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The Curriculum, Qualifications, and Life Chances



WHAT THIS CHAPTER IS ABOUT

The selection of curriculum content is an expression of culture that is itself an arbitrary construct, meaning that there is no value-free curriculum. Since social power is continuously contested within a social field, the struggle over curriculum content is important, as the training delivered via schools can shape what is valued or not and what is understood by social structures. Thus, all forms of capital are apparent in education and are expended to retain and advance social status and power. The state assumes the role of arbiter of the struggle over curriculum, and its recognition provides legitimacy for the interests aligned with specific curricula, as well as the standards and tests that assess them.

School leaders should not view this struggle as one of “right” versus “wrong” but, rather, as a political struggle in which one group wants to maintain or advance its influence and domination over other groups. This struggle is often masked as one of “rigor” versus “more or less rigor,” and the argument is often “won” by whichever curriculum produces the best test scores. We can see this argument used in

the debate over the Common Core curriculum standards in the United States. However, tests themselves are not neutral indicators, as some are more aligned than others with specific curricula (English, 2010). So test scores cannot be the ultimate and final word on curricular propriety or selection.

When a specific curriculum is adopted, sanctioned, and enforced by the state, it represents a form of symbolic violence. This is because it involves the imposition of an arbitrary set of symbols and constructs on all other groups in the social space governed by the school. The domination of one set of curriculum content over all others is usually presented as normal, natural, or even inevitable.

As a state agency, most public schools are the means of retaining the advanced social standing of some groups over others, achieved in part by the sanctioning of some curricula and the exclusion of others. In this way, the school is a means of retaining the social control of some groups at the expense of other groups. School leaders must see this struggle for what it is as it plays out every day in many classrooms and must understand the stakes involved. There is no “scientific” or “neutral” way to resolve this struggle. It is normally resolved via political imposition, with the selected curriculum presented in a variety of ways as a matter for “experts,” in an effort to try to conceal or disguise the arbitrary nature of the process.

Some children will always be much more familiar with the adopted curriculum than will other children because curriculum represents a symbolic system reflecting the dominant values of the dominant group. Thus, subordinate groups will necessarily always be at a disadvantage. To the extent that tests and curricula represent the values of the dominant group, there will always be an achievement gap, as illustrated in Chapter 2. Using the achievement gap as an excuse to further impose dominant group values on subordinate groups is a classic case of misrecognition, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Specifically, this chapter addresses the following points:

- The school curriculum as a form of symbolic capital works to reinforce existing social hierarchies and is ultimately translated into economic capital advantage for the children of the more privileged classes.
- As a form of symbolic and cultural capital, the curriculum, when imposed on all children as an educational requirement, becomes a matter of symbolic violence. This creates, among other features, the so-called achievement gap in schools. Such

gaps are likely to be a permanent feature of schooling until the true nature of their cause is understood.

- Neither curricula nor tests are culturally neutral constructs.
- Curriculum content struggles are contestations of a political struggle to preserve the social advantage of those in political power.

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 explored two of Pierre Bourdieu's core concepts, aspects of habitus and field. Here, the third of this trio of concepts, capital, will be considered, but we are reminded that these core concepts work together to influence many aspects of social life, including the schooling choices and curriculum content that act to determine the differing "values" placed on qualifications and education routes.

Bourdieu considered academic credentials to be significant, as qualifications are effectively translatable to economic capital, serving to reinforce mechanisms for social hierarchy and reproduction. This is because variations in access to different forms of education, including the curriculum design, can result in "unequal" chances for children. Hence, we will explore aspects of curriculum against Bourdieu's concepts as an example of an institutionalized educational mechanism that can be influential in determining children's academic progression, and an example of how culture and habitus play a role in their function.

Disputes over curriculum rigor have been, in part, the result of international test score comparisons based on the belief that national school systems can be objectively compared one to the other. Such comparisons are deceptive and conceal the actual function of schools to reproduce the existing social order of social and economic domination and subordination. This chapter deals with how schools, through the formal and hidden curricula, determine educational qualifications, educational success, and, ultimately, life chances.

THE THREE FORMS OF CAPITAL

Bourdieu understood capital to exist in many forms. He referred to symbolic capital as anything that is recognized as being capital by a particular field or social group, thereby gaining legitimacy. However, this capital falls into three principle forms: economic, social, and

cultural. The primary and most easily recognizable form is that of **economic capital**. Bourdieu (1986) argued that economic capital was “at the root of all other forms of capital” (p. 252) because its value is universal across social groupings and fields, and because economic capital effectively “buys” access to opportunities that allow further accumulation of wealth and power in all its forms, thereby affording the holder a privileged position of influence or power.

Bourdieu determined that all forms of capital are important, as they directly relate to power and thereby to social structures and relationships. Put simply, capital is an expression of power (Calhoun, 1995). As we have seen with his other concepts, Bourdieu had a tendency to keep refining and adding to his ideas of capital; so the boundaries of what constitutes capital become very blurred, leading to a “tendency to see power everywhere and, in a sense therefore, nowhere—an extreme diffusion of power that Bourdieu himself rejects” (Swartz, 1997, p. 79). Therefore, rather than pursue the multifarious definitions derived by Bourdieu, we will focus on his central idea of symbolic capital, which he defined as

any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural, or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know and to recognise it and to give it value. (Bourdieu, 1998b, p. 47)

Essentially, as previously explained, capital is whatever is valued by a particular field or group within that field. Indeed, to be of even greater value, it would need to be recognized and prized between fields as well as within them.

