

The Impact of Teachers' Communication Approach on Children's Co-Cultural Adaptation

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Abstract

Classrooms, where power, class, and/or cultural differentiations exist among children and their teachers, offer a rewarding setting for intercultural communication research. This case study (1) investigates how teachers in an urban elementary school, use “positive communication” to bring about hope amidst chaos in both the classroom literally and in the lives of inner city children fundamentally and (2) explores the impact of the selected classroom-communication strategies in terms of students' co-cultural adaptation. The study findings prompt us to consider how teachers can facilitate healthy co-cultural adaptation among children, who are seldom the focus of intercultural communication research.

Keywords: *intercultural communication, instructional communication, co-cultural theory, cross-cultural adaptation, inner-city schools*

Introduction

Miss Katie takes a deep breath before she enters her fourth-grade classroom. As a second-year teacher, she still feels shocked by the noise level and all the running around first thing in the morning. Five round tables, big enough to seat four or five 9 to 10-year-olds, cluster in a 300-square-foot room. A couple of energetic boys, Larry and Derek, are chasing each other through the narrow space between tables. Traffic in the tight quarters is overwhelming to Miss Katie. Larry accidentally bumps into David. David is angry, swinging his fist while cursing at Larry and life in general. At the back of the room, Caleb is drumming with his hands on the table. Mike is singing along with the drumbeats. Alexis and Tiana join the boys at the impromptu rap circle, trying out a few dance moves they watched on TV last night. The bell rings. Among the 15 students, only five are sitting with their eyes on Miss Katie, as they are supposed to be in preparation for the morning sharing circle every day at SARC (School of Advocacy in Responsive Communication). [1] Miss Katie is ready. She wants to use her training in the “Resp kid”, at a time.

According to Miss Katie and her colleagues, the rationale behind the “Responsive Classroom Approach” is to use “positive communication” in school to lay the foundation for a good life for every student. Teachers at this school maintain that through this communication approach, inner-city children's chaotic lives can be turned around by nurturing in them fortitude and abilities to rise from daily challenges into better lives. Their approach to instructional communication is more about engaging and encouraging students than about spoon-feeding academic content required for high-stake standardized testing. This approach requires both teachers and students to unlearn some communication habits and work on developing new ones. Out of the best of intentions, SARC teachers use the classroom as a site for deculturation and acculturation. To have a good life in the future, the SARC teachers believe, children need to learn to behave in the “right” way. The arising questions are: From whose perspective is a good life defined? Whose way is the right way? In situations where teachers from the dominant culture decide for the young from the non-dominant culture what communication style to acquire, what is the impact on children's co-cultural adaptation? This paper reports on the author's on-site investigation of the instructional-communication patterns utilized in the name of the “Classroom Responsive Approach” and explores the implications of this approach for intercultural-communication theories.

Context

At the time of the study, SARC was one of the 50 plus charter schools in Washington, D.C. Charter schools are funded by competitive grants awarded on the basis of innovation in teaching approaches. SARC's selling point was its emphasis on using art and the "Responsive Classroom Approach" to address the learning needs of individual students. This school, established about a decade ago, had been serving mostly K-8 students who cannot succeed in D.C. public schools (see Brandon & Brown 2010; West-Olatunji, et al. 2010). All but a few of the 140 or so students enrolled at SARC were African Americans. The few exceptions were Latino and a couple of immigrants from Central America and Africa. SARC founders believe that poor academic performance among many inner-city children is mostly caused by inadequate and ineffective classroom instruction provided by public schools instead of students' low cognitive abilities (see Nocera, 2012).

The teaching staff, at first glance, reflected cultural and racial diversity. Some were Black, some were White, and a few were from other countries. However, nearly all of them grew up in educated, middle-class families that value altruism. In contrast, most kids attending this school came from low-income, struggling families and had experienced little geographical and cultural diversity in their young lives (see Parker 2007; St. George 2011).

Connecting Theories to the Reality of Inner-City Schools

Given the socio-cultural gaps that exist among teachers and students, communication at SARC and other inner-city schools is a form of intercultural communication. This section of the paper explores how a study of instructional communication involving minority elementary-school children contributes to advancing intercultural communication theories. The effort addresses a research gap in communication studies; that is, children's communication. According to the Fall 2013 issue of "Professional Trends in Communication Scholarship," children have been left out of communication research over the last ten years. Specifically, few studies concerning intercultural communication involve children. None of the commonly cited intercultural-communication theories fully address developmental communication issues (Nussbaum & Prusank 1989), especially in classroom setting where the students' socio-cultural background is different from the teachers'. This literature review aims to explore ways in which co-cultural theory and cross-cultural adaptation theories intersect with the instructional communication approach conducted with poor inner-city minority children in the "responsive" classrooms at SARC.

