

CHAPTER FOUR

SOCIO-CULTURAL PROCESSES AND SCHOOLING

“If we understood better how schools can help construct inequalities, we may be in a better position to try to change them.” -Caroline Persell

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL CAPITALISM

Imagine three babies born at the same time, but into three different socio-economic situations: The first was born to wealthy parents living in an exclusive community, the second to parents from a middle-class community, and the third into a poor family and community. Let us further imagine their life outcomes as we travel with them into their futures:

- a. Fast forward these babies' lives five years into the future. What do you think would be going on in their lives? What kinds of food would they be eating? What pre-kindergarten education would each baby have been exposed to? What trips would they have taken by this time? What kinds of academic language terms would they have heard, and could be using?
- b. Fast forward these babies' lives five more years into the future. By now, they are ten years old. Ask yourself the same set of questions. What would be your response?
- c. Yet again, fast forward these babies' lives five years into the future. By this time, they are fifteen years old, and in high school. They are getting ready to enter tenth grade. What kinds of information do they know and can take for granted? What kinds of people have they met (as their potential role models)? What are they aspiring to become, and why? What kinds of life and academic preparation would each have that would position them for a better future? To what extent are the teachers, counselors, and the school administration likely to identify or connect with these different kinds of students?
- d. Fast forward them fifteen years into the future. Each person is now thirty years of age, and has a family. What do they do? Where do they live? Whom do they know? Whom did they marry?
- e. Finally, let us consider the next generation from each of these three people: each one's children. What do you think would be going on in their lives? What kinds of food would they be eating? What pre-kindergarten education would each baby have been exposed to? What kinds of academic language terms would they have heard, and could be using?

Can you see the potential for the cycle to repeat itself? How can the cycle be broken? Given the sequence of events above, what would be your personal conclusion about the effects of socio-economic factors on the lives of students? What then are some good considerations for teachers of students from low socio-economic populations?

Caroline Persell writes:

Although the United States is based on the promise of equal opportunity for all people, the educational experiences [of children from different economic strata] are likely to be different.

Education in the United States is not a single, uniform system that is available to every student in the same way. Children of different social classes are likely to attend different types of schools, to receive different types of instruction, to study different curricula, and to leave school at different rates and times. As a result, when children end their schooling, they differ more than when they entered, and these differences may be used by society to justify adult inequalities. If we understood better how schools can help construct inequalities, we may be in a better position to try to change them.ⁱ

The purpose of this section is to explain how certain socio-cultural processes influence, and sometimes even pre-determine, the future of students. More importantly, the aim of this chapter is to help teachers to understand how to use education as a means of breaking vicious cycles imposed on students by socio-cultural processes.

Teaching for agency: Can the cycle be broken?

“We are not asking for a handout; just a hand” -Right Moves for Youth Organization

The theory of ***social and cultural reproduction*** (which asserts that individuals, institutions, and even communities tend to reproduce themselves, similar to biological reproduction) helps to explain the socio-economic cycles noted earlier in this chapter. It suggests that wealth is likely to beget wealth, and poverty is likely to beget poverty, unless positive interventions are implemented. In the landmark longitudinal research known as Perry and High/Scopes studies, 123 African Americans born into poverty and at high risk of failing in school were studied. The participants were randomly divided into two groups: 58 in a program group that received a high-quality preschool program, and 65 in a comparison group who received no preschool program. The participants were followed from 1962 at ages 3 and 4, and then at ages 14, 15, 19, 27, and 40. In their publication on this study titled, *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry*

Preschool Study Through Age 40, the authors noted that by age 40, the participants who had the preschool intervention program not only had better education and higher earnings, but were more likely to rate better on positive life outcomes, including the likelihood to hold a job, or commit fewer crimes:ⁱⁱ Other comparisons were as follows:

Education: 65% vs. 45% graduated from regular high school overall. More interestingly, however, 84% vs. 32% of the females graduated.

Income: \$1,020 vs. \$700 at age 27, and \$1,856 vs. \$1,308 at age 40.

Home ownership: 27% vs. 5% at age 27.

Social Services: By age 27, 59% vs. 80% had received social services sometime in the previous 10 years.

The Perry and High/Scopes studies illustrate that it is possible to counteract the challenging effects of the home environment with good intervention programs or effective instruction. Exemplar schools in this respect include Harlem Children's Zone, Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), and Marva Collins programs across the nation.

