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Cultural Production and Reproduction in Contemporary Schools

Kathryn M. Borman, Amy E. Fox, and Bradley A. U. Levinson

The articles included in this section include a wide range of topical areas and theoretical frameworks. A common set of organizing ideas links the articles that, taken together, cover the life course of school-aged children and young adults engaged in formal schooling arrangements. Three important concepts related to schooling in a capitalist society constitute overlapping themes. These themes are: (1) persistent and inherent inequities in the educational delivery system, resulting in equitably persistent gaps in academic achievement between groups of students; (2) inadequacies of current pedagogical and administrative practices; and (3) the continuing importance of race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES) in structuring students' life experiences and opportunities.

These conceptions of school and society have their roots in the earliest sociological literature, particularly analyses by Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. For Marx and his coauthor Friedrich Engels (1978), the rise of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century signaled the "rapid improvement of all instruments of production" (477), and this required the refinement of skills for workers who fueled the process of production with their labor. Although their analyses did not interrogate the institution of schooling *per se*, Marx and Engels examined how the growing division of labor, the bourgeoisie's concern for control of the means of production, and the exploitation of labor in the name of economic progress, all served to justify a system that ensured the economic and social advancement of the few on the backs of the many. Thus, inequities along class lines with respect to access to skills and knowledge is a Marxian concern, and such inequities continue to be played out in schools through grouping and tracking practices that result in differential skill acquisition.

In contrast to Marx, Durkheim's preoccupation with the relationship between the individual and society led him to emphasize the importance of institutions such

as education and religion in binding individuals to the social fabric (see Bradley A. U. Levinson, section I). This binding would decrease the likelihood of *anomie* (drift and confusion in values) and a potential disassociation of the individual from the common good. The "cooperation of particular wills" was so important to Durkheim as a mechanism to increase social solidarity that he was reluctant throughout his work to suggest a liberatory role for education. Instead, he saw the moral life of the child as inextricably bound to early socialization in the family, church, and school.

Weber's concern with status issues, as these are tied to social class, prompted him to recognize, value, and expand upon Marx's contributions to intellectual thought (Roth and Wittich 1978). Weber didn't think that inequalities were determined solely by a person's relationship to the means of production (Marx). He defined social class more broadly in terms of status, occupation, and lifestyle. By elaborating how tastes, habits, and preferences are largely linked to the individual's position in the social hierarchy, Weber opened the door to examining the school's role in validating certain kinds of status and style over others. He is an important precursor to the current postmodern focus on habitus (Bourdieu 1977), cultural capital, and other aspects of the individual's relationship to the social order.

By the early 1960s, scholars from the sociological tradition began to analyze the reproductive function of schooling (Karabel and Halsey 1977). The goal was to identify the ways schools served to reproduce basic features of the social order. From a so-called functionalist perspective, like that offered by Durkheim, social reproduction was an important and valuable process. The reproduction of the social structure, and the cultural values supporting this structure, were seen as a requirement of coherent social systems, good and necessary for generational continuity. (You can see a parallel here with earlier anthropological work stressing the "conservative" dimension of education and the relatively smooth transmission of knowledge for the preservation of society—see section I.) Yet from a so-called conflict perspective, such as that offered by Marx and Weber, social reproduction ensures the dominance of certain groups over others. The process of social reproduction maintains an exploitative and oppressive social structure characterized by fundamental inequalities in resources and life opportunities. From the conflict perspective, the reproduction cycle ought to be broken to encourage the liberation of dominated groups and the creation of a more equitable society.

Until the 1970s, educational scholars of either sort tended to view reproduction as a process that was more or less "automatically" accomplished by the whole social system. Functionalist sociologists saw social reproduction as built in to the nature of society, and for the good, whereas conflict sociologists saw social reproduction as a negative but perhaps inevitable feature of modern capitalism. Among the latter, the American economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) wrote about the injustices of *Schooling in Capitalist America* (cf. Baudelot and Establier 1975), and the French Marxist thinker Louis Althusser (1971) characterized schools

as the primary "ideological state apparatus" under capitalism. In this vision, there wasn't much that could be done about changing the social order through changing schools; reproductive schooling could only be challenged through a total transformation of the capitalist system. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977), also writing about modern capitalist France, emphasized the cultural dimension of reproduction. Not only did schools reproduce the social class system, they also reproduced the cultural values and styles associated with dominant and subordinate social classes.

