Radical-Local Teaching and Learning

A Cultural-Historical Approach

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Over the past 20 years we have been developing a perspective about subject-matter teaching and learning in relation to individual development. Although pedagogical trends and fashions come and go, some basic issues are always present as part of the defining features of pedagogical practice. Two of these problems, which are addressed in this book, are (a) how to conceptualize and organize the subject-matter content to be used in pedagogical interactions, and (b) how to develop desired psychological capabilities through pedagogical interactions with subject-matter content. While these problems can be addressed in general terms, it is also necessary to relate the general perspectives to the local historical conditions within which pedagogical interactions are conducted. From this point of view, general theoretical perspectives become interesting when they serve to guide efforts to realise a practice in a specific historical context, while practical efforts should be evaluated in relation to a general theoretical perspective. In turn, practical work challenges the further development and clarification of our theoretical understanding of how to relate subject-matter teaching to the particular conditions under which children are learning.

The practical research work in this book was conducted in an afterschool program for children in a New York City neighborhood where many of the families have a historical relation to Puerto Rico. The intention is to present an example of the dynamic interaction between theory and practice in a way that will encourage persons with a more practical interest to consider the theoretical arguments, while the more theoretically oriented reader will also consider the practical example. The hope is that the reader will reflect about the ways in which theoretical and practical aspects of pedagogical work can be integrated, to the benefit of both aspects.

At the time that we conducted the project, Mariane Hedegaard was a visiting scholar at Teachers College, Columbia University, while Seth Chaiklin was a Project Director at the Institute for Learning Technologies at Teachers College, Columbia University. The afterschool project was conducted in collaboration with Pedro Pedraza as a project at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, City University of New York, with support from the Exxon Foundation. This collaboration was essential for the development of the project. We thank Pedro
Pedraza, the leader of the project, Jorge Ayala, a research assistant in the project, Karen Diaz Navarro, the teacher in the project, who worked with engagement and enthusiasm, and the parent helpers, Carmen and Belén, who assisted the children in the classroom.

Seth Chaiklin and Mariane Hedegaard
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Chapter 1

Radical-Local Teaching and Learning for Education and Human Development

This book presents an approach to teaching and learning that we have designated radical local. To realize both general societal interests and worthwhile personal development, the content of educational programmes for children must be grounded in and draw explicitly from the local societal conditions within which the children live. Through working with this content, children should appropriate an understanding of general theoretical-dialectical concepts from subject-matter disciplines, which they can use as tools for understanding the content they have studied, and more generally for analyzing their own life conditions and future possibilities. These are distinctive features of a successful radical-local teaching and learning approach. The central concern of radical-local teaching and learning is how to relate educational practices to children’s specific historical and cultural conditions – both the objective conditions in which the children live and their comprehension of and relation to those conditions.

The specific event that provided the opportunity for formulating our theoretical ideas about radical-local teaching and learning was the possibility to conduct an experimental teaching programme for a group of elementary school children in the context of an existing experimental afterschool programme in East Harlem. An afterschool programme can be an ideal place to experiment

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1 The afterschool programme was started originally by Pedro Pedraza, a researcher at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, City University of New York City, with a focus on developing literacy and mathematics competences for children (Pedraza, 1989). This afterschool programme was part of the El Barrio Popular Education Program (K. Rivera, 1999; Torruellas, 1989; Torruellas, Benmayor, Goris & Juarbe, 1991), which was started by researchers at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, in part, because of a dissatisfaction with producing research studies that contributed primarily to the professional advancement of the report writers, without affecting noticeably the conditions and possibilities for the people in the community being described.
with radical-local concerns such as bridging family and community traditions with subject-matter knowledge, because the content of afterschool activities are not usually formalized by laws, regulations and curriculum plans.

