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The Influence of Cultural Capital on Twenty-First Century Secondary School Literature Curricula

Hunter Brimi

HBRIMI@aol.com

In his many writings, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu articulates the concept of “cultural capital,” a social reproduction theory born out of Karl Marx’s idea of class struggle, Erving Goffman’s notions of human behavior, Michel Foucault’s beliefs regarding societal knowledge, and Ivan Illich’s criticism of schools. In essence, Bourdieu argues that the structure of a society is reflected by, and perpetuated by, its education system, a system that conveys a collection of cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes essential to the society. These ideas bear the marked influence of Bourdieu’s early contemporaries Basil Bernstein and Robin Nash, both of whom espoused theories concerning the educational system’s role in shaping individuals within society. Since the work of Bourdieu, Bernstein, and Nash an array of sociologists have expanded the scope and application of this popular, and easily adaptable, theory. The first part of this paper examines the expansion of Bourdieu’s theory; the second part applies this theory to the current state of American education.

Background and Influences

While Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital derives from Marxist ideology in representing a society of “haves” and “have-nots,” of bourgeois and proletariat, his theory does not denounce capitalism. Like Marx, Bourdieu recognizes a conflict between an elite,

ruling class and a subordinate working class. And like Marx, Bourdieu shows the gap between the two groups as built by inequities in the possession of capital. But Bourdieu defines capital in more than mere pecuniary terms; to him capital and power also lie in a group's or individual's ability to fit into society through shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and virtues. Hence, for Bourdieu, education is a source of more than academic credentials that can lead to economic gain, but it serves as a fountainhead from which the elite propagate the ideology that constructs the rules of society--rules, of course, that favor this same elite. Furthermore, where Marx sees the bourgeois intellectual as a potential instrument of social reform, as a potential traitor to his class and ally of the proletariat in transmitting his knowledge, Bourdieu views the intellectual not as a revolutionary force, but as a maintaining, even as a stabilizing force within the society. The intellectual spreads his knowledge judiciously and by the rules established by society allowing the populace to compete for cultural capital. This competition, according to Bourdieu, inevitably reproduces the current social classes in subsequent generations as the children of the elite are best-equipped to accrue the spoils of education. In short, where Marxism yearns for revolution, in an almost Weberian sense, Bourdieu recognizes social reorganization and equality as infeasible (Tumino).

To account Bourdieu's departure from a strictly Marxist view, one must consider the influences of Goffman, Foucault, and Illich. Starting with "Symbols of Class Status" (1951) and continuing with work concerning the individual in society, Goffman highlights the importance of social roles. Goffman states in his theory of social interaction that people act according to defined roles within a given context (Travers). A cultural capitalist can use this idea to rationalize the way in which students from different social classes respond to their teachers and their learning environments. Those from an upper or middle class background should be more comfortable and competent to learn than their working class peers. Therefore, according to Bourdieu's model, they should be more adept at acquiring cultural capital because of their innate role in society.

Furthermore, in accordance with Foucault's ideas, social class plays a paramount part in determining what exactly comprises cultural capital. In "Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason" (1961), Foucault argues that society determines the definition of abstract terms such as "madness," "knowledge," and "reason" ("Sociology of Knowledge"). Essentially, under Foucault's conditions, no cultural capital can exist in a society unless the society recognizes it as cultural capital. This means that those in power must consider an element of culture as valuable for it to *truly* hold value. So, in Bourdieu's theory, not only do those in the elite classes have a better chance in the competition for acquiring cultural capital (under the Goffman influence), but they are also at an advantage in that they attempt to acquire what the previous generation of *their own class* deems valuable (as presented by Foucault).

Of course, Illich acknowledged these same truths in *Deschooling Society* (1970) where he proposed several myths regarding schools. Among these myths, he included the myths of institutionalized values, measurement of values, packaging of values, and self-perpetuating progress (Gajardo). Countering the first of these, the myth of institutionalized values, Illich believes that the individual can have academic and learning interests outside of what the school teaches. Unfortunately, in Illich's view, schools fail to respond to the students' individual interests, but instead promote the values that have been accepted by society. The implications to Bourdieu's theory are fairly self-evident: schools give students the knowledge, skills, and ideas--the cultural capital--that society expects from them. Furthermore, under the next two myths, measurement of values and packaging of values, Illich contends that schools determine what students will consider essential or valuable and that the schools maintain their curricula as commodities that students must have. Finally, according to Illich's critique of the myth of self-perpetuating progress, students stagnate as their individual goals inevitably conform to what the school advocates as valuable. In other words, they cannot truly self-actualize so long as schools persuade them to comply with society's expectations. Presumably, Bourdieu agrees with Illich in charging that the schools are under the sway of the powerful elite, pushing *their* values and *their*

methods. Yet, while Bourdieu does view schools as pushing the values of the dominant culture, he also sees them as not only allowing for different class cultures to emerge, but as also encouraging such class stratification. In other words, a student from the working class will go to school, learn about his society's structure, recognize his place in society, and accept his role. And whereas Illich denounces this reality and calls for "deschooling," Bourdieu seemingly accepts this status quo as a reflection of a self-reproducing society.

