

Questioning Pedagogy:

Reflections on the Critical Theory of Curriculum¹

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Since the classic studies carried out in the 1960s by Blau and Duncan (1967) and James Coleman (1968), sociologists of stratification have made considerable strides in explaining the complex processes that produce inequalities in educational access, achievement, and attainment among different social groups. The strong emphasis on rigorous empiricism that has characterized this tradition has made its findings relevant not only for academics, but also for educational planners and government policymakers. However, in its preoccupation with educational inputs and outputs, most stratification research has ignored a fundamental feature of American education: the curriculum. By treating schools as black boxes that mass-produce competitive candidates for the labor market, mainstream sociology of education has failed to acknowledge the political, economic, and organizational factors that shape the curriculum toward specific, and often problematic, objectives. To uncritically accept these objectives as legitimate is to miss a crucial element of the power dynamics that contribute to the very inequalities that concern stratification scholars. This paper will examine an alternative paradigm, the critical theory of curriculum, and suggest ways of reconciling some of its claims with the mainstream sociology of educational stratification.

Let us imagine a hypothetical, albeit somewhat exaggerated, scenario involving a high school American history class. The material covered spans the first half of the 20th century and features such archetypal heroes as Woodrow Wilson and Helen Keller (Loewen 1995: 19). The teacher talks about the wonders of the American Dream, America's valiant fight for freedom and democracy during the two World Wars, and Wilson's commitment to the creation of the League of Nations. This lesson resonates with ideas covered in other classes: the courage of Columbus in crossing the Atlantic, the wisdom of the Founding Fathers, the steady progress of science thanks to great minds like Newton and Einstein, or even the beauty of a Beethoven piece (Loewen 1995). The students listen to these tales of greatness and, provided that they are paying attention, which many are not, try to relate them somehow to their own lives (Loewen 1995: 12).

Now, let us imagine how two different students might react to this knowledge. For the first one, a white male from a middle class family, all this makes sense. Although he may view a lot of the information as irrelevant, on some level he internalizes this history because he recognizes it as his own. Like the great white heroes—Wilson, Keller, FDR—he too believes that he can succeed. The simple teleology of the stories appeals to him. His life, though not perfect, has many happy endings, much like everything he hears. He is proud of his country and of his ancestors who helped make it great.

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The second student is a black male from a poor, inner-city family. His life is full of conflict and hardship, much of it beyond his understanding. He listens to the stories, but sees little in them that he can recognize as his own (Brown and Kelly 2001: 511-3; Loewen 1995: 12). The glory of the heroes' actions does not help him explain his family's problems; the happy endings seem all too foreign. He decides to stop listening.

What neither of the students realizes is that the history they learned was incomplete. Neither knows that their teacher failed to mention that Woodrow Wilson was a blatant racist who re-segregated the civil service (Loewen 1995: 27); that Helen Keller was not just a blind and deaf girl, but also a radical socialist who fought for justice (Loewen 1995: 20-1); and, that as America was battling for freedom in Europe, it persecuted thousands of German and Japanese Americans at home (Zinn 2003). They also may not know that many of the things they were told in other classes were equally incomplete. Could they guess that Columbus did not discover America (Loewen 1995: 47)? That when the Founding Fathers spoke of liberty for all, they meant for all but blacks, Indians, and women (Zinn 2003)? That Newton and Einstein did not snatch their ideas from thin air? That science depends as much on conflict as it does on continuity (Apple 1979: 88-91)? Unless they have been educated outside of the dominant curriculum, they know little about these issues. Had the teacher decided to inform them of some of these contradictions, it is possible that they would have found the class much more relevant to their daily lives.

