

# Social Constructivism and the School Literacy Learning of Students of Diverse Backgrounds

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*This theoretical review builds on the idea that social constructivism offers implications for reshaping schooling in ways that may correct the gap between the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds and that of mainstream students. A diverse social constructivist perspective may encourage literacy educators to progress from a mainstream orientation toward a serious consideration of the significance of students' ethnicity, primary language, and social class to literacy learning. From a social constructivist perspective, 5 explanations for the literacy achievement gap appear plausible: linguistic differences, cultural differences, discrimination, inferior education, and rationales for schooling. Incorporating these 5 explanations and building on the work of Cummins (1986, 1994), a conceptual framework for addressing the literacy achievement gap is proposed. This framework suggests that the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds will be improved as educators address the goal of instruction, the role of the home language, instructional materials, classroom management and interaction with students, relationships with the community, instructional methods, and assessment.*

IN THIS ARTICLE, I ADDRESS ISSUES of the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds. I use the phrase *students of diverse backgrounds* to refer to students in the United States who are usually from low-income families; of African American, Asian American, Latina/o, or Native American ancestry; and speakers of a home language other than standard American English. Differences between the school literacy achievement of these students and those of mainstream backgrounds have long been documented. The National Assessment of Educational Progress has compared the reading and writing achievement of students of diverse backgrounds to that of students of mainstream backgrounds for a period of over 20 years, providing what appear to be the most comprehensive results on this issue. These results indicate that, although the achievement gap appears to be narrowing, African American and Latina/o students at all three age levels tested are not learning to read and write as well as their European American peers (Mullis & Jenkins, 1990).

The gap between the school literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds and those of mainstream backgrounds is a cause of growing concern, especially given demographic trends. Urban school districts in particular are faced with the task of educating an increasing number of students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds from families living in poverty (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989).

The main orientation to be explored here is that of social constructivism. From the perspective of social constructivism, it may be argued that both success and failure in literacy learning are the collaborative social accomplishments of school systems, communities, teachers, students, and families (e.g., McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1981). The thesis to be developed is that a social constructivist perspective on the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds can be strengthened by moving from a mainstream orientation to an orientation toward diversity, giving greater consideration to issues of ethnicity, primary language, and social class (see also Reyes, 1991). Although issues of gender play an important role, a discussion of these issues and feminist perspectives is beyond the scope of this article.

To develop the argument for a diverse constructivist perspective, I discuss social constructivism and its application to research on school literacy learning. Then I outline what appear to be the major explanations, consistent with a social constructivist position, for the achievement gap between students of diverse backgrounds and those of mainstream backgrounds. Finally, I propose a conceptual framework for improving the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds. In discussing this framework, I review concerns about the largely mainstream nature of the constructivist orientation as applied to issues of school literacy learning and instruction and highlight the implications of taking a diverse constructivist orientation toward these issues.

## Social Constructivism

At the heart of constructivism is a concern for lived experience, or the world as it is felt and understood by social actors (Schwandt, 1994). Constructivists reject the naïve realism of the positivists, the critical realism of the post-positivists, and the historical realism of the critical theorists, in favor of a relativism based on multiple mental constructions formulated by groups and individuals (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). There are many forms of constructivism, which appear to differ along several dimensions including the relative importance of human communities versus the individual learner in the construction of knowledge (Phillips, 1995).

Spivey (1997) presented the most detailed available treatment of constructivism and its influence on contemporary literacy research. She noted that, in constructivism, communication or discourse processes are compared to processes of building, and generative acts, such as those of interpreting or composing texts, tend to be emphasized. Themes in constructivist work include active engagement in processes of meaning-making, text comprehension as a window on these processes, and the varied nature of knowledge, especially knowledge developed as a consequence of membership in a given social group. In exploring different conceptions of constructivism, Spivey highlighted the issue of agency, and whether the focus is seen as the individual, small groups and dyads, or communities and societies.

Both sociology and psychology have undergone a transformation from views of constructivism centered on the personal, subjective nature of knowledge construction to views centered on its social, intersubjective nature (Mehan, 1981). These newer views are generally called *social constructivism*. The social is seen to encompass a wide range of phenomena, from historical, political, and cultural trends to face-to-face interactions, reflecting group processes both explicit and implicit with intended and unintended consequences. In the case of literacy research, the social can include historical changes in definitions of literacy, functions and uses of literacy within communities, and the social construction of success and failure in learning to read in school, to name a few.

Social constructivists argue that the very terms by which people perceive and describe the world, including language, are social artifacts (Schwandt, 1994). Because reality is seen to be created through processes of social exchange, historically situated, social constructivists are interested in the collective generation of meaning among people. Social constructivism includes the idea that there is no objective basis for knowledge claims, because knowledge is always a human construction. The emphasis is on the process of knowledge construction by the social group and the intersubjectivity established through the interactions of the group.

Vygotsky (1987) is the theorist who appears to have had the greatest influence on literacy researchers working from a social constructivist perspective.

