

## Refereed Articles

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# *A Legacy of Cultural, Social, and Linguistic Hegemony in Education: Understanding the Adult Learner's Educational Past*

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### Abstract

A significant number of Adult Education classes in the United States are designed to correct deficiencies resulting from the adult learner's earlier educational endeavors. In order to teach effectively, the adult educator must understand the reasons why the educational system—specifically, the public school system—failed to adequately instruct these students. Research shows that students from minority groups are the least successful in the public school system. This is due to a silent discrimination pervading the American classroom in the form of cultural, linguistic, and social stereotyping that leads to the failure of large numbers of students who represent minority groups.

For approximately two decades America has watched the decline of its public school system; the institutions touted as the vehicle to equality and economic advancement have now become ineffective and overburdened holding places for students. Often-cited evidence of how the educational system is failing Americans includes declining SAT scores and subject mastery, the inability of Americans to speak a foreign language, skyrocketing illiteracy rates, increasing dropout rates, and the inability of American employees to keep up intellectually in the job market. As a result, Americans are unable to compete economically and intellectually on an international scale, and, therefore, federal, workplace, and community expenditures for vocational and literacy training, Adult Basic Education, and workplace skills education are necessary to compensate for the earlier failings of the educational system.

Adult educators are faced with the dilemma of how to correct the damage to adult learners caused by their past experience in the classroom;

essential prerequisites to this process are attending to learner comfort in the classroom, providing vehicles for heightening self-esteem, and minimizing the threat of failure for the student (Rogers, 1951). In order to meet these prerequisites, adult educators must understand their adult learners and why the public school is failing them.

### **Who are the Victims of Public Education?**

Not all students in the public schools are doing poorly. In fact, Burciago (1983) suggests that public education today is successful in reaching a good deal of the population—the white, middle to upper socioeconomic classes. However, it is failing to provide an equal education to several overlapping groups: people in the lower socioeconomic strata in the United States and people who represent linguistic minorities (Bourdieu, 1977; Fine, 1989).

In most states minority dropout rates reach a staggering fifty percent or more (Williams & Snipper, 1990). Levitan (1990) and Fine (1989) state that since poverty directly correlates with lack of education, students who drop out are doomed to a life of social and economic inequality. For instance, because they are not prepared intellectually to participate competently in the workplace, their earning potential and their means for advancement in society are limited. A lack of self-esteem caused by failures in school promotes reluctance for further educational endeavors and results in a cycle of little education and high poverty for future generations (Briscoe & Ross, 1989; Kozol, 1985; Rubenson, 1989). Daniels and Kitano (1970) contend that the cost to the failed student and society in general is enormous in terms of lost potential earnings throughout the student's lifetime. They add: "The waste of talent and manpower through unfulfilled lives is a cost that goes far beyond mere dollars and cents" (pp. 21-22).

### **Monoculturalism in the Classroom**

The victims of public education—students of color, women, the poor, and students of linguistic minorities—are enrolled in programs which are constructed in a way that excludes their cultural perspectives and fails to consider linguistic and socioeconomic differences. Students are unable to fully participate in the learning process of these types of programs because they do not possess the background knowledge, or schemata, of the

dominant society in America. In fact, what teachers include in their curriculum "is not the culture of the majority of students . . . or the culture of blacks or American Indians or Hispanics. It is the culture of teachers, who quite naturally advocate the supremacy of their own beliefs to the exclusion of others" (Williams & Snipper, 1990, pp. 8-9). The misunderstanding that results from cultural hegemony in the curriculum and the lack of educator sensitivity to differences in linguistic styles and socioeconomic schemata results in general underachievement for many in minority groups (Briscoe & Ross, 1989; Rist, 1970).

### *Cultural Chauvinism in the Schools*

Steele (1992) states that "deep in the psyche of American educators is a presumption that black students need academic remediation or extra time . . . to overcome background deficits" (p. 77). Such preconceived notions held by educators and administrators concerning the intellectual abilities of people of color or recent immigrants constitute a kind of cultural chauvinism or stereotyping of expected student behavior. Negative expectations by the instructors are mirrored by the students who, in turn, take on the expected attributes. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy that the instructor imposes on the students. Levitan (1990) contends that "when children . . . are told by well-meaning people that they cannot be expected to succeed like other children because of the deficiencies of their environment, then they fail" (p. 179). Often students mark their discontent with the institution's lowered standards by refusing to attend classes or by dropping out altogether. Thus, "rather than provid[ing] the children . . . with the means to escape, . . . [teachers] add to the suffocating pressure to fail" (Butler & Kondratas, 1987, p. 162).

