

## **Power and Conformity in Today's Schools**

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The purpose of schooling is the transmission of culture, the process by which the culture of a society is passed on to its children. Individuals learn their culture; acquire knowledge, beliefs, values, and norms. Agents of socialization are people, groups and/or institutions that influence self concepts, emotions, attitudes and behavior. This influence occurs in small groups and in society, and it may be the result of direct and overt explicit social pressure, or it may be subtle, insidious, and unconscious. This influence acts on the individual's attitude, beliefs, and behaviors to conform to the influencing group's beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes.

Societies have seen the development of institutions that assist in the transmission of culture, such as family, school, religion, mass media, peer group, etc. Contemporary society has developed and established three main agents of socialization that have served to perpetuate it. The three traditional agents that have consistently perpetuated society have been the family, the church, and the school. These traditional institutions support continuity of thought, morals, values, and other tenets the culture considers important.

This paper focuses on the socializing function of the school and on the contention that it has remained the most stable traditional agent of socialization as well as the one that teaches and reinforces conformity the strongest. The school is the agent responsible for socializing groups of children and young people on specific skills and values in a society. As the most stable and formal socializing agent, in American society today, the school is expected to both train the individual for practical occupations and skills and to provide the individual with basic societal values, like loyalty to country, politeness, etc. Therefore, the school exercises strategic power relations as a means and as an end to teach conformity, and in so doing some students learn to become agents in its service, while others learn to oppose it. The school system has always been charged with the task of promoting conformity. Conformity is an insidious practice, and this paper proposes to frame the discussion on it around Foucault's conception of power.

Foucault's interest in exploring the role power plays is that our identities as subjects and agents are formed apart from, and even before we participate in, the public realm: our identities are formed in private and semi-private peripheral social institutions, such as families and schools. Foucault further claims that we are formed as subjects and agents by being subjected to dangerous strategic power relations (e.g. sexism, racism, class oppression, and heterosexism) within those social institutions.

### **The School – Purpose and Origins**

Schools are the agents responsible for socializing groups of children and young people on specific skills and values in a society (Henslin, 1999:77-78). Appelbaum and Chambliss (1997:120) argue that this socializing agent probably contributes most to social conformity. The school system has become the glue that holds society together.

The education system has served the purpose of catalyst when movement and dynamism was required or the purpose of stabilizer when society needed to put on the breaks. The school system responds to society's needs, and complies with society's demands, for trained workers, intellectual citizens, and well-educated citizens. The school system has always operated within specific parameters and has been charged with the task of promoting conformity.

In 1932 Professor George Counts of Teachers College in his *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* states,

"Faced with any difficult problem of life we set our minds at rest sooner or later by their appeal to the school. We are convinced that education is the one unfailing remedy for every ill to which man is subject, whether it be vice, crime, war, poverty, riches, injustice, racketeering, political corruption, race hatred, class conflict, or just plain original sin. We even speak glibly and often about the general reconstruction of society through the school."(Counts, p3)

Professor Count's statement is relevant today as it was then. Today's society expects the school system to teach students life skills, such as drug awareness, conflict resolution, and sex education, all within the confines of set parameters imposed by today's society's conflicting values, diverse morals, and emerging mores. The other traditional agents of socialization, the church and the family, have changed, and in the absence of a consistently strong and homogeneous church and family the school has emerged slowly as society's binding agent.

Hiner explains, "The Puritans had great optimism in the educational efficacy of a Christian community and its two primary institutions, the family and the church."(Hiner,p8). However, as Puritan society was becoming more heterogeneous, the social fabric was coming undone, and the Puritans realized that

"Education for salvation by churches and families had failed to reach all members of the community. Education for social control by the schools, the third member of the symbiotic triad of Puritan educational institutions, became necessary to keep the unregenerated civilized on a minimum level. Concern for civility tended to enlarge the cultural importance of the schools."(Hiner, p11)