But most likely, all this matters little for the white student. Whether he remembers that World War II ended in 1945 or not, his chances of making it through school and getting a decent job are relatively high. However, for the black student, these omissions may make all the difference. He may grow disinterested with school, not because of any intrinsic opposition to education, but because of the contrast between the bland truisms he hears in class and the brutal reality he sees in his neighborhood (Brown and Kelly 2001: 511-3; Loewen 1995: 12). Even if he does not stop caring about his education, he will not learn much about himself or about his people. He will not be included in the glorious story of America's coming of age.

How would sociologists of educational stratification deal with this scenario? Unfortunately, most of them would not give it any consideration in their work. They would certainly have information on the students' family backgrounds—their parents' education and income, the number of siblings in their house, maybe even the number of hours their parents spent helping them with homework. They would also know how well the students performed on their standardized tests or on their annual report cards. They would probably also have access to demographic data on the neighborhood, the school district, maybe even the school itself. Yet, none of this information would capture what happened in history class, because what happens in history class is not seen as a legitimate area of sociological research. All that matters is whether our students pass their SATs, go to college, and get jobs. In the meantime, the educational system has yet again missed a crucial opportunity to make a difference in the lives of young people and to create the hope, no matter how finite, of making society more just.

The link between the contents of the curriculum and the notion that mainstream schooling is a job-oriented endeavor may not be immediately apparent. After all, what does the portrayal of Woodrow Wilson have to do with the creation of good workers? To answer that question, it is necessary to shift one's perception of the curriculum from that of a neutral enterprise arrived at through objective scientific means to that of a necessarily value-laden ideological process that forms at the intersection of powerful social forces. Here, the term 'ideological' is not intended as a negative moral judgment (though in some cases such a judgment may be warranted), but rather a loose notion of a collection of beliefs about the world, which are created by particular social arrangements. Crucially, those social arrangements are not haphazard; they are permeated by power, which shapes them in a manner that favors certain groups, while it excludes or oppresses others.

One way of approaching the curriculum in a manner that acknowledges its social construction is to treat it as a culture—"a shared system of meanings" with specific "symbols and rituals" (Joseph 2000a: 16). Among these meanings are particular epistemological beliefs about what constitutes knowledge and how it can be legitimately produced and altered. The mainstream curriculum, such as the one presented in the earlier hypothetical example, is simply one of many possible curricular cultures, but one that has become dominant due to particular socio-historical processes (Joseph 2000a: 19).

The dominance of this particular culture poses an analytical (and political) challenge precisely because its principles are so widely accepted. As Margaret Mead once commented in reference to the invisibility of culture in daily life, "if a fish were to become an anthropologist, the last thing it would discover would be water" (in Spindler 1982: 24). It is in seeing the water that a critical theory approach to social analysis can make a significant contribution. Critical analysis creates the possibility of observing the ways in which taken-for-granted social phenomena negatively affect the life-chances of particular groups and individuals, thereby contributing to fundamental inequalities in the social order.

Critical theorists strive to expose the ways in which the dominant curricular culture presents particular political, economic, and moral knowledge as a series of immutable facts that constitute the only legitimate way of viewing the world. For many of them, including Michael Apple, that culture is closely related to the early 20th century philosophy of mass education, dominated by the values of the scientific management movement. Curriculists like Franklin Bobbitt and W.W. Charters utilized scientific and technological discourse, loosely based on emerging psychological research and industrial production methods, to create a highly rationalized curricular planning regime that expressly aimed at the production of capable workers (Apple 1979: 79). In this emerging curricular culture, efficiency and control were paramount. A number of objectives were set out by “neutral” scientific means, and the most efficient method for achieving them was engineered by specialized planners. The high level of trust placed in science and technology by industrial society gave this technical planning system substantial legitimacy, ensuring its dominance of the educational system for decades to come.

