POWER, PRIVILEGE AND EDUCATION
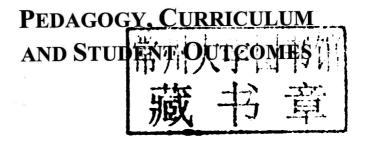
Pedagogy, Curriculum and Student Outcomes

Greg Wiggan

Editor

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Introduction

POWER, PRIVILEGE AND THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF EDUCATION

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In a truly democratic society, the tenants of justice, liberty and equality echo in the minds and heartbeats of citizens, and public policies are created to protect and deliver on those freedoms. For indeed, in the United States the Declaration of Independence states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." However, for too many citizens the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness has been a dream deferred.

In the history of the U.S., slaves were not allowed to learn to read or write or to think for themselves because, since they were not considered to be fully humans, such behavior would warrant punishment, reprisal and at times even death. Slaves, women and many poor white immigrants (e.g. Irish and Italians) were prohibited from engaging in civic activities such as voting and attending schools. The power elites who ruled the country protected their privilege and influence by controlling access to knowledge and opportunity, which led to institutionalized forms of gatekeeping and legitimations regarding inequalities and discrimination. In the Jim Crow era, those who were left from the Native American population were sent to reservations and special schools to teach them how to acculturate to the dominant white culture. From the *Plessy v.*

Ferguson case of 1896, which stated that "separate but equal" accommodations for blacks and whites were supposed to be the legal norm, the social boundaries were clear and those who dared to cross the color line would be punished severely, even by lynching. Later, the *Brown v. Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education* case of 1954, overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine of the *Plessy* case. The legal regulation of human freedom and opportunities to pursue equality and to participate in the opportunity structure were blocked by local and federal legislation, because the laws themselves also reflected the interest of the group in power. Even in the court of law, African Americans were asked to swear-in on separate Bibles than their white counterparts.

As a result of these legacies, the 1960s and 1970s became periods of social unrest, protest and activism, as citizens became weary of oppression and discrimination. The Civil Rights Movement aimed to correct much of the discrimination against African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos/Latinas, women and sexual minorities. While there have been great strides towards improving the democratic process and protecting the rights of all people to pursue "Life, Liberty and Happiness," there remains a need for greater social progress, as there is still much work that needs to be accomplished. Those who have fought on the side of social justice and progress can feel proud knowing that they have helped elect President Barack Obama, the first African American president of the U.S., which is no small step for a country that is embedded in repressive racial and ethnic relations. While there is reason to pause and celebrate this progress, we must still march forward because having the responsibility of justice and freedom requires us to continue to make the promise of "Life, Liberty and Happiness" true for all people.

SOCIAL SEGREGATION AND THE OTHER

Even in the twenty-first century, in the U.S., Sunday is still the most racially segregated day of the week, where the deity is made to take on the appearance and image of the group in power, and legitimates their authority, and where the Bible belt maintains some of the most oppressive racial and ethnic relations. In these segregated services, some social groups give thanks and praises for power and social privileges that they receive because of historical processes and group domination, while others use the space as a coping mechanism to deal with structural and systemic social challenges that disproportionately affect racial minorities (e.g. high unemployment,

underemployment, home foreclosure, homelessness, incarceration, poor school quality, lack of health care and chronic illness, crime and homicides, police brutality, etc.), where they receive social support and encouragement from members and through inspirational songs and messages. Across the nation, but more specifically in the South, which is regarded as a religious fountainhead, social illiteracy, religious intolerance and racism in-and-outside of religious and educational institutions are still the social norm.

Today, public schools continue to be one of the most embattled sites of institutional progress. Throughout the nation, our schools continue to under-serve poor and minority student populations. For these students, the promise of a quality education is as daunting as trying to catch the wind. Through no fault of their own, some children were born into low socio-economic status and others are non-white, and because of that, they pay the price by receiving limited access to high quality schools, which negatively impacts their life chances.

However, many teachers are seeing high levels of school performance and social outcomes in poor and minority students when they are given an opportunity to benefit from high quality instruction, school enrichments, and culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy. This book presents a collection of works that examine the intersections of power and privilege in education, as well as their social consequences and outcomes.

POWER AND GROUP MARGINALIZATION

In the context of this book, power is defined as the possibly or likelihood that the desires of a person or group will be carried out or obeyed, even when faced by opposition by other groups and individuals. Power is even more salient when those who are the subjects of marginalization and mistreatment, comply with the wishes of dominant groups based on the perceived benefit towards their own self-interest, or because of habit or fear of punishment and reprisal. In this way, powerful groups create consensus and agreement through systems of legitimation that reinforce their authority and position of power at the expense of others. They also create loyalty while socially controlling the behaviors of those who are their subjects -- less powerful groups and individuals.