Research has proven that the self-fulfilling prophecy also works in reverse. In other words, "superior expectations have led to superior performance" (Levitan, 1990, p. 179). In fact, "when they are told that their intellectual abilities are no different from anyone else's, that they are expected to succeed and encouraged to do so . . . then they do succeed" (Levitan, 1990, p. 179). However, positive stereotypes are oftentimes as harmful as negative stereotypes. Tatum (1992) suggests that preconceived ideas like, "Orientals will do well in math," and, "Women are good in languages, while men are good in math and science," have "negative effects because they deny a person's individuality" (p. 3).

These misconceptions are more prevalent than is expected and are infinitely more harmful to the student than is believed. For instance, when

African-Americans enter the classroom (especially in the inner-city), both the teacher and the students expect them to be intellectually slower and a great deal more violent and dangerous than other students (Rist, 1970). In fact, "society is preconditioned to see the worst in them" (Steele, 1992, p. 74). This focus on racial preconceptions leads African-American students to act defensively.

### *Linguistic Chauvinism in the Schools*

Linguistic stereotyping occurs when instructors and students develop preconceived notions about people based upon how they speak. Chaika (1989) states that "if subjects are asked to check off the character traits of speakers they hear on tape, clear pictures of stereotypes often emerge" (p. 248). Generally, people assign the attribute of intelligence to speakers of standard American English. Conversely, they assign a lack of intelligence to speakers of other dialects of English, even though the dialect may be as comprehensive a language (Labov, 1969).

Thus, through linguistic chauvinism (privileging standard English) on the part of educators, speakers of non-standard English—African-Americans, non-native speakers, Native Americans, women, the deaf, and others—often are relegated to special education or remedial classes. In fact, "members of minority groups in American schools have been labeled as learning-disabled or even retarded based on testing done entirely in standard English" (McGroarty, 1991, p. 379).

Researchers such as Bereiter and Engelman (1966), Jensen (1968) and Chaika (1989) contend that some speakers of non-standard English are so deprived linguistically in a school setting that privileges standard English (one form of teacher culture) that they are not able to learn how to succeed in school. This handicap is most often magnified, rather than lessened, in the poorly financed inner-city schools which these minority students are likely to attend.

Kozol (1985) suggests that this no-win situation "in any land as well-informed and wealthy as the U.S.A. . . . is not an error. It is not an accident" (p. 89). If this assertion is correct, it is at this point that linguistic chauvinism becomes linguistic discrimination.

### *Social Class Discrimination in the Schools*

Educators impose many stereotypes on lower socioeconomic classes, including those that suggest that the poor are apathetic and indifferent to educational and vocational opportunities. They often suggest that "given

an increase in opportunities for success, . . . those who remained in poverty must be there through lack of effort" (Higgins, 1978, p. 110).

Often these stereotypes combine with those related to race and language to create teacher expectations that considerably weaken the educational opportunities for the poor. Kozol (1985) suggests that rather than lack of effort or apathy, low achievement levels "among the poorest people in our populations [are] a logical consequence of the kinds of schools we run, the cities that starve them, the demagogues who segregate them, and the wealthy people who escape them" (p. 90). The poor are greatly disadvantaged because they are often subjected to the very worst school facilities in the country; poor nutrition and health care, which has been proven to substantially affect learning; and the inability because of financial restraints to express their disapproval with the public school system by leaving and enrolling in a private institution.

Moreover, the children of the poor are unable to draw upon the educational experiences of their parents or older siblings as a back-up to their deficient public education because the public schools have failed the older generations as well. This promotes a cycle of poverty and low education levels (Kozol, 1985). Levitan (1990) offers a description of the make-up of the lower socioeconomic class as being "related to age, race, household type, and educational attainment. . . . Blacks are three times as likely as whites to be poor. Families headed by women are five and a half times as likely to be poor as all other families. . . . Adults with less than 12 years of schooling experience an incidence of poverty five times that of those with some college education" (p. 7).