While economic capital is the primary form of capital, the second form is **social capital**. This refers to all those social connections and networks that bring the old adage of “not *what* you know but *who* you know” to the fore, as social contacts can open doors and ease the way for accessing different social positions and opportunities that might not be open to those agents lacking such elevated levels of social capital.

EMPIRICAL VALIDATION OF THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ON SCHOOL SUCCESS

Empirical support for these claims was recently proffered by a 2008 U.S. study of the utility of parental social capital, involving 25,000 eighth-graders derived from a 1988 National Education Longitudinal

Study database (Ream & Palardy, 2008). *Social capital* was defined as “the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social structures” (Portes, 1998, p. 12).

Using concepts derived from Bourdieu’s (1986) perspective—that is, that the reproduction of certain forms of power and privilege is associated with the inequitable distribution of social capital to various social groups—the study affirmed that “race and class characteristics are interwoven to the disadvantage of minority groups” (Ream & Palardy, 2008, p. 250).

While this study illustrated Bourdieu’s notion that forms of capital are relational and not always convertible one to one, there was one exception. That exception pertained to the test scores of middle-class children, who were in an excellent position to prosper from their parents’ knowledge of how to influence school practice and policy. In a trenchant summary of this research, Ream and Palardy (2008) commented, “We find that parents at higher rungs of the social class ladder are characterized not only by disproportionate wealth and know-how, but also by more bountiful stocks of what counts for this study as parental social capital” (p. 255).

THE POWER OF CULTURAL CAPITAL AND BOURDIEU’S OWN EXPERIENCE AS A STUDENT

The third form of symbolic capital is **cultural capital**, a noneconomic, largely intangible, and difficult-to-measure form of capital that is represented in manners, taste, bodily deportment, dispositions, dress, consumption patterns, and forms of knowledge that are approved—or not approved—by the school and its agents.

The great effort of students from lower social origins to overcome obstacles in school is often not enough to make up for the cultural capital they lack. This is not a new finding. For example, more than 30 years ago, Dimaggio (1982) showed that in the case of 2,900 eleventh-grade boys and girls, “the impact of cultural capital on high school grades . . . [was] ‘very significant’” (MacLeod, 1987, p. 100), with those students who possessed cultural capital more similar to the school’s getting much better grades.

It is interesting to note Bourdieu’s recollections of his own lack of cultural capital in his educational experience. As a child from one of the poorer families in his region, he was acutely aware of how his dress reflected on himself and his family as being inferior to his more

affluent classmates. “I lived my life as a boarder in a kind of stubborn fury,” he reflected, which “made no small contribution to my revolt against the punishments and persecutions imposed by the petty officials whom the very norms of scholastic life led one to despise” (Bourdieu, 2004b, p. 96).

Later, Bourdieu (2004b) recalled those “monotonous regularities” of boarding school that were the result of the

routine of everyday anxieties and struggles, all the calculations and ruses that had to be deployed, at every instant, to secure one’s due, keep one’s place, defend one’s share . . . arrive on time, win respect, always ready to exchange blows, in a word, to survive. (pp. 92–93)

Young Bourdieu was marked by school officials as a “discipline problem.” He received punishments and detentions—he estimated as many as 300 in his school career—and he lamented that as an adult he did not know how to give the child who had endured this ordeal of “despair and rage, his longing for vengeance” (Bourdieu, 2004b, p. 93).

SCHOOLS AS INSTITUTIONALIZED EMBODIMENTS OF FORMS OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

Cultural capital extends to education as the “cultural” understanding and appreciation that gives access to different areas of society, and includes educational institutions that are viewed as holding various levels of esteem. This is a form of cultural capital that is “institutionalized” and where educational credentials, or qualifications, awarded by different educational institutions hold different levels of “prestige” and therefore value.

For example, while the actual differences may be small or nonexistent, a degree from Stanford University is generally held in higher esteem than one from Montclair State University. The higher esteem accorded to Stanford constitutes a form of symbolic capital that is translatable to economic capital, in that the “right” education and qualifications can command a higher capital value and afford access to higher-earning employment opportunities. However, this capital is not evenly distributed in the social field, nor is it equally accessible to all social agents.

Indeed, schools have the capacity to reinforce and confer different forms of capital on their participants—for example, in terms of qualifications or an appreciation of “good” art and literature. This will reinforce

which friendship groups are “appropriate” and what ways to behave are “acceptable” and, importantly, what behaviors do not conform to this pattern. All such approaches serve to render school an important means of promoting compliance to the prevailing social codes, by determining what is deemed acceptable and what is not.

These factors therefore play a key role in creating (and maintaining) social inequalities and reproducing social structures. The significance of education as a form of cultural capital and the importance of symbolic capital in accessing and recognizing this will be further considered in the following sections.