Social, cultural, and historical factors all play a part in Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development. Vygotsky saw the focus of psychology as the study of consciousness or mind, and he wanted to discover how higher or "artificial" mental functions developed from the "natural" psychological functions that emerged through maturation. A higher mental function, such as literacy, is an aspect of human behavior, present in some form from humanity's beginnings, that has changed over time as a result of cumulative historical experience (Cole & Griffin, 1983). Vygotsky's view of consciousness included two subcomponents, intellect and affect, which he regarded as inseparable (Wertsch, 1985). Social constructivist research on literacy includes attention to the motivational and emotional dimensions of literacy, as well as the cognitive and strategic ones.

Vygotsky's approach to learning was holistic, and he advocated the study of higher mental functions with all their complexity (Moll, 1990). He argued for research on units with all the basic characteristics of the whole and rejected methods based on the analysis of separate elements. Similarly, research on school literacy learning conducted from a social constructivist perspective assumes that students need to engage in authentic literacy activities, not activities contrived for practice.

Vygotsky believed that the internalization of higher mental functions involved the transfer from the interpsychological to the intrapsychological, that is, from socially supported to individually controlled performance. Perhaps the best known of Vygotsky's formulations is the *zone of proximal development*, by which he sought to explain the social origin of higher mental functions. He defined the zone as the "difference between the child's actual level of development and the level of performance that he achieves in collaboration with the adult" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 209). Social constructivist research on literacy learning focuses on the role of teachers, peers, and family members in mediating learning, on the dynamics of classroom instruction, and on the organization of systems within which children learn or fail to learn (Moll, 1990).

*Everyday* and *scientific concepts* are differentiated in Vygotsky's (1987) theory. The child gains everyday (or spontaneous) concepts through daily life, whereas she learns scientific concepts through formal instruction and schooling. In Vygotsky's view, the two kinds of concepts are joined in the process of development, each contributing to the growth of the other. Research conducted from a social constructivist perspective addresses the manner in which school literacy learning activities can be restructured to allow students to acquire academic knowledge (scientific concepts) by building on the foundation of personal experience (everyday concepts). Or conversely, this research looks at how students may gain insights into their own lives through the application of academic knowledge.

Vygotsky argued that higher mental processes are always mediated by signs and tools or instruments. Wertsch (1990) pointed out that signs and tools, in Vygotsky's view, do not simply facilitate activity but shape and define it in fundamental ways. Obviously, language and writing systems are foremost among

the cultural tools developed by and available to people in different societies. The forms of language and literacy within each culture have developed over time to carry the concepts that reflect the experience of that cultural group. Thus, the historical condition is joined to the cultural condition, and links among historical, cultural, and individual conditions are formed when children are learning to use language and literacy. In the next section, I draw on a social constructivist perspective and the ideas of Vygotsky in providing an overview of explanations for the literacy achievement gap.

### Explanations for the Achievement Gap

From a social constructivist perspective, research should account for the literacy achievement gap in terms of the societal conditions that led to its creation and sustain it over time through students' daily interactions and experiences in school. As shown in Figure 1, five major explanations appear plausible from a social constructivist perspective. I arrived at this scheme of explanatory categories through a process that involved, first, identifying what appeared to be the major lines of educational research, consistent with a social constructivist viewpoint, that attempt to account for the achievement gap. Second, I drew on the explanatory categories proposed by other researchers (e.g., Jacob & Jordan, 1993; Strickland & Ascher, 1992).

The first explanatory category is that of *linguistic differences* and stems from the fact that many students of diverse backgrounds speak a home language other than standard American English (e.g., the home language of many Latina/o students is Spanish). Current theory and research in bilingual education, consistent with a social constructivist perspective, suggests that students' poor academic achievement generally is not due to their limited English proficiency. Rather, it is due to the exclusion or limited use of instruction in the home

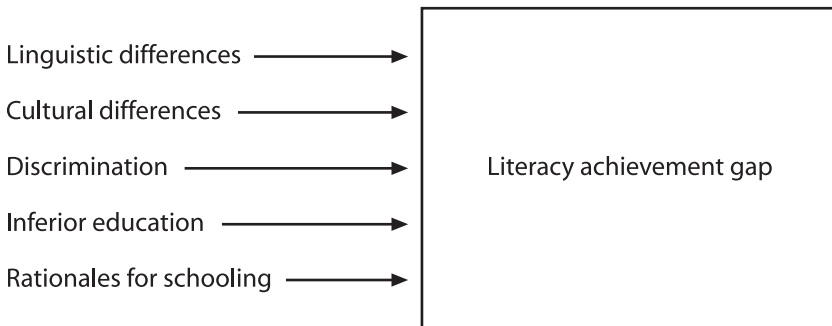


FIGURE 1. Explanations for the Literacy Achievement Gap

language in many school programs (Snow, 1990) or to the low status accorded the home language. Unlike mainstream students, students of diverse backgrounds are not encouraged to use their existing language skills as the basis for developing literacy in school, because these skills often are ignored or denigrated (Moll & Diaz, 1985). For example, Spanish-speaking students may be prevented from expressing in Spanish their thoughts about a story with an English text. Thus, linguistic differences are related to decreased opportunity to use existing language skills as the foundation for learning to read and write.