### **Is There a Conspiracy in the Public Schools?**

Social reproduction theory is one tool used by sociologists to grapple with the combined effects of cultural, linguistic, and social class stereotyping in the educational system. It is suggested by proponents of this theory that public institutions act as assigners of societal roles. These roles are introduced early in the educational experience of the student, thus forging a bond between the student and the assigned role--making the role part of his or her identity. Daniels and Daniels (1990) suggest that instructors, as graduates of the institutions of culture (schools), "function as translators of cultural conditions" (p. 160) by assigning to students roles based on cultural and linguistic chauvinism and social class stereotyping. For instance, through increased positive interactions with the educational

system (including a good school environment, abundant resources, and the most qualified educators), white Anglo-Saxon males are assigned the roles of achiever, college-bound, manager, Congressman, President, etc., while children from linguistic and cultural minorities and/or the lower socio-economic strata, generally exposed to inadequate school structures and, often, the least qualified instructors, will be assigned the roles of dropout, underachiever, remedial student, welfare dependent, garbage collector, shop employee, etc. Thus, in explaining the social reproduction theory, Briscoe and Ross (1989) suggest that "schools . . . function as a part of state apparatus, protecting the hegemony of the dominant class" (p. 585). In fact, there is a theory among a population of researchers including Apple and King (1983), Bourdieu (1977), Giroux and Penna (1983), Illich (1983), and Nasaw (1979) that the public school plays a role aimed at proliferating this type of silent segregation in order to maintain the status quo: in effect, by conspiring to hold back access to educational opportunities or equity in educational endeavors from the population most unlike it, the government guarantees its continued supremacy. Higgins (1978) suggests that "social policy [and, by extension, educational policy] [does] not evolve out of humanitarianism or compassion but as a response by ruling elites to threats to social stability" (p. 15).

Although the arguments for a government-inspired educational conspiracy are compelling, most researchers believe that the inequity in education and in society at large is unintentional. Kozol (1992) contends, in fact, that people in government and education just "don't identify with the poorest . . . the blacks and Hispanics, because they don't see them. They never know them. They live in a separate universe" (p. 58).

### **The Adult Educator's Role**

How can educators of adults, who in general have traversed successfully the public educational system, bridge the gap between the disparate universes of culture and discourse that exist between themselves and that portion of students who have not successfully transversed this system? First, adult educators must be sure that they are not perpetuating cultural stereotyping; they must understand the differences within the adult learner population. Pai (1990) suggests that an increase in the amount of culturally diverse experiences, including personal encounters and relationships with minority students; exposure to non-mainstream literature, music, and lectures; and a variety of other experiences can increase the adult educator's

awareness of, sensitivity to, and familiarity with diverse cultures now found in American society.

Ross (1989) suggests also that adult educators can increase their cultural and linguistic sensitivity by using "consultants or mentors who have experience working with particular racial/ethnic groups . . . [and] making bibliographies and inventories . . . to help instructors start shaping the curriculum to represent . . . traditionally neglected populations" (p. 101). Lupo-Anderson (1992) agrees with Ross and further contends that the curriculum should be shaped around the students' backgrounds, cultural traditions, and preferences; students should not be asked to adapt to the instructor's or school's choices, preferences, and cultural orientations. "A [school] that exposes its students to only one vision of culture places its students at excessive risk of accepting or even perpetuating intolerance, distortion, injustice, and prejudice" (Plante & Atwell, 1992, p. 34).

Educators of adults can become better interpreters of their students' needs by valuing and using the variety of cultural and linguistic life experiences and traditions of our students as building blocks to successful learning (Fraser & Kysilko, 1991). Moreover, we can encourage students of color or from cultural and linguistic minorities, or from the lower socioeconomic levels to get involved in education as a profession by offering academic support (as an academic mentor, for instance) and by helping to find financial support for these students (Fraser & Kysilko, 1991).

Griffith (1976) contends that adult educators must also become politically active in the fight against the inequity in financing, staffing, and physical surroundings of the public schools, especially those schools that deal primarily with minority student groups; political activity can also include lobbying government officials (Quigley, 1989; Rachal, 1990). The problems of the public schools are the problems of the educators of adults as well as of educators at all levels; the separation of educational disciplines is antithetical to the goals of education.

In addition, adult educators should learn to see the harm to linguistic minorities of English-only regulations and fight to defeat them. They should voice our approval for school choice to give the poorest members of society a means to disapprove local school conditions.

Finally, they must get involved in changing the preconceptions of educators on all levels by investigating practical and applicable solutions through research, in-service training and follow-up, and changes in

teacher training. Data must also be collected on the multicultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic make-up of American classrooms—rural, urban, and suburban schools alike. Only through an increase in research into cultural diversity in America and its effect on equity in education will the American public school system finally reach its aim of an equal education for all Americans.

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