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CRITICAL AUTONOMY: INVESTIGATING SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATION

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Education

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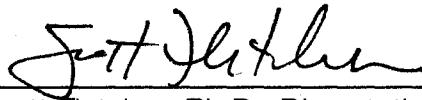
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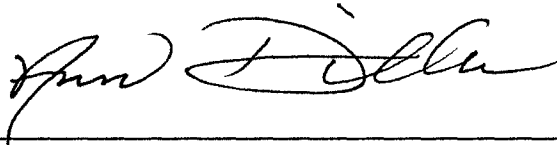
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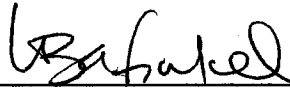
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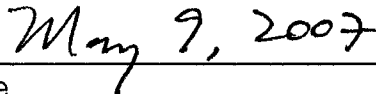
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DEDICATION

For Jessie, my best friend.

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ABSTRACT

CRITICAL AUTONOMY: INVESTIGATING SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATION

By

Peter-John Giampietro

University of New Hampshire, May 2007

This dissertation develops the concept of critical autonomy as a theoretical framework to guide responses to social class oppression in schooling. The project is grounded on Cheryl Misak and C.S. Peirce's arguments about inquiry and their implications for holding knowledge claims, especially claims to self-knowledge. As a result, critical autonomy presupposes the need for engagement in a community of inquiry. Unlike other theories of autonomy that may acknowledge that autonomy is nurtured socially but is realized in isolation, I argue that critical autonomy is enhanced through the constant process of inquiry *with other inquirers*. Thus it is always a relational concept.

To introduce the importance of the conception of autonomy that I develop, I draw upon relevant research on social class and education to argue that schools are exploitative spaces. Through the framework of exploitation, I argue that schools mediate the process through which working class students come to consider

themselves, and are considered by others, to be less intelligent and less motivated to learn than their dominant class counterparts. In response, I argue that the notion of critical autonomy I develop allows us to begin the task of effectively addressing social class exploitation in schools.

Rather than arguing that the conception of critical autonomy will help agents transcend the challenges of living within oppressive social contexts, it grounds itself in the contradiction at the heart of oppression and offers a solution that is itself paradoxical. We wish to make our lives our “own,” living them from the “inside” as Will Kymlicka describes it, but to do so, we must draw on “external” resources to foster independence. Of course, it is paradoxical to link increasing one’s individual autonomy with greater dependence upon others, but it is the key to critical autonomy.

I also argue that schools can support critical autonomy by fostering the conditions in which on-going collaborative inquiry into a wide variety of beliefs and claims to knowledge thrives. Such an environment help students engage in analyses of knowledge claims as well as the processes that led to those claims in a variety of domains, both academic and personal. I explore the ways that an autonomy-enhancing context is created through collaborative inquiry amongst students, teachers, parents, and school officials on a variety of questions.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

O-o-h child things are gonna get easier
O-o-h child things'll get brighter
O-o-h child things are gonna get easier
O-o-h child things'll get brighter
Someday - yeah - we'll put it together and we'll get it undone
Someday when your head is much lighter
Someday - yeah - we'll walk in the rays of a beautiful sun
Someday when the world is much brighter

- Stan Vincent (1970)

Eric sang these lyrics while perched in the bow of our canoe, beating percussion by hand against the canoe's metal wall. It was a sunny morning and we, along with nine other students and two other instructors, were paddling down the Suwannee River during March of 1993. We were in the middle of a 28-day Outward Bound expedition, making our way from the Okefenokee Swamp to the Gulf of Mexico. When he was not singing or cracking jokes,¹ Eric often talked about missing his grandmother, worrying about his sister, and wanting to get away from all the bugs – to get back home. He had been enrolled in our Outward Bound program by the Florida court system in lieu of being incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility for repeatedly stealing cars. Like so many of his “hardened” peers, Eric was a delightful mix of obstinance, humor, and non-stop observations about the world and what he was going to do once he returned home. While I remember

¹ He called me “professor” because I used “big words.” Despite our friendship, I don't think the nickname was always a compliment.

smiling at his wonderfully off-key yet passionate singing, I feared that our expedition may have done little more than to provide him with a needed respite from the complex circumstances to which he was returning.

Smelly, silly and cantankerous, our small groups traveled black rivers like the Suwannee, past cypress trees and alligators, and through swarms of mosquitoes – all the while talking, laughing, swearing, singing, yelling and crying to each other about dreams, past mistakes, fears and hopes for the future. Although I did not appreciate the importance of those conversations at the time in my own development as a person and teacher, I know now that all of us – those teenagers and their slightly older and supposed more mature guides – were trying to make sense of being in a world marked by racial and economic injustice. We Outward Bound teachers were trying to help our students find ways to return to their “real” lives with the tools to cope within social and economic oppression. While valuable in many ways, I fear our canoe expeditions did not adequately address the realities our students faced when they returned home. But one thing stands out to this day: despite their profane language, their socially unacceptable ways of dealing with anger and dissatisfaction, their lack of high school degrees and other traditionally conceived indications that they were going to be successful, my young friends, my students – “incarcerated” teens like Eric – were bright and inquisitive, people who often made insightful observations about the world and their places within it. While I may not talk about canoes and mosquitoes in this dissertation, kids like Eric and others like him remain the focus of the analysis to follow.

The analysis is also inspired by the students I taught within more traditionally conceived school settings. My many “general track” high school students, also often defied the stereotypes that at first examination they seemed to embody. While we teachers “knew” they were not interested in school, were seemingly biding time until they could be free of us and our school requirements, they quietly (and often not so quietly) demonstrated that they were more than the labels that we regularly assigned to them. Throughout my teaching career in both alternative and “traditional” school contexts, again and again I confronted the discrepancies between the perceptions of the kids that schools deem less intelligent and less interested in learning and the students I taught. While they professed hatred of all things reading and writing, I regularly had insightful conversations about the world and sometimes about literature with my 6th period seniors – “general” English students who were taking eleventh grade English simultaneously with their twelfth grade courses. For that class, the group who vowed to teach *me* how to teach *them*, Of Mice and Men became a text that opened new avenues for our collective inquiry. Despite their protestations otherwise, I knew they cared about each other and were scared about their futures, never more apparent than when school administrators threatened to expel one of them for an angry outburst directed at another teacher.

The fact that the “trouble” students *do* care profoundly about their futures and schooling in particular was perhaps most clearly demonstrated during my work with the students in the Claremont Alternative Program, known as CAP. My CAP

students – juniors and seniors in high school who had few to no high school credits, told many stories about how their teachers did not care about them, or looked for ways to get rid of them because they refused to play the games that schools and teachers demand. Again, I found them to be intelligent, energetic and caring people who despite repeated failings and painful school experiences, returned again and again to attempt to earn a high school degree. They each had a different story for why schooling did not “work” for them – a complex assemblage of emotional issues, misdiagnosed learning problems, and refusals to submit to the indignities that teachers perpetuate on students in the name of education.

And then, while in graduate school, I read Paul Willis’s Learning to Labor.¹ Despite the gap of over twenty years, despite the language differences between industrial England and places like urban Florida and rural New Hampshire, I “heard” my Outward Bound, my “general” track, and my CAP students all talking through the voices of Willis’s “Lads.” Willis’s and then Michael Apple’s subsequent analyses – that even well-intentioned, “progressive” teachers using “student-centered” methods could still sustain a variety of social inequalities – forced me to return repeatedly to analyze my previous work in schools and programs designed to “liberate” and “empower” students. Despite Eric’s optimistic singing, my doctoral work reinforced the belief that made returning to graduate school a necessity: while I had attempted to “help” students realize their myriad dreams and goals, my very participation in the institutions of school and other social agencies may have subtly reinforced the very features of oppression I sought to counter.

Despite the differences in race, ethnicity and gender, my students – “adjudicated,” “tracked” and “alternative” – were generally united across their social class memberships. Thus, Willis’s research into the importance of social class as a mediating factor in students’ beliefs about themselves, their life opportunities, and where they “fit” in the world forced me to reexamine my prior experiences with students. Call it a nagging belief, but I suspected that social class played as big a role in their lives as did other features of their social experiences, like gender and race. Yet we never overtly discussed social class.

A subsequent exploration of the relationship of social class to educational experiences revealed that it remains one of the most significant predictors of academic struggle and failure in U.S. schools.² Current trends mimic similar historic patterns: dominant class students succeed and working class students experience relative failure. A plethora of studies make similar conclusions. Working class students come to understand themselves as the sort of people who do not belong in schools. They often describe themselves as not being smart enough, interested enough, or driven enough to garner the academic accolades we offer.³ Rather than dreaming about the possibilities that schooling represents, these students associate our classrooms with what they lack.

Despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the popular notion that schools are meritocratic remains a powerful ideology within formal education today. We believe in the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” notion that academic success belongs to those bright and motivated students who push themselves to

take advantage of the “opportunity” that schools represent. But such simple meritocratic explanations of academic success and failure rely on social class stereotypes; they distort and hide how schools create the conditions in which members of the dominant class are more likely to succeed.⁴ Furthermore, when combined with a lack of national discourse on the influence of social class within daily life,⁵ we are led to explain class-based academic success and failure in terms of individual student attributes, not in terms of the complex mediating factors, powerful ideologies, and controlling social practices related to social class power and cultural differences.⁶

The educational gap between social classes reflects the widening rift in economic disparities between social classes within the United States generally. Much of the economic boom of the last decade benefited those of the highest incomes, exacerbating the gulf between them and those at the bottom of the economic scale; data indicate that the U.S. has reversed the post-Depression-era wealth redistribution trend.⁷ Whereas all social classes had benefited significantly from the economic developments of the 1940s and 1950s, we are witnessing the return to levels of wealth stratification not seen since the 1920s – a time of significant and widespread national poverty. Similar to that era, the top 1% wealthiest citizens control over 33% of our national wealth, and the bottom 80% control 16%.⁸

Despite this well-documented and increasing gulf between the wealthy and poor in the United States, social class remains a hidden subject. Indeed, most U.S.

citizens claim to be middle class.⁹ They make these claims despite the conclusion that most of the population of the U.S. cannot be “middle class” given the wealth distribution data. The gap between the economic data and self-proclamations of social class membership represents, then, a significant challenge. We are increasingly becoming a class stratified nation, but we refuse to address the issue.

Recent research by the Russell Sage foundation supports what might be an intuitive reaction to the previous data: Increases in the gap between the dominant class and the working class coincide with increasing disparities in educational attainment based on social class. The researchers argue that without “additional public intervention, the inequality in schooling seems likely to increase sizably.”¹⁰

I situate this project against the backdrop of increasing social class disparities within the United States. My dissertation argues for the thesis that schools privilege features of the dominant class experience and transform them into the very markers of school success. Through a complex process that I will explain here, the values, norms, and practices of the dominant class are transformed into the ideal of the educated person, an ideal that informs schooling in a variety of ways, including the design of school practices, curricula, and teacher-student interactions. This matters because dominant class students are better positioned than working class students to be perceived as academically gifted at school, and they are frequently treated as being more deserving of any success that follows. In contrast, working class students face an ideology of deficit and dysfunction that contributes to the expectation of academic failure. When schools thus transform the markers of social

class identity into evidence for academic preparation or success, they limit the range of potential life choices and definitions of the self that working class students might legitimately draw upon and retain the ability to be successful in schools. As I delineate later in the dissertation, the process I describe here is exploitative because the success of the dominant class depends upon the relative failure of the working class.

The most promising educational paradigm to address the features of class-based exploitation in schools emerges in the literature of critical pedagogy. It assists in the identification and analysis of the situation, but it suggests an inadequate intervention. While offering important critiques about how schooling fails to account for social class experiences in a variety of ways, it lacks a theoretical treatment of the contradictions students experience between working class homes and dominant class schools. An adequate intervention will provide students with direction as they attempt to address the contradictions caused by exploitative social structures. Those contradictions are keenly experienced in students' self-conceptions, conceptions that help them make multiple decisions each day. Thus, we need theoretical tools for understanding how to help students respond as individuals to exploitative social structures.

The concept of autonomy captures the heart of this goal, but most autonomy theories do not adequately account for the influence of social structures on individual agency. We need, then, a conception of critical autonomy that will help us understand how students can or might respond to the features of social class

exploitation in their lives, where “critical” refers to an analysis of how power influences what it is possible to think and do.

The conception of critical autonomy developed in this dissertation best assists us to resist class exploitation in public schooling by centering its analysis on how to negotiate self-conception and its influence on one’s choices in three ways. First, it will help students analyze how power influences their self-conceptions and their choices. Such analysis is enhanced by focusing on the features of inquiry necessary for critical analysis. Second, this analysis provides the basis for students to strategize forms of resistance and to construct identities and choices less constrained by social class exploitation and oppression. Finally, critical autonomy offers tools for negotiating the contradictions that arise when trying to move across the discrepancies across class boundaries. While the first two features I describe are directed at altering the social conditions that enable exploitation to flourish, the final aspect of critical autonomy offers resources to construct responses to oppression that minimize the violence one perpetuates on the self.

Implications of Social Class Research for Educational Theory

Mine is not the first project to explore social class and educational experiences. Others have offered both research projects and recommendations for educational responses to the particular needs and challenges created by social class issues. The mounting evidence regarding the increase in social class polarization within the United States does not necessarily indicate that we need new theoretical tools.

Perhaps instead we need to redouble our efforts to address social class problems by providing students with more resources, adding support programs, and providing students access to information they might lack. While I generally support such efforts, the research into the experiences of working class students in schools presents us with profoundly challenging issues to address – including the theoretical frameworks that support our educational efforts and programs. Our school-based responses to social class concerns are likely to be better constructed if we first attend to the theoretical work that guides such efforts, but to address those needs, we must revise our current theoretical frameworks. They do not adequately attend to key issues associated with social class in schools. In the following section, I address these two issues in turn.

The social class problems I raise in this dissertation require a range of educational responses; some involve the continuation of previously defined projects, while others indicate the need for the development of new responses, involving both different theoretical tools and concrete educational practices. As we have seen, schooling and social class intersect critically on the issue of academic identity development. As I noted earlier, research indicates that complex sets of practices and ideologies prompt working class students to see themselves as less intelligent than their dominant class peers. Of course, no one strategy can hope to address the complexities associated with the ways students form their self conceptions and the various ways that social class shapes schooling. Answers will include compensatory measures, structural changes to educational practice, and

reconceptualized educational theory. Others have already proposed a range of compensatory responses.¹¹

Compensatory proposals often focus on providing needed goods and services to address specific issues associated with working class problems; the most famous one is Head Start. While I do not focus my analysis and discussion on specific programs, my argument supports the creation and continuation of compensatory efforts. Research indicates, for example, that access to basic healthcare may privilege some students over others in schools, suggesting that a variety of health-related issues influence children's abilities to participate in school and to learn. Researchers argue that a variety of childhood illnesses and health issues negatively impact the early grade experiences of lower class children at a higher rate than their more affluent peers.

Richard Rothstein, for example, synthesizes significant data that reveals that working class students' vision impairment is "twice the normal rate"¹² of dominant class students. Whereas the normal occurrence of vision problems is approximately twenty-five percent, research indicates that many working class communities experience rates over fifty percent. Vision deficits potentially result in reading problems, a thesis confirmed by a study conducted by researchers in Baltimore, MD, who randomly selected low-income fourth graders to receive optometric care. Their subsequent reading test scores increased beyond expected normal growth rates, while the control group (receiving no eye-care interventions) slipped further behind their grade level score expectations.¹³ Additional research indicates that

working class students suffer disproportionately with regard to hearing difficulties, dental problems, asthma, and general medical care. As with the data on eye care and reading, if young children miss school due to health issues like asthma or have untreated hearing problems, their academic development suffers in significant ways. Researchers into the influences of health care differences based on social class argue that because differences in academic achievement accrue over time, even minor differences in educational gains in younger grades based on health related causes may eventually develop into more entrenched difficulties in older grades.¹⁴

While compensatory measures are important, they do not address the background conditions from which the important differences in social class educational experiences emerge. They do not alter the norms and beliefs that provide students of different social classes with disparate resources from which to construct their identities. Because compensatory efforts do not challenge the essential background conditions that support the very features of schooling I wish to change, I focus my analysis on the theoretical constructs that guide educational practice. I do so with the aim to engage others in discussion about changing the ideologies and practices that privilege some students over others.

Some theorists who address working class issues argue that unless the basic economic paradigm, i.e., globalized free market capitalism, is altered, then the diverse problems facing the working class will not radically change.¹⁵ They also argue that compensatory measures offer temporary solutions, not answers that

alter the root of the problem; capitalism favors the dominant classes in a variety of ways, and their continued success requires that less affluent classes not succeed. Thus, some radical educational theorists build upon Marx to argue that schools should help working class students understand their positions within capitalist economic relationships while also helping them develop the skills and dispositions to alter the political and economic landscapes to form more equitable economic relationships for all.¹⁶

While radical transformation of the economic system might truly be the only way to alter the influences of social class in schools, I argue that the failure of pedagogical attempts to inspire students to define themselves as social class activists stems from linking student agency too closely with social class activism. While many educational activists have long rallied around the conceptual tools associated with critical pedagogy, tools centered on the academic awakening of political analysis in students – hoping to create a class “for itself,” I argue that it is a mistake to predicate a response to working class educational problems by focusing the aim of educational practice on the development of class-specific political activist identities in students. Doing so glosses over the complexities of the having, the development, and/or the finding of one’s self conception. Part of critical pedagogy’s failure to offer a satisfactory set of useful theoretical tools for teachers and students rests on their lack of attention to what it means to form a conception of self amidst contradiction and exploitation. They underestimate the power of the conflicts and tensions generated in “world crossing” between working class homes

and middle class schools. I maintain that we should focus our educational theory on how to help students forge lives amidst the pressures of social class oppression. The general notion of autonomy provides that focus. It is a vehicle for addressing both student interests and how their varied goals and passions intersect with and are influenced by the features of social class oppression in schools.

The Need for a Theory of Critical Autonomy

Broadly conceived, autonomy involves the ability of individuals to identify and pursue goals free from pressures to conform to another's ideas of what one should pursue. It is not surprising that promoting student autonomy should be a popular theme in educational discourse in a democratic, individualistic society like that of the United States. Teachers from diverse circumstances might easily embrace the goal of helping students live lives that they choose – free from coercion – as a central aim of educational practice. As such, autonomy is something that students can claim for themselves as well as something teachers can seek to nurture in students. Promoting student autonomy necessarily involves the consideration of a wide variety of issues including compensatory measures, structural constraints and supports, as well as the relationship of education to individual identity. Ultimately, attention to autonomy involves some account of how individuals are helped and hindered by their social experiences. But judgments of whether or not students exhibit evidence of autonomy, or whether or not they believe themselves to be autonomous, depend also upon the theoretical constructs we use. The bounds of

a particular definition or characterization of autonomy influence both how we come to recognize autonomy in our students, and they recognize it in themselves. It also influences the particular educational experiences we design to foster its development. Thus, an adequate definition of autonomy, one useful for emancipatory educational experiences for all students, must take account of the influence of social class.

As I have previously indicated, the central focus of the analysis of social class and educational experiences that I offer in this dissertation is that schools influence student identity development along social class lines in significant ways. A theory of autonomy provides a useful vehicle for addressing the issue of developing an identity within social constraints particularly well. Autonomy challenges us to reflect on questions like: Who am I? What do I believe? What goals do I have at this point in time? Why do I believe what I do? The answers to these questions and ones like them are inextricably linked to one's conception of self identity. They also involve a host of identity-related questions: Am I the sort of person who believes this? Do people I identify with think similarly or differently than this? What does it mean to who I am and how others will judge me if I believe this? How do I fit into the groups who claim me? What groups do I claim as my own? Ultimately, one cannot ask questions associated with autonomy without considering who one is and who one wants to be. Autonomy is not an individualized concept, in as much as it entails examination of how the self relates to a host of social others. Thus, I argue that

autonomy provides a vehicle for addressing concerns of identity, issues of social contingency, and the demands of social justice.

A beginning response to the challenges associated with social class oppression in schooling may be formed by drawing upon resources offered by three theoretical traditions, those of critical, feminist and liberal theories. Conveniently for my own purposes, they all converge usefully on the concept of autonomy.¹ Thus, I will develop an account of autonomy that draws upon the most relevant features of educational theories motivated by the concerns of social justice and emancipation. To emphasize the importance of analyzing how the individual is radically situated within networks of power that constrain and enable the development and exercise of autonomy, I name my conception of autonomy “critical autonomy.” In so naming it, I mean to bring attention to the fact that it builds upon the existing tradition of autonomy begun in liberal theory. I supplement this useful beginning notion with specific features developed by feminist autonomy theorists, and, finally, associate it with the analysis of power that drives critical pedagogy. My ambition is to offer a conception of critical autonomy that teachers and students can use to direct emancipatory projects that address the specific features of social class oppression. As such, this dissertation is focused at once on three directions: helping students by offering a conception of critical autonomy useful to respond to their lived

¹ This project is heavily influenced by Scott Fletcher’s work in *A New Constellation in Education* in which he mounts an argument for the convergence of “particularist” (feminist and postmodern) and “universalist” (neo-Conservative and liberal) educational theories on autonomy as an emancipatory educational ideal.

experiences, while also discussing how teachers and schools can support students and create school and classroom environments and curricular experiences to support the development of critical autonomy.

Defining and Analyzing Social Class

Social class is a beleaguered concept. Many theorists claim that it has no conceptual force when used to analyze our contemporary world.¹⁷ They cite a number of factors that converge at once on the current political scene. For example, some point to the collapse of so-called “Marxist” governments within the former Soviet Bloc and the apparent moral and economic triumph of globalized capitalism to indicate the “death of Marxism” and related social class analyses.¹⁸ Others point to the lack of salience of social class identifications within the contemporary United States as evidence that people do not possess the revolutionary class-consciousness Marx predicted. Even if social class might not be an active category for self-definition in the United States context, the research I draw upon in this dissertation indicates that it is a powerful influence on students’ educational experiences. The theoretical complexities and inherent problems associated with defining social class categories in today’s “information” economy offer a final challenge for social theorists who wish to conduct research on social classes and their relative positions of power.

Most class theorists have historically concentrated on developing categorical definitions. The literature is filled with debates about how to divide the population

into readily identifiable class categories. To do so, researchers divide families across salary distributions, usable wealth distributions, occupation descriptions and educational attainment.¹⁹ Within educational contexts, these categorical discussions of class largely center on masculinist definitions (i.e., a student's father's occupational status). Despite the difficulties of establishing social class distinctions, it is often useful and important to discuss the relationship of different students' class status in categorical ways. Such descriptions often entail the classic tripartite division: working class, middle class and upper class. Others offer more specificity: underclass, working poor, lower working class, upper working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, lower capitalist class and upper capitalist class. Still others find use in defining classes through descriptions of individuals' and families' relative positions of economic stability: "hard living," "settled living," "strivers," "in the middle" and the "already there."²⁰

While I draw upon research that employs all of a range of the previously mentioned categorical descriptions of social class location, in this dissertation I discuss social class membership using two general terms: working class and dominant class. I do so because the analysis I present does not depend upon my developing precise social class definitional boundaries. I choose to emphasize the relative positions of students and parents based on differences in social and political power within schools and communities. My general terms allow for cultural social class variations as well. By limiting myself to two terms to describe social class in this discussion, I do not mean to imply that we will find a unity within each

category. The research on social class and schooling reveals that what matters is relative social position and economic power. The research details how schools come to draw upon the norms and practices of the dominant class – roughly conceived – while positioning the working class – again roughly conceived – against such dominant class norms.

In addition to the disputes about whether we can define class and how we ought to do so, there is considerable debate about the relationship of class to other aspects of identity. I do not engage in a needlessly polarizing philosophical discussion about which aspect of identity does or ought to trump the others. I acknowledge that people experience oppression in the United States in a variety of ways, with an important described by social class. I readily admit, however, that social class does not explain all oppression nor exploitation. Class intersects with gender, ethnicity and other aspects of identity in powerful ways. By attending primarily to class analysis in this dissertation, my intention is not to argue for its primacy as an explanatory tool, but rather to argue only that there are unique and significant features revealed when we concentrate on it. While I believe that the following analysis reveals important questions and problems related to education best explained by social class, because social class cannot be disaggregated easily from other aspects of social identity, I also discuss specific examples in which class intersects with ethnicity and gender. As E.O. Wright²¹ argues, class in this instance is like an independent variable. It focuses the following analysis in ways that failure to take class into account misses, but it does not assume that class always has

supreme explanatory power. While it is true that there are aspects of social justice that the class lens may not reveal, this project demonstrates that a focus on social class uniquely reveals distinct problems for schooling.

Summary of the Chapters

In chapter two, *Another Look at Commodity Fetishism: Exploitation and the Ideal of the Educated Person*, I use relevant research on social class and education to argue that schools are exploitative spaces. I use Eric Olin Wright's definition of exploitation and elaborate three different features of exploitation. To make sense of my analysis of exploitation, I draw upon Marx's notion of commodity fetishism to argue that exploitation is supported by the commodification of the very notion of what it means to be an educated person. I argue that schools mediate the process through which working class students come to consider themselves, and are considered by others to be, less intelligent and less motivated to learn in school than their dominant class counterparts. This process influences student identity in profound ways, ways that working class students must negotiate if they are to autonomously develop and realize their personal goals.

In chapter three, *Critical Responses to Social Class and Commodified Identity*, I focus on the responses and resources made available to address social class exploitation by the theoretical orientation most closely aligned with social class analysis: critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy offers valuable resources for analyzing the structural features of schooling, as well as how school practices influence

individual student identity development. While I find much to applaud in the educational goals of critical pedagogy and its research tradition, present work within that paradigm fails to offer adequate resources to help teachers and students work through the described problems associated with social class and self conception. To defend that interpretation of the literature of critical pedagogy, I divide current iterations of the “school” of critical pedagogy into three categories. I critically appraise the theoretical resources made available by what I call the cultural Marxists, the postmodernists and the “Neo-traditionalists.” I conclude by claiming that critical pedagogy does indeed help us analyze how social class influences student success and failure, but it does not offer sufficient resources for responding to evidence of oppression in students’ lives by detailing what individual agency amidst the experiences of oppression entails.

In chapter four, *Negotiating the Paradox of Critical Autonomy*, I articulate a conception of what I call “critical autonomy.” I align the conception of autonomy I develop with the picture of social class and education that I paint in the second chapter, arguing that the notion of critical autonomy allows us to begin the task of effectively addressing social class exploitation in schools. Rather than arguing that the conception of autonomy I propose will help agents transcend the challenges of living within oppressive social contexts, it grounds itself in the contradiction at the heart of oppression and offers a solution that is itself paradoxical. We wish to make our lives our “own,” living them from the “inside” as Will Kymlicka describes it, but to do so, we must draw on “external” resources to foster independence. Of course,

it is paradoxical to link increasing one's individual autonomy with greater dependence upon others, but it is the key to critical autonomy.

The account entails three parts. The first focuses upon a “foundation” upon which to build what we might consider to be the “received view” of critical pedagogy. In it, I outline the central argument regarding how critical autonomy is a fundamentally relational notion. To do so, I focus on the relational aspects of inquiry in general, and then draw on Cheryl Misak’s conception of a pragmatic epistemology to outline specific implications for inquirers guided by the notion of critical autonomy. The second section focuses on “power-functional” beliefs. Here I argue that there are some categories of belief that we should flag as ones we should be suspicious of, ones that require a more focused type of inquiry than the general sort discussed in the first section. It returns us to the central paradox by positing that our analysis of our individually held beliefs may be “contaminated” by power-related influences. Finally, I build upon the work of the previous two sections by applying the analysis of critical autonomy to issues of identity. While the general inquiry-related issues I develop in the previous two sections create a general framework, in this final section I focus on the important issue of how students negotiate the contradictions inherent in the “double bind” created by identifying with competing aspects of their social identities. To bolster the work of the first two sections, I describe three metaphorical conceptions of critical autonomy based upon the work of Maria Lugones, Heesoon Bai, and Buddhist philosophy. The chapter concludes with a summative account of how the conception of critical

autonomy serves as both a descriptive analytic tool that aids us in identifying features of exploitation, and a normative ideal for resisting them.

In chapter five, *Fostering Critical Autonomy in the Social Context of the School*, I explore the implications of the analysis for schools. Schools can support critical autonomy by fostering the conditions in which on-going collaborative inquiry into a wide variety of beliefs and claims to knowledge thrives. Such an environment may function like what Charles Taylor describes as a “background of intelligibility” through which students engage in analyses of knowledge claims as well as the processes that led to those claims in a variety of domains, both academic and personal. In this last chapter, I explore the ways that an autonomy-enhancing context is created through collaborative inquiry amongst students, teachers, parents, and school officials on a variety of questions facing them throughout the experience of schooling. I discuss issues associated with fostering the conditions for collaborative inquiry in schools through the curriculum and interpersonal relationships within classrooms. I also address issues associated with attending to analyses of power within those inquiry groups, and finally, I take up the topic of how to negotiate a reconceptualized ideal of the educated person that takes seriously the implications of the previous theoretical framework.

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- ¹² Rothstein, Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap 37.
- ¹³ Rothstein, Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap.
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CHAPTER II

ANOTHER LOOK AT COMMODITY FETISHISM: EXPLOITATION AND THE IDEAL OF THE EDUCATED PERSON

Introduction

Despite the rhetoric describing schools as meritocratic places where one need only work hard to succeed, who thrives and who fails in schools is tied to the comparative power of their social positions: dominant class students enjoy much greater academic success than their working class peers. Attributing these differences in academic success to individual variations in talent and motivation, or even chance circumstance, fails to explain why dominant class students persistently succeed, while working class students comparatively fail. With the issue of social class framing the discussion, in this chapter I claim that schools are exploitative places and that the process of exploitation is best understood through an examination of how the conception of being an “educated person” has been commodified in the school realm. The argument turns on the premise that schools mediate the process through which many of the skills, attributes and values of the dominant class come to characterize what it means to be educated. In conjunction with this process, working class students are seen and see themselves as defined against the dominant class conception of being educated. Before launching into a

detailed argument to support the thesis that schools are exploitative spaces with regard to social class, in the following section I first define the key terminology employed in subsequent analysis: commodity fetishism, ideology and exploitation.

Social Class and Schooling: Commodity Fetishism and Ideology

Karl Marx's concept of "commodity fetishism" points to two important features associated with commodification and its impact upon identity. First, within specific social contexts, some commodities accumulate symbolic power beyond what their simple functions might superficially reveal, and through ownership, agents come to embody the associated symbolic attributes that they (or others) ascribe to such goods. As G.A. Cohen observes, when social groups fetishize religious objects, for example, they come to view the objects themselves as being invested with powers that they ascribe to them. The key to our analysis here is that, as Cohen emphasizes, "What is mistakenly attributed to it is experienced as inhering in it. The fetish then manifests itself as endowed with a power which in truth it lacks."¹ To draw upon a secular example, when people purchase name-brand designer clothing, they may do so to acquire the cultural values associated with those goods. The name-brand logos signify that the wearer belongs to a certain social set and, presumably, has the attributes associated with that group. Rather than being a utilitarian object, this clothing becomes something more (e.g. the "Polo" symbol on shirts purposefully seeks to imply that the wearer belongs to an "old world" moneyed social set). As Marx observes, such a commodity "changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness."²

Marx also emphasizes that the process of commodity fetishism camouflages the connection between the commodity and its production. He describes the ideological discourse needed to hide the many social processes required to produce goods as a “mystifying process.” Jean Baudrillard succinctly observes that this process means that “social relations are disguised in the qualities and attributes of the commodity itself.”³ As a result, neither the labor expended to produce it nor the host of social processes required for it to appear as an object for consumption. The good no longer represents something connected to laborers and labor processes. For example, the emergence of “cheap” goods on Wal-Mart shelves hides the exploitative work policies both Wal-Mart and many manufacturers use to keep costs low. When we fail to perceive how a commodity’s existence depends upon its relationship to a variety of social processes and actions taken by others, we ignore and mystify the complex mechanisms that produce the good and its symbolic values. The commodity seems to exist independent of human labor and effort.

Through an examination of relevant empirical research, in this chapter I discuss how both of the features of commodity fetishism I describe here are keys to the argument that schooling within the United States is exploitative.

The object of the fetishizing process within schools – the very conception of the educated person – appears independently of the social networks upon which it depends for its creation. Like cheap clothing appearing for consumption on the shelves of a U.S. department store, the process of producing important aspects of

the educated person is disconnected from their emergence within schools. Furthermore, the obscuring of social networks constitutes a central feature of commodity fetishism: the production of an identity whose very definition remains closely tied to the agent's ability to "own" the objects that give it meaning. In the case of the definition of the educated person, students do not literally own the features associated with it as much as properly display, use, or draw upon them at the proper times in the socio-cultural world of the school.

The related concept of ideology¹ helps us understand how commodity fetishism and exploitation become "hidden in plain view." Ideology involves the process through which rationalizations for the current structures/practices of schooling support exploitation by blocking the public discourse about how schooling privileges some students at the expense of others. Michael Apple draws on Antonio Gramsci to argue that such ideological hegemony requires two essential components.⁴

The first is a set of explanations for "the ways things are." With regard to schooling, we find ideological explanations for social class differences that explain

¹ Within both Marxist theory in general and Marxist educational theory specifically, ideology remains a contested concept. It involves a debate about structure and agency. Its use often invokes the arguments associated with reproduction and resistance, a line of theory that has been contested within Marxist educational theory. While I return to the concepts of resistance and reproduction in Chapter 3, here I draw upon the concept of ideology to stress that the ubiquitous discourse of meritocracy ignores the evidence that working class identities are constructed in relation to middle class identities in school, and that these differentiated identities support social class exploitation.

working class educational failures by referencing variations in individual interests or intellectual deficits. Henry Giroux observes that these ideological explanations saturate the entire trappings of the school experience. They involve the “rituals, practices, and social processes that structure the day-to-day workings of schools.”⁵

Similarly, Peter McLaren explains:

Ideology refers to the production of meaning. It can be described as a way of viewing the world, a complex set of ideas, various types of social practices, rituals and representations that we tend to accept as natural and as common sense. It is the result of the intersection of meaning and power in the social world. Customs, rituals, beliefs and values often produce within individuals distorted conceptions of their place in the socio-cultural order and thereby serve to reconcile them to that place and to disguise the inequitable relations of power and privilege; this is sometimes referred to as “ideological hegemony.”⁶

As the argument of this chapter will demonstrate, ideology works through the overt curriculum and structures of schools, as well as the informal practices and beliefs that structure how students, their parents and their teachers interpret the nature of those educational experiences. Marxist educational theorists often discuss the existence of a related “hidden curriculum,” which they use to describe the ancillary learning that happens coincidentally with the overt or planned curriculum; the notion of ideology I use here entails the general idea of a hidden curriculum.

Gramsci also theorizes that ideological hegemony requires more than existing beliefs; it requires groups of intellectuals to imbue those rationalizations with explanatory power. Teachers, then, function as essential legitimizing agents within the hegemonic ideology-perpetuating process. Michael Apple explains that, “it is not merely that our economic order ‘creates’ categories and structures of feeling

which saturate our everyday lives. Added to this must be a group of 'intellectuals' who employ and give legitimacy to the categories, who make the ideological forms seem neutral."⁷

For the power of the meritocratic ideology to "grab hold" of the collective consciousness, teachers and school administrators must rationalize social class disparities as belonging to individual differences rather than the broader patterns of exploitation that I outline in this chapter. An ideology of meritocracy camouflages and normalizes exploitation in schools, helping to disguise the complexities concomitant with some students succeeding and others failing. As such, ideology helps students, teachers and parents interpret individual student success and failure as explainable by individual attributes of persons, not as a complex interaction of social experiences partly explained by the powerful influence of social class membership. Meritocratic ideology also hides the exploitative features of contemporary schooling – the focus of the following discussion.

Exploitation and Schooling

In this dissertation I describe schooling as being both oppressive and exploitative with regard to social class. In this chapter I focus my argument on the claim that schooling is particularly *exploitative*. Within the school context, drawing upon exploitation as an analytic tool forces our inquiry upon the ways that the relative success of the dominant class depends upon the relative failure of the working class. It emphasizes that our analysis must focus on how the relative

success of one and the relative failure of the other are not a coincidence. They are not an unrelated phenomena, rather, the two are inextricably linked. When one fails to account for the relational aspects of oppression, one may focus on fostering compensatory responses, ones that provide helpful resources to the working class without addressing the perpetuation of the exploitative relationship across classes. In contrast, a theory that focuses on exploitation addresses the existence of causal relationships themselves. Marxist theorist Eric Olin Wright is helpful:

Underlying both the concept of simple material oppression and the concept of exploitation is the idea that there are various kinds of productive resources which are important for material welfare and which have the property that one's welfare is enhanced by excluding others from access to the resource. Oppression occurs when one group illegitimately excludes another from access to those resources. Exploitation occurs when such exclusion from resources also gives the owners of the resource the capacity to appropriate the fruits of labors of others.⁸

Wright argues that we can helpfully distinguish between non-exploitative oppression and exploitative oppression by focusing on the differences of dependence between the two. "In the case of nonexploitative oppression, the oppressors would be happy if the oppressed simply disappeared."⁹

Wright cites examples of genocide enacted by invading groups who want resources and land but do not seek to enslave the inhabitants of an invaded region. The European settlers in North America, for example, did not create an economic structure dependent upon the work of native populations. Instead, the resulting practices of genocide and expulsion from ancestral lands sought to remove the Native Americans from the economic structure completely. In contrast, the practice

of slavery within the United States involved a variety of oppressions, including exploitation, because slaveholders depended upon the labor of the slaves for economic benefit. Thus, we see that a key feature of exploitation is the relationship in which one group predicates its material gain upon the material deprivation of others; it characterizes a set of “relations which mutually bind the exploiter and the exploited together.”¹⁰ Without this focus, our analysis risks treating social class experiences in schooling as if they were the result of mere cultural differences, not because of structural features of social class relationships that favor the dominant class.

Wright’s conception of exploitation¹¹ offers us a particularly keen analytical tool for analyzing school-based social class exploitation. I draw upon it to defend my position that schools are exploitative spaces with regard to social class. I thus construct the remaining chapter’s discussion around each of the three principles Wright argues are the basis of exploitation: the Principle of Exclusion, the Principle of Inverse Interdependence and the Principle of Appropriation. I demonstrate how each of these principles aptly describes features of schooling with regard to social class. Wright’s definition helps me discuss why schooling is exploitative with regard to social class, and it provides direction as to what sorts of responses will help counteract the influences of exploitation in schools that I discuss in chapter five.

Exclusion, Commodity Fetishism and Self-Conception

Explaining the first principle, exclusion, Wright¹² argues that exploitation requires that the dominant class retain the power to prevent others from influencing the conditions through which they are exploited. Using more economic language, he argues that those who are exploited are actively prevented from acquiring ownership of the means of production - or the relevant means by which they are exploited - by those who benefit from the exploitative relationship.² In the following, I develop the argument that this first feature of exploitation describes contemporary schooling within the United States. Social and political structures privilege the interests of the dominant class, thereby sustaining conditions in which the working class is effectively excluded from defining educational policy and influencing how its children are judged by professional educators. As a result, the dominant class is better positioned to draw upon its resources to define the very object of educational practice: what it means to be an educated person. A variety of practices and ideologies work to exclude the working class from participating in the various means through which school decisions are made. These diverse processes, both informal and formal, comprise the means through which definitions of the ideal of the educated person are established, maintained and altered. Moreover, the exclusionary process pathologizes the working class, defining its members in

² Wright further argues that we should distinguish between owning the means of production and those who can put those means into use for themselves while also appropriating the profits from those resources. Within an educational context, dominant class students are obviously not able to appropriate the control of schools, but as the research in the following section will demonstrate, their parents, by virtue of their differently positioned class memberships, *can* and *do*.

opposition to the dominating class's educational ideal, and binding them to aspects of personal identity that are found wanting in comparison to the ideals of the dominant class.

