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**Multicultural Education**

**Problem Kids: The Implications of Sociocultural Capital And What To Do About It**

The American dream is ripe with language of meritocracy and teachers are not immune to this rhetoric. In this paper I argue that educators and students ought to continually examine the implications of culture in order to restore legitimacy to the American dream. I will examine socio-cultural capital and the expectancy effect to inspect their role in academic and social mobility. In addition I will propose potential pedagogical tactics for both students and educators that lessen the impact of cultural bias in the classroom.

I chose this topic after reading about the experience of Fernando Naiditch and his student, “Pedro”, an 8 year old ESL student from a working class family. Most of Pedro’s teachers were quick to write him off as unintelligent and non-engaged after noticing him hold books upside-down and his quiet demeanor. This interpretation of Pedro affected his curriculum and he was labeled as learning disabled (Naiditch, 26).

Pedro’s experience with the school is just one of many cases in which incongruences in socio-cultural capital are misidentified as deficits. In this section, I will examine socio-cultural capital. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu identified three forms of capital in a 1986 paper: economic, cultural, and social (Bourdieu, 15). Economic capitalcan be understood as “Immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights” (Bordieu, 16). Cultural capital is represented as long lasting dispositions of the mind and body and also in the form of cultural goods (Bordieu, 17). In other words, knowing how to act in various situations in order to produce advantageous results as well as knowledge of books, politics, music, etc. Finally, Bordieu described social capital as, “The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bordieu, 21). In this paper, I use the portmanteau socio-cultural capital because of the reciprocal relationship between the two.

In her book *Unequal Childhoods,* Annette Lareau offers an analysis of socio-cultural capital and childrearing tactics in relation to class. She identifies two primary childrearing techniques used in America as concerted cultivation and natural growth.

Her research suggested that working class and poor families primarily use natural growth, the view that as long as children are provided with basic amenities (food, comfort, shelter, etc), the rest of their childhood will evolve spontaneously (Lareau, 238). Parents who use natural growth are more likely to use language as a directive as well as feel dependent on institutions. As a result, children raised with natural growth tend not to negotiate with adults as they often lack the language and sociocultural capital to assert themselves. However, products of natural growth are often more autonomous and have closer family ties than their counterparts.

Lareau describes the process of concerted cultivation as very active parent involvement in the child’s upbringing. Activities meant to foster physical and mental growth are encouraged and planned for the children. There is a distinct two-way relationship between adults and children; children often negotiate with their parents and parents use language more as a conversational tool than as a directive. Because of the constant emphasis on langue, children raised with concerted cultivation are usually more adept at self-advocacy and working within institutions (Lareau, 31).

In the next section I will examine the expectancy effect and its relationship to cultural perceptions. The expectancy effect is defined as “the influence that a researcher can exert on the outcome of a research investigation” (University of Wisconsin, 2014). One example of the expectancy effect occurred when psychologists Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson informed a group of teachers that they would administer the "Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition," which served as a measure of academic "blooming” to the students. The test was actually just a test of general ability (TOGA). After the test was administered to students, researchers presented 18 teachers with a list of the “top 20%” of the class. Teachers were led to believe that certain students were entering a year of high achievement, and other students were not. In actuality, this grouping was completely arbitrary. At the end of the school year, all students were once again tested with the same test (the TOGA). Students who had been labeled in the top 20% of the class showed greater improvement than those who had not been labeled as such, despite the arbitrary assignment of intelligence (University of Wisconsin, 2014). This demonstrates that if teachers expect one group of children to succeed, and one group to fail, they are likely to put different effort into teaching the group they expect to succeed.

Recall Naiditch’s experience with Pedro, expected by his teacher to be dull. The teacher, not expecting to see returns from his work, did not put significant effort into meeting Pedro where he was intellectually, and instead slapped an LD label on him. In reality, Pedro wasn’t LD, he just came from a working class home that placed different value on written literacy than the school did. Naiditch writes,

*Labels simplified everything and easily hid the problems of teaching across language barriers and between cultures…. Teachers expect students to already know so many things when they come to class, and labels can easily explain away gaps in knowledge” (Naiditch, 28)*.