CAPITAL, POWER, SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE, AND SCHOLASTIC HABITUS

The importance of schooling is that it transmits patterns of the dominant culture that are mirrored in school curricula and other routines and that include the attendant master dispositions to value and extend those patterns. In this way, schools themselves play a focal role in imbuing their students with the prevailing culture and “rules” of society, which will be determined to a greater extent by those with more symbolic capital and, therefore, more symbolic power. These early educational experiences, both in school and in the way education is perceived within the family and social group, form a type of habitus—a “scholastic habitus”—that remains with us and influences our continued approaches to how we “value” education, how important we think it is to us, and what we consider an appropriate education. Here, habitus, coupled with cultural and social capital, plays an important role, as it is not merely a case of making the progression through the various levels of academia; it is also about selecting the “right” qualifications and academic institutions. This relates to early upbringing and education that forms a scholastic habitus—which, as previously explained, means the development of an approach to education and seeing it as having “value”—and leads to viewing some routes through education as being the preferred or natural choices.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) explained:

Not only do the most privileged students derive from their background of origin habits, skills, and attitudes which serve them directly in their scholastic tasks, but they also inherit from it knowledge and know-how, tastes, and a “good taste” whose scholastic profitability is no less certain for being indirect. (p. 17)

From their habitus and the influences of symbolic capital, these “most privileged students” are better able not only to identify prestigious institutions but also to access them and to know the “right” subjects to study to gain access to the “best” schools and universities.

More children from families holding enhanced levels of capital view higher education as an accepted, unquestioned path than do children from families holding less capital. For these more privileged children, the choice of remaining in education appears more natural than, say, for children who need to find employment. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) indicated, “social origin exerts its influence throughout the whole duration of schooling, particularly at the great turning points of a school career” (p. 13).

Yet, given that not all of us can enjoy the same opportunities to access and benefit from education, it remains that some will be better placed to influence education policies and to determine the education choices that members of a field will receive. Indeed, it is unlikely that these privileged agents would either instigate or support any reforms that would bring about radical social change, because they would not support anything that might undermine their own elevated position brought by holding valued capital within that field. The controlling nature of capital and power constitutes **symbolic violence**, which Bourdieu (1972/1977) explained as being the “gentle, hidden form which violence takes when overt violence is impossible,” rendering it a form of aggression that, because of the interplay with habitus, might not be recognized as such by those inflicting the violence or even the recipients of it (p. 196), as it is the accepted pattern of “the way things are.”

TWO RECENT EXAMPLES OF SYMBOLIC POWER (VIOLENCE) IN SCHOOL CURRICULA

The idea of symbolic violence is not meant to suggest that we are all passive. Bourdieu’s analyses of contestation in specific social fields revealed that even though members may be classified as having similar characteristics—such as their level of economic capital—jostling for position, protesting, and contesting policy, for example, remain integral features of any field. As explained in Chapter 2, social agents are not simply acquiescent, especially if their own positions of influence are involved, and Bourdieu (1993) strongly argued that fields comprise various forces and involve struggle between and among those forces. In other words, a field is never wholly homogenous but consists of a contested space with stratified social systems and hierarchies that tend

to endure by being reproduced. This struggle for distinction or position is an ever-present feature of social life, making the issues of power and power relations fundamental.

One example is the creation and implementation of the Common Core curriculum standards in the United States. The Common Core movement began in 2006 when former North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt convened a meeting of a select group of educators and policy experts to consider creating national curriculum standards. After this gathering, papers from a variety of recognized scholars were commissioned to examine the impact of creating national curriculum standards. Following this, the Hunt Institute began shaping an approach to the formation of national standards.

The move was enhanced when the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers came together to forge a joint agenda. In 2009, a coalition of the National Governors Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, National Association of State Boards of Education, Alliance for Excellent Education, Hunt Institute, and Business Roundtable collaborated in the development of what is today known as the Common Core curriculum standards (Rothman, 2011). When the U.S. Department of Education made the implementation of the Common Core curriculum standards part of its Race to the Top initiative, more symbolic power was added to this movement with the endorsement of the federal government.

Leaving aside for the moment the exact nature of the content of the Common Core, Bourdieu spoke at length about how, within a contested social field and without any one agency holding absolute power, agents and agencies join together to forge what has been called a “world-making view.” This master label consists of a categorically absolute symbol of authority and legitimacy. To possess such symbolic power and ultimately impose it, as has been the case with the Common Core movement, the master vision must be perceived as being based in reality and the groups advocating it must have sufficient symbolic capital to compel its recognition. Bourdieu (1990b) said it best when he wrote, “Symbolic capital is a credit, it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition” (p. 138).

The new Common Core curriculum standards are a wonderful example of a form of cultural capital at work, as embodied in a type of symbolic capital that has been elevated above all others. When a high school diploma is granted as being from a Common Core base, which, arguably, has been advanced on the grounds of its alleged superior “rigor,” it becomes a kind of universal piece of cultural capital, and “as

an official definition of an official identity, it releases its holder from the symbolic struggle of all against all by imposing the universally approved perspective" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 136). When symbolic capital becomes a kind of universal capital via collaboration in a contested social field, the result has been called "political power par excellence" (p. 138).

