

Troubles with Class

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WHAT IS THE FIRST MEMORY you have of someone you thought was richer than you? And what is your first memory of someone you thought was poorer than you? Why did you think that person was either poorer or richer than you?

Over my career as both a high school teacher and college professor, I have mostly taught students from privileged backgrounds. Talking about social class with privileged students who come into my classes with different levels of readiness and kinds of experiences is a complex task. Some of them do not recognize their own privileged assumptions and have little awareness of class issues. Others have some degree of awareness of social class inequalities but have deep-rooted beliefs of individualism and meritocracy; that is, they understand poverty as an end product of the poor themselves and affluence as the reward for being the most talented, most ambitious, and most successful. Almost all of my students find social class a difficult and troubling concept.

To initiate a discussion with my students about social class, I often begin with the above questions about their earliest encounters with others they perceived to be outside their own social class group. Students usually respond by listing the various class markers that led them to assume another's social class standing. They also gauged others by their appearances, mannerisms, speech, and tastes. We do not get too far into our discussion before we surface the stereotypical assumptions many people hold of different social class groups. But as I have discovered both through my teaching and research (e.g., Howard, 2010), privileged students often refrain from expressing certain views and using derogatory language to project a politically correct image; they have been taught ways of talking about others to avoid being perceived as prejudiced. Getting past their political correctness to surface what they actually believe is indeed a complex task. I have asked these kinds of questions to not only help move my students beyond polite conversations about social class but also out of my own interest in people's earliest encounters with class differences.

This past year I had the opportunity to further explore this topic of early encounters with social class through a research study on young children's perceptions of social class differences. I conducted this study at two elementary schools (one private and one public) in a small, rural Northeastern town where, as with many communities throughout the United States, class bifurcation is quite evident. However, because of the small size of the community, the K-12

schools have similar heterogeneous enrollments except two private elementary schools where the majority of students are from class-privileged families. Nearly 200 children from the two schools, at different levels (i.e., kindergarten, third grade, and sixth grade) and of different social classes, participated in this study. Guided by the notion that methods used for adults and even adolescents may not be the best approaches for understanding children's understandings (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005), I used children's drawings as a primary source for exploring their understandings of social class differences. I asked the children first to draw a self-portrait in the place they consider home with objects they consider to be most important. For the second drawing, the children drew a rich person on one half of a piece of paper and a poor person on the other half.

Although the children's drawings revealed a higher level of knowledge about class divisions in society with advanced age, children at all levels and at both schools demonstrated through their drawings that they had formed some level of awareness about their own social class position and class inequality. For the most part, their awareness reflected stereotypical conceptions of different social class groups and the extremes of social class stratification; that is, the upper class was often equated with the ultra-wealthy while the lower class was associated with extreme poverty such as homelessness. For all three age groups, students' drawings of disadvantaged people were smaller and had less color than their drawings of affluent people. These drawings also included people with unhappy facial expressions who were often located in rainy or snowy weather. In Figure 1, for example, even the sun is happy on the left half of the paper illustrating the rich person and unhappy (with a bruised eye) on the right half with the picture of the poor person. Many of the figures were drawn participating in dangerous activities (as depicted in Figure 1 with the girl who has "a bloody knee") and appeared to be less educated or a failure in school. In contrast, the figures that represented affluent people were drawn with bright colors and more detail. They also emphasized material possessions and often had the figures wearing business or formal attire.



Figure 1. Third-grader's drawing of a rich person (left) and a poor person (right).

The drawings revealed that the children were very much aware of stratification and held strong ideas about the causes and consequences of social class inequality. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the children's drawings reflected an understanding of social class as about complex as that of most adults in the United States. Like adults, the children attempted to legitimize class inequality in their representations of it. They thought of both poverty and affluence as life conditions that are just. And their understandings of class inequality failed to account for the many interrelated complexities that perpetuate the existing social order. One could argue that it is understandable why young children have not had the kinds of learning opportunities to form more complicated views about social class. It is a little more confusing to understand why most adults have such facile and misguided views. For example, although ample evidence attests to the disparity between rich and poor in the U.S., the general public believes that the contours of class have become blurrier, and some argue that they have even disappeared in recent years (see for example, Scott & Leonhardt, 2005). Most American adults hold tightly to the "rags to riches" faith; that is, they believe it is possible to start out poor, work hard, and become rich. According to a *New York Times* poll (Leonhardt, 2005), 75% of Americans believe that chances of moving up from one class to another have risen over the past three decades, a period in which class has played a greater, not lesser, role in the nation. Class awareness and class language have receded in the United States at a time when the gap between rich and poor in the country has widened (hooks, 2000).

One of the various reasons scholars have offered in explaining this adverse trend is that people do not talk about social class enough to understand the concept. Social class has been and remains a taboo subject in American culture.¹ As Ortner (1991) points out, "American natives almost never speak of themselves or their society in class terms. In other words, class is not a central category of cultural discourse in America" (p. 169). Rosenblum and Travis (2003) add, "Because social class is so seldom discussed, the vocabulary for talking about it is not well developed" (p. 22). Without this vocabulary, most people are ill-equipped to engage in the type of complicated conversation that is needed to understand the evasive nature of social class in their own lives and the world around them. It is not surprising, therefore, with this lack of complicated conversation about social class in public discourse that the academy has been and continues to be relatively silent about class. As Robertson (2000) observes, "It has become unfashionable in academic circles to talk about class, as if class suddenly no longer mattered and the historic concerns of class theorists—such as inequality—have disappeared" (p. 19).