Co-cultural Theory

Co-cultural communication refers to interactions among underrepresented and non-dominant-group members (Orbe 1995; Orbe & Roberts 2012). Co-culture theory assumes that non-dominant groups have norms, values, communication styles, etc., that are different from those of the dominant group. Most inner-city-school students in D.C. grow up in low-income Black neighborhoods that are influenced by a culture that is different from the school culture and from those of the teachers. The premises of co-cultural theory allow us to evaluate the extent to which instructional communication shaped by culture, class, and power differentiation (Orbe & Allen 2008) influences co-cultural adaptation of the inner-city school children.

Co-cultural Theory Premise 1: "In each society, a hierarchy that exists privileges certain groups of people" (Orbe 1998:11). An arising question is: Which group(s) of people do existing hierarchies in inner-city schools in general, and in SARC in particular, privilege? What is the influence that such hierarchies have on instructional communication and hence children's co-cultural adaptation?

Co-cultural Theory Premise 2: “On the basis of the varying levels of privilege, dominant group members occupy positions of power that they use—consciously or unconsciously—to create and maintain communication systems that reflect, reinforce, and promote their field of experiences”(Orbe1998:11). An arising question is: Do inner-school teachers who are assimilated to or heavily influenced by the dominant culture use communication to reinforce the privileged status of the norms, values, and communication styles of the dominant group in U.S. society?

Co-cultural Theory Premise 3: “Directly and/or indirectly, these dominant communication structures impede the progress of those persons whose lived experiences are not reflected in the public communicative systems” (Orbe1998:11). An arising question is: How might the communication approach aiming to teach the dominant-communication practices to school children in the inner-city classroom impact, both positively and negatively, students who grow up in low-income Black neighborhoods?

Co-cultural Theory Premise 4: “To confront oppressive dominant structures and achieve any measure of ‘success,’ co-cultural group members strategically adopt certain communication behaviors when functioning within the confines of the public communicative structures” (Orbe 1998:11). This premise leads to a number of questions: Do all co-cultural group members possess a repertoire of communication strategies? Do children have the cognitive abilities to choose how to communicate at home or in school? Is school a place where children develop the repertoire? Or, is school a place where children learn to replace one repertoire with another?

Cross-cultural Adaptation Theories

While co-cultural theory describes intercultural experiences of minorities in their country of origin, cross-cultural adaptation theories often are applied in studies concerning immigrants’ or sojourners’ experiences of settling in an alien environment. The pluralistic view of cross-cultural adaptation implies that “adaptation is a matter of conscious (or unconscious) choice on the part of individuals, depending on the sense of group identity they hold in relation to the dominant group in the receiving society” (Kim 2001:25). The assumption is that non-dominant group members have the freedom to choose to use the assimilation, separation, marginalization, or integration strategy (see Berry 1997) in the adaptation process. However, Berry maintains that non-dominant-group members do not always have the freedom to choose a preferred acculturation strategy. In some cases, non-dominant groups are required by the dominant society to “separate” from or to “assimilate” into the mainstream culture. If the dominant society is not “open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity,” non-dominant members would not be able to freely choose and successfully pursue “integration,” (Berry 1997:10; Berry 2009). In addition to societal attitudes, age appears among the dozens of factors shaping acculturation in Berry’s framework. An arising question is: How does this framework illuminate the impact of instructional communication in the elementary-school setting where young children are unlikely to be able or inclined to evaluate and appraise their everyday intercultural-contact experiences as adults would (see also Nigbur, et al. 2008)?

Two additional concepts closely related to acculturation are enculturation and deculturation. Kim’s (2001) integrative-communication theory sheds lights on the connections among enculturation, deculturation, and acculturation in the classroom communication process. Although Kim developed integrative-communication theory to understand the adaptive struggles and successes of immigrants, this theoretical model can be modified to help analyze co-cultural experiences in the inner-city-school context. Enculturation is “the process by which persons adapt to surrounding cultural forces throughout the years of socialization” (Kim 2001:47). Normally, the “enculturation process started during an individual’s childhood [It] allows the individual to establish daily routine behavior within a social group” (Somani 2010:61). According to Kim (2001), the continuous-enculturation process occurs through communication. Therefore, in the classroom context, enculturation could occur through communication strategies consciously implemented by teachers.

Conceptually, choice seems to be a key factor that distinguishes acculturation from enculturation. Enculturation occurs when people are not consciously making choices whether to accept or reject dominant-culture and/or mainstream-communication patterns (see also Weinreich 2009). In the classroom

context, under the strong influence of teachers (the authority in schools), children are likely to have little choice but to be enculturated into the school culture.