A second explanatory category is that of *cultural differences*. Proponents of this position attribute the lack of school success experienced by many students of diverse backgrounds to their preference for forms of interaction, language, and thought that conflict with the mainstream behaviors generally needed for success in school (Au & Mason, 1981; Philips, 1972). These preferences are not in-born but the result of socialization practices in the home and community, which in turn reflect cultural values. Because the school is a mainstream institution, instruction is carried out in ways following mainstream standards for behavior and reflecting mainstream cultural values. Students have difficulty learning in school because instruction does not follow their community's cultural values and standards for behavior. For example, Au and Mason (1981) found that Native Hawaiian students performed poorly in reading lessons, showing a considerable degree of inattentiveness, when teachers conducted these lessons following the rules for conventional classroom recitation. These students paid more attention to reading, discussed more text ideas, and made more logical inferences about the text when their reading lessons were conducted in a culturally responsive manner. In the culturally responsive lessons, the teacher allowed the students to follow rules for participation much like those in talk story, a common speech event in the Hawaiian community. In talk story-like reading lessons, unlike classroom recitation, the students could collaborate in producing responses and there was a high degree of overlapping speech.

A third explanatory category is that of *discrimination* (also called societal racism; Strickland & Ascher, 1992). From a social constructivist perspective, it can be argued that poverty and school failure are both manifestations of historical and systemic conditions rooted in discrimination. The argument is that American society and its system of schooling are structured to prevent equality of educational opportunity and outcome. For example, disproportionate numbers of students of diverse backgrounds are labeled as poor readers and placed in the lowest reading groups in the classroom, or sent from the classroom to receive remedial reading instruction. The instruction these students receive is qualitatively different from that of students placed in higher groups and tends to further hinder their learning to read. Shannon (1989) summarized research suggesting that low-group students receive the message that reading does not have to make sense, that accurate pronunciation is more important than comprehension, and that they need not be responsible for monitoring their own reading.

The fourth explanatory category suggests that differences in academic

achievement are due to the *inferior education* received by students of diverse backgrounds (Strickland & Ascher, 1992). For example, urban schools with a high proportion of African American students frequently have deteriorating buildings, outdated textbooks, inexperienced teachers, and surroundings that expose students to violence. Material circumstances in these schools and in the conditions of students' lives and communities lead to savage inequalities in educational opportunity (Kozol, 1991). Schools with a high proportion of low-income students tend to devote less time to reading instruction and to rely on testing practices that limit students' opportunities to learn (Allington, 1991).

A fifth explanatory category highlights the importance of *rationales for schooling*. D'Amato (1987) noted that students who accept school and cooperate with teachers do so on the basis of rationales related to either the structural or situational implications of school. *Structural rationales* involve children's understanding of the significance of school performances to settings beyond the school, such as their relationship to employment and other life opportunities. Structural rationales allow students of mainstream backgrounds to justify their participation in school, because they usually have family histories illustrating a strong connection between schooling and life opportunities. However, structural rationales are usually not available to students of diverse backgrounds whose family histories do not show these same connections (Ogbu, 1981). *Situational rationales* are found in students' experiences with being in school, and whether or not that experience is rewarding and enjoyable. Situational rationales for accepting school are available to children when school structures and processes are compatible with the structures and processes of their peer groups (D'Amato, 1988). D'Amato argued that schools cannot rely on structural rationales but must make situational rationales available to students of diverse backgrounds as a way of motivating them to remain in school.

Considerable research supports all five of these explanations, a testimony to the complexity of the issues. Yet researchers have tended to focus on one explanatory category or another in their attempts to account for achievement differences. Few steps have been taken toward developing a comprehensive explanation of the achievement gap, by simultaneously considering the contributions of research associated with different explanatory categories.

### Cummins' Theoretical Framework

A conceptual framework for improving the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds should seek to bring together the various explanations described above and show their application to school literacy learning in particular. A starting point can be found in the work of Cummins (1986), who proposed a theoretical framework for empowering students of diverse backgrounds, as shown in Figure 2. His framework is consistent with a social constructivist

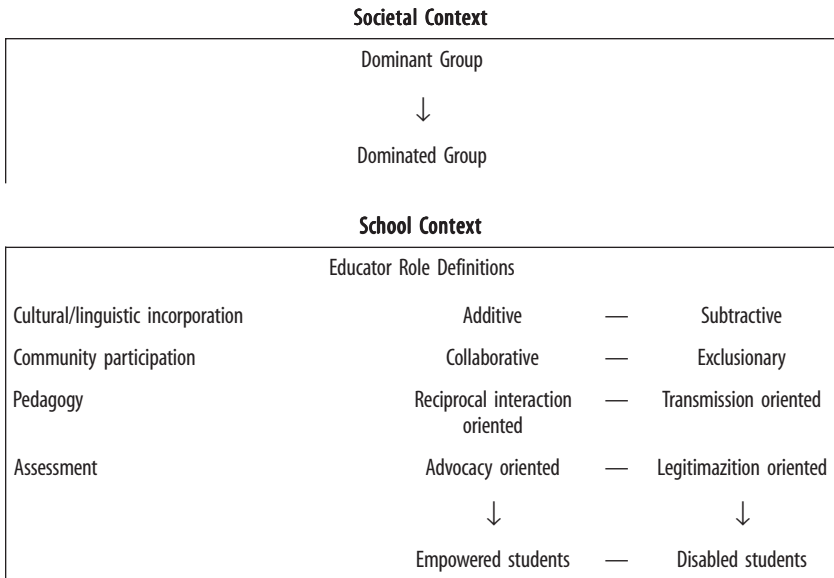


FIGURE 2. Cummins’ Theoretical Framework for the Empowerment of Minority Students. From “Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention,” by J. Cummins, 1986, *Harvard Educational Review*, 56, p. 24. Copyright 1986 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Adapted with permission.

perspective in its recognition of the links between events in the school and conditions in the larger society, the centrality of the teacher’s role in mediating learning, the inseparability of affective or motivational factors and academic achievement, and the connections between schooled knowledge and personal experience. Cummins’ framework has the virtue of incorporating all five explanations and, for this reason, provides an appropriate organizational structure for the diverse constructivist framework proposed here.

