CHAPTER 2

RENegotiating Cultural Diversity
in American Schools

STUDENTS' MULTIPLE WORLDS:
NAVIGATING THE BORDERS OF FAMILY,
PEER, AND SCHOOL CULTURES

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First, you must understand and digest the fact that children, all children
come to school motivated to enlarge their worlds. You start with their worlds.
You do not look at them, certainly not initially, as organisms to be molded
and regulated. You look at them to determine how what they are, seek to
know, and have experienced can be used as the fuel to fire the process for
enlargement of interest, knowledge, and skills. You do not look at them in
terms of deficits: what they do not know but need to know. Far from hav-
ing deficits, they are asset rich. You enter their world in order to aid them
and you to build bridges between two worlds, not walls. (Sarason, 1990,
p. 164)

This study focuses on understanding students' multiple worlds and
the transitions between them in an effort to provide information that will
assist teachers, administrators, and others who work with students to build
bridges between their worlds and the world of school. Our purpose is
twofold: first, to describe family, school, and peer worlds, and the inter-
relationships among them, and in particular how meanings and under-
standings combine to affect students' engagement with learning; second,
to understand students' perceptions of boundaries and borders between

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Students' Multiple Worlds

worlds and the adaptation strategies they employ as they move from one
context to another. We are especially interested in features in school
environments that aid or impede students in making the transition
between their worlds and the world of school.

We use the term "world" to mean the cultural knowledge and behavior
found within the boundaries of students' particular families, peer
groups, and schools; we presume that each world contains values and
beliefs, expectations, actions, and emotional responses familiar to insid-
ers. We use the terms "social setting," "arena," and "context" to refer to
the places and events within which individuals act and interact. Students
employ cultural knowledge acquired from their family, peer, and school
worlds in social settings and contexts. Social settings and contexts may
be found within the bounds of any one world (e.g., a student having din-
nner with family members) or may include actors from various worlds (e.g.,
students interacting with friends in classrooms or friends in each others'
homes). In the latter case, people in the same social setting may or may
not share the same cultural knowledge acquired from the constellation
of their individual worlds.3

Similar to Erickson (1987), we refer to boundaries as real or perceived
lines between worlds, settings, or contexts that are neutral and where
sociocultural components are perceived to be equal by the people in each
setting. When boundaries exist, movement between worlds occurs with
relative ease—social and psychological costs are minimal. Alternatively,
boundaries are real or perceived lines that are not neutral and that separate
worlds not perceived as equal. When borders are present, movement and
adaptation are frequently difficult because the knowledge and skills in one
world are more highly valued and esteemed than those in another.
Although it is possible for students to navigate borders with apparent suc-
cess, these transitions can incur personal and psychic costs invisible to
teachers and others. Moreover, borders can become impenetrable barri-
ers when the psychosocial consequences of adaptation become too great.5

Although the concepts we use are not new, prior research generally
has focused on families, peers, and schools as distinct entities. We know
that any one can affect powerfully the direction in which adolescents will
be pulled. For example, dynamic teachers, vigorous schools, and programs
targeted to override the negative effects associated with low socioeconomic
status, limited motivation, and language and cultural barriers can produce
committed, interested, and academically engaged individuals (Abi-Nader,
1990; Edmonds, 1979; Heath, 1982; Johnson & Johnson, 1981; Joyce,
Murphy, Showers, & Murphy, 1989; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, &
Ouston, 1979; Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1988; Slavin & Madden, 1989; Vogt,
Jordan, & Tharp, 1987; Walberg, 1986). Likewise, research on peer groups

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has described the potency and force with which members pull young people toward the norms of groups (Clasen & Brown, 1985; Clement & Harding, 1978; Coleman, 1963; Eckert, 1989; Larkin, 1979; Ueda, 1987; Varenne 1982). We know too that family indices, such as socioeconomic status and parents' educational levels, are important predictors of students' engagement with educational settings (Jenks et al., 1972), as are cultural expectations and beliefs (Clark, 1983; Erickson, 1987; Fordham, 1988; Gibson, 1987; Hoffman, 1988; McDermott, 1987; Ogba, 1983, 1987; Spindler, 1987; Spindler & Spindler, 1982; Suarez-Orozco, 1985, 1987; Trueba, 1988; Trueba, Moll, Diaz, & Diaz, 1982).

In other words, we know a great deal about how aspects of families, schools and teachers, and peer groups independently affect educational outcomes. But we know little about how these worlds combine in the day-to-day lives of adolescents to affect their engagement with school and classroom contexts. Steinberg, Brown, Cider, Kaczmarek, and Lazzaro (1988) also note this neglect in educational research: "Virtually absent from the literature are studies that examine student and contextual influences in interaction with each other" (p. 43). Further, while it is in these different arenas that young people negotiate and construct their realities, for the most part, their movements and adaptations from one setting to another are taken for granted. Although such transitions frequently require students' efforts and skills, especially when contexts are governed by different values and norms, there has been relatively little study of this process.

