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The creation and maintenance of a 'learning-loving minority' in conventional high schools: a research-based response to John Ogbu

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The creation and maintenance of a 'learning–loving minority' in conventional high schools: a research-based response to John Ogbu

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This research focuses on the adaptation strategies of students from an innovative elementary school run as a community of learners who have been involuntarily 'thrown into' competitive, credentialism-based high schools. We apply the anthropologist John Ogbu's comparative historico-ecological framework of 'minority' to the innovative school graduates in their new school contexts. The students in our study, whom we refer to as a 'learning-loving minority', were generally academically successful in their new conventional schools, yet expressed distinctly ambivalent attitudes toward conventional schooling practices. Discourse analysis revealed distinct response patterns, some paralleling those of (unsuccessful) involuntary minority students and others paralleling those of (successful) immigrant minority students described by Ogbu. We suggest that Ogbu's comparative historico-ecological approach can be useful for education research but should be modified to take into account the effect of the institution of conventional schooling itself—its competitive, credentialistic and meritocratic nature—which has to date been under-analysed within Ogbu's theoretical perspective.

Introduction

This paper has emerged as a dialogic interaction between our own research data and the research of John Ogbu (2003), and our (re)interpretations of his and our data in the light of this fruitful dialogue. Our research focused on students' transition from an innovative, collaborative private K-8 school,[1] Newark Center for Creative Learning (NCCL), to local conventional high schools. This transition was involuntary and cultural; NCCL developed its own practices and overarching educational, cultural

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and social values in its members, yet it went only through year 8, and there was no similar learning environment available at the secondary level in the nearby area. We tracked a cohort consisting of one entire class of recent NCCL graduates during their first year in conventional high schools.

While we were collecting our data in the state of Delaware, USA, we were reading Ogbu's book *Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic disengagement* (2003) in which he attempts to separate class effects from race effects in unequal school achievement by studying middle-class African American students in the state of Ohio, USA. We began to critically view our own work in progress in light of his analysis, and vice versa. We began to see that these two ostensibly different investigations into primarily middle-class populations— 1) mostly African American students in conventional schools (Ogbu) and 2) mostly White students in transition from collaborative to conventional schools (us)—had surprising implications for each other. This dialogic interaction of our study with Ogbu led to interesting methodological and conceptual consequences.

To begin with, our preliminary analysis of the alumni's discourse about their transitions convinced us that we should use Ogbu's framework of 'minority' to describe the NCCL alumni's experiences, attitudes, strategies, beliefs and approaches to their new schools (DePalma *et al.*, 2009). This notion of 'minority' comes from Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory and, in our context, does not refer to race and ethnicity. Ogbu's interpretations centred on how a group comes to create an oppositional identity to the mainstream, seeing themselves as culturally and historically distinct. This 'minority' group, in turn, develops a set of coping strategies that Ogbu referred to as 'secondary cultural characteristics', so termed because they emerge as a response to the mainstream culture. Our early interviews with NCCL graduates strongly suggested that they saw themselves positioned as outsiders and appropriated 'minority' discourses in describing themselves largely in contrast to and in opposition with their new peers (who did not share their educational history and perspectives). It is exactly this curious interplay between our NCCL alumni's majority status in a broader cultural context and their positioning as 'minorities' in their specific new school contexts that provides an interesting critical lens.

We want to again emphasise here that we have deliberately taken the NCCL students' situated perspective as an analytical frame because we are interested in analysing Ogbu's notion of 'minority' oppositional identity as developed within his comparative historico-ecological approach (discussed further in the paper). By doing so, we do not consider these students to be minorities in the sense of broader cultural and historical inequities (as the term is generally used, for example, in critical race theory).

The students in our study, whom we refer to (using their own terminology) as a 'learning-loving minority', were generally academically successful in their new conventional schools, yet expressed distinctly ambivalent attitudes toward conventional schooling practices. Furthermore, in an intriguing comparison with Ogbu's analyses, these NCCL alumni were academically successful and developed strategies for academic success while maintaining a group oppositional identity in regard to their conventional high schools. Our analysis of their discourse revealed distinct

response patterns, some of which parallel those of Ogbu's (unsuccessful) involuntary minority students and others parallel to those of Ogbu's (successful) immigrant minority students. Overall, our analysis suggests that the comparative historico-ecological approach can be useful but should be modified to take into account the effect of the institution of conventional schooling itself—its competitive, credential, and meritocratic nature—an aspect which has to date been under-analysed and not been critically considered in Ogbu's theoretical perspective.