Cultural Capitalism: A Theory of Social Reproduction

As stated earlier, Bourdieu's approach comes from a Marxist view of class conflict. In "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," (1973) however, he and Jean-Claude Passeron put forth the idea that more than just economic production delineates the classes. Bourdieu and Passeron propose that members of the working class fail in school because of their own lack of cultural capital; that is, they are put at fault by the education system because they are unable to fit into the academic culture of the school ("Cultural Capital"). Since this class of children do not achieve academically, they become socially immobile, resulting in the next generation of manual laborers. Meanwhile, the offspring of the elite classes do possess the background, the shared ideas regarding education, the prerequisite social skills to do well academically. With this academic success, of course, these students translate degrees into higher paying, higher status employment. Are the lower class students intellectually inferior and incapable of learning? Not according to Bourdieu and Passeron; they just do not acclimate to the school environment as well as their classmates who have grown up in educationally-affluent environs.

This idea is similar to that proposed at approximately the same time by Basil Bernstein in his two volumes of "Class, Codes, and Control" (1971, 1973). Bernstein believes that language, or better, proficient and conforming use of language (what Bourdieu would perceive as part of cultural capital) heavily influences social

achievement (Apple). Hence, a child will not succeed if he cannot competently use written and spoken language in the prescribed manner of education. This notion predicts negative results for the child of a working class background with working class parents who themselves most likely did not succeed in school.

Additionally, Robin Nash contributes “Keeping in with Teacher” (1972) in which he hypothesizes that a teacher’s individual cultural bias has as large a role in a child’s success or failure as the institution. He believes that teachers actively promulgate disparity in educational success by perceiving that certain children can achieve while others simply cannot. He essentially argues that cultural capital plays a cardinal role in shaping teachers’ “perception.” In effect, Nash concludes that a child from even the poorest background can gain favor if he has the ability to conform to the teacher’s ideal of a good student. Again, if the child has enough cultural capital, regardless of his lineage, he can succeed. Conversely, students will fail if they do not have the ability to appear potentially successful (“Robin Nash”).

Responses, Problems, and Adjustments

In *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis present a theory of social reproduction that echoes Bordieu’s work, but that contains a more elaborate Marxist element of class struggle. Bowles and Gintis argue that three primary, connected hierarchical systems operate in America: a class system, an occupational system, and an educational system (Harris). In their model, the educational and occupational systems help perpetuate each other, and ultimately, together they uphold the class system. Yet, while Bordieu believes schools present essential realities and culture to students, allowing the qualified to advance, Bowles and Gintis produce data that suggest a weaker correlation between academic ability and future employment. In fact, they argue that other social and demographic factors contribute more to high status employment; schools simply teach students how to be good workers in adult society (Harris). Furthermore, they argue that the academic

components of school are far less meaningful than the “hidden curriculum,” the good manners and work traits that schools emphasize, including deference, organization, congeniality, dependability, and tidiness. Students gain acceptance and merit by exuding these characteristics. Those who do not are punished. In this manner, schools produce good workers, allowing those with the right social connections and demographic attributes to advance to higher status through their cultural capital.

Yet, according to researchers such as Paul Willis, the *lack* of cultural capital may not be the primary reason for the failure of many working class students. In his oft-cited 1977 study, published as “Learning to Labour,” Willis documents the attitudes of twelve working class boys who have formed an identity by avidly denouncing the current education system (“Education--Paul Willis“). Willis portrays the boys as astutely aware of the inequities of the system; as such, they *choose* to fail rather than conform. The boys rebel against the system claiming that it prevents the possibility that they *could* ever advance beyond their ordained realm of the working class. Thus, Willis depicts cultural capital not merely as a necessary possession for students, but as an iconic deterrent to student effort in some cases. If students feel they cannot achieve within the system, they will not exert themselves in it.

Bourdieu responds in “The Forms of Capital” (1983) by elaborating on his original theory. Again, Bourdieu explores more than the fiscal aspects of capital and categorizes cultural capital into three groups: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (Hayes). The first refers to internal aspects specific to an individual such as his knowledge and skills. This embodied capital is an integral part of who an individual is, and Bourdieu refers to this as part of the individual’s “habitus.” Bourdieu uses “habitus” to refer to the internal cognitive mechanisms that an individual uses to interact with his society. For example, a resident of New York City has probably developed the knowledge and ability to hail a taxi. The first-time visitor from Sand Mountain, Alabama lacks this internal knowledge and most likely will struggle completing what is considered a routine task to regular inhabitants of this culture.

Bourdieu calls the second aspect of cultural capital “objectified.” These elements of cultural capital include material objects that have symbolic meaning within a culture. Only those who are familiar with and well-versed in the culture grasp the meaning of these items, at the exclusion of those who do not (Stone). For example, suppose a teacher shows students Emanuel Leutze’s famous portrait *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* and asks them to research the painting and its historical basis. To many students, this image of America’s first president leading men through turbulent waters is part of their objectified cultural capital; they know who George Washington was, they know his importance to this country, and they attach value to this work of art and this assignment. For others, perhaps for students not born in America, this painting simply portrays a man standing on a boat while other men struggle against a rough current. The point is, certain images in a culture have meaning and value to those who possess ample cultural capital. The real value to the possessors of this capital comes in their ability to relate to other members of society, to socialize with powerful others, and to basically feel comfortable as a citizen who shares common meanings for certain symbols.