In this study our focus is on the individual as the mediator and integrator of meaning and experience, in contrast to single context approaches that compartmentalize aspects of students' lives (studies in which peer groups, family, and school variables are studied independently of one another). Although research in these areas has provided a great deal of important information, it is the researcher who determines the focus. Our emphasis is rather on the worlds of the individual child. Studies focusing on peer groups alone may miss the significance of school and classroom features that determine the choice or effects of a peer group. Likewise, studies of teachers and pedagogy can obscure features of adolescents' lives, such as peer group interactions or cultural background factors, which combine to impact students' engagement with learning.

Educators attempting to create optimal school environments for increasingly diverse populations need to know how students negotiate borders successfully, or alternatively, how they are impeded by barriers (and borders) that prevent their connection, not only with institutional contexts, but with peers who are different from themselves. We feel that it is particularly important to direct attention to school features that enable smooth transitions, and transform borders, real or perceived, into passable boundaries.

THE STUDENTS' MULTIPLE WORLDS STUDY

During this 2-year longitudinal study, the student study team has had an opportunity to know 54 students in 4 high schools increasingly well. The large, urban, desegregated schools in our sample are paired across districts: "Maple High School" ("Montevideo District") and "Explorer High School" ("Bolivar District") have experienced fairly dramatic changes in the demography of their student populations, whereas "Canyon High School" ("Montevideo District") and "Huntington High School" ("Bolivar District") have had more stable, middle-class student populations. A majority of the students, selected to represent some of the diversity found in many of California's large urban high schools, were in their first year of high school when the study began in the fall of 1989. Students vary in a number of dimensions, including gender, ethnicity, achievement level, immigrant history, and transportation status. An equal number of academically high- and low-achieving students were selected from each school and both minority and majority students are included in the two achievement categories. Students were asked to participate by school personnel.

Four in-depth interviews with each of 54 students provide information on students' perceptions of classrooms and schools, the importance and influence of friends and peer groups, and the family conditions that are significant to their lives. In addition, informal conversations and interviews with 10 of the 54 students supplement more formal data collection methods. Observations in classrooms furnish documentation of interactions between adolescents and their teachers and peers in classroom contexts. Student record data (which include standardized test scores, grades, teacher comments, and attendance and referral records) contribute a picture of achievement patterns and teacher perceptions of individual students over time. Additionally, we obtained demographic and descriptive information about students and their families. Finally, we interviewed teachers about their perceptions of students' academic performance, classroom interactions, social and peer group behavior, and family background.

As the study began, our emphasis was on students' descriptions of school factors that affect their engagement with learning—for example, classroom organization, teacher attitudes and behaviors, pedagogy, and overall school climate. However, the use of open-ended interviews allowed students to talk about other features of their lives (i.e., peers and family)
that are relevant to their feelings about school. "I wouldn't let them put me in a higher track because I wanted to be with my friends," reported one student. "At least in my family it's sort of expected that you're going to try to get A's or something close," said another. "Being Mexican means being popular, cutting classes, acting crazy," reported yet another student.

As a result, a model evolved to describe students' multiple worlds and the relationships among them. Particularly important is our focus on the nature of boundaries and borders between worlds, as well as strategies that students employ to move between and adapt to different contexts and settings. As depicted in Figure 2.1, the meanings drawn from each of these worlds combine to influence students' actions. For example, if parents emphasize school achievement but friends devalue good grades, young people must incorporate and manage these different perspectives while deciding on their own course of action. The emergence of the Multiple Worlds model is an important development of this investigation. Unlike most other approaches, which focus attention on stable characteristics of individuals (e.g., gender and ethnicity) or concentrate on language acquisition or achievement level alone, the Multiple Worlds model

is generic. It is not ethnic, achievement, or gender specific, but transcends these categories to consider multiple worlds, boundary crossing, and adaptation for all students. The generic nature of the model is particularly useful for understanding diversity within ethnic groups. For example, we have seen that students—Latino, Asian American, African American, and European American—may perceive borders very differently and utilize various adaptation strategies as they move from one setting to another.

By focusing on transitions, we have been able to identify a number of different types of borders that students encounter. Psychosocial, sociocultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, gender, and structural borders all impede students' connection with classroom and school contexts. Borders are created in several ways and each type is characterized by distinctive properties that are important to understand as educators attempt to identify strategies that will enable students to make transitions successfully.

Borders

Psychosocial. Psychosocial borders are constructed when children experience anxiety, depression, apprehension, or fear at a level that disrupts or hinders their ability to focus on classroom tasks, or blocks their ability to establish relationships with teachers or peers in school environments. Psychosocial borders can also prevent students' connections with peers or family. It is certainly possible that psychosocial borders are secondary to or result from a child's response to sociocultural, socioeconomic, or linguistic borders. However, other events in children's lives can also create psychosocial borders, for example, stress and anxiety resulting from a physically or sexually abusive home situation; a parent's serious illness; the death of a pet; or other non-borders-related events. In some cases, psychosocial borders are temporal in nature. In other words, anxiety and stress connected with a particular event can be reduced as circumstances change.

