The Politics of Accountability in the Era of Globalization and Late Capitalism: Disenchanting Educational Reform for Marginalized Migrants

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Abstract

In the aftermath of "A Nation at Risk," which was issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 to restructure the educational system and develop new curricula, a great amount of effort was made by policy makers in Unites States to improve secondary education through more testing and accountability measures. The most important driving force behind developing new curricula was the need to boost student performance. Improved accountability, it was argued, would enable students to be better equipped to enter higher education, compete in the labor force, and be prepared for the global capitalist economy. A majority of students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) are negatively affected by these accountability measures. In the face of this impediment that students with LEP have encountered to succeed in high school, the article focuses on the core issue at hand, namely, how high-stakes testing accountability has been used in the era of globalization and late capitalism to marginalize working class migrant students in United States.

Keywords: High-Stakes Testing, Accountability, Limited English Proficiency (LEP), Globalization, Capitalism, Social Class, Cultural Deficit Model, and Culturally-Sensitive Approach

Introduction

Educational accountability is arguably nothing new in the context of the American educational system. In fact, accountability has been administered in the United States at least since the mid-19th century. Nonetheless, in the 1980s, the United States Department of Education developed and implemented new measures to reform the educational system to significantly improve educational quality. A key component of these measures was the creation of new standardized testing nationwide. The major driving force behind the policy initiative was the desire to increase student performance. Improved accountability would enable students to be better prepared to enter higher education, participate in the labor force, and be able to compete in a global capitalist economy. The initiative to strengthen and reorganize the educational system by using accountability measures first came to national prominence through "A Nation at Risk" report in 1983. This report insisted upon the need for American education to be more thorough in order to meet the demands of the global market. The report went as far as to indicate the following:

> Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report [is] concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justified pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. . . . We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Drawing on the call for urgent reform, advocates argue that policy reform in education is essential and has the potential to increase the upward social mobility of illiterate youth. The proponents of this policy reform argue that educational change will be effective if it is led by experts who know the necessities of the labor market.

Following "A Nation at Risk" report, what may be described as the accountability enterprise was born, and it has continued to erode the trust that many parents, students, and politicians have in teachers in the entire education community (Johnson & Johnson, 2006, xvi). This article examines how a main aspect of the accountability enterprise, namely, standardized testing, presents multiple challenges that cultural minority students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) face on a daily basis.

In this article I first examine accountability reform in public schooling understood as an institution structured to administer social reproduction. Berger and Luckmann (1966) define social reproduction as the means by which a society reproduces its population, its main institutions, and its social practices continuously from one generation to the next. At the core of this form of social reproduction is the idea that, on the surface, it promises to promote fairness, equity, and success to all students, whatever their frame of reference may be. But instead it prevents certain groups from attaining social mobility, specifically in this case, LEP immigrant students in the public school system.

To delve deeper into the structural ceiling established by schools in their practice of social reproduction, this article subsequently looks at experiences of cultural – and especially linguistic – discontinuity as immigrant minority students arrive in the school environment. A prime issue is that the same discourse they are taught at home differs from what they are taught in the educational system (Nieto, 2004). The article then examines a related perspective, the "cultural deficit model," which claims that a cultural inadequacy exists for immigrant students that stems from their impoverished backgrounds, or that they simply do not possess the analytic faculties needed to succeed in school. Lack of success is often linked in these arguments to childhood poverty. I challenge this claim in light of students' documented differential learning in a new school environment. Students generally are not born with an inability to learn or succeed, nor do they typically grow up with one. It may be wise to recognize the cultural deficit theory as a smokescreen. It lays blame on the victim and obscures the barriers to learning that are structurally organized and expressed in the form of socio-cultural hostilities immigrant students encounter in their school's social milieu. These hostile experiences do not meet immigrant student needs or help them to fulfill their potential. Rather, they curb or squander the benefit that engagement with English speakers potentially can bring.

The article next describes potential alternative educational policies. To create a more level playing field for LEP students under the accountability establishment, educators can turn to a more culturally-sensitive and culturally-responsive approach so that all students could benefit from the educational process. A number of multicultural theorists (Bartolome, 2009; Valencia, 2006; Nieto, 2004; Leistyna, 2002) have examined how the achievement gap in standardized tests among minority students goes beyond the boundaries of class and race. The culturally-sensitive approach suggests that low performance in standardized testing cannot be understood without accounting for any cultural factors that impact the educational experience of students with limited English proficiency in United States. Thus, blindly reforming the educational system to advance a capitalist agenda without accommodations for students from different social strata or ethnic background does nothing but perpetuate social inequality in the school system (Macionis, 2012).