In addition to embodied and objectified cultural capital, Bourdieu describes institutionalized cultural capital. In this category, Bourdieu refers to academic achievements and qualifications that certify an individual as accomplished and capable members of the society (Stone). This form of capital includes academic degrees and professional credentials such as board certification for a doctor or lawyer. With such institutionalized cultural capital as an end for their years of education, students can turn their schooling into economic gain through better jobs. People pursue academics less fervently if they fail to realize the value of institutionalized cultural capital. Subsequently, they most likely fail to acquire much from the other categories of cultural capital during their schooling.

Thus, Bourdieu argues that schools become agents for “social elimination” (Bowles) as only those who fit in with the established culture proceed through the system and find their ways to higher status. Bourdieu believes that the system excludes people

through two processes: testing and intimidation. First, consider the national tests that students must take to further their educations; they take the ACT and/or the SAT to go to college, they take the GRE for graduate school; they take the MCAT for medical school; they take the LSAT for law school. Then, in some professions, they have to take another test just to be certified for employment in the field (e.g. medical boards, the ABA bar exam, and the Praxis.) The lower class students are less likely to pass standardized tests because of inherent cultural shortcomings according to Bourdieu. Second, this process simply intimidates many working class students. In short, they see what they have to do to further their educations and achieve higher status, and they feel overwhelmed and inadequate. So they quit.

Bowles has answered Bourdieu's work by citing several inconsistencies between his theory and the policies of American schools. For one, he questions Bourdieu's belief in the goal of social elimination by citing efforts by the government to increase the number of students in higher education (Bowles). Furthermore, he does not accept the premise that individual teachers act under the guidance of a ruling class, that teachers work as instruments for social reproduction (Bowles). Then there is the disparity between modern job requirements and Bourdieu's view of elimination. With increased technology, workers in many fields need more training, which schools are apparently willing to provide. So instead of weeding out the weak, schools want to arm the future work force with more skills for new kinds of employment.

Other sociologists have also questioned the theory's validity in modern America. In "Cultural Capital: Illusions, Gaps, and Glissandos" (1987), Michelle Lamont and Annette Lareau redefine cultural capital, allowing for more relative diversity and promoting its exclusionary effects between social classes. They do not view cultural capital in America as only existing within and deriving from a dominant culture; lower status cultures exist with their own legitimate capital. Lamont and Larue believe that sociologists should judge cultural norms relatively. They see Bourdieu's failure to do this as a weakness in his theory. Plus, with the onslaught of mass media in recent decades, distinctions between cultures have become blurred. Consequently, the lower

classes have more independence from any overriding dominant culture (“Social Stratification: Additional Readings”).

Subsequent commentators and Bourdieu himself now regard cultural capital as a subcategory within the concept of social advantage and stratification. They include economic capital and social capital equally, if not more, important. John Goldthorpe, for one, regards economic capital as more necessary for social mobility than cultural capital (Silva and Edwards). Others, such as James Coleman and Robert Putnam, claim that social capital, the ability to create and operate within social networks, can help individuals overcome their economic shortcomings (Silva and Edwards). Furthermore, in her study “Cultural Capital and Educational Achievement” (2001), Alice Sullivan dismisses lack of cultural capital as the primary contributor to student failure. Thus, the trend seems to be towards the view that people a panoply of capital and use it according to their particular strengths. In fact, in a 2000 Parliamentary Report on education, the University of North London contributes a memorandum advocating Diane Reay’s view that the government needs to more actively dole out economic, social, and cultural capital to boost college attendance by the working class (“Appendix 10,” *Memorandum from the University of North London (HE 91)*).

Applications to American Education: From Cultural Capital to Cultural Literacy

Researchers continue to debate the role of cultural capital in American schools. E.D. Hirsch promotes the transmission of cultural capital in his book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Here he selects a multitude of historical, literary, and other facts that he claims define American culture. Critics decry the arbitrary nature of his listings and his exclusion of comparably valid and important facts.

Furthermore, as educators have recently emphasized multiculturalism in schools, the notion of focusing on the ideas and history of a dominant culture seems antiquated. School systems debate, for example, which books to include and which to eliminate

from their literature courses, mindful of the desire to present a curriculum that promotes the value of diversity. In his 1993 book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, John Guillory examines this topic, recognizing changes in society that lessen the need for some traditional works while criticizing those who seek to include works simply because they may appeal to a certain segment of the population.

Consequently, while the exact value of cultural capital seems to be declining (though it was never objectively measurable in the first place), the general concept of Bourdieu's theory still lingers. After all, culture pervades what we as a people do and how we act in society. And most people seek to belong, to fit in with their surroundings. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in "Self-Reliance":

Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Many American educators typify the type of conformity that Emerson bemoaned. Ask any citizen to describe a school classroom, and he or she will most likely list rows of desks, a teacher at the front, possibly a few bulletin boards, and probably an American flag. Ask a group of citizens from various parts of the country to describe the curriculum of a given grade level, or just to name some books that they read in high school, and they will likewise produce eerily similar responses. Is this consistency because of laziness on the part of teachers and administrators? Probably not. Is it due to a "why-argue-with-success" mentality? Judging by the seemingly perpetual calls for reform in education, this surely is not the case. In truth, school curriculum does not change because of the cultural and social roles that America has determined that schools should fulfill. For every teacher that speaks of teaching his or her students to be critical thinkers and creative producers, legions of others succumb to demands placed on the schools for initiating youth into the American culture.