Along with the hegemony of scientism in curriculum planning, the early days of the modern curriculum were dominated by overt attempts at the homogenization of American culture. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a time of mass immigration to the United States, hitherto a country dominated by white Protestants. Already adept at dealing with the influx of rural Americans into the cities and the entry of black Americans into the educational system, American politicians and curricular planners implemented policies that aimed at the acculturation and homogenization of the newly arrived Eastern and Southern European immigrants. A remark by a member of the New York State Assembly in 1890 captures the political climate quite tellingly: “Like the vast Atlantic, we must decompose and cleanse the impurities which rush into our midst, or like the inland lake, we shall receive their poison into our whole national system” (in Kaestle 1973: 141). Thus, the roots of the nationalist curriculum with which our two hypothetical students were confronted run deep into the history of American schooling.

Despite fleeting attempts at curricular reform and the creation of a handful of alternative school systems over the past century, the general philosophy of the mainstream curriculum in the United States has remained relatively unchanged since the days of Charters and Bobbitt. Today, perhaps more than ever, the notion of education as “training for work and survival” dominates the ideology of American society (Green 2000: 29). Nancy Green partly attributes the continued relevance of this dominant curricular culture to four fundamental premises that lie at the heart of contemporary American culture:

(a) ‘success,’ whether personal or societal, manifests itself in material well-being; (b) work has moral significance, and attributes of ‘good work’ such as thoroughness, promptness, neatness, reliability, and punctuality are to be valued; (c) the American version of the free-market system is the most efficient and beneficent economic system; and (d) economic and technological trends are immutable and essentially uncontrollable” (Green 2000: 32).

These four principles (along with a variety of others like them) are crystallized in the daily practices of most schools, such as the selection of course content and materials, the organizational structure, the norms that govern classroom behavior, and the choice of evaluative techniques.

The research of many critical theorists focuses on exposing these and other practices within the hidden and overt curricula in order to demonstrate what kind of effects they have on students and on society as a whole. Their primary argument is that these practices are in conflict with other, more fundamental values, such as equality of opportunity, egalitarianism, social justice, and democratic participation. Because the curriculum focuses predominantly on the production of technical skills and basic civic knowledge (of the reductive type described in the hypothetical example), it is not fulfilling its duty of creating informed, critically thinking, well-rounded individuals capable of affecting positive social change. As Henry Giroux stated, “if schools are not to be defined as either training centers for the corporations or as high-stakes testing centers, it is imperative for educators to reassert the discourse of critical citizenship, public participation, and democracy as central to the meaning and purpose of schooling” (Giroux 2002: 1149).

The hidden curriculum has received significantly more attention than the overt curriculum, particularly in the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976), Bourdieu (1973), and ethnographers like Lareau (Lareau and Horvat 1999). The hidden norms of the educational system typically observed by sociologists have included the power imbalance between students and teachers, the discipline in the classroom, the passive nature of learning, the primacy of work over play-time, the importance of time and punctuality, or, in the case of cultural capital theory, subtle class markers.

In addition to these features, many of which were instrumental in the formulation of neo-Marxist correspondence theory, scholars have argued for the general absence of democracy-as-practice from the hidden curriculum. Or, using

Eisner's (1985) terminology, democratic practices have been part of the "null curriculum"—the curriculum that has typically been omitted. George Wood has argued that the conspicuously non-democratic nature of schooling, manifested, for instance, by the lack of student involvement in curriculum development and evaluation, prevents students from appreciating the value of true participatory democracy in which citizens play an active and critical role (Wood 1998: 185). Instead, schools pay lip service to a different type of democracy, one that merely protects the rights of individuals and emphasizes the need to vote. This is typically accomplished in civics lessons through the use of bland nationalistic rhetoric (Loewen 1995).

Although critical theorists study the hidden curriculum, their primary contribution to curricular theory has come from their focus on the overt curriculum. Many of them have pointed to the significant discrepancies in funding and status between technical/scientific disciplines and the arts, which reflect particular epistemological beliefs emblematic of the "preparation for work and survival" educational culture. For the purposes of this curricular culture, subjects such as philosophy and literature are simply not as relevant as mathematics or biology, because they do not produce tangible technical knowledge that can be easily tested with standard evaluative methods.

