions ascertained the students' perceptions of culturally themed behaviors their parents' would prefer for them to use at home. A final set of four questions was used to determine which culturally thematic behaviors students thought would get them in trouble when employed at home and at school. Two questions queried which culturally themed behaviors get them into trouble with their teachers at school, particularly during class time. The other two questions queried which culturally informed behaviors get them into punishment or trouble with their parents at home.

There were six subscales (2 questions per subscale) on the Cultural Activities Instrument. They included student preference at school (SPS), student preference at home (SPH), student perception of teacher preference (SPTP), student perception of parent preference (SPPP), student report of trouble and punishment at school (SRTPS) and student report of trouble and punishment at home (SRTPH). For data analytic purposes, the scores for each subscale were added together to give a possible score range from 0 to 2. Internal consistency coefficients for the sample are reported in Tables I–VI in the Results section.

Table I. Means, correlation and internal consistency of Student Preference at School (SPS) variable

Cult. theme	Mean	Std. dev.	1	2	3	4	alpha
Indiv. (1)	.54	.40	1.00				.77
Comp. (2)	.54	.40	.48**	1.00			.77
Verve (3)	1.78	.29	.13	.20	1.00		.77
Comm. (4)	1.88	.21	.03	.12	.47**	1.00	.79

Midpoint = 1; $N = 81$; **Significant at the .01 level.

Table II. Means, correlation and internal consistency of student preference at home (SPH) variable

Cult. theme	Mean	Std. dev.	1	2	3	4	alpha
Indiv. (1)	.66	.33	1.00				.69
Comp. (2)	.60	.30	.36**	1.00			.81
Verve (3)	1.72	.86	−.02	.19	1.00		.71
Comm. (4)	1.88	.94	−.02	.07	.48**	1.00	.73

Midpoint = 1; $N = 81$; **Significant at the .01 level.

Table III. Means, correlation and internal consistency of student perceived parent preference (SPPP) variable

Cult. theme	Mean	Std. dev.	1	2	3	4	Alpha
Indiv. (1)	1.12	.47	1.00				.89
Comp. (2)	.52	.39	.26*	1.00			.71
Verve (3)	1.38	.43	.16	.07	1.00		.83
Comm. (4)	1.74	.24	−.10	−.04	.39**	1.00	.74

Midpoint = 1; $N = 81$; *Significant at the .05 level; **Significant at the .01 level.

Table IV. Means, correlation and internal consistency student perceived teacher preference (SPTP) variable

Cult. theme	Mean	Std. dev.	1	2	3	4	alpha
Indiv. (1)	1.54	.37	1.00				.72
Comp. (2)	1.14	.57	.47**	1.00			.84
Verve (3)	.76	.44	−.26*	.07	1.00		.78
Comm. (4)	1.12	.56	−.30**	−.04	.39**	1.00	.84

Midpoint = 1; $N = 81$; *Significant at the .05 level; **Significant at the .01 level.

Table V. Means, correlation and internal consistency of student reported trouble and punishment at school (SRTPS) variable

Cult. theme	Mean	Std. dev.	1	2	3	4	Alpha
Indiv. (1)	.26	.30	1.00				.77
Comp. (2)	.50	.39	.41**	1.00			.74
Verve (3)	1.42	.42	−.05	−.10	1.00		.80
Comm. (4)	1.28	.45	−.20	−.07	.35**	1.00	.83

Midpoint = 1; $N = 81$; **Significant at the .01 level.

Table VI. Means, correlation and internal consistency of student reported trouble and punishment at home (SRTPH) variable

Cult. theme	Mean	Std. dev.	1	2	3	4	alpha
Indiv. (1)	1.38	.44	1.00				.85
Comp. (2)	1.60	.37	.18	1.00			.82
Verve (3)	.44	.37	−.39**	−.04	1.00		.75
Comm. (4)	.14	.23	−.16	−.13	.44**	1.00	.83

Midpoint = 1; $N = 81$; **Significant at the .01 level.

2.3. PROCEDURE

The research team was granted permission to conduct research at the two elementary schools in the Midwestern region of the United States. The research procedures at both schools took one week to complete. Convenience sampling was used in the study as grade level specific classrooms were designated by the assistant principal at each school for use by the researchers during the study. Teachers were not present during data collection. To gather students' reported preferences of the culturally themed learning practices, student groups ranging from 7 to 12 students were called

from their regularly scheduled classes periodically to complete the Cultural Activities Instrument. At this time, students were told of the study's general purpose prior to the administration of measures and materials. Students were also told about the confidential nature of the responses and their right not to participate in the study.