On the other hand, acculturation and deculturation take place simultaneously in Kim's conceptualization of cross-cultural adaptation. Kim (2008) explains that deculturation or unlearning occurs when one chooses to take on new cultural practices through acculturation. Kim (2001) argues that "adaptation in the new environment is not a process in which new cultural elements are simply added to prior internal conditions. As new learning occurs, deculturation (or unlearning) of at least some of the old elements has to occur..." (p. 51). If co-cultural adaptation requires a repertoire of old and new skills, deculturation would not be a constructive instructional objective. Therefore, in order to evaluate the impact of instructional communication on co-cultural experiences of SARC students, it is necessary to identify the instructional communication strategies that serve to accelerate or prevent deculturation among elementary-school children.

In sum, the following questions emerged from the literature review:

1. What is the influence that socio-cultural hierarchies have on instructional communication and hence children's co-cultural adaptation?
2. Do inner-school teachers who are assimilated to or heavily influenced by the dominant culture use communication to reinforce the privileged status of the norms, values, and communication styles of the dominant group in U.S. society?
3. How might the communication approach aiming to teach the dominant-communication practices to school children in the inner-city classroom impact, both positively and negatively, students who grow up in low-income Black neighborhoods?
4. Is school a place where children develop a repertoire of communication strategies? Or, is school a place where children learn to replace one repertoire with another?
5. What instructional communication strategies serve to accelerate or prevent deculturation among elementary-school children?
6. Do children have the cognitive abilities to choose how to communicate at home or in school?
7. How does the acculturation theoretical framework illuminate the impact of instructional communication in the elementary-school setting?

Some of the above questions helped guide data collection and others helped enrich data analysis. In order to address questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 through this case study, it is necessary to find out the teachers' educational goals for the inner-city children and the communication strategies they use to achieve those goals. Goals and strategies indicate whether the norms, values, and communication styles of the dominant group in U.S. society are being reinforced. An understanding of teachers' interpretation of students' communication patterns and their perspectives on students' communication behaviors allows me to address questions 4 and 5 more thoroughly. Although assessing children's cognitive abilities falls outside of this study, we need to take question 6 into consideration in order to address question 7. This study aims to investigate study participants' instructional goals and communication approach related to questions 1-5. In the discussion section of this paper, I will explore questions 6 and 7 based on insights derived from analyzing study findings.

Research Questions

The specific research questions that guide this study are:

- What are the educational goals shaping teachers' instructional communication approach?
- What are teachers' perception of students' communication patterns?
- What instructional communication strategies do the teacher participants use in response to their interpretation of students' communication behaviors?

- What are the cultural and intercultural considerations behind participating teachers' selection of communication strategies (if any)?

Questions about instructional communication can be addressed from the teacher's perspectives or from the learner's perspectives (see Staton-Spicer & Marty-White 1981). The study reported in this article aims to examine teachers' perspectives concerning selected instructional-communication strategies, instead of assessing learning outcomes or evaluating teachers' classroom-communication behaviors.

Research Methods

Participants and Data Collection

The author collected the previously unpublished data in October and November of 2007. I conducted individual interviews with 25 out of a total of 30 SARC staff members. Of the 25 participants, 17 were teachers and the others included the school director, the principal, the dean of students, the social worker, the school nurse, the speech therapist, the special-education coordinator, and a grant administrator. My intention was to interview all teaching staff members, but five were unable to find time to meet before my departure. Interviews took place in empty classrooms or private offices in the school. Each interview lasted about an hour. I obtained oral consent from all study participants before each interview started. Once I explained the rationale of my research, all of the participants expressed enthusiasm in sharing their viewpoints. As an active parent volunteer in the school, I was a trusted member of the school community.

Most of the teachers had taught in the school for 1 to 3 years. Only two had taught for more than five years. All of the teaching staff that I interviewed had received at least an undergraduate education. Some were working on or had completed their master's degree. Most had teacher training either through their university education or through special teacher-training programs. Thirteen are female and four are male. All but one were in their 20s and 30s. Ten of the 17 teachers are Black, two are of mixed Black and White heritage, and five are White. As a non-White and non-Black researcher from out of state, I represented neutrality in the interview process.

I prepared a list of questions to guide semi-structured interviews with each study participant (copy available upon request). The interview protocol served as a general guide for open-ended interviews rather than as a rigid template (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Follow-up questions emerged spontaneously during the interview process. With IRB approval and participants' oral consent, I tape-recorded all the interviews, which resulted in about 400 pages of transcription.

Data Analysis

I conducted thematic analysis on the transcriptions of interviews with the 17 teachers, but not those with the eight non-teaching staff members. The non-teaching staff members provided background information about the school, but they did not address the research questions regarding communication in the classroom.

In the process of analyzing the transcribed interview data, systematic coding allowed me to discover thematic categories (see Strauss & Corbin 1990). I applied open coding for organizing interview data into categories included in research questions, namely, teachers' goals, teachers' perception of students' communication patterns, and communication strategies used by teachers. Then I used axial coding for identifying themes under each of the categories. A theme emerged when an idea, a comment, a description, or an expression appeared in most of the interviews. In the following section, I will illustrate each theme with selected quotes.