In the following section, I discuss three features of student life that have been commodified within schools. In each case, middle class practices come to define the natural and central features of what counts as "normal" and as being central to what defines the educated student. By "educated student" in this context, I am referring to an often unspoken yet influential ideal consisting of a defining set of features associated with those students most valued and considered to be brightest within schools. While this process is ongoing, students possess high degrees of "potential," "promise" or "readiness" that corresponds to such explicitly stated or tacit guiding definitions of "educated," definitions which guide teacher practices and beliefs. In each of the three instances of commodification that I outline in the following discussion, features associated with the dominating class define what the school values and rewards. Through the process of commodity fetishism, those who display them view themselves and are viewed by others as possessing identities associated with the ideal of the educated person, and thus, the dominant class excludes the working class from defining what it means to be educated through a variety of processes.

I begin the exploration of the exclusionary features of exploitation and the resulting impact on commodity fetishism with perhaps the most obvious aspect: that of physical appearance and comportment. In the second section, I examine

how socio-linguistic norms, skills and dispositions associated with the dominating class come to define the heart of the educated person. I then open the discussion to the broad topic of the dispositions of students, arguing again that schools draw upon social class norms to center the dispositions of the middle class subject as the educational ideal. I conclude the discussion of exclusion by addressing a related topic. I discuss how beliefs about “good” parental roles reinforce and sustain the exploitative process. While not an obvious example of commodity fetishism at work, beliefs about parental roles significantly interact with the previous features to reinforce the process by which students of different social classes are or are not identified with the commodified definition of the educated person.

Physical Appearance and Compartment

Popular accounts of education have long emphasized the ways that students differentiate themselves into social groups. Depending upon the slang of the time, books and movies depict student social groups as “jocks,” “greasers,” “nerds,” “preps” and a host of other descriptors to describe the demarcations between them. Educational research replicates these descriptions, albeit with more analytical precision. We have spent time with Paul Willis’s “Lads” and “Ear-Oles,”¹³ Lois Weis’s “Freeway Kids”¹⁴ and Philip Wexler’s “Rads,” “Jocks,” and “Thespians.”¹⁵ Despite the anecdotal saturation within cultural representations of schooling, explanations about why students divide themselves into disparate social groups

generally center on student interests, personal styles, or naturalness of the process.”³

Research demonstrates that within the U.S. and British contexts, social class powerfully influences how students form their social groups, but because of its lack of centrality within the U.S. discourse on social life, students themselves often do not claim it as a defining feature of their social experiences.¹⁶ Yet, despite the lack of focus on social class within the U.S., students often replicate social class boundaries by conforming to social class appearance norms. One teacher explains her observations of these boundaries:

The lower-class child always has, often times, a chip on their shoulder because they do feel inferior. And they want to be a part of... want to fit in, but, you know, sometimes kids don't want somebody with tennis shoes from K-Mart. It's a real prestigious thing, you know – they look at the coats the kids have on, and they know who's on who's [sic] Little League team, and a lot of the children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds don't have those advantages.¹⁷

With respect to the argument that I am advancing here, research reveals what might be obvious: certain social groups most closely align with the school's expectation of what good students look like.¹⁸ While schools might promote the attitude that appearance should not influence how teachers treat their students, research demonstrates that students conforming to physical styles associated with

³ Julie Bettie finds six distinct student social groups in one California high school: smokers, Cholas/Cholos, Las Chicas, skaters, hicks, and preps. Despite the importance students themselves place on these social divisions, “this is an aspect of their lives and of their school experience that many adults (school personnel and parents) either don't take seriously, dismiss as stereotyping, or avoid talking about in an effort to enact a color-blind and, less consciously, a class-blind social environment.” (See Bettie, 2003, p. 12)

middle class (and white) students most closely align with teachers' and other students' beliefs about who are the most intelligent, studious students – the “good kids.” This influences how schools (teachers and other staff) treat students in a variety of ways.

Julie Bettie's¹⁹ recent research, for example, explores the ways that girls within a California high school divide themselves along social class and ethnic lines. She explores the myriad ways that middle class girls become those considered the “good” students. One of the most obvious signs of belonging to the academic set is conforming to group-defined appearance norms. The most academically successful students are middle class girls who wear conservative clothing and cosmetics, projecting the image of youthfulness, innocence and sexual purity. In contrast, other students who do not identify with the middle class position themselves against it, in part, through adopting oppositional physical styles. Bettie²⁰ demonstrates how the five other student social groups in the school all position themselves against the norms associated with the middle class, college prep students at the center of the school's social hierarchy. Consider, for example, their different cosmetic styles. It becomes immediately clear that cosmetic choice is one feature that defines the barrier between social groups across social class lines. Girls who identify themselves as being middle class do not wear excessive or obvious make-up; they strive to be seen as “natural” despite their use of cosmetics. Others in the school reject these middle class cosmetic styles. A large group of working class Mexican American girls, for example, define themselves in direct opposition to the middle

class girls by using dark lipstick and eye-liner, portraying themselves using an oppositional style that they consciously cultivate to differentiate themselves from their middle class peers.

Cosmetics and clothing are commodified within this school because possessing and displaying these different objects identify their wearers as different types of students. Teachers and students alike judge the wearers as corresponding to stereotypes about what the clothing and cosmetic choices signify within this school culture. Teachers and middle class white students both believe that the working class Mexican American girls are preoccupied with sex, are less intelligent and are less motivated to succeed than their middle class peers. In contrast, the middle class girls are interpreted as being sexually innocent, bright and focused on their educational careers. Bettie stresses that her research reveals that *neither* set of girls is more preoccupied with sex than the other, nor is either set necessarily less focused on their academic futures.⁴ The middle class girls – the “innocent” ones – hide their sexual identities from their teachers and come to represent the stereotypes their teachers expect. The working class Mexican American girls are also interested in their academic futures but are dismissed by their teachers as being less intelligent, less motivated, and again, sexually preoccupied. Bettie explains her introduction to some teachers’ views about these working class girls:

⁴ Bettie stresses that the Mexican-American girls reveal that they gather to dress for dates with boys as a group hours before the outings begin. They joke that they have more fun together during these times, and that the boys are good excuses to gather for “girl time.” Their focus is clearly not only on preparing for being with boys, nor upon the sexual nature of dating, at least no more so than their white, middle class peers.

Looking for help connecting with non-college prep girls, I visited the faculty room in the business department, which offers primarily vocational track classes, to recruit the aid of teachers and ask whose class I might visit. When I told these teachers that I wanted to talk to some of their girl students about their aspirations beyond high school, teachers shook their heads and laughed together in a knowing way, one man joking that “They’ll all be barefoot and pregnant.” While the other teachers expressed discomfort with his way of making the point, they did acknowledge that their students did not have high aspirations and often were “trouble.”²¹

The assumptions teachers make about these different groups of girls matter in and outside of the classroom. Research demonstrates that teacher assumptions about students matters a great deal to students’ school experiences.²²

Teachers’ beliefs about students’ capabilities, interests and motivations influence how they treat them in myriad ways. Such beliefs influence the sort of classroom atmospheres they construct; their expectations regarding behavior and quality of academic work.²³ Outside the classroom, teacher assumptions about students influence how they and academic counselors help their students create academic career plans. We find this in Bettie’s research. Because of teacher biases that are in part fueled by the girls’ physical appearances, teachers and staff regularly place and/or encourage working class Mexican American girls to enroll themselves into vocational programs. Bettie discovers that the girls’ aspirations do not match what their counselors and teachers assume to be their interests. Thus, within the specific context of this particular high school, physical appearance (as related to their representations of social class and race) demarcate the academic boundaries between those who belong in the dominant class, academic track and those who do not.²⁴ Bettie details how teachers and academic counselors accept

the racial and social class stereotypes visually represented in clothing, cosmetics and physical comportment that correspond to each of these social groups. These stereotypes influence how teachers and administrators interact with the different groups of girls. Bettie also details how some working class, Mexican American girls cross class barriers and enter the college prep world by adopting the physical styles of their middle class, white peers. Teachers make different assumptions about these more “academic” girls.

The particulars of student clothing and cosmetics here are important because they aptly demonstrate the processes of exclusion and commodity fetishism. Within the particular California high school Bettie studies, the institution transforms middle class physical appearance and comportment into commodities that are the exclusive province of the middle class.

It is important to note that the relative value of the various features of their identities are always mediated by their relationship to a variety of factors that mark the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and these boundaries are not completely explained by social class position. As the example I use here demonstrates, there are racial biases at work in how teachers and students interpret the cosmetic styles of the Mexican American girls. This example works in this discussion of social class because within this same school there are within ethnic group variations on physical style. The Mexican American girls are distinctly *working class*. Bettie’s analysis shows that other social groups within the school also use physical styles to

differentiate themselves from the middle class “prep” students, and each of these groups is also grounded within specific social class locations.

The previous discussion offers an example of commodity fetishism at work. The girls themselves recognize that their choices mark them as belonging to different social groups – they do so purposefully. But the school’s gate-keepers, the teachers and administrators, interpret the various physical characteristics to represent features of the girls’ identities and ascribe to the girls these differing qualities. In a rough way, the process of commodity fetishism turns appearance into intelligence. This matters for two important reasons. First gate-keeping teachers and administrators who help transform physical appearance into a fetishized commodity help different groups of students engage in different academic experiences, ultimately conferring official credentials upon the different students, designating some as “educated” and others as not. Second, as I highlight later in this chapter, students themselves participate in the fetishizing process, and different students come to understand themselves as differently possessing the qualities associated with the educated person. Thus, students’ clothing and cosmetic choices proclaim their very conceptions of themselves as students capable or not capable, desirous or not desirous of participating in their schools’ academic programs, beliefs that may not be grounded in accurate appraisals of their capabilities, but instead, of what social group’s physical style they emulate.

Because the last detail about the influence of commodity fetishism and self-conception is one that requires its own more detailed explanation, I only mention it

now and return to it later in the chapter. I turn now to a second, less obvious form of commodification within schooling, that of socio-linguistic norms.

Linguistic Interactions at Home and School

In this section, I explore a fundamental feature of the commodification of the ideal of the educated person; schools equate students' exercise of the socio-linguistic conventions of the dominant class with innate intelligence. These linguistic norms include a wide variety of linguistic practices, skills and dispositions. What I discuss here includes reading skills and ways of talking about reading, as well as attitudes toward reading. Likewise, it includes written communication skills and attitudes toward them, as well as any type of oral communication involving students and teachers that appears within schools. Socio-linguistic researchers argue that the particularities of individual classroom language norms emerge from specific localized variations on larger socio-cultural contextual trends, and are most often predicated upon the values and conventions associated with the dominant class. Schools present these codes as being natural and ideal, not as belonging to culturally and historically specific temporal locations, reflecting the values, traditions and styles associated with those in position to normalize such features. Schools help reify these dominant class socio-linguistic conventions by contrasting them with the devalued ones associated with dominated groups.²⁵

When students communicate with their teachers and their peers about any variety of academic or non-academic issues, whether they interact in conventional academic situations or the myriad less formally defined ones that constitute the

school day, students and teachers draw upon socially mediated communication norms. The enacting of some norms over others marks some students as being more closely aligned with the ideal of the educated person that the school seeks to foster. Aligning oneself, either consciously or unconsciously, with particular class-related socio-linguistic practices has profound implications for formations of individual student self-conceptions. As I will presently show, socio-linguistic researchers and theorists²⁶ argue that socio-linguistic frameworks influence what it is possible to think, as well as the fact that students consider themselves as belonging to groups who interact with the world within certain parameters. School structures create conditions that value the socio-linguistic practices associated with the dominant class. Schools sanction students who draw upon the “correct” sets of socio-linguistic norms as being intelligent, properly motivated and deserving of academic success. Conversely, working class students who draw upon differently valued “communication sets” are considered to be less intelligent, less interested in things academic and aptly deserving of their less valuable academic accolades.

Claiming that student identity is partially influenced by the limits and possibilities associated with material socio-linguistic experiences, James Paul Gee²⁷ argues that localized linguistic and literacy practices (including a variety of literacies, both textual and spoken) are connected to larger society-wide language and textual practices, but that they have their own variations within local communities. Like Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus,” these communication traditions help individuals make sense of what it is possible to think and say through their available socio-linguistic tools. As

such, literacy involves more than merely skills associated with decoding text. Instead, literacy taps into ways of interacting with the world that run deeply into one's socially mediated sense of identity as it encounters different forms of textual material. Gee argues that different sorts of texts hold different functional and symbolic meanings in different cultural communities, and that how people interact with texts is partially mediated by those norms. By extension, classrooms draw upon culturally specific attitudes toward language use in its many forms.²⁸

Consider printed media as a test case. Students arrive in classrooms bringing with them prior social experiences with a range of texts. They have explored the use of written materials with their parents, as well as having witnessed how texts inhabit their parents' and larger communities' daily lives. These experiences influence the variety of text-related skills and dispositions available to students. Teachers, then, either introduce students to new text-based possibilities, norms and practices, or they reinforce the previously introduced sets of norms begun by their parents. When the codes of the classroom replicate the norms or habits students acquire in their homes, they come to see classrooms as being extensions of the projects begun by their parents. Schools thus regard dominant class children as more naturally intelligent than their working class peers because of their greater comfort with and abilities to develop the school-valued socio-linguistic norms. What I describe here is not "simply" a mismatch between teachers' prior socio-cultural class experiences, but instead a by-product of the expectations about text-use

developed in schools and linked closely with the ideal norms of reading and language interaction associated with the ideal of the educated person.

Gee explains that socio-linguistic practices involve “ways of talking, listening (often, too, reading and writing), acting, interacting, believing, valuing and using tools and objects in particular settings at specific times, so as to display and recognize a particular social identity.”²⁹ Thus, agents always act from within “‘social positions’ (perspectives) from which people are ‘invited’ (‘summoned’) to speak, listen, act, read and write, think, feel, believe and value in certain characteristic, historically recognizable ways, combined with their own individual style and creativity.”³⁰ Gee argues that socio-literacy involves “ways of being in the world...sort of identity kit[s] which come complete with the appropriate costume[s] and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize.”³¹ The important point here is that we should be careful to analyze how our classrooms match or vary from our students’ home cultures and how their “identity kits” match or differ from the ones that schools implicitly and explicitly value. Gee’s work is important in this discussion because it emphasizes how schools mark non-dominant class students as *lacking* valuable socio-linguistic experiences. As he observes, many students *are* introduced to a complex array of communication practices in their home contexts.

Much research supports the claim that schools value certain specific sets of socio-linguistic skills and practices and denigrate others. Along that line, Smith and Dixon³² summarize the plethora of research that indicates that children raised within

print and “reading rich” households arrive at school “ready to learn” (itself a social construction) or already able to read. Many studies argue that middle class homes are more print-rich than working class homes, resulting in social class differences in student reading “readiness,” but they do so by describing working class homes deficient in valuable linguistic experiences. It is a “deficit-oriented” mindset that fails to account for the hidden social class assumptions about how we define “normal.” The very description of some homes as “print rich” sets the terms of the discussion as privileging homes that reflect middle class norms and habits toward textual material. Gee’s work counters the “cultural deficit” approach by emphasizing that different groups raise their children within differently constituted socio-linguistic frameworks, and that these differences result in different types of linguistic strengths.

Shirley Brice Heath’s classic ethnographic exploration of the socio-linguistic experiences of three cultural groups in two small communities in the rural Piedmont Carolinas in the late 1970s most clearly demonstrates the preceding point.³³ Heath reveals that children’s school-based socio-linguistic experiences are influenced by their primary cultural linguistic and literacy experiences. While these experiences might be influenced by general differences in social class socio-linguistic traditions, each experience framework prepares children to interact within social communities in specific ways, ways that emphasize some skills over others. Heath’s work demonstrates that working class communities might not interact with texts in the manner that schools value and expect, but that they may have linguistically rich

socio-literacy norms. In her research, Heath explores the differences in the rural communities of "Trackton," a working class black community and "Roadville," a working class white community, while also contrasting both with the nearby suburban black and white community of the middle class "Townspeople." While the specifics of the linguistic, social and economic practices associated with the study's communities have certainly changed since the 1970s, Heath's work remains important because it points to specific features of how localized cultural groups interact with schools with regard to linguistic experiences based in part on social class identities. Again, as Gee³⁴ argues, Heath's work demonstrates that the socio-linguistic practices of a community influences how children are socialized to interact with such textual media as well as with their parents and other community adults. Her work also indicates that schools privilege the socio-linguistic practices of the dominant class.

Heath describes the working class black parents in Trackton as raising their children in community-specific but language-rich experiences. Working class Trackton parents expose their children to adult language and associated social norms by keeping them closely involved with adult social experiences, but they often do not directly focus adult attention on children when other adults are present. They expect their children to learn about language through observing and participating in adult conversation, but children have to assert themselves. This contrasts with the ways the other two groups train their children by involving their young in adult-mediated child-focused discussion. One related common strategy is

a form of discussion about naming objects. Heath observes that “Trackton adults recognize that they do not talk about bits and pieces of the world and that their general way of introducing their young to ‘knowing’ differs from that of the mainstream middle class, which many of the women come to know intimately from service as domestics in their homes.”³⁵ Instead, these parents ask analogy questions, inviting their children to make comparisons between people, objects and events. While children can answer questions like “What is this like?” they do not disaggregate distinguishing features. Heath explains:

They seem, instead, to have a gestalt, a highly contextualized view of objects which they compare without sorting out the particular single features of the object itself. They seem to become sensitive to the shape of arrays of stimuli in a scene, but not to know how individual discrete elements in the scene contribute to making two wholes alike. If asked why or how one thing is like another, they do not answer; similarly, they do not respond appropriately to tasks in which they are asked to distinguish one thing from another.³⁶

Instead, the children develop skills as complex story tellers. As they listen to and practice oral storytelling traditions, the children develop different sets of skills that distinguish them as creative thinkers and skillful in the art of weaving details into complex oral accounts. There are, of course, specific socio-linguistic values associated with their story telling norms; the Trackton community values the art of story telling over ensuring adherence to factual representation. “Good story tellers in Trackton may base their stories on an actual event, but they creatively fictionalize the details surrounding the real event and the outcome of the story may not even resemble what indeed happened.”³⁷

In contrast, the white, working class families of Roadville value facts over fiction. In their fundamentalist Christian community, fabrication – even fiction intended for pleasure – is dangerous because it distorts reality and represents a potential lie. This religious fundamentalism infuses the ways parents interact with their children. Heath observes a strong link between the type of interactions required in fundamentalist church services and the ways that parents talk with their children. The Bible is considered an authoritative document, the precepts of which are to be memorized and believed as true.

Evenings at home with children before they go to bed are similar to the lesson circles used in the church: parents ask children to repeat names and to recite knowledge they have learned during the day or in connection with certain events. Children have to repeat information as precisely as possible on these occasions, and if they do not do so, they are corrected.³⁸

Heath further contrasts both the families from Roadville and Trackton with those of neighboring middle class families. She discovers that the middle class socio-linguistic practices across ethnicities consistently differs from the working class practices of the other groups. She argues that the middle class families in her study train their children in the language practices and literacy skills valued by schools. As I previously indicated, mothers routinely interact with their children in question and answering exchanges that center on object identification. These mimic the question and answer format found in many classrooms, especially early elementary ones. As children mature, parents increase the complexity of their interactions, training the children to respond appropriately to factual questions, as well as ones requiring narrative summaries of sequential events. Children from young ages are also trained

to listen quietly, to respond to adult-initiated questions, and to make connections between items and themes. In addition, children are trained to value and to interact with texts. "They acquire the habits of talk associated with written materials, and they use appropriate behaviors for either cooperative negotiation of meaning in book-reading episodes or story-creation before they are themselves readers."³⁹ Thus, Heath argues that the middle class children develop the skills and familiarity with the social norms governing how they are expected to talk, interact with one another and with texts, as well as having discussions about textual material through their early exposure to such expectations in their homes and other middle class pre-school experiences. As Gee later argues, Heath, too, links these home experiences to the formation of social class-specific socio-linguistic interaction "kits" that influence their school experiences:

Townsppeople carry with them, as an unconscious part of their self-identity, these numerous subtle and covert norms, habits, and values about reading, writing, and speaking about written materials. As children, the townspeople learned the rules of talking about and responding to books and writing tasks; they came to accept retrieval of the structure and information of written texts as critical to the presentation of form and content in their oral texts. In school, they found continuity of these patterns of using oral and written language, as well as an increasing emphasis on expository talk and writing around events or items not physically present, but referred to in written texts.⁴⁰

As a result, Heath argues that middle class children enter classrooms fluent with the middle class socio-linguistic norms that schools prize, while working class children experience a sort of "culture shock" because the sorts of linguistic and textual tasks that schools require of them differ significantly from the social training their parents have given them. Heath observes that Trackton children, for example, are asked to

remember and to link seemingly disparate events and items, tasks that differ from the highly contextualized ways that they are used to interacting with events and objects. In addition, their imaginative storytelling skills are discouraged: "The school's approach to reading and learning establishes decontextualized skills as foundational in the hierarchy of academic skills. The creative embedding of items and events in unexpected settings is reserved in the primary grades for the brief occasions of creative writing and art."⁴¹ As a result, Trackton children find themselves in a school that values very different skills than the ones they possess, and when the school eventually seeks to draw upon their creative, contextualized skills, *they will already be labeled less intelligent or prepared than their middle class peers.*

While a variety of other studies support the prevalence of Heath's findings,⁴² researchers often present working class parents as being marred by verbal deficits. In the early 1990s, Erica Hoff-Ginsberg summarized a plethora of research studies in this way:

Many of the characteristics of maternal speech that are associated with child language development have been found to vary as a function of social class. Low-income mothers have been found to spend less time in mutual play with their children and to talk less to their children than middle-class mothers. The speech low-income mothers direct to their children is more frequently for the purpose of directing the children's behavior, is less frequently contingent on the child's speech, and less frequently asks the child questions just for the purpose of engaging the child in conversation. ... Thus the research suggests that poor and working-class children may have less opportunity to experience interaction of the sort suggested to support language development than their more-studied middle-class counterparts.⁴³

The author fails to consider Heath's primary point. Heath is unequivocal about the tendency to equate *differing* socio-linguistic experiences with deprivation. If we take townspeople to represent dominant class children in a variety of contexts, Heath's argument challenges us to reexamine the very definition of what constitutes a valuable linguistic opportunity:

It is the *kind* of talk, not the *quantity* of talk that sets townspeople children on their way in school. They come with the skills of labeling, naming features, and providing narratives on items out of their contexts. In addition, their home life has also given them extensive exposure to stories and situations in which they and adults manipulate environments imaginatively and talk about the effects of changing one aspect of a context while holding all others constant ("What do you think would happen if we didn't put the candles on the birthday cake?")⁴⁴

Thus, despite the prevalence of the viewpoint that sets the terms of the discussion on issues of cultural deficit based on students' experiences with specific socio-linguistic experiences, Heath and Gee challenge us to focus on the social context of the classroom to understand the source of linguistic norms and their relationship to what schools expect of parents with regard to pre-schooling socio-linguistic training. Such expectations are often hidden, yet they derive from features of dominant class socio-linguistic practices. They inform the very definition of being an educated student. Good students – smart students – are ones who model the dominant class socio-linguistic expectations in a variety of ways.

As I asserted earlier, James Paul Gee argues that Heath's work remains important today because it emphasizes that we should beware of labeling students who do not experience the middle class language training as beginning from a deficit. Heath

demonstrates that each community emphasizes ranges of literacy and linguistic practices that sometimes contrast with each other while at other times overlap:

The Mainstream group and Trackton both value imagination and fictionalization, while Roadville does not; Roadville and Trackton both share a disregard for decontextualization not shared by Mainstreamers. Both Mainstreamers and Roadville, but not Trackton, believe parents have a tutoring role in language and literacy acquisition (they read to their children and ask questions that require labels), but Roadville shares with Trackton, not the Mainstream, an experiential non-analytic view of learning (children learn by doing and watching, not by having the process broken down into its smallest parts.)⁴⁵

Thus, differences in social class based socio-linguistic frameworks privilege some skills and attitudes over others, helping dominant class students be deemed more intellectually gifted and academically deserving than the working class students who do not share the dominant class' socio-linguistic frameworks.

As I have been arguing, the equating of dominant class practices with the educational ideal infiltrates the ways teachers interpret features of student identities that include developmental features of "normal" student growth. Terms like "normal" and "age appropriate" or "on grade" all obscure the implied idealized student based upon dominant class practices, an argument taken up by Kathryn Anderson-Levitt⁴⁶ who argues that the model of developmental reading stages in contemporary U.S. schools privileges affluent children: "Age and 'maturity' matter because schools are built around the expectation that children move through predefined stages of learning according to a predictable schedule."⁴⁷ The timetable is linked to the demands to teach large groups of like-age students simultaneously.

Holding starting age constant and comparing it to children's stages or levels inclines one to compare children in terms of achievement, and to use the same "age" to describe that achievement. Although children all start at the same age, they perform differently in class; ... teachers see some 6-year-olds as 'reading fluently' at the same time that they see others as simply "decoding" and some as "not yet decoding." It is an easy next step to claim that the majority of children will "reach" a certain stage by age 6. The few 6-year-olds who go "further" are more like 7-year-olds, hence they are (mentally) "old" for their age, that is, very "mature." Those who don't go that "far" are more like 5-year-olds, hence "young" for their age or "immature." Thus the concept of "mental age" or "maturity" derives not from some "natural" process of learning or development, but from the combination of two institutional arrangements: graded instruction and a fixed starting age.⁴⁸

Anderson-Levitt rightly argues that the problem with this language of chronological development and maturity is that it contributes to what Stephen Jay Gould refers to as the "fallacy of ranking," in which we artificially create a rank order for something without admitting its inherently variable nature. Learning to read is a complex process that cannot be reduced to a neat chronological table, and doing so oversimplifies the complex variation in individual students' differing developmental processes. Furthermore, the language of individual chronological development obscures social class influences. The language of maturity/immaturity fails to account for the ways that the very definitions of development are predicated upon specific socio-cultural practices most closely aligned with the dominant class, helping dominant class students appear in classrooms as "advanced" readers and ultimately "mature" students. "The ideology rationalizes the success of children whose families have given them the 'cultural capital' they call on to demonstrate 'decoding' or other presumed stages of learning 'ahead of schedule.' It locates their success inside the children, defining them as 'naturally' precocious."⁴⁹

Anderson-Levitt further observes that the perceived “natural” differences in reading skill leads teachers to group students according to skill level. “The U.S. system operates more or less as if ‘readiness’ were a matter of the child’s inner development; educators protect ‘immature’ children from too much instruction, as if the children need more time rather than more instruction.”⁵⁰ Because children are thus given differential reading instruction, those with less developed reading skills continue to fall behind while their more mature, “intelligent” peers continue to excel, thus reinforcing the naturalness of the initial judgments regarding ability. The result is that middle class students appear in school as being more intelligent and move more quickly forward, while their working class counterparts are considered to be “developmentally delayed,” in need of special services or slower groupings. While schools use the child-friendly language of meeting individual students’ “needs,” such caring language obfuscates the pernicious results: “For all the educators’ talk about ‘immaturity,’ schools operate over the long run to ensure that most failing children look ‘stupid,’ not ‘immature.’ Mass education leads to a discourse about ‘immaturity,’ but actually constructs ‘stupidity.’”⁵¹

Anderson-Levitt’s argument is strengthened by other findings, like those presented by Feiler and Webster.⁵² Their research indicates that teachers’ judgments about maturity and intelligence in elementary grades are influenced by social class biases. They demonstrate that first grade teachers make judgments about students’ literacy skills based on initial impressions of students’ behaviors and parents’ social class memberships. Over time, teachers’ predictions come true.

Lower class students perform less well than their middle class counterparts.

“Although teachers place much weight on individual children’s responses to reading or writing tasks...another factor that emerged strongly when predicting literacy outcomes was the teachers’ appraisal of parental support. A general tendency noted in the literature is for teachers to provide less assistance for children expected to perform poorly.”⁵³ The authors note that this is a self-perpetuating cycle. As the children conform to teachers’ expectations, the teachers provide them less help, thereby furthering the decline in student performance, contributing to the judgment of the “natural” fit between the commodified attributes of being an educated student, in this case, being a good reader,⁵ and social class identity. Schools thus transform the judgment of early literacy “skills” into more pervasive judgments about intelligence, ability and aptitude. My point here is not to set the stage for an argument about the need for additive literacy programs for the “culturally deprived” working class. Instead, I want to emphasize the point that schools mediate a transformational process that involves both socio-cultural practices and individual identity. The school mediates the process in which the

⁵ Students who are coded as needing special education services will receive more attention than students deemed “normal” yet perhaps who still struggle academically. Eileen Brantlinger’s work in examining special education services reveals, though, that the extra services come at a price. The dominant ideology in the field of special education has been to characterize disability as a problem accruing to individual differences in children, “rather than an artifact that results from the general structure of schooling.” See Brantlinger’s recent writing on this issue in her edited volume, Who Benefits From Special Education? Remediating (Fixing) Other People’s Children (2006).

practices of the dominant class are transformed into the very criteria for judging the identities of students.

I want to emphasize that we should not underestimate the variety and subtlety of how the socio-linguistic frameworks we draw upon in schools privilege some students over others. It may be the case that social class-based language schemas influence every teacher-student interaction so that the educational advantage of the dominant class is constantly reinforced in subtle but important ways. We see this in the research presented by Lesley Rex. She draws upon Gee's work to investigate how teachers' metaphorical language regarding daily classroom structures is influenced by social class socio-linguistic frameworks, thus opening possibilities for dominant class student success while constraining working class students. Rex argues that the ways that teachers discuss academic work, through metaphors and justifications for how students are expected to interact with each other and the curriculum, are influenced by social class. To support that claim, she details the example of a teacher who argues that the student-teacher relationship is similar to that of a professional ballet dancer and dancing coach. In the following, the teacher shares the dancer story with his English class to help them understand both the heart of his teaching philosophy, but also how they, as students, should approach their collective work:

I want to tell you a little story. About 20 years ago—I can't believe it—actually—no—probably seventeen—only seventeen. It was when you guys were born, about. I was teaching at LC Junior High and I had a student who was in my English class and also was my aide . . . [Information removed about his relationship with aide and her family] [The aide told him...] Last night at ballet the teacher didn't yell at me. And I

said, well, wouldn't that be more an occasion to rejoice than to be sad? And she said, well, no, not really, because he only yells at the dancers that he thinks really have talent, and that could get better. The kids that he knows, you know, they're just there, he doesn't yell at them, he doesn't give them a hard time, cause he knows they're sort of doing their best and sort of passes it off, and he usually yells at me and he didn't last night and I'm worried. And I said, well maybe he will yell at you tonight. So the next day she came back and she was her usual effervescent self, and in fact he had yelled at her and everything was OK again. And she went on to do a lot of solo dancing and chorus line dancing and major Broadway productions and continues as a professional dancer.⁵⁴

The teacher and his students continue to draw upon this story and its obvious message throughout the remainder of the academic year. While the teacher uses it to draw his students into accepting his "tough" teaching approach in which he cajoles them to succeed, Rex observes that the story subtly accomplishes other rhetorical moves. It positions the students as being in competition with one another as well as the rest of the school. They are not ordinary students, but special ones, ones who have the raw talent to succeed and must be pushed and push themselves in order to "make it." It will resonate with students who have had previously positive experiences with authoritarian teachers and authority figures. When students resonated positively with the story's principles, their ways of being and their inclinations were validated as appropriate—they were special. Because they were who they were and thought as they did, they could succeed and they would be successful if they continued to believe and act in those ways. Their success in the course became further evidence of these beliefs. Students who were not predisposed to view adult knowledge and authority as monolithically would regard this view of patriarchal apprenticeship differently, and would not experience

reinforcement of their status. They have learned to obtain their reinforcement from other sources and to suspect adult criticism. They might respect the power wielded by adults, but being yelled at takes on a different meaning for students who have a history of checkered accomplishment that lacks the steady positive assistance of an adult. Authoritative demands are more likely to inspire resistance for the sake of self-protection.⁵⁵

In this example, we see that students who resonate with the justificatory language offered by the teacher and who possess the requisite social capital to align their classroom behaviors and academic responses to the justification and associated educational demands (both oral and written) have a much easier time succeeding in the classroom environment he creates. Those who do not may be left attempting to interpret academic practices through mismatched socio-linguistic frameworks, resulting in their responses to the teacher's expectations as being incorrect. Rex cautions us to consider that we can explain the success of dominant class students in part because of their familiarity with and acceptance of teachers' educational linguistic frameworks.

My point is not to argue that all teachers will draw upon such an overtly hegemonic framework for describing their teaching and student relationships; I use Rex's research because it illuminates what may be a powerful yet hidden feature of classrooms. We know that teachers do draw upon a variety of explanations to account for the success and failures of both the "good" kids and the "troubled" kids,⁵⁶ and Rex's research suggests that those explanations infiltrate the socio-

linguistic “air” of the classroom in untold ways. The point is that when such cultural, socio-linguistic and metaphorical frameworks reflect the ideologies, practices and discourses of one particular group, the students who resonate with such language and practices find themselves “at home” while the excluded experience the classroom as alien and unwelcoming. As I argue in the final section of this chapter, rather than explain the resulting mismatch as related to social class differences, working class students tend to explain their lack of ability to find “homes” within dominant class classrooms because of their individual failings.

Parenting, Involvement and the Perception of Interest

In this section I address a related and important perceived difference between social classes: the perceived differences between dominant class and working class attitudes about education. According to the received logic of schools, students reflect their parents’ attitudes toward schooling, and working class families value education less than their dominant class counterparts.⁵⁷ Research indicates that the situation is a lot more complicated than this common attitude reveals. Instead, what may be at the heart of the perceived differences in social class “attitudes” about school might not be so much attitudinal in focus, but perhaps differences in how teachers interpret parent-school (or parent-teacher) interactions. These differences matter because parents may act as proxies for their children in the complex range of ways that schools make judgments about students’ individual skills and dispositions. Schools transform judgments of parental involvement and attitudes toward education into more pervasive judgments regarding their children’s

intelligence and motivation to learn. As a result, within the context of young elementary educational schooling especially, part of the definition of an educated person is having *parents who conform* to expected school interaction norms.

We see evidence of the importance of *parents'* ability to demonstrate the proper dispositions toward schooling in Eileen Brantlinger's work. She asks teachers to identify their "ideal" students, and teachers respond with a range of similar descriptions. Beyond a range of student-focused qualities, the ideal student "*has concerned parents.*"⁵⁸ Brantlinger reveals the salience of social class interpretation across the schools she studies: "Children were referred to by family attributes (e.g., high-income parents' occupation, low-income parents' marital status.) Most importantly, ...teachers equated high-income status with advanced achievement and high intelligence and low-income status with low skills and behavior problems."⁵⁹ While some teachers caught themselves articulating remarks that correspond to social class prejudices, their collective narratives reveal that they consistently believe that working class students are "less intelligent or at least less achievement oriented."⁶⁰

Judgments of student aptitude based in part on beliefs about parental attributes influence how teachers treat and teach students, especially with regard to how they sort them into ability groups. Consider the explanation for the use of academic tracking within this teacher's reading curriculum: "Well, you know, we have reading groups mainly because it's easier. Well, I think that the top intelligence [students] needs to recognize that they are the top and can do more."⁶¹ When Brantlinger

asked this same teacher whether social class influenced the reading group composition, she responded:

Well, of course, let's face it. You'd like to think that it doesn't, but the ones with the better background are more apt to be in a higher intelligence group, and some poor little kid who it's a battle to survive, well, school is one of his lesser things to cope with just to live everyday.⁶²

Furthermore, I discuss Brantlinger's study in this section about the intersection of parent involvement in schools because teacher narratives consistently correlate their students' intellectual abilities with parents' willingness to "get involved."⁶³ One teacher observes:

A big difference exists between middle-class and poor parents. College parents are interested in their kids. They are always willing to come in, have talks with their kid. Most lower-class parents don't get involved at all. They don't really care. Then poor kids get a poor foundation in elementary school; they don't get the same start as higher-income students get. If they don't pick up basic skills, they're stuck, and it becomes impossible to catch up. The best-achieving kids are professional people's kids, and more higher-income kids are willing to get involved in extracurricular activities.⁶⁴

This teacher's opinion of working class parents as not being involved and interested in their children's educational experiences directly contradicts the wealth of research on working class parents' aspirations for and involvement in their children's lives.

Lois Weis's research into social class and education in the late 1980s clearly defies the stereotypes the previous teacher uses to describe working class parents' attitudes toward education. Instead, Weis argues that her data reveal parents who

desperately want their children to attend college, and many state that there is nothing for their children if they do not do so. Parents understand clearly that the jobs in which they participated upon leaving high school

are no longer available. They have lived through de-industrialization and stress to their children that education is the only way to obtain stable employment.⁶⁵

In addition, in their interviews with working class parents, Reay and Ball⁶⁶ report that their participants, working class parents, have quite definite and important ideas about what 'good' schools are and do, arguing that perhaps what teachers regard as lack of interest has to do with differences in how welcome parents feel at their children's schools. The authors assert that the working class parents in their study often discuss schools in terms of their openness to working class students and parents. Narrative transcripts detail issues of fairness, accessibility, friendliness of teachers and the importance of enrolling their children in schools where they "feel at home."⁶⁷

Valerie Walkerdine and her colleagues shed light on possible explanations for social class differences in school-home interaction styles. They find that the middle class parents in their study "push" their children to succeed in ways that the school values, while working class parents often do not use the same overtly coercive parenting strategies. Instead, they rely upon the school to motivate their students or to help directly with academic work. The researchers contend that the parents in their study draw upon different expectations for how they should interact with and encourage their children to engage with schoolwork. They argue that their data reveal that their working class parents trust that teachers, as professionals, are "looking out" for their children's interests, whereas the middle class parents in their study generally do not. Instead, they take on the heavy-handed role of intervening

constantly within their children's homework and on-going educational growth in the fashion that schools expect. While the working class parents *do* work to help with school details like homework, as a whole, the dominant class parents have much greater familiarity with academic work and can intervene to help their children acquire the types of knowledge, skills and dispositions the school expects.

I do not mean to argue that working class parents *do not* interact with their children over educational details like homework; research reveals that they certainly do.⁶⁸ But studies reveal that working class parents' lack of knowledge about subject matter often results in their feeling inadequate to the task of helping with homework, where middle class parents can draw upon prior educational experiences to provide help.⁶⁹ Perhaps most powerfully, the research reveals that the feeling of cultural mismatch that arises from the varying levels of parent education may inspire some working class parents to avoid engaging with school topics.⁷⁰

Research also reveals that beyond differences in their abilities to help their children negotiate their specific academic tasks and decisions, working class parents' prior experiences with schooling may cause them to temper how hard they "push" their children to succeed. In contrast to middle class parents and in direct response to the difficulties of their own academic and working lives, Walkerdine and colleagues also argue that their research reveals that many of their working class "parents want to protect their child[ren] from difficult feelings and perhaps preserve their childhood[s] as a time of happiness and freedom from worry and

expectation.”⁷¹ This does not imply that middle class parents do not worry about their children’s relative happiness in school, but the researchers argue that dominant class parents may be able trust in the positive results of delaying gratification and accepting educational discomfort. The working class parents in their study draw upon no such faith. Instead, many wish to prevent their children from experiencing what Sennett and Cobb refer to as the “hidden injuries of class.”⁷²

While it is difficult to summarize the myriad ways parents might draw upon their educational experiences to counsel their children as they negotiate schooling, the research indicates that working class parents who themselves had painful or unsuccessful school experiences, may attempt to help their children avoid class-based psychological harm while also obtaining valuable school credentials and knowledge. This may result in contradictory messages and variations in involvement patterns. Thomas Gorman’s⁷³ research reveals that working class parents experience a complex range of conflicting emotions as they involve themselves in their children’s academic lives. Participants indicate they feel a profound mixture of anxiety and hope. Gorman differentiates between working class parents who identify with the indignities associated with the “hidden injuries of class” and those who feel more secure in their social locations. Their general attitudes toward education seem to correspond to the level of overt indignity and oppression they feel attributable to their social classed educational experiences. When parents in his study more closely identify with class-based indignity and anger, they value

schooling less and they present a conflicted school attitude to their children. While they wish their children to thrive, they do not encourage their children to succeed in schooling as aggressively as other parents. The more economically “settled” respondents seem to accept more easily the value of schools, even though they still consider them spaces designed by and catering to the dominant classes. As Weis’s interview data demonstrates, some parents, despite their rejection of schools’ reliance on what they consider to be middle class values, ways of life and cultural tastes, want more economic stability for their children. They thus advocate the pursuit of education as a means for economic mobility despite its potential cultural costs (i.e. changes in their children to accept middle class ‘habitus’).⁷⁴

Thus, a central tension emerges in the collective research on how working class parents view schooling. They often value education, ascribing to the very meritocratic ideology that dominant class parents and teachers draw upon. Sustaining support for what often amount to psychologically challenging academic experiences for their children requires that they trust the ultimate promise of educational success, trust that might contradict their instincts about schooling that emerge from their own prior school experiences. Thus it is no surprise that the research literature reveals a profound ambivalence about working class parents’ attitudes toward education. The message the literature seems to capture is one of wary support. Succeed, but be wary.