SOCIAL PRIVILEGE AND ENTITLEMENT

Related to power is the issue of privilege, and more specifically, white privilege and male privilege. Having privilege confers dominance and opportunities that are invisible and unearned and which are enjoyed at the expense of disadvantaged groups. Peggy McIntosh (1995) explains that white privilege is the direct and indirect acquiescence of years of slavery and racial discrimination that benefits the white race. McIntosh (2002) states:

> I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions which were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turf, and I was among those who could control the turf. My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. (p. 100)

Similarly, America (2000) poses that whites possess an "unacknowledged inheritance" that they receive from four hundred years of practices and decision making, which today benefits their education, social class status and social mobility. Elaborating on the issue, Paula Rothenberg (2002) states:

> For people whose class position or gender or both place them at a disadvantage, the deprivations and inequities imposed by class and/or male privilege may be so overwhelming that they mask the privileges some of us receive simply by virtue of being white. (p. 3)

At the societal level, social and educational systems that are based on power and privilege stratify individuals along the intersecting axis of social class, race, gender, ethnicity, religion and sexuality. People's experiences with marginalization and discrimination form a continuum, where to be poor and non-white often has the greatest consequences. One example of power and privilege can be easily found in public institutions of higher learning where in many colleges and universities that have sixty-to-one hundred years of history, some departments have never had a tenured or full-time black or Latino/Latina faculty member, which is not a concern or a problem to the white colleagues that run the institutions. For them, it is business as usual. Or for example, in most public K-12 schools, students who attend for twelve or thirteen precious years of their lives may never learn anything of substance about any other social group other than white's contributions to civilizations and modern society, because the curriculum and the entire educational system are premised

on the experience of one group. And unless students master the dominant group's ways of thinking, they are considered failures. In this way, many public institutions of higher education and K-12 schools, reify race and repressive racial and ethnic relations in that they take public taxpayer dollars at the local, state and federal levels, to promote institutional practices that exclude minorities, or marginalize them through hegemonic hiring and promoting practices, and through school curricula and educational programming that subjugates less powerful groups. While this phenomenon is extremely visible to minority group members, those with power and privilege are often offended at the very suggestion that there is something wrong with this, and they might even use their power to punish those who might argue that this is problematic. However, the irony of this phenomenon is that the hope and potential for change and inclusion lies simultaneously in the hand of the groups that are negatively affected by exclusion and powerlessness, as well as those who benefit the most from power and privilege.

I can remember attending a presentation by a colleague in an institution of higher education, who was presenting recent findings from a trip to east Africa where she visited Kenya. I attended this presentation with a great deal of excitement and anticipation, wanting to hear about the trip and this research. During the presentation, the presenter talked about the 'strange beliefs (spirituality) of the Masai,' and how 'they don't bathe often.' As she recalled, when a few of the Masais accompanied her and her colleagues on the bus to direct them to the next town, they joked that 'they couldn't wait to reach their destination because their (Masai) body odor was "intolerable." In a majority white audience of people who were supposedly interested in Africa, everyone smiled and failed to see a problem with this European view and dehumanization of the Masais. In fact, after the presentation they praised the work and the fact that the presenter did research on Africans, essentially using their privilege to anoint this culturally incompetent person as an expert on the Masais.

Another example of this kind of misguided use of privilege was a black history month celebration that I learned of a few years ago. For black history month, the panel discussing the life and experiences of African Americans did not include one black person as part of the discussion or presentation. Here, these people felt that they were doing African Americas a favor by doing something for black history month, and they would present their research about the black experience, but they did not see a problem with excluding that very group. And any minorities who dare to question this false benevolence are generally considered to be a problem, and the dominant group might even

try to invert its racism, by calling these people racists. Both of these examples are cases of intellectual racism, where dominant groups benefit from the suppression of the other, and from being able to pose as experts on their experiences. This kind of privilege and entitlement is exacted when those with power use that power to speak for every other group. Privileged researchers often make the mistake of building their careers on the experiences of people they read about and conduct studies on, and claim to be experts on, while never unpacking racism and white privilege. They may even study a minority group, but live in segregated neighborhoods, attend segregated services, send their children to segregated schools, and may only interact with the other when it is time to conduct research or for professional opportunities. They often legitimate themselves by keeping professional ties with minorities, or connecting with a minority person who is known in the field. Nevertheless, while it is impossible to remove racial privilege, it is best to learn how to use it correctly to help rather than to suppress minority groups.

In this book, while each author applies the concepts of power and privilege to different educational issues, the above definitions capture their general use throughout the works.

The authors acknowledge that we live in the intersections of power, privilege and inequality, and that these dynamics influence our life chances. Power and privilege often make inequalities appear natural because of prevailing ideology that suggests that the society is meritocratic, and that the poor and needy are in their particular circumstance because they are lazy or because they lack moral fortitude or intellectual capacity. Those who are privileged enough to live in a wealthy major-developed country may never fully understand and appreciate what it is to have fresh running water every day, to have access to food, access to schools, public housing, and roads for supply and delivery trucks to drive on. This book uncovers the taken- for - granted aspects of power and privilege, and provides teachers and researchers with critical analyses and practical solutions for improving the education of poor and minority students.

