



*A Tale of Two Schools:
A Practitioner's Use of Bourdieu's Theory
to Understand Academic Underachievement
Among Students at His Inner-City School*

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Abstract:

This paper describes my journey, as a teacher at a Canadian inner-city elementary school, toward conceptually understanding why many children at my current school repeatedly academically underachieve. I have utilized Bourdieu's *theory of practice* as a heuristic to examine how social reproduction operates differently for school children from different social classes and leads to differences in achievement. The first component of this paper establishes a crucial theoretical base for practitioners by describing theory of practice and its key concepts of *cultural capital*, *habitus*, *field*, and *symbolic violence*, to explicate how social reproduction functions in education, highlighting the roles of institutions and professionals, and the transformative and generative potentials of Bourdieu's theory. The second component provides important epistemological and methodological considerations regarding how practitioners might conduct successful empirical studies while avoiding the problems that are prevalent in existing empirical literature.

Keywords: Bourdieu; inner-city schools; social reproduction; practitioner inquiry; cultural capital; habitus; field; symbolic violence

Introduction

I can vividly recall the satisfaction I felt as a Grade 4 teacher in June of 2009 when I completed one of my first full-term teaching assignments, at Hemlock Elementary (pseudonym), situated in a middle socio-economic status (SES)¹ suburb of Metro Vancouver. I finished that school year with an incredible sense of fulfillment, knowing that most of the students I had worked with had shown strong academic achievement. We were able to fully cover the curriculum with ease and meet the learning objectives that I had set out. In fact, a great number of these students were also able to progress into more complex learning activities that were beyond of the scope of the Grade 4 curriculum.

The following year (2010) I was posted to another school, Maple Elementary (pseudonym), that was geographically very close to Hemlock, except that it was located in an inner-city community that was clearly lower SES². I came to Maple with the same sense of excitement and hope that I had felt at Hemlock, hoping that I would be able to replicate that rewarding experience at Maple for both myself and my new class of Grade 4 students. Shortly after arriving at Maple, it became apparent to me that the students from Maple were quite different from those at Hemlock with respect to their attitudes, school readiness, work habits, and particularly their level of academic achievement. For example, based on the 2012 rankings of schools by the Fraser Institute³ (a prominent and influential think-tank), Maple was ranked in the bottom 20 percent of 860 schools and given an overall rating of less than 3/10. When I spoke to veteran teachers who had been at Maple since it opened in 1989, I was informed that academic underperformance had been the historical norm for Maple. In spite of this poor history, I was hopeful that I would be able to change the situation, but my efforts were fruitless.

As my first year at Maple came to a close, both frustration and curiosity began to set in. I found it intriguing how two schools such as Hemlock and Maple, which were geographically so close, could be so vastly different in terms of student achievement.

I was so concerned with the problem of poor academic achievement at my current school that I made it the focus of my doctoral research, and this is where my journey into practitioner-inquiry began. The SES differences between the two communities were apparent to me from the beginning, but I felt that there had to be sociological issues underlying this problem that could shed greater

¹ Some scholars draw a distinction between socio-economic status (SES) and social class, but for this paper I will view these terms as synonymous, as they are usually viewed in the mainstream context of Canadian schools.

² SES was determined by statistical data from BC statistics (2012) and based upon Hertzman's (2015) vulnerability scale.

³ The Fraser Institute ranks schools based upon the results of a standardized government exam (Foundation Skills Assessment) in reading comprehension, writing, and mathematics administered annually by the BC Ministry of Education to all grade 4 and 7 students. I do not necessarily support how these results are used, but they are the only metric available in BC to compare/contrast schools.

light on what is referred to in the literature as the “achievement gap” (Evans, 2005)⁴. Dollars and cents alone could not adequately explain the achievement gap amongst the children from two schools that were only a seven-minute car ride apart. As an inner-city practitioner, I was curious to understand why the lower SES children from inner-city schools like mine do not achieve on par with their middle SES peers at other schools. Notably, in order to improve the situations at inner-city schools, a number of provincial and local initiatives had been instituted. This included increased funding for resources and teachers and greater availability of specialized educational and extracurricular programs (BC Ministry of Education, 2013), however improvements in achievement remained negligible. As a practitioner-inquirer, I looked for a theoretical framework that could help me understand these questions in order to develop educational responses to them.

This line of inquiry led me to enter into a dialogue with the works of Pierre Bourdieu, who had proposed an answer to this problem in his *theory of practice* (1977, 1984, 1986, 1993, 2011), which is a social reproduction theory set within an economic framework. I set out to study Bourdieu’s work conceptually. I reasoned that if there were no theoretical merit to Bourdieu’s theory of practice, then it would not be worthwhile using it to engage in empirical research into the functioning of social reproduction in the inner-city schools of British Columbia, Canada.

My assessment of the ability of theory of practice to explain the underachievement of the inner-city school children at my school proceeded in three phases. First, I worked to understand theory of practice deeply by using the methodology of hermeneutics via its core concepts of historicity, prejudice, horizon, and the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 2013), which I will briefly explain. The term *hermeneutics* is derived from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, which describes the act of interpretation (Moules, 2002). Contemporary hermeneutics is defined as “interpretation with the category of understanding,” where understanding is defined as “the recognition of the author’s intention from the point of view of the primitive addressees in the original situation of discourse” (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 22). Contemporary researchers who utilize hermeneutic inquiry are interested in the space between the text and the researcher where interpretation and subsequent appropriation occurs as it leads to a new understanding, which is the ultimate goal of hermeneutics (Freeman, 2008; Kinsella, 2008).