Our project: Collaborative research with the NCCL community

The Newark Center for Creative Learning (NCCL) describes itself on its website as a small parent cooperative, founded in 1971 with a student-centred philosophy meant to guide children to 'become fully immersed in their work, enjoying their pursuit of knowledge' (Newark Center for Creative Learning).[2] Based on our discussions with staff and students, as well as our own participation in the school, we have extrapolated the following key ways in which the NCCL differs from most conventional schools:

- A free-choice learning environment (Falk & Dierking, 2002) in which children have a degree of autonomy to design and implement learning projects according to their own interests;
- No pre-set universal academic curricula;
- No grades (teachers prepare narrative reports of students progress);
- Expectation that parents will be highly and significantly involved (the school explicitly identifies as a parent cooperative);
- Multi-aged classrooms;
- A policy of discouraging competition and encouraging cooperative learning.

Like some other innovative collaborative schools (Rogoff *et al.*, 1996; Rogoff *et al.*, 2001), the NCCL has modelled itself as a community of learners. Our research suggests that over the years the school has been largely successful in defining itself as a community that is culturally distinct from conventional schooling, a sentiment expressed by the following NCCL graduate in her university application letter:

> Most kids learn to hate school by the time they are in second or third grade … By the time I entered high school, I had received much more than I would have with a 'normal' education. … *I learned to love learning.* (2005)

This cultural difference is made particularly clear to the students at the end of their 8th year, as the school terminates and the children are forced to leave the school for secondary schools that are, to a greater or lesser extent, considerably more conventional in their schooling practices than the NCCL. We set out to investigate how one cohort of NCCL graduates experienced this transition to their new school cultures with the goal of facilitating the process for future graduates.

To this end, we followed the entire graduating class, a naturally-occurring cohort of 13 students, seven boys and six girls, from the end of their last year at NCCL (grade 8) to the end of their first academic year in their respective high schools

(grade 9). The participants were all White, except one boy who was the child of French-speaking African-Caribbean immigrants. Research questions were collaboratively designed in May 2004, based on a preliminary meeting with NCCL teachers in which we asked them to discuss the main questions they would like us to investigate regarding the NCCL's perceptions of, in the official terminology of the school, 'graduation anxiety' (Newark Center for Creative Learning).

Students seemed particularly enthusiastic about the prospect of designing a web-based discussion space for them to keep in contact with each other, so this formed a part of the data collection process as well as four focus group interviews conducted with the graduates every two to three months throughout their first year of high school (2004/2005). The NCCL teachers helped to organise these meetings, which were held at the NCCL and were partially social events where graduates reconnected with each other and shared their progress. For this reason, they were called reunions. We also conducted a parent survey at the end of the study and finally offered a videotaped formal presentation of the study results, inviting parents, teachers, graduates, and current NCCL pupils to comment on the emerging findings.[3] We chose focus group interviews and group web discussion postings as our primary data collection tools because, like Ogbu, we were interested in the nature of the peer culture. Ogbu focused on 'community forces' in terms of the Black community, while we took the NCCL community culture as our unit of analysis. The fact that students discussed their perceptions in peer groups, mostly physically located at the school, was meant to foster the cultural nature of their responses rather than separate individuals' 'real' interpretations from those influenced by the NCCL culture. However, the participants were encouraged to comment on our emerging interpretations, and these took the form of personal email responses.

The graduates attended nine different high schools, which they described as varying in their degree of conventionality but unanimously defined as essentially different from the NCCL. Drawing upon Ogbu's framework, we will focus here on our subjects' creation and maintenance of a collective (learning loving) minority identity in opposition to what they perceived as an unfamiliar and somewhat alien school culture. We will discuss the implications of our data for a critique of Ogbu's framework, not to shatter or disprove it, but to engage in the lively dialogue that has continued beyond Ogbu's own lifespan in the spirit of what Foster refers to as forward-looking criticism; 'to refine [Ogbu's theory], to build upon its strengths, and correct its shortcomings' (2008, p. 589).

Dialogic engagement with Ogbu's research and theory

Ogbu's highly influential work analysing the systematic failure of African Americans schools in the USA has been extended not only to other North American contexts, such as Mexican-Americans (Gibson, 2005), African-Canadians (Cummins, 1997) and specifically female ethnic minorities (Hubbard, 2005), but has also been applied to cultural contexts as diverse as Arabs in Israel (Kalekin-Fishman, 2004), Moroccans in Belgium and the Netherlands (Hermans, 2004) and African-Caribbeans and

Asians in the UK (Gillborn, 1997). He developed what he called 'a cultural-ecological framework' (2003, p. 45) to explain difference in school achievements among different types of minorities. However, we prefer to call Ogbu's framework 'a comparative historico-ecological' approach, since it appears that many of Ogbu's interpretations are best seen as historical, as opposed to specific cultural differences between minority students and mainstream students. This approach is comparative by nature because it is generated by an inquiry into why one social group does better in the same social practice or institution than another social group. Ogbu always used comparison even when he investigated only one social group:

> [I]n Shaker Heights [Ohio, USA] schools, and elsewhere in the United States, the interlocking issues of collective identity, culture, and language are better understood from a comparative perspective—that is, the responses of Blacks as non-immigrant group are compared with those of an immigrant minority group. (2003, p. 174)

Ogbu locates the main reasons for school achievement gaps in the history of how a specific minority social group acquired its minority status. When a social group arrives in a new society voluntarily based on a conscious decision to better their life, its members develop a differential collective identity, perceiving themselves as being different from the mainstream dominant group. Although some cultural aspects of the new society's dominant practices and institutions may undermine and threaten certain cultural traditions valued by the minority groups, other aspects are attractive to and accepted by the minority group (which is why these people come to the new society in the first place). The dominant cultural practices and institutions are not rejected by these voluntary immigrant minorities in their totality but rather pragmatically used by the minority as needed for their own social advancement. In contrast, when a social group has historically found itself violently subdued by the dominant group due to slavery (e.g. African Americans), conquest (e.g. Native Americans and Chicanos), or ostracism (e.g. the Buraku people in Japan), they develop an oppositional collective identity, perceiving themselves as being in opposition to the mainstream dominant group. Wholehearted acceptance of a mainstream dominant practice or institution by a member of their minority group is perceived by many members in the involuntary minority as a betrayal of their ancestors, who suffered past oppression and injustice, and of the whole contemporary community based on oppositional solidarity (Ogbu, 2003, pp. 44–55).

We have reconsidered Ogbu's data and findings as presented in his last study (Ogbu, 2003) in the light of our own data and analysis and developed a revised explanation of his findings. He consistently defines the purpose of education in terms of social efficiency and social mobility (Ogbu, 2003, pp. 41, 49, 116, 122–123,145, 170–171), but he does not seem to mention any other possible goals for school learning, such as empowering citizens to participate in a democratic society (Labaree, 1997) or self-actualisation and self-growth (Maslow, 1943; Kohl, 1970; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Liston & Zeichner, 1996). Our NCCL students insisted on considering these other purposes for education, particularly those involving self-actualising, meaningful learning.

The attitudes to school expressed by our NCCL 'learning loving minorities' closely paralleled what he describes as immigrant minority attitudes, yet at the same time they sometimes came closer to involuntary minority attitudes. We believe that comparing and contrasting NCCL students with both immigrant and involuntary minority students reveals the effect of the current prevailing culture on the institution of schooling itself (Foster, 2004), a factor that Ogbu does not adequately account for in his historical analysis.

NCCL minority status: a 'learning-loving minority' reflect on their involuntary transition

NCCL graduates tended to define their new schools in terms of a nostalgic view of NCCL, and their new peers in contrast with themselves, as if they had come from two different cultural worlds. When asked, most of the NCCL alumni felt that they were fundamentally different from their classmates in their current high school. They emphasised the difference between conventional schooling and what the NCCL graduate defined earlier as a 'learning loving minority':

> My school and me are on opposite *ends* of the universe, literally [laughs]. … I don't understand why people wouldn't have an interest in learning sometimes … in general we're on opposite ends of the universe. (Sarah, reunion 3)

The alumni saw the primary value of NCCL as promoting genuine learning, love for academic learning, and building a learning community among the students and the teachers. Sarah, who had attended a conventional elementary school before switching to NCCL, reflected back on this cultural shift; 'When I went to NCCL I started to love learning, which was something completely new' (reunion 2).

It was this comment from Sarah, along with students' reflections on their transition from NCCL to conventional high school as a sort of involuntary trauma and their perceived collective difference from their new peers, which led us to take seriously as an analytical frame the self-defined notion of a 'learning loving minority' in their new schools. This notion was supported by parent surveys emphasising NCCL's contribution to promote a 'real passion for learning … enthusiasm for discovering new things and … respect of others' in their children. Some parents consider transition of their children from NCCL to conventional high school as 'a rite of passage'. While high schools seemed to vary in terms of types of instruction, from mainly lectures and rigid assignments to open-ended project-based ones, all NCCL alumni characterised current high schools as conventional and not like NCCL (reunion 3).

In their understanding of conventional schools as a category transcending internal variations, NCCL alumni echoed Stigler and Hiebert's (1998) argument that despite the wide variety of curricular and instructional design across US schools, our schools share a cultural, political and philosophical history. The institution of schooling in the USA, as we know it today, is by definition competitive (there can be no success without failure) and credentialistic (success and ability are measured externally to learning itself: IQ, passing grades, test scores, acquisition of diplomas and certificates, etc.).

Academic achievement is defined by measurable performances, and successful students are sorted from unsuccessful ones on the basis of these performances into pre-determined categories of success versus failure, ability versus disability, demonstrating the preset material versus not demonstrating the preset material (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). This is a fundamentally cultural aspect of US schooling that does not depend on or change according to quality of teaching, availability of resources, or particular learning theories that guide instructional and curricular design.