Thus, schools were born out of the necessity to perpetuate an established view of the world; they filled a void no longer fulfilled by home or church. Evidence shows that the purpose of the school from the start was to give heterogeneous society commonness. The school connected the parts of the society. The Puritans had a sense of society as a system and each of the institutions, home, church, community, and school, were the interlocking parts which held society together. As society became more heterogeneous the Puritans sought for the school to become the foundation for their collapsing community, although they understood the limited capacity for the school to become a hub for spiritual renewal and spiritual sustenance. "The school could provide literacy and the most elementary spiritual instructions, but it was not designed to furnish the direct means of salvation."(Hiner, p17). As society became increasingly egalitarian and the diversity of thought increased this required those in charge to set up systems to perpetuate their way of thinking. Foucault states that the power elite in the classical age discovered the body as both "an object and target of power" and therefore sought to use state institutions, one of them being schools, to produce "docile bodies" that could be "subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (p. 136). In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Foucault drew analogies between the creation of the prison and the social organization of the school system in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Contemporary historians also agree that the school's role as an institution of social control has existed since its creation. (Foucault, 1979; Sarason & Doris, 1979; Noguera, 1995, Spring, 2001). Erevelles writes about the "unruly bodies" that challenge the rigidity and discipline of the system, and argues that these strategies and constraints mirror those being applied by the penal system. He points to the development by the school system of strategies, constraints, and activities that were designed to manage those "unruly bodies" (2000). One such strategy is that of routinization of every aspect of the students' life, as well as the imposition of rules and regulations that became the operating norm of the institution; Schools were designed to be scientifically managed to ensure order and efficiency. Schools were also divided into vocational schools for lower-class immigrants and high schools for middle-class students to ensure the continuation and the smooth transition of the social order into the world of work. (Noguera, 1995). Thus, as the school and penal systems mirrored each other, both were built on the concept of an institution whose main task was to control people who were in its custody, "to regiment, control, and discipline the social outcasts" (Noguera, 1995).

While European immigrants soon assimilated into the "American way" a new threat to the social control of the school came from African Americans through the provisions of *Brown v. Board of Education*; from the new wave of immigrants, predominantly of color; and from the issues of inclusion brought about through the provisions of PL94-142 (Noguera, 1995). The result of these threats was the tightening of rules and regulations of the system. Schools began operating as institutions of social control by providing an important custodial function with respect to the care and movement of children; they began exercising considerable authority over students, and many of the basic civil rights of students were suspended while they were in school (Casella, 2001a).

Today's stated norms prompt students to relinquish some individual freedoms in exchange for the benefits of receiving an education. For the majority of students, this arrangement elicits and even encourages a high level of compliance (Noguera, 2003). However, many students understand, and reject, the reality of such control and rebel. When these students' response to school policies and procedures is rooted in an active rejection of the dominant culture's norms and values, they consciously engage in behaviors that ensure their educational failure (Willis, 1977; Giroux, 1990). These students do not sabotage their educational prospects by themselves; the educational system is only too eager to ask conformity of these students or to exclude them from their established system.

Contemporary school reform movements haven't done much to alter the outcome of this conundrum. Today's education reform efforts have only created more effective processes to perpetuate the status quo. With the school seriously taking on its role as an institution of social control and adopting rigid policies that are instrumental in constituting the deviant student, it has turned its oppressive ideologies on students with differences marked by race, class, gender, and disability. These differences play an important part in the disciplinary and punitive policies supported by the schools. For example, several researchers have pointed out that the students who are consistently disciplined in public schools are male, working-class African Americans and Latinos, many of whom are segregated in classrooms for students labeled Educationally Mentally Retarded (EMR) and Trainable Mentally Retarded (TMR) (Artiles, 2003; Casella, 2001a; Skiba et al., 2000; Noguera, 1995).

When poor and minority students do not conform the system has designed effective and more stringent ways to control them (Devine, 1996). For example, the widespread use of tracking is one educational practice that helps replicate the social order. This gate keeping process distributes institutional benefits in numerous informal and formal ways (Oakes, 1985; Lee & Bryk, 1988). Students are sorted according to ability, past academic achievement, and behavior to form more homogeneous classrooms. The result is that poor African American and Latino children are overrepresented in the lower tracks, reproducing the social order and maintaining the status quo. Some social reproduction theorists have argued that schools mirror the social structure and organizational patterns of society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1977). They have proposed that schools maintain the existing social order by transmitting knowledge, values, norms, and social skills that translate into either high-skilled or low-skilled jobs. Grant and Sleeter (1988) state that schools provide "an institutional ideology, socializing agents, and an experiential context within which students define and shape the way they think about their personal dreams" (p. 19).

### **The School – Power and Players**

The school system manages to maintain and perpetuate the status quo because most of the people who work in it are agents in its service and may not even be aware of how power is exercised on its behalf, as it was exercised over them, and they either conformed to it, or in their rebellion are exercising it as it was exercised over them. Power within the school system is not exercised through force. The system has set up an insidious and unconscious process.

Foucault provides an interesting perspective on power that could be used to explain, and to help us understand, the power dynamic within a classroom or educational system. Foucault presupposes that power is a key element in the very formation of individuals: individual subjects/agents don't come into the world fully formed. They are constituted in and through a set of social relations, all of which are imbued with power. Within these social relationships individuals are subjected in a dual sense; they are *subjected to* the complex, multiple, shifting relations of power in their social field and at the same time they are enabled to take up the position of *a subject* in and through those relations. Therefore, power is a condition for the possibility of individual subjectivity. Thus, some students are engaged in enhancing such possibility, while others are engaged in fighting against a constraining possibility, so are teachers, and everybody else who engages in the educational system.

