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Toward Deconstructionist Pedagogy in the Hegemonic Meritocracy

Abstract:
This paper problematizes the existing essentialist structures that govern contemporary American public education, specifically defined here as the "hegemonic meritocracy." In its discussion this paper considers the contributions of classic and contemporary critical pedagogues, such as Freire, Giroux and McLaren, as well as poststructuralist theorists, such as Baudrillard, Foucault, and Derrida, before proposing a specific pedagogy of deconstruction. After offering a thorough critique of this existing structure, the paper proposes a "pedagogy of deconstruction" and outlines the poststructuralist philosophies that might inform such a pedagogy.

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Dedication

For Dr. Stephen Szilagyi (1952-2009), a wonderful professor and kind soul. You will be missed.

Abstract

This paper problematizes the existing essentialist structures that govern contemporary American public education, specifically defined here as the "hegemonic meritocracy." In its discussion this paper considers the contributions of classic and contemporary critical pedagogues, such as Freire, Giroux and McLaren, as well as poststructuralist theorists, such as Baudrillard, Foucault, and Derrida, before proposing a specific pedagogy of deconstruction. After offering a thorough critique of this existing structure, the paper proposes a "pedagogy of deconstruction" and outlines the poststructuralist philosophies that might inform such a pedagogy.

Keywords: deconstruction, American public schools, hegemony, essentialism, meritocracy.

Toward Deconstructionist Pedagogy in the Hegemonic Meritocracy

The school system is constructed for only a few to "succeed."

–Denise Clark Pope, "Doing School"

Nearly a decade into the twenty-first century, not much has changed regarding American public education. Despite shifts in federal administration every four or eight years, educational policy seems to remain comparatively unaffected. Though the Barack Obama administration has promised a "Blueprint for Change" concerning education, much of the president's rhetoric reads similarly to that of his predecessor, George W. Bush (Organizing for America, 2009). Educational discourse from the last several American presidential administrations, in fact, seems to be based upon an essentialist paradigm in which schools exist primarily to prepare citizens who can contribute to the preservation of an established democratic society (Ornstein & Levine, 2008, p.181).

From a poststructuralist perspective—one specifically drawn from the writings of Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida and an assortment of critical theorists—essentialism is problematic because it assumes that learning occurs in a static, unilateral fashion. Essentialist pedagogies situate the teacher as the dispenser of curricular knowledge that students "should" know as a result of schooling. Critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970) describes this as the "banking" model of education, in which students are passive receptacles to be filled with the knowledge sanctioned by the powers that be, manifested in public schools as teachers (p.72-73). Conversely, a poststructuralist pedagogue might argue that because reality can be interpreted as a social construction, the goal of schools should be to inform students that they are situated within a uniquely constructed reality that is informed by the totality of people, events and situations they encounter. Consequently, such a pedagogy charges students to scrutinize these circumstances

that impact their lives so strongly. Considering a pedagogy based upon Derrida's theory of deconstruction, for example, Michael Peters (1998) notes that "deconstruction offers a resistance to the instruments of domination embedded within the praxeology of teaching-learning" (p.19).

With respect to Peters (1998), the purpose of poststructuralist pedagogy is to produce students who have an understanding of the realities in which they are situated; that is, they both realize that reality is constructed and understand potential implications of such a condition. This must involve the scrutiny of power structures that inform and govern the students because it is these structures that have perhaps the most clearly definable external control over their lives. These structures might include parents, teachers, political entities and any others who assume leadership of and/or exert control over students.

This sort of pedagogy, one of deconstruction, poses a problem to established power structures and mechanisms of governance because it requires students to question the roles these structures play in their lives. Though one aim of this pedagogy is student comprehension of the "school situation"—that is, teachers and students interacting in some way in a physical space, presumably a classroom—it also requires student realization of the larger situations that shape their lives more broadly. This paradigm additionally dictates that mere awareness of one's own condition will not suffice; rather, a complementary understanding of the roles that others play in one's life is crucial to understanding one's own situation.

Though a pedagogy based upon this philosophy might seem idealistic, it is one that is executable. It requires a curriculum built around the promotion, development and fostering of critical thinking, as well as a teacher that is willing to yield some classroom power to students. A potential paradigm of such a pedagogy will be presented, though not before an examination of the foundation of contemporary American educational discourse, essentialism.

Deconstructing Essentialism

In outlining the philosophical roots of essentialism as a paradigm of contemporary educational thought, Ornstein & Levine (2008) describe the metaphysical, epistemological and axiological foundations of essentialism's philosophical basis, idealism, respectively: "Reality is spiritual or mental and unchanging; knowing is the recall of latent ideas; values are universal, absolute and eternal" (p.163). These ideological premises should rouse suspicion in anyone who considers him-/herself an equal-opportunity educator, for they assume that knowledge is an unalterable body of knowledge to be transmitted from expert to novice, teacher to student. As Ornstein & Levine (2008) illustrate traditional essentialist pedagogy: "Content should be based on time-tested experience of the human race. Genuine freedom comes from internalizing the discipline of learning what is needed and staying with the task. . . . The essentialist goal of education is to transmit and maintain the necessary fundamentals of human culture" (p.183).