All participants described their high schools, in contrast to NCCL, as having grade systems, desks, rigid and predictably repetitious time schedules, and large amounts of sometimes boring and irrelevant homework that creates stress and demands on the students' time and effort without mobilising their interests or addressing needs (reunion 3). Some NCCL alumni described their current school teachers as caring, like in NCCL (Robert, reunion 3). Others, like Danielle (reunion 3), described them as not caring while others described their teachers as a mixture (Derek, reunion 3). Nevertheless, all alumni report that they felt closer to their NCCL teachers, whom they addressed by their first names (reunion 3). One NCCL teacher described this practice as a conscious effort to create a particular kind of school culture:

> [I]t was a conscious decision on the staff's part … to remove some of the artefacts of traditional teacher roles. It was the early 70's and many traditional behaviours were being challenged … For one thing, it is an immediate message to the students that things are different at NCCL, it is an informal environment. Some outside people have been concerned that if the kids use our first names, they will disrespect us. We take the view that respect is earned. It shouldn't come as part of a title. (Melinda, NCCL teacher, personal communication, February 2006)

This comment helps us to understand how the NCCL alumni might perceive themselves as being culturally different from their new peers. Having come from an environment with a particular history and philosophy, their understandings of learning have been culturally constructed in a way different from the culturally constructed understandings of their new peers.

NCCL alumni were asked to reflect specifically on their 'boot camp', an intensive week of simulating conventional school practices in the 8th grade designed by NCCL staff to prepare students for anticipated hardships in conventional schools.[4] In the opinion of the NCCL alumni, this preparation was useful and necessary, as it softened the culture shock:

> Andy: [Y]ou come from an innocent environment where grades don't matter and everything and you're not taking tests, they're not really big things. But the real reason for boot camp, I think, is to give you a feel, so that when you go back to, when you go into that environment you're not completely stumped as to losing the mind aspect of it in a sense. [reunion 2]

It is clear that the NCCL alumni describe their transition as moving from something good they experienced in NCCL to something bad that they are experiencing in conventional schools. This was consistent across all NCCL alumni, including Cameron, who described his high school as the least different from NCCL. The NCCL alumni perceive their transition from NCCL to a conventional high school as

involuntary. The NCCL alumni were unanimous in their desire to stay in NCCL if they could have:

Eddie:	… I say that there should be an NCCL high school, so I could go to that [sounds of assent from others].
Sarah:	(looking at Melinda, a teacher) OK, so you have four years to come up with an NCCL college, and I'm counting on you.
Third author:	If there was an NCCL high school, would you all go there?
Sarah:	Yes!
Cameron:	I would!
Robert:	Oh, yeah!
[Amy nods]. (reunion 2)	

When the NCCL alumni mentioned and discussed NCCL and their previous experiences in it, they all talked very fondly about their past school. Their comments were emotionally coloured as they explicitly and implicitly compared NCCL with their current schools. They praised the quality and humanity of the NCCL instruction and missed the high degree of teacher–student bonding that they experienced at NCCL.

When asked to elaborate on why they feel nostalgia for NCCL, their responses revealed essential connections between relevance, enjoyment, close relationships with teachers, and effective learning:

Sarah:	You can learn and enjoy it, you know.
Amy:	And it's so much easier to remember things. I don't know why.
Cameron:	Yeah, that's true!
Amy:	… I remember so much more.
Sarah	[with laughter]: I remember things in your voice, it's really scary! [laughter, pointing at Richard, an NCCL teacher, others agree] … I do, I remember things that you say, like things about WWII, and in math, I hear it in my head, in your voice, it's scary! [reunion 2]

Sarah's comment that her memory of class materials are embodied with her NCCL teacher's voice highlights the strong personal and relational component that is inherent to learning at NCCL. This contrasts with some students' recollections of the difficulty of listening to and remembering everything the teacher in their conventional high school said for a test:

| Amy: | I loved it [at NCCL] when I was here. I just like the whole *atmosphere* and the experience and … I miss it! [laughs] … I don't think I've retained hardly as much information this year as I have, I can recall stuff from like 4th grade, but cause I don't know, it feels a lot more crammed in high school and I really appreciate the learning experience here. [reunion 4] |

In this conventional scenario, the teacher–student relationship becomes irrelevant as the test surfaces as the all-consuming goal. Both Amy and Sarah expressed the opinion that it is easier to remember information in the test-free environment of NCCL.

The NCCL alumni perceive themselves as being different from, if not incomprehensible to, other students in their conventional schools:

| Cameron: | I never want to tell anybody about my school, because then I have to explain it. |
| Amy: | Uh!!! Everyone thinks I'm stupid! |

…

Sarah: Do you know they think you went to an insane asylum?! It's just crazy!