Foucault's initial conception of power is that of the conventional view, where power is coercive, open, and concrete. Foucault's initial model of power equates it with the rule of law and presupposes that the paradigmatic power relation is that by which a sovereign imposes his will on his subjects. Foucault realizes that when power is conceived of in this way, the primary sphere in which power is seen as operating is that of the State. Eventually, Foucault realizes that power and all its accoutrements, operates insidiously and permeates daily life.

This initial model of power also suggests the exercise of it as the imposition of the will of a powerful individual on that of a powerless one: it explains power as a fundamentally restrictive, repressive, negative force. Foucault claims that this model views power in terms of ‘an essentially negative power, presupposing on the one hand a sovereign whose role is to forbid and on the other a subject who must somehow effectively say yes to this prohibition’. (Foucault, in Gordon 1980, p. 140).

In this notion the teacher would be the representative of the State and the exerciser of the power of the State; the students would submit to their teacher’s will in a compliant and conforming manner. It would be easy for a teacher to observe deviant behavior, and take action to counteract it. It would also be easy for students to understand the expectation and conform or rebel against it. This simple notion of power could be observed and scrutinized by all openly, thus engaging people in simple discourse as to its effectiveness, preference, application, fairness, etc.

Eventually Foucault modifies his model to suggest that power is not restricted to a very limited sphere within social and political life, nor is it an essentially negative, repressive, and prohibitive force. That’s not to say that Foucault doesn’t think that power is repressive, his point is that the repressive model is too narrow.

*“If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse”.* (Foucault, in Hurley 1978, p. 12).

Foucault’s expanded notion of power involves more than constraint and repression; power is productive and repressive, as well as enabling and constraining. Power cannot be amassed to be exercised later as the holder sees fit: power emerges out of the interactions among agents and it exists in its exercise, and it plays a crucial role in the formation of individual subjects/agents. Thus power is not merely negative or repressive; power is positive and productive. Power becomes the “means by which individuals try to conduct, to determine the behavior of others” (Foucault, in Bernauer & Rasmussen, 1988, p.18). In this way strategic power relations are always normatively suspect and power is not always bad, but it is always dangerous.

In this notion all who come on to the playing field, the school system, have been socialized as subjects/actors in a dual sense as both doers and sufferers, as sufferers because they are doers and as able to do only insofar as they suffer. During their socialization, participants have mutually reinforced each other’s role at different times, under different circumstances. Children who have grown within the culture may not be able to understand this power play relationship but have learned to negotiate their participation, or lack of, in it. They have learned to conform.

The school system in the United States was developed as an instrument in service of a way of thinking that is no longer prominent, but it still exists. Thus, its nature is difficult to transform. Outsiders who have been socialized in a different way may not understand, or might not want to participate in, these power play relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Foucault’s expanded notion of power serves to explain the reason the school system seldom discusses the issue of conformity in our schools. The school system is a public space where some individuals are encouraged to try to conduct and determine the behavior of others through different means, including the use of power (not force). The use of power in this way is perceived as not always being bad. However, Foucault contends that it is always dangerous.

The system moves at a slow pace, and the practice continues. Conformity is an insidious practice that can be appreciated better when its components are deconstructed within a framework or a set of parameters. For example, we can see in the way teachers are trained that conformity can limit professional autonomy and initiative. When student teachers are faced with different approaches to professional practice, like a technist approach compared with a reflective approach they choose the technist approach. This is because student teachers perceive the technist approach to be the preferred method. It is an accurate perception, since that is the message the system sends to new teachers.

Thus, conformity helps ensure competent practice based upon generally accepted models of practice, and ensures socialization into the accepted practices of a teacher. (Zeichner 1990).

It is evident that our education system reflects a system that is less concerned with the cognitive development of learners than on the maintenance of power relationships. If the education system seeks to empower rather than constrain it needs to focus on genuine autonomy and it needs to encourage public debate about the nature of democracy and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The church and the family need to shoulder some of the responsibility of promoting genuine cognitive reflection as well, since the survival of these two institutions is dependent on the school not becoming an instrument of oppression. Should the school take on, or be given, even more influence over the socialization of children it could lead to the demise of the church and the family as equal partners in the socializing function. Becoming a secular society would not be a detriment to the United States, but assigning the socialization of its children to only one outdated institution would.

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