The concept of empowerment is central to Cummins’ framework. Cummins viewed empowerment as both a mediating construct and an outcome variable. Empowered students are confident in their own cultural identity, as well as knowledgeable of school structures and interactional patterns, and so can participate successfully in school learning activities. Cummins (1994) distinguished between coercive and collaborative relations of power. Coercive relations of power legitimate the subordinate status of students of diverse backgrounds on the assumption that there is a fixed amount of power, so that the sharing of power with other groups will necessarily decrease the status of the dominant group. In collaborative relations of power, no group is put above oth-

ers, and power is not fixed in quantity, because it is assumed to be generated in the interactions among groups and individuals. The nature of relations of power, whether coercive or collaborative, within the larger society leads to the development of educational structures that shape the interactions among educators and students in schools. These interactions determine whether the zone of proximal development is constituted so as to help students think for themselves or accept the existing social order. Particular formulations of the zone thus contribute to students' empowerment or disempowerment.

The interactions between students and educators are mediated by the role definitions that educators assume. In Cummins' (1986) framework, these role definitions were seen to be influenced by three social contexts: (a) power relations among groups within the society as a whole, (b) relationships between schools and diverse communities, and (c) interactions between teachers and students in the classroom. Cummins urged an examination of dominant/subordinate group issues, as discussed by critical theorists, because of apparent parallels between the way students of diverse backgrounds are disabled by schools and the way their communities are disempowered by forces in the larger society. He argued that the academic success of students of diverse backgrounds depends on the extent to which patterns of interaction in the school reverse those in the larger society.

Cummins suggested that, if students of diverse backgrounds are to be empowered in school, educators must redefine their roles and assumptions in four key structural elements. For each element, the role definitions of educators are seen to lie along a continuum, with definitions at one end tending to disable students, and definitions at the other tending to empower them. The first element has to do with the incorporation of the language and culture of students of diverse backgrounds in the school program. The second element is concerned with the extent to which the involvement of community members is an integral part of the school's program. The third element refers to pedagogy that encourages students of diverse backgrounds to use language to construct their own knowledge. The fourth element, assessment, addresses the extent to which educators tend to label or disable students of diverse backgrounds, as opposed to serving as advocates for them.

Through a consideration of larger, societal influences on school, and through these four elements, Cummins provides a comprehensive framework for empowering students of diverse backgrounds through changes in the attitudes and actions of educators. Yet this framework is not without weaknesses. From the perspective of critical theory, this framework can be faulted for focusing more on the roles of educators than on issues of power in the larger society that constrain the actions of both educators and students. Another possible criticism is that Cummins' framework does not address the material circumstances with which teachers and students must contend, as illustrated in the work of Kozol (1991).

## Proposed Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework for improving the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds is shown in Figure 3. The seven elements in the framework reflect key areas of research on school literacy learning, especially that conducted by scholars from underrepresented groups. This research and the framework are consistent with the assumptions of social constructivism outlined in the first section. The framework attempts to capture the strengths of the five explanations for the literacy achievement gap and incorporates many of the features of Cummins' framework, although it focuses on school literacy learning in particular rather than student empowerment in general. Whereas Cummins' framework has four elements, the proposed framework requires seven in order to incorporate the major areas of literacy research I identified. The seven elements are (a) the goal of instruction, (b) the role of the home language, (c) instructional materials, (d) classroom management and interaction with students, (e) relationship to the community, (f) instructional methods, and (g) assessment.

One end of the continuum represents what I call a mainstream constructivist orientation and the other, a diverse constructivist orientation. I see differences between the mainstream and diverse constructivist orientations as a matter of emphasis and degree, rather than kind. I take the position that the social constructivist orientation can serve well to address issues of the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds. However, an adequate treatment of these issues requires that discussions move beyond the boundaries usually evident in mainstream interpretations of social constructivism. In my opinion, a mainstream constructivist orientation does not take adequate account of differences in ethnicity, primary language, and social class that may affect students' school literacy learning.

A diverse constructivist orientation attempts to look at how schools devalue and could revalue the cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) of students of diverse backgrounds. For this revaluing process to take place, educators can experiment with collaborative power relations that do not privilege mainstream knowledge claims over the knowledge claims of students of diverse backgrounds. A mainstream constructivist orientation recognizes that students' knowledge claims must be considered valid within students' own cultural contexts. A diverse constructivist orientation takes this line of reasoning one step further, by inquiring into the ways that knowledge claims, of educators and their students, are related to cultural identity and shaped by ethnicity, primary language, and social class. The experiences students bring to literacy events (e.g., the forms of their narratives) may depart significantly from educators' expectations. The revaluing process includes teachers' acceptance of students as cultural beings. It also encompasses the manner in which teachers receive and extend students' literacy efforts and encourage students to interact with peers and with texts.