Another example of a different kind of symbolic power (and violence) in curriculum occurred when the Texas State Board of Education insisted that textbook writers not use the term *capitalism* but instead refer to "the free enterprise" system. Writers were also to refrain from using the word *imperialism*, instead substituting *expansionism*, a term deployed when dealing with U.S. territorial acquisitions (Frank, 2010). The Texas State Board of Education also erased Thomas Jefferson from the state curriculum because he was too secular. Gurwitz (2010) said of the board's decision, "What they accomplished isn't conservative. It's not pro-family, pro-life, pro-freedom or patriotic. It's idiotic" (p. 9B).

But what is missed in Gurwitz's assessment is that all curricula are social constructs based on one or more sets of what is valued and then accepted by the most powerful of social agents and agencies within the education field. The curriculum may have nothing to do with what is true or good. "Symbolic power is a power of creating things with words," observed Bourdieu (1990b), "a power of consecration or revelation, a power to conceal or reveal things which are already there" (p. 138).

Such legitimation and misrecognition of symbolic power essentially legitimize social hierarchies and permit those in dominant positions with more capital—or power—to control capital and effectively reproduce existing social structures, thereby maintaining the status quo.

SOCIAL ORIGIN AND SCHOOL SUCCESS: HISTORICAL AND CONTINUING EVIDENCE OF THE LINKAGE BETWEEN THEM

Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) argued that of all the differentiating factors in social relations, in education "social origin is doubtless the one whose influence bears most strongly on the student world" (p. 8), as both access to educational institutions and qualifications are in part determined by social status and can continue to determine a level of "success" that persists well beyond schooling. This is because,

primarily, only those holding high levels of cultural capital can enjoy an education that carries with it opportunities for further privilege.

Thus, the educational system, access to various forms of schooling, and curriculum or qualification pathways play a central role in legitimating and maintaining these social structures via the “value” assigned to academic credentials and institutions, together with the definitions of what constitutes a “good” education.

An excellent historical example of this situation was provided by Labaree (1988) in his longitudinal study of Central High School in Philadelphia, whose constituents viewed a

high school credential as an economic commodity that could be exchanged for status in the open market. The exchange value of this credential derived from its relative scarcity, which in turn derived in part from the high school’s limited enrollment. (p. 50)

Labaree (1988) explained that the Central High School was based on both academic ability and social origins and therefore could fail even the wealthiest of students, but he stressed that while a bright working-class boy could possibly be admitted to the high school and a less academically able middle-class boy turned down, the actual probabilities were reversed.

A similar situation was reported in England, where Saunders (1996, as cited in Power, Edwards, Whitty, & Wigfall, 2003) indicated that private (fee-paying) schools were able to protect even “dull” middle-class children, as they were better able to get children “through examinations irrespective of their abilities or ambitions” (p. 44).

Bourdieu and Passeron’s path-breaking 1979 research on social class and access to higher education pinpointed a startling fact—that the opportunity of obtaining a college education is the result of a selection process of the total school system and is available unequally depending on the student’s social origin. “In fact, for the most disadvantaged classes, it is purely and simply a matter of elimination” (p. 2).

More than 40 years later, Carnevale’s (2012) study of the 200 most selective colleges in the United States showed that students from the bottom income quartile accounted for less than 5% of the total enrollment in those colleges, about which Carnevale commented,

In a society where people start out unequal, the test-based metrics that govern college admissions become a dodge—a way of laundering the money that comes with being born into the right bank account or the right race or ethnicity. (p. B8)

Kahlenberg (2012) similarly remarked that “instead of counteracting the inequalities they inherit, colleges and universities magnify them. Higher education in the United States is highly stratified, showing the most resources on the most-advantaged students” (p. B6).

Likewise, in the United Kingdom there are repeated criticisms of the low numbers of state school students accepted to the best universities, and repeated complaints in the popular press of the decrease both in numbers and in type of working-class children who attend meritocratic grammar schools (Shaw, 2013, p. 21). The increasing disparities of wealth in the United States and Britain are seen by many economists as a threat to the democratic welfare of both nations, and the educational policies of both are serving to increase those disparities (see Irvin, 2008).

ACADEMIC FAILURE AS THE “FAULT” OF THE STUDENT?

Indeed, when there is debate over university admissions or where some students fail to pass exams at the required level, the argument is often related to the students’ own “failure” to exhibit ambition or aspiration in academic achievement or thinking about a future career. Such arguments can be seen in the earlier illustration of elite U.K. university entry as disproportionately divided between students educated in private and state schools.

In defending this situation and asserting that the universities are working hard to redress the imbalance, Wendy Piatt, the director general of the Russell Group of universities in the United Kingdom, stated that “this is an entrenched problem and there is no quick fix. It will take time to raise aspirations, attainment and improve advice and guidance offered to students in some schools” (Paton, 2013). She added, “We can only admit students who actually apply and who have the right grades in the right subjects” (Paton, 2013). These statements suggest that potential applicants lacked the aspirations to apply for prestigious universities and that even those who did perform well on entrance examinations were not necessarily skilled in the right subjects to gain admittance to the university. Thus, it was the students’ “own fault” because they had failed to consider what prestigious universities require and made incorrect or unwise choices.