Public Schools: A Place for Social Inequality and Social Reproduction

How can we contextualize the problem of educational inequality in the Western political economy? Feinberg and Soltis (2004) argue Marxists and Neo-Marxists view public schools as a branch of the institutional state apparatus established by dominant, ruling elite to replicate and sustain the status quo. Public schools are perceived by Marxists as state-run educational organizations that must be "understood in terms of the role that the state plays as the arm of the ruling class" (Feinberg & Soltis, 2004, p. 56). Bowles and Gintis (1976) are Marxist theorists who echo this presumed role of schools, arguing that schools are significant components in the construction of political control. By this they mean that schools must serve the objectives of capitalism to be fiscally supported. Thus, schools are only allowed to exist on a nationwide scale if they help the state to legitimize inequalities in the current social order necessarily stemming from capitalism. This is true despite the fact that potentially schools could perform very different functions and still be well-funded.

Under late capitalism the school has been recognized as a disciplinary apparatus to train new immigrants as noted by (Lipman, 2004). However, as Bowles and Gintis observe, this apparatus functions to "discipline a new proletariat, fragment it and eventually stratify it along racial, ethnic, and sexual lines" (186). Legitimization is thereby carried out through the social reproduction of labor stratification and organization (Mbayo, 2011). Under this mechanism those in the lower social strata have been given the illusion that they have an opportunity toward upward social mobility.

Thus, schools legitimate the system by preparing immigrant students to join the workforce to serve a capitalist agenda rather than pursue individual goals toward a more local, autonomous community life, and serving familiar and individual needs more than corporate needs (Mbayo, 2011; Feinberg & Soltis,2004).

The mechanism requires the consent of all layers of society to their roles. Bourdieu and Passeron (1997) argue that the middle class is comprised of those functionaries of elites who, as professionals, semi-professionals, or upwardly mobile managerial workers, define what knowledge is, prescribe curriculum content, determine the parameters for the certification and validation of educational credentials, and determine what credentials can fulfill a job requirement. In this sense it could be said that the middle class has a stranglehold on the thinking, cultural values, and norms that society cherishes. Moreover, Bourdieu and Passeron (1997) note how schooling produces certain entrenched ways of recognizing and accepting that foster existing class stratification.

The drive toward high-stakes testing fits with the traditional pursuit of industrialization as a means of attaining economic growth under capitalism. According to its hegemonic functionalist view, investment in people as human capital through schooling is a sound strategy for economic development because it helps assure an incessant supply of labor in the job market and enhances worker income (Psacharopoulos, 1994; Schultz, 1963). Hurst (2007) notes that many state and federal educational reforms of the last two decades parallel Thomas Friedman's similar argument that globalization requires free market capitalism, including deregulation and privatization. The view lies beneath efforts, particularly in states like New York and Texas that have strongly advocated federally-instituted high-stakes testing and accountability requirements. Policies like No Child Left Behind (2002) promote such reforms as being necessary to increase efficiency, accountability, fairness, and equality under the expanding process of globalization. Given the need to expand the proletariat to advance the long-term goals of the capitalist system, immigrant students with limited English proficiency become an easy target in the public school system as required recruits into a new industrial class under globalization. Lipman (2004) upholds that power shapes people's perceptions and often creates imbalances concerning socially constructed racial groups, imbalances that determine who can learn and graduate from school. Lipman also notes that minority groups are treated as the *other* by the dominant culture in society, and the intensity of their treatment shifts over time in response to the job markets and the needs of migrant workers. Implementing mandates like standardized testing with the proclaimed goal of boosting success for the underprivileged becomes a tactic to maintain the status quo of the dominant group and marginalize the racial other.

From this vantage point, race is significant in explaining and fully accounting for inequity in educational opportunity in the United States. Oakes noted that although class- and gender-based analyses can and do offer insight, whether singularly or combined, the variables do not explain all the educational achievement differences apparent between Whites and students of color (cited by Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Yet with the careful use of class to analyze issues related to minority education, it becomes apparent that middle class, African-American students do not achieve at the same level as their White counterparts, so class standing does not guard them. Thus, in this case it is even harder for students with limited English proficiency. Diverse reports on academic tracking also point out that, "poor and minority students are most likely to be placed in the lowest school system" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, p. 67 citing Oakes).