The concept of agency

The saying that teaching is a mission hints at the notion of teaching with agency. The term ***teacher agency***, in the context of this book, may be broadly defined as the conscious, strategic educational roles teacher-advocates assume in order to create conscious, motivated students. Specifically, it is the process whereby students are guided to become a part of their own social emancipation. Whereas ordinary teachers have an average level of responsiveness to struggling students, teacher-agents go beyond the call of their job responsibilities. Such teachers instill agency or ***autonomy*** (self-regulation and self-motivation) within their students.

Agency is achievable because students usually understand their realities, the possibilities that exist, and the probability that they will not achieve success without the help of others. By guiding them to discover the power and other tools they already possess, they may realize that education has the power to make their dreams come true. This higher degree of professional activity is reminiscent of the literature of ***critical pedagogy*** and ***critical literacy***, which help to explain the art of teaching students in order to empower them.

A conversation on agency: Bridging socio-economic gaps

Mike's parents come from a long line of poverty, and, coming from a tough neighborhood, he saw no hope for the future. One day, the following conversation occurred between him and Damian, a student from an upper middle-class family:

Mike (M): Say, dawg, whose ride (car) is this? Ain't Jags (Jaguars) really expensive?

Damian (D): Yeah, it's my dad's ride. He let me borrow it.

M: Wow, he's loaded (wealthy)! So how did he get that, I mean, what does he do?

D: Oh, he's a lawyer; y'know, becoming a lawyer is like a money bomb!

M: So how did he become a lawyer?

D: You know, his folks were poor, but he was smart in school. He told me that he worked hard in school, and got a scholarship to a good college. That was it!

M: Wow! Miss Small always tells me that I am smart. Maybe, I can become a lawyer.

➔*Reflection:* Hill Harper, actor and author of *Letters to a Young Brother* (Gotham, 2007), once noted that, "Money and education buy you the same options in life."

- *What lessons can be learned from the conversation above?*

Critical theory perspective: Of standards and common-sense

Critical theory has a long history and several strands. In education, however, it espouses that all human knowledge is valuable. Consider, for example, the fact that the world is indeed extremely old, with highly advanced ancient civilizations across continents (e.g., Puma Punku in Bolivia, S. America; Stonehenge in England; and the great pyramids of China, Egypt, and S. America) and written records that span over 8,000 years. However, the Western knowledge tradition only begins with the Greeks, whose knowledge base is relatively very recent. Therefore, Western education excludes vast volumes of important knowledge sources. Critical theorists argue that respect for all human knowledge is tied to the idea of respect for human dignity. For this reason, Black or White, rich or poor, all humans have something to contribute in a contextualized conversation. Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was one of most popular proponents of **post-colonial theory**, a subset of critical theory. He was a Brazilian educator and advocate of the poor in Brazil, and was particularly interested in giving them hope. As a teacher, he viewed education as part of the larger struggle for the liberation of the poor. He believed that, when given proper education so the poor understood the value and power they naturally had in their own rights, they could liberate themselves without the help of their oppressors.

Why critical theory for teachers of diverse learners?

As will become clear in the sections to follow and throughout this book, many students in diverse classrooms come from low socio-economic and marginalized backgrounds. Such students are likely to believe that there are discriminatory practices in society to which they need to respond. For such students, critical theory is an effective teaching tool for addressing their intuitive drives. In the challenging classroom, teachers who, like Paulo Freire, are able to convince their students that good education is a means of mental and economic liberation are likely to succeed. These teachers can create conscious students who, because they have become more aware of social issues and how they relate to their own economic plight, may take their schooling more seriously, as a personal revolution.

Insights into critical theory

Since the world is very old, societies have had a long time to collect a lot of information—in fact, too much information to learn in one’s lifetime. For this reason, societies focus on the kinds of knowledge that serve their interests and create systems or *learning traditions* for working with their accumulated knowledge. Aspects of their knowledge are grouped into bodies of knowledge called *canons*. Of critical interest, however, is who decides what should become a part of the canon. Ultimately, some people’s ideas become a part of the canon, and others’ are left out. Sometimes, it is even more interesting to know what was left out of history and why. This process of the canonization of “acceptable knowledge” is a part of the concerns of critical theory.