Findings

The interview data contain rich information about the intercultural experience of the teachers, the co-cultural experience of the children from the teachers' perspectives, the communication patterns of the children through the eyes of the teachers, the selected communication strategies used by the teachers, and the teachers' explanation of their rationale for selecting the strategies. The findings summarized below start with a description of the educational goals shared by teacher participants. The goals reflect the values and beliefs of the teachers, which also reveal the learning needs of the students in the view of the teachers. The data also indicate that teachers' interpretation of learning needs sprang from the gap between what they expected of their students and how their students behaved in the classroom. Student classroom behaviors, their communication patterns as perceived by the teachers, help explain the rationale behind the communication strategies used by the teachers in the classroom. Teachers' descriptions of children's communication behaviors also shed light on the cultural influences that the children experience outside school. The children's co-cultural experiences as perceived by the teachers are important factors to consider when analyzing the communication strategies selected by the teachers to organize the chaotic classroom and to plant hope in the inner-city children. All in all, the data reveal that the SARC teachers neglect, negate, and/or neutralize their students' co-cultural experiences, intentionally or unintentionally, when selecting communication strategies for classroom interactions.

Teachers' Goals

Without much prompting, the teachers talked about their hopes for their students when reflecting upon the communication strategies they used not only for disciplinary purposes but for transforming the children. None of the teachers mentioned that they strived to develop in their students' literacy and math skills. Their goals, unlike the common rhetoric of mainstream educators, were not about preparing students to excel in standardized testing or engaging students in rigorous subject-content learning. The SARC teachers' education goals focused on nurturing in the students fortitude and abilities to rise from life challenges into a better life. The selected quotes below represent the themes emerged from teachers' sharing on educational goals:

"What's important to me is wherever they are, they're being independent... They're going to need to be responsible for themselves and doing the right thing," said Ms. Brenda.

"These kids aren't really that bad. They just need discipline...or what you call tough love..." said Ms. Tomi.

"I want them to feel that they can be successful if they're on the Metro, if they're in a store, if they're in another state...their skin color should not matter..." said Ms. Apoorva.

"Resiliency, resiliency, and resiliency will serve them well anywhere," said Ms. Sally.

"My job is to...expose them to different things outside of where they live...redirect them..." said Mr. Alex.

These goals appeared to be shaped by the teachers' understanding of students' socio-cultural backgrounds, home experiences, and survival needs. Most of the children were from low-income, blue-collar families while nearly all of the teachers were brought up by middle-class, educated parents and were highly educated themselves. The teachers, many of whom had diverse academic, professional, and travel experiences, knew how life could be much richer than life saturated with TV images and violent video games, which the teachers perceived as major parts of SARC students' exposure. The teachers also perceived the importance of resiliency and independence for children who received little support and supervision from their parents. Such understandings are likely to have influenced how the teachers interpreted their students' communication behaviors.

Teachers' Interpretation of Student Communication Patterns

The SARC teachers interpreted their students' communication patterns both positively and negatively. Most of them noticed that the children were naturally musical, physical, and energetic. All of the teacher participants expressed disapproval toward students' being restless, aggressive, disrespectful, and loud. Given limited space, I selected only one quote to illustrate each theme that emerged from study participants' descriptions of student communication patterns.

Musical

"They use song a lot. They love to sing and love to dance....," said Miss Margaret.

Physical/Communal

"A lot of kids always want to hug you.... They're moving around. They've getting up constantly to get more materials. Or they're going over other people's shoulder to see what they did. They have to have that kind of connection if they're around other people...just natural to them," said Ms. Apoorva.

Energetic/Animated

"African American students have a natural inclination for more dynamic activities, more active learning...very much more animated.... Lots of body movement, lots of arm movement, lots of body, just head and legs, everything's always going....," said Ms. Grace.

Disrespectful

"A sense of respect for adults is missing.... They don't follow directions." said Ms. Branda.

Aggressive

"I have to put up with a lot of fits just to get through my day. Their pattern is more aggressive here and it's not even on purpose. I just think that the children really want a voice," said Ms. Tomi.

Loud

"Screaming is...their mode of communication.... Hollering and jumping around inappropriately," said Mr. Gavin.

Only one teacher acknowledged African American or Black culture as a source of influence on SARC students' "dynamic" communication behaviors. Nearly all of the teachers believed that inner-city culture was the main source of influence and that some behaviors were just natural for kids. For instance, kids were just naturally "touchy" because they needed attention. On the other hand, lack of educated adult guidance in the children's lives also explained why they wanted to be heard and why they relied on movements to communicate instead of words. One teacher pointed out that the inner-city neighborhood was a culture all in itself. For instance, the inner-city speech pattern was full of "slang" and was distinctly different from "proper English." Being aggressive, the teachers believed, was required in the inner-city "survival the fittest" environment. Some of the teachers perceived that children who grew up in the inner-city environment were used to people yelling at them, loud talking, TV on all day long, and crowded living conditions. To the teachers, the inner-city culture rather than African American culture explained

the children's musical inclination, short attention span, loud-communication habits, and close personal space.