I point to the apparent “cultural mismatch” between parents’ apparent attitudes toward schooling, because it influences the resources from which students draw to

construct self-identities. Because of their parents' so-called lack of interest, working class students are assumed not to be interested school success as well. Research reveals this process is exacerbated through working class parents' lack of specific "school process" information. Teachers may interpret the fundamental lack of school-specific knowledge as lack of interest or lack of value in education. Again, for a variety of reasons, many working class parents do not have enough experience with schools as institutions to counsel their children on academic decisions like course choices, taking "high stakes" tests (i.e. PSAT, SAT, achievement tests). Likewise, they may not understand the college admission process. These are details that middle class parents know because they have already negotiated various school steps, rituals and processes themselves. In contrast, despite their intentions to help their children succeed, many working class parents do not have the appropriate knowledge to do so. Again, teachers may interpret the lack of school-knowledge as correlating to parents' lack of interest in helping their children succeed in school – judgments that teachers may then use to judge the aptitude and potential of working class students.⁷⁵

In contrast to the literature on the working class parental experiences, Carol Vincent writes that the most affluent parents in her research feel quite comfortable in schools.⁷⁶ Vincent's parents intervene on a number of topics: assignments, homework, student relationships (teacher and with other students), as well as teaching styles and curricular choices. They are most often likely to set up meetings with school officials, but they also work *around* the school by hiring tutors, for

example. She argues that their most powerful tool is their general ability to persistently intervene on behalf of their children. When their efforts on behalf of their children do not meet with satisfactory changes, they persist. For example, Vincent describes an example of a parent who writes the head of the science department to protest her son's placement within a low tracked science course. As in other instances revealed in other studies I will discuss in the next section, the child is moved. The point here is that this detail exemplifies how teachers come to regard the dominant class parents as being more interested in education than their working class counterparts. Rather than interpret such a move as an example of a parent's apparent school-specific understanding of how to advocate for her child as well as comfort in doing so, both of which may be attributable to her social class standing, teachers may instead interpret such a "pushy" parent as being a concerned one, one who values education.

When working class parents do not conform to the dominant class-related ideal, teachers interpret them as fundamentally representing the social class stereotype. Furthermore, Brantlinger's research clearly demonstrates that teachers may then draw upon those beliefs about parents (especially in elementary grades) to make judgments about student intelligence and motivation. Thus, we see that the process through which the skills, attributes and values of the dominant class becomes the very foundation for what being an educated student is dizzingly varied and complex in its details.

Again, throughout the literature on working class parents' attitudes toward their children's educational experiences, we find no correlation with middle class parents' and teachers' beliefs that working class parents do not care about schooling. As the research I have been reviewing indicates repeatedly, how parents express their care emerges from within complex sets of prior experiences and beliefs about how parents should interact with their children's schools. In addition, parents' abilities to demonstrate the expected expressions of motivation is greatly influenced by structural impediments and complex socio-linguistic and socio-cultural norms governing what "interested" parents do and how they communicate their interest in the school setting. We see that *how* they help or are *able* to help may be greatly influenced by a combination of prior experiences, differences in power relationships, structural features of schooling and expectations placed upon them by schools.

Inverse Interdependence, Commodity Fetishism and Self-Conception

In the following section I discuss how academic tracking sorts students into differently valued academic programs and, at the same time, describes the result of this sorting process as evidence of students' natural interests and talents. Because students are either placed or helped to place themselves into curricular programs that correspond to assumptions related to social class, the practice known as academic tracking reinforces exploitation. Dominant class students come to take the most valuable academic courses and are thereby considered to be more

intelligent, motivated and deserving of academic success than their working class counterparts because of their very participation in the classes that are considered appropriate for them because of their dominant class identities. This is yet another way that schooling promotes the exploitation of working class students through a process that can best be explained using the concept of commodity fetishism. Thus, I claim that academic tracking represents a key feature of E.O. Wright's definition of exploitation: inverse interdependence. It captures the fundamental dynamic at work in the example of academic tracking: the dominant class *depends upon and benefits from the relative academic failure of the working class.*⁷⁷

Academic tracking advocates argue that it is a merit-based curriculum-organization scheme whereby students are divided by their natural abilities and interests into differentiated instructional courses.⁷⁸ Because academically tracked class assignments are reportedly developed using a variety of inputs: students' prior academic records, test-measured abilities, as well as student career aspirations, tracking proponents argue that the practice benefits all. They portray it as a voluntary and efficient sorting mechanism. However, even a superficial examination of how students are placed in various academic tracks fails to support the merit-based argument. Academic counselors do consult students' past records to determine track placement,⁷⁹ but examination of who makes it into which track indicates that the simple meritocratic explanation blurs academic tracking's complex relationship with social class, racial and gender biases.⁸⁰ Students of lower socio-economic classes and students of color populate the non-academic,

vocational, and lower tracks more frequently than students from higher economic classes (and whites).⁸¹ Similarly, girls are frequently tracked into academic courses that prepare them for caring and administrative support positions.⁸² Thus, the weight of the combined studies on academic tracking in schools contradicts the simple explanation that track placement decisions reflect students' natural academic abilities and proclivities toward certain vocational futures.

Some advocates of academic tracking argue that these concerns reflect older academic policies that have been largely rejected in favor of what they consider to be less rigid practices found in schools today.⁸³ It is superficially true that current forms of academic tracking lack the rigidity of earlier iterations. Because educational reformers raised concerns about the preponderance of racial minorities and working class students in the vocational and less educationally rigorous academic tracks, schools dismantled more inflexible programs in the 1970s. They created more fluid curriculum trajectories in which students could choose individual courses, not just a set of prescribed sequential classes. But in his summary of tracking research, Lucas⁸⁴ argues that despite this apparent dismantling of these rigid forms of tracking, schools have not made it substantially easier to move between tracks. Instead, tracking has moved "underground" and remains a powerful influence, albeit in a "defacto" way. The claim that schools are not academically tracked fails to account for the more subtle stratifying influences associated with social identities such as social class and race. Instead, he argues that dismantling rigid tracks while retaining individually tracked subject classes

actually *reduces* “students’ and parents’ ability to effectively seize the opportunities for individual upward mobility that schools provide.”⁸⁵

Despite the rhetoric of openness, students effectively choose between a series of academic and vocational tracks (or are placed in one) relatively early in their academic careers. Because some courses build sequentially upon one another, failure to take certain “gate keeping” courses early in school closes future opportunities along different academic and vocational lines. Consequently, Ball argues that tracking is a matter of social closure. It “is not merely a neutral way of organizing teaching but has consequences for both access to longer-term success roles and routes, the distribution of esteem and of resources.”⁸⁶ While schools might advertise policies of academic track fluidity, students make decisions (or have decisions made for them) that essentially dictate their academic experiences along demarcated lines early in their academic careers.

Oakes and Guitton’s⁸⁷ research into the tracking practices of three high schools in California illustrates how track choices are fundamentally related to students’ and parents’ social class locations. Their research indicates that how students find themselves “tracked” depends in part upon staff beliefs about student capabilities and interests, which correspond to student social class identity, decisions about what courses to take and issues associated with a school’s allotment of resources to different tracks. Their research indicates that arbitrary enrollment numbers based on financial resources influences the number of students allowed to enroll in certain tracked classes despite students’ qualifications; therefore qualified students might

not be allowed to take upper track courses because of the school's limited finances, not their abilities. Guidance counselors must then make decisions about who deserves the limited resources of the more prestigious courses, and they do so in part based on students' social class identities.⁸⁸ The students of affluent parents are assumed to be college-bound, while working and lower classed students are assumed to be more likely to be focused on vocationally related futures.

Oakes and Guitton⁸⁹ find that counselors track students based on a number of factors, many beyond the control of the individual student, although their explanations for decisions are generally inscribed within the discourse of meeting students' self-determined interests and performances. Counselors consult a range of details such as prior test scores, grades in prerequisite courses and teacher recommendations, in addition to parental and student interests. Research indicates that teachers' and counselors' biases about students' social class identities lead them to make track placements based upon assumptions about students' goals and abilities.⁹⁰

Ansalone⁹¹ argues that from the beginning of students' school experiences, they are judged academically and tracked by their social class identities. His critique is that the tracking decisions made in middle and high schools are extensions of a series of prior tracking segregations that happen even within individual elementary classrooms:

Decisions about track placement are made by schools and often based on nonrelevant ascriptive factors strongly influenced by class and race.

Kindergarten reading groups are often arranged prior to the conclusion of the first week of school and primarily based on class-related characteristics, including style of dress, parental work patterns, and racial differences. It is also not unusual for students to be sorted on the basis of cultural norms, language, and disciplinary records.⁹²

Repeated research studies supports the general claim that “lower” tracks (i.e., non-college bound) are populated by working class and ethnic minority students.⁹³

Studies also reveal that guidance counselors regularly place students of the dominant class in higher tracks.⁹⁴

The results of these tracking decisions matter in a number of ways. One powerful result is that of the “self fulfilling prophecy” of the naturalness of tracking placement with regard to social class identities. Persell⁹⁵ summarizes research from the 1970s that demonstrates that “teachers expect more from ‘higher groups’ and less from ‘lower’ groups, even when students have actually been randomly assigned to those groups.”⁹⁶ He observes:

Tuckman and Bierman moved 421 randomly selected black high-school and junior high-school students in a suburban-city school system into the next higher ability group, while 384 comparable students were retained in the assigned groups as controls. By the end of the year the two groups received quite different recommendations for ability-group placement for the next year. Teachers recommended 54 percent of the experimental students for the same (higher) group in the following year, but only 1 percent of the controls were recommended for that group.⁹⁷

Likewise, Dornbusch, Glasgow and Lin⁹⁸ discuss the often-cited research on the power of teacher perception and its influence on how they interpret student abilities. They recall the work of Rothbart and colleagues from the early 1970s. The researchers randomly assigned students to “tracked” classes, and the teacher treated these groups of mixed ability students according to their perceptions of

need and intelligence. The study shows that teachers of lower tracked classes consider their students to be “unresponsive” and less intelligent, while they deem their higher-tracked students to be quite bright. “Videotaped interactions revealed that teachers spent more time attending to students who were randomly labeled as having greater academic ability than to students randomly labeled as having less ability.”⁹⁹

Other studies reveal similar attitudes. In a recent study of middle school students in a New England town, Donna Marie San Antonio discovers identical findings to the studies conducted twenty-five years previous to her work. She notes an “unmistakable difference in the way teachers taught to their different groups of students.”¹⁰⁰ In the “accelerated” classes, teachers encourage the students to be “independent, responsible, organized, and thorough.”¹⁰¹ In the “slower” classes, the teachers use more autocratic teaching styles, worrying that the students will be more likely to get “out of hand.”¹⁰²

Teachers of lower tracked classes are often the least experienced and least talented, and their academic expectations of their students are lower than those of higher tracked classes.¹⁰³ When added to the increased prevalence of more academically useful materials and resources in higher tracked classes, it is little wonder that the discrepancies between what is learned and how students view their educational experiences continues to grow. Ansalone summarizes the resulting implications of this research:

If less-advantaged students are more often restricted to lower tracks as the process of differentiated curricula is played out, it is very likely that

upper-track students may be provided knowledge and information that is valuable in our society, while lower-track students are not. Accordingly, lower-status students who are provided with only low-level information might find it more difficult to attend college and find economically rewarding careers.¹⁰⁴

Recent research by Useem¹⁰⁵ shows exactly how this is accomplished. Some courses, including mathematics, have always been keys to success in college. Prior experience with these courses can only assist those who attempt to complete them in college. Once relegated to a lower track, most students are restricted in their access to many of these key courses, thereby limiting future opportunities.¹⁰⁶

As a result, it is not surprising that research also indicates that students in tracked classes see themselves and their relationships to school differently.¹⁰⁷ Students in higher academic tracks view their school experiences more favorably than do their lower track counterparts. The placement of students in tracked classes creates the conditions for both teachers and students to perpetuate academic expectations based on those placements.

In an effort to combat the deleterious effects of tracking in its various guises, schools have experimented with heterogenous groupings, eliminating differentiation in courses (removing labels such as “honors” and “basic.”) It is here that we see the political influence of dominant class parents: research shows that when districts discuss de-tracking schools, many dominant class parents use their political and economic influence to *ensure* that schools retain some form of tracking.

Researchers observe that parents express the common theme that they are motivated to prevent their children from *contamination* by the lower expectations of

working class students.¹⁰⁸ As one parent in a research project by Oakes and Lipton argues, dismantling academic tracking sends the message that “educating capable students is less important than making sure those less capable aren’t left behind.”¹⁰⁹

To prevent their students from being influenced by working class students and from receiving less valuable educational experiences, affluent parents use their political influence to make sure that schools place economically privileged yet academically marginal students within the more privileged academic tracks. Middle and upper class parents exert this pressure regardless of how their children’s teachers perceive the students’ intellectual capabilities. While one common argument in favor of tracking purports that heterogenous grouping forces more academically talented students to “go slower” while learning in less intellectually rigorous classes, the research reveals that affluent parents ensure that their children are in academically more prestigious courses regardless of prior academic performances. Despite their lower or “average” abilities, students of middle and upper class parents are regularly placed in higher tracks either because their parents push schools to make accommodations for them or the school staff judges them to be college-bound.¹¹⁰ Language that describes middle and upper class students as being more academically gifted despite evidence otherwise hides the power the privileged exert over their children’s track placements.

Eileen Brantlinger’s research reveals that middle class mothers do not recognize that they intervene as much as they do. Instead, parents place responsibility for

their children's lack of educational success on school policies, teachers and the influence of other students. Schools are to blame for not understanding or not attending to the needs of their "gifted" children. They also describe lower class students as the contaminating "others," thereby failing to recognize the contradictions within the stories they have told about their own children. One parent, for example complains that her own sons

felt school was a "waste of time" and "did not value education." Later, in justifying her preference for class homogenous schools, she said: "I don't want them to go where kids do not value learning. Kids learn from each other—they must go where kids are inquisitive and parents value education. If parents value education and learning, that will influence the kid." Jeanne fretted about her sons' substance abuse, yet felt that making schools social-class heterogeneous would introduce the contamination of low-income drug users to "ordinary" schools.¹¹¹

McGrath and Kuriloff¹¹² detail how the more affluent parents in one school district successfully prevented their academically marginal students from sitting in classes with the so-called "low achievers" of the working class. Despite vehement protestations of a variety of other parent groups, the dominant class parents successfully pressured the school to retain its tracking policy. This coheres with other studies that reveal that economically privileged parents use a number of strategies to insure that the policies they prefer remain enacted within their children's schools. Wells and Serna¹¹³ summarize these practices: (1) "threatening flight," (2) "co-opting the institutional elites," (3) "soliciting buy-in from the 'not quite elite,'" and (4) "accepting detracking bribes." Affluent parents mobilize their powerful resources to coerce and unduly influence their children's schools to retain policies that benefit the dominant class. In separate studies, Lipman¹¹⁴ and Brantlinger¹¹⁵

also reveal that parents keep schools differently tracked through school rezoning. Again, the affluent parents are able to mobilize their political and economic resources to insure that the school retains the policies they prefer – through “behind the scenes” negotiating and overt pressures that the less politically influential, working class parents cannot match.

A number of important features emerge in the preceding exploration of academic tracking and its relationship to social class. First, schools treat students differently because of their social class identities. They make assumptions about their goals in life, their interests, their needs and the type of educational training they require. Schools expect more from the affluent and less from the working class, and teachers and administrators describe students who identify or are identified as belonging to disparate social classes differently. Dominant class students are considered more intelligent and in need of freedom to explore on their own. They are morally virtuous. Alternately, teachers consider the less affluent as marked by a variety of deficiencies. They are less intelligent, more troubled, morally suspect and in need of different types of school direction.¹¹⁶

The features of academic tracking that I outline here exemplify what Eric Olin Wright describes as an inverse interdependent relationship.¹¹⁷ It describes a pernicious feature of academic tracking: the educational gain of the dominant class is predicated upon the relative failure of the working class. Tracking policies help schools discriminate among the masses of young who enter their doors and separate them according to the contemporary equivalents of Plato’s metallurgic

divisions. Schools thus present students with different forms of knowledge and credentials that provide them differently situated abilities to access future opportunities associated with economic and social power.

As I have been arguing, the gate-keeping features of academic tracking policies merge with the process of exploitation through the process of commodity fetishism. Despite the pervasiveness of the ideology that the college tracked students are the “best,” the “brightest” – the “good kids,” while the others are “troubled” and “less interested in school,” those claims are difficult to sustain given the plethora of studies that show how students come to occupy different tracks; it has less to do with their individual variations in talent and interest than in aspects of their social identities, notably social class.

The strength of dominant class parents’ fighting to use their resources to ensure that academic tracking practices remain in place reveals that they recognize the importance of tracked schoolings’ ability to help children succeed in the ways that the dominant class parents want. It is not merely that students who graduate with “honors” credentials are considered to have identities that correspond to descriptions like intelligent, capable and motivated. The value of these descriptions and the resulting identity traits that they represent are fundamentally relational in nature. It is essential that there be a foil against which the more valuable academic credentials – and students – can be measured. That some students have *more valuable* educational skills and credentials is predicated on the existence of a vast number of students *possessing less valuable* skills and credentials. Likewise, the

value accrued to schools designating certain students as being more educated than others requires the existence of a vast number of less educated students. Thus, Wright's concept of inverse interdependence captures how the success of the dominant class – in this case in an educational context – depends upon the relative failure of the working class.

In the preceding two sections, I have argued that we find much evidence for two of the three principles of exploitation as outlined in Wright's three-part description. I turn now to the final feature that marks his definition of exploitation: appropriation.

Appropriation, Commodity Fetishism and Self-Conception

In the broadest of terms, Wright explains that the final feature of exploitation involves appropriating “the labor effort of the exploited.”¹⁸ This definition focuses on the way that appropriation is most often applied in the economic analyses of class relations (in which the dominant class appropriates the “surplus labor” of the working class,) and we cannot easily superimpose this economic interpretation upon schools. Past efforts to do so encountered many problems,⁶ not the least of which is the obvious difference that working class students do not “produce” goods or earn wages that dominant class students can appropriate.⁷ Yet the concept of appropriation still helps describe an important aspect of schooling in a capitalist

⁶ See the discussion of “correspondence” theories that correlated school structures to those of the industrial sector in the discussion of cultural Marxist critical pedagogy in Chapter Three.

⁷ Beyond the obvious differences in the types and quality of “labor” expanded in different academic tracks, all students “work” in schools as well.

society, an aspect that is closely related to the features of the previous analysis. The key once again is commodity fetishism. Through that process, students of different social classes draw upon differently valued practices and ideologies to construct conceptions of themselves. My argument is that in the context of schooling, the dominant class appropriates the materials from which they construct self-conceptions that serve to support power inequality associated with social oppression. In contrast, the responses available to members of the working class are constrained and lead to denigrated self-conceptions that lead to self-limiting life decisions that contribute to the benefit of the dominant class. The dominant class, then, “appropriates” a wider range of culturally valuable resources that support a wider range of life choices, the more open set of identity possibilities and the ones that accrue to social class ideologies and practices to construct self-conceptions that are not aimed at supporting their own social domination.⁸

I have used the concept of commodity fetishism to help explain how schools mediate the development of self-conceptions that are consistent with a range of features associated with dominant class experiences – aspects like interests, norms, practices and beliefs. Schools shape students’ self-conceptions or identities and, through this process the ideal of the educated person is constructed in the image of dominant class students. Thus, on the analysis of schooling put forth here,

⁸ It is here perhaps more than any where else that my choice to discuss social class groups within a binary construct threatens to over-simplify my analysis. While I draw upon the binary language to keep the discussion coherent, I must note that there will be a range of social class-related self-conceptions, many of which may be in contradictory locations. The process I describe should be conceived upon a continuum, not categorically.

schools provide the resources through which dominant class students develop aspects of their individual identities in which they consider themselves to be more academically gifted and deserving of success than their working class counterparts. In contrast, working class students forge self-conceptions amidst ideologies that characterize them as lacking the abilities and qualities associated with being educated.

Thus in order to succeed in school, dominant class students must “be” themselves, the selves that their primary families help them become, while working class students must fundamentally alter themselves, adjusting their primary cultural orientations and refashioning themselves into people who act and think in the requisite ways, ways most valued by the school – those of the dominant class.

Diane Reay’s research supports the previous argument. Her examinations of how students transition from high school into post-secondary schooling reveal that the dominant class students engage with schooling as a relatively natural extension of the identity development they begin in their homes. Her dominant class research participants specifically discuss education as helping them discover and create their “genuine” identities. Her narratives reveal working class students also articulating similar projects, but their experiences are marked by much greater psychological angst. Her working class students try to discover “who they are” in school, but they must do so while encountering an internalized ideology that positions them as being less intelligent, less capable and less interested in things academic. Reay argues that because the dominant class occupies the very definition of “normal” in school,

those students who arrive at school already embodying those features or steeped in the dominant class norms, practices and values find the school process to be one more akin to a natural exploration of themselves and their worlds. Those who differ from the norms, like working class students, must negotiate the self-realization project by un-doing what Bourdieu calls habitus – their very understandings of the world and the ways that they should engage with it. This includes how they identify themselves as people, including the types of futures they might imagine. Reay observes that for the working class student attempting to succeed in a dominant class school setting, “feelings of being an imposter are never far away.”¹¹⁹

Being an imposter seems to emerge from the complexities associated with a commodified identity that equates working class norms and practices as crude, unintelligent and inadequate. This has been the hallmark of the concept of social class since its ideological beginnings. Beverly Skeggs traces the history of the concept of class to argue that the dominant class has always been associated with the good and pure, while the working class has been the embodiment of everything not valued by the dominant group. “The working-class have a long history of being represented by excess, while the middle-classes are represented by their distance from it, usually through associations with restraint, repression, reasonableness, modesty and denial.”¹²⁰ She cites Michelle Wallace’s argument that class-based identities often rest on binaries: “serious/trivial, authentic/commodified, natural/artificial.”¹²¹ The binary nature of class ideology leaves students in a difficult

double bind. If they accept the norms and practices associated with schooling, ideology that rejects those norms and practices of the working class, then they must reject what they regard as parts of themselves. Because the discourse that defines what shapes each class depends upon its relation to the other as a foil, students cannot easily fashion identities that blend the two.

Similar to Gramsci's notion of hegemonic ideology, Skeggs argues that the working class identity is defined and presented to them in a variety of ways by the dominant class (in media like newspapers, television programs, advertising). Again because these identifications are presented in binary opposites, the working class has historically exhibited conflicted relationships with its own cultural representation. That is, working class subjects both reject and accept many of these negative evaluations of what being working class means, because to reject them outright might mean accepting that which the working class may have come to disdain – cultural practices associated with the dominant class.

The representations are *not* taken up by those for whom they are intended; this is because of the negative evaluation. ...Who would want to be seen as lacking in worth? One challenge to negative evaluation is to devalue the authority of those who are in a position to judge through a critique of pretensions, but this is double-edged. It also works to contain and keep the working-class in their place, as they; too, become subject to their own critique.¹²²

Features of working class identity, then, become the contested terrain over which schools become principle mediators. As Skeggs argues, the working class denigrates the dominant class and its pretentiousness, but in doing so, it requires itself to generate an artificial sense of un-pretentiousness that in turn reinforces the

working class stereotypes, strengthening the very binaries about which Wallace argues the warfare of class-based identity is waged.

Brantlinger points to the discursive binaries Skeggs discusses as being quite common in the self-descriptions that emerge in her research of both middle class and working class families:

My studies of low-income parents and adolescents indicate that people in low positions engage in various forms of resistance to being stigmatized and excluded. One form is inventing an alternative scale for gauging social value. They assert that, unlike wealthy people, they are not snobs, selfish, or full of themselves. Epithets such as good students, preppie, and respectable ones are imbued with derision and cynicism. Countercultural and anti-intellectual sentiments result in high achievers being called nerds or geeks. Misbehaving youth and even low achievers may be seen as cool. Negative terms become semantically positive, as in black adolescents use of 'bad' for things they like and value. Nevertheless, consistent with ideas of hegemony, those in low positions also internalize the dominant class's degrading categorization of them and tacitly consent to being in the stigmatized and demoralizing low placements to which they are relegated by those in power.¹²³

Thus, students in school attempt to find and to create themselves amidst the opposing pulls of the ideological constraints associated with their social class locations. Working class students try to "find themselves," but they must do so amidst the constraints of the binary position in which they are placed by the dominant class. They are at once marked by deficits – lacking culture, intelligence and motivation to learn – while also being characterized by excess interest in the immoral and base. In order to succeed at school, working class students must create alternative identities that both accept and defy stereotypes.

Reay's description of Shaun, a working class middle school student, exemplifies the dynamic of conflicting identities. He struggles with his conflicting identifications

as both being interested in school and wanting to fit into his anti-school working class male culture. Narrative transcripts reveal that Shaun struggles to define his identity, at once being pulled by the “educated student” school identity and that of his working class neighborhood, one that questions sensitive boys who like academics. As a result, Reay argues that Shaun doesn’t so much find nor create himself, but rather, he loses himself in the process of exploring his identity in school. Shaun resorts to psychological splitting into different selves depending upon the context. Within the classroom, he puts on the act of being the student, but in the playground he reverts to his “true” self:

Shaun: Like now I am different in the class than I am out in the playground. I’m just different.

Diane: Right, so how are you different?

Shaun: In the playground, yeah, in the classroom, should I say, I am not myself, I’m totally different. I am hard working and everything. Out in the playground...I am back to my usual self, wanting to fight and everything, just being normal.¹²⁴

Reay explains that for Shaun, “academic success is not normative and he has to literally think and enact himself as ‘other’ in order to do well.”¹²⁵

Older students are much more able to articulate the social class world traveling required of them in school contexts. Reay’s research into the transition of working class students into university programs reveals narratives marked by struggle to negotiate the difficulties associated with reconciling their developing, “new” identities associated with dominant class schooling and their working class backgrounds. Many of Reay’s working class research subjects articulate a desire to

go on to college in order to “find themselves” as distinctly different people than their working class backgrounds permit, but these selves are contradictory. Reay explains that “underlying feelings of hopeful anticipation there are confusions and ambiguities about the sort of self they are seeking, which the middle-class students do not have to deal with to anything like the same extent.”¹²⁶

We see the previous dynamic at work in Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey and June Melody's¹²⁷ recent longitudinal ethnographic study of girls in different social class locations. They present insight into the reasoning and emotional life of working class girls attempting to succeed in school. They detail the academic career of a working class girl who identifies from a young age that she wants to attend a university, a “life plan” distinctly different from those of her immediate family members. As an elementary student, Nicky's teachers describe her as being “quietly motivated” with considerable “inner strength” and self-sufficiency. Her strength of will sustains her negotiation of considerable obstacles. Nicky's parents, while supportive, do not have the financial nor the intellectual resources with which to help her succeed in school. As a result, Nicky shields them from her school challenges (academic and social), and she develops an identity independent of them. Nicky works long hours to fund school. Nicky disciplines herself to become the hard-working, successful student. But because she seeks to shield her parents from worries about school funding, and from guilt about not being able to help her with academics and the myriad decisions associated with the school experience, Nicky separates herself emotionally, intellectually and socially from her family. The

changes associated with advanced study further exacerbate the alienation process.¹²⁸

In college at the time of the research's publication, the young woman the researchers describe now continues to be fiercely independent. She is also one who is greatly conflicted emotionally because of her educational path. She expresses the common working class sentiment that she finds no social congruence within the world of her working class home nor within that of her largely middle class, university peer group. Similar to other working class university students in the study, Nicky expresses a profound isolation as a result. Although she forms friendships within her new academic setting, she maintains rigid boundaries between her school relationships and those of her working class community. As a result, Nicky experiences increasing isolation from her family. Researchers stress that the resulting emotions of guilt, shame and anger that students like Nicky experience are quite ubiquitous, but despite their frequency, the individualistic discourse of education helps working class students internalize their emotional and intellectual struggles as personal failings. Subsequently, Nicky and her peers internalize the associated conclusion that their successes depend upon their increased ability to discipline themselves, to work harder at being "good students."¹²⁹

Nicky's narrative reveals that the creation of a self-identity requires great emotional discipline. Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody argue that most of the working class girls in their study ultimately fail in their original academic pursuits because the

conflicted, bifurcated selves they experience and construct in order to negotiate their middle class-dominated educational experiences exact too great a set of emotional costs to sustain.¹³⁰ The researchers worry that Nicky, too, will find that her university career is extracting too great a toll on her psychic life to sustain her educational plan.

Diane Reay argues that like Nicky, other working class students internalize the message that they are unfinished and incomplete. When they falter on “completion projects” associated with pursuing academic degrees, they most often attribute their fundamental difficulties to individual inadequacies and thus attempt to shore themselves up and solve their “problems” by appealing to inner traits of discipline and strength of character. They attempt to discipline themselves to become the person of the middle class ideology that permeates what schools value in students.

If we recap on their often negative, frequently disrupted, and sometimes fragmented, educational histories there clearly has been no easy union of the academic with personal satisfaction and achievement in their narratives. Any attempt at transformation runs all the risks of the academic failure and shame many experienced in their early schooling. As Janice says, “I don’t ever want that sick feeling in my stomach again”. Instead most opt for safety and comfort; a combination of achieving educationally and still being able to be themselves that stops short of transformation.¹³¹

The tendency of working class students and parents to blame themselves for their “failures” to negotiate an academic realm whose structure and character are designed to benefit the more affluent, reveals how the middle class appropriates more than just credentials from working class students; they appropriate the very conception of what it means to be an educated person.

I do not wish to imply that middle class students do not have difficulties in this project themselves. While middle class parents work to enable their children to reproduce socially-classed identities that cohere with middle class norms and economic stability, successful self-creation in the sense that Nikolas Rose¹³² articulates does not mean that they also do not experience psychological distress. Reay argues that the ease with which middle class students succeed in school hides the deep psychological costs associated with accepting middle class identities:

The routine nature of that success and the apparent ease with which many middle-class children perform well academically masks deep fears around failure, fears which are driven underground because they so threaten the very bases on which middle-class subjectivities are founded. But out of sight does not mean out of mind.¹³³

Walkerdine et. al. also demonstrate that while both middle class parents and their children seem to embody a deep fear about economic instability, their use of various resources to ensure their success does not preclude psychological distress. While the researchers describe the middle class girls in their study as displaying near seamless successes throughout their schooling, many of the girls exhibit deep psychological difficulties associated with having internalized aspects of their identities built around constant striving for success and perfection.¹³⁴ The apparent “ease” with which dominant class students draw dominant class practices and norms appear as more intelligent than their peers masks the psychological difficulties they experience during schooling. While commodity fetishism describes the process, it does not preclude dominant class students from experiencing deep

psychological difficulties at the same time that they experience academic success.¹³⁵ While I have been arguing that dominant class students have access to differently valued resources from which to construct their self-conceptions, self-conceptions that are relatively free from the influences of exploitation and oppression, research indicates that even they do so with emotional difficulty.⁹

Conclusion

In this chapter I defend the conception of schools as exploitative spaces, places where the dominant class succeeds at the expense of the working class. I construct the argument using Eric Olin Wright's three-part definition of exploitation. Through the Principle of Exclusion, we see that the dominant class predicates its success on the link between schooling and dominant class practices. One of the most important results of the dominant class control of schools is captured by the process of commodity fetishism; schools predicate their notions of what it means to be an educated person upon dominant class norms. Schools mediate the process through which many of the skills, attributes and values of the dominant class become the very foundation of the definition of being educated. This process comes to constitute fundamental features of what individuals consider to be their identities: academic ability, interest and moral worth.

⁹ I believe that the research into dominant class students' experiences at home and school and the subsequent influences on their self-conceptions is important, and may have implications for a theory of autonomy aimed at students in positions of privilege. As my purpose in this dissertation is to focus on marginalized student experiences, I will not develop this alternative direction of focus, although I assert that it is important to address both, the marginalized and the privileged within schools. It is too large of a topic to engage adequately here.

The second principle, that of Inverse Interdependence, focuses our attention on the relational nature of the exploitation. The dominant class's ability to center educational practice and ideology on those attributes associated with dominant class norms and the results of owning dominant class "cultural capital" is fundamentally exploitative because it depends upon the working class's inability to influence the ideologies and practices of schools to include *their different* norms and skills. Academic structures like academic tracking sustain exploitative inequality through the predicating of "higher" academic track curricula upon the norms and ideologies of the dominant class, thereby helping to ensure the greater value afforded to those practices. Key to the analysis is the observation that the increased value of the "higher" track credentials relies upon their rejection by the working class. The process of commodity fetishism once again helps explain how the placement of working class students in "lower" tracks is rationalized through perceived differences in individual talent and motivation, the host of social class practices and ideologies that separate the working class from the dominant class.

Finally, the third principle, Appropriation, focuses on the ways that students of different social classes draw upon differently valued practices and ideologies to construct conceptions of themselves. Within the context of schooling, the dominant class appropriates the materials from which they construct self-conceptions that serve to support power inequality associated with social oppression. In contrast, the responses available to members of the working class are constrained and lead to denigrated self-conceptions that lead to self-limiting life decisions that contribute

to the benefit of the dominant class. The dominant class, then, appropriates a wider range of culturally valuable resources that support a wider range of life choices, the more open set of identity possibilities and the ones that accrue to social class ideologies and practices to construct self-conceptions that are not aimed at supporting their own social domination.

Now that I have articulated a description of schools as characterized by exploitation, we must consider a second question. What guidance can existing theories give us in search of a way to counter the exploitative features of schooling? In the next chapter, I evaluate the resources offered by the group of educational theorists who have historically concerned themselves with issues of social justice in general and social class in particular: critical pedagogy. In what follows, I suggest that while current critical pedagogy offers valuable resources for constructing appropriate responses to social class exploitation in schools, we need to develop a better understanding of how we might disrupt the process of commodity fetishism and provide working class students with opportunities to forge individual life plans free from the pernicious influences of social class ideologies.

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CHAPTER III

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO SOCIAL CLASS AND COMMODIFIED IDENTITY

Introduction

In this chapter, I turn to the school of educational analysis most closely aligned with social class activism: critical pedagogy. I critically appraise resources from within the perspective that help us develop a conception of individual agency and its relation to commodity fetishism and schooling as described in the last chapter. We need a theoretical framework that both helps us understand how students might forge new self-understandings and how to make choices amidst the influences of social class exploitation. To do so, I divide current theories of critical pedagogy into three general strands: “mainstream” critical pedagogy – inspired by cultural Marxism, challenges to cultural Marxism proposed by postmodern critical pedagogy and the most recent position advocated by a group of theorists who present what I describe here as a “Neo-traditionalist” position.

While there are important differences that divide the three perspectives I discuss, they are united in their attempt to present resources for analyzing social injustice in schooling. They are all concerned with the powerful ways that schools both enable and constrain students in relation to a range of social oppressions. Despite the unity of purpose, their arguments about how to interpret schools and

about “what must be done” take them down different paths. While I claim that each offers important resources for constructing a response to the features of social class exploitation found within schools, I argue that all have moved too quickly toward constructing answers about “how” to construct responses to oppression without first theorizing a conception of individual agency. Moving too quickly toward application has left important questions that critical pedagogy has yet to answer.

To make that case clear, in the following I provide a general introduction to the distinguishing features of each perspective and then critically appraise each for resources to address the issues raised by social class exploitation and commodity fetishism.

Cultural Marxist Critical Pedagogy

Rejecting traditional Marxism’s near complete focus on economic structures and social class position, cultural Marxists ground their projects in Gramscian or Gramsci-inspired investigations of the ways that public institutions like schools mediate societal “stability through a combination of ‘domination,’ or force, and ‘hegemony,’ defined as consent to ‘intellectual and moral leadership.’”¹ Cultural Marxists analyze how ideological hegemony works through the rituals, practices and structures of schooling and its curriculum, as well as how these forces constrain individual agency. While early and some contemporary critical pedagogists work within primarily economically driven analyses of the relationships between education and social class, cultural Marxists have historically expanded the analysis to include how

“ruling ideas reproduce dominant societal interests serving to naturalize, idealize and legitimate the existing society and its institutions and values.”² Despite worries about the debates surrounding these terms, I will hold that cultural Marxists generally examine how schools support the (re)production of social inequality both through structures and ideology.

Helpful in addressing the problem identified in the previous chapter, cultural Marxists offer a complex explanation for how individuals participate in schools as social institutions that legitimate structural inequality. Cultural Marxism in education in particular grew in popularity because it responded to theoretical and empirical challenges to analyses that correlated school structures and practices to society’s economic needs. In early “correspondence” forms of critical theory, analysts like Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis³ argued that schools “prepare students to enter the current economic system via a correspondence between school structures and the structure of production.”⁴ Correspondence theories portray schools as metaphorical factories that “produce” real results: students ready to enter the work force with the dispositions and beliefs that are appropriate to their social class position. While early articulations of critical pedagogy drawing upon the correspondence approach offered strong indictments of schooling’s role in reproducing social class inequalities, these accounts suffer from too rigid a connection between the practices of schooling and class identity.¹ Likewise,

¹ While perhaps superficially similar, there is a large difference between the correspondence-type analysis offered by early critical pedagogists and the arguments I offer in the previous chapter. Rather than positing the existence of a

because a crucial aspect of the critical project is to foster social change, the lack of student agency within early analyses left critical pedagogists seemingly no direction to enact change beyond the complete reorganization of schooling and/or the capitalist economic system in which it is embedded.

The subsequent cultural Marxist grounding of its project within Antonio Gramsci's theories of ideology and hegemony (primarily championed by Michael Apple and Henry Giroux) offers a more nuanced and culturally sensitive analysis of the relationship between school structures and practices and individual student consciousness. This relationship continues to infuse cultural Marxist critical pedagogy today. A key feature of the Gramscian approach is the emphasis on analyzing how teachers and school practices (i.e. curriculum and rituals) provide justifications for inequality. In this characterization of education, teachers and schools function as justificatory agents within the hegemonic ideology-perpetuating process, providing a legitimacy to the existing class structure.⁵ Ultimately, cultural Marxism aims to explain how the practices and ideologies of schools interrelate, how they impact individuals and how to counteract their influences (a process often described as counterhegemony.)

determinate relationship between school practices and student personalities, beliefs and dispositions because of their social class backgrounds, I argue that the mediating process is a lot more complex and not reducible to comparisons of the school day to the factory schedule. Instead, in keeping with later cultural Marxist analyses, working class students participate in the process of forming self-conceptions influenced by social class features of schooling. The process, though, is fraught with contradictions.

Individual Identity and Commodity Fetishism

As a result of the continued analysis of the rituals, practices and ideologies of schooling and their influences on students, cultural Marxists contribute important resources for the analysis of commodity fetishism and its relationship to exploitative schooling. For example, writing at the end of the 1990s, Denis Carlson and Michael Apple observe:

Identity is being reshaped by the new consumerism organized around market niches... Each of these niches is defined according to a particular, highly specialized consumer identity, so that more and more we define who we are by the products we consume and the images of self attached to them. The commodified self becomes emptied of any meaning other than the commercialized sign it embodies and the identity it represents.⁶

Carlson and Apple argue that students draw upon cultural images as much as imagined work futures to define themselves and their social class identities. They cite Philip Wexler who argues that students' "central and defining activity in school is to perform the social interactional labor which enables them to establish at least the image of a [class] identity."⁷ They then conclude:

It will not be enough to help young people critique popular cultural representations of identity, although this is certainly needed. The challenge for public schools and other educational institutions is to provide a context for developing ways of becoming somebody—ones that are more personally and collectively empowering and more consistent with democratic conceptions of self and community.⁸

The cultural Marxist perspective within critical pedagogy offers important resources for analyzing the intersection of the ways students come to understand themselves within the exploitative conditions of schools, while also outlining strategies for creating pedagogical and school changes that respond to such conditions. Despite

these valuable contributions, cultural Marxism does not attend to the contradiction in self-conception experienced by working class students attending schools characterized by middle class ideologies. Before making that argument more explicit, I first summarize the additional resources that apply to my analysis of commodity fetishism and schooling and then I examine the concept most closely associated with individual self-conception, critical pedagogy and schooling: resistance. It particularly reveals why cultural Marxism requires a more nuanced discussion of identity. I begin with how the cultural Marxist perspective contributes to the general analysis.