Critical literacy and its close sister, *critical pedagogy*, may both be deemed as philosophies of teaching with an insider’s view of the art of knowledge construction. Whereas the concept of *constructivism* argues that students should be involved in the process of knowledge creation because they have something to contribute, critical theorists in general, such as Paulo Freire, Karl Marx, and Jürgen Habermas would argue that if knowledge creation is mediated and legitimized by society, then only certain kinds of knowledge would be legitimized by the *knowledge powerbrokers*. Knowledge powerbrokers are powerful decision-makers who advocate for their own personal interests or what they deem right or proper, thereby leaving out certain valuable bodies of knowledge in the school curriculum. This is the idea espoused by Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *cultural capitalism*, whereby the values, traditions, and the versions of history of the dominant social group may be elevated as the “*standard*,” and others’ values and traditions are under- or devalued and marginalized.

In the book *Free Lunch: How the Wealthiest Americans Enrich Themselves at Government Expense (and Stick You with the Bill)* (Portfolio, 2007), David Johnston discusses the economic aspect of

cultural capitalism by addressing the large gap between the middle-class and the wealthy. He notes that the wealthy exert influence over public institutions in order to create policies that serve their interest, often to the disadvantage of the lower-income class. Such policies may include astronomically high (“executive”) compensations for the kinds of work the more powerful of society do, not to mention special tax categories to shelter their extraordinary incomes. In effect, it is possible for two people with exactly the same qualifications to earn vastly different incomes only because one is socially powerful, but the other is not. Curiously, society is trained to accept that the job responsibilities of the socially powerful may include golfing or fishing “meetings” and well-catered functions for networking purposes. For such activities, they are compensated like gods, to the extent that sometimes, their better-qualified counterparts would literally need to work several hundred lifetimes in order to match them. What is rather interesting is that such practices are inscribed in generally-accepted public policies and even common sense.

Knowing what is valuable for success

→What does this tell us about the nature of knowledge and the nature of history?

The “hidden curriculum”

The proponents of critical literacy argue that since schooling is modeled after the standardized traditions and values of the powerful, educators may instinctively find themselves enforcing these legitimized traditions on all their students, with serious implications for many of them. This may be expected since teachers themselves were educated and inculcated with the same values and traditions. This is the notion of the “*hidden curriculum*” in schooling, whereby dominant groups’ values and traditions are often

incorporated into the school curriculum as if they were natural, common-sense components of universal knowledge: things that one needs to know unless one were illiterate.

The hidden curriculum may also be viewed as what needs to be known or taught for social progress, but is not taught to all, because it is a kind of knowledge reserved for select groups. For example, many poor people are not aware of what it takes to navigate schooling. Such parents are happy to have their children “walk the stage” in pompous, graduation gowns. What many do not understand is that their children may be walking away from 13 years or so of formal education with useless, but ego-boosting “Certificates of Completion,” as opposed to actual graduation certificates that qualify them for socio-economic progress. Finally, the hidden curriculum may be viewed as the unspoken, but engineered intentions of educational policies designed to produce specific outcomes for specific groups of people.ⁱⁱⁱ

Through *social and cultural reproduction*, values and traditions are passed on from one generation to another through the curriculum and the schools, with the help of teachers who are used as the medium through which this reproduction takes place.^{iv} Therefore, teachers become unconscious reproductive agents for the said values and traditions. On the other hand, teachers have the power to bring about the changes that avail better opportunities to all their students.

Another perspective for thinking about critical theory is offered by the social critic, Antonio Gramsci. He used the term *hegemony* to refer to the social mechanism by which people may inadvertently contribute to part of their own domination. He explained that people within any society follow certain rules and conventions which are generally taken for granted and often go unquestioned. The status quo is unquestioned partly because hegemonic mechanisms are instituted and implemented through the establishment of social institutions, including schools, which create subtle forms of social contracts or controls. Therefore, even if policies are created to serve the interests of the dominant class, they may appear reasonable and fair because they are taught, pervasive, and unquestioned. Any significant deviation from these policies and conventions of behavior is punishable: it could mean imprisonment or ostracism from society.

