

# Student Culture and Learning: What's the Connection?



**Tyrone C. Howard, Ph.D.**  
**UCLA**

**EWA--Stanford University**  
**November 11, 2015**

**Why do some children succeed in schools while others do not?**

# Attribution Theory

**Attributions - are the reasons we give for our own and others behaviors.**

People are motivated to understand the causes of behavior. Attribution theory seeks to explain how and why people make these causal attributions.

(Graham, 1982, Weiner, 1980, 1982)

# The Fundamental Attribution Error

...is that we overestimate the power  
of the *person*

and underestimate  
the power of *the situation*.

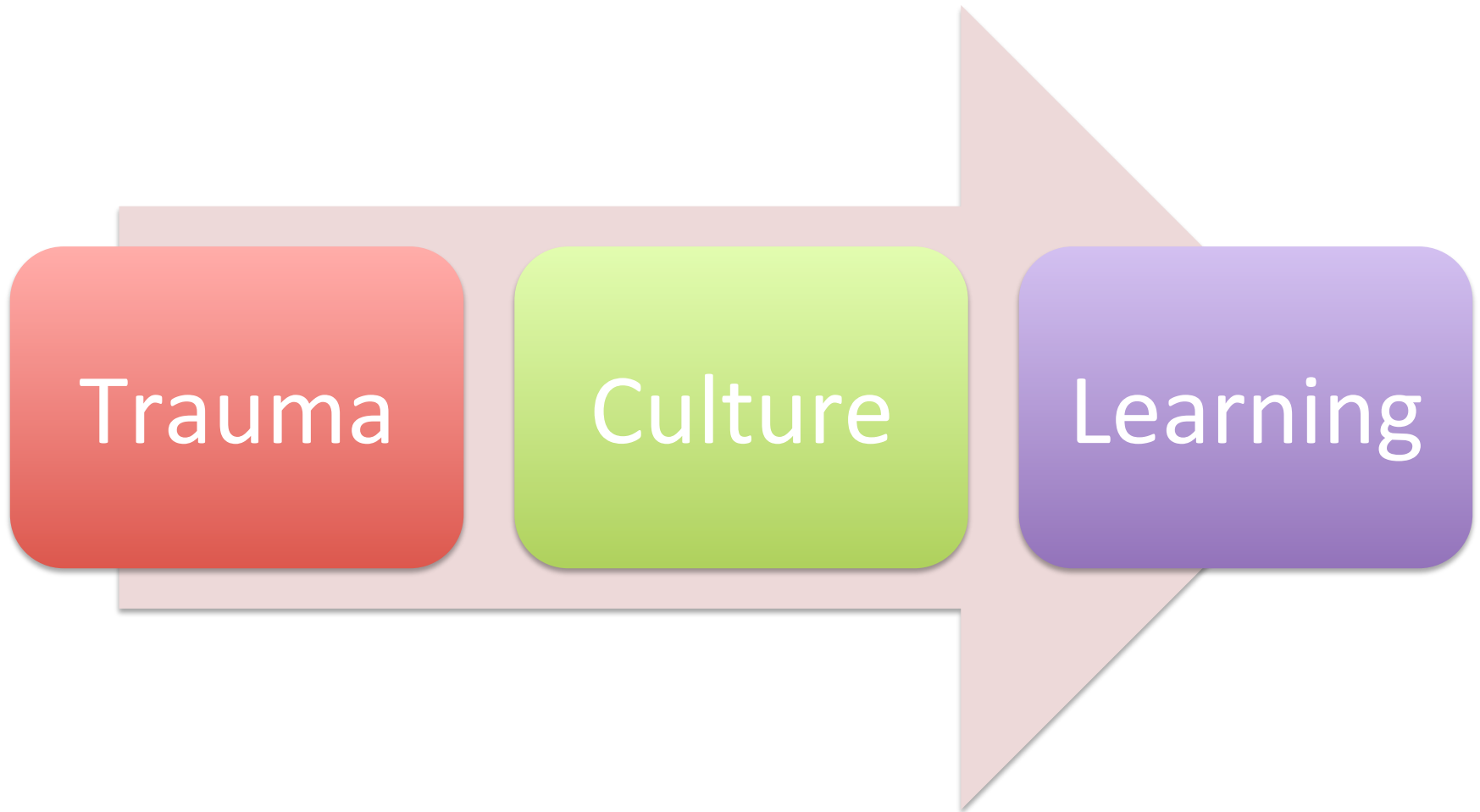
Jones & Nisbett (1971; Graham, 2004; 2011)