A mainstream constructivist orientation tends to assume that similarities among students override differences related to ethnicity, primary language, and social class. In a mainstream constructivist orientation, the tendency is to pro-

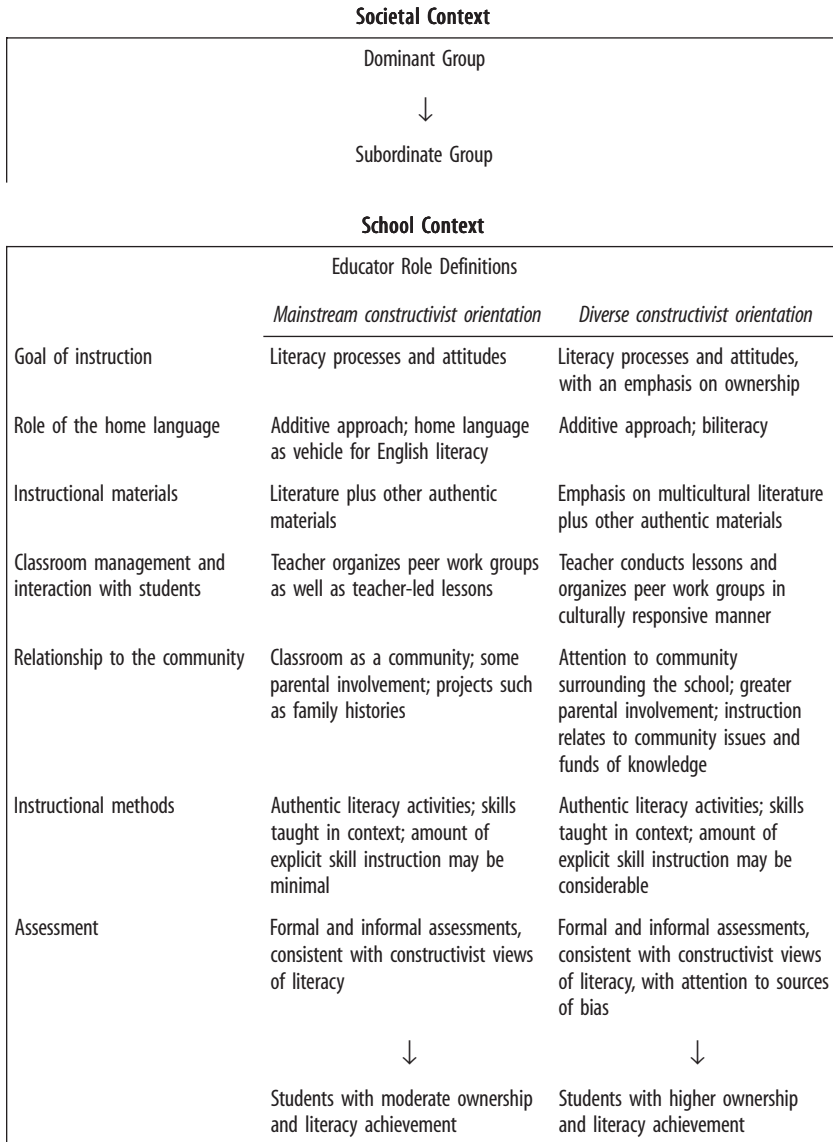


FIGURE 3. Proposed Conceptual Framework

pose general principles applicable to all students, although individual differences may be considered. This point of view fails to acknowledge that a given set of learning opportunities may benefit mainstream students while working to the detriment of students of diverse backgrounds within the same classroom. A diverse constructivist perspective assumes that general principles must be examined

and refined so that their specific application to local contexts involving particular groups of children can be understood. Investigations include the possible influences of ethnicity, primary language, and social class on students' responses to particular literacy learning activities and the reshaping of these activities to improve students' opportunities to learn.

Educators' recognition of the inequities possible in a given educational situation depends on an understanding of their own cultural identities as well as the cultural identities of their students. Researchers, too, should be aware of how their cultural identities shape their studies of literacy and literacy learning, in terms of research questions, methodologies, relationships with participants, and attention paid to the consequences of their work. Research conducted from a diverse constructivist orientation addresses issues of educators' and students' cultural identities and the specific ways in which ethnicity, primary language, and social class may interact in school settings effective and ineffective in bringing students of diverse backgrounds to high levels of literacy. Often, the goal of this research is not merely to describe but to improve the education of students of diverse backgrounds (Moll & Diaz, 1987).

In a mainstream constructivist orientation, it may be assumed that students primarily need to acquire the proficiency in literacy needed for self-expression and for success in the larger society. From a diverse constructivist orientation, it can be suggested that a concern for proficiency should not be allowed to override a concern for the transformative possibilities of literacy, for the individual and for the society. Garrison (1995) referred to the double bind: "the tension between the need of the students to appropriate historically entrenched tools that empower them as social actors and the simultaneous need of the culture to retool and recreate itself" (p. 729). Literacy is one such tool. With students of diverse backgrounds, conventional school literacy practices may serve as instruments of control and disempowerment, superseding and displacing the literacy practices of students' families and communities. The double bind in this instance is that current societal conditions and school practices make it difficult for students of diverse backgrounds to attain the high levels of literacy that would enable them to reflect on, critique, and address situations of inequity. Yet by virtue of their positioning with respect to ethnicity, language, and class, these students might represent the very viewpoints needed to reshape the society in significant ways.