The "internalizing" of which Ornstein & Levine speak is undoubtedly a passive process. Essentialism situates the "time-tested experience of the human race" as something that occurred in the past, an artifact no longer in the process of being created. This unchanging knowledge corpus can be defined as the history that has delivered mankind to its present state. However, such a discourse of history ignores the social constructionist notion that knowledge and history are constantly changing because they are informed by the totality of human existence and experience. To situate knowledge as a static entity no longer in motion is to devalue the contributions of contemporary society to history. If this is the case, then the most arguable outcomes of essentialism are indoctrination and subordination, for if students are taught that what is important is only what happened in the past, then these students might logically assume that any contributions they make to society will never matter.

Perhaps no entity better exemplifies contemporary American essentialism than Core Knowledge, an educational initiative operating in public, private, and charter schools peppered throughout forty-seven states—all except Alabama, Mississippi, and Montana—and various countries in Europe, Asia, and Central America (Core Knowledge, 2009). E.D. Hirsch, Jr., the founder and overseer of Core Knowledge and author of *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, is the epitome of an essentialist pedagogue. Among Hirsch's most influential works are those in the Core Knowledge series *What Your _____ Grader Needs to Know* (First, Third, Eighth, etc.), which establish a curriculum based upon those facts supposedly indispensable to being a successful "American" in a society that defines success (perhaps subtly) as going to college and getting a good job. The realization of this aim also implies contribution to the American economy and competitiveness in the global marketplace by these ideal Americans.

As a means of achieving this American dream, Core Knowledge proposes a curriculum that in supposedly uniting its American students also homogenizes them. In the opening letter to the Core Knowledge 2008 annual report, Hirsch writes: "A broad, rich curriculum is a child's passport to full literacy, a life of civic participation, and a shared body of knowledge that makes written and spoken communication possible between and among all Americans" (p.3). This statement, seemingly the crux of Hirsch's entire Core Knowledge pedagogy, is highly problematic. The most illogical of the claims is the clear "written and spoken" communication among all Americans. Taken at face value, this statement is ridiculous because for it to be true, every American citizen would have to be fluent in every language spoken by all of his/her fellow citizens. Of course, it is assumable that Hirsch is actually idealizing the homogenization of spoken language in the United States. If every citizen could speak Standard American English, the nation's (and arguably the world's) dialect of power, then the seemingly impossible linguistic

comprehensibility Hirsch describes could occur. Though nationwide fluency in this dialect of power is not necessarily a bad thing in and of itself, such homogenization becomes problematic if the teaching of Standard American English is paired with the marginalizing of other languages, particularly the mother tongues of students for whom English is not their first language.

Similarly, the "civic participation" and "shared body of knowledge" of which Hirsch speaks also seem representative of some idealized, homogenized society. If the entirety of a society's citizenry is uniformly taught a static body of knowledge, then no citizen will have been educated (at least not in a formal school setting) with any curriculum beyond that mandated by agencies such as Core Knowledge. If this is true, then any "civic participation" that subsequently occurs will more likely resemble brainwashed interchange than active engagement. All other things equal, if every citizen is equipped with the same tools and knowledge to solve a problem, then to hope for any result beyond wholly homogeneous responses seems like wishful thinking.

Among its other accomplishments, the Core Knowledge 2008 report boasts the initial publication of *What Your Preschooler Needs to Know*, evidence that the organization's scope is wide reaching, with a curriculum that spans the ages of three to eighteen, and that essentialism is firmly rooted in contemporary American education. An examination of the Obama administration's seemingly ironically titled "Blueprint for Change" clearly demonstrates this.

While the Obama administration has won great popularity with its promises of "change" for America, such promises seem to be mostly hollow, at least in the area of educational reform. Juxtaposed to that of his predecessor, George W. Bush, Obama's educational blueprint does not seem to offer much "change." As in Bush's call for annual math and reading testing for all students to monitor individual schools' performances (On the Issues, 2008), established national educational objectives, such as increased teacher accountability and student competitiveness,

only seem that much more pertinent in Obama's educational discourse. Specifically, the Obama rhetoric outlines the current American educational system as thus:

> At this defining moment in our history, preparing our children to compete in the global economy is one of the most urgent challenges we face. We need to stop paying lip service to public education, and start holding communities, administrators, teachers, parents and students accountable. We will prepare the next generation for success in college and the workforce, ensuring that American children lead the world once again in creativity and achievement. (Organizing for America, 2009)

To fully realize these ideals, the Obama discourse proposes to reform No Child Left Behind—educational policy from the recent Bush administration that is generally critiqued and contested by concerned, critical educators—and increase the amount of funding for pre-Kindergarten/early education programs, such as Head Start (Ohanian, 2008; Organizing for America, 2009). It is clear from this discourse that a principal goal of Obama's educational policy is to create citizens who can successfully contribute to the U.S. economy and compete in the global marketplace.