The first part of the book presents a framework for conceptualizing and designing radical-local educational interventions for schoolchildren. We start by considering the goals of education and the relation of educational practice to personal development, and then consider some of the problems faced by cultural minorities, especially Latinos in completing school. The idea of radical-local teaching and learning is introduced, along with some key principles from the cultural-historical research tradition about knowledge, psychological development, and teaching and learning. Some of the cultural-historical principles are elaborated further in relation to problems of (a) selecting subject-matter content that takes account of schoolchildren’s cultural-historical background and life situation, and (b) using that selection in a way that is relevant both to their present life in their local community and their coming societal life.

The second part of the book presents a qualitative analysis of the teaching experiment. The intention of the educational programme was to develop the children’s subject-matter knowledge about general social science concepts and principles from history and social studies through investigation of a theme that was central in their lives. The specific topics selected for investigation were motivated by our knowledge of the cultural-historical background of the children and their families. General subject-matter concepts are first formulated through specific investigations. In turn, as these concepts become explicitly formulated, it is possible for the children to use these concepts to reformulate their everyday understanding of their life and community. In other words, the programme was an attempt to realize our ideas about radical-local teaching and learning.

Our interest was to develop a positive intervention that addressed significant intellectual and cultural needs of the children, most of whom came from families with a Puerto Rican background, while drawing upon knowledge of the East Harlem community in which most of the children lived. We did not want to conduct another study documenting that Puerto Rican children were not achieving comparable levels of academic success as other social groups in New York City (e.g., Calitri, 1983; Santiago Santiago, 1978) nor show that the form and content of teaching that the children receive tends to be oriented to rote learning, repetitious drill, and other kinds of tasks that do not require nor encourage analytic, creative, theoretical thinking (e.g., Anyon, 1981; Orum, 1988). These points have been well-documented, and they continue to be well documented, not only for Puerto Rican children in New York City, but for other Hispanic groups in the United States (e.g., Arias, 1986; Brown, Rosen, Hill, & Olivas, 1981; De La Rosa & Maw, 1990; Goldenberg, 1990; National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics, 1984; Nieto, 1998, 2000).
Although it is important to document the existence of these problems, these analyses do not usually contain insights into what positive steps should be taken for intervention. Especially in the more descriptive studies, one cannot tell what a symptom of inadequate educational programmes is and what a cause is. Our interest in this book is to present a theoretically motivated approach to subject-matter teaching, which in the present case was directed toward the needs of Puerto Rican children in East Harlem.

**Formal Education and Child Development**

A major goal of formal education, at least as formulated in official documents, is to help children gain insight into and a capability for using subject-matter traditions to understand the social and natural world. However, the content and purpose of formal schooling are not limited only to the goals of subject-matter learning and subsequent intellectual development. There are usually expectations that formal education should prepare and motivate children to participate in a society’s existing economic, political, and cultural practices, where subject-matter learning is seen as part of realizing that goal.

Radical-local teaching and learning is concerned to realize these widely-held goals for formal education, but focuses additionally on how education can contribute to the personal development of children in relation to their historical and cultural conditions. The assumption is that the relationship between schoolchildren’s cultural background and the historical conditions within which they live can and should have consequences for the content of teaching if these goals are to be realized. Schooling is normally organized around specific subject-matter content such as specific content and procedures for reading, writing, calculating, analyzing physical and historical phenomena. How are these specific practices to be related to these general goals? And how should one consider them in relation to the variations found within contemporary societies such as between city and country, rich and poor families, religious and cultural differences, to name only a few of the more important dichotomies that are commonly considered.

The idea of radical-local teaching and learning presented here is an attempt to make an integrated conceptual model for educational practice that addresses this tension between valued general goals of education and the individual and diverse variations found in its concrete practice. We focus specifically on the dynamic between how general subject-matter content and specific historical conditions can contribute to children’s development. The focus is on how education, through subject-matter teaching can contribute to the development of motives and competencies that are relevant for the child’s societal life.
The cultural-historical research tradition provides a useful set of theoretical resources for articulating and clarifying the ideal of radical-local teaching and learning, which in turn reveals some limitations in the current theoretical development of the cultural-historical tradition.