Eddie: Coming from NCCL … it's an excuse for being, different. They're like, 'You're really creative and stuff,' and I'm like, 'I went to NCCL ….' So I think it's good … people like it a lot.

Sarah: [I usually say in my school that] I went to a regular school with a really long name, don't ask. [reunion 1]

Not only did NCCL graduates believe that their new peers saw them as different, but they seemed to see their new peers as sharing group characteristics different from their own, particularly concerning their attitudes toward learning. NCCL students tended to describe their new peers as credential-driven, or uncaring about their own learning, and to contrast this with their own love for learning: '[They] want to learn, but they don't care, it's all about the test, the grade' (Cameron, reunion 1). This sort of mutual 'othering' did not seem to completely inhibit the NCCL students from eventually making friends and feeling relatively comfortable at their new school by the end of the first year, but it did seem to contribute to a mutually-constructed minority status based on recognised collective differences.

NCCL alumni had developed distinguishable values and practices that go beyond academic learning. They did not find values and practices of conventional schools based on competitiveness, credentialism and meritocracy attractive. If NCCL alumni could have stayed in NCCL, they would have. From this point of view, they have created a 'minority outsider' self-concept in relation to what they see as a shared history of something very different from conventional school. Their historically-defined minority position in their conventional schools, coupled with their majority (middle-class, mostly White) status in broader society, seems to have contributed to an interesting sense of ambiguity toward institutional schooling. Again, we want to stress that this is our analysis of their perceptions and does not coincide with the conventional academic use of the word 'minority' associated with race, ethnicity, or gender. Our own analysis attempts to understand how their own perceptions contribute to how our 'learning loving minorities' construct themselves relative to the institution of schooling, and how this compares and contrasts with the minorities in Ogbu's analysis.

Reconciling a critical stance toward school, a drive for conventional success and a love for learning

Elsewhere we have reported in more detail on NCCL students' attitudes toward conventional schooling and their strategies for surviving the involuntary transition (DePalma *et al.*, 2009). Here we want to focus on some key findings that interacted in interesting ways with Ogbu's interpretation of his own data. Following a general theme of ambivalence toward conventional mainstream schooling in terms of a perceived conflict between being 'a good student' and 'a good learner', some strategies for institutional survival described by NCCL graduates included:

● Resistance to conventional school practices and values

- Finding interest in the taught subject
- Asking for more, harder, but more meaningful, work
- Relaxing
- Making friends for coping with school hardships.

NCCL alumni tended to describe conventional schools as more tiring and draining than NCCL, but curiously this seemed to be based on the relationships with the teachers and degree of learner autonomy rather than the nature of the subject matter. Situated outside of caring relationships with teachers and intrinsic relevance of subject matter, academic learning in conventional schools was described as exhausting. Our alumni's description of the effort required for conventional school success led us to examine Ogbu's notion of effort. According to Ogbu's (2003) research, many students with involuntary minority status tried to minimise study efforts in schools while students with voluntary immigrant status put effort into their studies to get good grades. We decided to ask our participants to reflect on this notion of effort with us:

> Amy: I think it's hard to compare, because for NCCL … [students] really excel and really learn a lot and buy into their own personal growth, so that doesn't mean that in the standard school they would have gotten an A, it just means that they would have learned a lot and they would have grown themselves, but it wouldn't fit conventional standards … And so like picking a hard and difficult class, like, in conventional school, you have to be able to manage the workload in a conventional setting. Like you have to be able to study for everything and so you can like give it back to them the way they want to see it. Not the way you understand it. [reunion 4]

Curiously, while Ogbu's Shaker Heights study tends to focus on the lower-tracked classes filled with unengaged African American students, he does provide an intriguing glimpse into a class where African American and White students alike were engaged in learning. He briefly alludes to a class on Oppression and Human relations (Ogbu, 2003, p. 110), where African American students were very engaged and active on a regular basis 'much like we observed students [were] … in AP [highest-level, Advanced Placement] classes'. This all-too-brief glimpse of engagement suggests the possibility that when instruction was guided by the goal of self-actualisation rather than (or at least in addition to) credentialism and meritocracy, the involuntary minority students were active and engaged in their academic learning.

The NCCL alumni were not just ready but eager to work harder if the study work served their authentic learning and self-actualisation. This approach is different from the approaches of both voluntary and involuntary minorities described by Ogbu. Ogbu documented that many voluntary minorities put their efforts unconditionally in whatever is required by the teacher in their conventional schools, while involuntary minorities often try to minimise their efforts in schoolwork (2003).

Furthermore, like involuntary minorities described by Ogbu, the NCCL graduates' resistance to conventional school practices took an active confrontational stance against conventional schooling, 'I don't see the point about learning about tests … and you get a bad score, and you studied, and you did what you did, I mean, what

are you going to do?' (Derek, reunion 1). However, in contrast to many cases of involuntary minorities described by Ogbu, NCCL alumni's apathy towards the conventional practices they criticised only went up to a certain point (e.g., 'as long as I have a good grade average'). Like immigrant voluntary minorities and unlike involuntary minorities described by Ogbu, many NCCL alumni did care about good institutional standing in their new schools, even though this was a new and unfamiliar culture practice for them.

