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Viewing classroom discipline as negotiable social interaction: A communities of practice perspective

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ABSTRACT

Classroom discipline is a major concern of American teachers and why many leave teaching. A conventional view of learning is so deeply interrelated with schooling in the American culture it also drives the view of discipline, especially in urban contexts where students are disproportionately failed and excluded by the mainstream educational system. The purpose of this paper is to propose a critical social practice view of learning as defined by legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), providing a communities of practice framework to guide future research that sets out to transform conventional views of learning, particularly within the context of classroom discipline.

1. Introduction

This literature review approaches questions of classroom discipline from a critical social practice perspective combined with anthropological classroom theories of cultural synchronisation and cultural responsive pedagogy. It is a useful contribution to the *Teaching and Teacher Education* Special Issue on Anthropological Perspectives for several reasons. First, this literature review may provide a valuable review for a research article looking at effective classroom management practices in multicultural urban schools, which are becoming more common around the world (Kemmis, 2008; van Tartwijk, den Brok, Veldman, & Wubbels, 2009). Second and in light of globalising conditions and trends, it may be very valuable for deconstructing ethnocentristic, authoritarian, and homogenizing ideas in teacher education to prepare teachers for multicultural classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Merryfield, 2000). Third, this review may be helpful for those who are also searching for ways to transform classroom and schooling conditions.

Fourth and perhaps more importantly, this review may offer a useful review for cross-cultural research studies emphasising forms of control in classrooms, schools, or other teaching and learning situations (Varenne, 2008). I do not set out to diminish the excellent classroom and school research from outside of the U.S. in this review but primarily focus on American research in American classrooms to accomplish several goals. First, this review may open a window on how American researchers are dealing (or not) with the unresolved American phenomenon of disproportional exclusionary school discipline practices among African American students. Second, this review may shed light both on the world's increasing prison population rate and the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon that exists in the U.S., which has the highest prison population rate in the world more than half of whom are Black (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008; Walmsley, 2006). Overall, this review has the potential to initiate cross-cultural, global, and social justice conversations towards a theory of ongoing transformation in classrooms and schools anywhere in the world and ultimately contribute to the overall task of the anthropology of education as the "anthropology of cultural transformation" (Varenne, 2008, p. 356).

1.1. Anthropological experience

My experiences as a teacher for nine years in an urban alternative school for predominantly African Americans who had been expelled from their regular schools and were involved with the United States juvenile justice system anthropologically distanced me from the "usual power of academics" (Varenne, 2008, p. 359) and "Anglo-American presupposition[s] about curriculum, pedagogy and teachers' work" (Kemmis, 2008, p. xi). U.S. urban (as opposed to suburban or rural) contexts are defined as

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> heavily populated with students of colour… large number of students from lower socioeconomic status, high attrition of teachers, heavy institutional and systemic barriers, and meager resources… grossly underfunded, larger in size, and infiltrated with administrative [local to federal] bureaucracy. (Milner, 2006, p. 493)

It was here in this urban alternative school that I (a White middle-class female from Southern United States) first experienced a different culture (without leaving America), interacted on a daily basis with students who had been excluded from regular school settings, began to understand the "political situationality of all knowledge" (Varenne, 2008, p. 359), and grappled with cultural arbitrariness and transformation of literacy education in particular. In order to deal with U.S. educational contradictions (Meier, & Wood, 2004; Woodson, 1933), my students and I became engrossed in transforming ourselves and our classroom conditions by constructing ways of not practicing exclusionary school discipline when all around us, the phenomenon thrived.

The American phenomenon of exclusionary school discipline is the administration of punishment to disruptive students on the premise that isolation gives the perpetrator time to reflect on what happened, realise the error of his or her ways, and return to the same situation but with a change of behaviour and attitude. Exclusionary school discipline practices range from time-outs in the classroom to office referrals, suspension, and expulsion from school. One of the problems with exclusionary school discipline is that the majority of students affected by the practice are African Americans. Since the Children's Defence Fund (1975) research on school suspension, studies of school discipline have consistently documented the disproportionality of African American students, particularly males, involved in exclusionary school discipline (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000).