Cultural-Historical Theory of Education

In 1931, Lev Vygotsky prepared a book-length manuscript on his cultural-historical theory of human development. This theoretical perspective provided the framework for subsequent investigations into schoolchildren’s conceptual development. In several of his texts from the period 1932-1934, Vygotsky discussed this relation, considering different models. The model Vygotsky promoted was that instruction and learning should be the source of further development, where instruction should prepare and motivate the child to participate in a society’s existing cultural practice as well as develop psychological functions of thinking and concept formation that were not yet fully acquired. This model contrasted with a behaviorist model which equated learning and development, or a Piagetian model in which instruction must wait for a certain level of development to be achieved (see also Vygotsky, 1926/1998b, Chap. 4 and 6).

In Vygotsky’s analysis, thinking with real concepts was the major psychological function that characterized school age children, and instruction should be directed toward such development (e.g., Vygotsky, 1934/1987, Chap. 6). As part of his analysis of the development of schoolchildren’s conceptual thinking, Vygotsky considered the relation between what he called spontaneous or everyday concepts and academic or scientific concepts. The former are typically learned as a result of everyday practice and tend to be strongly situated. The latter, which are usually learned as a result of formal instruction, often by verbal definition, tend to be abstract and reflect historically-developed systematic analysis of societal and natural phenomena. The acquisition of scientific concepts depends on the child’s everyday concepts, and a consequence of this acquisition is that a child’s everyday concepts are modified and their content further developed. This dialectic of the child’s everyday knowledge and its potential transformation from theoretical knowledge acquisition provides an important conceptual model for addressing a main concern of radical-local teaching and learning, namely to use the general concepts of disciplinary knowledge as a way to develop and refine personal, local knowledge.

Vygotsky’s perspective about the relation between learning and development for school age children and the theory of activity provided a conceptual framework for Vygotsky’s former research assistant Daniil El’konin, who in collaboration with Vasili Davydov, started in the late 1950s to develop an approach to educational practices that aimed, in part, to support psychological
development. In the late 1970s this tradition started to receive attention and interest from other cultural-historical researchers outside of Moscow, especially in Northern Europe (e.g., Hedegaard, 1990, 2002; Hedegaard, Engeström, & Hakkarainen, 1984; Hedegaard & Lompscher 1999; Lompscher, 1985; van Oers, 1999), and this tradition continues to be developed today especially within Russia, Ukraine, and Latvia (Davydov, 1998; Experiment Centre, http://www.experiment.lv; International Association ‘Developmental Education’, http://www.maro.newmail.ru).

Developmental teaching-learning research has focused primarily on problems of subject-matter teaching (Davydov, 1988b; 1988c; Lompscher, 1985, 1999), providing an important theoretical and practical perspective for developing educational interventions aimed at promoting children’s learning of theoretical-dialectical concepts. The developmental teaching-learning approach developed by El’konin and Davydov did not conceptualize sufficiently the children’s cultural background and local historical conditions, even if these aspects are generally recognized within the theoretical tradition as significant.

We believe this theoretical tradition, given its grounding in the cultural-historical tradition, can be elaborated to integrate these aspects, so that cultural and social conditions and motive development can be addressed explicitly in the planning process and in the content of the teaching. The elaborated theoretical perspective provides a coherent general perspective for conceptualizing processes of learning and teaching and the role of knowledge in children’s development.