Although NCCL alumni did make *enough* effort to do well institutionally, they tried not to invest too much of their effort, in order not to become too serious about schoolwork (with all the worries associated with grades and tests).

> Amy: … in the beginning I went in thinking, 'I have to get the most points, I have to do the best.' And now I do better if I stop thinking about the points … *if you just relax* and like, know you know it. [reunion 1]
>
> …
> Derek: You need to relax sometimes otherwise you just go crazy … . Because you get all worked up with all like the work and stuff, and then, like weekends, *oh my god, I just love weekends.*
> Cameron: Yeah, *don't kill yourself* because it's not worth it.
>
> …
> Amy: … in 8th grade, I was really worried, high school looked like this thing like I couldn't do, and I kind of had the idea that I would go in and I would work constantly, that I would come home, and I would work and work and work, five days a week, all the time. And, um … high school is *impossible*, but I don't have to work that much either. [reunion 4]

Curiously, the NCCL students seem to adopt an effort-minimising strategy when their high school teachers' assignments do not make much sense for them as learners, a strategy which Ogbu characterises as counter-productive among involuntary minorities. Like voluntary minorities, they put forth *some* effort, but seem to consciously remind themselves and each other to keep this effort down to a manageable minimum in order to protect themselves from stress.

NCCL alumni's focus on friendship as a coping strategy seemed to be similar to ones Ogbu ascribes to involuntary minorities. However, Ogbu qualifies this strategy as negative, as something which distracts the minority students from their efforts to do well in school. Ogbu describes peer pressure against school success as a problem increasing in the upper grades among involuntary minorities. Interestingly, after illustrating his concern about peer distraction from academics, Ogbu presents a scenario of peer competition for success as the appropriate alternative:

> We even found some instances where Black students were competing with one another to do well. An example of the latter was an occasion when four Black girls were going a group project. One was apparently smarter than the others; she got all the answers to the assignment right … the three who competed for the right answers covered their papers to prevent the fourth girl from copying them. (2003, p. 195)

In contrast to the value Ogbu places on peer competition for academic success, our NCCL students' comments (particularly their scathing criticism of competitive peers) clearly indicated that this type of peer competition for academic success was

not the kind of peer relationships they consider healthy and useful strategies for coping with conventional school.

Comparing the 'learning loving minority' with Ogbu's immigrant and involuntary minorities

At first glance, it might seem strange that we chose to use a study of mostly White successful students to shed light on Ogbu's theory about failing African American students. Yet this is a way to check assumptions. As Nasir argues:

> Ogbu does not study the white students, families, and communities who ostensibly are doing well in school. In order to understand the relation between racial group membership and school performance, one would need to vary one or both of these variables. (2004, p. 111)

Strangely, while Ogbu's theory constantly compares cultural groups to explain why some are more successful than others, he does not check systematically across diverse social groups and such variables as diverse pedagogical practices or institutions. He does not, for example, study White students check to see whether the attitudes and behaviours he describes are actually specific to Black school children. There is no reason to assume, for example, that the fears of being labelled 'brainiac' or 'pervert brainiac' described by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) are not shared and propagated by White children. When Ogbu attempts to separate race as a factor by controlling for social class, as in the Shaker Heights study, his failure to engage with White students calls into question whether race alone can provide an adequate interpretation for his findings.

This practice of checking theory against new populations is a powerful way to sharpen and develop theory and contributes to enriching Ogbu's theory by studying populations which he did not. In our case, we considered the institution of schooling itself as a variable, rather than race or ethnicity, by studying a population that had been socialized into a very different schooling culture. Table 1 summarises the ways in which attitudes of our NCCL participants compare and contrast with those of Ogbu's immigrant and voluntary minorities, as described above.

It seems that NCCL students' ability to separate learning and the instrumental value of school success has allowed them to avoid confusing these two factors in their responses. Unlike other majority students who might be demographically similar to

Table 1.   Comparison of different types of minorities' attitudes toward learning and schooling based on Ogbu's notions of minorities and our findings

Categories	Types of minority		
	Learning loving (NCCL study)	Immigrant (voluntary) (Ogbu)	Involuntary (Ogbu)
Attitude to credentialism-based schooling	*Negative*	Positive	*Negative*
Playing 'school game'	*Yes*	*Yes*	No
Value of learning relevance	*Yes*	No	*Yes*
Active engagement in academic learning	*Yes*	No	No

them, our NCCL alumni viewed themselves as critical outsiders in conventional schools: they viewed themselves as different and they criticised their peers' uncritical acceptance of the conflation between learning and, as they put it, 'learning' (using finger gestures to indicate ironic quotation marks). In some ways their description of themselves mirrored Ogbu's immigrant minority students: they were faced with culturally different institutional practices into which they have not been socialised. Like involuntary minorities, they had negative attitudes toward the credentialism-based performance valued and rewarded by conventional schools and believed that learning should be relevant to their lives, a belief that immigrant minorities, with their uncritical acceptance of school as a source of good for them, do not share (according to Ogbu's analysis). Ogbu (2003, p. 25) considers involuntary minorities' expectations of relevance and authentic learning to be detrimental to their success because this value distracts them from learning the credentialised curricula promoted by conventional school and doing well on tests.