Communication Strategies Used by Teachers

Teachers' choices of communication strategies appeared to be determined by two main factors: their interpretation of students' communication behaviors as shaped by their understanding of students co-cultural experience and their educational goals for students. When asked to describe the "positive communication" approach that all teachers claimed to use at SARC, the main themes that emerged from the teachers' descriptions were "respect," "care," and "opening communication." For instance, Ms. Apoorva explained, "It [SARC] is very democratic and it's very safe because now they are in a place where they can express themselves and they'll be listened to." The SARC teachers used communication strategies to engage and encourage students who came from homes where little caring communication existed. The teachers also used communication strategies to educate those children who were accustomed to "disrespectful" communication toward adults.

The teachers labeled the approach as the "Responsive Classroom Approach." Analysis of the interview data reveals that the "responsiveness" highlighted by the study participants occasionally, but not consistently, responded to the children's co-cultural experiences. What emerged from teachers' descriptive and explanatory statements about "responsiveness" are three themes: to neglect, to negate, and to naturalize co-cultural influences. "Neglecting" and "negating" co-cultural influences through classroom communication, intentionally or not, would likely reinforce the dominant-communication structures. On the other hand, "to naturalize," or to include some aspects of children's home communication style in classroom communication, could serve to validate students' home culture and thus encourage children to maintain a range of communication styles that allow them to code-switch across cultural contexts. In the interviews, most teachers indicated that they used all three of these communication strategies. However, they talked more about strategies that fall under the themes of "neglecting" and "negating" than "naturalizing" ones.

To Neglect

Every teacher participated in the study believed that the "Responsive Classroom Approach" was beneficial for all children regardless of backgrounds. When asked to explain the approach, the teachers focused on describing communication strategies. Given limited space, I selected only two quotes to illustrate the consistent themes:

"Our strategies are about forming choices for the students, articulating those to them, letting them know that they have positive choices to make. Telling students possible things to do in the affirmative, ...less 'don't this, don't that,' but more 'you should be doing this, you should be doing that.' Use positive language, positive interactions," described Ms. Lisa.

"We try to make sure that they resolve their issues up front and they're verbal and communicating. [For example], 'I'm sorry, but I did this because I was angry at the time about this.' And they take ownership for their own actions....write apology notes," described Ms. Margaret.

The values that the teachers try to instill in the children through instructional communication are "making good choices" "positive communication," "logical consequences," "participatory decision-making" and "taking ownership of one's action." None of the teacher participants talked about the cultural perspective from which "good" "positive" and logical" were defined. Nor did any of them indicate that they had taken into consideration whether participatory decision-making and taking ownership were appropriate for children in students' home culture. Analysis of teacher participants' descriptions reveals a shared belief that these values are beneficial to all children regardless of socio-cultural backgrounds.

The teachers believed that democratic communication, positive verbal reinforcement, constructive verbal conflict resolution approach were what students needed to learn. Most of the teachers indicated they had not reflected on the extent to which those communications strategies were valued in students' home cultures. Most teachers did not attempt to find out about the cultural meanings of the selected communication practices in their students' culture or lives after school. For instance, "circle," "family," "collective responsibilities" are important concepts in African American culture. Avoiding eye contact is an act of respect in many cultures. Only two teacher participants indicated these particular cross-cultural considerations. The rationale of their neglect was that some behaviors were more "proper" than others. These teachers aimed to teach the "proper" way according to dominant group's standards, regardless of the norms in students' cultures. Given limited space, I selected only two quotes to illustrate the purposeful neglect of cultural factors:

"I don't teach them how to turn it on and off [code switch]. I think here we really try to model a more verbal way of communicating with people," said Ms. Margaret.

"I think the language should still be [the focus].... This is the way that I speak and this is the way that it should be spoken. And I'm teaching that way....proper English. This is what society expects," said Mr. Gavin.

To Negate

When the communication strategies practiced at SARC contradicted the patterns students were accustomed to outside school, some teachers explicitly chose to teach students to unlearn "the outside" or home practices. These teachers insisted that students replaced their "old bad" habits with the "new good" habits taught at SARC. Given limited space, I selected only two quotes to illustrate such a shared belief:

"They're so used to bumping into each other that they don't understand how to give space. And then once they sort of got to see what it felt like to have personal space, then it was easy for them to respect other people's personal space," said Ms. Sarah.

"I do not talk like a White person, I just talk correctly. I do not want short answers and we want explanation here. So you should try it. And I would tell them [the children], you need to talk the way I'm talking, because this is how you need to talk in order to succeed in life. The broken grammar and all the slang--that's not going to get you anywhere," said Ms. Terry.