A recent Gallup poll of nearly 1 million U.S. students in Grades 5 through 12 during 2009 to 2011 revealed that student success in school was connected to having a positive outlook (Heitin, 2012). Bourdieu

and Passeron (1979) observed the same phenomenon a little differently. They discerned that some students, by virtue of their social class position and its congruence with schooling expectations, “inherited” the existing school culture.

But the culture of the elite is so close to the culture taught in school that a child from a petit-bourgeois background (and a fortiori from a peasant or working-class background) can only laboriously acquire that which is given to a child from the cultivated class—style, taste, sensibility, in short, the *savoir-faire* and art of living that are natural to a class because they are the culture of that class. For some, the learning of elite culture is a conquest paid for in effort; for others, it is a heritage, which implies both facility and the temptations of facility. (p. 24)

While Bourdieu cited lack of aspiration as a feature of some social groups, he did not associate this with student “failure” but, rather, deemed it a product of the uneven distribution of symbolic capital that existed in the larger social field and linked to habitus, with those people who start with less capital striving the least for advancement. This stems from a belief that they should be content with what they have, not due to any “failing” but because their ambition to achieve is confined by the limitations established by such things as their field position and background (see also Webb et al., 2002).

The implication of this state of affairs is that differences in power mean that competition for symbolic capital, in all its forms within a field, is uneven. Different groups will compete for different capital based on what they have realistic expectations of attaining. They will, in effect, self-impose boundaries on their ability to achieve successfully based on the limitations of their education, social connections, and position within the field. In this way, the mechanism for reproducing existing relationships is embedded in the structure itself.

ACADEMIC CREDENTIALS—ESSENTIAL CAPITAL?

The issue of what constitutes the “best” form of qualifications, what these qualifications are, and which are the most highly valued and transferable to other fields continues to be the subject of much debate. This debate has gathered pace, with an emphasis on a more instrumentalist ideology whereby education has a primary purpose of equipping people for work.

An example is found in the goal of making high school children “college ready” by graduation. This pursuit reflects a persistent emphasis on higher education as the most desirable means to secure employment and reinforces the tendency for nations to compare their own academic results against those of other nations, as if education itself is a competition in which it is assumed those nations with the “best” academic results will also be the most economically competitive.

Rotberg (2011) contested the assumption that international test scores are related to international economic competitiveness. For example, he made the point that arguments claiming a shortage of graduates in some areas, such as engineering, fail to account for those graduates who transfer to other employment areas rather than remaining in engineering, suggesting that the issue is not a national shortage of U.S. graduates but, rather, a case of employers being unable to hire graduates “at the wages they would prefer to pay and find[ing] it cheaper to out-source” (p. 32). Rotberg similarly pointed out that of the 30 occupations expected to exhibit the fastest growth, fully 53% do not require a college degree.

Thus, while the rhetoric highlights a quest for ever-improving test scores, with an assumed connection between test scores and economic competitiveness, there is an apparent disjunction between this perceived need and the actualities of the labor market. So why such an emphasis on producing “college-ready” high school graduates?

As Emery and Ohanian (2004) more bluntly put it: “You have to ask why the corporate elite is so hell-bent on pumping up the pool of skilled workers” (p. 20) in a time of unemployment when the highest job demand is found in those areas not requiring college degrees. They conclude that the “corporate fat cats” prefer a situation where “there are more highly skilled workers than there are jobs . . . [because] when you have lots of people competing for few jobs, workers are scared and compliant” (p. 20).

Emery and Ohanian (2004) argue that the burden of the cost of higher education borne by many students and their families is perhaps unnecessary. They question whether so many high school graduates should go to college when they may leave with a large debt and be unable to secure employment to pay it off. From Bourdieu’s perspective, this could be seen as limited access to economic capital, thereby creating a barrier for those wanting to change their position either within a field or to a different field.

However, the emphasis of many U.S. state education departments continues to be placed on pushing test scores and perpetually measuring school success against prescribed attainment results, encouraging

young people to remain in education to acquire the skills the authorities deem necessary for building economic competitiveness.

The language of the reformers and the groups pushing this agenda is totally absent of concerns regarding social inequalities and social justice. They see the schools as a means to an end that affirms their own position of dominance and enhances their control of education. For the moment, they appear to have achieved that end. To envision a different future, we begin with Bourdieu's (1991) observation: "To change the world, one has to change the ways of making the world, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced" (p. 137).

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM, CULTURAL VALUES, AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

That schools bestow values on their students via school culture and curriculum, for example, is generally accepted and, arguably, deliberately used to instill those attitudes and behaviors considered most desirable in members of society, especially by those defining the values to be instilled. It is not unusual to find curricula that purposely seek to influence behavior in such a way. For example, the citizenship and personal, social, and health education curricula in England and the character education curriculum in the United States purport to promote "positive habits or virtues," and it is common to find in such curricula references to moral education and equipping children to "take their place in society."