To overcome the barriers of exclusion posed by conventional literacy instructional practices, educators must work with an expanded vision of literacy strategies and concepts in school, so that school definitions of literacy are transformed. In this way, educators create the possibility not only of helping students to become proficient in literacy but of enabling them to be empowered through literacy, to use literacy as a tool in bettering societal conditions.

The proposed framework follows that of Cummins in indicating that educator role definitions are embedded within and influenced by three social contexts: the larger society, including the power relations among groups; the school

and the diverse communities it serves; and the classroom, including the interactions between teachers and students. The manner in which the framework incorporates the various explanations for the achievement gap is described below, as each of the seven elements is addressed in turn. The propositions are intended as ideas to be explored, not as final solutions. They grow not only from the research base but from my experience over a period of 25 years in classrooms with Native Hawaiian children, which includes research with teachers encompassing each of the propositions below (e.g., Au & Carroll, 1997).

### *Goal of Instruction*

*Proposition.* The school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds will be improved as educators establish students' ownership of literacy as the overarching goal of the language arts curriculum. This proposition builds on the notion of empowerment (Cummins, 1994). Ownership, in this case the notion that literacy is personally meaningful and viewed as useful for the individual's own purposes, is seen as both a mediating construct and an outcome variable, just as empowerment has both these roles in Cummins' framework.

Educators with a mainstream constructivist orientation generally define literacy in terms of students' attitudes, such as enjoyment of reading and writing, as well as in terms of cognitive processes, such as those for revising a piece of writing. However, often associated with the mainstream constructivist orientation is a reluctance to focus on particular outcomes or to give priority to any particular instructional goals. This reluctance appears to grow from the view that a focus on outcomes or goals is inconsistent with the holistic nature of literacy and literacy learning and may lead to a narrowing of instruction (e.g., Goodman, 1992).

My own view of this issue is that educators with a diverse constructivist orientation should give priority to students' ownership of literacy. Ownership is recognized in process approaches to be important for all students (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1995). However, I have argued that it should be the major consideration or overarching goal in literacy curricula for students of diverse backgrounds (Au, 1997). This argument is grounded in D'Amato's (1987) research on the role of situational rationales discussed earlier. An explicit statement that ownership is the overarching goal has the advantage of reminding educators that literacy must be made personally meaningful to students of diverse backgrounds. Educators who wish to make literacy personally meaningful to students consistently draw on students' interests and experiences. By making literacy activities rewarding in an immediate sense, they provide students with the situational rationales for staying in school and engaging in literacy learning.

It should be noted that ownership in and of itself seems to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for promoting the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds. A study of an innovative constructivist literacy curriculum in classrooms with Hawaiian students indicated that most developed

ownership of literacy, as operationally defined by the assessment measures (Au, 1994). However, high levels of ownership were not necessarily associated with high levels of reading comprehension and composition. In classrooms where teachers view ownership as the overarching goal, attention must still be paid to systematic instruction in the cognitive processes of reading and writing.

### *Role of the Home Language*

*Proposition.* The school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds will improve as educators recognize the importance of students' home languages and come to see biliteracy as an attainable and desirable outcome. This proposition relates to the linguistic differences explanation and to Cummins' notion of cultural/linguistic incorporation.

Educators with a mainstream constructivist orientation usually take an additive approach. They believe that schools should add to and build on strengths in students' home languages, and they understand the value of literacy instruction in these languages. The assumption is that one only needs to learn to read and write once, and that this learning is transferable to another language (Weber, 1991).

Educators with a diverse constructivist orientation concur with these views and argue further that literacy in the home language should not be treated simply as a means for becoming literate in English. Rather, literacy in the home language should be valued in and of itself, just as literacy in a foreign language is valued at the college level. Unlike those with a mainstream orientation, educators with a diverse constructivist orientation often support biliteracy, the ability to read and write in two languages – the home language and English. Research suggests that the greater problem lies in the maintenance and development of skills in the home language rather than in students' learning of English (Pease-Alvarez & Hakuta, 1992). When biliteracy is the goal, students have the chance to use and extend literacy in the home language even after they have become literate in English.

### *Instructional Materials*

*Proposition.* The school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds will improve as educators use materials that present diverse cultures in an authentic manner, especially through the works of authors of diverse backgrounds. This element relates to the cultural differences and inferior education explanations and to the element of cultural/linguistic incorporation in Cummins' framework.

Educators with a mainstream constructivist orientation advocate the use of literature for reading instruction. They argue that the reading of literature provides students with richer, more interesting and motivating reading experiences. In a study conducted by Morrow (1992), students of diverse backgrounds who participated in a literature-based program outperformed control group

students on a variety of literacy and language measures, including those for comprehension, story retelling, and story rewriting.