THE BOOK

In chapter one, I examine the life of Paulo Freire and the emergence of critical pedagogy as a transformative approach to teaching for conscientization and liberation. I discuss the implications of Freire's work for educators. In chapter two, Crystal Glover and Katie Stover extend the discussion on critical

pedagogy and literacy. They explore the use of critical literacy as an alternative instructional model to neoliberal market approaches to education. Instead of a stratified education system where accountability and surveillance persist through the form of high stakes assessments and scripted curriculum, they argue that critical literacy can create greater agency and access for groups who are marginalized because of their race and or social class.

During a child's development, adolescence can be one of the most challenging times, both academically and socially. Generally, public schools struggle to effectively educate minority students during this crucial stage of life. In chapter three, Tarra Ellis describes how the structure of middle schools can influence the academic achievement of African American students, both positively and negatively. Ellis describes three shared principles of the middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education: *relevance*, *rigor*, and *relationships*. This chapter provides a new perspective by viewing middle schools serving African Americans through the lens of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education. In the next chapter [four], Paul Bennett continues the examination of middle school education, using institutional ethnography (IE) to analyze the power relations within special education classrooms at the middle school level. A primary debate within special education today focuses on the setting that is best for special needs students, inclusion or non-inclusion (also known as pull-out) classroom environments. Bennett observed two types of non-inclusion special education classrooms with different levels of student ability and performance: the resource room and the exceptional children's class. He maps three primary ruling relations at Madisonville Middle School – all of which maintain an unequal education: (1) Children with disabilities are often inappropriately placed into different levels of special education; (2) Two types of curriculum exists in non-inclusion special education classrooms—an official curriculum focused on standardized testing and a hidden curriculum defined by constant discipline and punishment for minority students; and (3) Special education teachers have extra burdens which limit their ability to adequately deliver effective instruction.

Paralleling the middle school experience, in the U.S., the fight for social and educational equality is embodied in the experiential struggle of African Americans for equal rights and opportunities. While public schools fail in educating African American students, some charter schools are experiencing great success. In chapter five, Cedric Stone investigates the history and development of charter schools and their impact on African Americans' education. His research focuses on the autonomy given to charter schools,

which allows these institutions to use best practices to teach using culturally responsive pedagogical strategies. One outcome of successful charter schools is that they have higher numbers of students who matriculate to colleges and universities.

In chapter six, Lindsey Yearta explores the higher education challenges of minority students and explains the aspects of a culturally responsive approach to education in institutions of higher learning as a prescriptive measure for mediating cultural hegemony in the academy and in teacher education programs.

Despite attempts by government, industry, university, and philanthropic organizations to resolve the gender and ethnic disparities in student graduation rates, and in college engineering programs, little progress has been made. In chapter seven, Patricia Tolley discusses how the structure of K-12 education in the U.S., as well as socio-cultural influences, the absence of female and minority role models in academia and industry, and the continuing struggle for power have resulted in challenges that are systemic and complex, and which create barriers to fueling the engineering pipeline with underrepresented student populations. Tolley provides solutions aimed at increasing and retaining the number of women and minority students in the field of engineering.

Extending the discussion on higher education, Spenser Salas (chapter eight) draws on classroom observation data and interview transcripts to discuss the power dynamics of an English class in a major university. Salas argues that while the teacher's expressed pedagogical goal was to establish a supportive climate whereby English as a Second Language writers might be proud of their progress over the course of a semester, the teacher and her students were increasingly aware that only their individual achievement on the standardized testing at the end of the class would matter. Salas provides a discussion on the often exclusive understandings of what constitutes "college-readiness," how that construct is measured, and the complexity of teacher advocacy for U.S. educated ethnic minorities in developmental postsecondary coursework.

In the final chapter [nine], Jean Walrond compares the educational experiences of adults in Canada to the Caribbean and the U.S. She explores the question: "As parents, what are your experiences with education in the Caribbean and with formal K–12 education in Edmonton's public schools?" Walrond uses cultural studies perspectives and connects student achievement and outcomes to immigrant identity development and school processes. She relates her findings to minority educational issues in the U.S. as she argues for cultural heritage education and culturally responsive teaching.

In sum, throughout this body of work the authors provide meaningful perspectives on the dynamics of power and privilege in education. The authors offer recommendations and policy considerations that are aimed at increasing social justice in education and improving student performance and outcomes. I am grateful for the many wonderful students whom I have had the opportunity to teach, to share with, and to learn from. To you I say the last 12 years have been dynamic. I thank my current and former students for contributing to this work.

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