These statements also capture the communication approach advocated at SARC. When teachers used these communication strategies, they negated students' co-cultural experiences. These strategies served to instill in the children, intentionally or not, the teachers' or the school's ways, which the teachers communicated as superior to the ways at home. These specific communication strategies were not "responsive" to students' orientations as shaped by their home cultures. On the other hand, when differences were not contradictions, some of the teachers would use strategies that were more aligned with the literal meaning of the "responsive" approach.

To Naturalize

Some of the literally responsive strategies used by SARC teachers intended to create a classroom environment that is natural and comfortable to the children. For instance, study participants described communication strategies that aimed to address SARC students' developmental, psychological, and/or physical needs. The teachers also explained communication strategies that aimed to respond to students' interests. Sometimes teachers even integrated elements of students' communication styles into their speech patterns for the following functional purposes:

To meet developmental, psychological, and physical needs

“I’m working with five-year olds. They don’t have to sit and be quiet except for very short periods during the day, because that’s just not how they’re going to get information. So we do a lot of songs, we do a lot of movement, we do a lot of pictures, a lot of art. That’s the way younger children are going to pick information up.... I give them hugs and kisses....they can earn five kisses if they do something. So they are kind of at this age,” said Ms. Grace.

To relate to students’ interests

“I’m not putting myself culturally aside from them because ... we have our classroom culture. But when I’m joking around with the kids, I’ll do things that they do, like with the high fives, and using certain speech patterns they use, or talking about the music that they like. And I’ve studied hip-hop dance. I’ve done things like that so that I can relate to them,” said Ms. Lisa.

To Function

“When the kids were having trouble communicating, they needed help with something, that’s when they started acting out. ... I would use some of their terminology to shock them, and it works because it gets their attention,” said Ms. Terry.

During the interviews, most of the teachers emphasized practical considerations when explaining the rationale behind the “responsive” communication strategies. They wanted to meet the needs of the students, to relate to the students, and to create a conducive learning environment that feels “natural” or familiar to the students. Although the teachers did not explicitly help students develop a communication repertoire to be used in different intercultural contexts, the teachers’ attempt to integrate some elements of the students’ home cultures into the classroom communication served as a form of validation of students’ co-cultural experiences. The arising question is whether such validation would be overshadowed by negation that took place alongside with neglect.

Discussion

The overarching question that initiated this study is concerned with the influence of socio-cultural hierarchies on instruction communication and hence inner-city children’s co-cultural adaptation. Specifically, in the context of this case study, how might a communication approach aiming to teach communication practices valued in the U.S. society impact, both positively and negatively, students who grow up in low-income inner-city neighborhoods? The study findings about the SARC teachers’ instructional communication approach based on their educational goals and their perception of students communication behaviors shed light on these questions. In addition, the acculturation theoretical concepts, namely enculturation and deculturation (Kim 2001), are helpful for analyzing the impact of instructional communication in the elementary-school setting.

In the context of SARC, to neglect students’ home or heritage cultural orientations in the name of teaching “the right way” is a form of enculturation. Whose way is the “right” way? In the inner-city classroom, the “right” way is based on the teachers’ moral standards, classroom rules influenced by middle-class values, and the norms of the mainstream society, the dominant culture (see also Muhammad 2007). In addition, most of the teachers seem to believe that there are “universal” standards of what is “right” and what is “a good life” for all kids. The belief in the universality of the selected instructional-communication approaches permits the teachers to ignore or neglect students’ experiences outside school in certain communication areas. In the dominant culture where the teachers completed K-16 education and teacher training, to sit still, listen, wait for your turn, etc., are the “right” things to do in the classroom. When the “right” things do not include what are “right” at home and in other interaction contexts, the enculturation process is not helping to pave the way for co-cultural adaptation (West-Olatunji, et al. 2010).

Co-cultural theory maintains that non-dominant-group members “strategically adopt certain communication behaviors” during intercultural encounters within the confines of the dominant culture (Orbe 1998:11). Such a strategic move is possible only if non-dominant group members are aware of the distinct communication patterns shaped by each culture in their lives. At the same time, they need to possess a repertoire of communication strategies to draw from and the abilities to select an approach that would bring about desirable outcomes. Is school a place where children develop such a repertoire and abilities? Or, is it a place where children learn to replace one repertoire with another? The case of SARC suggests the latter. At SARC, the instructional-communication approach that operates “to neglect” or to use culture-oblivious-communication strategies does not serve to assist students to develop the enabling repertoire. The communication strategies that serve “to negate” students’ home and/or co-cultural group influences on communication behaviors end up guiding students to unlearn their home and/or in-group practices. Such unlearning is a form of deculturation that hinders the development of a communication repertoire or *choices* required for strategic co-cultural adaptation.