Skiba et al. (2000) found that exclusionary discipline consequences are more frequent, harsher, and less congruent to the incident for African American students, particularly males, even though no evidence supports the claim that they are more disruptive than their White peers. Results also indicated that African American students, particularly males, were referred to the office, suspended, and expelled for more disruptive behaviour compared to White students. For instance, African American students were referred for more subjective reasons such as disrespect or excessive noise while White students were referred for more serious and objective behaviours such as smoking and vandalism. Results also indicated that significant racial disproportionality existed after controlling for socioeconomic status regardless of analytical method used. Racial and gender disparity appeared to originate at the classroom level as "systematic and racial discrimination" (Skiba et al., 2000, p. 16). However, explanations for the disproportionality, which is termed the *discipline gap* (Monroe, 2006), are inconclusive.

As a result of being out of class so much, too many African American students get caught in the school failure, dropout, and juvenile justice cycle, or the *school-to-prison pipeline* (Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 2007; Wald & Losen, 2003). The school-to-prison pipeline demonstrates an existing trajectory that increases in disproportionality from the first time students get in trouble at school to being (a) labelled a troublemaker and potentially dangerous; (b) referred to the office; (c) expelled to disciplinary alternative schools; and (d) sent to jail or prison (Centre on Crime and Juvenile Justice, 2008; National Centre for Education Statistics [NCES], 2008; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Even though the abundance of descriptive and consequential data in the literature is helpful for gauging the extent of disproportional and inequitable teaching and learning conditions and exclusionary school discipline outcomes, it does not explain or transform them (Milner, 2006; Skiba et al., 2000).

1.2. Educational contradictions

Educational contradictions in the U.S. emerge from a conventional view of learning that supports the belief that all students will and should easily fit in and learn what is being taught in the classroom. Two interpretations of Vygotsky's (1986) zone of proximal development (ZPD) are compatible with a conventional view of learning. In the first interpretation, the ZPD is explained as the "distance between the problem-solving abilities of a learner working alone and that learner's problem-solving abilities when assisted by or collaborating with more experienced people" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 48). Teaching is thought of as scaffolding, or slowly relinquishing initial explicit support given for performance of a task until the learner can perform the task independently. An example of scaffolding is that of teaching students to write a five-paragraph essay by writing one together the first time, writing all but the last paragraph the second time, and so on until the students write the whole essay alone. In the second interpretation, the ZPD is the distance between cultural (understood) knowledge provided by the sociohistorical context (instruction) and active knowledge owned by the individual. "This interpretation is based on Vygotsky's distinction between scientific and everyday concepts, and on his argument that a mature concept is achieved when the scientific and everyday versions have merged" (p. 48). An example is that of the teacher who bases her instruction of the scientific concept of precipitation on what students already know from their own cultural backgrounds about rain. The social nature of learning is minimised in both conventional interpretations of the ZPD.

A conventional view of learning is so deeply interrelated with schooling in the American culture that it also drives the perspective from which students who have been disproportionately failed and excluded (i.e., marginalised), both academically and socially, by the mainstream educational system are taught, disciplined, and studied (Carpenter, Ramirez, & Severn, 2006; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Delpit, 1995; King, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Moje & Lewis, 2007). A conventional view of learning prioritises the transmission of knowledge through transmission-style teaching, which is characterised by lecturing, authoritarianism, competition, and passivity (Giroux, 1991, 1994, 2001; McLaren, 2003). Transmission-style teaching is referred to as "banking education" (Friere, 1985, p. 21). Banking education occurs when knowledge is deposited into and withdrawn from the learners' heads by the authority, or teacher (Freire, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Scripted lessons are intended to deliver the given knowledge which students are expected to absorb, learn, and regurgitate upon demand. Students who do not achieve the predetermined guidelines for success are declared to be academic failures, discipline problems, or both. According to its opponents, banking education is oppressive education (Freire, 2000; Kozol, 2005). Oppressive education perpetuates dominant educational myths through systematic indoctrination, measurement, testing, and rote learning (Goodlad, 1984). Oppressive education upholds the status quo of mainstream schools by reproducing the dominant culture's social and academic expectations and not addressing the political nature of schooling (Wynne, 2002), outcomes which are challenged from a critical social practice view of learning.

2. Anthropological classroom theories

Anthropological classroom theories of cultural synchronisation and cultural responsive pedagogy provide the theoretical framework for challenging conventional approaches to questions of classroom discipline.

2.1. Cultural synchronisation theory

Cultural synchronisation theory (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 1990, 2003) provides a base for understanding cultural incongruence in the