Upon seating the students in the designated research classrooms, each was given a copy of the gender-specific instrument and a pencil. The African-American male researcher went through the cover page with the students as they filled out the student demographic information. Then, the researcher and the students read through the directions that were to be followed during the process. During the entire course of the research, the African-American researcher was present to help participants with questions and also to disseminate and collect instruments and pencils. Students were asked not to talk during the study, but were encouraged to direct any questions to the researcher and/or African-American male research assistant.

After completing the cover page and directions for the study, the researcher administered the instrument. The researcher read each scenario aloud as students read the scenarios quietly. The researcher read a copy of the scenarios that employ both gender-specific names (i.e., John/Jane likes to share his/her materials with other students). After reading each scenario, students were then asked to respond to the 12 questions following each scenario. The researcher read through each question while students circled their responses to each. Students were told that they could respond to all the questions for that scenario without waiting for the researcher and other students. Students were permitted to refer back to the scenario being read as necessary while answering the questions. Students were not, however, permitted to refer back to previous scenarios or proceed to other scenarios. Once students answered all questions for a given scenario, the researcher told them it was time to move on to the next one. This process was carried out for each of the four scenarios. Upon completion, materials and instruments were collected and students were escorted back to their classes by the researcher and/or the research assistant. Sessions – from the time students were escorted to and from their regular classrooms – lasted about 35 minutes.

3. Results

3.1. DATA ANALYSIS PLAN

The independent variables for this study were student gender and cultural theme (individualism, verve, competition, and communalism). The analytic plan included six 2×4 factorial designs with repeated measures on the cultural theme independent variable. The six dependent variables were

(1) student reports of preference at school and (2) at home, (3) student reported perceptions of their parents and (4) teacher's preference, and student reported perceptions of trouble/punishment (5) at school and (6) at home. Scheffe post-hoc analyses were used to determine where significant differences lie among culture-based learning behavior preference subscales. Also, Pearson correlation coefficients were generated between each dependent variable across the learning theme scenarios.

3.1.1. *Analyses of Difference*

3.1.1.1. *Student Preference at School.*   The means and reliability and correlations between these reported preferences are presented in Table I. There was a significant main effect found for the learning orientation independent variable [$F(3, 237) = 114.34, p < .001$]. Post-hoc analyses revealed significantly higher student preferences in school for learning behaviors in the communal theme scenario than those exhibited in the individualistic and competitive behavior scenarios. Likewise, students indicated a preference in school for the vervistic behaviors over individualistic and competitive cultural behaviors. There were no significant differences between the alternative ethno-cultural behavioral preferences or between the mainstream cultural preferences. Students' reports of their preference for individualism at school were positively correlated with their preferences for competition at school ($r = .48, p < .01$). Both were endorsed below the scale midpoint of one. Similarly, a positive association between student preferences for verve and communalism emerged ($r = .47, p < .01$). Preference reports for these alternative ethno-cultural themes were above the scale midpoint.

3.1.1.2. *Students' Preference at Home.*   The means and reliability and correlations coefficients for these reported preferences are presented in Table II. There was a significant main effect found for the scenario type independent variable [$F(3, 237) = 82.37, p < .001$]. Post-hoc analyses revealed a significantly higher at-home preference for communal behaviors than for either individualistic or competitive practices. Students also indicated a preference at home for the vervistic behaviors over the individualistic and competitive behaviors. There were no significant differences between the alternative behavioral preferences or between the mainstream cultural preferences. The correlation data suggest a similar reporting pattern for students' preferences for both sets of cultural themes. Specifically, correlated competitive and individualistic home activity preferences ($r = .36, p < .01$) were both endorsed below the scale midpoint, while correlated communal and vervistic home activity preferences ($r = .48, p < .01$) were endorsed above the midpoint by the participants.

3.1.1.3. *Perceived Parent's Preference.*   The means and reliability and correlations between these reported preferences are presented in Table III.

There was a significant main effect found for the scenario type independent variable [$F(3, 237) = 44.64$, $p < .001$]. Post-hoc analyses revealed significant differences between perceived parent preferences for each cultural behavior. Parents were perceived as having the highest preferences for communal behaviors, followed by vervistic, individualistic and finally, competitive behaviors. Though perceived as preferred among parents significantly more than competition, individualism was significantly associated with the perceived parent preference for competition ($r = .26$, $p < .05$). The association between communal and vervistic perceptions of parent preference was also significant ($r = .39$, $p < .01$), as both reported preference perceptions were endorsed above the midpoint. With the exception of the reported parent perception of individualistic activity preference, the pattern for what African-American children believe their parents prefer to do appears relatively aligned with the pattern of culturally thematic behaviors they prefer at home and at school.