As compelling as a class analysis might be, it may not be sufficient to fully understand the low performance of immigrant students. I argue that a culturally-sensitive and culturally-responsive approach to educational reform would both help us understand the adversity that LEP immigrant students face, and help them to use their own agency to meet their goals for academic achievement and upward social mobility. A thorough cultural analysis is needed to shed light in the case of immigrant students in a host society. The starting point focuses on the cultural discontinuity experienced by immigrant students in the school system.

Cultural Discontinuity

According to Lovelace and Wheeler (2006), cultural discontinuity refers to a lack of interconnection between two or more cultures. When minority students arrive in a school system, changes in language use when transitioning daily between home and school can be stark. Since language is a mean of cultural interconnection, such students often encounter a wall of cultural discontinuity that radically disrupts their prior experience. Immigrant LEP students entering a school system immediately begin being socialized into a new set of culturally-specific ways. The discourse structure and communication styles used by many of the students from culturally and linguistically diverse populations contrasts sharply with the more monolithic hegemonic discourse of the teacher's instruction and method of interaction. For example, sometimes immigrant students come from a culture of collectivist learning; however, when entering most U.S. schools, they are confronted with an individualistic culture of classroom instruction. This discontinuity between home and school discourse has had a serious impact on the academic performance of immigrant students (Nieto, 2004).

The interruption in a student's normative behavior injected by the school environment often delays a student's readiness for any high-stakes testing. Test procedures in many countries are often quite different from those found in the United States. For example, often tests are administered in other counties as written essays. In the United States, often tests are composed of both multiple choice questions and written essays. The challenge of having to accommodate for such differences can be enormous for immigrant students new to a culture, especially when they are also faced with a new language and new discourses to apprehend.

Lovelace and Wheeler (2006), citing Champion and Colman, note that cultural discontinuity often occurs between home language use and how teachers communicate and teach in the target language. Yet alternative, culturally-responsive assessments are possible. When teachers are uninformed about the culturally-influenced language styles of their students, miscommunication may arise that can lead to misapprehensions and misunderstandings about student interactional configurations, intellect, and potential for academic success. Instead of dismissing students' cultural capital and home language use, school administrators and counselors can get better results if they were to evaluate students' needs through a baseline assessment. From this baseline, they can determine a student's developmental stage in the learning process. After assessing students, administrators and counselors could organize a series of activities to increase awareness of teacher biases to show the possible negative effects of solely Eurocentric teaching on the psychological well-being of low-income, ethnically diverse students. They could offer culturally-responsive educational tools in an effort to demonstrate the learning effectiveness of such lesson plans (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008). For students to succeed, they must be informed at every juncture how to map out the array of different social and cultural signs they find operating in the school environment.

When students are unable to perform well on standardized tests, it is not enough to simply point out that this is due to a student's cultural deficit, i.e., the claim that a lack of social or cultural capital required for a student's success is due to hailing from a poor immigrant and working-class background. Any approach that does not link achievement gaps to home culture just obscures the reality of school failure and immigrant student suffering, and it absolves schools from the responsibility to change practices in order to better educate students. It is wrong to situate failure in simplistic ideas of cultural deficit.

The Cultural Deficit Model

Cultural deficit thinking is a hegemonic tool of manipulation used to blame students for their own victimization. According to Valencia (2006), deficit thinking is a one-sided explanation of school malfunction that faults low-income students for membership in marginal group categories, for example, being a member of a racial minority or an economically marginalized group. The endogenous nature of the deficit philosophical framework bases poor school performance in so-called cognitive and motivational deficits, and it absolves institutional structures and discriminatory schooling arrangements that keep students out of the best possible learning environments. Valencia maintains:

> In light of the "victim-blamers/victims" nature of deficit thinking and the lop-sided power arrangements between deficit thinkers and economically disadvantaged students of color, the model can oppress its victims. As such, the deficit thinking paradigm holds little hope for improving school achievement by addressing the school culture in ways that can improve the possibilities of school success for such students" (p. 18).