# A Look at Classrooms in the United States

Current demographics in the U.S., if a classroom of 30 would look like the following:

- **7 of the 30 students would live in poverty**
- **11 of the students would be non-White**
- **6 of the students' primary language would not be English, but would be one of over 350 languages spoken in U.S. schools**
- **6 would not be reared by their biological parents (Reared by grandparents or foster parents)**
- **1 of the students would be homeless**
- **6 of the students will either be questioning their gender/sexual identity or have immediate family members who identify as LGBTQ**
- **6 of the students will have been physically, sexually, verbally or emotionally abused before turning 18**

# What is missing in the conversation on motivation & grit?



# The Effects of Trauma

*Trauma is the emotional, psychological and physiological **residue left over** from heightened stress that accompanies experience of threat, violence and **life changing** events*

Source: Australian Childhood Foundation, *Making Space for Learning: Trauma Informed Practice in Schools*, 2010, <[www.childhood.org.au](http://www.childhood.org.au)>

*A more **overwhelming event** than a person would ordinarily be expected to encounter. **Untreated trauma has a direct influence on cognitive development and academic outcomes***

Source: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, <[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)>

# Types of Trauma

Informed Practice Guide, Provincial MH& Practice Counsel, May 2013

- ***Single incident trauma***: unexpected & overwhelming event
- ***Complex or repetitive trauma***; ongoing & normalized
- ***Developmental trauma***: exposure to early life trauma
- ***Intergenerational trauma***: Effects from living with trauma survivors
- ***Historical trauma***: massive group trauma; experiences of immigrants, refugees, historically marginalized populations



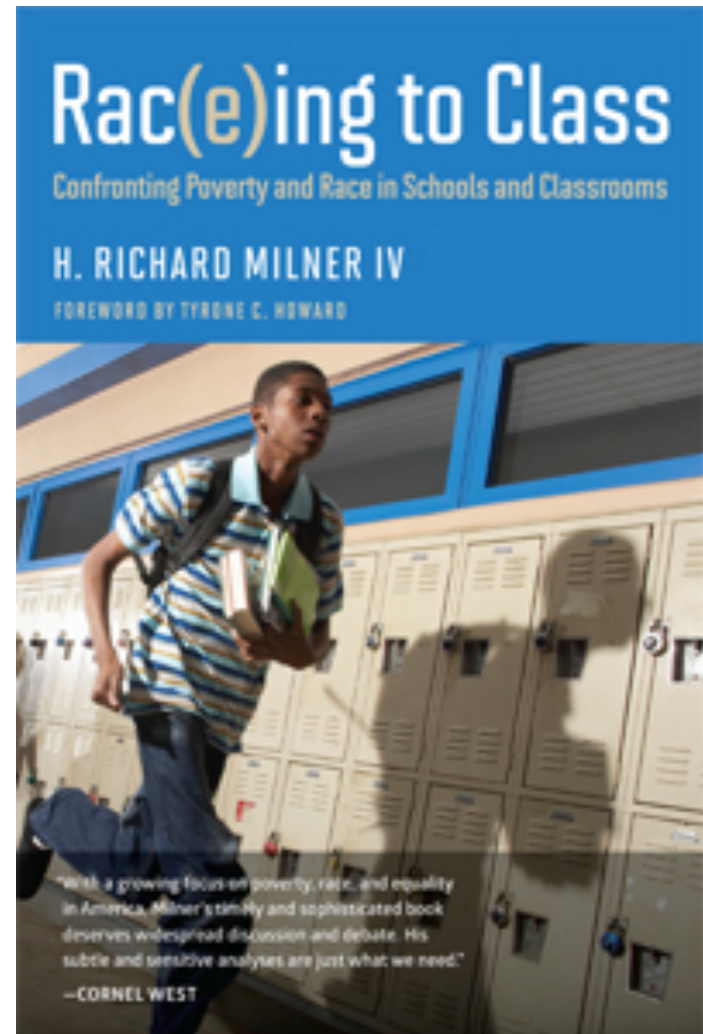
# *What are contributors to trauma?*

- Poverty
- Abuse
- Neglect
- Exposure to violence
- Death
- Exclusion
- Separation
- Lack of safety
- Bullying
- Displacement
- Discrimination (Race/Gender)