Likewise, if the Obama administration does indeed think that one of "the most urgent challenges we face" is "preparing our children to compete in the global economy," then it is reasonable to assert that among the main goals of such an educational system is reproduction of capitalist values. Undoubtedly among values perpetuated in American public schools is the meritocratic ideal, in which stratification occurs based upon demonstrated ability. Perhaps bearing equal significance in defining the essentialist American educational paradigm is the notion that the ideological reproduction that occurs in public schools closely resembles what Antonio Gramsci refers to as hegemony, or the wielding of power from the subordinated to the

powerful (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p.165). Considering this, the current American public educational paradigm can be appropriately dubbed the "hegemonic meritocracy," characterized by the ideological reproduction of the meritocratic, capitalist ideals that direct contemporary American public schools.

Hegemonic-Meritocratic Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know

The seemingly intrinsic marriage of essentialist pedagogy and capitalist, hegemonic meritocracy in American educational policy and practice is a phenomenon that must be more fully examined and critically deconstructed before the necessity of a paradigm shift to a poststructuralist pedagogy of deconstruction can be truly justified. Because of this, the capitalist attributes of hegemonic-meritocratic public schools must be thoroughly critiqued. Such an examination can begin by scrutinizing the influence of "businessification" on education.

In describing the "corporate assault on education," critical theorist Peter McLaren (2003) observes that, "We have entered the age of the corporatization and businessification of education. As capital insinuates itself over the vast terrain of the globe, it is not surprising that the United States is leading the charge toward the privatizing of education" (p.43). After detailing the financial ties between the administration of George W. Bush and McGraw-Hill, a standardized-testing and textbook "publishing giant," McLaren (2003) further posits:

> Today the creation and scoring of K-12 tests is a multimillion dollar industry. Businesses are predictably emphasizing 'output' in their workers, and business-based management techniques are increasingly being adopted in schools. The business model that drives the U.S. classroom requires frequent and efficient

> testing. The K-12 standardized testing industry generates sales of about 1.5 billion dollars a year. (p.43)

Scrutinizing the "businessification" of which McLaren writes, this current model of education emphasizes the role of the student as a contributing member to an already established societal framework, specifically a capitalist one. When schools are governed by the outcomes of expensive standardized tests, there are obvious expectations in place for the test-takers, ones that will determine what sort of student passes a particular examination, as well as those that will likewise determine which students are failures of the same test. Considering McLaren's description of "corporatized" schools, the students that pass these standardized tests will most likely be those who are best equipped to successfully navigate the structures of the tests. Unless some students possess an innate "test-taking gift" that helps them to navigate standardized tests with ease (arguably, some students might), then these skills are likely fostered in the students by the schools that administer the tests. In this situation, the purpose of schools is to create test-taking "machines" that can successfully complete the exams. If this is the case, then McLaren's idea of schools as sites of production, of student "output," is indeed viable.

Similarly to McLaren's description of public schools as producers of successful test-takers, Stanley Aronowitz & Henry Giroux (1985) theorize education as a means for constructing a particular type of "educated" person, one prepared to enter the workforce with a specific set of specialized skills. In this discussion, Aronowitz & Giroux describe an education as "cultural capital," an asset valued by American capitalist systems. The authors specifically illustrate this "neo-conservative" ideology within higher education, though such an argument is equally applicable to American K-12 schools: "Possessing cultural capital in the form of a credential [an education] becomes a code of legitimate formation . . . [which means that] the individual has

gone through a process of educational socialization which is recognized by employers and by the larger society as constituting adequate preparation for occupational status" (p.164). Furthermore, Aronowitz & Giroux (1985) posit that "we see the passing of the 'self-made' person—the autodidact who gained fame and/or riches by entirely individual means . . . Now the term 'self-made' connotes a person's ability to rise within a fairly well established corporate or bureaucratic hierarchy" (pp.164-65). With consideration to McLaren's example of standardized tests as specialized examinations whose material is thoroughly drilled into students in public schools, Aronowitz & Giroux's point is especially applicable to students in American K-12 schools: essentialist "education" within a capitalist society aims to produce students who can successfully perpetuate the ideals and values of the capitalist forces that largely inform their lives, specifically in public schools housing an essentialist ideology.

Though this bureaucratic paradigm of schooling requires that students internalize a prescribed set of skills and values that are sanctioned by the capitalist powers that be, it is not a model that necessarily encourages student dormancy. In the landmark text *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Samuel Bowles & Herbert Gintis (1976) explain how the capitalist ideals of contemporary American education encourage students to adopt the values of the meritocratic system in which they are immersed in schools:

> The educational system legitimates economic inequality by providing an open, objective, and ostensibly meritocratic mechanism for assigning individuals to unequal economic positions. The educational system fosters and reinforces the belief that economic success depends essentially on the possession of technical and cognitive skills—skills which it is organized to provide in an efficient, equitable, and unbiased manner on the basis of the meritocratic principle. (p.103)

In this paradigm, schooling encourages active student participation in a capitalist system by equating success in school with "getting a good job," or successful contribution to the national economy. Presumably this sort of materialistic success promoted by meritocratic schooling also provides for success in life. However, this logic is incredibly flawed because not everyone can attain this ideal of "success" in a meritocracy; socioeconomic stratification will inevitably occur. Bowles & Gintis (1976) continue:

> Throughout history, patterns of privilege have been justified by elaborate facades. Dominant classess seeking a stable social order have consistently nurtured and underwritten these ideological facades and, insofar as their power permitted, blocked the emergence of alternatives. This is what we mean by "legitimation": the fostering of a generalized consciousness among individuals which prevents the formation of the social bonds and critical understanding whereby existing social conditions might be transformed. (p.104)

In this sense the meritocratic ideal not only stratifies students based upon ability, but it also shamelessly pits them against one another in a society where success is meaningless without failure because winners cannot exist without losers in such a paradigm. So, if the sort of stratification underwritten by a meritocracy is viewed as legitimate by those that it most intimately affects—the students—then the students will naturally legitimate the desire to compete against one another in order to be stratified at the top of the academic hierarchy perpetuated by meritocratic schooling. In addition to this legitimation is that which occurs in a more strictly ideological realm: the uncritical legitimation of the capitalist values that underlie meritocratic schooling. Gramsci defines this ideological wielding of power by the subordinates

(students) to those who dominate them (the adults in charge of the students' schooling) as *hegemony*, illustrated by Croteau & Hoynes (2003) as follows:

> Gramsci (1971) argued that ruling groups can maintain their power through force, consent, or a combination of the two . . . Power can be wielded at the level of culture or ideology, not just through the use of force . . . Institutions such as schools, religion, and the media help the powerful exercise this cultural leadership since they are sites where we produce and reproduce ways of thinking about society . . . Hegemony operates at the level of common sense in the assumptions we make about social life and on the terrain of things that we accept as "natural" or "the way things are." (pp.165-66)

A pedagogy of deconstruction is necessary because schools indeed are the sites of ideological reproduction of which Croteau & Hoynes speak. Because the capitalist aim of meritocratic schooling is to instill in students a sense of economic competition, then the Obama administration's aim of preparing students for the global economy seems realistic. Perhaps related is the sense of patriotism that is forced into students each morning at school. The daily recitation of the pledge to the American flag is undoubtedly a form of brainwashing of the highest order. If students are expected to uncritically "pledge allegiance" to a tri-colored piece of fabric every morning in school, then it would be foolish to assert that American public schools are not sites of ideological indoctrination.

Furthermore, if the ultimate essentialist aim of schools is to produce students who are armed with the "core knowledge" that it takes to successfully contribute to the American capitalist market system—both as consumers and as producers of goods, services, products and capital—then it is logical to assume that the sort of meritocratic ideals that underlie American

capitalism will likewise be instilled into the students that are the "products" of its government-funded schools. Regardless of whether the ultimate authority to which each school answers is government at the state or national level, a school that is designed to reproduce the ideals upon which it is founded does not seem destined to undergo the type of "change" insinuated by the Obama administration's plans for educational "reform."

Croteau & Hoynes (2003) are correct in implying that Gramsci's notion of hegemony permeates public schools (and other sites of ideological reproduction) today. Schools in America strongly reinforce the meritocratic principle that the results of hard work (good grades) will lead to success in life (college, good job, healthy salary, etc.). Even if this is not always true, it is the message that is nonetheless perpetuated by public schools that operate meritocratically. If students want to accomplish the sort of success that is valued in schools (good grades), then acceptance of this ideal is practically a necessity. When students assimilate the values of the public school culture in which they are immersed for (usually) thirteen years, they willingly relinquish any power over their education—if they ever had any at all—to the hegemonic structures that govern the American public school experience.

If Gramsci is correct, then public schools will inevitably produce students who unquestioningly accept and legitimate the actions of schools because they believe that such is simply "the way things are." Considering this, such uncritical acceptance almost seems at odds with the demands of the meritocratic ideal, which requires students to be active and competitive in their pursuit of success. Jean Baudrillard (1981) theorizes a dilemma of objecthood vs. subjecthood that illustrates this phenomenon:

> Children are simultaneously required to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible, free and conscious, and to constitute themselves as

> submissive, inert, obedient, conforming objects. The child resists on all levels, and to a contradictory demand he responds with a double strategy. To the demand of being an object, he opposes all the practices of disobedience, of revolt, of emancipation; in short, a total claim to subjecthood. To the demand of being a subject he opposes, just as obstinately, and efficaciously, an object's resistance, that is to say, exactly the opposite: childishness, hyperconformism, total dependence, passivity, idiocy. (p.85)

Considering Baudrillard's assertions that it is human nature to rebel in the face of contradictory demands, then when required to passively conform to the hegemonic control mechanisms that govern their educational experience, perhaps students naturally rebel. Likewise, in the face of the contradictory task of demonstrating independence over their education, students revert to less mature behaviors because what is being asked of them by authority figures in the school is contradictory of what the larger hegemonic school "machine" demands of them, even when these demands are subtle or unstated. Though this logic seems sensible, it would be a fallacy to believe it applicable to everyone, for some students are able to successfully balance the seemingly contradictory demands of the hegemonic-meritocratic structures that govern contemporary American public schools. High-achieving students illustrate this phenomenon well.