Yet even as this body of work was beginning to exercise considerable influence among scholars, there was growing unease about how schools were portrayed in such functionalist terms. The picture was too deterministic, the school too much an instrument of powerful political and economic interests (Liston 1988). Teachers and textbook writers appeared as guileless agents of the state, or handmaidens of the ruling class. Students appeared as passive dummies, marching off to their respective fates. Critical ethnographic research in schools sought largely to correct this imbalance (Anderson 1989; Mehan 1992). Paul Willis's (1981) striking study of working-class students at a British comprehensive high school is often cited as a watershed moment in this ethnographic wave, but in reality the 1970s and 1980s saw a flurry of nearly concurrent activity (Anyon 1981; Apple and Weis 1983; Everhart 1983; Rosenbaum 1976). Willis's primary achievement was to show how the working-class lads produced their own culture valuing labor and tough masculinity. They ended up being "reproduced" socially (i.e., they stayed in the working class), but this happened through their active intervention in school and the production of cultural meanings, not through a passive acceptance of their working-class fate. In these studies, both teachers and students demonstrated great agency, the ability to intervene creatively in their circumstances and even "resist" the dominant script. Yet there was still an exclusive emphasis on social class. Feminists and critical race theorists also broadened the question of reproduction to include structures of gender and racial inequality, focusing ethnographic research on the agency of women and racial minorities (Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Lesko 1988; Valli 1986; McRobbie 1992; Gillborn 1990; see also Signithia Fordham, section V).

Meanwhile, educational theorists reflected on the findings of this ethnographic research and developed a more nuanced picture of how power operated within schools to shape particular student outcomes (Apple 1982; Giroux 1983; Morrow and Torres 1995; Shapiro 1990). They attempted to understand the range and modalities of human agency in schools without losing sight of the structures and circumstances conditioning that agency. Increasingly, ethnographers enriched theory by exploring the process of *cultural production* as the making of meanings by reflexive social actors in specific and diverse contexts of structured power. Theorists now agreed that social and cultural reproduction, if and where it occurred, could not be foreordained; it had to pass through the dynamics of cultural production, the consequential making of meanings.¹

Within the last decade, social theory has expanded even more to take into account divergent voices whose perspectives consciously set about dismantling white male privilege to instead honor diversities of experience (Agger 1998; Andersen and Collins 1992). The most important of these theorists is arguably Patricia Hill Collins, whose *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) revolutionized social theory by calling into question a number of important concepts, including social action, community, and male-female relations. She argues that society is characterized by multiple sites of domination and resistance, noting that in addition to

being structured along axes such as race, gender, and social class, the matrix of domination is structured on several levels. People experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography, the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class and gender, and the systemic level of social institutions. Black feminist thought emphasizes all three levels as sites of domination and as potential sites of resistance. (1990, 223)

Collins's analysis allows us to envision individuals as actively creating and resisting social structure and cultural forms in diverse racial and ethnic communities.

The authors of the selections included in this section, like the social theorists we have reviewed here, explore inequalities in education and society and demonstrate how an active engagement in teaching and learning is centrally important if children and young adults are to participate meaningfully in school.

Donna Eder's article, "Ability Grouping as a Self-fulfilling Prophecy: A Microanalysis of Teacher-student Interaction," examines the influence of learning environments on student achievement. She demonstrates the inadequacies of pedagogical practices that sort and separate students according to ability level. Eder draws from her in-depth research in a first-grade classroom to investigate the effects of learning contexts on different ability groups and their performance on tests. By combining interviews, observations, and videotaped interactions of different reading ability groups, Eder captures the dynamics operating in these groups and focuses on within- and among-group variation. She utilizes a sociolinguistic approach to analyze and explore both teacher-student interactions within the classroom and behavioral differences across varying ability groups. Eder's detailed analysis of videotaped interactions allows her to investigate the verbal and nonverbal cues as they unfold within the context of these differing ability groups.