Kim’s (2001) integrated theory of communication posits that deculturation or unlearning occurs as one *chooses* to take on new cultural practices in a new environment through acculturation. In the case of SARC, deculturation is not always a choice. Referring to the communication patterns at home or the inner-city neighborhoods, the teachers insist that children unlearn the “improper” ways. Such deculturation experienced by SARC students reflects a form of co-cultural adaptation imposed by the teachers upon the children. Communication strategies aiming “to negate ” would not serve to validate students’ co-cultural experiences. Such negating strategies would not help children develop the communication repertoire and the abilities that allow co-cultural members to “code-switch” depending on the intercultural contexts.

On the other hand, other communication strategies utilized by the teachers could counter some of the negative impacts of deculturation. A few communication strategies selected by teachers at SAR Care explicitly and implicitly responsive to the students’ co-cultural orientations, although the stated rationale is to address children’s developmental needs, hobbies, and tasks at hand. While some teacher participants recognize that certain dimensions of SARC students’ communication are consistent with the generalizations described in the literature (see, for example, Hale 1982; Hamlet 2000; Hecht, et al. 1993; Houston 2000; Irvine 1990; Paris 2009), all of the participants downplayed that cultural association. Most of the teachers tend to explain away the cultural association by referring to other “natural” factors. For instance, some teacher participants explain that kids naturally enjoy being near people and young children need lots of hugs and kisses because of their age. Also, young children like to call out their responses, a teacher participant explains, because they have not learned the mature ways of taking turns. Circle, according to another teacher, is a mundane concept commonly used in mainstream education. Why do the teachers avoid framing their instructional communication approach in cultural terms?

The teacher participants indicate that catering to inner-city children’s home culture is not educationally sound. This perspective appears to be an outcome of assimilative education experienced by most of the teachers in the socio-cultural hierarchies of the U.S. society (see De Jaeghere & Cao 2009). Many aspects of inner-city culture contradict the “best practices” that teachers are trained to implement in the classroom. In addition, the reality is complex. The teachers tend to avoid separating cultural influences from socio-economic factors and the individual learning needs of the students, especially when over 50 percent of the students are diagnosed with learning disabilities in the public school system. This tendency underlies the instructional communication approach “to naturalize,” to adapt to the children’s needs while the students are learning to adapt to the communication norms at SARC and the larger society. The difference between the teachers’ experience versus the children’s experience is that the teachers consciously shift their communication patterns to achieve their desired outcomes, but the children are not encouraged to choose whether to adopt any interaction form or format in the classroom context.

Even if choice is available or allowed, do children have the cognitive abilities to choose how to communicate at home or in school? In “Co-cultural Theorizing: Foundations, Applications, and Extensions,” Orbe and Roberts (2012) hypothesize that six interrelated factors influence the choice of communication strategies selected by non-dominant-group members to communicate within dominant-societal structures. The six factors include preferred outcome, field of experience, abilities, situational context, perceived costs and rewards, and communication approach (see also Lowe, et al. 2011; Simmons

et al. 2013). The “abilities” factor implies that level of cognitive maturity influences one’s choice. Adults are more likely than children are to be able to act according to conscious evaluation of specific situations and to select from a repertoire of communication strategies. In the elementary-school context, most children developmentally are unable to decipher the relative positioning of the social groups they interact with. It is unlikely that elementary-school children have developed the critical consciousness required for identifying desired outcomes of interactions that determine what strategies to choose to communicate in intercultural/intergroup settings.

Can formal education, as a form of socialization, serve to nurture in children the abilities to decide consciously what communication strategies to use with dominant groups in society? Can the enculturation process that takes place in school pave the way for acculturation (implying choices) in the future? Would it be constructive to make this an instructional objective? For instance, enculturation through instructional communication can be an educational process that aims to expand learners’ repertoire to include abilities to participate effectively in both one’s home culture and the mainstream culture of larger society. Given the capability to choose, acculturation and deculturation would be one’s choice instead of assimilation outcomes. Given the ability to “code-switch,” one can choose to adapt to each context without neglecting, negating, or degrading one’s “old self” all together. For instance, in the case of SARC, the school children (non-dominant-group members) could engage in enculturation when learning to behave in teachers’ desired ways (the dominant-communication structure) while developing the ability to choose when to deculturate or acculturate. To expand Kim’s model in alignment with co-cultural theory, I would define “healthy co-cultural adaptation” to encompass enculturation, deculturation, and acculturation (see Figure 1).