3.1.1.4. *Perceived Teachers' Preference.* The means and reliability and correlations between these reported preferences are presented in Table IV. There was a significant main effect found for the scenario type independent variable [$F(3, 237) = 10.30$, $p < .001$]. Post-hoc analyses revealed that teachers were perceived by students to prefer individualistic behaviors over communal and vervistic behaviors. Individualistic behaviors were viewed as preferred significantly more by teachers than competitive behaviors. Finally, competitive behaviors were perceived as preferred over vervistic behaviors, but not communal behaviors. As the African-American students reported their perceptions of their teachers' preference for classroom activity, several correlation coefficients reached statistical significance.

First, the African-American student sample reported that their teachers, contrary to their own reported preferences, would prefer for students to be relatively actively engaged in classroom behaviors and activities which reflect individualistic and competitive cultural values. These two mainstream cultural themes were positively correlated ($r = .47$, $p < .01$) and were both reported to be above the scale midpoint. Unlike their reports of their own classroom and home activity preferences, the students in the sample reported that their teacher would not highly endorse communal or vervistic practices in the classroom. These two alternative ethno-cultural themes were positively associated ($r = .39$, $p < .01$), though only perception of teacher preference for communal activity was endorse slightly above the scale midpoint.

Additional correlation data reveal another interesting finding, namely that students' perceptions of their teachers' preference for individualistic classroom activity was negatively associated with reported perception of communal and vervistic activity. Here, as students' reported perceptions of their teacher preference for individualistic activity increased, those reported

for communal ($r = -.26, p < .05$) and vervistic ($r = -.30, p < .01$) activity decreased. The students, in essence, believe that their teachers prefer for them to learn and work in class while adhering to individualistic cultural values and practices.

3.1.1.5. *Trouble/Punishment at School.*   The means and reliability and correlations between these reported preferences are presented in Table V. There was a significant main effect found for the scenario type independent variable [$F(3, 237) = 45.58, p < .001$]. Post-hoc analyses revealed that students reported they would get in significantly more trouble with their teacher for employing communal and vervistic behaviors over individualistic and competitive behaviors. The correlation data support this finding. In particular, the positive associations between reports of trouble and punishment for competition and individualism ($r = .41, p < .01$) and between reports for communalism and verve ($r = .35, p < .01$) suggest that, at school, mainstream cultural behaviors are less likely to get students in trouble than the alternative ethno-cultural practices of communalism and verve.

3.1.1.6. *Trouble/Punishment at Home.*   The means and reliability and correlations between these reported preferences are presented in Table VI. There was a significant main effect found for the scenario type independent variable [$F(3, 237) = 75.70, p < .001$]. Post-hoc analyses revealed that students reported getting in significantly more trouble at home for employing individualistic and competitive behaviors than for communal and vervistic behaviors. In addition, a negative association between reports of trouble and punishment for individualistic and vervistic activities ($r = -.39, p < .01$) emerged. That is, as reports for trouble and punishment at home increased for individualistic practices, reports for trouble and punishment at home for vervistic behaviors decreased. The positive association between reports for communal and vervistic practices ($r = .44, p < .01$) indicates that the students in the sample get in little trouble and are not typically placed on punishment for exhibiting these behaviors at home.

4. Discussion

Broadly speaking, this study sought to further our understanding of how culture mediates the learning experiences of minority students. In particular, this study analyzed students' cultural-based preferences for learning behaviors both at home and at school. Their perceptions of their parents' and teachers' preferences were also assessed. Finally, students were asked to report their perception of getting in trouble with teachers and their parents for employing specific cultural practices believed to be aligned with their out-of-school experiences and inconsistent with their teachers' perceived in-school instructional practices. It was believed that gathering student reports

of what they prefer and actually do at home and what they are able to do at school would help substantiate the salience of specific cultural themes in students' academic lives.

An examination of the findings yielded through the analysis of variance and correlation procedures revealed that students held the greatest learning and working preferences at home and at school for communal and vervistic behaviors. Students also reported that their parents would prefer communal behaviors over individualistic and competitive behaviors. Teachers, however, were viewed as having significantly higher preferences for individualistic and competitive learning behaviors in class than communally or vervistic ways. Similarly, students reported that they would get in more trouble with their teachers and less trouble with their parents for employing communal and vervistic behaviors rather than individualistic and competitive behaviors.