For example, I recall a conversation with a colleague who was teaching tenth grade English for the first time in her six year teaching career. Having previously taught the subject myself, I asked her if she needed any resources and proceeded to discuss the course with her. I mentioned that I gave up on teaching *Julius Caesar*, the Shakespeare selection in the textbook, because I just felt that it was too dry and not as easily accessible to students as my preferred choice, *Othello*. While she did not criticize me for doing this, she said that she taught it because she wanted her students to be familiar with the play. “You know, the whole cultural literacy thing,” she said. At the time, I viewed cultural literacy as simply a theory, a suggestion for teachers. In reality, though, many educators, like my colleague, view “cultural literacy” as Pierre Bourdieu viewed “cultural capital”--as a necessary prerequisite for student success. Quite simply, the concept of “cultural literacy” marks the current evolutionary stage of Bourdieu’s theory.

The question now, however, is, “Does cultural literacy *really* matter?” If we peruse the curriculum guides, textbooks, and syllabi of high school classes, we may answer, “*Educators* seem to think so.” We say this because, regardless of the county, city, or state, certain elements pervade our current secondary school courses. More significantly, these elements dominated the courses twenty years ago, too. Certainly, no Geometry class would be complete without Pythagoras, and no Chemistry class could exist without a discussion of ionic and covalent bonds. But in areas where instructional content can vary, especially in literature classes, the same sense of curricular consistency (dare we say, “permanence?”) still flourishes. For example, many sophomores still read *Julius Caesar* or *Othello*. Juniors read from Twain, Poe, and Steinbeck. Seniors endure *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and heavier doses of Shakespeare. Why is this so? After all, students can surely learn the same language arts and critical thinking skills with other, more modern (and more teen-friendly) pieces of literature. Yet, we cling to these classics in our high school literature courses, regardless of changing times and changing tastes.

This tendency to maintain a traditional curriculum has taken several forms and has

originated from several sources. To start, administrators, educators, and parents tend to cringe at the thought of their students getting what they perceive as an incomplete education, an education short on cultural literacy. Consequently, legislators and educational commentators have voiced their desire to augment the prominence of cultural literacy in our classrooms. Legislators have developed the *No Child Left Behind Act* to ensure that all students and schools are meeting the same minimum standards. The fallout of this law includes statewide and countywide end of course exams which effectively dictate to teachers what material they should cover in their academic classes, regardless of the socioeconomic classes of their students.

Furthermore, men like E.D. Hirsch and the developers of college admissions tests have provoked further concern about the quality of secondary education and have acted to stiffen standards in classrooms across America. As a result, teachers (and English teachers especially) not only teach to a standardized test constructed by local and state officials (as mandated by *No Child Left Behind*), but they also teach to a mythical test authored by generations of American culture. To truly serve their students (and more accurately, their students' parents), teachers feel obligated to deliver the same cultural goods that their own teachers gave to them years earlier.

For teachers of literature, this means teaching "the classics." But, do classic American literature and British literature still matter? As Americans, we are two and a quarter centuries removed from British colonial rule; we are already eight generations removed from being Englishmen. Yet, our students, even the progeny of non-British immigrants, still study British Literature. Is this still a necessary part of a complete education? Furthermore, are the American Literature classics of four generations ago still relevant? American public school teachers struggle with these quandaries each year as they write their syllabi.

So educators face the issue of teaching "cultural literacy" as they wrestle with forces external to the classroom (*No Child Left Behind*, E.D. Hirsch, and college boards) and with the expectations/needs of the students (and their parents) in the classroom. On

one hand, teachers may seek to address specific needs of diverse students in a changing society. On the other, teachers may more realistically gear their lessons to the dictates of society as embodied by legislation and cultural expectation.

The Current Landscape: Reexamining Schools Through *No Child Left Behind*

Visit any public school teachers' lounge in America today, and the surest way to provoke vociferous debate and raise blood pressures is to ask about the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001). Teachers almost universally decry the implications of this act which seeks to hold teachers accountable for improving the performances of students from every ethnic, economic, and educational background. The idea of accountability, however, does not raise the ire of the teachers the most; teachers most often furrow their brows and bite their lips at the notion that standardized tests are the surest ways to measure the improvement of their students. Many teachers see themselves as simply producing good test-takers, kids who can accurately interpret test questions and find the appropriate letter to darken on their answer keys. While the students may develop either an aptitude for or possibly a phobia of these tests, teachers really feel the pressure of the tests' magnitude as they struggle to cope with being assessed for a semester's or a year's worth of instruction by a single test.

These tests, as mandated by *No Child Left Behind*, reflect the state curricular standards for the grade levels being tested. Thus, state policy-makers and testing experts may develop a fourth grade math assessment by first deciding what nine and ten year old children "should know and be able to do in math by the end of the fourth grade" (*No Child Left Behind: A Toolkit for Teachers*). In effect, states determine what their students in every big city, tiny borough, and backwoods hollow should learn and how quickly they should learn it.

Of course, this approach contradicts many accepted theories of cognitive and psychological development. To start, while Jean Piaget recognized certain set stages of

cognitive growth, he asserted that humans progress through these stages at different rates (Rothstein, 14). So, to expect all fourth graders to be at the same place cognitively is simply unrealistic. Furthermore, with teachers, administrators, and school districts more concerned about test results, educators face the perils of extrinsic motivation. They often see education as a stick-and-carrot activity where the payoff for students in learning is the good test score; likewise, the reward and validation of their teaching comes from the same test score. Finally, and perhaps most dangerously, the testing mentality violates the humanistic approaches espoused by Maslow and Rogers (Rothstein, 55). Instead of addressing the individual needs of students, teachers now must focus on the curricular demands of the state.

