Children, Class, and the Classroom: What Children Know About Class and What Is Taught in the Preschool Classroom

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"Any child can grow up to be President. So says the achievement ideology, the reigning social perspective that sees American society as open and fair and full of opportunity. In this view, success is based on merit, and economic inequality is due to differences in ambition and ability. Individuals do not inherit their social status; they attain it on their own. Since education ensures equality of opportunity, the ladder of social mobility is there for all to climb."
--Jay MacLeod's opening passage in his 1995 "Ain't No Makin' It"

Americans, as Jay MacLeod eloquently articulates above, are prone to individualistic thinking. Ambition, energy, endurance, and adeptness are the foundations of future successes, not the structural building blocks of race, gender, sexuality, or class. This individualistic view is anything but a benign misunderstanding of social correspondents. Instead, it is a dangerous way of thinking because of its easy linkages with a moral vocabulary. Those who don't become members of the middle or upper classes are not seen as unlucky victims of the accident of birth, lacking the unmeritocratically distributed social capital, cultural skills, and educational opportunities, but instead are perceived as lazy, unmotivated, unskilled, unintelligent failures (Dudley 1994). And as each new generation of children grows up, class socialization occurs, giving rise to the perpetuation of class judgments and the suffering of the judged. I propose to research three related questions concerning this topic: First, what do preschool children know about class? Do they exhibit signs of class prejudice? And what role do schools play in overtly or covertly teaching children about class? The answer of these questions should enable us to intervene to stop the reproduction of class prejudice.

Who Cares? Why Answers to this Study Matter to the American Public

Twenty percent of children live in poverty (US Census Bureau 2000). CEO's incomes are 531 times higher than the average worker's (Frank 2006). The United States has the highest poverty rate among the seventeen most developed countries (United Nations Human Development Report 1998). Most newspapers have a business section; few have a worker's

section. The median net worth of a black American is nearly $72,000 lower than the median net worth of an average white American (Wolff 2000). The phrase "white trash" is an acceptable euphemism. The gap between rich and poor is growing and the chances of upward mobility are dwindling (Frank 2006). A child born into the lowest income quintile has only a 7.3% chance of reaching the top quintile; a child born into the top quintile has a 42.3% chance of remaining there (Frank 2006). People are denied jobs for having the wrong dress, the wrong accent, the wrong educational credentials.

These facts and statistics are not abstract statements; they are realities that shape our lives, our actions, our opportunities, and our judgments. This is the class-inflected world in which our children are growing up. In the past century, we as a country have come great lengths in alleviating the prejudice and discrimination which non-whites and women were forced to endure. As it is no longer acceptable to call a non-white "macaca," shouldn't it now be unacceptable to call a working-class person "trailer park trash?" As America has opened its doors to female students entering universities, shouldn't we also make our colleges more accessible to working-class students? As it is now intolerable to deny an applicant a job based on their skin color, shouldn't it also be inexcusable to reject a candidate based on their class culture? As we have pledged to raise our children to be free from racism and sexism, shouldn't we also demand they be free of classism? This study is a first step in calling attention to the importance of class. This study will examine what children know about class, paying special attention to displays of class prejudice, because prejudice is learned, class biases are taught, and classism can be reproduced. If we can discover what children know and how they know it, we have the potential to change it. We can produce a new generation of children that is class conscious but not class prejudiced.

The Sociological Importance of The Proposed Study

There is little research on children's knowledge of the stratification system, their class based socialization, their class biases, or their class identities (Lawler 2005, Simmons and Rosenberg 1971, Cummings and Taebel 1978). The minimal existing research indicates that children are aware of their class-based surroundings, rate job prestige similarly as adults, and that by adolescence societal stereotypes based on class are cemented in the children's minds (Tudor 1971, Simmons and Rosenberg 1971). Research on children's development of race prejudice indicates that children are definitely capable of prejudice: "[preschool] children are not just ready to jump into the prejudice pool, they are in it" (Bergen Jr. 2001). As young as age three, children can identify their own and others' race, are aware of the privilege of white skin, form in-groups and out-groups based on race, spout racial epithets, and are generally concerned with their own status and prestige (Bergen Jr. 2001, Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996, Cameron et al. 2001, Kowalski 2003). From five months of age, babies can discern gender; at age three they can correctly identify their own and others' gender; and in preschool play groups they already show preferences for associating with children of their same gender (Bergen Jr. 2001). In sum, preschool children use social categories to label themselves, group themselves, differentiate themselves from others, and use these differences as a basis of judgment. More is known about children's identifications, perceptions, and actions surrounding race and gender than class; this proposed study seeks to fill that gap.