However, such efforts to influence behavior and values are not always so overt. Schools function in the dominant culture in which they are embedded. The close congruence between schooling and social expectations as embodied in law, customs, and cultural practices extends to both the formal and public curricula but also appears in the informal and **hidden curriculum** (Eisner, 1992). The hidden curriculum represents the cultural content that is not consciously thought about but that, through school routines, often represents unconscious assumptions and expectations.

Given the element of "concealment," it is perhaps inevitable that the role of the hidden curriculum in "controlling" a population has long been the subject of debate and theorizing, largely polarized between two views. One view, functionalism, argues that the hidden curriculum promotes the transmission of collective values where there is general consensus over what these values are. In this way, schooling

contributes to the effective, smooth running of society. However, other writers focus on an approach that embodies more “conflict” and a more deliberate nature to this situation, suggesting that the purpose of education is to reproduce social structures in a way that keeps people in their place within the social hierarchy and to serve the needs of a capitalist or market-focused economy.

This argument, notably expressed in Bowles and Gintis’s (1976) *Schooling in Capitalist America*, suggests that schools promote values such as obedience, punctuality, and discipline, making students work-ready and unquestioning and thereby maintaining the economic status quo. However, while others, including Bourdieu, would sympathize with elements of this argument, especially in serving social reproduction, Bourdieu did not consider people to be so docile or unquestioning. He understood that any group’s culture was really its own take on the world and its place in the world. As he observed, “the members of different social classes differ not so much in the extent to which they acknowledge culture as in the extent to which they know it” (Bourdieu, 1984/2009, p. 318).

CALCULATING LIFE CHANCES: THE ACADEMIC VERSUS VOCATIONAL EDUCATION DEBATE

Concerns about what to do with children who encounter great difficulty in academic work plague both the United States and United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom, worries over labeling children and how this might hamper their progression were reflected in a report from the mid-1980s, which showed that students in the private schooling sector and the “best” secondary schools had the highest school-leaving examination scores. The authors of the study observed that advantage came from remaining in education and achieving higher qualifications, such as those at the A level (advanced level), the entry requirement for universities. Those students not achieving such qualifications might have been more likely to follow a vocational route by working and learning a trade, but they were at a disadvantage compared with those taking the more accepted route, as alternative, more highly paid professions were not open to them (Power et al., 2003).

Indeed, another author reported that, for both universities and employers, “almost any collection of A levels was preferable to vocational ‘equivalents’” (Killeen et al., 1999, as cited in Power et al., 2003, p. 46).

That those groups holding the most power will seek to impose their influence to retain their preferential status is equally apparent in the way qualifications are discussed in terms of “value”—that is, which ones are the most desirable and which are effectively deemed second-rate. The significance here is that only those accreditations determined as holding value will be transferable between fields and, ultimately, translatable to economic capital.

In England, the question of which qualifications are the most prized was highlighted in a report by Professor Alison Wolf (2011) widely referred to as *The Wolf Report*. Wolf called for an overhaul of the vocational, or practical and technical, qualifications being offered in schools and colleges.

The use of the term *value* is significant here as a demonstration of how the field of power has the ability to affect the value of symbolic capital across many fields. Wolf (2011) reaffirmed the government’s role in assigning value when she stated, “High quality vocational qualifications can and should be identified by the government, as part of its task of providing objective information to citizens” (p. 12). Here, the report legitimized the responsibility of the government in designating the value of qualifications by clearly identifying the government as the appropriate agency for deciding which qualifications will be offered.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, *The Wolf Report* similarly helped confirm the capital value of different awards, with the clear inference being that vocational qualifications hold a lower value than academic qualifications. Such assertions further elevated the position of the more “traditional” academic qualifications by establishing their superior value both within and between fields, thereby ensuring their dominant position and reproduction. Similarly, the report affirmed the government’s role in using its position to establish this hierarchy of value in the wider society.

This stance was bolstered with arguments that change was necessary to protect both the integrity of the school league tables and to prevent young people from gaining qualifications that hold no value in terms of securing employment or recognition in different fields. Wolf stipulated, “Pretending that all vocational qualifications are equally valuable does not bring them respect. On the contrary, it devalues vocational education in people’s eyes” (Paton, 2012, para. 9). This statement was reiterated by Education Secretary Michael Gove when he said, “For too long the system has been devalued by attempts to pretend that all qualifications are intrinsically the same” (Vasagar, 2012, para. 9).

THE MALDISTRIBUTION OF OPPORTUNITY

Bourdieu argued that the value of social and, particularly, cultural capital is not uniform either within or between fields, or in relation to qualifications. What is highly prized in one group or field might carry less value in another. The examples presented earlier reflect this variation in the comparison between vocational qualifications and the more highly prized academic qualifications. We may not be conscious of it, but we all have some notion of what we consider worthwhile or valued qualifications, and even in cases where qualifications are deemed of “equivalent” worth, we are bound to consider one more valuable than the other. This is important across social fields but even more so if we in education also assign value, consciously or not, to qualifications, as this can impact our perceptions of learners and other teachers alike, given that teachers will deliver a whole range of courses from vocational (or practical) to academic in settings that may still foster a qualification value hierarchy. This is especially pertinent when we remember Bourdieu’s argument that capital equates to power, which is embodied in the resources that are valued within fields and where qualifications are transmutable to capital and therefore power.