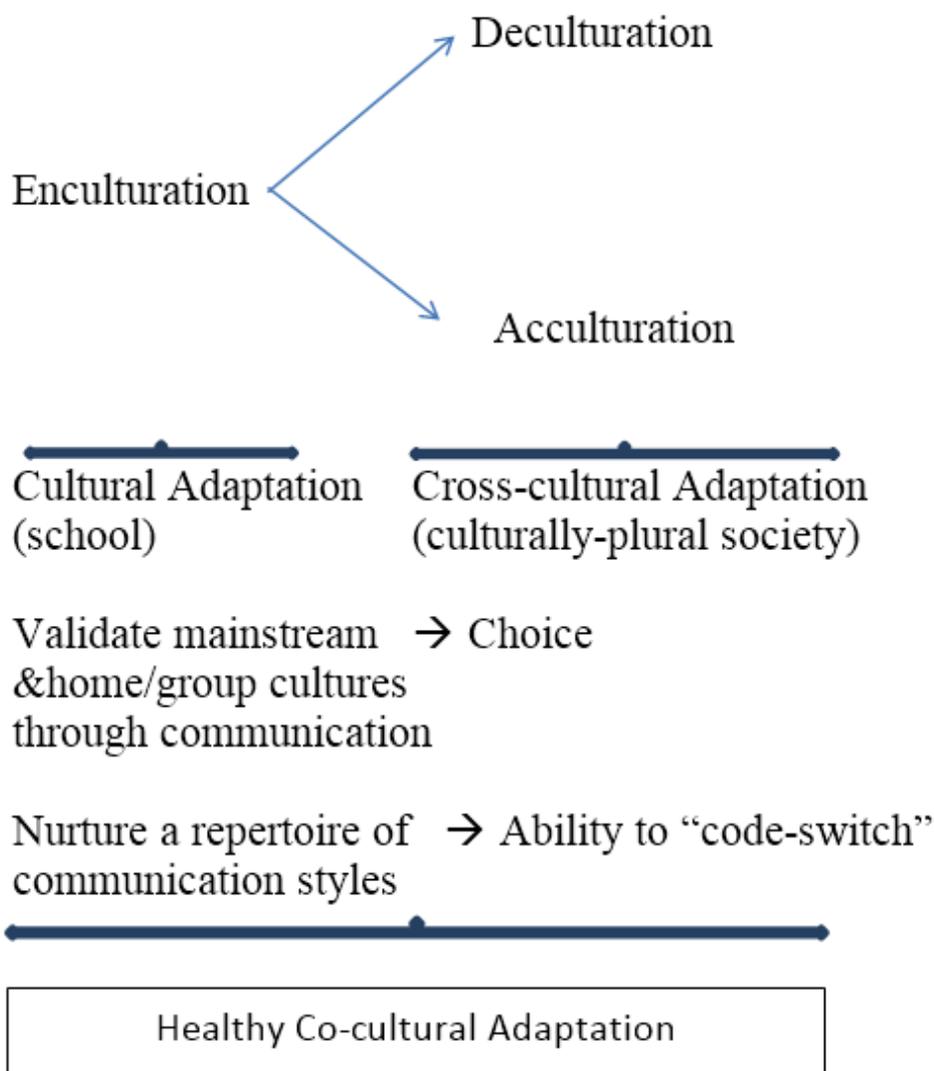


Figure 1: Co-cultural Adaptation Model adapted from Cultural/Cross-cultural Adaptation Model (see Kim, 2001 p. 53).

Conclusion

If one wants to choose which communication strategy to use in co-cultural interactions or what adaptation approach to take in co-cultural situations, one needs to develop a repertoire of strategies and approaches, or at least recognize the range of possibilities. In the school context, teachers could encourage students to embrace both the communication practices used in the classroom and the communication style dominant in their neighborhood. If students have both co-cultures validated in their toolbox, they would eventually develop the ability to choose intercultural communication strategies that bring about desired outcomes depending on the context. Students could learn or be taught to “switch between cultures quickly” and “drift between them over a longer period” (see Hannerz 1974:153). These choices are available only if co-cultural members or acculturating individuals are aware of the distinct communication patterns shaped by each culture in their lives. Teachers can help nurture in children such critical consciousness through instructional communication.

Instructional communication can serve to lay the foundation for a good life for inner-city children (Gay 2000; Grant & Sleeter 2011). On the surface, communication is just a tool. This study reveals that how teachers perceive and react to co-cultural differences in the K- 8 classroom carries deep and far-reaching implications. The communication strategies used by teachers, the authority, can either facilitate or stifle development of healthy intercultural or co-cultural identities and adaptation capabilities in the young. The question requiring further research is: *How* can teachers help facilitate healthy co-cultural adaptation among children of different ages, especially in inner-city contexts?

Future studies can investigate the extent to which children of different ages are equipped to make acculturation choices. Classrooms, such as at SARC, where power, class, and/or culture differentiation exists between children and their teachers influenced by the dominant culture, provide a rewarding setting for further attention by intercultural communication researchers working in close collaboration with scholars trained in instructional communication, cross-cultural psychology, and multicultural education. Researchers in these fields can collaborate to “offer a productive way for marginalized persons... [including students] to assert their identities and affirm their dignities” (Alexander, et al. 2014:77). Children are seldom the focus of communication-studies research (Communication Institute 2013). This study shows the importance of expanding and refining communication theories to address issues influencing the growing mind.

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[1]The author changed the school name and the names of all other participants for confidential reasons.

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