

Synthesis and Critical Reaction Paper One
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Some may say that we are living in a post-racial society, where color and class do not matter and everyone has access to an equal and fair education. However, the readings and videos expose how a history of unequal policies and practices has laid the foundation for an oppressive and unjust system in the United States, particularly concerning schools.

Critical Thinking and Knowledge

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) warn that before we start uncovering issues of power and oppression, we need to learn what it means to become a critical thinker and central to that is uncovering what knowledge really is; they describe knowledge as a social construction, reflective of the “values and interests of those who produce it” (p. 7). They state that thinking critically means that we must seek out knowledge that is typically beyond our scope of thinking and understand “the historical and cultural context in which knowledge is produced and circulated” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 2). James Banks, education scholar, outlines five different types of knowledge: Personal and cultural knowledge, popular knowledge, mainstream academic knowledge, school knowledge, and transformative academic knowledge (as cited in Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 8, 9).

Historically left out of our current ideas of knowledge are Non-Western perspectives and cultural values which could lead to bias, racism, and ethnocentric assumptions; Instead, Western thought is considered to be sustained as truth based on “scientific” research and presents its findings as “universal knowledge” (Merriam, 2007, p. 3, 4). Merriam (2007) reflected on this, asking, “What counts as legitimate knowledge, who constructs this knowledge about whom, and how is this knowledge transmitted” (p. 4)? Merriam (2007) continues her article comparing Western perspectives to non-Western perspectives, and maintains that understanding various perspectives is important so that we do not marginalize or oppress the “other,” we can be inclusive and effective educators, we can examine how knowledge is produced and validated, and finally so that we may become personally enriched by the experience (p. 12-16).

Discourse and Power

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) continue to move through *Is Everyone Really Equal* by calling attention to the various terms and practices that are currently reinforcing inequalities and oppression today and how oppression is related to historical and political relationships of power, how it is internalized and normalized, and how our social groups lead us to being more valued or more oppressed in our society. They argue we “must understand language as discourse” and that our “experiences and perceptions” happen within a framework shared between members in a particular culture (2012, p. 48). “Discourses... Shape relations of power” by influencing how we interact and relate with others leading to internalized dominance and oppression; those in positions of power then impose their knowledge, and ideas and “socialize us into compliance with norms that serve dominant interests” (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012, p. 49, 53). Foucault seems to argue along similar lines, saying that discourse “constructs the topic” and “defines and produces the object of our knowledge” and is concerned about where meaning comes from (as cited in Hall, 1997, p. 72). He argues that there is no absolute truth, only truth within a historical context and that truth will change from period to period but when linked to power can “make itself true” (will-to-power) (Hall, 1997, p. 74, 76). Foucault argued that knowledge is a form of power, but most important is the question of “what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not” (as cited in Hall, 1997, p. 76).

Race: An Illusion takes us through the history of white power, racism, and segregation in the US; describing how the socially constructed idea of “race” and being of Color (non White) affected how much land you could or could not acquire, your citizenship status (and how it varied from state to state), immigration laws, where you could live, and the loans one could get from the bank. The film showed how discriminatory policies has left a mark on businesses, communities, and schools today and how this has led to unequal opportunities and conditions. Lipsitz (1998) also illustrates the history of white power in the US through the story of activist Bill Moore, and states that even though discriminatory, Jim Crow, law has been abolished, we still have a legacy of segregated school districts and policies in place that are reflective of white interests (p. xviii).

How Knowledge, Discourse, and Power Play Out

School is an institution, and institutions “produce, circulate, and maintain the dominant culture’s norms, values, definitions, language, policies, and ideologies” (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012, p. 80). This can lead to investment in certain qualities of students and communities, and a disinvestment or discriminatory action in others. An example of this is the study by Lareau concerning the role of parenting in schools and teacher attitudes (Lareau, 1987). The working class parents doubted their educational ability and trusted the teachers to teach their children whereas the middle class parents viewed teaching as an equal “division of labor” (Lareau, 1987, p. 80). The middle class parents were viewed by the schools as more involved and invested in their child’s education, while the working class parents were viewed as disinvested and not valuing education. Today, the institution of school (reflective of dominant culture), values the qualities that the parents in the middle class school were demonstrating, their cultural capital, while devaluing the capital of the working class parents which led to less parental involvement in those schools and prejudiced beliefs on behalf of the principals and teachers (Lereau, 1987, 82-83). The video *People Like Us* also illustrates the separate and unequal class system in the US. Exposing both upper, lower, and middle class cultures, we see how people stick to their “tribes” and how prevalent class discrimination is in our country.

The role of power and neoliberalism is present in our schools today in the form of charter schools, vouchers, and the contracting of services to private, for profit, businesses, and in legislation such as “No Child Left Behind [NCLB]” (Burch, 2009, p. 4,6). NCLB policies changed the way we fund our schools, reduced the inclusion of parents and communities from policy participants to mere consumers, and has led to a reproduction of inequalities (charter schools and vouchers) (Burch, 2009). Burch (2009) asks who benefits from the privatization of public schools and how are school patterns and inequalities reflective of society (p. 19)?

Conclusion

The course readings, particularly *Is Everyone Really Equal*, have led me to reflect on my current class status and qualities that lead me to positions of power and reflect on ways that I myself may be oppressive or discriminatory. I found Burch’s article particularly relevant to schooling today, as we feel the affects of NCLB daily. I believe in her call for more research around current practices concerning how they are reproducing inequalities, particularly because of the lack of evidence for many of the policies that we have put in place which affect our poorest and most vulnerable students. These readings call attention to the need for radical structural change in our education system towards a more socially just and relevant education.

References

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