Social Studies Teaching with Cultural Content in a Radical-Local Perspective

Rather than view cultural sensitivity and disciplinary standards as necessarily standing in opposition to each other, we assume that by giving a solid disciplinary foundation through the investigation of topics that are related to their life, children will be able to better appreciate the relation between academic or disciplinary studies and their own life situations. That is, in a radical-local teaching approach, schoolchildren should develop academic knowledge and

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2 After El’konin’s death in 1984, Davydov and his colleagues continued to develop this tradition, which came to be called developmental teaching-learning (e.g., Davydov, 1988a). More precisely, Davydov called his approach Oubchenie Razvitsia. The polysemous Russian word oubchenie means simultaneously teaching and learning. There is not a corresponding English word that has this double meaning, so we will use the somewhat awkward ‘teaching-learning’ to preserve the intended meaning.
skills that correspond to those normally expected in a school curriculum, but
developed through subject-matter content that is relevant to the children’s life
situation, and which can develop the children’s capabilities for analyzing and
interpreting their situation. Our goal in this book is to show how one can con-
duct subject-matter teaching that simultaneously draws from the participants’
historical situation while contributing to their own development in relation to
that historical situation.

We believe that helping children explore the historical and cultural conditions
of the community in which they live can be relevant for this purpose. It is pos­
sible to select social studies subject-matter content that is relevant to children’s
life situation, and to investigate this content in a way that concurrently develops
academic knowledge and skills typically associated with disciplinary traditions.
‘Relevant’ means that the content of social studies teaching should provide
children with useful academic concepts and methods for analyzing existential
issues that confront them in their lives. These issues include both immediate
and visible issues (e.g., housing conditions, family life, and adequate resources
in their neighbourhood) as well as longer-term identity issues in which one
forms an attitude or position in relation to one’s life situation.

A focus on relevant topics does not necessarily result in a dilemma or con­
tradiction in which the teacher must choose between academic relevance and
personal relevance. It is necessary, however, to help children integrate their
experience and information into a theoretical model or perspective for under­
standing the significance of events and conditions, and not simply to draw on
experience or provide children with specific historical facts that are culturally
relevant. Ideally, such a model or perspective functions as a foundation from
which children can continue to analyze and interpret their life situation. By
bringing the methods of investigation of a subject-matter discipline into the
classroom as a working approach, the teacher, in collaboration with the children,
can develop specific substantive results which can be related to the children’s
concrete situation. More generally, through this process, one aims to help
children acquire knowledge and skills for understanding and developing better
relationships to their life conditions.

In the case of our experimental teaching programme, we assumed that it
would be possible to give the children academically challenging activities that
reflected disciplinary standards, despite a common tendency to assume that such
goals are too demanding or inappropriate for inner-city minorities in the United
States.\(^3\) By incorporating the history and culture of the immediate community

\(^3\) Though there are some exceptions (e.g., Levin, 1995; Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik,
1996).
in educational activities, we aimed to help the children in the project extend their knowledge about central characteristics of the Puerto Rican community in general and in East Harlem in particular. Through this investigation, and planned instructional activities, we expected the children to acquire research methods and concepts from social science. We hoped to engage the children in these instructional activities by letting them become active in researching their community and its origins. That is, through acquiring concrete knowledge about their local community, we would at the same time develop appropriate theoretical-dialectical concepts that could be used as a tool for analyzing their own life conditions and future possibilities. Thereby we hoped that they would develop motivation for school subjects and self-respect as competent pupils.

Children’s Motive Development

We do not assume that children will necessarily learn about their local community simply because we introduce this subject-matter content as part of teaching. Even though experience with their local community is part of their everyday life, it is often necessary to develop a motivation for wanting to investigate this experience in a more systematic way. One task in a teaching-learning programme is to create activities that are interesting for the children so that they develop interest for the kind of knowledge presented in the programme and hopefully thereby a general motive for learning.

Vygotsky’s colleagues El’konin (1999) and Leontiev (1978) both extended Vygotsky’s theory by introducing development of motives as a central aspect of human development. Motives are seen as culturally created through the child’s participating in institutional activities. El’konin describes how cultural-historical practice in institutions influences children’s development and how new motives that become dominant result in qualitative changes in the child’s relations to the world and therefore can be seen as markers of new periods in development.

