Reflection:
Displaced Blame

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1.   Abstract:

This reflection examines how social class-consciousness shapes student learning and wellbeing. The findings summarized herein are some of the understandings gained through a qualitative interview study that was concluded in the summer of 2008. Thirty-eight adult literacy learners were asked to share their perspectives on public education and to provide firsthand knowledge as to why some individuals emerge from public schools with limited literacy.

Key Words:

social class-consciousness, students, learning, wellbeing, literacy, public education

2.   Introduction

In a recent conversation with friends about the causes and effects of the mortgage crisis, one woman stated that the poor choices of the "uneducated" are to blame for the economic condition of the United States. Her argument reflected a societal tendency to negatively judge those who are less educated and affluent and to blame breakdowns in powerful systems on powerless individuals and groups. This reflection is not intended to argue whether Wall Street or Main Street is culpable for the market's instability. Rather, this rumination focuses on how social class-consciousness permeates our educational systems. By understanding that we are all influenced by the structural systems within which we are situated we will be better able to promote more just effects for all, including the less privileged (Orellanam and Bowman, 2003).

The National Adult Literacy Survey found that approximately 50% of the adult population in the United States lacks the necessary and sufficient level of literacy that is required to successfully function in society (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 2000). To gain a firsthand perspective of this phenomenon, I interviewed 38 adults who were engaged in developmental education programs, all of whom had emerged from public schools in the United States with limited literacy. I asked participants to evaluate the quality of their education and to share their experiences with schooling. Each recalled at least one teacher who had nurtured their learning and wellbeing. Yet all had experienced many teachers who provided differential instruction and kindness to students based on their status positions. Most interviewees self-identified as poor or working class and as they told their stories and described ways in which social class status shaped their teachers' expectations of students and influenced how effectively they taught children how to read, write, compute, and position themselves in the world. Their narratives revealed class, ability, and racial discrimination ubiquitous in public schools. Their stories portrayed that public education is most advantageous for those who come from relative advantage. Most participants had learned lessons of positionality in lieu of acquiring literacy through schooling. We know that successful teachers build relationships with students, engage them conversationally, and facilitate

rather than dominate their learning (Juliana and Andrews, 2005). Yet, participants remembered being ostracized and reprimanded; experiences that affected them in sometimes subtle and often significant ways that had deteriorating effects on their sense of efficacy.

Teachers (like students) relish immediate rewards. While it is easy to attend to the bright and beautiful, struggling learners may frustrate our best intentions if they fail to respond to our initial teaching attempts. However, even those who are most susceptible to learning failures can thrive when taught with equity, kindness, and respect. Teaching with patience, care, and intention facilitates students' academic growth and pushes our own development as educators. Participants' fond memories of early elementary school centered on teachers nurturing them, peers accepting them, and everyone "being nice." Fifth grade marked the beginning of successive years of academic failures and interpersonal problems as cumulative losses in learning and social stratification began to manifest. Teachers began to respond to less privileged students' struggles as if they were inevitable and the provision of rote work became predictable. As the joyful days of learning in a social context waned, teacher attention now focused on behavior modification rather than individualized instruction directed at the teaching and learning of essential skills. Untaught and under stimulated, interviewees reported that they were then expected think critically, synthesize, and analyze complex information in order to pass a standardized test.

Participants described feeling 'out of place' at school. They perceived that social markers such as use of language, clothing, and parental prestige had informed teachers' expectations of their cognitive abilities and social aptitude, while their innate intelligence and actual dispositions went unrecognized. Gee (2004) tells us that discourse involves one's use of language as well as ways of feeling, thinking, believing, valuing, and behaving. Through discourse individuals identify themselves as members of a particular social group and as holders of specific roles in society. Everyone develops a primary discourse within his or her unique socio-cultural and familial life. Secondary discourses are encountered in societal institutions, like public schools (Gee). A number of participants described the domain of school as a foreign place, yet their feelings of alienation had little to do with their expectations of school, rather they were estranged by schools' negative presumptions about them.

Participants conveyed an intimate familiarity with the sense of failure that is consequential to an inadequate acquisition of knowledge and skills and negative in-school social experiences. Their stories depict ways in which poor and working class students "learn" their subordinate positions and develop an identity of 'misfit' that is often carried into adulthood and other domains of life. Shannon (1998) states that, "the poor must endure the antagonisms of members of other economic classes" (p. 181). Participants affirmed that social class 'antagonisms' occur in public schools as they described how having been dismissed and disrespected had diminished their sense of confidence and competence. Indeed, most indicated that with each year of public education they experienced a decline in their self-esteem. That so many participants described themselves as 'messed up,' and in differing ways attributed their academic failures to personal defects, suggests that the 'better than / less than' dichotomy that exists in public schools was internalized and carried into adulthood by most. They

blamed the children they had once been for their limited literacy on one hand and expressed hurt as they realized that they had been educationally neglected on the other hand. Their stories acknowledge that even effective instructional methods will fail to foster learning in an environment that is void of inclusivity, warmth, and egalitarianism.

Educators have long held up the few who have risen from the oppression of poverty as evidence of equal educational opportunity. This myth negates the realities of the multitudes that have experienced inequity, such as the adult learners represented in this reflection. They tell us that public schools do not provide equal education to every child through their accounts of structural inequities that are perpetuated in public schools. Most interviewees had left school before graduating. They told me that they did not reject school. They felt that schools had rejected them.

While participants were clearly intelligent and capable individuals, they had not been granted the promise of public education. Few had recognized their potential and worth and none had achieved their literacy potential before pursuing adult education. Systems of inequity had hindered their learning opportunities as children and subsequently their ability to effectively maneuver social, economic, and political systems as adults. Yet, these adult learners still believed that education is the path to self-actualization. It would be useful to seek the perspectives of individuals who emerged from public schools with limited literacy who have not sought adult developmental education; the absence of such voices is a limitation of this study.

One participant described himself as a "hard learner." Many who emerge from public schools with limited literacy are 'hard learners.' What contributes to 'hard learning'? Participants explained that they had been figuratively and literally 'passed' from one grade to the next in absence of meaningful learning. They described how they had struggled to learn with inadequate foundational knowledge, until finally conceding to teachers' definition of them as low achieving, they quit. Do other factors contribute to 'hard learning'? Many interviewees came from literacy poor homes where they enjoyed few educational, emotional, or material supports. Yet they did attend public schools, which we presume are literacy rich environments and do provide supports. When we attribute academic failures to poverty, absent or negligent parents, less than desirable social affiliations, socioemotional issues, and other factors – we absolve public schools of the responsibility to educate. We must recognize and ameliorate the structural inequities that exist in educational systems; otherwise we inadvertently neglect those we claim to serve. We must struggle for educational equity and foster the development of every learner. We must draw in and embrace those who reside on the margins because only those who are part of a community will benefit from what it has to offer. We must teach that social justice progresses from the just acts of individuals. Just as homebuyers trusted financial systems and mortgage brokers to serve their better interests, students trust teachers to teach.

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