Educators with a diverse constructivist orientation share this view of the importance of literature, but extend it by arguing for the inclusion of multicultural literature. In particular, educators with a diverse constructivist orientation endorse the use of multicultural works, usually by authors of diverse backgrounds, that present cultures in an authentic manner (Harris, 1992). The use of literature that accurately depicts the experiences of diverse groups may improve the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds by increasing their motivation to read (Spears-Bunton, 1990), their appreciation and understanding of their own language and cultural heritage (Jordan, 1988), and their valuing of their own life experience as a topic for writing. Lee (1991) found that African American students considered below-average readers could write insightful interpretations of the significance of the color purple in Alice Walker's (1982) novel.

When using multicultural literature, educators with a diverse constructivist orientation recognize that attention must be given not only to the selection of books but also to the curricular approach. Rasinski and Padak (1990) used Banks' (1989) hierarchy of approaches in multicultural education to define different approaches for the use of multicultural literature, including the transformation and social action approaches. Teachers who follow these approaches use multicultural literature to promote critical analysis of social and historical issues and to empower students to work on the resolution of social problems.

### *Classroom Management and Interactions With Students*

*Proposition.* The school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds will improve as educators become culturally responsive in their management of classrooms and interactions with students. This element relates to the cultural differences explanation and the rationales for schooling explanation, as well as to the element of cultural/linguistic incorporation in Cummins' framework.

Educators with a mainstream constructivist orientation see genuine literacy activities, over which students can feel ownership, as central to classroom organization and management (Routman, 1991). These educators recognize that students may learn effectively not only in teacher-led lessons but through collaboration with peers. Discussions of literature may take the form of grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989), and these conversations may have rules more like those for everyday talk than for classroom recitation.

Educators with a diverse constructivist orientation agree with the spirit of these innovations but point out that the teacher's approach to classroom management and interaction with students may need to be adjusted on the basis of differences in students' cultures. Delpit (1988) cited the expectation of African American students that the teacher act like an authority figure, displaying authority in a more direct and explicit manner than a mainstream teacher might.

The authoritative teacher establishes a high standard of achievement, demands that students reach that standard, and holds students' attention by using features of Black communicative style (Foster, 1989). Considerable research has been conducted on culturally responsive instruction (for a review, see Au & Kawakami, 1994). This research suggests that students' opportunities to learn to read improve when teachers conduct lessons in a culturally responsive manner, consistent with community values and norms for interaction.

### *Relationship to the Community*

*Proposition.* The school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds will be improved as educators make stronger links to the community. This proposition builds on the idea of community participation in Cummins' framework. It relates to the discrimination explanation in pointing to the need to restructure power relations between the school and community, and to the cultural differences explanation in highlighting how the involvement of parents and other community members in the schools may increase the cultural and linguistic relevance of school situations for students of diverse backgrounds.

Educators with a mainstream constructivist orientation describe classrooms as communities of learners but do not often extend the concept of community beyond the school (Barrera, 1992). They are concerned about informing and educating parents about their children's activities in constructivist-oriented classrooms and ask parents to assist with such tasks as the publishing of the children's writing (Routman, 1991). Students write memoirs, and these projects frequently involve them in interactions with family members (Whitin, 1990).

Educators with a diverse constructivist orientation support all of these activities but go a step further. They point to the notion that literacy practices, as well as the resources available to promote literacy, differ across cultures, and that connections need to be made to the specific communities to which students belong. For example, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) discovered a deep valuing of literacy in the homes of young African American children growing up in poverty, but the absence of a connection between the children's literacy experiences at home and at school. Students' school literacy learning would have been strengthened if connections to home literacy practices had been made. Moll (1992) described the "funds of knowledge" present among Mexican American households and how teachers motivated students to write about topics such as building and city planning, using parents and other community members as speakers.

### *Instructional Methods*

*Proposition.* The school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds will be improved as educators provide students with both authentic literacy activi-

ties and a considerable amount of instruction in the specific literacy skills needed for full participation in the culture of power. This proposition relates to the discrimination and inferior education explanations, and to the pedagogy element in Cummins' framework.

Although educators with a mainstream constructivist orientation provide students with authentic literacy activities, the amount of skill instruction in the context of these activities may vary considerably. Because the emphasis in constructivist approaches tends to be on process rather than product, educators with a mainstream constructivist orientation may see it as their role to act as facilitators of students' learning, responding to students' work but not transmitting knowledge (Reyes, 1991). Educators with this orientation may be reluctant to provide students with instruction on specific skills. However, a countervailing tendency is evident, as seen in Spiegel's (1992) work on the blending of whole language and systematic direct instruction.

Educators with a diverse constructivist perspective agree that skills should be taught within the context of authentic literacy activities. They appear to depart from the mainstream constructivist perspective in their views about the nature and degree of teacher mediation required to promote the literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds. In a study of the literacy learning of bilingual Latina/o students, Reyes (1991) concluded that students' progress appeared to depend on a higher degree of teacher mediation and scaffolding that their process-oriented teacher felt she should provide. Delpit (1988) argued that students of diverse backgrounds are outsiders to the culture of power and deserve to gain a command of conventions and forms of discourse already known to insiders (those of mainstream backgrounds). She distinguished between what she called personal literacy and power-code literacy. Although both are important, it is the latter that is needed for success in the larger society.

### *Assessment*

*Proposition.* The school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds will be improved when educators use forms of assessment that eliminate or reduce sources of bias (such as prior knowledge, language, and question type) and more accurately reflect students' literacy achievement. This proposition relates to the inferior education explanation and to the assessment element in Cummins' framework.