NCCL students were institutionally successful, perhaps because, like immigrant minorities and unlike involuntary minorities, they were willing to play the same 'school game' that they criticise. Their majority status in the broader society might help explain some of these attitudes, but NCCL students did not conflate school success with learning. The active engagement of NCCL students in their own academic learning, which included maintaining their own historically—and culturally—defined characteristics through critiquing and rejecting some aspects of schooling while strategically doing what is (at times, the minimum) necessary to succeed, was unlike most majority, immigrant or involuntary minority students. While Ogbu (2003, p. 278) insisted that involuntary minorities must try to adopt the attitudes of immigrant minorities, the NCCL students' active engagement strategy suggests an alternative, and less damaging, route to conventional school success.

It seems to us that the involuntarily minority is not necessarily ambivalent about or even resistant to education *per se*, as Ogbu claimed, but rather may be ambivalent about or even resistant to *conventional mainstream schooling* that is guided by the goals of social mobility and social efficiency. As mentioned earlier, Ogbu does briefly describe a high school class where involuntary minority students seemed motivated and engaged. It is interesting that not only does Ogbu not provide important details about these classes, as he does about other classes, but he also does not discuss in any detail this apparent anomaly from his general findings and conclusions.

While Ogbu does not entertain the possibility that disaffected minority youth might respond enthusiastically to more engaging, and even more challenging, instruction, Nieto's (2000) interviews with young men in alternative school settings suggest that this pattern is at least possible. One African-American 19-year-old conventional school dropout, for example, argues for longer classes with more discussion, and praises the classes in his alternative school curriculum for being more demanding, and at the same time more engaging, than his previous classes:

> I like history and the way [Seymour] teaches it, and it's just that his method and the mate-
> rial that he has to cover the history, it's like the reading is so real. The message here is just
> so powerful. … Instead of just reading, we discuss. We'll read like a certain section and

> we'll discuss that section. Why was it written like this and what do I think it means? What is the real meaning behind what they're saying? And do I really believe that this could have happened? (Nieto, 2000, p. 266)

In fact, ethnographic research in lower-tracked classes where minority students predominate suggests that coursework is even more passive, repetitive and meaningless than in the higher-tracked classes (Ferguson, 2000, see especially pp. 55–61). Even Ogbu's brief allusions to educational practices in Shaker Heights remedial classrooms reflect this tendency (solo academic computer games, correction of homework, reading aloud from class texts), and Ogbu himself (2003, p. 99) reflects that in lower-tracked classes, 'instruction appeared to be more geared toward memorization of facts rather than comprehension and analysis'. Ogbu's interviewees (2003, pp. 98–99) also seem to be aware of instructional differences across tracking, referring to low tracked classes as 'irrelevant' and 'busy work' and honours classes as having 'depth' and 'complexity'.

In general, Ogbu demonstrates an astonishing lack of interest in instruction and curriculum in his ethnographic work. It seems that Ogbu's low interest in the actual practice of teaching and learning and his high interest in students' content-free, instrumental efforts and *unconditional engagement* in schoolwork are guided by his primary focus on social mobility (credentialism: grades, test scores) and, to a lesser degree, on social efficiency (meritocracy: learning important skills necessary for economy as defined by school) (see description of the middle-class Protestant ethic at the beginning of the 20th century, Weber & Kalberg, 2001).

The reorientation of conventional mainstream schools towards self-actualisation requires transforming pedagogy and the whole education system, and this is exactly what Ogbu opposes as being unpractical. Ogbu uncritically accepts the status quo of schooling that is oriented toward social mobility and social efficiency. He argues that for involuntary minorities to become successful in conventional mainstream schooling, they have to adopt and conform to it like voluntary minorities do, rather than expect schooling to adapt to all students by promoting their self-actualisation. Ogbu writes:

> The classroom practices are based on the culture and language of the dominant group, which in turn are the medium of polity and commerce in society. Members of the society, majority as well as minority, are expected to master the attitudes and skills imparted through the conventional pedagogy for competence in adult life. … Immigrant minority students do better in school than the nonimmigrants do because they seem to understand and accept the role of the schools [as such – the authors]. … For this reason, they adopt and conform to the conventional pedagogy of the public schools. (2003, p. 272)