The state's policy-makers hopefully have the students' best interests in mind when they develop statewide curriculum. But what are these best interests, and by extension, what should drive this curriculum. In effect, the question becomes, "What is the purpose of education?"

Hirsch's Answer and Its Cultural Implications

In his seminal work, *Cultural Literacy*, E.D. Hirsch proposes that "the basic goal of education in a human community is acculturation" and that "[t]he acculturative responsibility of the schools is primary and fundamental" (qtd. in Reynolds). In short, Hirsch believes that schools need to prepare students to interact within an already defined culture, in Hirsch's view, the culture of America.

To this end, Hirsch developed the concept of "core knowledge." This concept refers to a collection of specific items that should be listed and taught in schools to produce culturally literate Americans. Hirsch and experts in several academic fields thus created a document of what he deems "shared literate knowledge, 80 percent of which is over 100 years old" (qtd. in Reynolds). Furthermore, Hirsch argues that possessing this "shared" knowledge, or being "culturally literate" is necessary for anyone to "thrive in the modern world" (qtd. in Reynolds). In short, schools should teach a certain

package of knowledge because this knowledge will be *useful* to students if they wish to function in American society. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is *not* a consideration here. Thus, while Hirsch may want students to know that the Greeks proposed the ideal of “know thyself,” his theory more accurately reflects an attitude of “know thy culture and know thy place therein.” Again, culture and cultural literacy are key.

As Richard Reynolds and other commentators ponder, though, whose culture defines cultural literacy in America? According to Reynolds, “America is, perhaps, the single most multicultural nation on earth.” Hence, while Hirsch and his predecessors (of which Reynolds lists historian Arnold Toynbee and theologian John Amos Comenius) seek to produce a definitive list of information for all Americans to learn, such a list may not be inclusive of all Americans. Many argue, in fact, that it is not.

One of these dissenters is theorist Peter McLaren who objects to Hirsch’s ideals on the grounds that he perceives “core knowledge” to perpetuate existing disparities in American society (Reynolds). Essentially, McLaren and other critics see in Hirsch’s work the consolidation of a ruling culture’s beliefs, ideals, and values that must be transmitted, or perhaps imposed, on members of other cultures existing in America. Hypothetically, a school in a primarily Chicano neighborhood in Southern California may look at the clientele that populates their classrooms and recognize a community desire to learn about Chicano traditions, history, and literature. At the same time, a school in San Francisco may serve a primarily Asian student body and tend towards adopting a curriculum that explores Eastern philosophies, literature, etc. Ultimately, though, the State of California sets forth standards that its public school students, *all* public school students, must attain and demonstrate on a standardized test. Sure, individual teachers may vary their instruction and their curriculum in parts to meet the interests of their students, but the state will assess these same teachers and their schools by how well their students respond to the state curriculum. The not-so-subtle statement here? The state’s curriculum is more important. By extension, the dominant culture, as defined by the state (and influenced by Hirsch and his colleagues) is more

important as well.

College Admissions

Educators must also consider the demands of college admissions boards. Secondary school teachers tend to differ in their views of college. Some see their jobs as simply giving the students a solid educational foundation, and if they want to pursue higher education after high school, then so be it. Others, though, define their jobs as more closely aligned with the goals of college preparation.

The latter view seems more popular and more prominent, and colleges, and more importantly, perhaps, the producers of admissions tests apparently agree. In the past, for example, the SAT was purely an aptitude test. The test and its sections of reading comprehension questions, analogies, and mathematical logic simply measured the likelihood that a student could successfully work at a collegiate level.

Now, however, the New SAT is more content driven. Instead of simply measuring future ability, the test seeks to measure acquired skills. The SAT board president, Gaston Caperton III, has led the reformation of the test and admits that the “test is really going to create a revolution in schools.” (Cloud, 51) The revolution? To start, Richard Atkinson, president of the University of California, threatened to stop requiring admissions candidates to take the SAT if the test did not change to a more content-based assessment. To meet the needs of the test’s largest client, the University of California system, Caperton willingly complied. Of course, he did so with what TIME magazine deemed as the “the goal of influencing school curriculums.” (51) For example, the New SAT will include Algebra II questions. This means that schools will have to adjust their curricula to make sure that all students wishing to succeed on the test have had Algebra II by the time that they take it. While this level of math may not be too hard for many students to reach by the age of seventeen, others will lag simply because they have developed at a slower rate.

This situation is dangerous. Rebecca Zwick, formerly of the College Board, believes that this will widen the gap in scores for minorities. She adds that “kids who go to crummy schools may be disadvantaged.” (50) At this point, those “crummy schools” will need to adjust for *No Child Left Behind* and for the New SAT. Lost in this adjustment may be the differing social needs of their students.

Further Implications Regarding Education

At the heart of Bourdieu’s “cultural capital” theory (and by extension through the “cultural literacy” and “core knowledge” movement), lies a basic assumption about the role of education: Schools should prepare citizens to fit into an established society. This assumes a static society with concrete values. For example, “America as a democracy” presents such an established value.