These descriptive data suggest that there are certain alternative ethno-cultural practices that students are socialized more towards at home and prefer throughout their home and school settings, particularly communalism and verve. The data also indicate that these students' teachers are perceived to have preferences for classroom activities and behaviors reflective of mainstream culture, namely individualistic and competitive. The reported misalignment in the culturally situated learning practices present in these students' home and school environments is indicative of cultural mismatch or discontinuity in their academic lives. Though more rigorous research efforts, such as a more fully representative sample and longitudinal data collection are needed to substantiate this claim, these data suggest that the public schooling experiences of low-income African-American students are largely permeated by individualistic and competitive classroom practices more so than those preferred and salient in their out-of-school contexts, namely communalism and verve. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies with similar student samples, along with reports from teachers and parents (Boykin, Tyler, & Miller, 2005; Boykin, Tyler, Watkins-Lewis, & Kizzie, in press; Gay, 1975, 2000; Tyler et al., 2005).

Overall, this study provides some empirical support to a host of theoretical assertions in the educational research literature. For instance, this study uncovered evidence to support the contention that students' home cultural experiences inform their preferences regarding school and home-based learning and working behaviors (Parsons, 2003; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Furthermore, the finding that parents' preferences for learning and working were closely related to their children's preferences lend support to the notion that these cultural themes – and the behaviors they inform – are situated in contexts that promote learning and socialization through observational learning, interaction and shared participation and activity (Greeno, 1997; Luria, 1976; Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995; Vygotsky, 1962).

Similarly, the salience of specific cultural themes, particularly those reflective of mainstream culture, was uncovered by way of students' percep-

tions of their teachers' instructional practices. While less preferred among students during class and home-based learning and working activities, individualism and competition-based behaviors were reported least likely to get students into trouble at school and most likely preferred by their teachers. Despite their reported preference and salience during home learning and working activities, students in the study reported that communal and vervistic-based behaviors were more likely to get in trouble while enacting these behaviors than with the more mainstream cultural behaviors. In all, these findings support the claim that such cultural values are integral to the overall life experiences of many African-Americans, particularly those behaviors which foster cognitive skill development.

5. Limitations and future research directions

In all, these findings offer a fuller appreciation of the alternative ethno-cultural themes that inform the contexts where cognitive skills emerge. While many have purported that cultural discontinuity lies at the root of the many academic challenges faced by this and other minority youth groups (Arunkumar, Midgley, & Urdan, 1997; Erickson, 1987; Ogbu, 1982; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991), few have actively sought to investigate it through quantitative means. While this was, to some degree, accomplished in the present study, several limitations warrant attention. To begin, the preference and presence of the cultural themes is gathered from only students' vantage points. While some research addressed this limitation by measuring parents' actual preferences and socialization practices of the mainstream and alternative ethno-cultural themes (Tyler et al., 2005), what is needed is a simultaneous assessment of both parents and their children's socialization practices towards mainstream and alternative ethno-cultural behaviors. The parents and children may have different opinions about the alternative ethno-cultural practices as well as about their children's usage of them at home. Similarly, to more accurately examine the presence of cultural discontinuity, future investigations of students' reports of their home experiences need to be simultaneously examined with teachers' reports of the culture-based schooling experiences fostered for their students.

Furthermore, there is a need to gather an empirical understanding of the role that cultural discontinuity has in the academic performance of minority students. To provide support for the cultural discontinuity hypothesis, researchers must investigate the link between the degree of continuity or alignment between students' home culture and their school cultural experiences and academic performance. It is possible that cultural discontinuity affects students' academic motivation and other psychological variables linked to task engagement and overall school success. This awaits further research (Tyler, Haines, & Anderman, in press). Given that low-income African-American students are not alone in facing academic

difficulties, especially those perceivably linked to cultural discontinuity, it would be equally worthwhile to explore whether cultural discontinuity accounted for such difficulties among students from different ethnic backgrounds (Deyhle, 1995; Garrett, Bellon-Harn, Torree-Rivera, Garrett, & Roberts 2003).

In terms of instrumentation, there were several positive correlations found between the student preferences at school, at home, perceived parent preference and also trouble and punishment at home. This suggests that, while these variables were considered conceptually independent, statistically, they were similar. Future research should use a composite score for the home preference dependent variables. Such has been addressed in the Tyler et al. (2005) study.

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