# *The Intersection of Poverty & Race*

- 50 million people living in poverty in the US
- **16.5 million children living in poverty**
- 10% of Whites
- 13% of Asians
- 28% of Latina/o
- 30% of Blacks
- **(Milner, 2015; US Department of Education, 2013)**



# Perseverance & Grit

University of Pennsylvania psychologist Angela Russell investigated the role of perseverance in achievement. Duckworth and colleagues have used in their studies items that are listed under grit's two subscales, the factors that comprise grit:

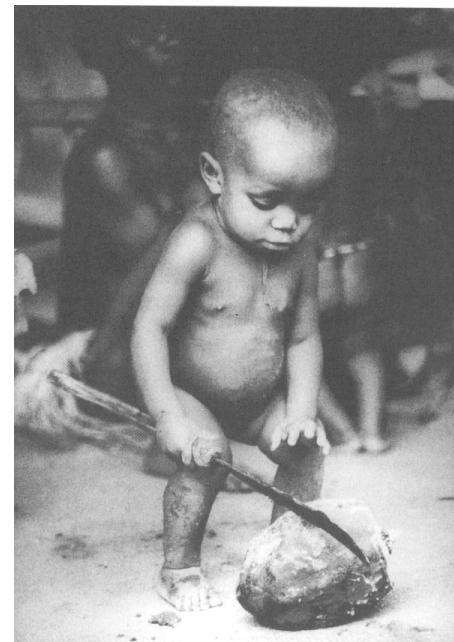
- Consistency of Interests Subscale. These items are answered on a four-point scale:
  - Very much like me
  - Mostly like me
  - Somewhat like me
  - Not much like me

# Perseverance of Effort Subscale:

- **New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.**
- **I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.**
- **I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.**
- **Setbacks don't discourage me.**
- **I finish whatever I begin.**
- **I have achieved a goal that took years of work.**

# Why not consider...

- I always have bus fare to get to school.
- I hear my parents talking about not having enough money for the rent.
- Whenever I get sick, I am able to go to a doctor.
- We always have enough food in our home.
- I worry about getting to school safely.
- There are times when I have to stay home to care for younger brothers or sisters.
- I know where I am going to sleep tonight
- I have at least one teacher who cares about me.



# Culture Matters

**A system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts, conscious and unconscious, transmitted across generations through learning.**



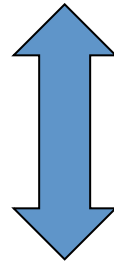
## The social origin of mental functioning:



- "Any function in the child`s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the ***social plane***, and then on the ***psychological plane***. First it appears between people as an ***interpsychological category***, and then within the child as an ***intrapsychological category***. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition (Vygotsky 1981:163)

How to understand (and change?) the relationship between the two planes?

**Individual**



**Sociocultural setting**

(Cultural, institutional, historical forces)



# Theory's Principles and Concepts

- **Children construct their knowledge.**

Knowledge is not transferred passively, but is personally constructed.

- **The learning is mediated.**

Cognitive development is not a direct result of activity, but it is indirect; other people must interact with the learner, use mediatory tools to facilitate the learning process, and then cognitive development may occur.

- **Language plays a central roles in mental development.**

The most significant sociocultural tool is language, as it is used to teach tool use and is vital in the process of developing higher psychological functions.