But some argue that America’s institutions do not reflect an entirely democratic society. They view America as “democratizing” (Slater, 174). That is, America is still developing as a democracy. In some segments of society, democracy exists; in others, it does not. Most notably, the public schools of America are *not* democratic.

Public schools most closely resemble bureaucratic dynasties, where the ideas, values, and traditions of a line of educators are transmitted by an agency of administrators and teachers to the people, the students. Some may even argue that the dynasty is closer to a plutocracy where the wealthy elite control the course content of schools in an effort to reproduce their social standing in succeeding generations. Whatever the case is, the schools are not democracies. Exhibit A: The classroom teacher stands in front of the students and tells them what they need to know as chosen by policy-makers, textbook companies, and perhaps the teacher. Exhibit B: The same teacher sits amongst colleagues as principals, county department heads, consultants, or textbook companies tell *them* what students need to know and how the teachers should get them to know it. Hence, the schools may be preparing students to live in a democracy, but they do not replicate democracy.

But should they completely replicate democracies? After all, most schools hold student government elections, require civics classes, and teach the students all about the ideals of a democratic society. Do Americans, though, really want students to be true democratic citizens?

According to studies performed by the National Opinion Research Center (1996), Americans increasingly desire that the younger generations learn obedience in schools (Slater, 175-176). This works out well for the followers of Hirsch as obedient students will be receptive to learning what the teacher asks them to learn. Obedient students will perform well on tests. Obedient students will accept the current state of American society.

Yet, is this what we really want? In his examination of schools at the end of the twentieth century, Robert Slater identifies certain “imbalances” that exist in our schools (177). The foremost of these is the imbalance between “Freedom” and “Order.” Schools, of course, favor “Order,” and most teachers adopt classroom management styles that fit this preference. This preference, though, may stifle the students’ need for academic and social freedom and the subsequent growth that results from each. It may also stifle their cultural traits.

To illustrate, I offer a seventh-grade English class I observed a few years ago. The teacher, a young African-American lady commented on a difference between her classroom and others in the building. She told me that she usually got minority students with behavioral problems, probably because of her own race. She was not, however, offended by this; in fact, she felt that she had insights and understandings that aided these kids. She provided an example that is pertinent to the usual imbalance between “Freedom” and “Order.” She acknowledged that she gave more leeway to her students, especially the African-American students, when it came to “being loud.” In the teachers’ opinion, they tended to be louder, and perhaps more unruly, because they came from homes that were loud. She told me that in her own home, she remembered growing up with many voices talking at once; to be heard, a

child had to be loud. So, whereas a teacher not familiar with this cultural trait might continually discipline students for the slightest bit of talkative behavior, this teacher generally gave more latitude to the students.

Returning to the notion of imbalances, though, the most disturbing imbalance cited by Slater may be the tendency of schools to favor “Tradition” over “Change” (179). In a society that changes as new generations replace older ones, as more immigrant cultures arrive, as new technologies change the economic market, schools tend to cling to traditional methods and values. To wit, noted education professor Ted Hipple frequently commented on how a modern day Rip Van Winkle may awaken from a twenty year slumber and find that through all the changes in society, the one place he would feel comfortable, the one place that would not have changed, is the local public school.

The Curricular Aspect and Its Cultural Impact

Not only have the structures and relationship dynamics of schools remained in tact, but the curriculum has as well. On the surface, a consistent curriculum does not appear to be a bad entity. After all, for the sake of comparing students for college admissions and for the sake of making sure that no children are truly left behind in society, we should try to guarantee an equal opportunity to be educated. For many English teachers, this means the necessary exposure to “the classics.”

English teacher Carol Jago defends teaching the classics to the diverse student body at her school. Regarding the demographic composition of the school, she writes,

One third of the 3,200 students at Santa Monica High School do not speak English at home. More than twenty different languages are spoken on campus. One student body includes teenagers who live in million-dollar homes and others who reside in homeless shelters. (Jago, 122)

She justifies teaching the classics to her students by citing their timelessness and the rigorous study that they provide. Jago writes that “a critical reading of classical

literature results in a deep literacy that I believe is an essential skill for anyone who wants to attempt to make sense of the world.” To wit, she cites Marshall Gregory (1997), a professor at Butler University, who enumerated several benefits of studying literature, including the development of “intra and intercultural awareness.” (125) Additionally, she argues that the themes and character traits present in classic literature (she even cites *Beowulf* in this argument) have “real world” relevance (126). Jago concludes by reminding her readers that education requires work on the part of the students; she believes that the more accessible pieces (such as work classified as “adolescent literature”) has a place in the students’ independent study time. But for her, the classics are essential to the formal education of all of her students.

Others see a problem in Jago’s approach, questioning whether the essentials for one group of students are necessary for all students across the county, the state, and the nation. In *Curriculum Based Assessment: A Primer*, Charles Hargis vilifies what he terms a “lock-step” curriculum. In this model, Hargis points out that children are expected to adjust and to adapt to a prescribed set of standards at each grade level. He compares this practice to the “Procrustean Bed” from Greek mythology; in effect, the high achievers (in the Procrustean model, those who are too tall for the bed and whose heads are cut off) are inhibited since their learning is relegated to standards below their capacities. Likewise, low achievers (those who are too short and must be stretched to fit the bed) must work at a rate that is beyond their natural capabilities (Hargis, 3). He believes that expecting too much from those who are incapable results in a pattern of failure that pervades students throughout their academic careers.