Plan of the Book

The first part of this book describes the theoretical background that was the foundation for formulating the teaching intervention described in the second part. Chapter 2 contextualizes the intervention by discussing the goals of education, the nature of problems experienced by children from minority families, and reviewing research about school completion. Chapter 3 introduces the concept of radical-local teaching and discusses some of the research and intervention
projects that have considered the use of local community knowledge in relation to teaching.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the main theoretical ideas that were used to plan, conduct, and analyze the teaching intervention. Chapter 4 contains an analysis of different forms of knowledge and how they are related to school teaching and what this implies in relation to children’s personal knowledge. This combination is seen as the primary process by which persons can relate their theoretical knowledge to their daily life. In the case of cultural minority children, this would mean acquiring a theoretical-dialectical understanding of their local community so that it could be used to interpret their daily situation. Chapter 5 presents a theory of child development. Development is described as a societal and cultural process, in which the interaction between motivation and knowledge acquisition are the main developmental processes, and the development of motives is the central aspect of personality development. Chapter 6 describes a theory of radical-local teaching characterized as a double move between the goals of teaching and the conditions and interests of the child. There is a special interest in clarifying the relation between subject-matter knowledge and the cultural procedures and understanding from everyday life. Chapter 7 gives a historical overview of the history of the community of East Harlem. Chapter 8 describes some of the educational conditions in East Harlem along with the specific problems that motivated the teaching experiment. Chapter 9 gives a brief overview of the content and organization of the teaching experiment conducted in an afterschool setting in East Harlem, along with methods of data collection and analysis. Chapters 10 through 13 give a narrative report and some analysis of the teaching experiment, while Chapter 14 discusses the competencies the children achieved through participating in the experiment. The book concludes with Chapter 15 which discusses the implications of radical-local teaching and learning for planning teaching of cultural minorities and majorities.
Chapter 2

Education in a Societal Perspective

Education is viewed today as a basic human right. Any self-respecting nation-state has, as a minimum, a primary educational system; international treaties and conventions on civil and political rights recognize the right to education; and the value and importance of education is praised worldwide. Within this historical condition, educational researchers should have an integrated perspective on teaching and learning that engages the main aspects of a satisfying educational practice in relation to societal interests.

The function and purpose of education in contemporary society is difficult to explicate, especially if one wants to separate what might be realistic to achieve from what is idealistically expected by interested persons such as politicians, government officials, educators, and parents. A systematic historical investigation and analysis of the purposes of and expectations for education are beyond the scope of this book, which is focused on a theoretically-grounded approach for planning educational practices (radical-local teaching and learning) that aims to contribute to the improvement of children’s life situation, especially for cultural minority children. It is important, however, in formulating a perspective about a satisfying educational practice, to consider the relations between general visions and expectations about the goals of education and how these practices might relate to the broader goals and interests found in societal life. It is not enough to assume the sufficiency of intentions to make improvements; we need to have an analysis that clarifies the relations among educational practice, educational goals and our expectations of what can be achieved by education in relation to societal interests. Such an analysis is likely to reveal the need to refine goal formulations and expectations of education relative to predominant conceptions, as well as identify issues that need to be addressed more directly in specific research and intervention efforts.

In the previous chapter, we mentioned some of the most typically expressed purposes of education, namely to help prepare and motivate children to participate in a society’s existing economic, political and cultural practices as active, productive citizens (e.g., Burstyn, 1996; White, 1990). These interests, when formulated in general terms, appear transnationally. Examples of official docu-
ments with these kinds of formulations can be found from a variety of countries with diverse political and economic systems such as the United States, the Soviet Union, Denmark, and Great Britain. They can also be found in formulations from cultural minorities (e.g., Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Chap. 5; Fisher with Pérez, González, Njus, & Kamasaki, 1998, pp. 87-89).

Formal documents often focus only on the global qualities that should be developed among children in relation to these general goals for participation in societal life. For example, subject-matter teaching, aimed at the development of children’s motives and competences, should be a central and essential goal in education. This kind of goal is reflected in curriculum standards formulated by the National Council for the Social Studies (1994), which argues that a consequence of social studies education should be that children acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are directed toward the common good.