Michael Apple argues that schools equate “normal” with dominant class norms/habitus, and school practices provide the “mechanisms through which dominant ideologies operate.”⁹ He also posits that we come to see students as embodying those labels. He aptly observes:

Educators have developed categories and modes of perception which reify or thingify individuals so that they (the educators) can confront students as institutional abstractions rather than as concrete persons with whom they have real ties in the process of cultural and economic reproduction.¹⁰

He argues that the “categories by which we differentiate ‘smart’ children from ‘stupid,’ ‘academic’ areas from ‘non-academic,’ ‘play’ activity from ‘learning’ or ‘work’ activity, and even ‘students’ from ‘teachers,’”¹¹ are all labels that contribute to schools and teachers treating individual students differently.

The label and all that goes with it is likely to be used by the individual’s peers and his or her custodians (e.g. other children, teachers, and administrators) to define him or her. It governs nearly all of the conduct toward the person, and, more importantly, the definition ultimately

governs the student's conduct toward these others, thereby acting to support a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹²

Apple makes an argument similar to mine. Students partially understand themselves through the labels offered to them in the context of their school experiences:

Usually the 'deviant' label has an essentializing quality in that a person's (here a student's) entire relationship to an institution is conditioned by the category applied to him. He or she is this and only this. The point is similar to Coffman's argument that the person to whom a deviant label is applied by others or by an institution is usually viewed as morally inferior, and his or her 'condition' or behavior is quite often interpreted as evidence of his or her 'moral culpability.' Thus, such labels are not neutral, at least not in their significance for the person. By the very fact that the labels are tinged with moral significance – not only is the child different but also inferior – their application has a profound impact.¹³

Apple accurately describes the power of the process of commodity fetishism, at least through its more obvious manifestations in the common school practice of labeling students. He also accurately captures the way that working class students internalize culpability for their lack of ability to display "normal" practices and skills when he observes that marginalized students thus understand that their failure is self-generated. "It is my fault. If only I had tried harder."¹⁴

In response to the analyses offered by Apple and other cultural Marxists, critical pedagogy has long offered conceptual and practical responses to "resist" the oppressive and exploitative features of schooling. Within the literature of critical pedagogy, resistance generally refers to any sort of oppositional action resulting from students making politically situated interpretations of themselves, their internal motivations and their broader social contexts. As Henry Giroux explains, resistance

“emerges out of a latent or overt ideological condemnation of the underlying repressive ideologies that characterize schools in general.”¹⁵ Of course, marginalized students might also resist or reject evidence that they are being exploited and oppressed. Consequently, we find a second type of resistance, often discussed in more recent work evaluating what happens when teachers attempt to challenge dominant hegemonic ideologies with dominant-group students. Related to this type of resistance theory, the rise of critical pedagogy has sparked another line of research into how privileged students react to or resist the content of politically motivated educational interventions. Thus, the literature draws upon distinctions between the acceptance and rejection of oppressive features of schooling/larger culture. Depending upon the researcher’s focus, the target group is sometimes the privileged and at other times the marginalized.

As may be obvious, resistance involves aspects of individual agency and identity, but rather than exploring how those features intertwine, the literature of critical pedagogy has focused on either identifying resistance or nurturing it within students. While these are both important lines of analysis, they generally suffer from a lack of theoretical clarity about what constitutes resistance, a task besieged by a wide range of conceptual hurdles.

One approach entails equating resistance with effectiveness, but considerable problems arise when attempting to define resistance through how well it furthers the stated goals of those initiating some action. The difficulty is revealed in Joan Weitz’s question. “Is a strategy effective if it improves an individual’s life without

creating broader change or if its effects are only short-lasting?”¹⁶ No clear answer exists within the literature of critical pedagogy, for we can mount arguments to base educational responses on either sort of approach. We might very well embrace a student action as resistance even if it only benefits the individual student, without disrupting larger oppressive/exploitative structures, and we might also foster legitimate “resistances” that are short-lived. That sort of resistance might be unsatisfying to many teachers because, while it may help some students for short periods of time, their acts of resistance do not contribute to the fundamental changing of the social structures deemed oppressive in the first place. If we counter with the argument that resistance must include some sort of broader change aimed at disrupting power discrepancies, then we would need some mechanism for assessing effectiveness (along with the criteria for what “effectiveness” means.) Stomblor and Padavic¹⁷ convincingly argue that the effectiveness criterion might veil small acts of resistance that, when considered collectively, act as the foundation for later change. These varied observations reveal that defining resistance through effectiveness is a difficult approach, one that most critical pedagogists eschew.

A second approach asks whether or not an action counts as resistance if the agent’s intention is to resist, even if the action might not truly be effective. This seems to fit analyses of the sort begun by Paul Willis¹⁸ and those influenced by his work. It removes the problematic task of determining whether or not a candidate resistance action was effective or not, but it grounds the definition in the need to understand a person’s intentions. Joan Weitz¹⁹ observes that judging intention

depends upon a researcher's and/or a teacher's interpretation of resistance acts. This opens the possibility for the researcher/teacher to ascribe to students' political agendas or intentions that they do not otherwise possess. It also means that teachers most certainly will misinterpret acts of resistance in either direction (judging some acts incorrectly as examples while missing the political-motivations of many others.) While Willis admits that resistance analysis involves researcher interpretation,²⁰ defining resistance through intent involves theoretical interpretation and insight that do not seem to advance the critical project in helpful ways.

Because defining resistance is such a troublesome task, many critical pedagogists reject it as an analytical category, leading some to argue the more extreme position that most resistance to schooling cannot be characterized as politically motivated, or as the result of rational analysis.²¹ I believe this charge misconstrues the arguments made by Paul Willis and others; i.e. it fails to account for the general assertion that students *do not* consciously or "completely" understand how their rejection of schooling is bound within hegemonic social forces, *even as they resist*. That stated, the charge does reveal the difficulty associated with "finding" resistances that we might positively correlate to critical analysis (understood to be associated with examinations of power relationships.)

I raise these problems associated with defining the concept of resistance for two reasons. First, it remains a central conceptual tool within current critical pedagogy. Second, it illustrates the need for continued development of a theory of the relationship between individual identity and autonomy within critical pedagogy.

The troubling notion associated with defining resistance captures the heart of the difficulties associated with forging identity projects amidst oppressive conditions and negotiating contradictions. Social categories like class, for example, foster identifications with often incommensurable “worlds” like that of the working class home and the dominant class school; identifying what a clear or “proper” resistance should be in a given situation may be impossible as it may require students to choose between competing self-conceptions. As such, considering intention and effectiveness are important features associated with attempting to negotiate those contradictions. Exploring the contours of ongoing identity negotiation within the features associated with exploitation addresses another feature associated with the resistance literature: the fostering of ongoing resistance. We have yet to offer guidance for how one would understand resistance or how to conceptualize it. I suggest that doing so is an important part of the next phase of critical pedagogy, but we should do so under a conceptually related yet differently articulated conceptual aim. That aim should be a conception of critical autonomy. Let me elaborate.

Critique

The resources that cultural Marxists offer, while certainly important, do not adequately address an important feature of working class experiences of schooling: the negotiating of identity contradictions that emerge amongst the ongoing processes of exploitation and commodity fetishism. Current articulations of critical pedagogy offer important structural analyses of schooling, aspects like curriculum,

school practices and epistemological issues, but they do not closely address the issue of how such structures influence individual student identities, and again, how students might work within existing structures to develop new self-conceptions and to make choices relatively free from exploitation. For example, consider the position of Carlson and Apple again. They argue that schools must create the conditions for students “to provide a context for developing ways of becoming somebody—ones that are more personally and collectively empowering and more consistent with democratic conceptions of self and community.”²² After making such a recommendation, they point to Apple and Beane’s brief text that describes examples of democratic schools. While the book contributes an important set of examples of schools inspired by the emancipatory project of cultural Marxism, none of the examples link schooling to individual struggles with identity development. I am not arguing here that the text is not valuable, nor that the schools presented do not offer important examinations of potentially emancipatory educational spaces. To be clear, my point is that the literature of critical pedagogy – from within the specific cultural Marxist perspective I am considering here – does not offer a linking between individual identity and schooling in as detailed way as we need. Theorists often offer examples of school-wide and pedagogical resources, but the lack of focus on the individual student within existing analyses emphasizes the importance of moving our analysis toward a theory of individual identity and autonomy in response to the challenges raised by the links between schooling, commodity fetishism, exploitation and self-conception. Doing so will not only result in a better

articulated theory; it will also result in better developed school policies and pedagogical recommendations.

The most fruitful candidate for such a theoretical tool is that of autonomy. It is an approach begun by the cultural Marxist Scott Fletcher.²³ I agree with his assertion that autonomy holds potential for promoting emancipatory educational projects, and I return to Fletcher's work in the next chapter. I also conclude this chapter with a more detailed argument about why autonomy promises to address the problems associated with social class and schooling, so I suspend my full argument until I have completed the present survey of resources provided by critical pedagogy.

To be clear, I have drawn upon the theoretical tools offered by the cultural Marxist approach to critical pedagogy in the analysis offered so far in this project. As I have demonstrated in this section, this perspective offers ways for analyzing and explaining how power works through schools to saturate how students think about themselves and their places in the world in fundamental ways, ways that involve relative positions of power. I argue that my analysis of social class and exploitation, driven by a concern for the influence on student identity through commodity fetishism requires a theoretical framework that provides more specificity about how to respond to the fetishizing process within schooling. Given my understanding of the process of commodity fetishism, an adequate theory of critical autonomy will have to articulate strategies for interrupting the process. Those strategies should provide students with the resources to analyze how they come to understand themselves and fundamental aspects of what they consider to be their

identities amidst what Marx describes as the “mystifying” process of commodity fetishism. It should also help students develop the skills to make choices in environments that will continue to be characterized by the process of commodity fetishism and the norms associated with the dominant class. Working class students, for example, will need to fashion identities and make choices in oppressive environments, and the sort of self and social negotiation needed in such environments may involve a variety of skills, ones that a critical theory of identity might develop. Cultural Marxism, while offering invaluable resources to this theoretical project, must focus its attention on articulating a theory of identity/autonomy within the exploitative and commodified educational spaces.

Before exploring a definition of autonomy from within perspective of critical pedagogy, the subject of the fourth chapter, in the next section I turn to the second major perspective within current manifestations of critical pedagogy: postmodernism.

Postmodern Critical Pedagogy

The ascendance of theories of postmodernism and post-structuralism created a wave of controversy within critical pedagogy. Some cultural Marxists, like Michael Apple, have attempted to incorporate many of the ideas and themes taken up by postmodernist theories while remaining grounded within a decidedly “modernist” framework. Others, like Henry Giroux and Stanley Aronowitz, have adopted the postmodern label, although how completely “postmodern” their approaches remain raise questions as to the proper placement of their theoretical positions. For

example, the self-described “postmodern education” of Giroux and Aronowitz seems quite amenable to cultural Marxism:

We need to combine the modernist emphasis on the capacity of individuals to use critical reason in addressing public life with a critical postmodernist concern with how we might experience agency in the world constituted in differences unsupported by transcendent phenomena or metaphysical guarantees. In that way, critical pedagogy can reconstitute itself in terms that are both transformative and emancipatory.²⁴

Furthermore, they make a decidedly “modern” claim when they draw upon the language of transformative action: “Freedom consists in the capacity of people and groups to transform knowledge in accordance with their own plans.”²⁵

Regardless of the problems with crafting a precise categorical framework from which to assess a theorist’s position with regard to postmodern orthodoxy (perhaps an oxymoron in the first place), many critical pedagogists regard themselves and their projects as being greatly influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist theories. (For ease of discussion, I will henceforth call them postmodern.) Generally, postmodern critical pedagogists agree in three general ways. These include claims about power and knowledge, the self and resistance.

Drawing upon the influences of discourse analysis and literary theories, postmodern critical theorists “deny that language provides us with any privileged access to the world it pretends to describe.”²⁶ Thus, postmodernists hold all claims regarding truth statements to be suspect; they cannot be independently validated by external standards. Similarly, drawing upon the work of Michel Foucault, they often argue that “we have to give up hope of ever acceding to a point of view that

could give us access to any complete and definitive knowledge...of what may constitute our historical limits.”²⁷ That is, all claims to knowledge are products of the discourse systems that produced them. As a result, postmodernists are often equated with Jean Lyotard’s²⁸ famous rejection of “grand metanarratives” in favor of local and partial perspectives – embracing more hesitant truth claims.

In keeping with their rejection of sweeping theories, postmodernists reject theories of identity that posit a unitary, essential self. Instead, theorists argue that we should consider individual identity as “fragmented.” Because their theory posits that individual perspectives are always partial and contingent, postmodern critical pedagogists emphasize the importance of understanding and engaging with individual perspectives and experiences. For example, drawing upon the work of Foucault and Butler, Thomas Popkewitz²⁹ argues that one important feature of postmodern critical pedagogy is the notion of “decentering” of the individual agent. As such, the individual we come to understand is always related to complex historical social processes and not the independent and free actions of an unsituated agent found within modern conceptions of agency. In a radical move, Foucault urges us to “get rid of the subject itself.”³⁰ Likewise, Popkewitz echoes Butler’s argument that “the decentering of the subject enables us to problematize our relation to present modes of reasoning by examining how an autonomous ‘self’ is historically constituted. The decentering of the subject, then, focuses on systems of ideas as historical practices through which the objects of the world are

constructed and become systems of action.”³¹ The individual recedes, and the focus of analysis becomes attuned to the structures that create “the individual.”

Like their modernist counterparts, postmodern critical pedagogists draw upon the concept of resistance to inform their work. As such, many of the problems I discuss in the last section still hold. But within the postmodern analysis, resistance becomes an even more problematic notion than within the cultural Marxist perspective, because power influences all perspectives, theories and truth claims. Within this theoretical framework, we cannot step “outside” structures of power (discourses), therefore there is no non-power influenced position from which to construct a resistance project. Thus, any claims we make that we are resisting power structures are already compromised, and while we might perceive that we are resisting some features of the power structure we seek to alter, we are always drawing upon the tools of discourse and their relationships to power structures to understand ourselves, our resistances and the world. Therefore we are never completely “resisting.”

Postmodernists often draw upon Foucault’s argument that social institutions define what we consider to be normal, what we consider to be acceptable behavior, as well as what constitutes being a subject in Western society. Power has both an external controlling force on our behaviors and an internal hold on our desires. Foucault tells us that the result is that “you are always trapped.” Thus resistance must always draw upon material presented to the agent through power

systems. In this sense, there can be no single resistance, no breaking free from power relationships.

Individual Identity and Commodity Fetishism

Given the previous discussion of the influence of power on the conception of the individual and the resulting difficulty in constructing resistance projects, it may seem impossible to draw upon postmodernism to construct a theory of autonomy. To discuss individuality within a postmodern perspective is somewhat of a conceptual sleight of hand, so the theory of autonomy I propose will be informed by many of the features of the postmodern analysis without a thorough acceptance of the “postmodern perspective.”

Again, while postmodernists generally assert that there is no core self (a contention generally acknowledged by current cultural Marxists as well), postmodern conceptions of resistance demonstrate that despite the rhetorical flourishes that reject notions of individuality, postmodern theorists do worry a great deal about individual agency. Of particular help is the postmodern focus on how individuals come to understand themselves in ways that are radically influenced by power relationships. Their discussion of the “lack” of a subject position is a useful analytic tactic, but when we move from analysis to implications for individual agency, we find that even postmodern theorists who proclaim the “death” of the subject, do so in order to open opportunities for individual agency. While the postmodern perspective does not offer much by way of theorizing school policy nor pedagogical responses, it does contribute aspects to each of the other three

criteria. Within postmodern critical pedagogy, we find, then, two main aspects to the theoretical approaches to approaching individual identity within structures of dominance and what I have been discussing as commodity fetishism. I discuss those features before moving to a critique. In turn, I discuss two related postmodern topics: (1) resistance within contingency and (2) resistance as deconstruction and performance.

Resistance within Contingency: Because of their radical critique of power relationships, postmodernists argue that any answers, any resistances of oppression will necessarily remain within relationships of power. Thus, the sources of resistance will always emerge from within the contexts of the very power relationships that give rise to the oppressive circumstances being resisted. For example, Thomas Popkewitz states that “resistance is imbricated within power not outside of it.”³² This raises a unresolved conceptual tension.

This social theory creates a space for undetermined agency by destabilizing the conditions that confine and intern consciousness and its principles of order. Making the forms of reasoning and rules for ‘telling the truth’ contingent, historical, and susceptible to critique, is a practice to dislodge the ordering principles, thereby creating a greater range of possibility for the subject to act.³³

The focus on theorizing resistance within power relationships and offering a hyper-reluctance to theorize agency as freedom from power is an important feature of the theoretical project needed in this analysis of exploitation and commodity fetishism. Students may not be able to “undo” the influences on their fundamental conceptions of themselves, and to the extent that they can it might be a continual process of renegotiation while they live amidst the features of exploitation and

oppression. Thus, we must develop the resources for helping students negotiate their self-conceptions within the ongoing challenges that the processes of commodity fetishism and exploitation create, processes that may require more than “one time” negotiations. We must help students to live with contradiction amidst the fetishizing tendencies of their social contexts, contexts that may never be “free” of such exploitative influences.

Resistance as Deconstruction and Performance: Both Patti Lather and Thomas Popkewitz turn to deconstruction in order to understand “how systems of ideas discipline individuals to act, think and ‘see’ themselves in the world.”³⁴ Jean Anyon³⁵ argues that deconstruction involves

identifying the rhetorical operations that ground an argument and then demonstrating that the terms being used are contradictory or philosophically unstable. This may involve locating a set of conceptual categories that are thought to be discrete and in opposition to each other, and demonstrating that they are in actuality not in opposition but are definitionally interdependent. A major goal of deconstruction is to show that many of the categorical oppositions that permeate traditional social analyses (e.g. male/female, culture/nature) are socially constructed rather than natural and immutable.³⁶

As an extension of the process of deconstruction, theorists articulate projects of resistance to power, but the postmodern notion of resistance must be understood within the general theory of power. For example, Foucault argues that the process of normalization never completely dictates how people will respond in given circumstances. People always resist normalizing discourses in multiple, surprising ways. Thus, these innate resistances offer places for building more strategic ones:

There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where

relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies.³⁷

We see the influence of the theory of resistance within power structures in both Lather³⁸ and Popkewitz's³⁹ work. Popkewitz, for example, draws upon Butler (who builds on Foucault) to argue that rules must be performed, and while we inherit rules, there is a gap between the ideal rule form and how individuals interpret and perform them. Thus, the gap between the two opens the possibility of a creative reworking of the rules and how one enacts them. An agent creates "identity through a referential repetition, that 'provisionally institutes an identity and at the same time [opens] the category as a site of permanent political contest.'" The subject created by resistance in its name is simultaneously what is being resisted."⁴⁰ Patti Lather argues that "the task becomes not so much to invent or incite as to use praxis as a material force to identify and amplify what is already begun toward a practice of living on. This is a praxis that can survive the critique of Marxism, a praxis immanent in practices that helps us think not only *with* but *in* our actions."⁴¹

As such, the political subject is always "in-process" and not capable of claiming agency. Unlike the nihilistic "postmodernists of reaction," Lather argues that we need educational praxis that embraces "ontological stammering, concepts with a lower ontological weight, a praxis without guaranteed subjects or objects, oriented toward the as-yet-incompletely thinkable conditions and potentials of given arrangements."⁴² The postmodern discussion of deconstructing binaries, analyzing

power relationships and theorizing relative agency amidst contradictions, addresses the tasks associated with the first three of our criteria, but I argue in the following section that the postmodern tools are incomplete and fraught with contradictions.

Critique

Despite their work to situate postmodern theory as a perspective distinct from other forms of critical pedagogy, I argue that it is a form of critique that complements the cultural Marxist tradition. First, current forms of postmodern critical pedagogy contribute to, but fail to distinguish themselves from, the discussions of power and identity that I have surveyed in the cultural Marxist section. While the radical power formula that Popkewitz attributes to Foucaultian analysis is important, it does not subvert Gramscian power analyses. Instead it furthers that project by pointing to the complexities associated with the hegemonic powers of structures and ideologies. There is no conceptual contradiction between the position advocated by cultural Marxism with regard to how individuals come to understand themselves within structures of domination – even if we accept (as I argue we should) the important Foucaultian argument that power is generative as well as repressive (with regard to individual identity). Instead, I argue that such a conception of power drives the analysis of commodity fetishism and identity that I present in the preceding chapter.

Second, the postmodern strategy of decentering the subject is just that, an analytical strategy: one that is already at work within cultural Marxism, though perhaps not with the same level of emphasis. It is a useful analytical move because

it forces us to examine how individuals are constituted by the power relationships surrounding them. But within the writing of postmodern critical pedagogists, it is a temporary move. At the end of their analyses, they return to *centering* the subject once again. Consider Popkewitz's arguments here:

The decentering of the subject, we have argued, does not prevent the subject from acting and does not abandon the Enlightenment project. The strategy of decentering the subject is itself a product of the very self-reflectivity produced through an enlightenment ethos. The decentering of the subject has its own sense of irony: there is an acceptance of the need to construct knowledge that can enable people to act intentionally. The subject is made into a dimension of the questionable and of "insistent contest and resignification," not as a foundation of research that is taken as the unquestionable.⁴³

The quote raises an unresolved tension: "This social theory creates a space for undetermined agency by destabilizing the conditions that confine and intern consciousness and its principles of order. Making the forms of reasoning and rules for 'telling the truth' contingent, historical, and susceptible to critique, is a practice to dislodge the ordering principles, *thereby creating a greater range of possibility for the subject to act.*"⁴⁴ (emphasis added) Thus, the task of decentering the subject in order to analyze power relationships has at its base a "modernist" project, the agency of the subject, the individual. Postmodern critical pedagogy, then, can be usefully considered a form of analysis, but one that returns us to a central task associated with the "modernist" project: theorizing individual agency within and through oppressive circumstances. While postmodern theorists contribute important details to the construction of a theoretical response to commodity fetishism and exploitation within schooling, we can draw upon their particular

analytical contributions without resorting to an acceptance of postmodernism writ large.

As I have already articulated, I understand the process of commodity fetishism as requiring a theory that addresses the way schools center a variety of dominant class practices and norms with what it means to be "educated." Because of its emphasis on how context shapes individual identity, I argue that critical pedagogy should draw upon postmodern ideas and analysis, but because of important theoretical inconsistencies resulting from full-blown acceptance of the postmodern position, critical pedagogy should reject postmodernism as a theoretical vantage point from which to construct pedagogical theory. Similar to cultural Marxists, postmodern critical pedagogists argue that ideological pressures exert "inescapable determinative influence on the ideas of possible selves available to individuals."⁴⁵ As a result, "freedom amounts to the recognition that choices and circumstances are negotiated."⁴⁶ Thus, key aspects of the postmodern analysis offer tools to address the process of commodity fetishism within exploitative schooling.

From the postmodernists, we derive the importance of examining binary positions and complicating them. It is important that we help students examine binary categories that fundamentally drive aspects of identity like social class, race, gender and sexuality. For example, as an historical and conceptual analysis of social class reveals, social class is *a/ways* implicated with the "absent center" of the dominant class.⁴⁷

It is also important to understand how schooling *produces* powerful aspects of student identity. This contributes to our theoretical resources to address the problem of ongoing identity negotiation. Postmodern theories of performativity may point to potential directions for an emancipatory theory of identity and agency, one that articulates ways to respond to commodified binary categories, for “opening” spaces for student agency. As the theory of performativity suggests, we must resist seeing our students as exhibiting “false consciousness” but that the very commodified aspects of identity *are* their identities.

In the third and final section of this chapter, I turn to the third major perspective within current critical pedagogy, the relatively recent emergence of a group I describe as the “Neo-traditionalists.”

Neo-traditionalist Critical Pedagogy

Recently, a small group of theorists has been arguing that we must “return” critical pedagogy to its Freirean-Marxian roots (e.g. Peter McLaren, Paula Allman, Ramin Farahmandpur, David Hill, and Michael Cole). They attempt to reconstruct critical pedagogy against what they describe as a trend towards depoliticized liberal humanism by “reintroducing” the “critical” to the tradition, as well as a firm rejection of postmodern analysis. Peter McLaren is their most vocal spokesperson. He states that “there are not many direct heirs to the Marxist tradition among leftist educational scholars in the United States.”⁴⁸ McLaren elaborates:

Part of the problem faced by the educational left today is that even among the most progressive of educators there appears to exist an

ominous resignation produced by the seeming inevitability of capital, even as financial institutions expand capacity in inverse proportion to a decline in living standards and job security. It has become an article of faith in the critical educational tradition that there is no viable alternative to capitalism. When class relations are discussed, they are not talked about in the Marxist sense of foregrounding the labor-capital dialectic; surplus value extraction, or the structure of property ownership, but instead refer to consumption, lifestyle politics, theories of social stratification in terms of access to consumption, or job, or income, and cultural prestige.⁴⁹

Thus, for the Neo-traditionalists, critical pedagogy must center its analysis on how capitalism structures society, consciousness and by extension, schooling. In the following passage, McLaren is particularly condemning: “Arguably the vast majority of educationalists who are committed to critical pedagogy and multicultural education propagate versions of it that identify with their own bourgeois class interests.”⁵⁰

As a corrective, the Neo-traditionalists propose a “revised” and “revolutionary” critical pedagogy based on the realization of hitherto oppressed full human potential. As such the “basic premise for the revolutionary educator is to create the social environment and social consciousness necessary for the human being to reach their [sic] full potential in social capacities.”⁵¹ The perspective embraces a core set of principles, fundamentally driven by a return to analyzing economic influences on all aspects of social life, thus grounding critical pedagogy in class analysis. As such, it would be easy to mistake this group’s project as a simple return to the earliest forms of critical pedagogy. They argue that their goals are more complex and motivated by the increasing polarity of social class power within the United States and the successful hegemony of oppressive globalized capitalism

worldwide. They argue that they aim to re-establish the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy within a class analysis, while not returning the discussion to the simplistic “correspondence” theories of the 1970s.

The Neo-traditionalists advance a general set of propositions. First, social class is the fundamental organizing feature of oppression/exploitation, and it is organized by the labor relations associated with globalized capitalism. Their emphasis on the primacy of social class as the most powerful explanatory feature of oppression is aptly captured by their claim that the “class relation runs through our personhood.”⁵² Second, they argue that schools condition students to accept the inevitability of capitalism in general (rather than particular work futures associated with the shop floor, as in earlier accounts), and that this conditioning feature of schooling represents capitalism’s “weakest link.” This, then, is the focus of the critical pedagogist within the school. McLaren explains:

Following Marx, Rikowski notes that labor-power—our capacity to labor—takes the form of “human capital” in capitalist society. It has reality within the individual agent. Thus, labor-power is a distinctly *human force*. The worker is the active subject of production. He or she is necessary for the creation of surplus value. He or she provides through the living labor the skills, innovation, and cooperation upon which capital relies to enhance surplus value and to ensure its reproduction. Thus, by its very nature, labor-power cannot exist apart from the laborer.⁵³

To be clear, the Neo-traditionalists emphasize that they are not recirculating correspondence theories of the 1970s, a point made in the previous quote’s emphasis on the incomplete saturation of ideologies in individuals. Similar to Foucaultian theories of how power inscribes itself incompletely upon individual consciousness, as well as Butlerian performativity theory, the Neo-traditionalists

argue that the ideologies that support capitalism can only infiltrate the individual incompletely:

Insofar as schooling is premised upon generating the living commodity of labor-power, upon which the entire social universe of capital depends, it can become a foundation for human resistance. In other words, labor-power can be incorporated only so far. Workers, as the source of labor-power, can engage in acts of refusing alienating work as de-linking labor from capital's value form.⁵⁴

As a result, they advocate a pedagogical theory that centers its goal on developing students' capacities "to resist the 'capitalization' of subjectivity, a pedagogy that we have called revolutionary critical pedagogy."⁵⁵ Such strategies suggest that teachers need to help students develop class consciousness in order to release students' potential "consciousness waiting to happen." It is important, though, that class consciousness cannot be developed from within class positions without "outside" help. Furthermore, class consciousness requires political agency to sustain it and further develop it (praxis). As a result, the Neo-traditionalists focus on Paulo Freire's *conscientization* and dialogical pedagogical methods. This is evident in the appeal to developing critical consciousness, the emphasis on the social nature of learning, and the call for deep commitments to create learning environments that promote student empowerment, group discussion and the "student centered" questioning and discussion methodologies redolent of Freire's dialogical teaching. They also emphasize the necessity to develop politicized ties with other learners and teachers in order to support ongoing critical reflection of self and society. Finally, they encourage teachers to become radical class-based activists: "The larger goal we have stipulated for radical educationalists involves

direct participation with the masses in the discovery and charting of a socialist reconstruction and alternative to capitalism.”⁵⁶

Individual Identity and Commodity Fetishism

The Neo-traditionalist perspective is particularly useful because it challenges us to focus upon the relationships between schooling and the economic patterns associated with global capitalism. Although they have critiqued Wright’s work, I believe these theorists would be open to the general critique of education being exploitative, especially along class lines. Their renewed emphasis on fundamental arguments begun in the 1970s brings what might be an expected range of associated criticisms, but they do offer resources for understanding individual identity within the context of schooling that transforms dominant class norms into the standards by which student identities are defined.

While she does not elaborate on the relationship between an analysis that focuses on social class contradictions and its implications for interrupting commodity fetishism, Paula Allman does describe education in a way that echoes the analysis I offer in the last chapter:

We relate to knowledge as something to have, to accumulate in the first instance, rather than as something we use, test, question and produce. We also tend to develop a fetish for the qualifications that signify our possession of it. Knowledge can only become a commodity in relation to people if some of those people, what they are, are determined by their possession of knowledge and others by their need for it.⁵⁷

As a result, over the course of two texts, Allman stresses the importance of basing a renewed critical pedagogy upon Marx’s analysis of the contradictions associated

with social class relationships.⁵⁸ For example, in part, commodity fetishism can be seen as describing the process through which these opposites are understood individually as opposed to belonging to the same “internal relation.” As such, the norms that have come to represent academic excellence and intelligence that we trace to differences in social class involve disunited opposites that we experience as individual variables. In her analysis Allman argues that Marx’s work helps us to understand how the seemingly independent aspects of many working and dominant social class experiences are inextricably linked together, a central premise of the analysis I offered in the last chapter.⁵⁹

By focusing on contradictions, the Neo-traditionalist argument may contribute an important feature to a critical theory of individual agency, one that helps students understand themselves amidst the double bind-like influences of commodity fetishism. While I find the spirit of the contribution helpful, I argue that we need to develop more detailed analyses of the contradictions students face and how they intersect with their abilities to develop and sustain self-defined goals and direction, something that Allman and the other Neo-traditionalists do not offer. Instead, they move too quickly from theory to articulating pedagogical practice. Thus, I argue that their approach suffers from a similar critique to the one I make of cultural Marxists: little specificity with regard to how we might resist the multiple and conflicting influences of the commodification of the educated person within schools.

Critique

The Neo-traditionalist approach has two general problems, both of which emerge from the historical critiques of the early forms of critical pedagogy upon which they draw while also wishing to distance themselves. As much has been made of these two types of argument in the past, I will not dwell upon the traditional types of objections, and move instead to the main part of the critique I want to offer. I break the following critique into two parts. In the first, I focus on the centrality of social class analysis, and in the second, an analysis of critical consciousness.

While they try to avoid doing so, the Neo-traditionalists cannot avoid positing that social class is the basis for, or the foundation of, social oppression. This is evident in how they discuss the intersections of different aspects of social identity.

In the following, McLaren quotes Glenn Rikowski:

The class relation runs through our personhood. It is internal to us; we are labor, and we are capital. We are social beings incorporating antithetical social drives and forces. This fact sets off contradictions within our lives, and their solution can only come from the disintegration of ourselves as both capital and labor and our emergence as a new, non-capitalized life-form.⁶⁰

Again, given the abundance of critiques that emerged from within the last thirty years of identity politics, the Neo-traditionalists are careful to emphasize the importance of other types of social justice projects, that their call for a renewed class analysis does not negate the need for other projects as well. For example, Peter McLaren is quite careful on this point:

I believe that race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation constitute an interconnected ensemble of social practices and relations and to a certain extent constitute different logics that arise within the same

material relations of capitalist exploitation. My position is not a riposte to the relative autonomy thesis (in its various incarnations throughout the years) or to nonclass processes, but rather a criticism of postmodernism's petit-bourgeois-driven movement away from a "represented exterior" of signifying practices that renders an anticapitalist project non only unlikely but firmly inadmissible.⁶¹

Furthermore, McLaren attempts to clarify:

Class and nonclass processes fundamentally shape one another. My argument is not that class should subsume all other social and cultural processes or that an analysis of class should outweigh an analysis of gender or race or sexuality, but that it should occupy a position of strategic centrality in educational reform efforts in the sense of taking into consideration the profound effects of globalized capitalist social relations.⁶²

Despite McLaren's attempt to qualify his recommendations for the centrality of social class analysis, his writing tries to have it both ways. That is, in the last quote, he argues that social class should not "outweigh" the other types of analyses, although it should be "strategically" at the center. One gets the sense in their collected writings that if we were to adopt a communist or socialist economic alternative, other forms of social injustice would disappear. To be generous, I do not necessarily believe that McLaren and his peers mean to argue such a point, but because they are so intent to refocus critical pedagogy upon social class analysis, their writing does seem to suggest that altering social class relationships will thereby alter all other forms of social injustice. While reforming our economic system in favor of a more egalitarian model might very well alter social interactions in a variety of profound ways, it does not follow that doing so would necessarily alter racism and sexism, for example. Therefore, I believe that the neo-traditionalist argument is needlessly polarizing; we need not offer a social class analysis, nor

even call for a *renewed* social class analysis, while needing it to act as *the* driving force of all social justice projects. While it is true that it does powerfully intersect with ethnicity and gender, for example, as I argue in the first and second chapters, social class analysis can reveal certain aspects of our social experiences while not others.

The second problem associated with the Neo-traditionalist position is one that also emerges from their desire to enlighten the working class, to develop a class-based critical consciousness based on the “better” analyses that they offer. Their theory of critical consciousness involves reading the world as “an objective reality, independent of oneself, capable of being known.”⁶³ This leads to a categorical analysis that threatens to simplify the complexities of events and situations. Their work exemplifies the sort that Burbules and Berk describe when they observe that “learning to ‘decode’ means to find the actual, hidden meaning of things. ...It is a crucial aspect of Critical Theory that dialogue does converge upon a set of understandings tied to a capacity to act toward social change — and social change of a particular type.”⁶⁴

But even more troubling than the continued reliance of seeming categorical responses to oppression, the description of what “critically conscious” students would be doing is not defined well enough. One might quite justly counter that critical pedagogues do offer visions of what it means to be emancipated, most often captured by some version of the Freirean concept of *conscientization* or critical consciousness. While the goal of developing critical consciousness is clearly

defined in a certain way, it is as of yet, incomplete in its articulation. For example, this line from Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed finds its way into much writing describing itself as critical pedagogy: Conscientization "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."⁶⁵ Therefore, critical consciousness entails two parts: (1) the perception of power influences in one's world, and (2) the on-going attempt to make change as a result of one's critical analysis. The two reinforce one another.

This is the formula that the Neo-traditionalists also emphasize: the necessary link between critical analysis and political action. My point is that the literature of critical pedagogy makes this sort of definitional claim, and then we move to an exploration of the teacher-student relationship without an exploration of what such an analysis and its resulting political action entails. Without solving the problems associated with helping students identify what resistance means, critical pedagogy fails to address the complexities with such a praxis. The lack of theoretical development is important because, as I have been articulating throughout this dissertation, oppression creates contradictions, and how to forge one's way through them may not be readily obvious. Students may be faced with choices that involve compromises, with none being easily seen as "critical" in the sense that we often find in the literature.

For example, students might occupy conflicting identifications with both oppressed and oppressor groups (e.g., white, working class female). But the critical consciousness that the Neo-traditionalists advocate is not well defined enough to

respond to such contradictions. Instead, it posits a *way of knowing* which Freire considered the only true way of knowing: "The more accurately men grasp true causality, the more critical their understanding of reality will be."⁶⁶ Designations of accuracy depend upon access to the objective reality of a given situation, but situations associated with identity and commodity fetishism are often much more complicated than categorical designations will allow. They might entail contradictions that admit no categorically "correct" judgment. The Neo-traditionalists thus promote an analysis and the discovery of "best" actions according to such work, a task that may doom teachers and students to search for categorically clear responses to contradictions in their lives. For example, Allman argues that a "critical perception of reality enables people to know what needs changing."⁶⁷ Again, as the research of the last chapter reveals, this denies the complexities associated with social class experience. No clear "best" truth may reveal itself, and this is not because of faulty reasoning, but because there may be no single, easy to establish solution.

Finally, as many have observed about Freirean methods in general, the approach implies that teachers already have reached critical consciousness. Allman draws upon Freire to argue that the "revolutionary" approach values educational projects that "are based on developing critical...perception of reality among the participants... He expects socialist cultural workers and revolutionary leaders to have already developed this perception."⁶⁸ Thus, despite the reliance upon dialogue and co-explorations of educational projects, we might read the project the Neo-

traditionalists describe as positing the learner as beginning the process as *flawed*. While careful reading of their texts reveals that they argue repeatedly for privileging individual student perspectives and providing students with access to power (e.g., “voice”), their project is still susceptible to this long-standing critique of critical pedagogy as being the tool of “missionary” work of dominant class academics. While I read the Neo-traditionalists more favorably, they remain susceptible to this sort of critique, I argue, because they have not yet articulated how their discussions of critical class consciousness intersect with a theory of identity and agency. As such, their general recommendations regarding social class agency remain too vague and open to critique. Without more detail, they remain open to the criticism that critical teachers define “it” and “do it” to our students (despite the language of “with” – education encourages a development “to” approach).

Once again, I understand the process of commodity fetishism as requiring a theory that addresses the way schools center a variety of dominant class practices and norms with what it means to be “educated.” The Neo-traditionalist perspective within critical pedagogy offers two important contributions to that effort.

First, the Neo-traditionalist insistence on the importance of social class analysis is vital to an analysis of schooling within the United States. Given the paucity of discourse on social class and the over whelming identification with the middle class by people who might otherwise be considered to be working class by outside observers, despite the increasing evidence that social class divides are growing more sharply drawn and influential on school experiences, we need an educational

discourse on social class and education. Second, and as I discussed above, the Neo-traditionalist return to Marx's focus on the contradictions at the heart of many social class relationships emphasizes the importance of an analysis that is able to understand the ways that commodity fetishism influences self conception amidst contradictions. While the previous two aspects of the Neo-traditionalist position are worth drawing upon, to the extent that the perspective suffers from long-critiques of critical pedagogy, it should be rejected as a general approach.