Educators with a mainstream constructivist perspective have contributed to the development of alternative forms of assessment, including portfolios and statewide tests such as those implemented in Michigan and Illinois. These new forms of assessment are consistent with current views of literacy in focusing on the process of meaning construction (Pearson & Valencia, 1987).

Educators with a diverse constructivist orientation support the development of alternatives to standardized testing. However, they recognize that innovative approaches to assessment also have the potential to work to the detriment of

students of diverse backgrounds. For example, performance-based assessments tied to standards may not be sufficiently flexible to assess the literacy of Spanish-speaking children. If innovative assessments are high-stakes in nature, poor performance may carry the same negative consequences associated with standardized testing. These educators recognize that all forms of assessment, whether formal or informal, may incorporate elements of bias (García & Pearson, 1991). García (1991) compared the reading test performance of bilingual Latina/o students in the fifth and sixth grades with that of monolingual European American students in the same classrooms. She found that the tests underestimated the reading comprehension of the Latina/o students, because of their having less prior knowledge of the topics in passages and a tendency to apply strategies of literal interpretation to questions with textually implicit answers. Langer, Bartolome, Vasquez, and Lucas (1990) explored ways of tapping the text comprehension of bilingual fifth graders. One of their findings was that open-ended "envisionment" questions (e.g., What have you learned that is happening so far?) elicited more information from students than decontextualized probing questions (e.g., What order was used in the piece you just read?).

I do not propose a process-product relationship, in a positivist sense, between any particular proposition or element in the proposed framework and students' literacy achievement. All elements will operate in the context of schools and classrooms in which larger social, political, and economic forces, such as those explored by the critical theorists, play an important part. Educational change may well be prevented by material circumstances or stifled by policy decisions. Or change may take place with results that fail to be recognized, as in situations where standardized test scores are the only sanctioned outcomes. Furthermore, the complexity of school situations makes it impossible to isolate the possible effects of any single element or group of elements, and elements may interact in complex ways. Still, the overall implication is that the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds will be stronger in schools and classrooms where elements of a diverse constructivist orientation are in place than in settings where they are not.

## Conclusion

The thrust of this article has been to argue for the need to move from a mainstream to a diverse constructivist orientation in research on the literacy achievement gap between students of diverse backgrounds and students of mainstream backgrounds. Taking a diverse constructivist perspective, I presented a framework incorporating multiple explanations for the literacy achievement gap, while suggesting researchable actions that might be taken in schools. In concluding, I step away from the framework itself to reflect on sources of tension

evident in current discussions of the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds and certainly in this article as well.

A first source of tension arises from the ontological, epistemological, and methodological differences between the competing paradigms of constructivism and critical theory (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; for a discussion of epistemological issues and reading research, see Shannon, 1989). These tensions are evident in the very framing of the problem of the literacy achievement gap: what the gap signifies and what steps should be taken to address it. Without crossing from one paradigm to the other, it is difficult to link micro and macro levels of analyses, necessary to an understanding of how relations of power in the larger society play out in the way literacy instruction is organized and enacted in schools and classrooms. At the same time, attempts to incorporate critical notions into a constructivist framework, or the reverse, are likely to appear inconsistent when judged from the perspective of one paradigm or the other. I do not think these tensions can or should be resolved, but it seems desirable to have a principled importing of ideas across paradigms, as is taking place in educational anthropology.

A related source of tension arises because of differences in the political ideologies associated with liberalism and radicalism. No doubt, some will prefer a framework oriented toward more ambitious ends than those proposed here. As a researcher with liberal leanings, I am persuaded that all research is inherently political (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994), but I do not see a research agenda and a political agenda as one and the same. As a school-oriented researcher, I have constantly been reminded of the difference between that which I see as a desired end and that increment of benefit to students and teachers which seems possible under the circumstances. Extending this view to the proposed framework, I incorporated elements that seemed researchable and achievable, at least in some school settings.

Still another source of tension resides in the differing perspectives of mainstream researchers and researchers from underrepresented groups (Willis, 1995). As I reviewed the literature, it became clear that many of the criticisms of the mainstream constructivist orientation had been formulated by researchers from underrepresented groups. This I see as no accident. These researchers may provide an insider's perspective on issues of literacy achievement with students of diverse backgrounds, through a deep understanding of issues of ethnicity, primary language, and social class, gained through personal as well as professional experience. In discussions of the literacy achievement gap, their work deserves more attention than it presently seems to receive, perhaps because of a tendency to downplay the value of studies conducted by these researchers of issues within their own communities (Frierson, 1990).

A final source of tension lies between the world of the academy and the world of the school and centers on whether researchers should keep a distance from, or be participants in, the situations being studied (Reason, 1994). Analyzing the problem is, of course, quite different from working on solutions in

collaboration with educators in schools. In evaluating the contributions of critical theory to education, Giroux (1989) suggested that too much emphasis has been placed on the language of critique, too little on the language of possibility. Critical theorists, he noted, have been so concerned with the existing realities of schools that they have failed to address the question of what school should be. In a similar vein, Delpit (1991) and Ladson-Billings (1994) called for more research on situations in which students of diverse backgrounds are experiencing academic success. We are reminded, then, that the greater challenge is not in proposing frameworks but in bringing about changes in schools that will close the literacy achievement gap.

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