At the same time, we presume there is also a societal belief, at least implicitly, that these global qualities provide relevant resources for each individual to have a fuller, richer life, preferably a ‘good life’. The relations between education and a good life are complicated because of the tension between a desirable societal goal (‘a good life’), the insufficiency of education alone to realize that goal, and the strong likelihood (if not actual necessity) that some forms of education can contribute in significant ways to helping persons develop knowledge and skills that would be relevant and useful to the development of a good life.

Additional complications arise between the psychological or experiential dimension that characterizes a ‘good life’ and the material conditions within which one lives, and the relation between individual and collective conditions. It is possible to have a positive orientation or attitude to one’s life, even if living in difficult material conditions. On the other hand, there is no reason why one should have to continue to live in those conditions, as a matter of moral view or economic necessity. That is, the question of a good life cannot be reduced solely to the psychological state of the individual, but must also consider the concrete, societal conditions within which life is lived.

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4 A philosophical analysis of the concept of ‘good life’ is complicated. Persons living in difficult and relatively impoverished material conditions can still experience their lives in positive terms. Others, with considerable material wealth can experience their life in miserable terms. For example, consider the extent of drug and alcohol abuse, and stories of psychological misery among movie and rock music stars. It is likely to be impossible to specify which material conditions are elements of a ‘good life’. However, to start, we think it is valuable to create some minimal social conditions (e.g., in terms of health care, freedom from physical violence, access to qualifying education, and employment opportunities).
Moreover, realizing a good life is not always a matter of individual development. It will probably depend critically on the conditions for and state of collective societal relations. In other words, education alone will not be sufficient for helping a person to realize a good life, yet a satisfying educational practice should help individuals to develop knowledge and skills that would be relevant to living in relation to their current living conditions, which includes developing a critical understanding both of what should be protected and what might be worthy of further improvement. In a radical-local perspective (see Chapter 3), we want to consider how the development of motives and competences through specific subject-matter learning is necessary or useful for leading a richer, fuller life. At the same time, we need to recognize that the question of a good life must take into account the diverse background of persons who are being educated.

This tension between societal and personal goals for education raises the possibility that these two aspects are not necessarily satisfied simultaneously in every case. This tension is recognized, at least implicitly, in the previously-mentioned curriculum standards, and the pro-offered resolution is a suggested need for personal, academic, pluralist, and global perspectives. However, the standards do not confront the possible or even likely conflicts between individual needs and interests in contrast to dominant societal interests.

In addition to a focus on individual development, education is also often viewed as having an important contribution to the resolution of problems of social justice that arise from inequalities in material resources and access to economic opportunities. A popular belief in the United States (and many other countries) is the idea of education as a social equalizer, providing an opportunity for advancement and improvement. Assuming this belief is true, then it would appear that one could address (or at least reduce) the societal problems faced by children from cultural minorities by ensuring that their educational achievements and qualifications correspond to those of the majority.

We do not expect to find a simple causal relation between education and the quality of an educated child’s societal life. Moreover, there are many reasons to doubt, that education alone can resolve the unacceptable societal conditions under which many minority children must live, especially when they come

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5 As a substitute for full justification of this assertion, we will only point to the numerous examples from everyday experience in the United States in which sports and music stars exhort children to stay in school, public advertising campaigns, popular slogans, ‘a mind is a terrible thing to waste’, and so forth. As we discuss later, there are also some empirical grounds for holding this belief (e.g., clear statistical evidence for the economic advantages of having a high school diploma).
from poor families. It is necessary to consider the variety of societal conditions involved in a life situation.

There is a tension between (a) wanting educational practices to address societal problems in a comprehensive way, (b) likely limitations for educational practices alone to realize those goals, yet (c) possibilities to make significant improvements in relation to existing practices that contribute in a meaningful way to addressing societal problems, without mistaking these improvements as necessarily being sufficient to all the issues of societal life that must be addressed.