# *How Can Schools Respond?*

- Partnerships with teacher preparation institutions
- Mental health supports are integral to student learning
- Recognition of the salience of race and culture
- Restorative justice practices
- Socio/emotional & Socio/cultural supports

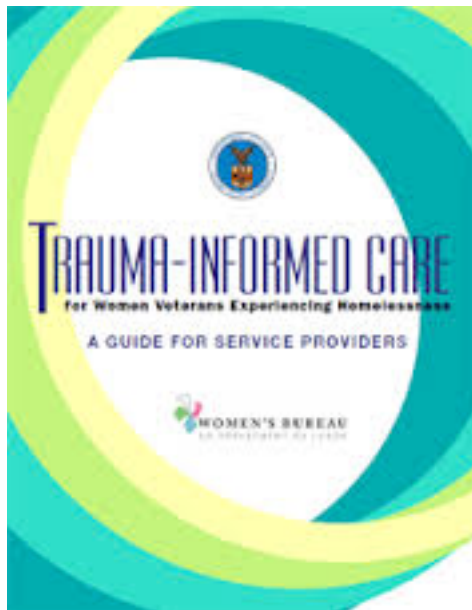
# Conclusion

- Structural inequities matter.
- Culture matters. It significantly influences cognition and subsequently learning.
- Trauma and mental health matters.
- Appropriate supports must inform school reform and student outcome efforts.

# MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCACY SERVICES



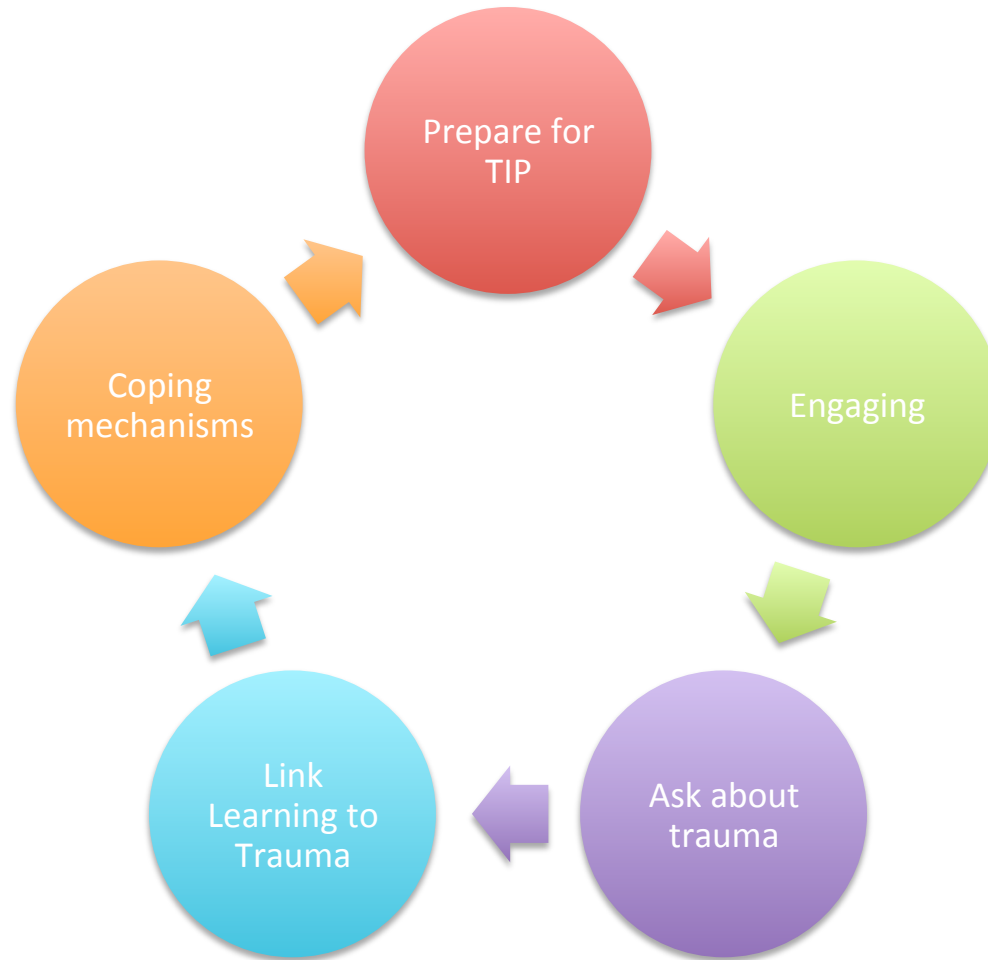
Cross Cultural  
Competency TRAINING



**THANK YOU**

**thoward@gseis.ucla.edu**

# Trauma Informed Practice Principles



# Schooling?

- All human activity, regardless of context is culturally mediated and is inherently social.