This study also aims to develop Bourdieu's (1977) theory of habitus. The habitus is a socially learned and embodied set of dispositions that are an outcome of one's relation to material positions. This is not a "natural" personality, but a class-based way of seeing the world, of shaping aspirations, perceptions, values, and mannerisms. Bourdieu's theory of habitus is

well formulated and well accepted in sociological circles, but fails to explain *how* the habitus becomes inscribed in the body. Through examining the peer interactions of young children and the socializing role of the school, this study proposes to help explain this process.

Julie Bettie's (2003) similar theory of performance and performativity will also guide this study. Bettie defines performance as the unconscious performance of enacting one's class status, and performativity as the conscious effort at class passing or performing a class identity that is incongruous with one's material conditions. These identity performances are constructed and become apparent in school settings: "Group categories at school require different class performances, and students engage in practices of exclusion based on authentic class performances" (Bettie 2003:51). This proposed study seeks to examine class performances and performativities in the school setting to both test the theory at the preschool level and to extend it if need be.

Finally, this study seeks to add to the literature on schools' hidden curriculum concerning class. Most of this literature has revolved around the work of Bowles (1971), who theorized that schools form pupils into future workers through their emphasis on obedience, deference to authority, punctuality, perseverance, tact, and discipline, or conversely shape students into aspiring capitalists through teaching creative thinking and management skills. Bourdieu (1994) theorizes that children are divided into the separate tracks by their cultural capital, which is a reflection of one's class status. Both of these theories and the empirical research surrounding them focus on how hidden curriculum leads to class reproduction; only preliminary research has been completed about what hidden curriculum teaches children about the causes and realities of the class stratification system. As hidden curriculum teaches norms, values, and behaviors, it is

imperative we learn what lessons are taught about the nature of the class system: its legitimacy, its causes, its consequences, and its fairness.

Methods

In order to determine what children know about class, if they demonstrate class prejudice, and what role the school plays in educating children about class, I will conduct two months of participant observation in the University of Michigan Children's Center for Working Families. Students at this preschool range from age two and a half years to five. Children attend the school five days a week and through the summer. Visiting the same children daily will allow me to establish rapport with the children and their teachers, to spend a significant amount of time with the students, and to get to know the children and their class understandings well.

Though the University of Michigan's Children's Center for Working Families is part of the University, its enrollment is open to the public. Financial assistance is provided to qualifying families, implying that there should be some class variation among the students. There should also be race and gender variation within the school. I will study children of all classes, races, and genders in each classroom. This will allow me to examine modifying factors and include more students in my analysis. Observing various teachers will also allow me to evaluate whether hidden curriculums are teacher-specific or apply to the pedagogy of the school.

My observations will take place in the context of The University of Michigan's Children's Center for Working Families play-based pedagogy. This means that I will be able to observe the children interacting in both structured and unstructured time. This variation will enable me to observe children in both play and "work" modes. I will also assist the teacher in classroom activities but refrain from acting as a disciplinary figure, a role similar to the one enacted by sociologist Valerie Moore (2001) in her study of children at day camps. The

combination of this research identity as well as observing and interacting with children in structured and unstructured time should produce the richest possible data.

This study will explore this data through a grounded theory approach. This is an inductive method. As a researcher, I will enter the field with a theoretical understanding, but will not be testing a specific hypothesis. Rather, I will observe carefully, take extensive field notes, and interact with the children. My interactions will be informal and unstructured, and I will refrain from asking leading questions. I will also take into account how my own positionality affects how I interpret my observations, and I will be aware of and try to minimize any bias I have from sharing insider status with any of the subjects (Harding 1991, Schutz 1970). Grounded theory allows the observations to guide the analysis.