As a simple way to elaborate this tension between educational practice and more general societal goals, especially in relation to a good life, let us consider the following example.\textsuperscript{6} Many of the general societal goals formulated by cultural minority groups, especially societally and economically disadvantaged groups, are not fundamentally different from the goals of dominant groups, though some of the particular goals of ethnic groups may conflict with the dominant groups. Consider, for example, the kinds of goals formulated by the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) in their report \textit{State of Hispanic America 1991}.\textsuperscript{7}

The primary goal is formulated in the Foreword as ‘equality’.\textsuperscript{8} The specific issues presented in the report’s Executive Summary include a focus on socio-economic issues in relation to major population groups, where the general goal is to reduce ‘the economic disparity and gaps in opportunity between Hispanics and the rest of the U.S. society’. For example, the Executive Summary notes that Hispanics have ‘the lowest levels of educational attainment of any major population group, but are underrepresented in pre-school programmes and other education programmes designed to help at-risk students’, and that Hispanics are more likely to be members of the working poor, more likely to contract certain diseases while being less likely to have access to health care, to suffer from substantial levels of discrimination in education, employment and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Given that the teaching intervention described in this book is concerned with the education of children from Puerto Rican families in East Harlem, the rest of this chapter will draw primarily from examples that are either oriented to Latinos in general in the United States, and to Puerto Ricans in New York City.
  \item \textsuperscript{7} According to the statement on the back of the report’s cover page, ‘The National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the largest constituency-based national Hispanic organization exists to improve life opportunities for the more than 22 million Americans of Hispanic descent’ (National Council of La Raza, 1992).
  \item \textsuperscript{8} ‘[I]t is in everyone’s interest to join in our struggle for Hispanic American equality’ (Yzaguirre, 1992).
\end{itemize}
housing, yet receive minimal attention from federal civil rights enforcement agencies.

It is interesting to note that although these issues are formulated in terms of rights, equal opportunities and access, the NCLR suggests that it ‘is not simply a moral preference, it is a social and economic imperative’ (p. 33). Their argument seems to be directed to the idea that regardless of one’s sense of human rights and dignity, the material conditions of the future well-being of the United States will depend on the socioeconomic conditions of Hispanics. What is important to recognize here is that there is not a call for changing the general or typical practices and goals of the American social, political, or economic traditions, but rather a call for programmes, policies, and interventions that will enable Hispanic persons to participate with comparable conditions as other Americans. One might wonder, as we do, whether there are any special characteristics or conflicts between the needs and traditions of Hispanic persons that might interact with these general socioeconomic demands. The Executive Summary gives a small indication of this possibility when it states that current programmes ‘do not necessarily take into account the special characteristics and needs of Hispanics or serve them equitably.’ Without developing the analysis further, we can say that these characteristics partly refer to cultural traditions (e.g., emphasis on the family), but may also refer to material conditions that are not particular to Hispanics alone.

One would expect that NCLR and other organizations would not advocate material equality if the price to be paid would be existential misery. Education can have an important function in this connection, because of its possibilities and potentials for addressing the experiential and existential aspects of life, even if material conditions are difficult. Furthermore, this education does not have to adopt a pacifying or institutional justifying function as illustrated, for example, by the work of Paolo Freire (1968/1970) with adult literacy in Brazil, Oskar Negt (1971) with industrial workers in Germany, or examples from American high schools described in Delpit (1988).

Several important points arise when one starts to analyze the goals formulated in this example as an indication of what characterizes a ‘good life’. First, there are likely to be multiple visionary goals (related to health, education, work, living conditions, and so forth). Second, many of these goals may need to be addressed simultaneously if a general effect is to be realized. Third, the concrete actions that are taken or needed to realize these multiple goals may sometimes contradict or affect each other.