The cultural aspect of Hargis’s theory is quite evident. Take the aforementioned seventh grade students and put them into a classroom where they must adapt to standards with which they are culturally unfamiliar. These students are much more likely to fail in a classroom that does not recognize their cultural background and that expects them to get in line both behaviorally and academically.

The problem is often exasperated for economically disadvantaged students. If a child

grows up in a home that does not contain books, with parents who perform working class jobs, he or she may not value education as much. For example, take the case of a fifteen year old student that I met at an alternative school in Knoxville. The boy could not read. (The snack lady told me that she had to “read ‘M&M’s’ to him.”) I started tutoring the boy at his home and found that the mother had not learned to read until she was married at which point her husband taught her. Furthermore, I found no books in the home, and the boy and I had to search the house for a writing instrument. His lack of reading ability in schools simply was a by-product of the lack of literacy at home. On the other hand, though, his father and brothers had taught him how to disassemble and reassemble an automobile engine. This, unfortunately, does not appear on Hirsch’s list of core knowledge.

Beyond Theory: Interviews with Literature Teachers

In *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, Alfie Kohn makes a clear distinction between “Old School” educators and more progressive educators. He criticizes the Old School for their “return to the basics” approach (Kohn, 49). He states that these educators believe that “thinking comes later” and that students need to learn basic facts and skills, often out of a relevant context (50-51). He illustrates his point about content relevance by asking “Which is larger, $4/11$ or $5/13$?” His answer? “Who Cares?” (141). To many math teachers, this attitude may border on heresy, but Kohn comes back to the question later in an example where students need to know how to compare fractions to complete a project. At this point, since the question is relevant, the kids care, and the difference between $4/11$ and $5/13$ is important (146).

Furthermore, many educators have increasingly sought out ways to make their content relevant. To the Hirsch followers, content is relevant because “we say it is relevant, and you need to know this to succeed.” This especially seems to be the case in high school literature classes.

Go into the book closets of local high school English departments, and you will find

scores of copies of *Wuthering Heights*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, and other classic novels from American and British literary canons. Look in the textbooks, and you will find similar selections and excerpts from classic literature. Why do we teach the classics?

Several reasons are evident. First, these really are good pieces of literature. Second, these books have been taught by generations of teachers already, and teaching resources are easily available. Third, many parents want their children to be well-versed in the classics in anticipation of college.

But there is another viable reason that courses in American and British literature are on the curriculum of practically every public high school across the continent: the transmission of culture. Like the teacher who wanted her kids to be culturally literate with *Julius Caesar*, Americans generally want to keep alive the same experiences, ideals, traditions, and stories that have shaped the country.

I recently spoke with experienced teachers of each course, American and British literature, and asked them about their curricula. Specifically, I investigated their views of literature in conjunction with history, the multicultural aspects of their courses, their views of Hirsch's theory, the importance of a teaching a literary canon, their overall goals for education, and whether they saw a place for cultural capital in American education.

The teachers differed in their use of history in their literature discussions. The teacher of American literature ("Ms. B") said that she wavered from semester to semester; some semesters she uses more history while using a formalist approach more prevalently in others. The English literature teacher ("Mr. S") felt that he always has to give an extensive account of the history behind the literature that he taught. Both teachers, though, agreed that when dealing with history, they do so from a standpoint of "how current events and attitudes affect the literature." In other words, they did not see relating history to the literature as part of acculturation.

Yet, when it came to issues of culture, the teachers again had some differing views. Mr. S recognized that with British literature, there was not a whole lot of opportunity to relate the topic to a multicultural audience. He did state that his material was relevant to different ethnicities in that it is “related to Western civilization, and they’re living in the West , so obviously it’s relevant to them.”

While recognizing the importance of “the writers of the age,” Ms. B said that she tries not to have a curriculum of “all dead, white guys.” She cites using Native American myths and legends, the poetry of Anne Bradstreet, and the work from the Harlem Renaissance as evidence of trying to bring in “alternate voices.”

Next, having read Hirsch’s statement that education’s primary function is “acculturation,” the teachers gave responses indicating partial agreement. For Ms. B, she felt that the reason for having American literature spoke to the issue of cultural literacy. She believed that students have gained appropriate language arts skills by their junior year, and that her curriculum is more about cultural literacy than skill-building. Mr. S views the role of acculturation as more limited in his class. To him, school does partly exist to “give [students] a sense of culture...a way to think.”

Yet, when it came to the importance cultural literacy to the future success of students, the two teachers had vastly different comments. Mr. S stated, “I think they need to be aware of major movements and perhaps a few authors within these movements to understand the steps that have carried us through time.” While this may somewhat Hirsch’s idea of core knowledge, Mr. S continued by citing “limited benefits” to all students reading the same materials or even from all of the same authors. For example, he said that students “should be exposed to the Renaissance or Elizabethan England,” but that “does not necessarily mean they should have read certain specific authors from the period.”