In fact, any log of students' grades from any American public school—a dangerous generalization, undoubtedly, but one of necessity in this case—would demonstrate that some students do, in fact, succeed in schools. Any student that retains a position on the "honor roll" throughout school is arguably able to successfully navigate the seemingly contradictory demands of a hegemonic-meritocratic school structure. However, "success" in school does not necessarily equate to any other type of success, happiness, or fulfillment in life. In a study of the moral

dilemmas faced by highly motivated, "overachieving" teenagers in a wealthy private school in California, for example, educational sociologist Denise Clark Pope (2001) observes:

> Those students [the high-achievers] explain that they are busy at what they call "doing school." They realize that they are caught in a system where achievement depends more on "doing"—going through the correct motions—than on learning and engaging with the curriculum. Instead of thinking deeply about the content of their courses and delving into projects and assignments, the students focus on managing the workload and honing strategies that will help them to achieve high grades . . . Values normally espoused in schools, such as honesty, diligence, and teamwork, necessarily come into question when the students must choose between these ideals and getting top grades . . . [These students have] learned to do "whatever it takes" to get ahead, even if it means sacrificing "individuality, health, and happiness"—not to mention compromising ethical principles . . . They feel bound by a narrow definition of success and resigned to a system in which ultimate satisfaction may not be attainable. (pp.4-5)

In detailing the experiences of five privileged, high achieving students over the course of one academic year, Pope notes their frustrations with themselves, their friends, families, teachers and school experiences. Even though each student has mastered the art of "doing school," none are successfully able to carry on a healthy social life with friends and family while competitively maintaining a high grade point average. Though Pope's study is comparatively small in scope, it nonetheless sends a troubling message to essentialist pedagogues and critics alike: even those students from privileged backgrounds (high socioeconomic statuses) can succeed in "doing school" while failing at "doing life." If the goal of American essentialist education is to produce

students who can continuously contribute to the capitalist marketplace, then even those students who have become the ideal metaphorical, meritocratic machines may not necessarily be able to successfully navigate the demands of the work force *and* the demands of the "real world" outside of the office (or cubicle, or classroom, or unemployment line).

Therefore, if not even the supposedly best adapted students—those from privileged backgrounds—can succeed at both "doing school" and at life in general, then something is obviously amiss in American public schools. Perhaps Bowles & Gintis (1976) state it best: "The humanity of a nation, it is said, can be gauged by the character of its prisons. No less can its humanity be inferred from the quality of its educational processes" (p.102). However, the analogy of public schools to prisons is not original to Bowles & Gintis. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault (1975) theorizes the relationships between prison conditions and the necessity of punishment in (post)modern life. Perhaps most intriguing is Foucault's extension of philosopher Jeremy Bentham's concept of the Panopticon, relating it to contemporary education.

Foucault describes the Panopticon as perfectly structured so that each individual residing therein never knows whether or not s/he is being watched, though such is always a possibility because of the individual's proximity to the "supervisor." Extending the metaphor beyond the situation of the prisoner, though, Foucault includes other pariahs whose actions are watched—the "madman," "patient," "worker" and "condemned man" (p.200). Additionally included in Foucault's list is the "schoolboy," a label that does not typically assume the negative connotations of the others within the Panopticon. Unlike the others, the "schoolboy" would not seem to deserve this immediate Panopticist treatment because one does not typically choose to be a student in a public school setting. However, considering the hegemonic-meritocratic ideals that

govern American public schooling, the schoolboy's relationship to the others becomes clear: Contemporary American public school students are indeed "workers," slaving away to meet the demands of a competitive meritocracy. They are "patients," under the keen supervision of teachers and legislators who claim to know what is best. Likewise they are "madmen" and "condemned men," the latter because the public school experience is a legal requirement for all who cannot afford private schools or home schooling (so they are literally condemned to undergo public schooling) and the former simply because there is a chance that the totality of the hegemonic meritocracy might indeed drive these students to the brink of madness. As one parent, in describing his child as "a burnout at five," observes in the *Los Angeles Times*, "My son already hates school, and he's just halfway through kindergarten" (Ohanian, 2008, p.36).

If public schooling indeed creates a Panopticist situation for students, then the reason for such a phenomenon must be explained. Foucault (1975) continues:

> Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (p.201)

If Foucault's "schoolboy" is indeed the "inmate" within a structure in which s/he is always viewable to the entity in charge of him/her, then parallels to contemporary American education practically beg to be drawn. With the threat of high-stakes testing hanging ominously overhead,

for example, students are expected to outperform not only the other students in their classes, grade levels and schools, but also their peers at other schools in the same city, state, nation and world. Annual standardized test scores provide a constant (although incredibly hollow and shallow) illustration of individual students to the powers that be who govern educational policy, entities who eerily resemble Foucault's Panopticist supervisor and who apparently are manifested as Washington bureaucrats. As Ohanian (2008) reports: "The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable, two prominent Washington-based groups representing business owners and chief executives of large corporations, respectively, announced last month that they have formed a coalition with other business groups to protect the nearly 5-year-old education law [No Child Left Behind] from major changes" (pp.10-11).