To achieve this goal of acceptance and conformity to conventional mainstream schools, Ogbu proposes a series of measures, in part borrowed from voluntary immigrant minorities, to change the attitudes of involuntary minority people and their communities toward conventional mainstream schooling based on social mobility (credentialism) and social efficiency (meritocracy) (2003, pp. 273–289). Ogbu's terminology is telling; he insists that immigrant minorities not only accept but 'understand' the school's role in social mobility and social efficiency. We question whether immigrant voluntary minorities, or any students who accept conventional

credentialism-based schooling for that matter, fully understand the big price they are paying for their institutional success. They are often forced to sacrifice their genuine learning and self-actualisation when they agree unconditionally to accept any assignment and any demand that conventional schools put on them.

Foster has argued (2004, p. 370) that being an immigrant himself, Ogbu uncritically shared the 'folk narrative' of Black immigrants to the USA. Rather than presenting and contrasting two different views of school purpose, Ogbu clearly allies himself philosophically with the immigrant ('correct', in his view) version. He fails to separate his researcher voice from the voice of one of his subjects, an immigrant from Trinidad, who 'did not expect the Oakland public schools to teach him the curriculum based on his native Trinidad culture … he criticised his Black American classmates for insisting that the curriculum should be 'relevant' for them to learn' (Ogbu, 2003, p. 48).

Implications for revising Ogbu's historical-ecological framework: the value of not understanding

Our NCCL students very clearly did not share Ogbu's 'understanding' of the purpose of education, as reflected in the above quotation. They believed that schools should be places where learning is relevant to their lives and, like Ogbu's African American students, were quite critical of schools that do not share their own understanding of what learning should be. The fact that NCCL students have developed strategies for succeeding while maintaining their own understandings has two main implications for minority success. First, that it is not necessary, and perhaps not even advisable, for involuntary minority students to adopt the 'better' understandings of immigrant minority students about the nature of learning and the purpose of school. A better approach might be to develop specific strategies, such as the strategies of NCCL students or others, in order to preserve their own understandings of and values about education and to succeed in school. This might be best defined as accepting *without* understanding school practices—'playing the game' of school while actively smuggling their own understandings of learning into learning-adverse settings. Second, and perhaps more compellingly, schools might reconsider their own understandings of what the purpose of education ought to be. Do we, as a society, really want schools to be nothing more than credentialing institutions, or might schools take a hint from both NCCL students and involuntary (failing) minorities who insist that learning could and should be a relevant and self-actualising experience?

If our new interpretation is correct, there are positive and negative consequences of involuntary minority ambivalence about, if not disengagement from, credentialism and meritocracy described by Ogbu. Those like the NCCL students in our study—who reject participating in mindless, boring, and personally irrelevant activities promoted by the conventional school—provide a 'potent, activist critique of that system as not credible' (Hamann, 2004, p. 408). Children who resist conventional school practices may be (albeit largely unintentionally) voicing a radical critique of conventional credentialism-based schools as institutions that normalise and elevate

cultural practices and beliefs of dominant groups, the same critique levelled with relative impunity by social critics in academic circles (Ferguson, 2000). This potentially critical resistance, rather then reflecting a deficit in the resisters, calls upon teachers to reconsider their loyalty to an oppressive institution and to create space for 'intelligent engagement' within the classroom (Kohl, 1970, p. 135).

We do not imply that all who reject the activities of traditional schooling are engaging in critical resistance, but that children who reject Ogbu's 'understanding' of conventional school may unwittingly play the important role of 'canaries in coal mines.' The legendary canaries that miners used to carry did not intentionally sacrifice themselves, but coal workers knew that when the sensitive canary died from poisonous gases, it was time to get out quickly. In the same spirit, we might consider involuntary minority children's systematic rejection of conventional school as an important warning for all of us (Guinier & Torres, 2002). Luckily for the coal miners, they did not waste time wondering what might be wrong with the canaries or how the canaries have to be adjusted to the poisonous environment but quickly ran away and then worked to change conditions in their mines.

The NCCL students in this study provide us with a critical perspective from those who are, in fact, both successful and critical. Their strategies suggest that simply 'understanding' and assimilating to conventional school practices, as Ogbu suggested, may not be the healthiest solution for either students or for schools themselves.

Notes

1. K-8 covers the age group 5–14 in the USA.
2. The school is named in our research reports, a decision taken by the NCCL community. Newark is a university town in Delaware, USA. However, all the names of the participants mentioned in the paper are pseudonyms.
3. A detailed discussion of the methodology of the study and its participants, including discussion of the study's limitations, can be found elsewhere (DePalma *et al.*, 2009).
4. A more detailed discussion of the 'boot camp' can be found elsewhere (DePalma *et al.*, 2009).

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