

Social class, race and pedagogic practices: An analysis of the effects of early childhood programs on low-income African American children.

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The relationship between social class and pedagogic practices has been a central concern of Bernstein scholars (Morais and Neves; Sadovnik, 1991, 2008; Sadovnik and Semel, 2000; Semel, 1995). Based upon Bernstein's work on the social class contexts of pedagogic practice (Bernstein, 1977, 1990), the question of whether or not there is a more appropriate practice for educating working class and low-income students has become an important part of curriculum and pedagogic debates, especially in the United States (Delpit, 1995; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2003).

During the past decade the debate in the United States has centered on how to best close the achievement gap between low-income, mostly students of color and their more affluent, mostly white peers. Drawing upon Delpit's (1995) argument that progressive education has been detrimental to low-income children of color due to the fact that they often misunderstand or misread middle class codes, educational models such as Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and Uncommon Schools offer a traditional, often authoritarian, and highly structured pedagogy that has received considerable attention for their success in closing the achievement gap (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2003). Semel and Sadovnik (2008), however, have argued that there are historical examples of progressive education that have been successful for similar populations, citing Central Park East Secondary School under the leadership of Deborah Meier's leadership (Meier, 1995; 2005) and Urban Academy under the leadership of Ann Cook and Herb Mack (Raywid, 1999), as examples. Finally, Sadovnik (2008), using a Bernsteinian perspective, raises a number of questions about the methods of KIPP and Uncommon Schools, suggesting that although their students perform well on standardized tests, they may not be adequately prepared for the elaborated codes of colleges and universities, where authority and discipline need to be internalized and where authority is more often than not invisible rather than visible.

The purpose of this paper is to examine this issue in the context of early childhood education, as preschools provide children with the educational and social foundation for future success in school. In the 1960s, research on culture and race led many experts of the time to conclude that poor minority children were culturally deprived. Teachers in Head Start, a federal early childhood program targeting low-income children, were given the charge to teach these children what their parents could not (Meier, 2002). Thus, Head Start curriculum became strongly teacher directed in an effort to make up for cultural deficiencies. During this period, critics of cultural deprivation theory (Labov,; Valentine,) argued that theorists such as Bernstein had a cultural deficit model to explain the lower

achievement of working class and low-income children. In the United States, some critics (Labov,) incorrectly accused Bernstein of arguing that African American children were culturally deficient, even though Bernstein had written exclusively about white working class children in England. Despite Bernstein's rejection of what he saw as a misguided recontextualization of his work (1990), these debates over cultural deprivation and pedagogic practice have continued in the United States.

Although cultural deficit theory is no longer part of the explicit discourse in early childhood pedagogy development, it has left its mark on many curriculums. Classic works on progressive early childhood education (Brice Heath, Lubeck) provided ethnographic examples of how social class differences are central to understanding preschool curriculum and pedagogy. A decade later work by Hart and Risley (1995) asserted that children from low-income homes have a smaller vocabulary by kindergarten than more affluent children. Their work has been cited by those who advocate that due to these differences less affluent children need a more structured compensatory curriculum in preschool. Culture also became a consideration when creating curriculum for poor minority children. Delpit (2006) suggests that black children require more explicit instruction to gain the codes of the white middle class.

As a result of these issues, several curriculums developed for low-income children, particularly those in Head Start, varying degrees of teacher directed instruction. High/Scope requires that children make a plan for their day with the teacher before going to play. Creative Curriculum is highly focused on meeting benchmarks and testing. Leap, a curriculum developed in response to Hart and Risley's study, requires that teachers follow a strict, pre-planned lesson.

But it is not a foregone conclusion that pedagogy for poor minority children always grows from a teacher directed model. Several schools have incorporated more progressive approaches, such as Reggio Emilia or Project Approach, into Head Start classrooms. Each of these approaches includes a highly child-centered pedagogy in which the interests of the children drive the curriculum. In both Reggio Emilia and Project Approach, the teacher plans lessons based on the children's interests. In these approaches, the children chose activities with teacher guidance, rather than teacher direction.

Among many current early childhood researchers, child-centered pedagogy is considered superior to teacher directed methods. The National Association for the Education of Young Children finds many of the features of a child-centered pedagogy to be 'developmentally appropriate' for early childhood. However, issues raised by Delpit, Hart and Risley, and others should not be ignored. Should low-income children—particularly low-income minority children—be educated differently than middle-class children due to their limited contact with middle class codes at home?

This study will consider the effectiveness of differing pedagogical approaches for low-income black children. Using a Bernsteinian theoretical framework, it will use a comparative case study of three Head Start centers in high-minority Chicago

neighborhoods to examine the effects of different pedagogic practices on the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills of young children. The first school uses a highly teacher-directed curriculum developed by Leap Learning Systems. Leap advocates a year-long scripted curriculum including a weekly theme, required vocabulary words, teacher-lead dramatic play activities, and pre-specified writing and art activities. The second school uses Reggio Emilia, a highly child-centered approach. Reggio supports emergent curriculum, natural elements, exploration of the environment, and teacher-child dialogue. This center uses a self-developed curriculum called Bonding with Books. This curriculum includes the creation of a month-long classroom theme based on a book. The book of the month will be chosen by the Education Coordinator, who is based at the managing agency's cooperate office. Through the use of this curriculum, the center draws upon elements of both teacher-directed and child-centered pedagogy.

Comment [AS1]: What about the third, or am I missing something?

As a pilot for this larger study, a preliminary study was done at a Head Start classroom in Newark, NJ. This classroom is part of a program (Newark Preschool Counsel) that encourages directed instruction as a means to ensure kindergarten readiness. The classroom teacher and assistant teacher, however, both favored a child centered model. The resulting classroom environment drew on elements of teacher-directed instruction and child direction. The children were observed to have internalized classroom rules and required little explicit direction or discipline during their child directed free-play period. The teacher also used this period to deliver a highly directed small group lesson. The children responded well to both and moved easily between teacher directed and child directed activities.

The full study will employ a mixed-method methodology for analyzing the effects of the three programs on cognitive and non-cognitive development. First, based on six months of ethnographic research, the researchers will employ the Morais and Neves's (2010) model for analyzing the classification and framing rules of classrooms in each school. Second, through interviews with administrators, teachers and parents, their attitudes, beliefs and practices about appropriate pedagogic practices for their low-income students will be explored. Finally, through an analysis of a longitudinal data base on the 2005 cohorts of each school, the research will examine differences in academic achievement of students who have remained in the Chicago Public Schools through fourth grade. Controlling for race, income and other demographic variables, we will be able to isolate the independent effect of each school on achievement in elementary (primary) school. Given the fact that all three schools are located in the same part of Chicago and have similar low-income African American student populations, this research will provide empirical evidence to assess the effects on progressive and traditional pedagogic practices on low-income children of color.

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