In fact, the very notion of subject divisions is seen by some theorists as a measure of social control. By dividing knowledge into autonomous fragments, each with a particular status value attached, the curriculum is preventing students from drawing broader inter-disciplinary connections that could help them think critically about their society. However, it is what happens inside each of these subjects that is most interesting.

Apple argues that the curriculum advances a particular view of the world, one that incorporates the four basic American values outlined by Green, but also such norms as abstract individualism, absence of conflict, and homogeneity (1979: 9). The first of these refers to the treatment of particular cultural heroes (or villains) as autonomous from broader social and historical forces. Their actions are seen as either a result of brilliance or evil, rather than as a reflection of their social order. In the context of the earlier example of Woodrow Wilson and Helen Keller, the actions of both figures are reduced to one-dimensional heroism that completely ignores the true complexity of their character and their circumstances. However, one does not need to look to history class for such caricatures. They are as frequent in science (the work of isolated geniuses), music, and physical education.

The fundamental problem with this approach, aside from its blatant dishonesty, is that it prevents students from engaging with difficult social and historical issues in a critical and constructive manner that may actually cause them to question some of the fundamental presuppositions of their surroundings. Instead, the curriculum resorts to canned knowledge that is neither interesting nor helpful for most students. However, this strategy is not without purpose. The job preparation culture does not require, or in fact desire, individuals to question the system. It is far more functional for individuals to naively progress through school toward a job that awaits them (or at least those who fit the mold) after graduation.

The absence of conflict is another primary theme of the overt curriculum. Much like abstract individualism, of which it is an extension, its overall result is the failure of students to gain critical insights into the power structures of the social order. By reducing individuals to bland caricatures and important historical trends to series of isolated events, the curriculum prevents students from observing crucial connections between socio-historical phenomena. For instance, the portrayal of Columbus as a brave discoverer (which he undoubtedly was), but not as an opportunist, whose actions had a devastating impact on thousands of people for generations to come, renders his arrival in America useless as tool for understanding the complexity of Native American history, and of American history in general. As Michael Apple argues, "there are few serious attempts at dealing with conflict (class conflict, scientific conflict, or other). Instead, one 'inquires' into a consensus ideology that bears little resemblance to the complex nexus and contradictions surrounding the control and organization of social life" (1979: 7).

The third theme prevalent in the overt curriculum is its homogeneity. It presents the history, music, and norms of the dominant social group (usually white males), to the exclusion of all others. Certainly, improvements have been made in this area over the past couple of decades, but outside of dedicated disciplines (women's studies, African-American studies) non-dominant knowledge is provided in limited amounts, as an afterthought to the "real" material (Kincheloe 250-1). Thus students may study Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks, but these figures will occupy only a fraction of the American history curriculum. The situation is particularly abysmal when it comes to Native American issues (Loewen 1995: 99). If "Indian" culture is presented at all, it is reduced to the "food and dance" perspective typical of multicultural curricula. Complex and diverse Native societies, whose suffering and subsequent extermination was central to the European colonization of the Americas and whose descendants still occupy the very bottom of American social hierarchy, are mentioned in passing as manufacturers of pretty bowls and exotic headdresses. The possible repercussions of such treatment for minority students should be apparent from the earlier hypothetical example.

Aside from the hidden, overt, and null curricula, critical theorists are also highly skeptical of the evaluative procedures employed by the hegemonic curricular culture. Its obsession with measurable “excellence” and maximum efficiency has contributed to the proliferation of standardized tests, whose origins date back to the dubious IQ and personality testing from the early 20th century. Aside from their questionable validity (what do they really measure?) and even uncertain fairness (are all groups equally likely to do well?), standardized tests force teachers to cover specialized material to the exclusion of other, non-quantifiable curricular content. These evaluative tools speak volumes about the priorities and values of the dominant curricular culture.