Considering this bureaucratized, Panopticist nightmare of the hegemonic meritocracy in contemporary American public schools, a paradigm shift—from an essentialist pedagogy to a poststructuralist one of deconstruction—seems wholly justified. Before a specific deconstructionist pedagogy is proposed, though, the value of such a pedagogy will first be clearly discussed.

A Basis for Deconstructionist Pedagogy

The divergence of public schools from the hegemonic-meritocratic ideal that governs contemporary education must begin by establishing that reality is a social construction. Furthermore, with this acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of reality must come a thorough discussion of why this is relevant to contemporary American public education and how this discussion might inform a proposed pedagogy of deconstruction. Finally, considering

this necessity for such a paradigm, a deconstructionist pedagogy must be defined and illustrated as an effective alternative to the existing essentialist, hegemonic-meritocratic structure.

The crux of the social constructionist argument is undoubtedly that reality, as we experience it, is not a fixed state in which we simply exist; rather, the postmodern realm is a reality that has no meaning inherent of itself. To the social constructionists, all meaning that exists in "reality" is a product of the people that inhabit it and the situations that inform their lives. What is "real" is not defined by or limited to the parameter of what naturally exists; instead, the "real" is actually the reflection of how humans perceive the world(s) around them. Baudrillard (1981) describes this condition as the simulacrum—the copy without an original—that is, the real is not *what* we perceive as much as *how* we perceive it (pp.1-7). Similarly, Croteau & Hoynes (2003) posit that "postmodernist theorists have argued that the rising importance of images signal a new kind of 'reality.' In postmodern society . . . the image has come to replace the 'real'" (p.237). Croteau & Hoynes describe images much like Baudrillard outlines the simulacrum: the images that constitute reality are reflections of how humans perceive their world(s) and interact with them. Thus, what is perceived by one individual to be "real" may not hold true for anyone else.

Social constructionism is important for educational theory because it prompts pedagogues who criticize educational policies and practices to consider that what seems "wrong" with contemporary education might be an issue that is just as (or even more so) ideological than pragmatic. That is, if a deconstructionist pedagogy is to be developed for public schools, then it must first problematize the theoretical foundations of the existing paradigm rather than just the practices that result from it.

Outlining the value of poststructuralist (deconstructionist) criticism in education, St. Pierre & Pillow (2000) define the poststructuralist paradigm as a critical response to all philosophies, including humanism (which stratifies individuals based upon seemingly arbitrary determiners such as race and gender) and poststructuralism itself:

> Poststructuralism, then, does not assume that humanism is an error that must be replaced . . . It does not offer an alternative, successor regime of truth, it does not claim to have 'gotten it right,' nor does it believe that such an emancipatory outcome is possible or even desirable. Rather, it offers critiques and methods for examining the functions and efforts of any structure or grid of regularity that we put in place, including those poststructuralism itself might create. (p.6)

Considering St. Pierre & Pillow, poststructuralism's role in education should not be to replace the flawed, existing power structures that govern public schooling. Rather, it should serve as a springboard for subversive, creative thought. In this paradigm poststructuralism can be equated with deconstructionism because both seek to problematize and analyze power structures.

As a philosophical basis for deconstructionism, Jacques Derrida (1978) proposes: "It has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality . . . The entire history of the concept of structure . . . must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center" (p.279). Considering Derrida, no structure (or person) has at its core any static, inherent meaning. Rather, meaning should be considered a dynamic entity that changes as the structure in which it resides changes; this challenges essentialist education, which reifies the notion that at the core of every American student is some universal and static "American" center. However, such a one-dimensional

paradigm of an "American" student does not exist. For example, if Amelia, an American high school student, typically makes As on all of her assignments, then being a 4.0 student is a factor that informs the "center" of meaning that is Amelia. However, if she begins to make Bs on all of her assignments, then one aspect of Amelia's new meaning is being a 3.0 student, rather than a 4.0 one. These are the sorts of metaphysical substitutions of meaning of which Derrida speaks when discussing decentering.

Likewise, such a deconstruction of meaning can occur when examining public schooling at large. Cultural critic and philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2002) describes postmodern society as a paradoxical, "Janus-like" fantasy: that which is both "pacifying [and] disarming," as well as "shattering, disturbing [and] inassimilable into our reality" (p.18). The same argument can be made concerning contemporary American public schools, which arguably operate under the pretense of fantasy. As sites of domination and indoctrination (AKA the hegemonic meritocracy), schools seek as their output a specific type of student, one who can successfully (though uncritically) navigate the demands of a capitalist social structure. Juxtaposed to this is the goal of critical thinking, which is so often freely and crudely handled in educational circles when it is heralded as the ultimate goal of an education. This is a problematic goal in the hegemonic meritocracy, one that gives rise to an important question: How can critical educators and students "traverse the fantasy" (Žižek, 2002, p.18), that is, successfully navigate the hegemonic-meritocratic structures within public schools while still critically examining them? An answer to this lies in applied poststructuralist theory.