Sociocultural. When the cultural components in one world are viewed as less important than those in another, sociocultural borders are created. A number of authors have defined and directed attention to the significance of sociocultural boundaries and borders: Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba (1991); Erickson (1987); Barth (1969); McDermott and Gospodinoff (1979); Erickson and Bekker (1986). Like Erickson (1987) and Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba (1991), we believe that cultural differences per se do not necessarily create barriers to school participation and learning. In fact, it is certainly possible to view cultural differences as assets rather than as liabilities.

Figure 2.1 The multiple worlds model.
Socioeconomic. Socioeconomic borders are generated when economic circumstances create severe limitations. For example, the economic situation of a family may require a student to work outside the home thus making school participation (academic, social, and extracurricular) difficult or impossible. Or a student, economically constrained, may be precluded from involvement with peers whose economic circumstances are greater. And finally, socioeconomic borders can result from students’ community and neighborhood conditions that contrast with their school environment—this is particularly true for students who are transported. Although sociocultural and socioeconomic borders combine frequently, this is not always the case. We feel the distinction is worthwhile when intervention strategies are considered.

Linguistic. Linguistic borders result when communication between students’ worlds (home and school, peer and home, and so on) is obstructed, not because of different languages per se, but because one group regards another group’s language as unacceptable or inferior. As Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba (1991) state:

The very act of learning English as a second language is a cultural variation, but it does not necessarily create distress for children. A conflict ensues when children, limited in English proficiency, are taught all of their academic curriculum in English in such a way that their native language and culture are invalidated. (p. 28)

In our study, language differences became borders when teachers or students saw language as a problem.

Gender. When the school as an institution or the people in it promote roles, aspirations, or estimates of worth to women that differ from those it offers to men, gender borders exist. Gender borders can be found in both the substance and the process of the educational experience—in the content of the curriculum (i.e., when the history and accomplishments of one group are fully or partially excluded from the curriculum), in pedagogical styles and methods (i.e., when teacher attention and encouragement are more frequently directed towards one group), and in attitudes and expectations (i.e., when the sensibilities, problems and assets of one group are viewed differently than those of the other). Gender borders not only undermine self-confidence and block students’ perceptions of what is possible for themselves and others, but also discourage or impede the acquisition of skills necessary to pursue specific careers.6

Structural. Structural borders occur between students’ home or peer worlds and the world of school. We define structural borders as features in school environments that prevent, impede, or discourage students from engaging fully in learning—social or academic. Three types of conditions give rise to structural borders:

1. Availability—In this case, the school environment lacks adequate resources and supports to meet students’ needs, for example, inadequate tutoring, no counselors, insufficiently equipped libraries, inadequate second language training, and so forth.

2. Bridges—Services and opportunities for students exist in the school setting but there are no bridges to connect students with available resources. In other words, students do not have information about the programs and opportunities that are available to them or, if they possess such knowledge, no one in the environment assists them in accessing resources that may be potentially beneficial.

3. Match—Structures and services are available and visible to students but either they do not match student needs or they actually impede students’ connection with school and classroom settings, for example, an anti-abortion poster hung on a counselor’s office door, tracking, severe and punitive discipline policies, and so on.

Although there is often overlap between these distinctions, we believe that the development and implementation of successful intervention strategies depends on the ability of teachers and others in school environments to recognize and identify not only where and when borders exist (e.g., between peers and schools, school and home, and so on), but also the nature of the borders that students encounter.

TYPOLOGY OF ADAPTATION

As our study has proceeded we have found a good deal of variety in students’ descriptions of their worlds and in their perceptions of boundaries and borders. At the same time, we have also uncovered distinctive patterns among students as they cross settings. We use a typology to illustrate four patterns:

Type I: Congruent Worlds/Smooth Transitions
Type II: Different Worlds/Border Crossings Managed
Type III: Different Worlds/Border Crossings Difficult
Type IV: Different Worlds/Borders Impenetrable
The patterns we describe are not necessarily stable for individual students over time, but rather can be affected by external conditions such as classroom or school climate conditions, family circumstances, or changes in peer group affiliations.⁸

Each of the four types includes the variety of combinations possible with respect to perceived boundaries and borders (e.g., between family and school, peers and family, peers/family and school, and so on) and each combination is characterized in different ways by different students. Our descriptions of students illustrate only some of the combinations possible. Both enabling and limiting patterns of behavior are contained in this typology. We will see that some of the superficially approved styles of adaptation can be as potentially restricting as those where discordant patterns seem to dominate.