The deficit model is pseudoscience, a residual form of historic scientific racism (Smedley, 2007) in which researchers come to their work with deep-seated negative prejudices toward people of color, pursue such work in methodologically inconsistent ways, and communicate their findings in proselytizing, problematic ways. The deficit thinking proponents have descriptive, explanatory, and indeed predictive elements as to why students of color remain mired in mediocrity and underachievement. These elements enter into explanatory narratives that change in accordance with the times (Valencia, 2006). This point of view overlooks the root causes of underachievement by displacing and localizing the problem to students' communities. The deficit model one-sidedly frames a student's underachieving predicament is due to a lack cultural capital and family deficiencies. The aim of the model should be to generate and improve student underachievement in school; however, it often fails significantly to take into account problems within the school system and the larger society. Instead, the model blames a child's lack of performance in standardized testing on a particular ethnic group or class location (Irizarry, 2008).

Schools forget it is part of their responsibility to educate children regardless of their origins or social class membership. In the end, education is a human rights issue, and it should be made equally accessible for all. The deficit model takes a negative viewpoint and makes assumptions concerning student performance. It is a simple-minded conclusion that students do not do well in school because they lack a work ethic and aspiration to upward social mobility. Furthermore, it asserts that students of different ethnic groups and low-income backgrounds often do not succeed in school due to a perceived "cultural deprivation" (Irizarry 2008, p. 2) or lack of contact with cultural models more clearly congruent with school achievement.

The cultural deficit model is simplistic at best and dubious at worst when it comes to analyzing student failure in the school system. The model looks for self-fulfilling prophecies to make the argument that students from marginalized groups arrive in the school environment with myriad issues, and proclaims that educating them would require endless resources and take an eternity (Macionis, 2012). This argument rationalizes non-action to secure student success; it removes all blame from the school system. The deficit model ignores all the stereotypical lenses through which people view individuals when they encounter people who do not look or act like them. Thus, instead of continuing to blame victims for their victimization in the school system, it is best to start by identifying those stereotypes. It is with that common sense Leistyna (2002) argues:

> Teaching diverse traditions and perspectives, questioning stereotypes, learning appropriate cultural codes in order to function within a variety of settings, recognizing the contribution of all groups to society especially those that have been traditionally excluded, encouraging teachers to learn more about their students' experiences and realities, and eliminating negative biases from materials are all deemed important everyday practices(p.16).

Leistyna (2002) upholds that one approach that could be used to address the predicament of low performance is a human relations model. This model can promote positive relations among groups in schools by removing stereotypes associated with an ethnocentric mindset, and can instead encourage tolerance and concordance. This quintessential course of action can convey the understanding that all people share a collective social path through a universal human experience, while also recognizing differences. It is thought that this universal bond, combined with a newly acquired positive reception to difference and diversity, will infuse social harmony into current social structures, and will eventually result in improved student academic standing and indeed in better achievements on standardized tests.

In the same vein, Bartolome (2009) argues that culturally sensitive solutions can be valuable ways to unravel the conundrum of cultural discontinuity between home communities and schools. However, there are socio-historical, socio-political, and socio-cultural factors that are at the core of low academic achievement, and sometimes these factors are left unexamined in academic endeavors to bridge the gap among students of color. Minority students reacting to school coldness might calculatedly or unwillingly build an antagonistic identity, and experience cultural disenchantment in the school system. Therefore, the critical need for solutions to the unyielding educational underachievement of marginalized immigrant students requires significant pedagogical reorganization between both teachers and students in order for students to see hope and possibilities in their education. In this way, teaching will no longer function as it does so often currently, namely, as a political mêlée that has been neither neutral nor innocent about ignoring the cultural setting and social milieu of schools (Bartolome, 2009; Freire, 1971; Dewey, 1916).

Conclusion

This article has revealed the challenges faced by students with limited English proficiency in school systems using standardized testing. The challenges that they face are multiple. Many LEP students have escaped economic hardship and social class stratification present in home countries, and seek a better life in United States, but the schools they attend are located in the most neglected social segments in modern America. Because most of these students have been in the school system only for a couple of years, they are at a competitive disadvantage against students who have been born in the country, or who have been in the system much longer, and so have a stronger command of the English language. Students with limited English proficiency are viewed through a deficit model that assumes they fail in school due to their personal and cultural deficiencies. A significant body of literature shows that their difficulties may be caused by a culture of discontinuity and a lack of support from the school system. It is argued that mandated standardized exams reveal some major discrepancies when it comes to the issue of equity.

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