Crucial to the development of deconstructionist pedagogy is the acknowledgement that all knowledge is situated in larger socio-political/-ideological contexts and therefore must be subject to criticism. One potential problem with contemporary public education in America is

that people seem to hold it sacred simply because it is public education. Even though teachers are subject to rigorous standards to which their students must "measure up," the idea of a public education is firmly rooted as a positive one in the American psyche. With the acceptance of American public education as a desirable "good" also comes the acceptance of the practices that occur in these educational processes.

In *Pedagogy Is Politics*, critical theorist Maria-Regina Kecht (1992) describes the phenomenon of uncritical acceptance of public schooling as a "pretense of neutrality [that] stems from ideological consensus" and one that must be abandoned and replaced with the scrutinization of academic practices and knowledge as social and ideological constructions (p.3). Specifically, Kecht charges all individuals involved in public educational practices, especially educators, to "agree that language is situated in the world and thus always interested, that knowledge is socially produced and thus always determined by strategies of exclusion and containment" (p.5). Kecht's latter advice is especially applicable to pedagogues who seek to charge their students to critically examine and problematize their realities, goals that are the foundation of a pedagogy of deconstruction.

A Proposed Pedagogy of Deconstruction

Though the goal of a deconstructionist pedagogy is ultimately to empower students to critically problematize their own realities, especially those of their schooling and the other power structures that govern their lives, a pedagogy of deconstruction must first require teachers to realize that in order to empower students in the classroom, student voices must be validated and affirmed. As Kecht (1992) further asserts, before teachers charge students to question their own

realities, the teachers themselves must first scrutinize their own classrooms for the power relationships that exist therein:

> Our position of power in the classroom requires close scrutiny . . . Our instructional methodology should not subordinate the students, ignore their specific identities and experiences, and deny their own social, historical positions; rather, it should establish a climate of dialogue in the classroom that allows students to represent their own worlds and perspectives, considers their nonacademic forms of knowledge, and promotes self-expression. To realize our social and intellectual ideals, our teaching practices should encourage forms of learning that foster critical judgment and healthy skepticism and serve to prepare students for responsibility and agency. (p.8)

It is not enough for educators simply to tell students that they should be critical of their realities. Though this might indeed encourage the students to reflect upon their situatedness, it is also possible that this same information, if simply delivered to students by the teacher like any other curricular material, might be received by the students as "just more schooling."

Therefore, an acknowledgment and analysis by teachers of the unique students in their classrooms should accompany the charge for them to examine their realities. This critical acknowledgment of the students by the teacher is the beginning of deconstructionist pedagogy and can be modeled after Grant & Sleeter's (2007) "four essential motivators that drive the choices students make" (p.46). The authors specifically list these motivators as "power, freedom, fun, and belonging" (p.46), and they charge educators to strongly consider them when designing their curricula. Arguably any curriculum that caters to these four student motivators will be pedagogically sound when juxtaposed to deconstructionist pedagogy because like the latter, the

former allows for a student-centered classroom, especially if the "power" motivator is effectively utilized.

Though the thought of yielding power to students in the classroom might make some educators flinch, such a sharing of authority is arguably necessary for deconstructionist pedagogy to occur. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) argues that any subordinated group (such as students) cannot be truly free unless dialogue exists between the subordinates and their subordinators:

> Dialogue, as essential communication, must underlie any cooperation . . . Dialogue does not impose, does not manipulate, does not domesticate, does not 'sloganize' . . . As opposed to the mythicizing practices of the dominant elites, dialogical theory requires that the world be unveiled. No one can, however, unveil the world *for* another. Although one Subject may initiate the unveiling on behalf of others, the others must also become Subjects of this act. The adherence of the people is made possible by this unveiling of the world and of themselves, in authentic praxis. (pp.168-69)

Per Freire, dialogue cannot truly exist if one party "speaks" for another; it requires both involved to be communicating equally. Applied to education, these dialogic notions are valuable: Grant & Sleeter's (2007) paradigm of power, freedom, fun and belonging cannot truly occur in the classroom unless the dialogue of which Freire speaks exists between teachers and students. A crucial aspect of this Freirean dialogue is the "unveiling of the world" (p.125), which is facilitated by the teacher but ultimately undertaken by the individual student to whom each unveiling is directed. In this paradigm, students are active in the process of discovering meaning in their realities, a central tenet of this proposed pedagogy of deconstruction.

Not only is this sort of dialogue necessary for students to examine their realities by "unveiling the world," but it is also a requirement for teachers to make their curricula relevant to students' lives. Likewise, in describing the necessity of dialogue for both teachers and students, Kecht (1992) observes: "Unless we make the students' own worlds of desires, beliefs, and experiences a guiding principle in our approach to teaching, we will fail to establish a critical dialogue with them . . . If we are to accomplish such communication in the classroom we need to question our own authority and our tendency to impose intellectual identities on our students while ignoring their culturally shaped minds" (p.16). Kecht makes an imperative observation here: teachers cannot ignore students' "culturally shaped minds," which are intricately interwoven with the experiences and perceptions that have informed their lives thus far. Rather, they must consider these components of their students' realities when implementing deconstructionist pedagogy.