Earlier in this paper, it was pointed out that most stratification scholars eschew the curriculum (particularly the overt curriculum) as a legitimate object of research. However, it would be a mistake to use this argument as a dismissal of the “empirical/analytic” and “applied policy” (Noblit and Pink 1995: 25) perspectives. Although there certainly exist inevitable tensions between the work of critical scholars and the work of some empirical stratification sociologists, they are not insurmountable. A knee-jerk dismissal of the latter is counterproductive, since most stratification sociologists are in fact concerned with social justice and their work has contributed to a critical understanding of education.

However, there is another pragmatic reason why the empirical/analytic and applied policy perspectives are crucial. The theories of critical scholars are naturally seen as radical by most mainstream policymakers and politicians and as a result are largely dismissed as potential foundations for school reforms. This is reinforced by the fact that policymakers and critical theorists essentially speak two different languages: the latter base their decisions almost exclusively on systematic, reproducible empirical research that can clearly demonstrate the need for particular changes to the curriculum or to the structure of education (Stevenson 2000). Critical theorists tend to view this empirical orientation as problematic, arguing that policymakers rely on false claims of scientific neutrality that mask the political, economic, and epistemological value judgments inherent in curricular planning. Be that as it may, there is little anyone can do about the overwhelming reliance of contemporary society on science and technology. In the meantime, socially irresponsible policies are being implemented on a regular basis and critical sociologists have no ability to have a voice in the process.

Empirical/analytic and applied policy research does not suffer from the same problem. As a respected educational planner stated, “[empirical] social science research influences education policymaking often and in fundamental ways” (Stevenson 2000: 547). Clearly, this points to a significant advantage of stratification research in educational sociology—it actually plays a role, no matter how large or small, in shaping American education.

This begs a simple, but important, question: if the shortcoming of mainstream stratification research lies in its failure to take the curriculum into serious consideration and the fundamental flaw of critical scholarship lies in its refusal to speak the language of policymakers, then is there any way to bring these two schools together?

Although the epistemological and methodological divisions between them are substantial, some middle ground may in fact exist. Particularly, the work of ethnographers like Annette Lareau, ties together Bourdieu’s critical theory of cultural capital with some concrete empirical work that is widely recognized in mainstream sociology of education journals (Lareau 1987; Lareau and Horvat 1999). Similarly, research by John Ogbu, though controversial, has attempted to link oppositional culture with hegemonic power, using empirical classroom studies (Ogbu 1988, 1995, 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). These are but two examples of a rich tradition of research that has attempted to examine the curriculum from a stratification standpoint. Although this work certainly has its shortcomings—most glaringly, its focus on the hidden rather than overt curriculum—it opens a window of possibility for the reconciliation of empirical sociology of educational stratification with critical theory perspectives.

Thinking back to the initial example of two students in a hypothetical history class, it is likely that the work of Lareau and Ogbu would offer insightful arguments for the differential attitudes toward the overt curriculum among different groups. But other interpretations are possible as well. In their ethnography of Canadian classrooms, Brown and Kelly (2001) suggest that many members of minority groups become disengaged with their school experiences not because of some overarching feeling of historical oppression (as Ogbu would argue), but because of the blatant exclusion of groups from the mainstream curriculum. Much more research, both qualitative and quantitative, could be done to verify this theoretical possibility.

The larger point here is that there may exist common paths that can be taken by those interested in empirical studies of stratification processes and by those who critically analyze the mainstream curriculum. Both of these sociological traditions have significant strengths they can contribute to a joint research enterprise that aims at exposing the inherent inequalities present in the curriculum. However, these synergies cannot be realized until empirical/analytic and applied policy researchers stop viewing schools as black boxes and instead recognize the essential importance of the curriculum for the study of education. In the meantime, the curriculum will continue indoctrinating students with

false claims about abstract heroes from an idealized past, ensuring that yet another generation is denied the opportunity to make its world more just and its society more democratic.

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