In the context of schooling, deviations from behavioral conventions are punishable, sometimes by ostracism (expulsion) from schooling (compare to imprisonment)—ironically, the very process by which the oppressed may gain sophistication and power within the society. It is noteworthy that the non-violent, “*civil disobedience*” strategy of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was considered illegal, and so was America’s Revolutionary War against British rule and oppression. In other words, oppressed African Americans, if they were to follow the prevailing social rules, would have had to be compliant with—and thus tacitly consenting and indirectly legitimizing—the racist laws that oppressed them.

The school as a sorting agency

In an article titled “Social class and the hidden curriculum of work,” Jean Anyon observed that students from minority and low income populations were disproportionately placed on vocational and lower tracks, where the curricula emphasized behavioral modification, adherence to rules, and the maintenance of order, as opposed to the development of leadership skills.^v Martin Haberman describes such teaching practices as the *pedagogy of poverty*, whereby emphasis is placed on the mastery of basic skills, as opposed to the development of critical thinking skills.^{vi} Teachers of low-income students should be critical and conscious of their own actions so as to foster leadership and other skills that promote social progress for their students.

One of the questions *critical pedagogues* need to contend is: What is reproduced (or taught) in the process of schooling? Bowles and Gintis assert that schools are involved in the *reproduction of consciousness*, which may include beliefs, values, attitudes, ideologies, behaviors, modes of interaction, self-identity, achievement, and failure.^{vii} In this connection, it is useful to understand the purposes of schooling. According to deMarrais and LeCompte, they include the transmission of the explicit and implicit cultural norms of a larger society.^{viii} These societal norms constitute the primary contents of Civic or Social Studies.

From one perspective, when people go to school, they become labeled as “students,” and are taught according to pre-formatted structures, standards, and expected learning outcomes. This is sometimes referred to as the *factory model* of education, whereby different raw materials (or students) arrive in different forms, but at the end of schooling (or programs and programming), they emerge as similar products, thanks to quality control (compare to standardized testing). Because students bring different talents, cultures, and dispositions to school, some students fare better than others. Those who easily fit in or follow the socio-cultural values and traditions are rewarded with good grades, which may translate into good, future societal roles and employment. This may not necessarily mean that such students are of better academic caliber; it may just mean that such students are more willing to obey the social rules. Those who reject the social (school) rules or standards become marginalized: that is, they are labeled as “trouble makers,” become candidates for expulsion, and ultimately end up as societal outcasts, thanks to the school as a hegemonic agency. Among minority families, it is common to hear stories about bright, social action-oriented students who ended up in prisons, while the less bright, but compliant ones fared well within the school-social system.

For children of tough neighborhoods, navigating the school-social system is often a treacherous journey because of the tough, survival instincts they bring to school. Whereas some may be “discovered” by a teacher or an athletic scout and end up as a “diamond,” most of them remain diamonds-in-the-rough—possibly in the penal system—thanks to the sorting mechanisms of schooling. One example is Malcolm X, whose full potential unfolded only after he was guided by mentors—in prison.

Beverly Tatum contends that when people avail themselves of the opportunity to learn about the *other*, the results can be enlightening.^{ix} Teachers who come to understand the *other* will have established the infrastructure to better understand the current “location” of their students, and therefore which direction to take them in order to arrive at the proper “destination”: a place where they can take advantage of socio-economic opportunities, contribute to the larger community, and share in the greater American dream. This is the genesis of the teacher-agent.

ⁱ Persell, C.H. (2005) “Social class and educational equality.” In J.A. Banks and C. A. Banks, Eds. *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*, 5th Ed. (87-109) Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. (p. 87.)

ⁱⁱ L. J. Schweinhart, J. Montie, Z. Xiang, W. S. Barnett, C. R. Belfield, & M. Nores. (2005). *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press: High/Scope Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, see: Gillborn, D. (2005). Education policy as an act of white supremacy: whiteness, critical race theory and education reform. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(4), 485-505.

^{iv} For example, see Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, society, and culture*. Trans. Richard Nice. Beverly Hills: Sage.

^v Anyon, J. (1980). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education*, 162, 67-92.

^{vi} Haberman, M. (1991). The pedagogy of poverty vs. good teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan* 73(4), 290-294.

^{vii} Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.

^{viii} deMarrais, K. B., & LeCompte, M. D. (1995). *The way schools work: A sociological analysis of education* (2nd Ed.). White Plains, N.Y.: Longman.

^{ix} Tatum, B.D. (1997). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books, p. xiii, xiv.