Conclusion

Regardless of the differences among the "schools" of critical pedagogy, they are united by the aim to foster power-focused inquiry projects in schools. To that end, all three perspectives offer recommendations for reconceptualizing schools, curricula, teacher and student relationships and classroom environments to respond to social oppression and exploitation in its many guises. The historical trajectory of critical pedagogy clearly demonstrates that its object of analysis is social oppression and the power relationships (including structures and ideologies) that support such oppression. Across the three perspectives I have analyzed in this chapter, though, I have leveled a similar fundamental critique. As of yet, critical pedagogy has not articulated an adequate theoretical framework to address the multiple and conflicting influences of exploitation and commodity fetishism upon individual self-conception. Put in another way, critical pedagogy has developed tools for inquiry into how power works in schools, but it has not yet articulated a

clear understanding of *students as inquirers, nor tools for inquiry* into how power manifests itself in their lives and decisions they make.²

Because current descriptions of critical pedagogy center on the teacher-controlled aspect of a power-focused inquiry process, discussions obscure the difficulties of developing personal responses to exploitation and oppression from within the contradictory locations created by oppression. As a result, critical pedagogy focuses on what *teachers* do to, for, and ideally with students, rather than focusing on how *students* might think and what they might do as they respond to the features of oppression they experience in their lives. The difference of focus might be slight, but I believe it to be quite important. The former position allows us to construct educational practices and curricula without truly focusing on the details of developing self understandings and making life choices based on a power-focused analysis. I suggest that we can make this mistake even when we purposefully seek to co-create power-focused inquiry projects with students, ones that are dependent on students' lived realities, ones that we might call "dialogical" and inclusive.

As the preceding analysis has also shown, turning to the concept of resistance to build a conceptual framework is fraught with difficulties. Such an approach is

² Some might object and point to Paulo Freire's descriptions of developing critical consciousness as such a theoretical framework. As I argued within my analysis of the Neo-traditionalists who draw heavily upon Freire's work, those approaches most closely describe the teacher and pedagogical steps to *bring someone to critical consciousness without focusing on how the individual functions within the confines of exploitative circumstances to draw upon the resources of critical consciousness.*

bound to fail because it begins with an individual conception of the “good” in mind; although such conceptions are quite loose, when we construct critical pedagogy on helping students to “resist” oppression, we begin with the premise that they must conform in some way to making individual responses to counter in some way the instance of oppression we have identified.

Thus, the position I advocate asks: What does it mean to make decisions about oneself and one’s place in the world relatively free from the conditions of exploitation and commodity fetishism? Constructing an answer to that question requires a theory of individual agency. I believe that critical pedagogy can usefully draw upon the concept of autonomy found within mainstream philosophy and liberal educational theory in particular to help construct an account that is focused on agency within oppressive social structures like the ones of social class and schooling I have described in earlier chapters. Such a move has two benefits. First, the concept is wholly grounded within an exploration of what a relatively “free” individual response to the influences of exploitative and coercive others might entail. Thus, it forces us to focus our attention on the aspect of critical pedagogy that needs development. Second, it has the benefit of a long line of rich debate and inquiry, and while much of that work might reside within traditions that do not focus as heavily upon how social structures inhibit individual agency, many theorists do. Regardless, the task is not to advance a theory of autonomy simpliciter, but to construct a theory of autonomy that addresses the concerns of critical pedagogy – more aptly described as “critical autonomy.” That is the focus of the next chapter.

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CHAPTER IV

THE PARADOX OF CRITICAL AUTONOMY

Introduction

When later in the year I interviewed Tracey, now in year 7 of an inner city predominantly working class comprehensive, she told me, unsolicited, that she was a 3, 3, 3. When I asked her how she felt about that, she replied that it was better than being a nothing, but still “rubbish.”¹

- Diane Reay, *Finding or Losing Yourself*

It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl - the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface - and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.²

- Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

As the first quote indicates, Tracey interprets her sixth-grade “high stakes” exam score as a statement about who she is.¹ While Diane Reay argues that the score is powerfully influenced by the social class features of Tracey’s school experience, the young girl nevertheless uses the score to help her understand herself within her social context. As I argue in Chapter Two, this is an example of commodity fetishism in practice. Critical pedagogy aims to help a student like Tracey both understand how the “fishbowl” of schooling influences her self-conception and how

¹ Her score of three fails to meet the average score of four. Her teachers stressed that numbers lower than four predicted bleak futures.

she has come to the judgment that she is *rubbish*, as well as to craft a more general response to oppression in its many guises. Tracey lacks the awareness eloquently captured by Toni Morrison's description of coming to racial awareness. Morrison captures the difficulty of the critical project when she describes how oppression gives structure to the ordered existence of daily lives. It influences the ways people experience their worlds and limits their choices, while also providing a means to experience the world as "normal." That experience may be contradictory: simultaneously pleasing, yet profoundly and oppressively limiting.

These contradictions extend to the range of responses one might make to the existence of oppression. Even when one perceives the existence of the "glass bowl," no clear "solution" may emerge. That is, attempting to alter oppressive social structures requires rethinking how to live and survive in a new environment, once the "fishbowl" is altered – cracked, shattered, or perhaps replaced with a larger tank. It also means that one's self-identity must be renegotiated at the same time. Tracey, we hope, may come to understand herself, not as deficient because of her test scores, but as an intelligent, talented person whose initial sense of self was unjustly influenced by differences in social class experiences.

A central question remains at the heart of critical pedagogy. How does a student like Tracey inquire into her circumstances and develop a response to the social class oppression in her life? It is the question at the heart of this chapter. It describes the problem in its barest terms; while agents seek to forge individually defined lives, their beliefs, preferences and options may be so influenced by social

oppression that trying to separate what they believe from the beliefs influenced by social oppression may be difficult.

In this chapter, I articulate a response to the paradox created by trying to forge individual life projects amidst oppressive social experiences through the concept of critical autonomy, defined as “critical” to signify that the project aims to contribute specifically to the literature of emancipatory educational thought. As such, “critical” refers to an analysis of power relationships.² The focus on critical autonomy brings our attention to the problem of dealing with what individual students will do while responding to social oppression. It addresses the gap in theory within critical pedagogy I have identified as the lack of conceptual tools to address the problem of the relation between agency and structure, especially as this concerns issues of identity and resistance. Because I define it as a relational concept, critical autonomy provides a useful link between individual agency and social experiences like those found in schools. Given the many criticisms of autonomy being a topic burdened by its seemingly isolated and individualistic past, the claim that it is a relational concept may be a counter-intuitive statement. Despite its checkered past, I believe that it can help us understand what students might do in response to oppression in their

² Mine is not the first attempt to use autonomy as a grounding for critical pedagogy. I owe much to Scott Fletcher’s insightful writing on the topic. In Education and Emancipation: Theory and Practice in a New Constellation, he defines autonomy as a meeting place for disparate educational theories, including critical pedagogy, feminism, postmodernism and liberalism.

lives, while also understanding the roles of authoritative figures and institutions like teachers and schools.

In general, autonomy is always focused on the relationship between individuals and the social contexts surrounding them. For example, Rob Reich defines autonomy as “the ability of persons to examine and evaluate their underlying commitments, values, desires, motivations, and beliefs,”³ stressing that such examination must happen free from coercion. Similarly, Mackenzie and Stoljar observe that the “conceptual threads that link...different uses of the notion of autonomy is the idea of self-determination or self-government, which is taken to be the defining characteristic of free moral agents.”⁴ In the following, I define critical autonomy in a way that resonates with these general definitions, but I focus on the relational qualities of the concept that often seems to be about social isolation and self-protection.

Because of the apparent tendency to consider autonomy as an isolating concept, some may insist that autonomy is a notion too laden with baggage to be of use in an emancipatory educational project.³ I argue that such concerns do not

³ For example, both liberal and Marxist feminists have argued that many traditional definitions of autonomy presuppose overly individualistic accounts of personhood and import such a bias into the definition of autonomy itself. Marilyn Friedman succinctly summarizes the feminist critique when she asserts that the traditional conception of autonomy “presupposes that selves are social atoms, ignores the importance of social relationships, and promotes the sort of independence that involves disconnection from close interpersonal involvement with others.” (Friedman 2006, p. 40) Lorraine Code observes that the individualistic notion of the self has historically benefited white males and supports oppression because it privileges radical independence over all other values. Code argues that such a definition of autonomy promotes a vision of the individual as being a solitary bearer of rights, a

take account of the complexities found in the autonomy literature. For example, Marilyn Friedman argues that rather than reading all traditional accounts of autonomy as being overly-individualistic, the sweeping generalization is too broad to be accurate. She demonstrates that many leading accounts of autonomy do presuppose that autonomous agents are nurtured in specific types of social environments and that the autonomous life is one marked by significant attachments to others.⁵ Thus, rather than reject autonomy as being inextricably bound to an overly-individualistic conceptual framework, I agree with theorists like Friedman⁶ and Fletcher⁷ who both link autonomy to emancipatory projects.

Despite its usefulness, the description of critical autonomy I offer here will not seek to resolve the contradictions created by the existence of social oppression. Instead, my intention is to offer a theoretical framework for attending to the existence of oppression in one's life. The difference is important. Rather than arguing that the following conception of autonomy will help agents transcend the challenges of living within oppressive social contexts, it grounds itself in the contradiction at the heart of oppression, and offers a solution that is itself paradoxical. We wish to make our lives our "own," living them from the "inside" as Will Kymlicka describes, but to do so, we must draw on "external" resources

conception that ignores how individuals are socially situated. It also suggests that conditions that support the development of significant ties to others, including community relationships, hinder the development of autonomy. (See Code, 2004). Ultimately, these criticisms challenge that the individualistic view of the autonomous agent pathologizes relational values and social practices, supporting the conditions for continued exploitation of marginalized groups.

(outside the self) to foster independence. Of course, it is paradoxical to link increasing one's individual autonomy with greater dependence upon others, but it is the key to critical autonomy. To describe the tension in another way, social experiences give rise to doubts about our abilities to identify our beliefs' origins. Do we believe something because we were conditioned to believe it, or do we believe it because we freely choose to do so? The seeming response by many theories of autonomy is to attempt to isolate the individual, to draw rigid boundaries and inoculate the self from the potential harmful influences of others, to characterize social interaction as flirting with heteronomy. It may be counterintuitive, but the argument of this chapter seeks to ground critical autonomy in this very paradox. To be critically autonomous, one must be an inquirer into one's beliefs, to be one who draws on social resources as a part of that inquiry.

A note on paradox may be instructive. Following Parker Palmer's Deweyan argument, I suggest that grounding critical autonomy in the paradox drawn between the individualistic and the relational may lead to new responses to the challenges students face when negotiating the "fishbowl" of schooling. Rather than embracing either a hyper-vigilant isolationism characteristic of some forms of autonomy, or the nihilistic pessimism proffered by some postmodern theories, the current project refuses to lose sight of the paradox. As Palmer argues, by refusing "to flee from [the] tension but [to] allow that tension to occupy the center of our lives. ...The poles of either/or, the choices we thought we had to make, may become signs of a larger truth than we had even dreamed."⁸ As such, this

discussion of critical autonomy seeks to conceptualize a way to “live the contradictions, fully and painfully aware of the poles between which our lives are stretched.”⁹

The Structure of the Chapter

This chapter focuses on the central paradox I have described in what I conceive of as three “spiraling” sections. That is, each addresses the central paradox of forging an individual account of critical autonomy by stressing its relational nature while taking up individual aspects of the broader topic. I characterize it as “spiraling” because each section builds upon the previous one while returning repeatedly to the central tension.

In the first section, *Relational Inquiry and Critical Autonomy*, I develop the first aspect of the theory of critical autonomy, what I have described earlier as the “first stage” upon which what we might consider to be a more familiar approach to critical pedagogy can be built. In it, I outline the central argument regarding how critical autonomy is a fundamentally relational notion. To do so, I focus on the relational aspects of inquiry in general, and then draw on Cheryl Misak’s conception of a pragmatic epistemology to outline specific implications for inquirers guided by the notion of critical autonomy.

In the second section, *Power-Functional Inquiry for Critical Autonomy*, I posit that inquiry is particularly threatened by “power-functional” beliefs. Here I argue that there are some categories of belief that we should flag as ones we should be suspicious of, ones that require a more focused type of inquiry than the general sort

discussed in the first section. It returns us to the central paradox by positing that our analysis of our individually held beliefs may be “contaminated” by power-related issues.

In the third section, *Critical Autonomy and the Narrative Self*, I build upon the work of the previous two by applying the analysis of critical autonomy to identity formation. As I argue in the previous chapter, theories of critical pedagogy have not satisfactorily explained the tensions and contradictions that working class students experience in schools. While the general inquiry-related issues I develop in the previous two sections create a general framework, in the final section I focus on the important issue of how students negotiate the contradictions inherent in the “double bind” created by identifying with competing aspects of their social identities. For example, they may be caught not knowing which cultural roles or meanings capture their “true” selves. Is it the self they experience in the home, one that corresponds to their working class identities, or do they identify with their academic selves, self-conceptions that might reject qualities and norms associated with being working class? The discussion returns us to the central paradox once again. We must be wary of the external influences that shape our common sense assumptions about ourselves and our projects, but rather than turn that caution into a reason to isolate, critical autonomy embraces a relational inquiry, even into one’s very self-conception.

Relational Inquiry and Critical Autonomy

As a place to begin constructing a relational definition of autonomy, I turn initially to the discussions of autonomy found within liberal educational thought. That literature provides us with important resources upon which to build a theory aimed at the concerns of critical pedagogy. Specifically, I draw on their claims about the need to found inquiry on the use of rational methods. This is the sort of approach to autonomy popular in the 1960s and 1970s, with R.F. Dearden¹⁰ and R.S. Peters¹¹ being the standard-bearers of the autonomy as inquiry project. It emerges today in Harry Brighouse's more recent arguments about autonomy. He proposes that in order for people to be able to make judgments about whether or not their received life options are appropriate for themselves, they need to have developed traditionally-conceived rational reflective capacities. Furthermore, they "have opportunities to live well only if they can exit into other good ways of life. How able they are to exit into a good way of life depends, partly, on whether they possess epistemically reliable ways of evaluating different ways of life."¹² In Brighouse's view, it is the role of autonomy-facilitating schooling to prepare students to evaluate their lives with the most reliable of reason-assessing methods as possible. He acknowledges that while the methods associated with rational reflection cannot guarantee "successful" inquiry – that is, revealing an individual's "truest" desires – it is a valuable tool nonetheless:

Rational reflection does not suffice to weight different alternatives of how to live, or different immediate choices about what to do, in the way that propositional logic suffices when evaluating the validity of arguments. However, no other known device is so reliable in this area of human

understanding. Rational reflection can help us to detect inconsistencies and fallacious argumentation, and to uncover misuse of evidence. It helps us to see whether a choice coheres with our given preferences, including our higher-order preferences. It helps us, therefore, in determining the relative plausibility of different positions both on the grounds of evidence and coherence.¹³

This aspect of the definition of autonomy is important because it emphasizes that autonomy-seeking agents are inquirers who draw upon rational methods of analysis. In addition, it is important to emphasize something that is implied in Brighthouse's argument. Because traditional logic and reason can only get us "part way," we must examine the potential gap between the results of inquiry based upon the various methodologies and the truth-claims they purport to make. We find that R.F. Dearden makes the point much more explicitly when he emphasizes that autonomous individuals must appreciate more than the need to refine their reasoning capacities; they also must evaluate the very criteria with which they evaluate preferences and beliefs. Emphasizing the fallability of the tools of inquiry, Dearden argues:

To be regarded as autonomous, I suggest that a man must not only make judgments on his own initiative, but that the doubt must have entered his mind at some point that the criteria he employs in judgment might not, on reflection, be such as he would wish to acknowledge as his own.¹⁴

Thus, the liberals contribute two initial and important pieces to the conception of inquiry necessary for critical autonomy. One must draw upon rational methods even in self-inquiry, while simultaneously holding a healthy skepticism about those same inquiry tools and the beliefs they encourage us to adopt.

More recently, some liberals have been emphasizing that autonomy involves more than reasoning in that it involves aspects of one's identity such as character traits and virtues. This contributes a third resource to our definition. For example, they suggest that perseverance, clarity of thought and open-mindedness – the hallmarks of a classic liberal arts education – are the watchwords of the autonomous individual. Eamonn Callan's writing is instructive on this point. He argues that the rational scrutiny of our opinions and motives for action fails to capture what he takes to be the essence of autonomy. He wants to further buttress the notion of autonomy by speaking of proper motivational attributes of persons. "The strongly autonomous self is to be distinguished from others partly by a level of rationality at which the motivational structure is developed in a realistic fashion and occurrent desires are regulated in the same manner."¹⁵ Callan explains that by "realistic" rationality, he means that the autonomous person embraces "a persistent orientation of the mind towards reality and a corresponding suppression of the various ways human beings are apt to evade reality."¹⁶ On his account, the autonomous person embraces critical reasoning and exhibits the strength to achieve goals in the face of difficulties.

Moreover, Callan argues that in the face of strong social forces tempting us, especially the young, *at every twist and turn*, certain character traits are needed to resist the pressures against the development and sustaining of autonomy. His view of autonomy emphasizes the fact that it is "an amalgam of capacity, desire, and emotional susceptibility."¹⁷ The value of autonomy, he claims, is that it enables "us

to live as we should under conditions of countervailing desire and emotion.”¹⁸ On this account of autonomy, the autonomous person has well developed “will strength.” Rather than succumbing to the irrational folly of accepting certain unexamined desires, the autonomous person is resolutely virtuous. “One can allow a state of mind to come into being in which what one wills is what one feels tempted to do. The struggle of resisting temptation is simply the attempt to prevent this mental state from arising by focusing attention upon those interests to which it runs counter.”¹⁹ While he does not define autonomy as virtue in Aristotelian terms, Callan does subscribe to the Aristotelian premise that the virtue of autonomy is sustained and nurtured by its continual practice. Consider Eamonn Callan again here:

I am autonomous to the degree that I have developed the powers of practical reason, a disposition to value those powers and use them in giving shape and direction to my own life, and a corresponding resistance to impulses or social pressures that might subvert wise self-direction.²⁰

Thus, the autonomous person uses practical reason to arrive at self-adjudicated truths about individual desires and opinions. The resulting task, then, is to resist social influences that may lead one astray from that truth. While schools can help influence the nurturance of autonomy by providing students with liberal arts educations that train them in practical reasoning skills, when considering autonomy as a trait of character, we see that schools must also help students focus on other aspects of who they are, ones that encourage them to inquire into themselves beyond the accumulation of academic knowledge and the tools of rational analysis.

They also need opportunities to understand themselves and how their emotional lives intersect with and influence autonomy in important ways.

While I disagree with the details of the view of autonomy as a trait of character,⁴ the current linking of autonomy with aspects of one's identity contributes an important piece to the concept of critical autonomy. Their analysis is important because it forces us to consider how autonomy is linked to identity, and how aspects like self-conception impact the creation of autonomy in significant ways. For example, we have seen already that the commodity fetishism influences self-conception in a myriad of ways, therefore, central to an account of autonomy aimed at social class experiences in schooling must be the examination of the intersection of self-conception and its influence on autonomy. That is the focus of the third section of this chapter, so I will have much more to say about this aspect of autonomy there. It is important to note at this point that our definition of critical autonomy must account for the complexities of the influence of schooling on self-conceptions. It is a necessary part of inquiry for critical autonomy.

The liberals help us to see that critical autonomy must draw upon the tools of rational inquiry to forge its conception of analysis. Students learn these in a variety of places, including but not limited to schools. I wish, though, to push the

⁴ As I explain in what follows, I agree with the general assertion that nurturing and sustaining autonomy in the face of oppressive social circumstances requires more than rational analytical skills. I agree with much of what the liberals write about this topic, but they fail to account for the ways that social contexts support and inhibit the forging of the character traits and virtues they discuss. Their descriptions maintain that autonomy is a much less relational concept than the one I offer here. On their accounts, the autonomous person must protect the self from outside contamination rather than drawing upon relational resources to bolster autonomy.

implication of that stance further than the liberals do and argue that because the tools of inquiry are socially constructed, learned and taught in schools and elsewhere, the resulting notion of autonomy predicated upon their practice is thereby a much more relational concept than many posit. In this way, what I propose echoes arguments within the literature of critical pedagogy that emphasize the importance of communal inquiry. Let me reiterate the central point. The tools of rational analysis we draw upon in critical inquiry associated with autonomy are tools that we learn, critique and revise socially.

Inquiry is Always Relational

John Greco argues that inquiry, even inquiry into our own beliefs, involves drawing upon socially learned tools:

It has often been noted that knowledge is a social product with a practical value. We are social, highly inter-dependent, information-using, information-sharing beings. As such, it is essential to our form of life that we are able to identify good information and good sources of information. In this context, it is not surprising that we make evaluations concerning how beliefs are formed, their history in relation to other beliefs, why they are believed, etc. In other words, it is not surprising that we make evaluations concerning whether beliefs are reliably and responsibly formed. But evaluations of these sorts involve considerations about accuracy and etiology. And therefore, evaluations of these sorts are externalist evaluations.²¹

The point, of course, is similar to the one that R.F. Dearden and other liberal theorists make with respect to autonomy. The important issue here is the extent to which we rely upon resources outside our internal worlds of deliberation in self-directed inquiry projects like the ones associated with critical autonomy – the understanding our beliefs. If we draw upon Greco's argument, we see that

autonomy is a much more relational concept than perhaps traditionally allowed.⁵ While we may choose our actions according to the beliefs that guide them, the tools of inquiry we draw upon to decide what beliefs we identify as our own are not self-created nor wholly self-chosen. We learn them in places like our families and in schools. Pushing into this conclusion bears fruitful results for critical autonomy. For example, Joel Anderson extends the observation that tools of inquiry are socially learned to argue that trying to understand ourselves and our personal processes of inquiry demands that we look beyond the tools of rational reflection and analysis and into the ways that our social lives influence how we think in more subtle ways. He draws on Charles Taylor's observation that "things take on importance against a background of intelligibility."²²

We can conceive of this "background of intelligibility" as any inquiry framework we use to make sense of our beliefs. These will include informal ones as well as the

⁵ A number of recent feminist theorists have been developing relational accounts of autonomy. These works most often seek to respond to feminist concerns about how the social context influences autonomy in significant ways. Two main types of relational definitions of autonomy emerge in the literature. The first approach centers analysis on the social context surrounding autonomy, identifying the conditions that support it generally as well as the development of skills associated with autonomy. In a related fashion, the second set focuses on either the identification of substantive skills and dispositions necessary for autonomy, or the more radically difficult set of beliefs and decisions that inherently inhibit or even nullify autonomy. My conception of relational autonomy differs from these two types by exploring a third way of articulating how autonomy is relational by focusing on epistemological issues. While I do not specifically draw upon other types of relational definitions of autonomy in this chapter, they do help the development of the argument in the next chapter. For a useful introduction to relational autonomy theories, see Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar's "Autonomy Refigured" in their edited volume, Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self.

more formal tools that schools teach. They thus include the beliefs and ideologies we absorb consciously and unconsciously in our myriad social interactions, whether at home, the larger world, or in schools. Within schools, another useful way to describe an aspect of what he means is the concept of the “hidden curriculum.” The ideologies and practices of schooling form a “background of intelligibility” through which students process their beliefs, and while not formally codified like the procedures of rational inquiry associated with an academic discipline, they may powerfully influence the inquiry process. As such, Anderson builds upon Charles Taylor’s work to argue that making individual choices “presupposes the availability of the appropriate semantic resources, including terms ineluctably evaluative in character.”²³ The inquiry process is guided by a complex amalgamation of overtly and covertly learned inquiry tools.

Anderson’s argument helps us reread Lesley Rex’s research into how the social-class-influenced socio-linguistic frameworks of teachers shape student experience in classrooms. Recall that Rex portrays a teacher who argues that the student-teacher relationship is similar to that of a professional ballet dancer and the choreographer. While the teacher uses it to draw his students into accepting his “tough” teaching approach in which he cajoles them to succeed, Rex observes that such practices shape standards of experience in other ways. It positions the students as being in competition with one another as well as the rest of the school. They are not ordinary students, but special ones, ones who have the raw talent to succeed and must be pushed and push themselves in order to “make it.” The

image resonates with students who have positive experiences with authoritarian teachers, but it causes some of the working class students to interpret the teacher's intentions as hostile and unsupportive.

Anderson's argument makes such ordinary interactions profoundly important in shaping the decisions students make about themselves and their prospects. Rex's research demonstrates that students who identify with such a teacher's authoritarian approach then draw upon his description of the ballet troupe in their own self-understandings. Differences in student achievement, then, are influenced by the frameworks that teachers and schools offer to students as they inquire into themselves and their beliefs about their futures and their capabilities. Rex shows that students draw upon these evaluative/interpretive frameworks whether they are articulating such reasons aloud or completely internally. Like the quote that began this chapter, such "backgrounds of intelligibility" help students form beliefs about themselves and influence the inquiry process. A student like Tracey may draw upon the school-mediated sense of self (that she's rubbish) when deciding about which courses of action to take with respect to schooling. For example, she may believe the ideological myth that working class students prefer to "work with their hands." The point is that her inquiry is shaped by socially learned tools that take a variety of forms.

How relational autonomy truly is becomes clearer when we consider Anderson's final observation. He argues that not only do we draw upon socially constructed tools for individual inquiry, but that our inquiry methods naturally involve the offering

of explanations to others in ways that they can understand our reasoning. This holds, Anderson argues, even when we reason in isolation:

The object of critical reflection is an internalized version of the validity claims raised in speech acts. Someone trying to clarify how important it is for her to stay close to her hometown (or leave for the big city) is best understood as considering the justifiability of various assertions she could make. Even if she never utters a word to anyone while making her decision, the question of justification is the question of whether she could warrant the assertion that such a choice is appropriate.²⁴

Anderson extends these ideas to argue that the preceding observations make autonomy intrinsically relational in that during our personal process of reflective inquiry we naturally presuppose external interlocutors, consciously or not. That is, to offer reasons justified within a given inquiry framework, we must not only be able to use the tools offered within that paradigm, we must also be able to offer justifications that employ reasons others would recognize. To support his claims, Anderson draws on Michael Dummett,

who argues that understanding the meaning of an assertoric utterance is not a matter of knowing what it would be for the assertion to be true, but a matter of knowing what would be involved in justifying the assertion. Briefly stated: one understands an assertoric sentence when one knows what kind of reasons a speaker would have to cite in order to convince a hearer that the speaker is entitled to raise a truth claim for the sentence.²⁵

Drawing upon Greco and Anderson, I argue that we should consider self-inquiry to be a relational concept, one that involves the drawing upon socially learned tools for analysis, as well as a variety of background explanations, ideologies and discursive frameworks that, similar to rational analysis tools, influence inquiry. Furthermore, when we offer reasons to ourselves, we do so in ways that real and

imagined others can make sense of the reasons we offer, thereby situating self-inquiry within the frameworks of inquiry we learn socially. Because inquiry is an essential part of autonomy, the result of this line of argument is that our definition of critical autonomy must embrace the radically social aspects of inquiry. It brings us once more to the paradox that critical autonomy must embrace. We wish to make our lives our “own,” living them from the “inside,” but to do so we must draw on “external” resources to foster independence. Again, it may seem paradoxical to link increasing one’s individual autonomy with greater dependence upon others, but it is the key to critical autonomy.

Within this discussion, I describe autonomy as a “relational” concept in order to accomplish two separate aims. First, at times I invoke “relational” to distinguish my discussion from liberal accounts of autonomy that situate autonomy primarily as an attribute of individuals. As such, I refer to autonomy as relational especially in the ways that Joel Anderson just emphasized, that autonomy only takes on intelligibility when it is both embedded within and emerging from community experiences. Second, I describe autonomy as “relational” to push the point even further; individual autonomy is enhanced through the process of communal inquiry. Thus, to think about autonomy in this way is to think about how one interacts with others in one’s self-directed autonomy project. A contrast with Nel Noddings’s definition of caring may illustrate my point.

Noddings defines the ethic of care as a relational concept because it requires at least two people; as such, it may be better to think of “caring in relation” or “caring with” rather than just “caring.” As she defines, a

caring relation is, in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and recipient of care, or cared-for. In order for the relation to be properly called caring, both parties must contribute to it in characteristic ways. A failure on the part of either carer or cared-for blocks completion of caring and, although there may still be a relation – that is, an encounter or connection in which each party feels something toward the other – it is not a *caring* relation.²⁶

The conception of autonomy that I am advocating here, while differently focused than Noddings’s definition of caring, is also relational in that it presupposes the need for engagement in a community of inquiry. Noddings’s definition is more focused on a relationship between two people, and as such, requires at least two people in order to begin to qualify as an instance of caring. Because critical autonomy refers to a more general state of being, one does not need to be in direct relationship with others at all times as a precondition for its existence (or in the way of caring, to signal that a potential autonomous situation has arisen). Instead, critical autonomy is predicated upon the constant inquiry with other inquirers, but the parameters of those interactions cannot be pre-established, nor defined in a programmatic fashion. Again, unlike other theories of autonomy that may acknowledge some of my arguments about the ways that autonomy is nurtured socially but is realized in isolation, I argue that critical autonomy is enhanced through the constant process of inquiry *with other inquirers*. To make that case, I turn to Cheryl Misak.

Cheryl Misak offers a way for us to make sense of the relational type of inquiry necessary for critical autonomy and, by extension, the demands on inquirers resulting from such a theory. Misak's pragmatic epistemology is helpful in this project for three reasons. First, her notion of when one should accept the results of inquiry supports a project that is focused on the potential pernicious influences of hegemonic ideologies. As I will describe in more detail in what follows, Misak's emphasis on fallibility suggests that inquirers conduct better inquiry when they refuse to end inquiry too soon. Second, Misak's approach to inquiry embraces the relational nature of autonomy, already linking improved inquiry with being willing to offer reasons to others for one's beliefs. Her arguments thus build upon rather than contradict the ones of Greco and Anderson. Finally, Misak's theory directly addresses the implications of needing to draw upon socially-created inquiry resources during deliberation while also valuing the contributions of arguments, emotions, and other ways of expressing one's beliefs that do not readily coincide with traditionally valued inquiry methods. Such a move addresses the important need to attend to the lived experiences of students as they negotiate the contradictions of their social class experiences. It places the contents of those contributions up for serious inquiry.

Misak's Pragmatic Epistemology

Cheryl Misak contends that holding a belief as a truth-seeker entails being open to inquiry. I suggest that similarly, at its core, autonomy – and exploration into the truth of one's beliefs – entails a commitment to inquiry with regard to one's beliefs.

This aspect of Misak's theory of inquiry supports the conception of critical autonomy. As a pragmatist working within a Peircean framework, Misak argues that "a true belief is one which would stand up to the evidence and reasons, were we to inquire as far as we could on the matter."²⁷ This Peircean definition of truth for critical autonomy commits us to embracing the fallibility of individual knowers, even with respect to self-inquiry. It stands in direct opposition to the liberal insistence that autonomous knowers have privileged access to self-knowledge, as well as some critical pedagogists' insistence that objective reality is knowable if one uses the "right" tools of inquiry. Its value rests within the way that it directs inquirers not to end inquiry too soon. If we are seeking to hold true beliefs about ourselves, such an approach to self-understanding requires that we question our beliefs until we can inquire no more. (She also acknowledges that we often need to make decisions before the end of inquiry, and at such times we should do so with the best resources available to us.)²⁸ Such a criterion helps us address the ways that commodity fetishism seeks to end inquiry by ending inquiry before it fruitfully begins.

The importance of the previous discussion about the fundamental relational nature of inquiry is fully realized here. It forces us to return to the analysis offered by critical pedagogists for decades: "No matter how good a belief might appear to us, no matter if it were to be as good as it could be by way of accounting for the evidence, fitting with our other beliefs, etc., *it could still be false*. It might fail to get right that independent reality and there might be no way we could ever have an

inkling of the failure.”²⁹ This is the state of affairs critical pedagogists have variously described – sometimes as false consciousness, other times as succumbing to the influences of ideology, or perhaps even not having an exposure to a more “critical analysis.” The point is that even when one undertakes “critical analysis” into power relationships, one must draw upon rational methods to do so, and those methods cannot guarantee a correspondence between the results of inquiry and whether or not we should accept them as being beliefs we want to hold as individuals. It directly addresses the failure of rational inquiry – even when guided by critical pedagogy and its emphasis on power and topics of social justice – to reveal “right” answers to problems associated with living contradictory lives. Even careful and well-intentioned inquiry may reveal no one, innocent or obvious “solution” to how to respond to oppression in one’s life. I believe that Misak offers a way out of the dilemma created when no apparent “right” course of action appears. “Although we are never in a position to judge whether a belief is true or not, we will often be in a position to judge whether it is the best belief given the current state of inquiry.”³⁰ Rather than grounding a “critical” response in an objective reality “capable of being known,” she grounds it in the best belief that we can hope to come to given our current resources.

As a result, Misak encourages us to suspend trusting a belief until we reach the end of serious inquiry. The importance of such hesitation to suspend inquiry becomes clearer when we return to the preceding arguments about the relational nature of inquiry. Because the tools for self-understanding are socially-created and

learned, they are potentially flawed and subject to revision. If we are truth-aimed in our inquiry projects, even our individually-focused ones, then embracing the fallibility of our inquiry claims leads to better inquiry. We will be more apt to be aware of or seeking ways that our beliefs were falsely constructed. As Misak explains, the result of holding her conception of inquiry is that the individual knower is not the final arbiter of what a “correct” belief should be:

The pragmatist takes correct judgment not to be a matter for the individual, even though it is the individual who does the judging, but as a matter for the community of inquirers. Peirce was adamant that the “Cartesian Criterion” – “Whatever I am clearly convinced of is true” – makes individuals judges of truth, which is “most pernicious”... But this is not supposed to be the thought that the community is the epistemic agent – that it is the community which does the knowing or which has the beliefs, so to speak. Individuals are the possessors of belief, but whether or not a person’s belief is correct is a matter of what the community would determine. What fits with *my* experience is not of paramount importance as far as truth is concerned. What is important is what fits with all the experience that would be available, what the community of inquirers would converge upon. A hallucination, Peirce says, is a compulsion which does “not fit with the general mass of experience.”³¹

We see that better inquiry results when we continue to inquire into our beliefs, and such inquiry can be improved by drawing upon a variety of resources, including other inquirers. Because we already draw upon a plethora of socially-learned and created inquiry tools (both informal and formal ones), our inquiry is likely to be improved if we formalize that process by consulting with others in our personal inquiry projects. Again, Anderson’s argument helps us see that our internal self inquiry necessarily involves offering reasons to the self about why one holds the beliefs in question in ways that are intelligible to others. While she does not discuss

this feature of self-inquiry explicitly (although she appears to imply it in the previous quotes), I hold that we can read Misak's argument to address this aspect of inquiry: "Belief involves being prepared to try to justify one's views to others and being prepared to test one's belief against the experience of others."³² Self inquiry, then, is both guided and constrained by the perspectives, tools of inquiry, and myriad background beliefs we draw upon to make ourselves intelligible to others, even when the inquiry is solitary. The conclusion is that inquiry – even individual inquiry into the self – is enhanced when we inquire with other inquirers. "Thus, the differences of inquirers – their different perspectives, sensibilities and experiences – *must* be taken seriously. If they are not, reaching the best or the true belief is not in the cards."³³

One may object that the move I am advocating, that critical autonomy is enhanced when one consults with others even (or perhaps especially) in one's self-inquiry process, risks equating autonomy with heteronomy, with aligning one's beliefs with others in one's social world. I disagree. I do not mean to imply that agents *must* consult with others on matters of personal deliberation. I assert, though, that critical autonomy is enhanced when agents *submit* their beliefs to scrutiny in groups of *co-inquirers*, with an important emphasis on *inquirers*. Not all decisions will afford the opportunity to inquire with others due to any range of constraints, including time, resources and even inclination. But it should not be surprising to conclude that such decisions may not be ones that we would point to as being *the best* ones we could have made, that if given more time to self inquire,

we might have made different ones. This is wholly in keeping with considering critical autonomy to be a matter of degree.

Furthermore, consulting with someone who is not participating in inquiry may thwart rather than enhance one's personal inquiry. This conclusion fits with much of what critical pedagogists have argued for some time. Rather than being "neutral," teachers and classes that do not inquire into power-relationships and social justice topics may support the maintenance of oppression and exploitation. We would not consider such teachers and their classrooms to be engaged in the sort of inquiry necessary for critical autonomy. As such, consulting with those groups of others might thwart critical autonomy, not enhance it. I will have more to say about this topic in the next section.

The three features of Misak's approach to inquiry that I have defined here help us construct a definition of inquiry for critical autonomy, as well as a beginning list of qualities associated with critical inquirers. First, I have argued that critical autonomy is enhanced when we adopt a pragmatic approach to inquiry. We should accept a belief that stands up to reasons when we have inquired as far as we could into it. Second, critical autonomy is enhanced when individual inquirers join *other inquirers* in pursuit of inquiry. To return to the comparison between what I am advocating and the use of "relational" and Noddings' discussion of caring, when I argue that critical autonomy is relational, it is because I link critical autonomy with what Misak describes as a "radical democracy" in inquiry – *even inquiry focused on the self*:

The pragmatist supports a kind of radical democracy in inquiry. Belief involves being prepared to try to justify one's views to others and being prepared to test one's beliefs against the experience of others. Thus, the difference of inquirers – their different perspectives, sensibilities and experiences – *must* be taken seriously. If they are not, reaching the best or the true belief is not on the cards.³⁴

Thus, “relational” here means three things simultaneously. As Joel Anderson observes, when we formulate explanations for ourselves, we do so in ways that presuppose external interlocutors. Autonomy, then, always presupposes that one is answering to another. Drawing upon a Peircean framework, critical autonomy pushes Anderson's point one step further. Critical autonomy is predicated upon an associated attitude that the seeking of other perspectives is integral to one's reasoning process, a general acknowledgement that seeking the help of others enhances one's personal inquiry process. It also means that one *does* seek out and use those diverse others in one's deliberative process, that one truly does take the “perspectives, sensibilities and experiences”³⁵ of others seriously. The final feature, the actual performance of inquiry with others, may take multiple forms depending upon the circumstances surrounding the process of inquiry and the nature of the question being explored. Thus, the definition of critical autonomy cannot stipulate what forms that communal engagement must take.

Finally, Misak pushes us to keep in mind that because our tools of inquiry were socially constructed, we should be wary of granting them methodological purity. As such we should embrace experiences and perspectives that challenge or do not fit with what “counts” as normal or acceptable within the methods of inquiry we use. Experience matters, especially in inquiry.

Others may argue that the three features of inquiry that I have outlined place great burdens on an inquirer; perhaps they are too stringent in that they might encourage paralysis in making claims about one's beliefs, thereby stymieing critical autonomy due to a hyper skepticism leading students not to make any claims about what they believe at all. I think this worry is unfounded. Misak explicitly argues that we deliberate in different amounts on a variety of topics daily, and I concur. I argue that when it matters, we should pursue deliberation about an issue – even ones that remain only valuable to ourselves – as far as inquiry will take us.

Again, Misak is of help here:

I have suggested that there is no reason to think that debate will tidily resolve all issues. We must be prepared for undertermination and even for questions with no decent answer at all. What our theory does is provide justification and encouragement for debate and for taking others seriously and tell us that, were we to reach a belief which could no longer be improved, that belief would be true. It does not tell us that we are bound to reach the one right conclusion. And it does not tell us whether any particular debate has been pursued as far as it might fruitfully go. These are important points and they are again corollaries of the fallibilism which is at the heart of pragmatism. Fortunately, justification for action does not require that we be certain that our judgment would always withstand doubt or that it is a judgment which would be best for everyone. We will justifiably act on the most reasonable belief, given all of the available evidence, experience and argument.³⁶

Thus, Misak helps us ground critical autonomy within a framework that acknowledges and embraces our fallibility as knowing subjects. Instead of ignoring that issue (as do most theories of autonomy), it grounds our very conception within it, arguing that as autonomous agents we seek truth about matters of personal beliefs. Being truth-seeking, though, does not mean that we can nor must forestall decision making until we reach the end of inquiry. We must make do with what

resources and time we have available for the examination of any given belief. While critical autonomy is always related to choice, action and the making of decisions, Misak helps us see that the very essence of the autonomy formula may lead us to forestall making decisions about our beliefs before debate and inquiry is pursued as far as it might fruitfully go. We may need to make provisional decisions before we understand issues in ways that we would like, ways that might reveal how we “truly” perceive a particular question or belief. This aspect of autonomy cannot be removed. While we will always face the making of decisions before we may want to, Misak helps us emphasize that critical autonomy is increased when, as inquirers, we focus on the inquiry process to help us understand ourselves and our beliefs better.