Let us suppose, for the sake of analysis, that it was unproblematic to change the existing schooling conditions and practices for the children referred to in NCLR’s report; that it was possible to offer educational programmes that would qualify these young people for participation in economic life. Even with
this problem of education wished away, there are still many other problems, involving additional interactions with the family and their problems in maintaining basic living conditions (housing, food, health, physical safety), that can overwhelm the effects or possibilities of schooling. A similar point was illustrated in the context of prenatal healthcare programmes that were successful with middle-class women, but were not successful with impoverished women, because so many other problems hindered or overwhelmed the success of the programme (Schorr, 1988).

Often the practical problems that children in East Harlem face and the solutions that they sometimes find (e.g., drug-dealing) are perceived as more practical and relevant (Bourgois, 1989) than a friendly chat about the value of getting a good education (Inclán & Herron, 1989). It is important to note that these children’s capabilities may be comparable to other children in the United States, but when one looks at the actual conditions within which cultural minority children, such as those living in East Harlem, must grow up (described further in Chapters 7 and 8), then one can better understand why their life conditions can often overwhelm their possibilities for developing and using their capabilities, and why educational programmes alone can be overwhelmed or undermined by the other problems and conditions that these children face.

From a societal perspective, it is clear that educational programmes often have (or are given) goals and interests that extend beyond a well-functioning classroom. The brief analysis given here is meant to remind us that it is unlikely that significant changes in the societal conditions for large groups of people will be addressed or affected solely by individual educational programmes. We should not expect that educational interventions will necessarily be sufficient to eradicate social problems for these children, nor always succeed, if one does not also address other problems of health, child care, nutrition, physical safety, and so forth.

Realistic expectations for societal improvement may require more systematic and comprehensive analyses and interventions in community development and social services to help families and individuals achieve conditions of living that correspond to the demands and resources of New York City and the United States (e.g., Schorr, 1988). Programmes that provide comprehensive, integrated social support are probably needed if one wants to have significant numbers of impoverished minority children achieve the kinds of success considered typical or acceptable for middle-class children. Research about basic problems – such as sustaining school attendance and promoting sufficient educational activity to get, as a minimum, the certification needed for many societal opportunities (e.g., high school diploma) – that aims to move from describing these conditions and exploring possible effective interventions, toward developing intervention for ongoing practices, may have to take these
additional aspects directly into account in their implementation, or in coordination with complementary programmes (see Swanson, Mehan, & Hubbard, 1995, for one example).

At the same time, it should be obvious that addressing these issues about life conditions does not solve the specific educational problems, such as what should be taught – and how. We should not undersell the possibilities of education for contributing to societal improvement, if there is some conscious effort to take account of and integrate societal conditions into specific teaching programmes for the cultural-historical conditions of the children.

Attention to the broader societal issues gives a better opportunity to try to formulate educational interventions that can coordinate conceptually with other societal conditions, rather than hoping that one’s educational contribution will in some unspecified way contribute to a qualitative change. As we become more knowledgeable about the concrete, specific societal conditions and challenges within which the children are growing up, it becomes possible to think more explicitly about the content of the educational programmes in relation to those conditions and experiences, and our possibilities for formulating relevant and realistic educational interventions are likely to increase.

To get some sense of the complexity involved in understanding schooling practice in a societal perspective, we look at the issue of school completion, with a focus on cultural minorities and particularly, when possible, for Latino students in the United States and Puerto Rican children in New York.

School Completion

In Western, wage-based economies, formal state-approved schooling is not usually an end in itself. The institutionally-defined, objective status ‘graduation’

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9 Schorr (1988) describes Eugene Lang’s ‘I have a dream’ project, which started originally from a generous impulse in which the wealthy industrialist promised in a speech to the graduating sixth-grade class of his old elementary school that he would pay their college tuition if they came into college. Having made this promise, he subsequently hired a full-time worker to support the children. Lang originally thought that this person could organize enrichment activities such as trips to museums, concerts, and libraries. It quickly became apparent that this was unrealistic, when this person was using much of the time for such things as making sure that some of the children were simply getting out of bed in the morning to go to school. Incidentally, Lang’s initial promise was made in an elementary school in the same area where our teaching project was conducted.