Personality by psychology by its disciplinary norms focuses on the individual, but individual traits and qualities, regardless of how they originate and develop, manifest themselves in social and institutional context (Rose, 2014).



# Sociocultural theory

- Did NOT focus on the individual child but on the child as a product of social interaction, environment especially with adults (parents, teachers).
- Social world mediates children's cognitive development. Cognitive development occurs as child's thinking is molded by society in the form of parents, teachers, and peers. This leads to peer tutoring as a strategy in classrooms.
- People's thinking differs dramatically between cultures because different cultures stress different things.

# Conclusion

- Sociocultural theory considers learning as a semiotic process where participation in socially-mediated activities is essential.
- The theory regards instruction as crucial to cognitive development in the classroom. Instruction should be geared to the ZPD that is beyond the learner's actual development level.
- Social instruction actually produces new, elaborate, advanced psychological processes that are unavailable to the organism working in isolation

# Mediated learning

- "Psychological tools"
- "Cultural tools"
- "Mediational means"
- "Cultural artefacts"
  - Language
  - Symbols
  - representations



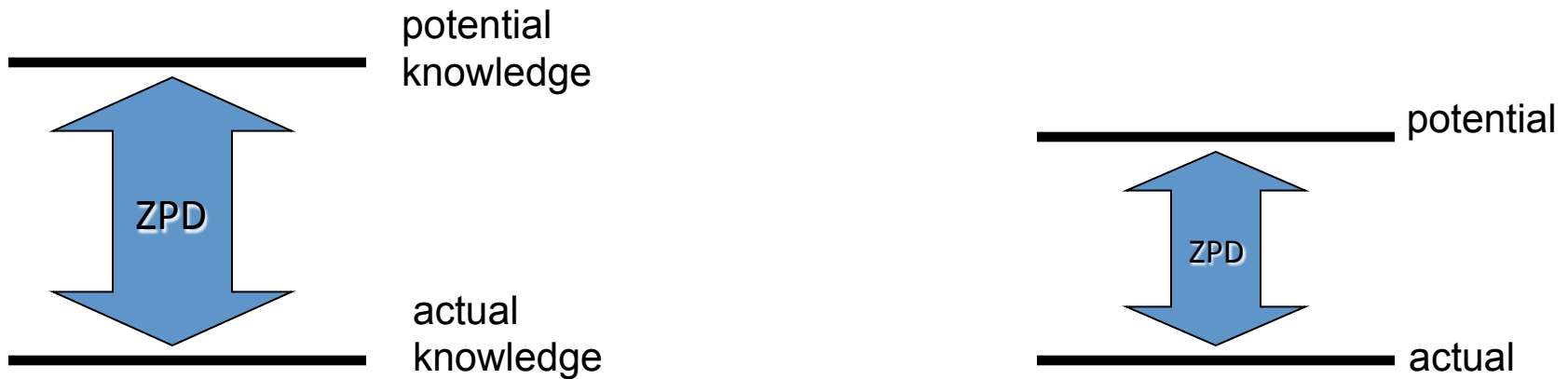
# Artifacts

- The cultural tools are artefacts created by human culture (s) over time. They are used by individuals and groups for different purposes, and they shape the ways in which we interact with and understand the world (Säljö 2000).
- Tools are material, symbolic, and semiotic

# Theory's Principles and Concepts

- Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Distance Between Actual and Potential Knowledge



Two children with the same actual knowledge travel different distances to their potential knowledge; therefore different ZPDs

# What is trauma?

- Experiences or events that are considered “out of the ordinary” in terms of their overwhelming nature
- They are more than merely “stressful” —they are also shocking, terrifying, and devastating to the victim
- Such as experience can result in profoundly upsetting feelings of terror, shame, helplessness, fear and powerlessness