Ms. B, however, did not believe that knowledge of American literature was a prerequisite to success in America. Students going to college, though, might be harmed by not having the class “because of lack of experience reading older

literature.” Yet, when asked if the course is valuable beyond college, she said that “it could depend on the profession” of the student. Furthermore, she believes that all current students do not necessarily benefit from reading American literature simply because they are incapable of reading it. “We’re asking them to do things beyond their ability; that stifles growth.” Plus, she found problems with a “one-size-fits-all program” that probably does not address the needs of all students. She also argues that students should not all have to read the same books. Again, she cited the disparity in ability levels as a reason. When asked if it is important for students of different ethnicities to be well-versed in American literature, she did allow that “the more you know about society, the more you’ll see where you fit in.” She went on to say, though, that different kids do need different things. For example, she realizes that kids in her school’s computer networking program really have no need for knowledge of literature other than to pass the end of course test.

So, what do the students have any needs that are universal? What should they get from high school? Ms. B believed that high school should get students “emotionally and intellectually ready for the next step, whether it’s a job or college.” When asked how her course fits into this goal, Ms. B indicated that the personal connections made between self and literature improve such development. Of course, emotional development is not easily measured, and consequently, it does not appear on statewide or countywide course objectives.

Mr. S, though, had a more specific goal in mind. He wants students to become “reasonably independent problem-solvers, reasonably independent in the use of resources as researchers, and fairly accurate communicators.” In effect, his goal as a teacher is to teach these disciplines through his curriculum.

Lastly, the teachers responded to the relative importance of cultural capital in education today. Ms. B viewed the notion as relevant only to the kids’ abilities to pass standardized tests that may still possess some cultural bias. Mr. S believed that cultural capital “has implications.” Yet, he also said that giving cultural capital is “a

community responsibility, a family responsibility” and is “not necessarily on the backs of schools.”

Thus, the teachers both seemed to recognize cultural literacy as an influence, yet not as the essential influence on their teaching. On the other hand, while one teacher validated the utility of his course content (in part, citing the value of cultural literacy), the other recognized shortcomings in the curriculum, even stating that many kids have academic skills for college before coming to her class. The difference in opinions may simply reflect a generational difference between a 17 year veteran (Mr. S) and an eight year veteran. Perhaps, though, this difference illustrates different pedagogical beliefs that exist throughout America. And just as difficult as it is to standardize what children learn, it is even more difficult to standardize what adult teachers believe.

The Results?

As an educator, I believe that my students will learn something. The question is, what will that something be? Will the students learn to think critically, write effectively, and work productively? Will they learn to memorize, organize, and strategize for the test? Or will they learn how to get through school, work within the system, stay out of trouble and move on with life? Will they learn that they can get away with procrastinating, with plagiarizing, and with cutting every corner? Probably a little of everything, to be honest.

But one thing that more and more students are learning is that they do not like reading literature. Much of the blame for this lies in our insistence on teaching “the classics.” While I personally love *The Great Gatsby* and *The Return of the Native*, I fear that I have scarred some students by forcing these works upon them. But what’s the worst thing that could happen? So what if they do not grow up to become English majors, join book clubs, or just occasionally dabble in reading something for the fun of it? They will make through life, right?

Yet, each succeeding generation that grows up averse to reading (not just reading the classics, but reading in general) perpetuates an increasingly less literate society. Mind you, this goes beyond simply being “culturally” illiterate; this means that the culture becomes one of illiteracy.

English teacher Daniel Gallo argues this point in “How Classics Create an Aliterate Society.” In this article, he recalls his own dreadful experiences as a teenager struggling through classics that were written at grade levels too high and about topics too intellectually inaccessible. In addition, he recognizes his own struggles in the complaints of his students who bemoan the staleness of their assigned readings. Consequently, he states that he would, “like to see ‘the love of reading’ listed as the number one goal of the English curriculum at every grade in all school systems.” (Gallo, 131) To do this, Gallo advocates teaching young adult literature, claiming that “[t]he only two elements common in the classics that some contemporary young adult novels lack are plot complexity and dull, length descriptions.” (134) Furthermore, he criticizes those who decry adolescent novels for these shortcomings by deeming them “ignorant elitists.” (134)

These “elitists,” though, seem to control the majority of thought on the subject. Gallo fears that their control will have serious consequences; he writes,

We are a nation that teaches its children *how* to read in the early grades, then forces them during their teenage years to read literary works that most of them dislike so much that they have no desire whatsoever to continue those experiences into adulthood. (131)

In short, Gallo foresees future adult societies that mirror today’s youth who prefer video games, television shows, action films, and internet chat rooms to reading.

Of course, an elitist might argue for the equal validity of such a society built on the acclaimed technology of the twenty-first century. After all, who’s to say that one culture, reading or non-reading, is better than the other? Simply put, however, the

written word allows for more exchange of ideas. A film viewer absorbs the director's art; a reader explores the writer's ideas and judges them against his own. Video grabs our attention for half an hour to two and a half hours at the most (generally speaking); reading demands sustained attention, offering less in the way of immediate gratification. Hence, there is more at stake than simply allowing people to choose how they spend their leisure time. A society of readers approaches issues and controversies in a deliberate, informed manner; a society of readers evaluates ideas and does not settle for a quick-fix with dangerous consequences; a society of readers values maturity, substance, and intellect over rashness, glitter, and emotional pandering.

The question should not be whether we can get our children to read the classics; the question should be whether we can get our children to read at all. If they read, they will learn about their culture; if they read, they will grow cognitively; and if they read, they will be well-educated eventually, whatever that means for them individually. Perhaps when we think about schools and their purpose, we should recognize that not all learning occurs in a schoolhouse. Again, in the words of Emerson: "The things taught in colleges and schools are not an education, but the means of education."

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