One method by which teachers can use student experiences to execute a pedagogy of deconstruction is by considering existing knowledge as a basis for new learning. Drawing from the social constructionists, knowledge is never neutral because it is constructed within the reality of each bearer of knowledge. This is an important notion for deconstructionist pedagogy because of its implication that all knowledge should be read textually, and therefore (as Derrida would say) deconstructed.

Situated within this pedagogy of deconstruction, the existing knowledge of students can be utilized as a tool for making the educational experience both more relevant and accessible to the students. As Vincent Leitch (1985) notes, the socially constructed knowledge that constitutes students' realities can be a valuable pedagogical tool when it is deconstructed in the classroom:

> Knowledge is constituted as *historical* writing. Our knowledge, in its present and past formations and branches, could have been, and may yet be, constituted in other ways. Our relation to 'facts,' disciplines, departments, and hierarchies of knowledge is less 'natural' or 'normal' than it is concocted and thus alterable. Out of such deconstructive thinking comes a certain strategic stance and practice for pedagogy. Nothing is ordained, natural, unalterable, monumental. Everything is susceptible to critique and transformation. (p.23)

Perhaps the most effective way to begin the true Freirean dialogue that involves teacher-facilitated but ultimately student-driven recognition and criticism of reality is to problematize students' existing knowledge. Arguably a deconstructionist teacher can equip students with the abilities to critically examine the power structures that govern their lives by first tasking them to examine their lives at large.

An example of this pedagogical paradigm can be drawn from the contemporary phenomenon of high-stakes testing as a measure of student, teacher and school accountability. If, for example, the tenth grade students in Mr. Wilbourn's English class at Public School XYZ are legally required to take a nationally standardized composition examination (such as the Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing), then it is possible that Mr. Wilbourn's principal might encourage him to "teach to the test," that is, spend the majority of instructional time equipping his students with the specific skills necessary to perform well on the examination. However, if Mr. Wilbourn wishes to be a subversive (but also arguably a good) teacher, he could utilize a pedagogy of deconstruction to prepare his students for the examination while also charging them to critically examine their immediate realities (in this instance, the reality of this specific standardized examination). Rather than merely instilling in his students the importance of clarity, organization

and strong thesis support (for example), Mr. Wilbourn might choose to deconstruct the test, explaining to students that the writing assessment does not necessarily seek creativity as much as particularly structured compositions (such as a thesis statement at the end of the introductory paragraph, a conclusion that restates the thesis, etc.).

While in this prior example, the teacher is largely the person examining the power structures that govern the public school experience, he could also utilize the same deconstructionist pedagogy in creating an assignment similar to the one above, but this time prompting students to examine the situation: In a class discussion, Mr. Wilbourn might ask his students how well essays they had previously written would score on the standardized examination, and why. The next part of the assignment might be for the students to rewrite these essays in a much less formulaic way, one that they think is "good writing." Such an exercise would require the students to critically analyze not only their definition of good writing but also the power structures that dictate what good writing is supposed to look like. The juxtaposition of these two perhaps differing opinions about "good writing" would be intended to prompt students to think about how what the larger power structures that govern their educations think of as "good writing" might be markedly different than what they themselves consider appropriate. This sort of engaged, reflective activity is exemplary of the proposed pedagogy of deconstruction, a pedagogy that will ideally lead to students who are critically engaged in their schooling, problematizing the power structures that govern their educational experiences.

If the ultimate goal of this proposed pedagogy of deconstruction is for students to examine their own realities, particularly those of the structures that govern their school experiences, then one specific aim of this student criticism of governing structures is the scrutiny of the hegemonic meritocracy that seems to govern not only American public schools but also

the capitalist structures that are at the economic core of everyday life in the contemporary United States. Though it is perhaps idealistic (even lofty) to think that the radical altering of the societal framework upon which American economic life is based—capitalism—might be attainable through the implementation of deconstructionist pedagogies in public schools, it is arguably not a wholly unfeasible aim. Though this deconstructionist pedagogy does not encourage the onset of anarchy as a means of altering the existing hegemonic-meritocratic system, it is a pedagogy that places great faith in its students. However, deconstructionist pedagogy has its limits.

Utilized simply for the purpose of charging students to examine their situatedness within larger social structures, deconstructionist pedagogy is flawed. Knowledge without action is merely that—knowledge, and though enlightenment is typically a good thing, it does not seem useful without accompanying action. Therefore, though deconstructionist pedagogy is admirable, it is insufficient as a vehicle for change. What must stem from deconstructionism is a pedagogy in which teachers not only cause students to examine larger social structures but also charge them to attempt to change those structures that shape their lives negatively. Such a pedagogy is not merely one of reflection but also one of action based upon that reflection. If students simply reflect upon their situations without taking action, then nothing changes beyond their ways of thinking about the world. However, if teachers can somehow equip students with the knowledge to shape their worlds, rather than merely reflect upon them, change can truly occur.

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