Further, these resources are the various forms of capital “that can be created, accumulated, exchanged and consumed” (Swartz, 2010, p. 46). Capital, qualifications, and experience “buy” entry to a field, determine the starting point within it, and affect promotions, movement, and influence. Bourdieu further argued “that power finds expression in the mundane activities of everyday life. It operates at a tacit, taken-for-granted level on both cognitive and bodily dimensions of human society” (Swartz, 2010, p. 48).

This situation means that some differences in terms of capital are accepted as the “norm,” a part of everyday life and society. This feature emphasizes the significance of value differences in qualifications, given that they represent a form of capital that is translatable to increasing economic capital with a more highly paid position, symbolic capital in terms of securing status, and social capital by securing valued social connections.

Those without access to these forms of capital can still achieve movement within a field but in a more limited capacity. Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) spoke of the value of academic degrees, diplomas, and all forms of credentials that, when attached to positions and not individuals, result in permanent differences. These differences, once established, mean that “relations of power and domination no

longer exist directly between individuals; they are set up in pure objectivity between institutions, i.e., between socially guaranteed qualifications and socially defined positions" (p. 187). In this situation, "academic qualifications are to cultural capital what money is to economic capital" (p. 187). For example, in an academic field, a PhD might be regarded as valuable and therefore represent high currency within the field or "marketplace," meaning that "the holder no longer has to engage in a 'symbolic struggle' about position" (Gunter, 2002a, p. 13).

Bourdieu referred to symbolic power as inflicting a type of non-physical violence, as it allows forms of oppression to continue unopposed by, for example, categorizing social groups, setting education standards, and determining accepted social behaviors. Acceptance of the need for qualifications to teach certain subjects and/or academic levels or to work in different roles within education is an example of this practice, as it sets the boundaries for progression and access to capital depending on capital held. It is important to understand that capital is dependent on the value placed on it within the field and the value it carries in other fields, recognizing that what is highly valued in one field might not be so prized in another. "This means, concretely, that the social rank and specific power which agents are assigned in a particular field depend firstly on the specific capital they can mobilize, whatever their additional wealth in other forms of capital" (Bourdieu, 1989a, p. 123).

Thus, preventing access to qualifications or setting students on an early pathway to, say, vocational or less highly regarded qualifications can represent a "maldistribution of opportunity," as not all students will be afforded opportunities to access or acquire the academic credentials that confer greater cultural and symbolic capital; in this way, the existing dominant interests and structure of the field will be preserved and strengthened. As Bourdieu (1999) argued, deprivation of capital, in whichever form, "chains one to a place" (p. 127).

Discussions of school content rarely deal with the differences among policy, practice, and rhetoric. The rhetoric is often one of "reform." The practice mirrors the extension of the status quo. This is the case because the role of cultural capital is not neutral; it is present in the formal and hidden curricula and bestows compelling advantage and disadvantage on children from different social groups and backgrounds. The proposed curricular reforms in both the United Kingdom and United States are unlikely to change this situation to any meaningful degree.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

There is a strong and relational confluence of what schools teach in their curricula and which interests are represented in the content selected. All curricula are representational of the interests of some groups that are not necessarily the interests of other groups. Bourdieu saw school as a special social space that functioned as a symbolic space where different lifestyles competed with one another for legitimacy and primacy. In this sense, schools are pivotal locations of an often fierce flashpoint of political struggle. The parties in that struggle see their own values and perspectives as self-evident and good for everyone, and see opponents' questioning of these values and perspectives as subversive and conspiratorial. Proponents cloak their values in a mantle of self-righteousness, good manners, and good taste, and in the interests of the nation and the larger economic values that support their own wealth and continued prosperity.

Any school leader caught in the middle of a curricular content debate will recognize at once that this conflict, by nature, cannot be resolved by logic or appeals to an agenda of social justice—that is, decisions that reduce rather than perpetuate the existing nature of wealth disparity the school currently embraces and, in so doing, reproduces. Arguments must be carefully crafted to appeal to a broad democratic base and to avoid the “zero-sum game” antidote, which carries the perception that what other groups gain, “my group” must lose. Arguments must be framed as how all groups can “win” with the options presented.

The most telling question for leaders in the day-to-day operation of schools is, How much and how far can schools be recrafted so the interests of all are promoted without some being alienated and lost? This is a most compelling and complex issue. For example, while the recent international test score comparisons show that Britain has one of the finest educational systems in the world, that is true for only the very top percentage of students. For those children not doing well and who would not qualify for Britain's best universities (the so-called Russell Group),

more than 13,000 children leave school at 16 every year with nothing to their name and as many again don't even go to the exams. . . . These are the children of the people of Britain and they have not been spoken for yet. (Collins, 2013, p. 17)

The key issue for policy developers is the question of how a monocultural curriculum that is most closely aligned with the interests and

cultural family backgrounds of the existing group in control of such matters can be augmented to become more inclusive for all. Currently, the Common Core curriculum standards in the United States side-step this issue in the name of promoting increased “rigor,” so as to fare better in comparisons of international test scores. What amounts to “rigor” in this case is simply an even more class-based artifact that will do nothing to decrease the already pronounced achievement gap based on race and economic condition. The nexus of these issues is the goal of somehow making curriculum and schooling more inclusive as opposed to exclusive.