Though I will let the analysis form from my observations, I will enter the research site with a definition of class. I view class as a Durkheimian social fact that is interpreted with Weberian subjectivity. In a society that creates taboos around class, "Experiences are often (epistemically speaking) 'out of phase' with events" (Bhakshar 1975:13) and therefore need interpretation. Class is a "structuring structure," (Bourdieu, Wacquant, and Farage 1994), a material reality, a culture, and an identity (Lareau 2003). My goal is to understand what and how children learn about class, and how this affects their treatment of others. My goal is not to criticize the students for misrecognizing the "objective" reality of class.

While some critics deplore the use of case studies, employing grounded theory in just one setting has particular advantages that are crucial to the success of this study. As leading theorist George Steinmetz (2004:383) pronounces, "The ontological peculiarities of social life mean that the 'case study' is a precondition for any comparative assessment of theory…Case studies are thus the indispensable building block for all sociology." The "indispensable" case study

approach is advantageous for three reasons. First, the case study focuses on a setting that is neither unique nor incommensurable. It was selected precisely because of its generalizability and comparability. Second, this methodology is perfect for discovering patterns, inconsistencies, and theories—in a word, of doing theory elaboration (Vaughn 1992). This is particularly appropriate for this topic, which is lacking in its theoretical groundwork. And third, the case study is an example of sociological miniaturism, a methodology "that permits recognition of the dense texture to everyday life, [and] permits sociologists to understand more fully a substantive domain" (Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001:387). Sociological miniaturism studies such as this one improve our knowledge not just about micro identities, interactions, and prejudices, but also about macro processes of class reproduction, interplays of structure and agency, and manners of identity formation.

While exploring these issues, special care will be given to the ethical considerations of working with children. The University of Michigan Children's Center for Working Families has an elaborate set of procedures which I will follow to ensure informed consent. This includes a letter to the parents describing the research agenda and a permission slip. I will also seek assent from the students and teachers. I will also use pseudonyms for the students and teachers to assure anonymity. And while observing and interacting with the children, I will wear a researcher button to alert adults to my role in the preschool.

Expected Findings

Based on the existing literature and the theoretical work surrounding children's conceptions of class and of school's hidden curriculum, I expect to find the following: First, preschool children will already be class actors. Even at a young age, children are likely to comply with Bettie's (2003) theory of performance and Bourdieu's theory of habitus; in other

words, they will have a set of dispositions and a way of acting that reflects their parents' class position. Second, I expect that children will use class as a basis of forming in-groups and out-groups. I expect friendship groups to have less class variation within groups than between groups. Third, I expect children will recognize and comment on class status markers, such as clothes, shoes, toys, camps, and/or vacations. I expect prejudice to surface not in direct comments about class, a word that I assume preschoolers will not be familiar with in the sociological sense, but through comments concerning status symbols. This could come in the form of admiration for those donning high class status symbols, disdain for those who do not, or exclusion based on status symbols.

Fourth, I expect there to be a fairly strong hidden curriculum regarding class. Martin (1998) found that preschools employ a hidden curriculum that helps turns bodies into gendered bodies; I expect that the preschool will also help form students into classed students. I expect middle class norms to be upheld as normative and desirable. I expect those children who deviate from those norms to be corrected; in other words, the school will try to shape the children into middle class children. I also anticipate the main tenants of capitalism—individualism and the right to private property—to be a large part of the hidden curriculum. I expect the notion of hard work as the key to success to be prominent and a discussion of structural obstacles to success to be nonexistent. This ideology gives the message that "Hard work is a measure of one's virtue; he who does nothing *is* nothing" (LeCompte 1978:35, her italics), and impresses upon children the belief that academic achievement is equated with personal worth (LeCompte 1978). I expect these capitalist notions to be prevalent components of the hidden curriculum.

Overall, this study will provide needed insight into the content of children's knowledge about social class, the process they learned it through, and how it may affect their behavior

towards others. It will fill gaps in the sociology of education, culture, and knowledge, and will contribute to carving out a new sociological subfield, that of the social psychology of class.

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