It might be objected that the Peircean framework Misak advocates is too stringent, perhaps especially so for developing adolescents who may have the psychological need to make decisions about the nature of the self. Misak’s call to suspend trusting a belief until the end of inquiry might seem particularly cruel or emotionally demanding for students. I suggest, however, that the pragmatic framework Misak advocates offers a way to help adolescents negotiate the pressures associated with making decisions about themselves without sacrificing its usefulness as a tool upon which to ground critical autonomy.

Students, for example, must answer difficult questions such as: Who am I? What is my place in the world? Who do I want to be? Who should I be? These sorts of questions require much thinking and exploration, and they cannot be explored in

isolation. They each require the constant interpretative interaction between the individual and the large world, a working and reworking of the answers to those questions as students accrue more life experiences and opportunities to experiment with answers. The pragmatic framework does not require that students do not make provisional responses to those questions. Instead, offering tentative responses might actually aid inquiry by providing claims to knowledge to be analyzed. The pragmatic stance, though, asks inquirers to hold those beliefs tentatively and not foreclose upon them, not end inquiry. Thus, with regard to a belief about the self, a student might have to make a provisional answer due to either psychological or practical needs (e.g., needing to make a school-related decision like course enrollment), *but those decisions need not signal the end of inquiry.* (That would be consistent with the process of commodity fetishism.) Instead, the pragmatic approach I advocate asks students to hold their decisions – even upon personal beliefs about the self – as open to revision and inquiry. Doing so does not mean that all decisions must be revised or abandoned, just open for examination. In addition, critical autonomy is also not a categorical concept.

Because the project of critical autonomy is grounded within the need to respond to features of oppression in students' lives, it must resist inflicting harm. For example, if students are closed to examining some features of their self-conceptions that may accrue to their social class experiences, we must not require that they hold those beliefs up for consideration. I argue that other features of the notion of critical autonomy work in concert to support the development of the

fluidity to support future exploration. Therefore, should there be topics upon which no further inquiry can be sustained for psychological reasons, the framework does not require them to be examined. Again, perhaps more “space” for critical analysis will open in the future.

Conclusion: When I introduced the importance of focusing on inquiry as a part of critical autonomy, I described the resulting discussion as focusing on the “first stage” of critical autonomy. I argue that the view of inquiry I have been discussing offers the ground work for the “second stage” of critical autonomy, a more focused examination of the influences of power on our beliefs and actions. It is what we traditionally associate with critical pedagogy. The background I have articulated supports the perhaps more intellectually and emotionally challenging work associated with “reading the world critically.” It helps students remain open to alternative explanations for their beliefs and the ways that the world seems to “work.” I posit that even if students reject the importance of conducting what I describe in the next section as a “power-functional” analysis, we can help foster future power analysis by helping students consider their beliefs as fallible. I elaborate this position in more detail in the final section of the chapter.

Power-Functional Inquiry and Critical Autonomy

Because the motivation for “emancipatory” approaches associated with critical pedagogy originate from analyses of unjust social conditions accruing to differences in relationships of power, one of the key features of “critical” autonomy is the

importance of attending to how power influences individual efforts at self-direction. Thus, critical autonomy is enhanced when we question the beliefs that may sustain oppression and exploitation. That, of course, is a daunting task.

David Weberman furnishes us with a particularly helpful tool for determining which beliefs must be examined closely in order to enhance critical autonomy. Worried about how ideologies can adversely influence agents' autonomous belief holding, Weberman offers criteria for evaluating when a belief may be ideological (in the pejorative sense), and thus suspected of inhibiting autonomy. As such, Weberman focuses on the genesis of beliefs. (He refers to it as a "genetic" definition of ideology.) Weberman defines an ideological belief as having two independent but related components:

A belief or desire is ideological if it (i) was generated behind the back of the agent (via a process that bypasses rational judgment, deliberate choice, and the agent's awareness), *and* (ii) was power-functionally generated, that is, exists because it is power-functional.³⁷

Weberman argues that (i) & (ii) "are necessary but only jointly sufficient."³⁸ In what follows, I adapt Weberman's language and use it to discuss criteria for identifying beliefs that an agent must examine in order to increase critical autonomy.

Generated Behind-the-Back

Weberman borrows language from Elster's description of ideology to describe it by its hidden genesis or, as Elster describes the process, "behind-the-back" of the agent. Like Weberman, Elster argues that the way a belief is formed is important.

A belief may be consistent and even true, a desire consistent and even conformable to morals—and yet we may hesitate to call them rational if

they have been shaped by irrelevant causal factors, by a blind psychic causality operating "behind the back" of the person... All desires and beliefs have a (sufficient) causal origin, but some of them have the wrong sort of history.³⁹

Weberman's argument captures the essence of the analysis I have offered with regard to commodity fetishism and schooling; agents (students) may draw upon reasons that they would not endorse because of hidden causal factors, factors that capture their imaginations or thinking in ways that they would not endorse otherwise. While I find Weberman's definition of ideology helpful, I wish to amend its language and alter his use of the phrase "behind the back." While it makes some intuitive sense, metaphorically, it fails to capture the power of commodity fetishism and exploitation. It construes these processes and the school practices that sustain them as things that are so well hidden that they happen out of view. Instead, I suggest that power relationships and ideological explanations for the "ways things work" happen in "plain view" – though drawing once again on Marx's language, the relationships between things are mystified in the process. As Toni Morrison aptly describes, they are both transparent and visible. To accommodate for this duality, I substitute the language of "behind the back" with "camouflage" to suggest that ideologies may exist and function "out in the open" while successfully obscuring their true relationships to power structures. While I do not believe that Weberman's analysis precludes the point, the description fails to account for how agents may be complicit in forging ideologies as legitimating power inequalities. This is one of the keys to commodity fetishism.

It is important to note that Weberman stresses that the definition he creates is limited; not every instance of hidden influences on preference formation would count as destructive. One can easily imagine a host of ways that our social lives and attending interactions with a myriad of others influences our ideas and preferences in untold ways. For something to count as a hindrance to autonomy, then, not only must it be hidden or camouflaged, but it must also meet the second criterion. It must be power-functionally generated.

Power-Functionally Generated

Weberman's second criterion requires an analysis of a belief's relationship to structures of power and dominance. It is intended to reveal when a belief serves to support power inequality associated with social domination and oppression.

Power-functional generation is a process by which something comes to exist (and would not otherwise exist) *because* it is power-functional (that is, functions or is intended to function beneficially for a system of social domination or power distributions, whether unjust or not.)⁴⁰

Weberman distinguishes between power-functional beliefs and those that are generated in a power-functional way. The key to his argument is that ideological beliefs that support social domination have some sort of *causal* relationship to those power structures. In brief, Weberman argues that there are three general types of "causes" for the genesis of ideological beliefs: indoctrination, endogenous adaptation and a functional origin. For example, he draws on Elster's discussion of endogenous adaptation to argue that individuals may adjust their beliefs to endorse the effects of relationships of domination. We may find this sort of influence

happening in schools with respect to academic tracking. As academic research has long shown, students who find themselves in lower academic tracks believe that they are less talented than “upper” track peers and they perform accordingly; the converse also holds.⁴¹ These students may adjust their self-expectations to match the social setting, adapting endogenously to presumptions about their abilities and interests.

While I accept the schema Weberman creates to support his causal argument, by retaining a strict historical definition the power-functional criterion is too limiting. That is, our concern is not just that ideologically tainted beliefs are ones that were created in an epistemically suspect fashion; our worry is that they continue to support power structures “behind-the-back” of the agent drawing upon them. Thus, I suggest that a more useful definition (and one that does not rely upon an acceptance of the way that Weberman characterizes “cause”) is that we amend Weberman’s definition in the following fashion: *a belief is ideological if (a) its origin is camouflaged, and (b) it is power-functional.*

As I discussed in the previous section, not only do we need to help students examine the history of their beliefs for hidden influences and power-functionality, but we also must help them critically to analyze the very tools we present (or fail to) present them for belief analysis. (I will provide more examples of what I mean by “tools” in the next chapter, but generally, I mean any resources, frameworks, metaphors, or knowledge-influencing resources or procedures we might use in the process of making knowledge claims. Within schools these might be as diverse as

theoretical frameworks or classroom texts.) The need to inquire into these disparate resources or “tools” emerges if one accepts that when we inquire and adjudicate our beliefs, we necessarily draw upon socially generated and acquired inquiry resources that are potentially fallible. This holds even in the process of determining whether or not beliefs support oppression. Once again, though, I must return to the central paradox that I argue captures the heart of critical autonomy: individual inquiry is enhanced when conducted with other inquirers. It is as Scott Fletcher describes when he argues that “to educate students for autonomy is to prepare them to deliberate freely and critically over possible life-plans, without having their needs and interests distorted by others, in a community of individuals who share a similar project.”⁴² Conducting such analysis may ask students to challenge common-sense explanations, inviting them to rely upon what some epistemological traditions associated with hyper-rationality consider to be non-standard tools for inquiry such as emotions, the testimony of oppressed people, and suspicions that the results of inquiry do not capture the “truth” about a situation, topic or belief. Commodity fetishism, one of the most autonomy reducing aspects of social class exploitation and schooling, is so damaging because it helps students end inquiry too soon in an area at the heart of autonomy: their self-conceptions. Thus, while the first two sections discuss the contours of a definition of critical autonomy, the third invites the use of the tools discussed in the first two sections in an application that is vitally linked to critical autonomy: self-inquiry.

Critical Autonomy and the Narrative Self

The tendency of working class students to blame themselves for their “failures” to negotiate an academic realm whose structure and character benefits a more affluent class of students, emphasizes the relationship between social class, schooling and students’ conceptions of themselves. My analysis of commodity fetishism focuses our attention on more than the observation that schools suffer from ideologically tainted biases about working class students (which they do). It demands that we attend to how students come to understand themselves as being intelligent, worthy of our praise, and the sorts of people who find schooling to be a positive part of their lives or as a source of limitation. Self-conception drives the heart of the analysis I provide in Chapter Two. It is also at the heart of critical autonomy. In what follows, I build upon the arguments of the previous sections and articulate how critical autonomy relates to student identity and commodity fetishism. While doing so, I focus the analysis on addressing an important aspect of the essential challenge facing students living and learning within the contexts of oppression: that of accepting one’s given identity or of negotiating a new or modified one. Let me explain.

If we once again return to Willis’s Lads,⁴³ we find that despite their often insightful analyses of the relationships between education and economics in their lives, they reject schooling in part because to accept the dictates of the school would be to invite change in their self-conceptions. As other working class students often express, accepting academic norms and developing school-valued skills

results in a fundamental alteration of the sort of person the student is, thereby potentially altering the student's relationships with people outside the school, people like parents and friends. The potential conflict between the sort of person critical autonomy calls one to become and the one that a primary attachment like that of family or close friends makes "choices" based on the results of one's analysis difficult. For example, given a choice between choosing school as a route to critical autonomy and choosing to maintain bonds with one's family, the value of personal relationships may count more than the academic project, despite arguments that maintain the value of education (even perhaps, when those arguments are offered by one's family).

The issue of identity and choice is especially difficult with regard to social class because despite the statistical shrinking of the middle class, most U.S. citizens do not consider themselves to be working class – even ones who we would classify as working class along any number of relevant markers (economic status, employment type and a range of socially-related styles and norms).⁴⁴ So, the issue of accepting aspects of one's given identity or participating in the choice of how one defines oneself is complicated in that critical autonomy may require a certain acceptance of the realities of a given social identity and its influence on self-understanding, regardless of whether or not the agent wants to accept such an identity marker. On the one hand, we want to help students increase the range of available options for self-conception, while on the other, the very process of critical autonomy may require an acceptance of some of the limitations we abhor.

Before directly addressing the relationship of self-conception to critical autonomy, it is necessary that we first take a closer look at the issue of commodity fetishism and its influence on self-conception. I argue that the fetishizing process enables students of both dominant and working classes to appear as if they have stable, “unified” identities that correspond to the social class biases about each. This is significant because autonomy theories often predicate their definitions on the existence of relatively unified self-conceptions. Based on the results of the commodity fetishism analysis, I discuss a way of conceiving of self-conception that is simultaneously “unified” while embracing current conceptions of identity as being fractured or involving multiplicity. I then use that framework to analyze the tension of “given identities” and choice.

Commodity Fetishism, Identity and Multiplicity

We see how school practices potentially influence student self-conceptions through the process of commodity fetishism in Diane Reay’s research into “high stakes” tests in British elementary schools. She interviews sixth year students about their taking of the Stage 2 Standard Achievement Tests (SATs). Reay interviews working class kids in these two excerpts. (Note that the expected, or “normal,” score for the tests is a 4.)⁴⁵

Hannah: I’m really scared about the SATs. Ms. O’Brien [a teacher at the school] came and talked to us about our spelling and I’m no good at spelling and David [the class teacher] is giving us times tables tests every morning and I’m hopeless at times tables so I’m frightened I’ll do the SATs and I’ll be a nothing.

Diane: I don't understand Hannah. You can't be a nothing.

Hannah: Yes, you can 'cause you have to get a level like a level 4 or a level 5 and if you're no good at spellings and times tables you don't get those levels and so you're a nothing.

Diane: I'm sure that's not right.

Hannah: Yes it is 'cause that's what Ms. O'Brien was saying.

Sharon: I think I'll get a two, only Stuart will get a six.

Diane: So if Stuart gets a six what will that say about him?

Sharon: He's heading for a good job and a good life and it shows he's not gonna be living on the streets and stuff like that.

Diane: And if you get a level two what will that say about you?

Sharon: Um, I might not have a good life in front of me and I might grow up and do something naughty or something like that.⁴⁶

Tracey, another white, working class girl is similarly driven to succeed on the SATs because of what they mean for the future and her self-conception.

Tracey: I think even now, at night times I think about it and I think I'm going to get them.

Diane: You think about your SATs at night time?

Tracey: Yeah, lots. When I'm in bed, because I've got stars on my ceiling, I'm hoping and I look up and I go, "I know I'm gonna get there." And my mum goes, "Who's talking in there?" and I goes, "Nothing mum."

Diane: So what are you hoping?

Tracey: Um, I think about a three. I dunno. I don't think I'll get a five. I'm hoping to get a five. When I look at the stars I hope I'll get a five.

When later in the year I interviewed Tracey, now in year 7 of an inner city predominantly working class comprehensive she told me, unsolicited, that she was a 3, 3, 3. When I asked her how she felt about that, she

replied that it was better than being a nothing, but still “rubbish.”⁴⁷

These transcripts speak powerfully of the influence of educational practices upon student self-conceptions. The exam helps Tracey *understand herself* through what is a focused example of commodity fetishism, the transformational process through which an object like her test score becomes equated with her sense of self. Tracey considers herself to be a “3, 3, 3” – Thus understanding herself as “rubbish.”

Furthermore, the young girl in the previous interview, Sharon, draws upon social class and academic ideologies that equate lack of academic success with moral corruption. Her academic test score is transformed into a defining feature of her essential identity.

Rather than being disconnected or only somewhat related to autonomy, one’s self-conception is an essential part of most any definition of autonomy, regardless of one’s conceptual framework. As Marina Oshana observes:

Being autonomous requires first and foremost that a person have the capacity and the disposition to know her will and know which of her beliefs, desires, affective states, relationships, and so on are distinctive of and essential to her self-conception. Most importantly, the autonomous agent knows the aspects of her self-identity on which she can rely, or which she is confident will manifest and be effective, for better or worse, as the circumstances mandate. The autonomous agent must recognize that these characteristics and attachments are crucial to who she is, and to how she perceives herself, and she must be familiar with the role they occupy in her world.⁴⁸

Earlier, I defined self-conception as “a schematic and adaptive set of beliefs about the self that is used to represent to the person whose self it is, and to others, the character traits, values, moral feelings, desires, and commitments that are considered to define the self.”⁴⁹ We see that such background beliefs influence

autonomy because they both enable and constrain what it is possible to think and to choose. Again, as Joplin argues, “this means that self-concepts preguide more explicit forms of inquiry into the self, by allowing as legitimate starting points certain avenues of self-questioning, and by excluding others.”⁵⁰ I suspect that students like Tracey and Sharon who come to believe that they are not intelligent nor perhaps, “good” enough, will draw upon class-tainted background beliefs about themselves as they adjudicate amongst the range of educational decisions that they make each day. Furthermore, commodity fetishism is reinforced and sustained by diverse school practices like academic track placements and assumptions about what intelligent students look and sound like. The girls are in all likelihood taught by well-intentioned teachers who consider them to be kids who are troubled, learn best by “doing” and who need concrete and direct instructions. Again, the process reinforces itself and students’ very autonomy is influenced as a result.

Thus, we are faced with a particularly vexing issue with regard to autonomy within exploitative circumstances. As I noted in chapter two, researchers emphasize that working class students experience themselves as having multiple selves, depending upon the social context. For example, recall Reay’s description of Shaun. A working class middle school student, Shaun struggles with his conflicting identifications as both being interested in school and wanting to fit into his anti-school working class male culture. Narrative transcripts reveal that Shaun struggles to define his self-conception, at once being pulled by the “educated student” school identity and that of his working class neighborhood, one that is hostile to

sensitive boys who like academics. As a result, Reay argues that Shaun does not so much find or create himself, but rather, he loses himself in the process of exploring his identity in school.

Shaun's example gives credence to the postmodern perspective that there is no essential self, that instead we are marked by "fractured" identities. Shaun certainly seems to be marked by at least two distinct self-conceptions, one as a child who loves academic pursuits and the other as a young aggressive male. Descriptions of this fractured self involve a range of issues that threaten either to move us far from the issues confronting us here, or to remain at an unhelpfully crude level of generality. Jay Lifton's description of the "protean self" helps us navigate between either of those two extremes. Lifton draws upon Greek mythology to describe the resulting view of the self as "protean." Like the god Proteus, individuals adapt to situational necessities, developing the qualities and dispositions needed to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of different social situations. Using the protean metaphor, McAdams describes self-conception as fractured or multiplicitous:

One juggles multiple roles, tries on different hats, different lives, forging selves whose unity is at best tentative and provisional, selves wanting to be dissolved into new combinations or even discarded for brand new editions when life changes and new challenges arise. The multiplicity of the protean self exists in both a temporal and a spatial sense. Over time, people change, new selves replace or improve upon the old. In any given time period, too, across social space and roles, a person assumes many different personas – "wife," "mother," "member of the church council," "tennis player," "party girl," "friend of Louise." As James foretold, there are perhaps as many potential social selves as there are significant social audiences. To think of the self as unitary in today's world, some would say, is to long for simpler times when people played fewer roles, cultural change was slow, and one grew up to be one particular thing, fitting a culturally sanctioned niche grounded in tradition.⁵¹

McAdam's description captures the essence of what working class students describe as a lack of social congruence between their working class homes and largely middle class schools.⁵² But despite this lack of congruity, despite the fractured identities, working class kids come to understand themselves as people who are not smart enough, are not good enough to succeed in schools. I suggest that the process of commodity fetishism helps these students forge a self-concept that crosses the divide between home and school. The protean self is one of a two-part conception that illuminates how commodity fetishism and autonomy intersect. To make that link clearer, I turn to a currently fashionable metaphor for responding to the philosophical problem of how to explain the continuity of selves across changing social contexts (and, of course, time). Both Daniel Dennet and J. David Velleman helpfully describe the guiding self as a fictional narrator, spinning a self-told tale to unify the discontinuities of self across evolving social spaces. For example in the following passage, Dennett explains that unlike spiders and beavers, human beings protect themselves through the telling of narratives.

Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories, and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others – and ourselves – about who we are... These strings or streams of narrative issue forth *as if* from a single source – not just in the obvious physical sense of flowing from just one mouth, or one pencil or pen, but in a more subtle sense: their effect on any audience is to encourage them to (try to) posit a unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are: in short, to posit a *center of narrative gravity*.⁵³

Dennett's description of the self as a center of narrative gravity is helpful in the construction of critical autonomy because he emphasizes how relational of a

concept it is. While Dennett concludes that there is no *true* self at the center of the action of story telling, I suggest that we can theorize a relatively thin self at the center of the narrative act without succumbing to the trap that it is an essential, unalterable self. Of course, philosophers, psychologists and religious scholars in each of those fields disagree on the true nature of the self, and the nature of critical autonomy that I am advocating here can accommodate a range of viewpoints, but does require that there be some self at the center of the project. How “thick” a self remains an open question for inquiry.

Velleman also describes the inner self as a narrator in a way that supplements Dennett’s description in a helpful way:

The self-narrating agent is a bit like an improvisational actor, enacting a role that he invents as he goes. The difference is that an improvisational actor usually invents and enacts a role that he is not playing in fact. His actions represent what they are not – actions other than themselves, performed out of motives other than his. By contrast, the self-narrator is an ingenuous improviser, inventing a role that expresses his actual motives in response to real events. He can improvise his actual role in these events because his motives take shape and produce behavior under the influence of his self-descriptions, which are therefore underdetermined by antecedent facts, so that he partly invents what he enacts.⁵⁴

Philosophers, psychologists and religious scholars in each field disagree upon the nature of the self, and while it is important to note that the metaphor of the self as narrator is a useful tool to describe a complex phenomenon, but as a tool, it necessarily simplifies. Velleman acknowledges the metaphor’s limitations, pointing out that “we tell many, disconnected stories about ourselves – short episodes that do not get incorporated into our life stories.”⁵⁵ Thus, the self as narrator speaks of

the larger life events more than it does about the many minor ones we tell ourselves.

I suggest that these two ways of conceiving the self, one as protean and the other as involving a master narrator who spins a story to provide coherence to our lives, help us understand the relationship between commodity fetishism and autonomy with greater clarity. The disparity between the home and school social contexts is much greater for working class students, thus demanding that they develop more radically different protean selves. Commodity fetishism describes the process through which the school helps students fashion self-understandings that bridge the various protean selves, establishing a relatively stable “essential” self upon which to fashion autonomy. (Of course, these narratives are further influenced by the intersection with other exploited and/or oppressed aspects of student identities like ethnicity and gender, to name but two.) We see this in the British elementary students’ dialogue about themselves. Tracey understands herself to be *rubbish* because of her standardized test scores. We can better see critical autonomy if we define a heteronomous person as drawing upon power-functional ideological resources to spin a relatively stable self-narrative or self-conception that seems relatively immutable. This relatively stable self-understanding is important, because, like Oshana observes, it serves as the background framework through which decisions are based. Again, without some sort of stable self, autonomy becomes difficult to imagine.

When I argue that student identities are relatively stable or unified, I mean that the main narrative that the school influences is the one about a student's academic self-understanding. Of course, one cannot easily isolate such a self from other parts of one's life, so the influence is most likely to be quite pervasive, but the issue is open and may depend upon the student's self-understanding. The point is that other social contexts might very well present students with differing information about their skills and preferences, but the partially unified or essentialized sense of self that the school offers is the narrative line that influences student's academic and school-related decisions. In so far as other academic narrations influence student choices and behaviors, the school-based commodity fetishizing process may be thwarted.

The depiction of the relationship between commodity fetishism, social class and autonomy I have presented here may be disheartening, but I propose that it helps us identify the value of efforts to build critical autonomy. Rather than being driven by uncritical narrators who draw upon power-functional ideologies to spin self-related stories, we can conceptualize "critical" narrators who examine their beliefs and their socio-political worlds with other inquirers to help forge self narrations and decisions that attend to the intersections of power and personal choices.

Supporting Critical Autonomy: Three Metaphors

In contrast to what I have been describing as the uncritical narrator marked by the process commodity fetishism, I propose we envision a critical narrator at the

center of the definition of critical autonomy. In the following section, I discuss three metaphorical ways of conceiving of critical autonomy, ways that help us conceptualize ways to respond to Parker Palmer's encouragement to "live the contradictions, fully and painfully aware of the poles between which our lives are stretched."⁵⁶ The sources are disparate, emerging from within literatures of feminist, educational, and Buddhist philosophies. As such, I do not want to argue that they we could necessarily integrate all three; they instead offer three different ways of conceiving how to work with the potentially irreconcilable contradictions that emerge in the experience of oppressive social conditions.

World Traveling: Maria Lugones offers us the first metaphor that supports the development of critical autonomy in her discussion of "world traveling." As a Latina, lesbian and feminist academic raised in a position of privilege in her native Cuba, Lugones discusses "'traveling" between a variety of worlds in which she perceives herself and is perceived differently depending on the social context. She notices that she has access to different ways of being in each of these worlds and that she has difficulty resolving the different selves she observes.

Those of us who are "world"-travelers have the distinct experience of being different in different "worlds" and of having the capacity to remember other "worlds" and ourselves in them. We can say "That is me there, and I am happy in that "world." So, the experience is of being a different person in different "worlds" and yet of having memory of oneself as different without quite having the sense of there being any underlying "I." When I can say "that is me there and I am so playful in that 'world,'" I am saying "That is *me in that 'world'*" not because I recognize myself in that person; rather, the first person statement is noninferential. I may well recognize that that person has abilities I do not have and yet the having or not having of the abilities is always an "I have..." and "I do not have..." (i.e., it is always experienced in the first person.)⁵⁷

Lugones skillfully captures the sort of reflective self-awareness about the ways that different social contexts give rise to different resources for expressing and understanding oneself. Lugones helps clarify the difference between the uncritical narrator and a critical one. The uncritical narrator is relatively heteronomous because she draws only upon the resources of a given social context to understand herself. In contrast, the world-traveling critical narrator associated with critical autonomy has developed enough detachment to conceptualize that the self she envisions as the “I” has different resources with which to construct itself in alternative contexts. Furthermore, she attends to the power-functionality of the social context, analyzing how the resulting influences on oneself support or subvert the maintenance of power-structures.

The creative playfulness Lugones mentions is also important because it describes the second feature of the critical narrator – that of harmonizing across social contexts. She differentiates between an agonistic playfulness grounded in competition and a loving playfulness, grounded in the sort of harmonizing spirit necessary for critical autonomy. Lugones explains:

The attitude that carries us through the activity, a playful attitude, turns the activity into play. Our activity has no rules, though it is certainly intentional activity and we both understand what we are doing. The playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case the uncertainty is an openness to surprise. This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the “world” to be neatly packaged, ruly. Rules may fail to explain what we are doing. We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are open to self-construction. We may not have rules, and when we do have them, there are not rules that are to us sacred. We are not worried about competence. We are not wedded to a

particular way of doing things. While playful, we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular “world.” *We are there creatively.* We are not passive.⁵⁸

In a footnote to the previous passage, Lugones makes a connection to oppression that particularly addresses the challenges associated with holding on to the paradoxes of autonomy: “One can understand why this sense of playfulness is one that may exercise in resistance to oppression when resistance is not reducible to reaction. Nonreactive resistance is creative; it exceeds that which is being resisted. The creation of new meaning lies outside of rules, particularly the rules of the “world” being resisted.”⁵⁹ Lugones’ discussion of a playful, creative non-reactive world traveling is quite different than the self-narration guided by commodity fetishism. Rather than being destructive of the self, critical autonomy is marked by Parker Palmer’s encouragement to “live the contradictions.”

Attunement: We find further help in our construction of critical autonomy by describing the critical narrating process as attunement. Heesoon Bai questions the traditional account of autonomy as being one of hierarchical self-control. She argues that the psychological processes of splitting the self into hierarchies is destructive. She cautions:

Control, whether intersubjective or intrasubjective, is... an oppressive force which blocks and negates otherness (in a variety of forms), and this contributes, not to harmony, integration, and wholeness, but to disharmony, fragmentation of psyche (say, into mind and emotion, reason and inclination, and so on), and is a form of violence in that it sets out to subdue, silence, and dominate the otherness in whatever form.⁶⁰

Bai, in sympathy with Confucian philosophy, contends that the task of education should be “the cultivation of the whole person who is fully integrated and

harmonized intrapsychically, body-heart-mind, and interpsychically with all social and natural orders of the world.”⁶¹ Bai explains that the sort of thinking associated with attunement is best captured by Roger Ames’ conception of aesthetic thinking which he distinguishes from logical order thinking. Whereas logical order thinking emphasizes the applying of “blueprints” to order reality within a preconceived pattern, aesthetic thinking emphasizes creativity emerging from the particularities of a given situation. Bai explains:

An aesthetic order is not something that preexists the concerned particulars but is something that contingently arises from the dynamic effort on the part of the particulars to attune themselves appropriately to each other. To this end, the effort is made of judiciously and at the same time creatively interpreting the self and others in the concrete particular context so as to achieve a coherent sense of harmony. The particular harmony that arises through this effort is not something that could have been predicted, planned on, specified, or counted on. While a deep familiarity with diverse things and situations may enable one to anticipate likelihood of outcomes, there can be no prior expectations or predictions of particular outcomes because knowledge of the particulars involved is disclosed only through the process of collaborative harmonious interaction with them.⁶²

Furthermore, Bai usefully compares attunement to quilting:

As a former quilter (I guess I now quilt with ideas and words), I am well aware of the major difference in approach between the quilting that utilizes fabric scraps one collects from various projects and the quilting that involves cutting out uniform pieces from new fabric and putting these together according to a preexisting pattern. The former approach has no “blueprint” to conform to, and the product is entirely dependent upon the odd collection of remnants one has at hand and one’s aesthetic sensitivity to the endless possibilities of harmonious color and shape patterns. The challenge of the project is to perceive the possibilities of harmony through the interpretive effort of integrating the pieces in such way that they mutually enhance each other. Here, even a piece that is not particularly appealing on its own is not discarded but is integrated with other pieces so as to bring out its best potential, which in turn contributes to the enhancement of the whole.⁶³

Bai's metaphor emphasizes that our students draw upon a variety of resources to fashion their self-narratives. We can either hinder their metaphorical quilt-making by prescribing what their quilts should look like, or at least by presuming that their "quilts" must be consistent with class-based stereotypes. We can also help them by supporting their individual "quilting" or "writing projects" by supplying them with rich and varied resources, not ones limited to the conceptions of "educated" influenced by social class biases. I will address this topic in more detail in the next chapter.⁶

I do not want to mistakenly portray attunement as a wholly individual action. Even attunement is both an individual *and* relational process, one that cannot emerge in isolation, one that is dependent upon the resources made available by the school context. We might help students in the task of trying to attune as part of the critical autonomy project, but we must create environments that support such harmonization. We can encourage and/or thwart the growth of such a capacity, just like other aspects of autonomy. An example of what I mean here is the existence of student agency support groups like the ones the working class Mexican American girls described in Bettie's study. She demonstrates that school-sponsored groups and activities directly aimed at addressing the concerns of the girls helped them retain "their racial/ethnic identity."⁶⁴ I will address the school context and autonomy in the next chapter, so for now I will conclude by emphasizing that this process I

⁶ For now, Shirley Brice Heath's approach to working with social class is illustrative of what I have in mind here.

describe is yet again one that entails both individual skills and socio-contextual supports. Attunement is also enhanced when pursued in concert in a supportive community of inquirers.

In the beginning of this chapter, I argued that current efforts by liberals to link autonomy with traits of character encourages us to focus on the ways that critical autonomy entails autonomy-enhancing dispositions. Rather than describe them as character virtues, though, I borrow a related concept from Buddhist philosophy to describe the sort of dispositions we might promote to help students engage in the difficult tasks associated with critical autonomy, it is described as “non-attachment.”

Non-Attachment: Non-attachment describes being at once fully engaged while also not “stuck” with regard to any belief or desire, an approach and concept that compliments the Misakian pragmatic epistemology that also supports critical autonomy. Thich Nhat Hanh explains that one should remain non-attached to beliefs because knowledge is both changing and fallible, necessitating that we be flexible and able to respond to change.⁶⁵ He offers instead the Pali word *upeksa* which he describes as equanimity, “evenmindedness,” or a “letting go.”⁶⁶ Ayya Khema captures the equanimity that Hahn suggests. “Even-mindedness is based on the wisdom that everything changes, on an understanding of total impermanence. No matter what happens, it will all come to an end.”⁶⁷ Again, non-attachment does not mean remaining aloof nor indifferent. Instead, it is a way of being fully engaged while not being “stuck.” Ann Diller remarks that we can be

committed to important beliefs while holding them "lightly and acknowledging that our particular views represent just one of multiple possible perspectives."⁶⁸ This stands in "contrast to forms of 'attachment to views' where we become 'identified with' certain beliefs so that they turn into 'positions' to 'defend.'"⁶⁹

To describe it in another way, Ayya Khema articulates the concept I'm describing here as equanimity:

Equanimity is a deep insight with an unshakeable heart full of love. Indifference is the cold shoulder, the way we avoid getting involved -- and end up making life even more difficult. Equanimity is the highest of all emotions and requires courage. The Latin root of the word means "even" (*aequus*) "mind" or "courage" (*animus*). It requires the courage to be different, to refuse to take sides, to resist losing one's vision in the dazzle of the world.⁷⁰

The point here is that by being non-attached to a belief or a decision, we commit ourselves to it in a way that is revisable. We make choices because we must, but we do not treat the choices themselves as representing the final belief we will or can hold on a given topic. It helps us remain focused on the act of being in the particularities of our given world situations while also acknowledging the limitations associated with belief choices and decisions made too hastily. Diller emphasizes that non-attachment is *not* the same as indifference, which is antithetical to what I am describing here. This stance contrasts with commodity fetishism which encourages a tight holding on to beliefs about ourselves that limit, that demand that we take sides about ourselves in toxic ways. Linking equanimity or non-attachment with critical autonomy, then, changes the dynamic considerably. Ayya Khema's insight helps us see that critical autonomy involves being passionately involved in

one's world, embracing one's commitments, forging relationships, but doing so with the courage to hold one's beliefs and commitments "light" enough that we might revise them. It also offers a way to conceive of autonomy as an individualistic yet thoroughly relational concept.

There is some danger that what I have described above might contradict and contrast with the psychological realities of adolescent development, especially in their developmental needs to belong, even potentially to establish conceptions of the self. They may, then, resist urges to "world travel" or not to attach too tightly to any one self-conception. I suggest that the Peircean approach to inquiry offers a guide for negotiating these real challenges to the tool of critical autonomy. As Barbara Houston observes,

If we are to cultivate critical autonomy, we need to make the desire to belong, the desire to be seen, the desire to be special, the desire to be competent and be seen to be competent an object of study as much as any particular socially patterned interpretation of where we do belong, how we are seen, what competencies are assigned and presumed of us.⁷¹

The framework of critical autonomy – including the three metaphors I have offered here – must be critiqued and analyzed. It is especially important for the capacity of critical autonomy to be analyzed and critiqued by teachers and students in schools. It is an open question whether or not it is a valuable educational goal, or that it would remain one under altered social conditions. Likewise, the three metaphorical tools I suggest support critical autonomy must be appraised for their usefulness as well.

Conclusion

As we have repeatedly seen in the literature of social justice and education, the engaging of students in the examination of social issues does not mean that they will accept the results of that inquiry. Quite often they resist. I must acknowledge that critical autonomy will not always resolve conflicts amongst an agent's main aims. Other values may trump the cultivation of autonomy. As a result, critical autonomy must intersect and address concerns associated with living one's life "from the inside." Within the language of autonomy theory, we find this important concept at the heart of what many refer to as "authenticity." Similar to the way my general argument that the nature of autonomy is both inward and outward looking, authenticity can be construed as an internal (individual) concept, but as I have been arguing throughout this chapter, we rely on socially learned tools for defining what authentic means for ourselves. Thus, our conceptions of the authentic are susceptible to contamination from power-functional ideologies and practices. I have addressed how to respond to this issue within the contours of inquiry in critical autonomy, but I raise the issue here to emphasize that the attunement process and the larger one I'm calling critical autonomy must always take seriously the ways that we perceive the world "from the inside." Scott Fletcher's description of authenticity helps me get at the point I'm trying to make here.

Fletcher argues that "authenticity is a form of autonomy rooted in our experience of uniqueness and originality; it is expressed through our efforts to create a sense of self in the 'local' context of our relationships with others, or put another way, in

communities where individuals find genuine recognition and reciprocity.”⁷²

Furthermore, Fletcher draws on Charles Taylor to argue that authenticity involves the active construction of self:

Authenticity of the kind I am describing does not require that our choices or life-plans conform to some preordained pattern or model of human development, or move in the direction of some common human ideal. Postmodernists, among others, have given us good reason to reject such essentialist views. Instead, the definition of authenticity that I propose for the new constellation involves a commitment to self-reflection and exploration consistent with the view that identity is constructed rather than given, and that this process of construction takes place in a complex landscape of historical contingency.⁷³

The notion of authenticity Fletcher crafts captures the essence of the autonomy project’s emphasis on individual determination of what beliefs and choices make the most sense to the individual agent in a given time and place. Once again, we must reject paternalistic interventions masked as encouraging self direction.

Regardless of whatever else autonomy might entail, I agree with Will Kymlicka who argues that it must acknowledge the “fit” from the “inside” about one’s beliefs and choices.

While we may be mistaken in our beliefs about value, it doesn’t follow that someone else, who has reason to believe a mistake has been made, can come along and improve my life by leading it for me, in accordance with the correct amount of value. On the contrary, no life goes better by being led from the outside according to values the person doesn’t endorse. My life only goes better if I’m leading it from the inside, according to my beliefs about value.⁷⁴

Despite our judgments or suspicions that students may be interpreting the world and making decisions through criteria influenced by power functional ideologies, we must honor and respect their motivations and reasons to act in a particular way, to

choose for themselves what the contours of their self-conceptions contain, as well as how to resolve the myriad tensions created by the social class influences on their lives. We can create the conditions in which they are supported in the process of critically analyzing their beliefs as well as the influences on how they came to hold those beliefs. Likewise, we can help foster the conditions that make exploring how harmonizing and attuning reveal new perspectives and opportunities for responding to oppressive life circumstances. Cheryl Misak once again helps here. Recall that she argues that beliefs about how one should live one's life, for example, are sensitive to an agent's intuitions or experiences, an argument different in form but consistent with what Kymilicka expresses in the previous quote:

Despite the fact that they are up for revision, our initial intuitions must be given weight. We have no choice but to take our background beliefs seriously in inquiry; if we did not, inquiry would grind to a halt. Without background belief, one is not empowered to see things, to make distinctions, to reason.⁷⁵

But Misak also helps focus our attention on how even a highly individualized notion such as authenticity is also relational:

My beliefs about how I should lead my life are sensitive to experience, both my own experience and the experience of others. I try out the life of the aesthete and find that it is not for me. Or perhaps I read an account of how self-indulgent a particular aesthete is I see that such a life is not for me. Or perhaps a friend argues that, given my dislike of pretence, such a life is not for me. "Personal" conceptions of the good are not so personal and immutable after all – they are responsive to experience, argument, thought experiment, and reasons.⁷⁶

When students choose other values than to develop critical autonomy, I suggest that they do so because schools force such choices. As Ken Howe⁷⁷ so persuasively argues, the context of choice matters in schools. The choice I

described above is created in part by the school's predicating academic success upon dominant class norms and skills. We can fashion schools such that choosing to embrace critical autonomy in some form does not equal the rejection of one's family. To realize those ends, we must do both – change schools and change how we interact with students. That is the subject of the next chapter.

But here at the close of this chapter, I return to my initial caution: critical autonomy reveals no clear-cut answers, no simple ways to resolve the conflicts that arise between conflicting desires and goals associated with social class and education. We can help students develop the skills and capacities to exercise critical autonomy, especially if we conceive of it as embracing a number of inquiry-related aspects, but we cannot erase the contradictions that emerge from living within oppressive social structures. In the spirit of attunement, we may also be able to identify more “critical” rather than less critical ways of approaching negotiating a decision, examining one's world or holding a belief. Critical autonomy also entails a critical understanding of the social contexts in which different versions of the self emerge. As Fletcher describes this feature of autonomy, “critical consciousness is a reflective capacity that individuals possess, to one degree or another, that enables them to grasp the meaning and implications of their choices in a social context.”⁷⁸

As I have been arguing, the notion of critical autonomy I advocate here involves two parts. Although in reality they are intertwined, I suggest that it is helpful to conceive of one supporting the other. The first aspect involves a set of beliefs about the features of inquiry necessary for critical autonomy. I have argued that critical

autonomy is enhanced when we adopt a pragmatic approach to inquiry. We should accept a belief that stands up to reasons when we have inquired as far as we can into it. Critical autonomy is also enhanced when individual inquirers join *other inquirers* in pursuit of inquiry. Furthermore, because our tools of inquiry are socially constructed, we should be wary of granting them methodological purity. As such we should be sensitive to experiences and perspectives that challenge or do not fit with what “counts” as normal or acceptable within the methods of inquiry we use. The second general part of critical autonomy entails the critical examination of power-functional ideologies and structures that influence one’s world in a variety of ways, including one’s beliefs. Finally, it is imperative to conduct inquiry into how one’s self-conception (or self-narration) is influenced by the various social contexts in one’s life.