She contends that by separating children into ability groups, teachers provide a disservice to students and risk creating ineffective learning environments. Her analysis suggests that those students placed into lower-level ability groups struggle with lower attention spans and are more likely to engage in inattentive behavior than those in accelerated groups. Students in lower-ability groups tend to require more direct teacher management and experience a greater number of disruptions in turn taking, thus compounding inattentive behavior. The author argues that children in lower-ability groups are often placed in learning contexts that impede the learning

process. This article has important implications for sorting and tracking students. The author challenges schools to reconceptualize the organization of classrooms so students are not classified and "sorted" according to ability.

In the article "Beneath the Skin and between the Ears: A Case Study in the Politics of Representation," Hugh Mehan examines the process of creating student identities by focusing on the case of the construction of learning disabled (LD) students. Mehan and his colleagues conducted research in a school district in southern California from 1978 to 1979. The researchers employed multiple methods, including observations, interviews, review of documents (e.g., student records), and videotaping. Mehan utilizes a linguistic perspective to examine how student identities are constructed, focusing on the institutional processes and practices involved in classifying LD students. The political aspect of representing others is evident through an examination of the terms and the process used to label students.

Mehan's analysis incorporates two interrelated levels that provide a context for understanding the politics and power involved in the classification of students into regular or special education tracks. The first layer examines the historical, social, and political context for the development of terms related to special education, disability, and mental retardation. The second level investigates the practical use of such terms. Students defined as LD are placed into special classes for part of their day and in "normal" classrooms for the remainder of the day. In order to determine the final assessment and placement of a student, schools hold meetings with various stakeholders to discuss the individual; those attending such meetings include parents, teachers, the psychologist, and other school personnel. The dialogue about the student being evaluated incorporates various perspectives and different discourses. Mehan examines such dialogue, paying particular attention to the ways in which students are represented and how certain types of discourse are considered dominant. For example, in reviewing the case of one student, the psychologist provides a technical, uninterrupted report laden with numbers and jargon. In contrast, the parent and teacher describe the student in an informal manner, utilizing anecdotal information to provide a profile of the student. Such informal presentations are interrupted and questioned, but the psychologist is not. We thus see how, during the process of classifying students, children become objects of the institutionalized system and translated into a kind of objective text.

Both Mehan and Eder utilize a linguistic analysis to criticize the process of sorting and labeling students. Although each researcher focuses on a different population of students, they underscore the importance of investigating school practices that encourage the separation of students into groupings. Such groupings have long-term implications for students, since labels according to perceived ability influence the types and levels of courses students can subsequently take.

Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart explore gender inequalities in institutions of higher education in their article "Moments of Discontent: University Women and the Gender Status Quo." Through their interviews with black and white women at two universities in the South, Holland and Eisenhart explore

aspects of the women's lives that are problematic with respect to their future plans and current experiences. Women interviewed during the course of the project were concerned about two dimensions of their lives: (1) not being taken seriously academically, and (2) romantic relationships. Some complained that their professors refused to take them seriously as students. Most, however, discussed the paramount importance of peer relationships, especially romantic relationships, and pointed to their critical salience in the women's self-definition and experiences at the university. Attractiveness emerges as a particularly important element related to social prestige, and therefore necessary in developing and maintaining romantic relationships. According to the women interviewed, people find romantic partners based on their relative attractiveness.

Interestingly, unlike the findings for other types of inequality, such as class and ethnicity, the women do not blame institutional structures for gender inequality, but rather seek in themselves or in their relationships with others the "causes" for their lack of academic recognition and achievement. Although some women complain about their treatment, few resist or challenge the status quo, in part because there does not appear to be a clear system of domination to confront. Despite historical patterns of gender discrimination, and ongoing reports of a chilly academic climate for women, these university students are not critical of patriarchy or the system.

R. W. Connell and his coauthors examine the intersection of class and gender in educational settings in their article "Class and Gender Dynamics in a Ruling-class School." In order to conduct research on the effects of class on education, the authors study both working-class and ruling-class schools in Australia for comparative purposes. The authors posit that educational systems embody class stratificative systems and in turn reproduce these relations.