KEY CHAPTER CONCEPTS

forms of capital

Bourdieu identified various *forms of capital* that individuals work to acquire and use to influence others in specific social fields. Those who have more capital are more powerful, and they exercise their influence to extend their reach, and certainly not to lose it. Other individuals or agencies want to acquire additional capital to expand their influence. The interaction that occurs takes various forms of contestation. Different fields have distinctive practices and follow their own logics and routines.

Thompson (1991) avers that Bourdieu employed the term *symbolic power* as an inclusive label to acknowledge “most forms of power as they are routinely deployed in social life” (p. 23). Symbolic power is felt by people in a field but often not clearly recognized for how it benefits some in the field more than others because it is in the end “an arbitrary social construction” (p. 23). School curriculum is a form of symbolic capital and, as such, is an expression of symbolic power.

Because curriculum revolves around cultural artifacts and shared cultural values, it works to enable some children over others to be much more successful in schools, primarily those children from the elite classes who by virtue of their political position use the schools as a means to retain their social and political power. Shared values are expressed as ideologies—that is, bundled beliefs regarding what is important, valuable, appropriate, and worthwhile, as well as the shared taboos about what is not.

We must remember that ideologies are always doubly determined, that they owe their most specific characteristics not only to the

interests of the classes or class fractions they express (the function of sociodicy, but also to the specific interests of those who produce them and to the specific logic of the field of production. (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 169)

One of the key Bourdieusian ideas is that even those who find the culture embedded in school curricula to be unfamiliar or even antagonistic to their own values still must have a shared belief in its legitimacy. From this perspective, Bourdieu's insight that all the players in a social field have to share a common cognitive acceptance of it means that those who are least advantaged (or disadvantaged) participate in the perpetuation of their own inferior positions within the field.

These are the various forms of capital at work in a specific social space or field.

cultural capital

This concept refers to a process and a state of possessing certain forms of knowledge that have been acquired through an extended process, beginning in the family, and from which a person takes on certain tastes and values regarding cultural artifacts and forms in the larger society (see Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

In Bourdieu's work, *cultural capital* aligns with social structure (LiPuma, 1993, p. 18). The school incorporates the culture of the dominant classes and engages in a transformation of culture by classifying the dominant culture "as 'natural' talent, and thus 'natural' superiority, levels of knowledge among students which are in fact largely the result of an informal learning process taking place within the family" (Johnson, 1993, p. 23). Schools complete the process of legitimization as each "transforms social hierarchies into academic hierarchies, and, by extension, into hierarchies of 'merit'" (p. 23), and ultimately into social power. Thus, cultural capital can be converted into other forms of capital. "The example of cultural capital has demonstrated that signals of cultural knowledge are rewarded in the classroom, which is easily converted into a type of economic capital—educational attainment" (Robson, 2009, p. 107).

An excellent overview of cultural capital is provided in Randal Johnson's (1993) introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu, 1993). Another can be found in Edward LiPuma's (1993) chapter in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*. Bourdieu's classic text is

Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (1984/2009), a lengthy commentary on cultural capital and its homology to social position and social power.

economic capital

In the simplest terms, *economic capital* is money and material wealth. It is represented in the accumulation of funds in bank accounts, stocks, bonds, and in such things as the value of one's home, automobiles, jewelry, and other material acquisitions.

social capital

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) defined *social capital* as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 119). Put another way, social capital is the influence one has or acquires via friendships and membership in groups such as fraternal or recreational (e.g., golf, tennis, poker, bridge) clubs, associations, or classes of like-minded persons in religious organizations or political parties.

symbolic violence

Linguistic exchange employs language as a symbolic system. Such exchanges occur between individuals and groups in a structured space, usually embedded in hierarchies of power. As such, linguistic exchanges are expressions of power and domination, and subordination. Social categorizations are based on linguistic expressions; certain expressions are sanctified as legitimate, while others are not. Legitimation of one over the other is the result of political struggle.

Symbolic violence is thus a generally unperceived form of violence and, in contrast to systems in which force is needed to maintain social hierarchy, is an effective and efficient form of domination in that members of the dominant classes need exert little energy to maintain their dominance. (Schubert, 2008, p. 184)

The imposition of some linguistic systems over others is an act of symbolic violence, and it occurs when those in the dominant groups just go about their normal lives, enjoying living within the rules that perpetuate the world they rule.

hidden curriculum

The *hidden curriculum* is that part of the cultural content of schooling taught as part of the lived routines that make up systemized and state-sanctioned education. Eisner (1992) summarized the nature of the hidden curriculum as follows:

The hidden curriculum consists of the messages given to children by teachers, school structures, textbooks, and other school resources. These messages are often conveyed by teachers who themselves are unaware of their presence. "Hidden" implies a hider—someone or some group that intentionally conceals. Concealment, in turn, suggests a form of subterfuge to achieve some gain. Hence, the hidden curriculum is often believed to serve the interests of the power elite, which the school itself is covertly thought to serve. (p. 314)

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