Assuming a normative culture in a classroom produces inequality. In Pedro’s case, the sociocultural capital expected by his teacher was something that he had little to no experience with. Pedro’s teacher assumed the normalcy and primacy his own sociocultural capital and ignored the different value set of Pedro’s culture. Failure to understand multiculturalism can easily lead a teacher to have negative expectations that lead to negative practice.

Incongruences in sociocultural capital also skew the application of classroom discipline practices. In his book, *The Trouble with Black Boys,* Pedro Noguera notes

*“Just as the threat of violent crime in society is characterized largely as a problem created by Black perpetrators, violence in schools is also equated with Black and Latino students”*. (Noguera, 105)

His research exposed the “undeniable” correlation between low/working class black and latino students, and rates of punishment (Noguera, 102). A possible cause is that schools are often more receptive to high-class students and families when navigating disciplinary matters. High-class parents and students are more likely to feel comfortable interacting with authority and advocating on their own behalf. Another reason for the disparity lies the common expectations for black and latino males in America as hyper-masculine, dangerous, and unintelligent. This expectation can and does lead teachers to apply discipline inequitably.

Annette Lareau also found a connection between school discipline practices and culture. She highlights the case of Billy Yanelli, a working class white elementary student. Neither of Billy’s parents completed high school and both felt apprehensive towards school administration. After hearing that Billy was being pummeled daily by a classmate, Billy’s father taught him how to fight and instructed him to “get the job done” the next day at school. As a result Billy was suspended which infuriated Billy’s parents (Lareau, 226). The parents’ lack of socio-cultural capital resulted in Billy being labeled and treated as a problem child as evidenced by the “powerless” feeling that both his parents described when advocating for Billy.

Though cultural barriers are challenging, teachers have a lot of power to adapt curriculum and tactics to a multicultural classroom. In this section I will outline some practices that shrink the privilege gap for students.

Most importantly, teachers should be continuously receptive to hearing students’ *self-described* cultural identity. To avoid having incorrect expectations about a student’s culture, the student must be an active part of the process. When Naiditch took the time to ask Pedro his mother about their family and home life, he learned that Pedro lived with a single parent in a home that placed great value on oral literacy. Learning, rather than assuming, Pedro’s culture allowed Naiditch to draft a tutoring plan that used Pedro’s strengths while still introducing new socio-cultural capital.

A teacher should also take an interest in the family life of the student. Lareau demonstrated that concerted cultivation families are likely to be more comfortable interacting with the school. It is easy to make the false assumption that a child who’s parents constantly ask for progress reports and behavior updates care more about their kid’s success than a student who’s parents rarely interact with the school. A successful multicultural educator is proactive at seeking parental input rather than waiting to be contacted in order to counteract this difference in socio-cultural capital. Furthermore, proactivity enables a teacher to determine what kind of network supports the student at home and if that network needs to be expanded.

In addition to the tactics mentioned above, a successful multicultural educator avoids labels as much as possible. A student’s “problem child” status is likely the result of combination of external factors rather than a problem inherent in the student. Labels can often follow a student from classroom to classroom and school to school, perpetuating the expectancy effect. Noguera describes an incident in which parents of a student suspended for fighting attempted to meet with the principal, who refused on the grounds that “the Momma was worse than the daughter…I know when I’m dealing with problem people, and this girl and her Momma have serious problems” (Noguera, 220). The family’s ‘problem’ label effectively severed communication between the family and school.

Another potentially beneficial tactic is to establish a ‘classroom culture’; explicitly stating and reinforcing daily expectations for participation, conflict resolution, and interpersonal relations in addition to outlining everything students are entitled to in the classroom. Creating a classroom culture to be continuously adopted by the group avoids privileging any culture over another.

Finally, restorative in place of punitive disciplinary practices lessen racial and class disparities. Doing away with zero tolerance policies and instead treating each incident as unique allows teachers and administrators to more closely examine cultural implications of the misbehavior.

Different cultures and upbringings result in a diverse transmission of differential advantages. Teachers are faced with the difficult role of teaching new cultural capital without erasing a student’s natural cultural capital. Though a multicultural education is not a panacea, it has immense potential to promote social mobility and equal opportunity.

Works Cited

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