Income, occupational status, and education define "ruling class." Within ruling-class schools, education encompasses preparation in three areas: (1) moral order, (2) academic performance, and (3) well-rounded education. The social organization of schools and school structure are shaped by market forces and therefore reflect the capitalist interest in individual achievement, as well as competition and conflict over scarce resources—in this case, high grades. According to the researchers, parents play an active role in ruling-class schools through the demands they place on administrators and teachers, as well as their social relations and networks in the community. This finding from Connell and his coauthors' early research has been documented repeatedly in subsequent studies in a wide range of settings. For example, through her case studies of working and middle-class schools in California and Philadelphia, Annette Lareau (1989) demonstrates that upper-middle-class parents, especially those whose children are not doing well in school, attempt to take an aggressive role in their children's schooling. They neither depend on the school for authorization nor automatically defer to teachers' professional expertise. As a result, these parents both closely supervise and frequently intervene in their children's schooling.

By contrast, working-class parents, lacking the skills and confidence to assist their children in school, rarely challenge the authority of the school, and thus infrequently confront their children's teachers or school principals. Ironically, working-class parents are often more respectful of teachers' "professionalism" and authority than are upper-middle-class parents. The findings of Lareau and others that have carried out similar studies are particularly important in highlighting the influence on children's school achievement of family-based cultural capital, including resources such as a well-developed academic vocabulary and a circle of well-schooled family friends and relatives.

Taken together, the readings in this section provide the reader with a good sense of how inequalities are created and/or reinforced in schools. If we can understand how processes of cultural production in schools lead to unfortunate social and cultural reproduction, then we can design strategies for achieving greater justice through schools.

NOTE

1. Two articles originally to be published in this book illustrate the point well: William Corsaro's (1993) work challenges notions of socialization that envision children as passive recipients of information transmitted by adults. He argues that children actively engage in the production and reproduction of culture through their interactions with adults and peers. Direct observations coupled with analyses of videotapes reveal that children create their own peer culture by utilizing elements of adult culture and in turn reproducing adult culture. To illustrate his perspective, Corsaro draws upon videotapes of two different groups of children (one with white, economically privileged children, and the other with black, low-income children) as they informally take on dramatic role-play situations in school. Themes that emerge from the children's informal play center on family life and occupational demands. Conversations and interactions reflect the children's own lived experiences, thus demonstrating the interplay between their play with peers, their understanding of the adult world, and their integration of these in their peer relations. The contrasting cases illustrate how the children interpret, react to, and "reproduce" power inequalities in existing structures.

In his article, "Student Culture and the Contradictions of Equality at a Mexican Secondary School" (1998), Bradley Levinson compares "official" school structures and policies with student subjectivity. Levinson draws from his ethnographic study of a Mexican secondary school, *Escuela Secundaria Federal* (ESF), to examine the interplay between school structures that promote equality and solidarity and student viewpoints on these ideals. Levinson utilizes the concept of agency to investigate students' participation in school and argues that they actively participate in the formation of school culture through their responses to the official school structures. Cultural production theory frames the analysis, interpretation, and understanding of strategies employed by students within the context of ESF.

The secondary school where Levinson conducted his ethnographic research is comprised of a heterogeneous student population with a diverse range of class, gender, and ethnic backgrounds. Despite the social differences among students at this school, subcultures do not

develop; rather there is a sense of equality and solidarity among students. Levinson explores how the school builds solidarity and creates a connection among the students despite their social differences. School administrators and teachers established the *grupo escolar*, a cohort of students who are placed into groups and remain together for their three years of schooling. These groups consist of a heterogeneous selection of students in terms of academic ability, social class, ethnicity, and gender. The author argues that the school culture embodies the national discourse about developing cohesion among citizens in building a national identity. Education, therefore, is linked to the formation of a united national persona as teachers and administrators emphasize that students are working for the good of Mexico. ESF utilizes the *grupo escolar* as a strategy to reinforce the official ideology of the school and reiterates a commitment to equality by requiring school uniforms to erase social class differences. Although students embrace the concepts of equality and solidarity, they do not focus on the nation as a whole. Rather, they appropriate such concepts to organize their own strategies and social relationships in the school. Levinson's article contributes to our understanding of the interplay between school structures and student cultures.

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