The scholarship in curriculum studies has done little to break the silence in the larger field of education. As Wright (2000) notes in his thorough review and characterization of the field of curriculum theorizing, the topic of social class

has receded quite substantially in representation in curriculum theorizing (as it has in social theory in general). It is highly significant ... for example, that Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman's (1995) *Understanding Curriculum*, which provides a comprehensive list of ways in which curriculum could be conceptualized, does not contain a section on "curriculum as social class text. (p. 7)

I agree with Wright that encountering a scholarly piece on social class "is like finding a rare gem" (p. 7). Even in *JCT* with its avant-garde character and history of breaking the silence on topics that need attention, there have only been very few articles addressing, even in passing, the subject of social class in the past ten years. Why is social class essentially ignored in curriculum

theorizing?

One can assume there are several possible answers to this question. Whatever the reasons for lack of scholarship on social class in curriculum theory, I agree with what others have argued that it is reasonable to assume what gets studied or ignored is political and ideological. As Brantlinger (2003) explains, what gets announced or silenced is often

a product of influential groups' intentions and is based on their desire to sustain their own personal interests ... it is important to keep in mind that dominant groups are constantly energized to come up with new theories to support their [power]. (p. 21)

One could argue, therefore, this lack of attention to social class is not simply a “gap” in existing literature, but scholars' intentional efforts to avoid putting social class issues under the scalpel of their analysis – and possibly themselves and their ways of knowing and doing along the way. I have explained more fully elsewhere (e.g., Howard, 2008) why scholars avoid examining social class and have pointed out the personal risks involved in interrogating social class. These reasons are important for understanding not only why social class remains understudied but also important in our discussions of what gets studied and what does not.

In the present moment when the social terrain between the haves and have-nots has grown ever wider and the uncertainties of the global economy ever increasing, the time is obviously ripe to look for new explanatory frameworks and new ways to generate conversations about social class. I agree with those who argue that past and present approaches to understanding social class need to be reconceived within newer theoretical perspectives in order to revive conversations about class in scholarship (see, for example, Van Galen & Noblit, 2007). There have been some recent efforts to provide such perspectives.

For example, Ellen Brantlinger (2007) (re)turns to Marx to explore the ways schools separate and prepare students for the stratification present in the larger social context. Brantlinger argues that powerful people need to look at the kind of schooling they have created and think more about what kinds of schools would be best for their own and for other people's children. She argues that the “losers” in schools are too demoralized to imagine a more just system and lack the power to engage in the collective action needed for change in schools we need. Philipsen (2007) explores this last argument of Brantlinger's a little deeper by contending that the issue of poverty does not need to belong to the poor but rather to the non-poor. According to this analysis, non-poor individuals gain disproportionate benefit from stratified systems. Philipsen argues that “it is time to shift the locus of analysis as to why poverty exists and how it can be eradicated from the poor to those of us who are not poor ...” (p. 283). Like Brantlinger, Philipsen emphasizes the need for developing a deeper understanding of how the success of a few relates to the failure of many.

Given that educational scholars seldom consider class privilege and educational advantage in their attempts at understanding inequality, both Brantlinger and Philipsen, provide a different and refreshing perspective on analyzing class stratification. However, both of these scholars have relied on past theoretical frameworks too heavily to imagine newer theoretical perspectives. For example, how much can we truly rethink the concept of class by returning to Marx? This is not to suggest that we do not situate newer theoretical perspectives in established ones, but to acknowledge the limitations of breaking away from the past when we rely heavily on the past to guide our development of newer perspectives. Relying solely or even heavily on the past perspectives provides little room for moving toward possibilities that are unforeseeable from the

perspectives of the past and present (Lather, 1998). Although several scholars have called for conceiving class within newer theoretical perspectives, they have been less clear about how to go about doing such theorizing. How, then, do we move toward these unforeseeable theoretical possibilities?

I believe we begin answering this question by engaging with the subject of social class and breaking the silence in the body of scholarship. We need to engage in the kinds of complicated conversations (Pinar, 2004) about social class necessary for discovering new theoretical terrain. There has to be a willingness to cast our scholarly gaze toward class issues even when this means looking critically at ourselves and unmasking our own complicity with maintaining the existing social order. And even with this means where we are headed theoretically is not completely known. *JCT* and the Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice with their distinctive character and history of being scholarly sites for speaking what needs to be announced provide the types of contexts for engaging in such theoretical work. This editorial introduction is a call for this work.

This call is initiated from a review conducted by Jill Martin, former editorial assistant, of *JCT* articles from 1982 (Volume 4, Issue 2) to the present dealing with issues of diversity. What was discovered in this review was a bit of surprise to the editorial team. In the 1980's, there was about an equal number of articles in *JCT* dealing with issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality as social class; however, by the 1990's, there was a steep drop in the number of articles on social class. This decreased attention to social class and increased focus on other forms of difference continue to be the case.

What we discovered from this review was significant. For one, over one third of the articles published in *JCT* address issues of diversity, which we were pleased to find out given our goals for the Bergamo Conference and *JCT*. But the nearly non-existent scholarship on social class, although not completely a surprise with the lack of focus on the subject in the field of curriculum theory, was troubling. Needless to say (but worth saying nonetheless), more scholarly focus on social class is needed. With the journal's avant-garde character, it is conceivable to imagine *JCT* being the intellectual site for breaking the silence about social class in curriculum theory. I hope this ends up being the case.

NOTES

1. I focus on the United States here since it is not only the mostly highly stratified society in the industrialized world but also does less to limit the extent of inequality than any other industrialized democratic country.

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