The spirit of attunement helps us focus our attention on developing the critical capacity to engage oneself fully as a creative individual in different social contexts. All of these details, these ways of analyzing the world and one’s place in it require both internal and external supports. It also requires an associated stance toward inquiry, one that does not take a belief to be true in a fixed, final way. Instead, critical autonomy demands that inquirers, especially self-inquirers, be wary of foreclosing inquiry and basing beliefs on incomplete and fallible information. It would be a rather powerful shift if students were to express themselves not as *being* examples of working class stereotypes, but to articulate understandings that in certain social conditions they experience themselves as having access to different

sorts of selves. Working there – to analyze the conditions in which their self narratives are perhaps more positive and open to possibility – students might be able to begin to analyze both themselves and the social contexts that give rise to different conceptions of those selves in the fashion that Lugones describes. Furthermore, their critical autonomy is enhanced such that they is able to analyze the power-functional practices and beliefs associated with each of their worlds and their places within them.

¹ Reay, "Finding or Losing Yourself?: Working-Class Relationships to Education."

² Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (New York: Vintage, 1993) 17.

³ Rob Reich, Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 102.

⁴ Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, "Autonomy Refigured," Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000) 5.

⁵ Marilyn Friedman, "Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique," Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays, eds. John Christman and Joel Anderson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 53.

⁶ Marilyn Friedman, Autonomy, Gender, Politics (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁷ Fletcher, Education and Emancipation.

⁸ Parker Palmer, In the Belly of a Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Thought of Thomas Merton (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1979), 9.

⁹ Palmer, In the Belly of a Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Thought of Thomas Merton, 9.

¹⁰ R.F. Dearden, "Autonomy and Education," Education and the Development of Reason, eds. R.F. Dearden, P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972). R.F. Dearden, "Autonomy as an Educational Ideal I," Philosophers Discuss Education, ed. S.C. Brown (London, UK: Macmillan Press LTD, 1975), R.F. Dearden, Theory and Practice in Education (London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), R.F. Dearden, "Education and the Ethics of Belief," Theory and Practice in Education (London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), R.F. Dearden, "Autonomy and Intellectual Education," Theory and Practice in Education (London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

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- ¹¹ R.S. Peters, "Freedom and the Development of the Free Man," Educational Judgments: Papers in the Philosophy of Education, ed. James F. Doyle (London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).
- ¹² Harry Brighouse, School Choice and Social Justice (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000) 70.
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CHAPTER V

FOSTERING CRITICAL AUTONOMY WITHIN SCHOOLS

Introduction

Because critical autonomy encourages students, especially when engaging in self-inquiry, to pursue their questions as far as circumstances and conditions allow, schools should support critical autonomy by fostering an environment in which ongoing collaborative inquiry into a wide variety of beliefs and claims to knowledge can thrive. Such an environment creates what Charles Taylor describes as a “background of intelligibility,” through which students engage in analyses of knowledge claims as well as the processes that led to those claims (in a variety of domains, both academic and personal). In what follows, I explore the ways that an autonomy-enhancing context is created through collaborative inquiry among students, teachers, parents and school officials on a variety of questions facing them throughout the experience of schooling. I have divided the discussion into three sections; the first addresses issues associated with fostering the conditions for collaborative inquiry in schools through the curriculum and interpersonal relationships within classrooms; the second addresses issues associated with attending to analyses of power. In the last I take up the topic of how to negotiate a

reconceptualized ideal of the educated person that takes seriously the implications of my analysis of critical autonomy and commodity fetishism.

Critical Autonomy and Collaborative Inquiry

While all the various features of a school's program interrelate in the nurturance of critical autonomy, I divide the following discussion into two sections in order to parse issues that are associated with different contexts in the school community. In the first section, I discuss the topic of collaborative inquiry with regard to whole-school issues like general approaches to curriculum development. In the second, I turn to a more focused examination of collaborative inquiry within the context of individual classrooms.

Curriculum, Context and Inquiry

C.S. Peirce's arguments about inquiry and their implications for holding knowledge claims help guide the understanding of collaborative inquiry necessary to foster critical autonomy. Put another way, his ideas help characterize the "background of intelligibility" that supports critical inquiry into one's personal beliefs and their relationships to the larger context of one's social world. At its heart, Peirce's work encourages us to embrace the pragmatic fallability principle, an approach to truth-focused inquiry that suspects all claims to knowledge as potentially error-laden. Cheryl Misak summarizes the resulting impact on our belief claims succinctly when she states that "a true belief is one which would stand up to the evidence and reasons, were we to inquire as far as we could on the matter."¹

Such a stance toward knowledge claims opposes the models of school instruction we often find today, ones that privilege school and state educational officials as having virtually unqualified privilege to define knowledge and thus the rationale for a pedagogy that focuses on knowledge transmission, or as Freire so eloquently described it – the “banking” model in which knowledge is poured into students’ empty and passive minds.² Adopting Peirce’s injunction to suspend definitive knowledge claims until the end of inquiry suggests at least three implications for the construction of academic curricula and programs. First, schools should adopt a more open stance with regard to the variety of knowledge claims that motivate and justify academic judgments. Second, schools should focus on the topic of on-going inquiry itself as a matter of sustained educational analysis and instructional focus. Finally, emerging from both of these implications of taking Peirce’s ideas seriously, teachers and administrators should collaborate with a variety of people within and outside the school throughout the process of schooling, its design, implementation and evaluation.

When we design academic programs of study, as well as behavioral policies and expectations within schools, we are making public statements about what schools should be like and what students should learn. These statements are embedded within epistemological beliefs, and they are often presented to students and their families as unassailable statements of truth about what is most valuable to learn and the best way to govern a school. When students and parents interact with the school under these conditions, they do so not to enter a dialogue

concerning the fundamental worth of those beliefs about knowledge and schooling, but to discuss how students will adapt to the consequences of decisions made by others for them. Embracing Peirce's fallibility principle challenges this understanding of practice and policy in at least two ways. First, rather than regard curricular decisions as being immutable, curricular standards and frameworks would necessarily need to be considered to be works-in-progress, open to revision and renegotiation at any reasonable point in time. Second, in order to increase the confidence that their decisions represent beliefs that are the product of better inquiry, the school would do well to expand the community of inquiry involved in making school decisions to include a wide array of perspectives and participants. It would require schools to include parents, students and community members in its decision making processes. I will return to this topic in the last section of this chapter, where I discuss how to negotiate a reconceptualization of the ideal of the educated person. For now, I will concentrate on curricular implications and leave the larger community-wide inquiry issues to that discussion.

Focusing on the analysis of inquiry in one subject area will help elaborate the application of this Peircean epistemological framework. The current science education literature, for example, is replete with discussions of the benefits of and techniques for helping students approach scientific inquiry as if they were apprentice scientists. In the science education literature, progressive educators seek to help students engage in age and skill-appropriate "authentic" scientific inquiry projects, rather than presenting them with uncontested scientific facts for

memorization. Such experiences foster the conditions in which students conduct developmentally appropriate yet relatively sophisticated scientific inquiry – including the development of hypotheses, experimental design and data analysis.³ These approaches contrast with controlled “experiments” in which teachers pre-select inquiry topics, hypotheses and experimental designs for their students. In this more traditional and currently dominant approach to the study of science, students seek to “discover” pre-established answers and are at least partially (and sometimes wholly) graded on whether or not they “got it right.”⁴

Trumbull and colleagues criticize the second approach, which they call “confirmatory” experiments, because it fails to help students develop sophisticated epistemological tools:

Schools continue to emphasize confirmatory exercises that require students to follow explicit procedures to arrive at expected conclusions. ...Students thus are rewarded for following directions and for obtaining predetermined correct answers. Consequently, students fail to learn habits necessary for conducting scientific inquiry, such as observing carefully, using theory and observations to formulate hypotheses, designing ways to investigate hypotheses systematically, analyzing and interpreting data, or other aspects of investigations.⁵

Again, while these sorts of “false” discovery projects have been soundly criticized by a number of theorists over the last forty years for their inability to help students engage with science in “authentic” ways, they persist.⁶ Chinn and Molhatra argue that as a result, “students are likely to fail to learn the heuristics scientists use to reason under uncertainty.”⁷ They conclude that “there has been little development of inquiry tasks that enable students to learn how to reason about methodological flaws or how to coordinate theories with multiple studies that may conflict with each

other.”⁸ The point is not that guided discovery is never appropriate, for even teachers who engage in “authentic” approaches to the study of science may have to supplement open-ended inquiry with closely-guided experiences to help students develop the skills necessary for more authentic work. The matter is one of emphasis, and does not preclude the judicious use of guided instruction.

The debate within science education about preparing students to engage in authentic scientific inquiry is important in this discussion of critical autonomy because it addresses the “background of intelligibility” through which students forge epistemological tools that cross multiple domains, whether they are associated with scientific inquiry, personal understanding or analysis of power and oppression.

Echoing Dewey, I agree with Sandoval, who argues that

if students do not have to decide what kind of data to get, they are unlikely to engage in epistemological considerations of what kind of data would be appropriate. If they are not responsible for coordinating data with particular claims, they are unlikely to consider the bases upon which particular claims might be warranted. Clearly, then, how “inquiry” gets implemented in particular classrooms has direct consequences upon the epistemological ideas that students might bring to bear on their work, and the potential of that work to affect those ideas.⁹

A pedagogy of transmission, or Freire’s “banking model,” is anathema to critical autonomy because students are not given experience with exploring how different inquiry-related frameworks influence knowledge claims. Such a lack of epistemological awareness denies students access to the tools associated with critical autonomy; including the tools that help them to analyze how their self-conceptions are constructed within specific social contexts.

The following example demonstrates how high school science teachers can engage students in an examination of how theoretical frameworks in general influence knowledge claims within the context of engaging with science curriculum. Stewart and Rudolph describe a high school evolutionary biology curriculum designed to challenge students to explore how researchers' "fundamental assumptions about the natural world"¹⁰ influence their interpretation of data. To do so, students were introduced to three divergent conceptual frameworks to explain evolution, two from within a traditionally acceptable "scientific" tradition; Darwin's natural selection model, and Lamarck's "model of use inheritance;"¹¹ with the third drawing from Paley's intelligent design theory.¹² Students were given access to case model data sets; for example, "they might develop explanations for a particular phenomenon, such as the shape of the carapace in Galapagos tortoises or the seed coat texture and thickness in a hypothetical species of plant."¹³ Within the context of this unit, the teachers focused student attention on analyzing data through the three conceptual frameworks and not data generation in order to present students with a focused opportunity to analyze theoretical framework influence on inquiry.

The researchers report that students developed sophisticated explanations for evolutionary process based on the different resources of the three different models provided. This example contributes to the development of critical autonomy, because students developed relatively sophisticated understandings of the ways that the three theoretical frameworks influenced their data interpretation:

Key to this section of the course is student exploration of the disciplinary context of each of these three models, focusing specifically on the fundamental assumptions about the natural world on which the various models are based. Darwin's model, for example, posited the existence of species capable of transformation by means of naturalistic forces continuously acting in the world. Paley, on the other hand, assumed the fixity of all species and required the action of metaphysical forces for the initial generation of species. Our goal here was not to lay out in detail the disciplinary structure of each of these models, but rather to simply illustrate the emphasis of this curriculum on the conceptual structure of models dealing with species of diversity. Once students understood both the general conceptual structure of these evolutionary models (that they were developed to account for a particular set of data and depended upon a given array of methodological and metaphysical assumptions) and the specific mechanisms of each, they were prepared to engage each other in debate over the relative adequacy of the models in addressing various empirical problems subsequently presented in class. What emerged in class discussions was a dialogue about the proper and improper use and evaluation of the competing models.¹⁴

In conclusion, Stewart and Rudolph observe:

Given the assumptions of any one of the three models, students found that the related model was often perfectly adequate for solving a variety of...problems. (Paley's intelligent design model is a particularly good example of a model with such broad explanatory power.) After recognizing the validity of each model in its own context, the comparative adequacy of the assumptions associated with the various worldviews rapidly became an issue.¹⁵

The approach that Stewart and Rudolph describe within the evolutionary biology course is valuable because it directly addresses how knowledge emerges from within specific epistemological frameworks. The teachers created valuable opportunities for students not only to generate knowledge claims about evolution while using each of the theoretical frameworks, but also to reflect upon the socio-historical contexts that gave rise to each of the three frameworks they employed. The unit is an example of one that would contribute to the development of critical

autonomy because it helps students contextualize knowledge as emerging from specific inquiry processes, and, it is important to emphasize here, to engage in critical analysis of *those frameworks and their influence on knowledge*. Critical autonomy promotes inquiry into the adequacy of competing explanations with the explicit intention to interrogate how we know what we know in multiple domains, not merely to recognize that knowledge emerges from conceptual frameworks. Interrogating those frameworks matters.

Feminist scholars offer a second source of examples for looking at the relationships of curricular context, inquiry and critical autonomy. They have attended to issues of power relationships and their influences on collaborative inquiry with regard to patriarchal social structures/relationships, and they have long analyzed the ways that claims to knowledge as well as knowledge exploring groups are influenced by gender bias and gender-based power differences. They make three general sorts of critiques of science.¹⁶ The first set are associated with the ways that women are underrepresented in science because they have not been encouraged to participate in scientific inquiry.¹⁷ The second critique involves the issue of patriarchal power and its influence on science in a variety of hidden ways. For example, it influences the types of questions asked in research projects, how money is allocated, as well as the gendered composition of research teams. Helen Longino,¹⁸ for example, argues that sexism influences the norms driving research; masculine-defined priorities are given more support, and they produce answers that

privilege patriarchal gender relations and obscure oppression. Eisenhart and Finkel observe that,

In health sciences, problems associated with conceiving a child have, until very recently, received little attention. The focus of work (generally by male researchers) has been on contraceptive techniques and devices to be used by women to prevent conception. From this perspective, science is likely to discourage women and minorities because it does not address many of the topics that concern them.¹⁹

Finally, in its most radical form,²⁰ some theorists point to the use of masculine metaphors and the resulting differences in interpretations of data when reanalyzed with typically non-masculine frames.²¹ A classic example of this most radical critique is clear in how early male scientists interpreted analyses of semen through microscopes as miniature men (with arms and legs). "Their observations were framed not by what they saw through their microscopes, but by what they expected to see based on Aristotle's 2,000-year-old idea that women are passive incubators in conception."²² While such an example may seem absurd today, the influences may remain, albeit in subtle ways. The remnants of patriarchy emerge clearly in Evelyn Fox Keller's historical account of developmental biology.²³

Keller describes a relatively recent "paradigm shift" in embryonic research in developmental biology due to the abandonment of the sexist metaphors that guided embryonic research since the 1920s.²⁴ Keller argues that the metaphors prevented researchers from inquiring into embryos in important and alternative ways. The previously dominant discourse was of "gene action," a way to understand the embryonic cell's gene as the driving force in the cell (the masculine part of the cell) while the protoplasm was conceived as feminine. The protoplasm

was considered to be passive and relatively unimportant, thus not worth researching.

By the discourse of gene action, I mean a way of talking about the role of genes in development, introduced in the 1920s and 1930s by the first generation of geneticists, that attributes to the gene a kind of omnipotence – not only causal primacy, but autonomy and, perhaps especially, agency. Development is controlled by the action of genes. Everything else in the cell is mere surplus. ... This way of talking not only enabled geneticists to get on with their work without worrying about what they did not know; it framed their questions and guided their choices, both of experiments worth doing and of organisms worth studying.²⁵

For the next forty years, Keller argues, embryology research was guided and inhibited by this masculinist metaphorical conceptual framework. Today, researchers have reconceived the relationship between cytoplasm and genes. That the cytoplasm plays a critical role in the “structure of the egg prior to fertilization, is widely regarded as pivotal in the recent renaissance of developmental biology. But it did not depend on new techniques.”²⁶ Scientists forty years ago could have used existing technology to advance their research had they adopted a different conceptual framework. Thus, the example demonstrates how the very tools of inquiry influence the knowledge claims we might make about a subject; in this case, it took feminist scientists to rethink the fundamental metaphorical grounding of a field of inquiry to make progress toward understanding embryo development in productive ways.

The three preceding feminist critiques upon science suggest three different responses. The first suggests that we should make the study of science more attractive to women. While certainly an important endeavor, it leaves the

fundamental epistemological critiques raised by feminists unanswered.²⁷ It is similar to the “add on” approach to multiculturalism in which the received curriculum remains unquestioned while it is made more “inclusive” with the addition of more diverse perspectives. The goal of critical autonomy cannot be reached through such measures; it requires that students be given opportunities to explore deeper epistemological issues within their academic study. Thus, while making curriculum more “inclusive” by directly focusing on working class issues is important, for example, the approach I am advocating focuses also on the second two types of analyses associated with how power influences both the context and the results of inquiry. In the example Keller²⁸ highlights, the specific tool of inquiry – the metaphorical framework scientists used to make sense of embryos – influenced the questions they asked about embryos as well as their interpretations of the data they collected in their research projects.

Keller’s and other feminists’ arguments about the influence of gender beliefs on knowledge claims has led to calls for teachers in schools to help students analyze knowledge claims in more sophisticated ways. This is evident in Maralee Mayberry’s recommendation within science education; we should

demonstrate early on that the facts and concepts they are presented with are relative to a certain system of thought or worldview. That will empower students to gain an understanding of how all knowledge is constructed within a social context. Even the seemingly benign fields of math and physics can be understood and taught as contextualized disciplines.²⁹

Elaine Howes’s example of a unit within a sophomore-level high school biology course exemplifies the sort of epistemological study Mayberry encourages.³⁰ Howes

created a unit focused on prenatal testing in which students worked in groups to study prenatal testing and then present their findings in role plays. The questions she asks students to consider are helpful:

- Why is the doctor recommending this test?
- During what time period in the pregnancy is this test used?
- What, specifically, do geneticists and doctors use this test to find out?
- What are the possible dangers of this test?
- Would you choose (or encourage your wife to choose) to have such a test?¹
- Do you think that women should be required to have such tests?³¹

During the process of their personalizing the issues associated with the various prenatal testing choices facing them, students took on different perspectives – from those of doctors and nurses, to those of the pregnant women and other family members. As a result, the differences in perspectives revealed that the scientific prenatal issues were complex, with the focus of one’s conclusions varying depending upon one’s role in the community of inquiry. For example, much of the science literature focused on the fetus giving very little attention to the needs and concerns of the mother.³² Howes reflects upon what she observes her students doing while engaging in the project:

Science education standards stress connections to the real world and to students’ everyday lives and experiences. As these students relayed their anecdotal evidence, the complications of the applications of prenatal technology were brought forth. The uncertainty of real life and the uncertainty of science and technology melded. Something that I always want students to do—question the efficacy and unquestionability of science and its attendant technologies—was indicated here; and the students were doing it without prompting from me.³³

¹ Howes regrets her framing of the relationships in the unit within the limited bounds of heterosexual marriages, arguing she should have adopted more inclusive terms.

The following exchange offers an example of the way that students began to personalize the relationships between the knowledge claims and the frameworks associated with inquiry groups, or in the following case, the specific participants of an inquiry group. (Students are role playing an encounter in an doctor's office, with Kari playing a pregnant woman. They are discussing the risks associated with a specific prenatal test, chorionic villus sampling:

Alex: So how long does this all take?

Jonathan: [sotto voce] And when should you do it?

Alex: And when should you do it?

Sam: Eight to 10 weeks after life begins. Or conception. Whichever you prefer.

Kari: All right, before we get any further, and you guys are talking about my body—

Alex: Hold on—

Kari: —No, I want to say this.

Sam: You get the results in 7 to 9 days.

Kari: What are the dangers of me doing this? You doing this test on me?

Sam: The dangers are spontaneous abortion.

Kari: Okay! [laughter]³⁴

In this brief exchange, Kari alters the focus of the discussion from one of a disembodied scientific examination of the proposed procedure (done in what students perceived to be an expected academic or clinical fashion) to one, even if momentarily, which forced the participants to contextualize the relationships of their

knowledge claims to their individual perspectives. She demanded that they focus on the pregnant woman in ways that were previously not encouraged by tone and scope of the scientific literature the students were consulting. Unlike the example regarding evolutionary biology I discussed earlier in the chapter, this example has the potential to travel similar terrain while also personalizing the material to an even greater degree. Howes's approach may also contribute to increased student critical autonomy because of its performative features. Howes hopes that the role plays will help students increase the range of their options if confronted with similar experiences in the future.

Collaborative Inquiry Among Students and Teachers

Whereas in the first section I discussed the general issue of communal inquiry as the basis for establishing an environment conducive to fostering critical autonomy through the academic curriculum, in this section I turn to the way that the interpersonal dynamics among students and teachers contribute to the "background of intelligibility" necessary to foster critical autonomy. Helping students analyze not only knowledge claims but the processes by which we come to make those claims importantly alters both the default student/student and student/teacher relationships. When knowledge claims are perceived as static and uncontested (relatively infallible), and the teacher (or textbook) is the source of validity for such claims, the student/teacher relationship is characterized by a transmission/reception model, with the teacher's expertise coming to bear to

impart knowledge to the student. Likewise, in the transmission model of education other students may help one learn, but instead, they are more commonly considered impediments to the important task of absorbing knowledge from the teacher. In the framework I am proposing here, collaborating with other students as well as teachers becomes an important feature of increasing critical autonomy.

The altered conception of the school's relationship to knowledge claims advocated here, then, complicates the teaching task in that it asks teachers to analyze *with students* the complexities surrounding claims to knowledge. As such, all school curricula is appropriately subject to critique and questioning by teachers and students. Rather than making demonstration of knowledge a matter of factual recall, the goals of schooling on this account would be to help students engage with each other and their teachers in the evaluation of curricula and the social context from which our claims to knowledge emerge.²

To help ground what I am describing within the context of schools, I again turn to the writings and recommendations of critical feminist scholars. They offer us

² As I discussed in chapter three, I am quite sympathetic to and interested in Freirean approaches to schooling. His call for collaborative, dialogical teaching runs similar ground to that which I am proposing here, especially his calls to rethink the teacher/student relationships as collaborative. Despite the similarities, I argue that Freire's positivist epistemology is at odds with the pragmatic approach I advocate here. Freire argues that collaboration leads to access to a knowable reality, while the Peircean framework does not presuppose that teachers can lead students to a pre-ordained set of conclusions, no matter how collaborative we wish to describe the act. The resulting difference may be quite significant in that a Freirean educator might be more inclined to assert that critically aware individuals may have better access to knowledge than does the community of inquiry, while a Peircian approach forces us to be wary of claims that end inquiry, especially ones made by individuals outside the community of inquiry.

helpful tools for constructing communities of inquiry that attend to the importance of interpersonal interactions amongst teachers and students in a variety of ways. For example, there is a plethora of research that helps us analyze how aspects of student and teacher identities influence how teachers interact with students. Within gender research, for example, we find investigation into the ways that teachers interact with female and male students differently. Studies reveal that teachers may spend more time with boys than girls, ask more challenging questions of boys, and encourage boys to enroll in more scientific and analytical classes than girls.³⁵ Such gender differences have implications for the types of inquiry that happen in classrooms. For example, in an analysis of power and gender relationships in classroom discussions, Kramarae & Treichler³⁶ found differences in gender with regard to the goals students held for classroom discursive interactions, with women preferring more collaborative and power-shared discussions in which students were encouraged to talk with each other not using the teacher as power-broker.

While the women make more explicit statements about the structure of the learning process than do the men, the men's focus on the importance of debates about ideas suggests a priority on interaction based on individual expertise and presentation and elaboration of abstract concepts. The valuing of this kind of knowledge acquisition is compatible with a commitment to relatively nonpersonal, hierarchical classroom interaction. The responses of the men and women in the class indicate that it is a circular process: how participants in the classroom talk shapes the kind of discovery and invention processes that occur.³⁷

Throughout the literature of critical feminist pedagogy, we find a consistent focus on of the ways that power positions influence the way that students and teachers

negotiate discussions of a wide variety of discipline specific topics, as well as justice-focused issues like gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and social class:

In their teaching practice, feminist teachers challenge male hegemony and expand the limits of classroom discourse to include a discussion of the power and oppression experienced by both boys and girls in their everyday lives as gendered subjects. But their teaching also leads to conflicts between the essentially middle-class subjectivity of the teacher and the working-class and ethnic cultures of her students. The feminist teacher affirms the experiences of her girl students, but challenges the privilege of the boys. And white teachers have to recognize the implicit power of their whiteness.³⁸

As a result, we find careful examinations of the ways that power works in the midst of student-teacher as well as student-student interactions, especially as they guide the ways that issues of social justice get taken up, silenced or controlled in the classroom.

As feminist critical theorists emphasize, helping students become epistemologically savvy entails more than an exposure to debates about evidence and methods of data gathering and their influences on our claims to knowledge. Those sorts of discussions are necessary, but not sufficient. In addition, we must help students explore a variety of communal inquiry skills, skills that will help them participate in the processes of inquiry that include an explicit recognition of status. There are a range of associated skills that support inquiry. Some of them are domain specific skills associated with learning about the methods of inquiry related to a specific field of study. I will not elaborate upon those here because doing so would take us too far from the central thesis. Instead, I wish to point to the need to specifically help students develop the skills to work with others and to attend to the

process of inquiry itself. While such skills should be open for revision and redefinition, I suggest that we can identify general dispositions and skills that support better inquiry projects than other ways of interacting.

For example, feminist researchers have focused on the many ways that power differences associated with gender influence the environment for communal inquiry within classrooms in significant ways. Researchers have long pointed to the ways that teachers interact with boys and girls in significantly different ways, from calling on boys more often and more frequently challenging their ideas, such that differences in educational experiences are produced. Similarly, norms of classroom interaction that make competition and challenge the default interactional style in classrooms favor boys over girls, while positioning girls to be viewed as less interested and less intelligent. Thus, the issue of how power and status affect students' capacities to inquire communally must become an object of direct study within a classroom that seeks to foster collaborative inquiry. As a result of their analyses, feminists have experimented with and recommended a variety of collaborative teaching techniques to alter the traditional classroom environment to be more inclusive of all students. For example, within science education, we find that feminist-inspired pedagogies share some general instructional elements:

Science education reformers call on science educators to implement an assortment of collaborative learning techniques in their classrooms: student-to-student exchange and collaboration, nonhierarchical teaching approaches, hands-on experiential learning, small group learning and conversation, group reports, and student journaling.³⁹

Similarly, we can help students develop a range of tools that support collaborative inquiry. For example, texts about facilitating the group process⁴⁰ offer a range of techniques and strategies to help groups work better together. They discuss details like “active listening,”⁴¹ how to resolve conflicts in various settings, how to generate ideas and encourage creativity, how to delegate tasks for efficiency and how to work with others who might have differing social interaction preferences and tendencies than our own.⁴² Helping students explore and experiment with those tools may improve their inquiry projects as well as helping them evaluate the work of others. We cannot assume that simply because our students have spent time in many groups in their lives that they bring with them the tools to work collaboratively with others. This is an educational goal that we must pursue through ongoing communal inquiry.

It is important to promote a “background of intelligibility” that values the asking of difficult and even uncomfortable questions, especially when such dialogue is constrained or discouraged within the current school context. The questions associated with critical analysis are classic ones associated with critical pedagogy: Who benefits? Who is harmed? Who is left out of the conversation? Who is silenced? We can create an atmosphere that nurtures the asking of these sorts of questions, in contrast to classrooms that inspire compliance and conformity by attending to it as one important aspect of on-going communal examination. Thus, nurturing the skills of critical autonomy requires on-going support and modeling

throughout all aspects of the curriculum and the approach to school life.³ As the feminist theorists urge us to do, we must attend to relationships of power within the inquiry process itself. This can happen in relations between teachers and students as well as among students. Among other important reasons associated with the values of a community, attending to these issues is also epistemically important because power relationships influence the knowledge claims we make. What questions get asked? Whose ideas are privileged over others? Whose ideas are excluded?⁴

Furthermore, attending to power issues within a community of inquiry requires the nurturing of the capacity to endure amidst hardships. The school can nurture such willingness to persevere – to stand for the hard right against the easy wrong – or put another way, to stand up for a position that is frequently dismissed or derided by others as a result of their positions of power. Schools can do this by purposefully seeking to cultivate it and discuss it, making avenues for students to inquire into power in multiple ways. In some respects, I am calling for the school to make it *easier* to persevere and to question by valuing it as a trait in its community

³ I suspect that discussing this issue through a binary description is faulty, that there are variations within social group spaces depending upon the particular topic, its relationship to the actors involved in the discussion, and the particularities of power as related to the ramifications of the results of inquiry. Regardless, in keeping with what I have been arguing, we can attend to aspects of the social space as well as ones that accrue to individual agents simultaneously.

⁴ While it is not the focus of my argument, research like Zion et al.'s (see "The Effects of Metacognitive Instruction Embedded within an Asynchronous Learning Network on Scientific Inquiry Skills.") indicate that asking students to reflect upon metacognitive issues about the relationship of the process to learning outcomes does more than uncover issues of power; it also improves student synthesis and understanding of the topics of their inquiry.

and supporting its development in the curriculum. That stated, there is more to be discussed with regard to power and its role in inquiry and the encouragement of critical autonomy. I turn now, then, to a discussion of power-functional inquiry.

Power-Functional Inquiry

In what follows I take up a more focused examination of the implications of attending to power as it relates to the nurturing of critical autonomy. In the first part of this section, I focus on the issues associated with power and schooling especially in relation to curriculum, and then in the second part I turn to the relationship between power, self-identity and educating for critical autonomy.

Power-Functional Analysis and Curriculum

As the analysis of this dissertation repeatedly suggests, power relationships like those accruing to differences in social class may corrupt inquiry in powerful ways, especially inquiry into the self. As a result, analyzing power must be an integral feature of the inquiry processes associated with critical autonomy. I suggest that we should encourage students to attend to what I will call the power-functionality of curriculum through three lenses (or three topics). The first lens involves examining our knowledge claims with the well-earned skepticism that comes from living in a society riven by class divisions. As the discussion of feminist theorists in the previous section exemplifies, claims to knowledge, even in the empirical sciences, have been importantly shaped and distorted by oppressive power relationships in

existing communities of inquiry. The second lens requires examining the process of inquiry for power-functional influences; it is a search for power-functional relationships in local circumstances and inquiry groups. The third connects the previous two sorts of power-functional analyses with their intersections in students' own lives, i.e., the processes that lead to conceptions of self. Analyzing power in these ways provides students with the resources for analyzing how they come to understand themselves and making choices in environments that will continue to be characterized by the process of commodity fetishism and the norms associated with the dominant class. Put another way, such analysis is aimed at helping students analyze the double-bind that many students experience as they confront the differences between their home-worlds and those they find in their schools. The first part of responding to the conditions of the double bind, then, is to make the issues of power and social justice a part of personal reflection by helping students explore the complex relationships between their own personal beliefs about themselves and their intersection with issues facing us as a society.

While I am suggesting that we analyze power relationships in a variety of guises, I do not presuppose that power differences are inherently unjust nor oppressive. Power differences may be natural and unavoidable in many instances. Take, for example, the generalized teacher-student relationship itself. As more mature and experienced scholars than their younger students, teachers possess knowledge and skills that their students do not have. These are the source of, and rationale for, some of the justified power imbalances in student-teacher relationships. We also

expect and want adults to use their more mature judgment and skills to keep younger students safe in a variety of ways while helping them learn. We expect teachers to use their skills and maturity to create environments within which students can resist, for example, oppressive social forces, or to do their best to insulate students from such influences. I am not suggesting that all imbalances in power are unhealthy or unjust. Instead, I am arguing that all power relationships should be questioned and that some should be critiqued and changed.

In order to support student inquiry into issues of power, we must present them with both the opportunities and the resources to analyze and understand the social contexts in which they live. One way to do this is to use social justice issues to interrogate all aspects of the curriculum, helping students to analyze how issues like social class, racism and sexism all contribute to the beliefs represented in the curriculum, as well as the discourses surrounding them locally and in larger societal examples. I do not want to limit our inquiries to the “traditional” issues of social justice, but they are useful starting points for teasing out the ways that power-functional beliefs and ideologies are camouflaged “in plain view.” Within the context of social class, I argue that social class issues should become a central focus of inquiry within the school community.

Furthermore, as theorists associated with critical pedagogy have encouraged us to do, we must also present students with opportunities to explore how the various issues associated with power-functional analysis intersect with their own world views and conceptions of self. If we allow the various issues we wish to explore to

remain abstract and theoretical, the ideological influences that saturate our schools and communities will stymie student attempts to contextualize the social class issues at the level of self-conception. If we allow our analyses to remain at abstract levels removed from our students' daily lives, then we will be inhibiting their engagement of the very power-functional structures we wish to inquire into and potentially change. When students are unable to connect analyses to their own experiences, the capacity for critical autonomy is hindered.

Like other theorists who advocate grounding academic curricula in the local contexts where students live, I, too, argue that to support the conception of critical autonomy discussed here, we must ground schooling within the complex intersection of "traditional" academic subjects and students' local communities and lived realities. The issue here is one that transcends the confines of social class and charges us to embrace the complexities of our students' lives as the foundation for our curricular endeavors, and it especially asks us to consider students' local communities and families as being marked by strengths and possibilities.

For example, Gloria Ladson-Billings argues that teaching with what I am calling a power-functional focus is "about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society."⁴³

Likewise, while Gary Howard uses the language of multicultural education, his guiding principles are wholly consonant with what I am discussing here. He argues that we should help students "understand the history and dynamics of

dominance,”⁴⁴ and “to nurture in ourselves and our students a passion for justice and the skills for social action.”⁴⁵

Ira Shor also argues that we should directly analyze a wide range of social justice issues, especially focusing on the structural inequalities that our students experience.⁴⁶ Shor passionately believes that teachers must begin with students’ interests while presenting them with material that helps them analyze how issues of social justice intertwine with seemingly “neutral” curricular issues. Shor sees the classroom as a place where teachers and students create a “third idiom” of co-created critical dialogue, a place where teachers and students examine material together, resisting what he describes as the *ingrained roles* of teacher as knowledge giver and student as passive recipient.⁴⁷ He urges students to question teacher authority, along with the many assumptions about the world students bring with them into our classrooms. Shor calls for schools to engage in “desocialization,” the process through which students critically examine their socialized beliefs, emotions and habits in a variety of domains, including the personal, educational and political.⁴⁸

Providing students with opportunities to engage in analysis of complex social issues facing them and their communities need can happen at any grade. For example, Kate Lyman⁴⁹ developed an inquiry into homelessness based on the intersection between her students’ lives and the their exploration of basic animal and human needs like shelter and food. When it became clear that the general issues of survival were evoking strong reactions in her students because of their

own personal experiences, Lyman helped her students explore the topic of homelessness rather than ignore it. Their unit explored the topic through a variety of research methods, from guest speakers to books on topics like human rights. Their exploration was personalized even more when during a visit to a homeless shelter, one of the students in the class usurped control of the tour; he had lived in the shelter recently and gave the class an “insider’s” perspective. Finally, supported by a volunteer attorney, Lyman helped her students synthesize the many issues associated with human needs and homelessness, by holding a mock trial in which students could role play while experimenting with the many perspectives involved in the issue.⁵⁰

While not directly addressing an issue that emerged from her students lives, Howes was confident that her unit would be relevant to her students’ concerns. It is also an example of embedding a power-functional analysis within a topic mandated by curriculum frameworks. Howes asked her students to analyze how dominant gender discourses influence both the scientific discussions associated with prenatal care, while also explicitly asking her students to analyze the intersection of their own beliefs and self-conceptions with those larger issues. She reflects:

I designed this assignment concerning prenatal testing partly to explore the research-based hypothesis that girls would be attracted to science that they could connect to their bodies and their lives, present and future... Because, like pregnancy, the direct physical experience of prenatal testing is something that only a woman could have, it provides a context within which women’s bodies and lives are central. The assignment was meant to support students in applying the science of genetic inheritance to comprehend the technology, and to begin to struggle from scientifically informed perspectives with the ethics involved in reproductive choice. I wanted to give them practice with the scientific

concepts that we had been working with throughout the semester: meiosis and mitosis; the connections between genes and physical traits; the contributions that each parent makes to offspring; and the effects of gene and chromosomal mutations. I hoped to support them as well in exploring their own beliefs in a context that might mimic their future experiences as pregnant women, as concerned others, as doctors, and as scientists faced with difficult and subtle scientific and personal issues.⁵¹

Howes's academic unit, then, sought to help students analyze their own self-conceptions as potential future parents and the supporters of pregnant women while helping them contextualize their analyses within the larger political frameworks that influence how we understand and make decisions about childbirth.

Similarly, Mayberry's⁵² approach to teaching geoscience asks students to explore geological content material while connecting them to sociopolitical issues. For example, students in class explore the geological issues associated with oil exploration and drilling through group projects where they pose as oil company geologists who must make business decisions based upon scientific analysis of geological data. As Mayberry explains, "in an exercise designed to get students interested in learning about sedimentary strata, faults, folds, and the difference between petroleum resources and reserves, students also gained a clearer understanding of the social and economic forces (and consciousness) that shape our use of the earth's natural resources."⁵³ Student journals reflect their passionate engagement with the issues they were confronting, and while Mayberry did not ground the unit within an exploration of how the issues of oil exploration related to local concerns, she did personalize the unit through the use of role playing activities that required the students to take on the perspectives of others. For example,

students who took on the roles of oil company executives expressed great dismay at the ease with which they discounted any environmental concerns in the pursuit of profits. Such an activity exemplifies a way to help students then perform subsequent analysis about how knowledge claims may be importantly influenced by power-functional interests.

It is not enough, though, to ask students to think about power and oppression in their own lives as a disconnected endeavor, one that bears no relationship to the many other inquiry-related experiences that students accumulate throughout their educational lives. As we think about helping students analyze how the differing social worlds in which they find themselves influence the people they are able to be, we help them develop the skills associated with critical awareness of both social context and its influence on conceptions of self. It supports the work I described in the last chapter as an analysis of how the social context influences the material available to construct one's narrative self-conception, as well as how the social context also performatively nurtures certain narrative constructs and discourages individuals from accepting others. To help them make these analyses, then, we also must provide space within the context of the school for students to reflect upon their beliefs about themselves, while linking them to multiple other analyses of their social and academic worlds.

I am not advocating that teachers create stand-alone reflection assignments. Instead, they can connect personal reflection as part of the complex web of other sorts of analytical and reflective work, embedding the self-analysis within a natural

part of contextualizing all knowledge claims. Much like the ways that feminist teachers infuse the analysis of power and social justice issues within the context of a variety of academic endeavors, teachers can also provide students with opportunities to explore their own personal relationships to the myriad topics and issues they encounter in their school experiences. While there is no formulaic way to promote such reflection, many teachers currently do provide students with the resources to do so within the course of their “regular” academic work by providing opportunities for journaling and reflective papers, for example. Regardless of the tool, the goal is to encourage the contextual understanding of the self as intersecting with a variety of social influences in the larger world – as an ongoing part of the school experience. Put in another way, it is building the opportunity for reflective world traveling into the foundational beliefs of the curriculum.

Contradictions, Self-Conceptions and Critical Autonomy

The response to the conditions of the contradictions that emerge from the analysis of commodity fetishism, though, is not finished. As of yet, we have asked students to analyze topics of power-functionality in a variety of places in the curriculum and the life of the school, while also making those analyses personal by providing them opportunities to explore how the power-functional topics pertain to their local communities and personal situations. That does not, though, address the topic of the “double bind.” That is the focus of the following section.

As I discussed in the last chapter, the concept of critical autonomy cannot resolve the contradictions created by the existence of social oppression, but it can provide direction for negotiating them. I return to Parker Palmer's injunction that guides this approach. By refusing "to flee from [the] tension but [to] allow that tension to occupy the center of our lives. ...The poles of either/or, the choices we thought we had to make, may become signs of a larger truth than we had even dreamed."⁵⁴ As such, this discussion of critical autonomy seeks to conceptualize a way to "live the contradictions, fully and painfully aware of the poles between which our lives are stretched."⁵⁵

The first metaphorical tool that guides the nurturance of critical autonomy and the direct focus on the contradictions of social class is "non-attachment." As discussed in the last chapter, non-attachment describes being at once fully engaged while also not "stuck" with regard to any belief or desire, an approach and concept that compliments the Misakian pragmatic epistemology undergirds critical autonomy. Again, non-attachment does not mean remaining aloof nor indifferent. Instead, it is a way of being fully engaged while not being "stuck." It is important to focus on what Ann Diller describes as holding important beliefs "lightly and acknowledging that our particular views represent just one of multiple possible perspectives."⁵⁶ Thus, by being non-attached to a belief or a decision, we commit ourselves to it in a way that is revisable. We make choices because we must, but we do not treat the choices themselves as representing the final belief we will or

can hold on a given topic. This stance contrasts with commodity fetishism which encourages a rigid holding on to beliefs.

Non-attachment directly addresses the topic of the double-bind that students experience as a result of oppressive social circumstances because it encourages students to care passionately about the things that matter to them in their worlds – their beliefs about themselves and the larger social order around them – but it offers the guidance to care so passionately that they also create some distance, not to get so stuck in their beliefs that they remain immutable. It supports the Peircean pragmatics at the heart of the conception of critical autonomy, and I suggest that the work of Stewart and Rudolph exemplifies a way to get at “non-attachment” in an academic context. By helping students analyze and conceive how knowledge claims emerge from within different frameworks, we create some “space” for them to then question their beliefs about themselves.

While the spirit of non-attachment supports the nurturance of critical autonomy, the contradictions will yet remain; non-attachment is but a piece of a larger response. The second aspect of the response entails what Maria Lugones’ described as world traveling. The metaphor pushes us to consider three issues. First, students need opportunities and help to develop the reflective capacities to analyze how social context influences self-identity, or how it shapes whom it is they become. To do so, schools must widen the scope of the sorts of topics we ask our students to reflect upon in their academic experiences. To encompass the topic of world-traveling, we need to provide students with opportunities to analyze their

personal experiences as people coming from disparate places and contexts. It entails reflecting upon the local context of what occurs in a given group interaction to larger ones that ask students to reflect upon the similarities and discontinuities of home and school life.

Second, the metaphor of world traveling also reminds us that we must inquire into the types of world traveling our students elect or are forced to undertake. That some forms are healthy while other forms like those associated with the pejorative influences of many social class differences might be ones we wish to alter. This inquiry might entail our working collectively to alter the conditions of students' home worlds because of radical social class disparities, and it also might mean that we must alter the school community to include the plurality of worlds from which our students emigrate each day.

Schools can support individual world traveling through helping students reflect upon how the social context influences the sorts of decisions they make on a daily basis. For example, world traveling can be related to the many issues of power and interpersonal relationships that abound in classrooms and schools each day.

Teachers spend a lot of time on issues of "classroom management" in which they help students develop a variety of behavior, conflict resolution and social skills. To support the reflective capacities associated with world traveling, teachers can help students undertake analyses about how the social context of the school influences the people they are able to become. As a place to start, when faced with a conflict, teachers can help students understand their personal experiences as they relate to

the larger social contexts that may relate to them. Teachers can help students contextualize the seemingly disconnected events in the school day to their links to larger issues facing their communities and the larger society.

For example, in response to bullying, some schools have adopted conflict-resolution curricula that seeks to help students understand and manage conflicts in a healthy way.⁵⁷ One of the key components to many conflict resolution approaches is the reflection upon the events that led up to the conflict, seeking to help students connect external events to internal emotional responses.⁵⁸ It is a teaching truism that teachers need to “see the whole child” in their interactions and explanations for a wide variety of behaviors and interactions, tracing possible outside-of-school events, for example, to in-class behavioral issues. But those injunctions may stop at the level of providing explanations for behaviors and direction for immediate teacher-initiated responses to perceived problems, without connecting localized incidents to their relationships with larger community and societal trends and issues. If we begin with the goal to encourage students to make contextualized judgments about themselves and their worlds, then the goal of conflict resolution becomes one that is expanded beyond that of ending immediate strife or to creating a different social climate, to the larger goal of helping students become more critically autonomous by helping them to analyze their individual conflicts as they relate to larger issues. In this altered vision, then, we would seek opportunities to help students contextualize seemingly disconnected events and issues in complex ways.

For example, an incidence involving students using homophobic slurs toward one another might result in a teacher ending such behaviors (if it is even addressed at all) by making some pronouncement about appropriate language use. Our seeking to contextualize the use of this language and to help students forge understandings of how they came to castigate someone or each other by using specific terms like “gay” and “fag” would require a much more complex response. There are a variety of issues to discuss, from historical examinations of the development of the specific words they choose to use, to explorations of the societal treatment of homosexuals, to an understanding of sexuality in general. Normal school reactions to such issues are to control the conversation in such a way that the outward behavior (using abusive language) is controlled or ended without an examination of the variety of issues that helped the particular incident emerge in the specific time and place between the specific students involved. Rather than merely conforming to school-sanctioned social norms, what I am describing here asks the participants, to be able to place themselves within a larger contextual understanding of the issues surrounding homosexuality and their particular problems with each other. A wide range of reasons may explain the abusive interaction, from those stemming from boys reinforcing the “code of masculinity” upon an effeminate boy to their drawing upon the most damning of language they could use in the social world of the schoolyard. Ultimately, the analysis must return to how students’ local social context influences the range of ways they interact with one another and how those options intersect with issues of

power and oppression. But the task is more than one of analysis; we must also provide students with tools to help them influence their social contexts, to develop a wider range of responses than the ones they might inherit.

While I am proposing that social justice be an important aspect of the academic and personal analyses that we ask of students in school, what I am suggesting does not presuppose that students will choose to embrace one another in the spirit of acceptance: to reject homophobia, sexism, racism and classism, for example. I suggest that we help students increase the range and complexities of their responses to social problems and choices facing them in a variety of domains, including those associated with oppression, if we help them contextualize their responses and analyze the ways that they can then influence the social spaces around them. Thus, part of the project is not just to analyze the context in which they find themselves, but also to be able to experiment with altering the very social conditions that give rise to their contextualized responses in the first place.

But yet again, the contradictions will remain. Thus, I turn to another resource to help address them. Heesoon Bai's discussion of attunement provides us with another way to conceptualize how to help students negotiate the contradictions associated with oppressive social circumstances. In sympathy with Confucian philosophy, Bai contends that attunement encourages "the cultivation of the whole person who is fully integrated and harmonized intrapsychically, body-heart-mind, and interpsychically with all social and natural orders of the world."⁵⁹ Rather than doing more harm to the self by forcing a choice between the worlds marked by the

double bind, attunement resists oppressive control. Bai explains that seeking to control oneself in such a way

contributes, not to harmony, integration, and wholeness, but to disharmony, fragmentation of psyche (say, into mind and emotion, reason and inclination, and so on), and is a form of violence in that it sets out to subdue, silence, and dominate the otherness in whatever form.⁶⁰

When we seek to help students attune across the dichotomies created in exploitative social spaces, we are not seeking to escalate the violence that has already been perpetuated upon them. For example, we would not want working class students who find the “worlds” of the school to be so disparate that they experience different selves in each context to *choose one or the other self* to reign or have the most value. Instead, we can help them *attune* by created the conditions in which the “home” self can emerge safely (with no violence) in the school sphere. Thus, the guiding feature of attunement requires that we create the social conditions to nurture their attempts to integrate across “worlds.”

Sonia Nieto also captures the heart of attunement when she argues that schools should see their students and their students’ families as having important strengths upon which the school can draw in its quest to educate them.

Building on students’ strengths means, first, acknowledging that students have significant experiences, insights, and talents to bring to their learning, and, second, finding ways to use them in the classroom. If teachers begin with the supposition that students bring nothing, they interpret their role as simply needing to fill students with knowledge. On the other hand, if teachers begin with an awareness that all students have useful experiences that can become the foundation of their learning, their role becomes a radically different one: to research what their students’ strengths might be, and then to co-construct learning experiences to build on those strengths.⁶¹

With regard to social class, attunement helps address the issue of the dichotomies created when schools commodify dominant class norms, skills and attributes; attunement urges schools to resist the trap of replicating the social class binaries that characterize working class lives as not marked by the potential to contribute valuable resources to the academic world.

In the spirit of attunement, Nieto recommends that teachers work with Frederick Erickson's suggestion to build curriculum off *critical autobiographies*. The approach makes the students, their homes and their local cultures the primary focus of educational research. Nieto emphasizes that "what makes this approach *critical* is that culture is approached not as a fixed or static state of being, but rather as socially constructed and changing; the goal is not to encase cultures in protective wrappings but instead to deconstruct the meanings behind them."⁶² Thus, such work can contribute to critical autonomy in an important way. It focuses the curriculum on an analysis of the social context, opening pathways for examining how the larger curricular topics intersect with and influence how the particularities associated with local communities came into being. Rather than seeing the social realities around them as having emerged accidentally or because of the individual choices of their parents or other community members, both in the present and in the distant past, a critical examination of the intersection of schooling and the local community emphasizes the complex ways that the larger social contexts influence local histories, customs and practices. It also demands an analysis of the ways that students have come to know about their local communities, an examination of the

epistemological sources of local knowledge claims: *how do we understand our communities as being like they are? What stories do we tell about the people who live here, what they are like, where they are from, and what the future holds?*

A caution here: attunement is a guiding principle to help us help students increase their critical autonomy. It fundamentally insists that the dichotomies caused by oppressive social circumstances are damaging to students in many ways, and it does not place the burden of resolving those tensions *on students*. We can support their efforts to harmonize across disparate social situations by seeking to alter those conditions and helping them conduct power-functional analyses. It might be rightfully objected that in some cases, attuning among social contexts or aspects of one's self-conception in different places might be dangerous to the self. For example, for young women, attuning across home and school worlds might seemingly require them to accept oppressive gender norms. That would not be in keeping with attunement. Bai contrasts, on the one hand, the violence of conforming to pre-established "logical constructions" with, on the other hand, self-defined, aesthetically-inspired work, arguing that the former does violence to the self because it represents a violent external imposition. The latter offers a more open-ended self-nurturing engagement with the self's particularities not characterized by violence. Thus, when we self regulate because of a "pre-assigned pattern" of how to define the self or to a preordained social role:

be it political or religious or cultural, and to the extent that we conform to and express this pattern faithfully and precisely as rules determinative of our conduct, we constitute ourselves as a logical construction. On the other hand, to the extent that we interact freely and without prejudice,

without obligatory recourse to rule or ideal or principle, and to the extent that the organization which describes and unites us emerges out of a collaboration of our own uniqueness as particulars, we are the authors of an aesthetic composition.⁶³

Attunement encourages students to reject features of social contexts they find damaging (e.g., restrictive and oppressive gender norms). At its heart, attunement involves the avoidance of enacting violence upon the self or others. As a result, in order to foster critical autonomy, schools must look for ways to help create the conditions to support student attunement. It requires that schools attend to developing nurturing, affirming atmospheres.

Reconceptualizing the Ideal of the Educated Person

The focus on knowledge and inquiry that guides the previous section also infuses the following discussion of a central issue presented in this dissertation, that of the commodification of the ideal of the educated person. In what follows, however, I do not redefine the ideal as another static image based on my critique. Instead, following the pragmatic approach that infuses the project in general, I suggest that reconceptualizing what we mean by the “educated person” must become an on-going part of educational discourse at all levels and involves multiple participants. As such, I propose that we “hold” such an ideal tentatively, considering it to be malleable and responsive to the outcome of inquiry. Such a view is driven by the belief that education must be dynamic, with its aims and practices always in a state of potential revision and re-evaluation, including the

most fundamental issue – what it means to be an educated person within our current social context.

To elaborate on how to respond to the topic, I have divided the discussion of the ideal of the educated person into three sections. The first expands on what I mean by adopting a Peircean-inspired approach to defining the ideal, and in the second, I outline further implications for school-based inquiry. In the final section, I discuss the issue of involving multiple agents in the constant reconceptualization, especially working class parents.

Holding the Ideal though Ongoing Inquiry

While it is tempting to dismiss the very notion of conceptualizing an “ideal” in the first place out of fear that it is irrevocably static, the pragmatic ideal of inquiry at the heart of my project allows us to establish a working definition that supports current academic work while avoiding the trap of foreclosing upon a process that admits no further revision. It allows us to begin inquiry *where we are now* rather than rejecting the beliefs and assumptions that guide current educational practice *tout court*.

A central issue in developing this account concerns how skeptical we should be of the influence of social class on our current conception of the ideal of the educated person. If our received account represents an unreflective acceptance of social class bias in our judgments of what being educated means, how can we conceptualize a definition that *does not* suffer from such biases? While at first examination it might seem that an appropriate response to the issue I raise here is to define our conception of what being educated means in such a way that it

remains neutral with regard to social class issues, or at best as free from social class bias as possible, I reject that goal as being unattainable. At this point, the received account, one influenced by a wide range of social class issues, has influenced our definition of the educated person such that performing the “god trick” of transcending the received account may be quite impossible. The argument I have offered with regard to the social class roots of the ideal is one that encompasses a host of practices, structures and ideologies. These may be so intertwined that it may be impossible to root out the social class influences of the ideal from schools altogether or in one act of reconceptualization. Furthermore, trying to perform some sort of social class “surgery” risks rejecting valuable goals, practices and skills because they happen to be associated with one class and not another. Despite these challenges, being unable to extricate the social class influences from current conceptual school frameworks is a reality that the theoretical tools I am offering can accommodate.

My solution rests in the same Peircean pragmatic principles that support the conception of critical autonomy presented in the last chapter. In what Peirce described as “critical common-sensism,”⁶⁴ I argue that we need not reject all our notions of what it means to be an educated person because of a worry about social class biases. As De Waal argues, for Peirce, “inquiry always takes place against a backdrop of beliefs that are taken for granted.”⁶⁵ Thus, *pace* Misak, I posit that we begin with a common-sense approach that simultaneously acknowledges that there is value in our current conceptions of the educated person while also subjects

its features to critical appraisal. Such critical analysis cannot, nor should not, happen at once, forcing us to abandon our existing frameworks and begin anew. As both Lorraine Code⁶⁶ and Harvey Siegel⁶⁷ argue in response to charges that rationality suffers from masculinist biases and therefore must be rejected, we should not discount the value of a concept because we find fault with how it is employed. Thus, because we define the ideal of the educated person upon the practices and norms of the dominant class, does not mean that all those norms and practices associated with the ideal are without value.

As an example of the sort theoretical approach I have in mind, we might helpfully rewrite Misak's Peircean pragmatic maxim to read something like this: *our definition of the educated person is the one which stands up to evidence and reasons as we inquire as far as we can about it.* It helps to undertake the admittedly complex (and never-ending) process of analyzing our conceptions of the educated person for power-functional influences of which social class is one variety. Notice that this argument allows us to start from where we might naturally want to begin – with many of our current conceptions of what being “educated” entails. It does not require that we reject our prior conceptions outright to begin anew. The former strategy might actually inhibit our inquiry into the subject because we would then have no grounds for direction or little to use for a starting point. Instead, we are encouraged to begin with our many conceptions of “educated” and in the spirit of truth-focused inquiry, collaboratively engage in inquiry into the matter.

This means that we must open such an inquiry across disciplines, across roles in schools and include all the interested members of our many communities in the process of analysis. To take the discussion *as far as we could* means that we would involve students, parents, teachers, administrators, staff and other community members in such a project. It means that state curriculum frameworks, as well as the conceptions held by individual teachers and other stake-holders, would all be possible objects of analysis. It also means that the inquiry would necessarily be on-going. Because the nature of our conception of being educated may change and develop over time, the “end” of inquiry on this topic would be impossible to reach – requiring the process to continue, holding current views as our current best ideas – but holding them in such a way that they are open to critique and revision.

School-Based Inquiry and the Ideal of the Educated Person

In previous sections I have discussed the necessity of involving students in projects of inquiry that focus on both the knowledge claims that arise from our collective explorations into the world and the processes and tools that help us make those knowledge claims. Adopting a Peircean approach to the ideal of the educated person also entails that we engage with the dual examination of the beliefs we hold about what being educated entails (i.e., the variety of content material and process-related skills we want our young to explore, develop and hold), as well as the means through which we have come to decide upon those ends as most valuable.

Because they occupy so much of our experience of social class differences, the topic of language practices are a particularly clear example that illustrates how we might proceed with this task. As discussed earlier, there are general differences in the language and textual practices and norms associated with different social classes. For example, when dominant class children are exposed to certain types of linguistic experiences at home before schooling begins, they emerge in schools having already acquired skills that schools value. While I have critiqued the commodification of those linguistic skills and norms as evidence of academic ability or achievement, that critique does not thereby indicate that those experiences, skills and norms are not educationally valuable. We might do two things here as they are not mutually exclusive options. While we might wish to expand the range of skills and norms that we embrace as academically valuable to include those associated with other classes, we may also wish to retain aspects of what is usually associated with dominant class experiences and promote them so that all students have access to them. Schools must not reject dominant class-related practices and norms necessarily, nor merely adopt working class practices and norms in an effort to be inclusive. Instead, I suggest two related things: stop fetishizing the norms and practices associated with the dominant class, and expand the ranges of norms and practices that “count” towards being educated. Each must be taken up as objects of communal inquiry.

The first suggestion may seem straight-forward because it requires that teachers not interpret working class students as being less intelligent and less

interested in school than their dominant class peers based on characteristics that relate to fetishized class norms rather than academic ability. But I suspect the task is much more difficult than first examination suggests. While becoming aware of how social class ideologies infiltrate our interpretation of students in a variety of ways is necessary, the pervasiveness and deep-rootedness of such ideologies and biases reveals that it is not sufficient. This is where the on-going examination of our collective beliefs about the ideal of the educated person amidst inquiry projects with a variety of others helps sustain a constant examining and re-examining of teachers' beliefs and practices in context. The difference is one between a one-shot "conscious-raising" experience designed to extricate some sort of bias, as opposed to an on-going effort to examine how shifting ideologies and practices associated with social class have structured and continue to shape our beliefs about the ideal of the educated person.

Thus, I suggest that we must create both the culture and the opportunity to discuss what being educated means within schools at all levels and throughout the academic calendar. For example, teachers and school staff members within schools and school districts will need ample opportunities to inquire into their notions of what being educated entails in multiple ways – and examine the curricula and school policies for evidence of fit between their goals and the programs and curricula that flow from them. Time, of course, is an issue. Minimally, I am arguing that teachers and school staffs need healthy amounts of time to collaborate and to inquire into their goals collectively. Fortunately, there are schools who are currently

experimenting with structures to encourage teachers to collaborate and engage in collective inquiry along the lines that I mean here. In what follows, I briefly describe three such structures before drawing implications for classrooms.

Supporting Teacher-Focused Collaborative Inquiry. Throughout the school year teachers need time to revisit their plans and their rationale for curriculum to critically assess what is happening in their schools with their goals. Schools will need to make planning time a real possibility – and not the sort of planning time that currently happens in many places. Instead, I am advocating the type of schedule for schools that supports on-going inquiry and collaboration amongst teachers. For example, schools participating in the Coalition of Essential Schools movement structure teacher collaboration in a number of ways. While strategies vary across schools, common strategies include the clustering of teacher desks or offices in specific work areas designed to support collaboration, the structuring of common planning time (sometimes daily, sometimes weekly) across appropriate groups in which teachers intersect (e.g., grades, “teams” and subjects) and scheduled retreats throughout the school year.⁶⁸

Similarly, the National School Reform Faculty’s promotion and use of “Critical Friends Groups” (CFG) exemplifies part of what I’m advocating. The focus of the CFG is to provide teachers a supportive and collaborative place to examine practice-related issues (including curriculum development and evaluation of student work).⁶⁹ As Kathleen Cushman observes, one of the key features to the CFG process is to provide teachers the space to explore their own questions with their

peers rather than turning to outside experts to “fix” their educational problems or to provide answers. “The people closest to the action are the “experts” in this inquiry, setting its terms, agreeing on its conduct, owning and using its conclusions. This contrasts directly with traditional methods of both research and professional development, in which outside experts arrive at schools to examine their innards and inject them with whatever ready-made remedies they think best.”⁷⁰

Deborah Bambino describes a “consultancy,” a protocol to guide reflective dialogue, where a teacher brings a question about how to help with a misbehaving student to her peer group. The group uses this protocol to guide its inquiry:

Through the use of the protocol and collaborative conversation, the teachers moved beyond labeling the student with real or assumed deficits and explored the student’s problem behaviors from the student’s point of view. ...Another participant wondered whether the teacher might be concerned more about the student’s impact on others than about the student’s misbehavior – a question that helped the presenting teacher refocus her attention on the cause of the student’s misbehavior instead of on its disruptive effects. The feedback session helped the presenting teacher find more effective ways to assist the student, including involving the parents more closely with the student’s situation.⁷¹

What’s more, the end of the CFG process is marked by a reflection on the inquiry tool itself, in this case the guiding discussion protocol. “At the end of the session the teachers all spoke about how the collaborative protocol process could prevent the long-term negative effects of premature labeling on student’s futures.”⁷²

While the general approach to the Critical Friend’s Group program is to support teacher-generated questions and inquiry, it does not seem beyond the capacity of the tool to include it as a way to engage in discussions about our conception of the ideal of the educated person, especially if we conceive of that discussion as taking

many forms. For example, I suggest that when we discuss topics like our educational aims, what we expect students to do at the end of a curricular unit or standards of assessment, we are engaging in a discussion that bears on our conceptions of the ideally educated student. As such, then, Critical Friends Groups are one potential model for how to engage in collaborative inquiry while also looking at the process of inquiry and focusing on our educational aims as well.

A third and related approach is the currently popular “action research” approach to studying institutional practice as well as larger school issues. While Kurt Lewin coined the term in 1946,⁷³ it has been linked to the work of a host of educational researchers and theorists, including that of Paulo Freire and critical pedagogy, as well as philosopher Jurgen Habermas and the critical theory school.⁷⁴ While some of the fundamental tenets of what “counts” as action research are debated amongst theorists, at its heart is the goal to involve teachers (or other agents within social practice arenas) with the tools to participate in the ongoing development and refining of the beliefs upon which they make decisions about practice. As such, it is generally characterized as being focused on understanding the social context of a given issue, participatory in that it seeks to include many perspectives in the research design and often focused on issues of social justice.⁷⁵

I focus on action research here not to offer a definitive account of what it entails, but to suggest that as a general approach, it supports the goal of helping teachers participate in communities of inquiry that examine critically the topic of the ideal of the educated person. It is another way of helping teachers and participants within

an educational community become direct participants in asking and answering educational questions, the conducting of inquiry and the evaluation of both: the results of inquiry and the tools used to make the resulting knowledge claims. The action research approach begins from a reflective inquiry stance and moves outward to the seeking of new data and information by conducting appropriate research into a question. Thus, teachers conducting action research into questions associated with the ideal of the educated person would do well to include discussions about the process of inquiry and the evaluation of knowledge claims.

Supporting Student-Focused Collaborative Inquiry. While the previous examples of collaborative inquiry focus upon teachers and educational inquiry in the larger school context, it is also important to look at ways to create within-classroom communities of inquiry. We find helpful examples from both Lisa Delpit and Shirley Brice Heath regarding how to include students in an examination of the ideal of the educated person amidst the on-going academic work of the classroom.

Delpit, for example, does so within the context of language classes. She makes the argument that we should celebrate our students' diverse language styles, styles that accrue to differences in their primary home cultures. Rather than merely teaching students that formal, standardized English is the only valuable form of communication, Delpit argues for the teaching of such standardized ways speaking and writing alongside the different ways that our children actually speak in the context of their homes. "Students can be asked to 'teach' the teacher and other students aspects of their language variety. They can 'translate' songs, poems, and

stories into their own dialect or into 'book language' and compare the differences across cultural groups represented in the classroom."⁷⁶ Delpit describes the wonderful example of students having language parties in which students analyzed the contexts in which different communication norms had different uses. Delpit's discussion importantly focuses on the ways that teachers can help students analyze the social contexts that make such different language styles each valuable.

It is not just that standardized English is useful in students' interactions with the larger world; it is just as important to value the ways that one's own cultural norms have value. They *feel* good to us. They also mark us as belonging with certain specific people in specific places and times.⁷⁷

Delpit helps students understand the ways that those differences, here differences in communication, help others understand speakers in different ways. For our purposes, within the context of redefining our conception of the educated person, the important point is to embrace multiple conceptions of communication styles, especially when the ones that students bring with them into classrooms diverge from those that are most closely associated with power and privilege. Delpit's example is also instructive because it helps us focus also on the need to embrace multiple conceptions of being educated while also focusing on how power differences function within local communities and our larger society to privilege some over others. She asks her students to evaluate each form of communication critically, assessing its contextual importance and usefulness. Notice, though, that standard English is not learned just to get along or to cover curriculum. Such a communication style is valuable in many contexts. It is not, however, commodified as being the *only* valuable way to communicate. While not overtly drawing upon the

language of “ideal of the educated person,” Delpit’s approach asks her students to inquire into that ideal with her.

Similarly, Shirley Brice Heath’s discussion of “learners as ethnographers”⁷⁸ also exemplifies what I have in mind. She describes how she and a fifth grade science teacher helped their “lowest track” students collect ethnographic data about local agricultural practices as part of a study of plant life. Their multi-week data gathering included a wide variety of sources, from direct interviews, to newspaper accounts, recipe books, as well as more traditionally accepted science resources like their course textbooks and library texts. Throughout the process, they were seeking to “world travel” as inquirers, to compare local knowledge about agricultural practices with the claims made in scientific literature. For example, they experimented planting feedstore potatoes and the ones found at home. “Through experiment and interviews, they discovered that grocery store potatoes were not treated with chemicals to make them resistant to pests which might attack them once they were planted. Thus the feed store potatoes produced more pest-free potatoes.”⁷⁹

Rather than being an example of a way to engage students in scientific inquiry and to make “connections” between the academic curriculum and their home environments (both valuable goals), I want to emphasize that the project Heath discusses is the sort of inquiry that supports the nurturing of critical autonomy while also implicitly engaging students in discussions of the ideal of the educated person.

Heath explains my point:

Their world of science uses had expanded far beyond the classroom, as they and members of their community had been caught up in their

inquiry. Many had, for the first time in their lives, carried on conversations with feed store owners, nurserymen, and local agricultural agents. They had been forced into situations in which they had to formulate specific questions to obtain particular bits of information needed to fill in a particular space on a chart or to complete definitions of a term. Traditionally, these boys and their families in Trackton and similar communities preferred giving a story in narrative form in answer to a generalized query; they noticed this trait in their informants and came to laugh about the fact that they “couldn’t get ol’ Mr. Feld to answer a question directly.” They had come to pay attention to the kinds of questions people in different situations in life asked and answered directly.⁸⁰

Heath observes that students had to learn how to collect data, and then they had to learn to translate what they had collected across contexts.

The end result was realization by students that participation in *both* domains is viable for the individual, and features of one domain can be used in the other. The translation process was bidirectional; by trying to translate the folk into the scientific, student learned to interpret or latch the scientific system into a familiar folk system. . . . Learners, under the guidance of teachers and fellow students, decontextualized their knowledge from home and community grids and reconstructed their learning into categories and abstractions valued in academic settings. Other students helped them recognize the gaps in their knowledge and forced them to make explicit knowledge which had previously been only implicit in their daily experiences. For example, implicitly the students knew greens were eaten more frequently than other vegetables; ethnographic investigation raised the question of *why* and made explicit the fact that other green vegetables have only one growing season, cultivated greens have two seasons, and some wild greens are available year-round. Thus, expanded knowledge helped fill in and extend the background underlying customary events.⁸¹

In a similar project, Heath describes second grade students who become ethnographic explorers of language and textual practices in their community.

Throughout their academic year, they developed the skills to “play” with language.

Heath likens their work to playing an instrument. “Students called attention to shifts

of style, picked out expressions characteristic only of speech, and laughed about the various meanings the same combinations of words could carry.”⁸²

These descriptions exemplify students and teachers explicitly exploring knowledge and creating communities of inquiry focused upon analyzing how knowledge and the tools we use to explore it alter what we know. Students formed classroom Critical Friends Groups and developed “action research projects” of the sort that I discussed earlier. While their projects were ostensibly about plants and language, they are also inquiries into the ideal of the educated person. They could not help but examine the differences in what is valued in the school context and the differences in the wider local community as they collected data. They also had to evaluate the differences in the sorts of claims to knowledge that each set of practices and norms allowed them to make, and they had to evaluate those claims as well. Likewise, they had to co-investigate these matters with their teachers. The teacher, while guiding the project and providing valuable resources and input, did not have definitive answers to provide them. Instead, teachers and students explored the objects of inquiry together, not as equals *per se*, but as differently positioned inquirers who each had valuable insights and skills to bring to the inquiry process.

Of course, helping students to analyze not only knowledge claims but the processes by which we have come to make those claims importantly alters the student/teacher relationship. When knowledge claims are perceived as static and uncontested (relatively infallible), and the teacher the source of the validity of such

claims, the student/teacher relationship is characterized by a transmission/reception model, with the teacher's expertise coming to bear on *how best* to impart knowledge *to* the student. The altered conception of the school's relationship to knowledge claims advocated here, then, complicates the teaching task in that it asks teachers to analyze *with students* the complexities surrounding claims to knowledge. As such, all school curricula is appropriately subject to critique and questioning by teachers and students. Rather than making demonstration of knowledge a matter of factual recall, the goals of schooling on this account would expand to help students participate in the very evaluation of curricula and the social contexts from which our claims to knowledge emerge.

Embracing the kind of collaborative inquiry that I am advocating is not a domain specific endeavor. One cannot help students analyze knowledge claims and methods used to make them in one limited and focused academic sphere and expect those skills and dispositions to remain bounded by task. If we ask students to accept teacher and administrative decisions in other aspects of schooling based upon some claim more privileged access to what is best for them (appeals to authority) then we are potentially undercutting the very skills and dispositions we are seeking to foster in the first place. The result is that accepting the pragmatic approach to inquiry requires deep alterations in how many teachers and schools interact with students and families. This is the point made clearly by David T. Sehr's⁸³ discussion of the ways that the way schools engage with students on

curricular and school-specific governance issues must be closely intertwined.⁵ To encourage critical analysis in an academic domain but then to encourage non-analytical acquiescence with respect to school policies reinforces a hidden curricular message that some truths are absolute regardless of the fallibility principle.

To that end, we should abolish academic tracking. As I argued in chapter two, academic tracking supports social class oppression and exploitation in powerful ways. Working with heterogeneous grouping strategies may contribute to the creation of more open environments that resist the deleterious influences of tracking and its support of commodity fetishism. Thus, one of the most important practical recommendations to emerge from this examination of social class and schooling is the need to end academic tracking in its many forms.

Finally, the focus on Heath's work emphasizes the need to include parents and other community members in inquiry projects into the nature of what it means to be educated. The inclusion of parents in the process, though, raises specific issues to

⁵ See Sehr's analysis of student's power with regard to Upton High School's no hat policy. While the school seeks to encourage students to become engaged democratic citizens, when the students challenge teachers about the validity of a school rule regarding not wearing hats inside, the teachers shut down the student protests and retreat from a collaborative discussion about the issue. While students recognize the contradictions between school rhetoric and practice, they respond with alacrity, cynicism and withdrawal, thereby undercutting the school's goals to inspire students to engage in their local communities as thoughtful democratic citizens. I suggest similar contradictions emerge if we demarcate boundaries amongst places students can engage in analysis of knowledge claims and the inquiry processes that made them available, even when such a process is uncomfortable for teachers and administrators.

which we must pay attention. In the following section, I discuss the special case of including parents in our school-based communities of inquiry.

While I have focused most of the previous discussion on the context of schooling for reconceptualizing the ideal of the educated person and nurturing critical autonomy, the participants in our community of inquiry are not all contained within the bounds of those who work and study within schools. We must also consider how other agents intersect with our discussions and inquiry projects, especially parents of students. As the research I discussed in chapter two reveals, social class differences amongst parents and the teachers in their schools matter a great deal, especially as we consider the norms associated with interacting with the school. Dominant class parents, for example, have much greater ability to participate within existing forms of communal decision making structures (e.g., school board meetings as well as parent-teacher conferences) than do working class parents.⁸⁴

I suggest that the framework I have previously articulated provides the template for addressing the issue of inviting parents of different social classes to participate equally in the schooling of their children. Focusing on the opportunity for them to participate in communities of inquiry related to the education and parenting of their children with teachers, other parents and even their children themselves may provide us with the direction needed to include parents who have been typically excluded from sharing in school decisions in meaningful ways. By focusing on including parents in school-focused communities of inquiry, I mean that we must

once again attend to the object of our knowledge claims (defining what being educated entails, as well as the aims and practices of schooling) *and* the *process of inquiry* itself. Doing so raises a number of issues to consider that do not suggest easy programmatic solutions, but suggest a number of topics and strategies to enhance participation in the process of inquiry.

Susan Auerbach's⁸⁵ research, for example, reveals that providing marginalized parents with opportunities to meet with and discuss educational issues with other marginalized parents can be a powerful catalyst for parents feeling invited and empowered to participate in the school community. She chronicles the experiences of a group of working class Latino and Latina parents and their involvement in school-sponsored parent groups. Those experiences gave parents the opportunity to discuss their feelings of marginalization from the school as well as their own prior negative school experiences. As Ken Howe⁸⁶ reminds us, equality of educational opportunity depends upon the context surrounding such opportunities, and I suspect that if parents were invited to participate in school conversations peopled by others with whom they share similar life experiences, they would find the process much more inviting.

That acknowledged, I must stress that the issue is not one of providing opportunities for *them* to meet each other. Schools should not replicate the marginalization of those with less power in social contexts by isolating parents in special groups. Once again, we seek to involve multiple perspectives in our communities of inquiry, and with respect to working class parents, we want them to

be working directly *with* teachers and others who have different positions of power within the school community. Auerbach⁸⁷ stresses this point when she writes that such a “social network becomes even more valuable if it extends to school staff members who are willing to engage in dialogue with parents. Having easy personal access to educators has proven critical to parents trying to help their students to navigate schools.”⁸⁸

Having access to information is an important theme regarding differences between dominant class and working class schooling experiences. Thus, regardless of whether or not the information comes directly from teachers or other school personnel, working class parents must have access to the information associated with schooling and the range of details associated with understanding school issues, from the implications of course selection to how to help one’s child access appropriate academic services. While dominant class parents have access to such information through a combination of personal knowledge, informal information networks and comfort demanding information from school staff members, working class parents do not have such ready access to information or the resources to get it.⁸⁹ If we want working class parents to participate in our inquiry discussions about the nature of schooling and what we find most valuable to promote in schools, we must also provide them with access to information about how schools work.

But access to information may increase not decrease class conflict. Therefore, we must make the class conflict that emerges in school a direct object of inquiry for

parents and teachers to explore together. Unlike school/parent meetings driven by the need to minimize conflict, the model of collaborative inquiry does not presuppose an absence of conflict. In fact, Concha Delgado-Gaitan⁹⁰ found that when parents were provided with culturally-responsive opportunities to become involved in their children's education by discussing school issues and policies with school staff members, conflict actually increased between some parents and the school representatives.

The empowerment process does not necessarily ameliorate conflict between the family and the school. In fact, in some cases, the conflict may appear to intensify as a result of the availability of more information in the hands of parents who once felt isolated from the school. Feelings of isolation, friction, and rigidity pose the need to organize. This new social framework involves aware parents who are committed to engaging and interacting with the school in dealing with issues about their children's education.⁹¹

Thus, given the natural conflicts associated with social class differences in schools, it "is vital for school programs to name and problematize points of conflicts between families and schools – to put them front and center so that parents feel free to talk about them – rather than concern themselves solely with building harmony and consensus."⁹² Thus, we should not confuse the involving of marginalized parents with conflict-free inquiry discussions. As Parker Palmer reminds us there is a difference between conflict and what we might helpfully describe as the process of social class competition in schools. "Conflict is open, public, and often very noisy. Competition is a secret, zero sum game played by individuals for private gain. *Communal conflict* is a public encounter in which the whole group can win by growing."⁹³ While working with and through conflict is

complex, embracing it as a natural part of the inquiry process – especially when we invite parents to participate – is important.

How different communities process conflict may be related to another important aspect of including parents in communities of inquiry – the power differences associated with differences in what counts as “normal” or reasonable discussion. Iris Marion Young⁹⁴ highlights the importance of attending to power discrepancies in democratic decision making processes – the very core of the collaborative approach to inquiry at the heart of this project. For example, when parents and others not trained in the language and discussion patterns expected by school officials, the inquiry group may interpret those who deviate from the norm as not inquiring in the “proper” way. Young explains:

Often...norms of speaking that I bring under the label ‘articulateness’ privilege the modes of expression more typical of highly educated people. Spoken expression that follows the structure of well-formed written speech is privileged over other modes. Speech or writing framed as straightforward assertion is privileged over more circuitous, hesitant, or questioning expression. The norms of deliberation also often privilege speech that is formal and general. They value expression that proceeds from premise to conclusion in an orderly fashion, formulating general principles and applying them to particular cases.⁹⁵

Young encourages us to consider the variations in discussion norms with which some communities feel comfortable as legitimate candidates for discussion norms. For example, being passionate, loud and even physical when communicating with one another on important topics. Those with more power in an inquiry setting may interpret such discussion practices as “signs of weakness that cancel out one’s assertions or reveal a person’s lack of objectivity and control.”⁹⁶ Thus, once again,

we must make this definition a topic of inquiry itself, an object of study within the groups we invite parents to join, seeking to alter the power discrepancies that accrue to social class differences in communication norms (amongst others).

Examinations of power discrepancies amongst parents from different social class backgrounds reveals yet another set of inquiry-related issues: the context of conversations. As the teachers of La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee discovered, not attending to details such as when parent meetings are held, places different sets of burdens on working class parents. Many found that they could not participate in school governance groups because they had to work during the proposed meeting hours, or they could not arrange for childcare.⁹⁷ Regardless of the reasons, schools must attend to the context of inquiry so that yet again, social class differences in power are minimized.

One potential solution is to alter the context of conversations. If parents are working more than one job, for example, or are working jobs that prohibit their coming to the school for meetings and conferences, or are uncomfortable within the school setting, then we can meet their varied needs by rethinking when and where we conduct school meetings. While perhaps logistically difficult in some cases, we may be able to find neutral spaces, or even spaces more comfortable to working class parents. Local communities will have to negotiate the details of the necessary changes in meeting settings as they pertain to their local circumstances. I raise them to highlight that we must remember the importance of collaboration. We can draw upon the parents themselves to help us establish places and times

that are both inviting and logistically possible for them to join us in our conversations and inquiry projects.⁶ Again, focusing on the process of inquiry itself must remain at the core of our work together.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have offered a framework for responding to social class oppression in schools focused on nurturing the capacity of critical autonomy in students. I do not propose that the conceptual framework of critical autonomy will eradicate social class oppression and exploitation. That project is a larger one involving the fundamental alteration of our socio-economic relationships. Instead, my intention is to offer a tool for helping students live within and potentially alter existing conditions of oppression and exploitation while also providing schools with a framework for minimizing their own contributions to those conditions. I offer this framework within the same pragmatic approach that guides its theoretical underpinning. While I have engaged in critical conversation with a variety of others while drawing upon multiple perspectives here, there is much more to the

⁶ While it is different from the main line of discussion offered here, I also argue that we can help parents join our school-based inquiry projects if we also make educational resources available to them. For example, depending upon their own academic experiences, parents who did not finish high school might have desires to finish their degrees or engage in informal academic study with other adults. Providing evening classes of both formal and informal nature would contribute to the creation of the inclusive atmosphere that schools want to foster. Doing so projects the message that education is valuable, important, and ongoing – and of utmost importance – available.

conversation that must follow. The engagement with others about these ideas involves yet more and ongoing projects of critical inquiry.

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