Hermeneutics does not have a formal methodology, but it does have parameters that are defined by four key concepts (Gadamer, 2013). The first of these hermeneutic concepts is known as historicity. Historicity refers to a “historically effected consciousness,” which means that the consciousness of individuals is shaped by their history (Freeman, 2008, p. 387). Hermeneutics regards texts and interpreters as being contextually located within particular spatial and temporal spheres; therefore, any interaction between the two is also an interaction between their respective histories.

⁴ The achievement gap between Maple and Hemlock was based upon the Fraser Institute’s (2012) ranking of schools in reading comprehension, writing, and mathematics, which itself is extracted from a standardized exam (Foundation Skills Assessment) administered yearly by the BC Ministry of Education to all grade 4 and 7 students. I do not necessarily support how these results are used, but they are the only metric available in BC to compare/contrast schools.

Inherent within the concept of historicity is the idea of prejudice, which is the second of the key hermeneutic concepts, and which is regarded as a significant threat to reliability and validity within the traditional positivist viewpoint that dominates much of research. Hermeneutics takes a different approach to the debate between subjectivity and objectivity by openly asserting that prejudices are an inescapable part of what it means to be human, and that “we do not hold our prejudices in abeyance but we situate them in our understandings,” causing them to “move with us and stand in front of and between us and the world, filtering our perceptions and interpretations” (Moules, 2002, p. 25). Hermeneutic researchers must be mindful of our prejudices and acknowledge that our interpretations and understandings are (un)knowingly influenced by them. However, because the hermeneutic researcher is not searching for an absolute truth, but rather one’s own truth, which Smith (1999) describes as “finding ourselves,” then prejudice is no longer a detriment, but rather an honest self-disclosure (p.100). In hermeneutics, prejudices are not regarded as limitations, but hold a transformative power because they enable individuals to establish their own understanding—a new understanding (Gadamer, 2013). Prejudices become generative because they enable researchers to be liberated and openly come to acknowledge and understand themselves in an authentic way that reflects them as the persons they are, prejudices included.

The third key hermeneutic concept is known as horizon. A horizon is a “range of vision which can be seen from a particular viewpoint” (Gadamer, 2013, p. 313). To me a horizon is essentially an interpreter’s world view at a particular point in time that has come to be as result of historicity and prejudices up to that given point in time. However, just as the individual has his/her own horizon, so does the text that he/she is trying to understand, and “working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry” (Gadamer, 2013, p. 313). Understanding, or appropriation of the text’s intent, is reached by the interpreter when his or her horizon is fused with that of the text to arrive at a new understanding, thereby rendering the fusing of horizons into the “culmination of the act of understanding between the interpreter and the interpreted” (Butler, 1998, p. 289).

The fourth hermeneutic concept is known as the hermeneutic circle, and this represents the overall spatial metaphor for the process of interaction that occurs between the text and the interpreter. Both the text and the interpreter enter into the circle with their individual horizons, and a process of interaction occurs between them. This process of interaction is dialectical and continues in a cyclical manner until the interpreter appropriates the meaning of the text (Schwandt, 2007). The interpretation and understanding that results is due to the occurrence of a continuous dialogue of negotiation between the text and the interpreter. Each time the interpreter enters the hermeneutic circle, he/she will likely do so with a different horizon, which may cause him/her to interpret and understand the same text differently and lead to a new understanding. The process of generating a new understanding continues recursively in a circular manner. As the interpreter’s historicity and prejudices change, so does the horizon by which he/she comes to reinterpret and understand the same theory, but in a different manner (Schwandt, 2007). By viewing Bourdieu’s theory of practice through a hermeneutic lens, I recursively created new understandings every time I engaged in a

dialogue with it, and thus it recursively transformed my understandings of my own *praxis* (practical action).

During the second phase, I critically examined 37 empirical studies that involved aspects of theory of practice in educational settings, and I evaluated whether the researchers were successful in utilizing theory of practice to explain academic underachievement among lower SES students. In the last phase, I marshaled layers of both positive and negative evidence that emerged from the empirical literature, and I used this evidence to pursue a reasoned inductive argument.

After engaging in hermeneutic dialogue with Bourdieu's texts and employing a process of inductive logic regarding the empirical research involved aspects of theory of practice, I arrived at a number of findings. Theory of practice is an effective heuristic for understanding the low academic achievement of inner-city students in British Columbia. I realized that schools are indeed structured to align with the attitudes, behaviors, and expectations of middle SES interests (Lareau, 2011), thereby giving the children of that SES an educational advantage. Furthermore, the advantage that is enjoyed by middle SES children in a school system that corresponds to both their interests and ways of being unfolds tacitly, but it still determines that children from lower SES backgrounds will not fare as well in a system that they neither understand nor have a voice in. Considering that most teachers come from a middle SES background (Knapp, 2001; Dumais, 2006; Macleod, 2009), the problem of academic achievement becomes compounded for the children of lower SES backgrounds, because they are commonly regarded within research to be instructed by teachers from a different social class (Lareau, 2011), who unconsciously espouse a distinct sociological inventory that is at odds with lower SES ideals (Bourdieu, 2011; Lareau, 2011).

This paper is a synopsis of key highlights regarding what I, as a middle SES practitioner-inquirer, have learned about how to work more effectively with lower SES students. These findings have helped me to transform my *phronesis* (practical wisdom), such that I no longer see the achievement gap as simple matter of differences in dollars and cents between individuals from different sociological classes, but rather of differences in complex sociological registers, which are valued differently in society. This paper is primarily (but not exclusively) intended for other inner-city practitioner inquirers who operate on the nexus of *episteme* (*theoretical knowledge*) and *praxis* (*practical action*). The classroom is situated at the intersection of *episteme* and *praxis*, and I hope that my contribution can help other inner-city teachers to better understand their lower SES students and address some of the complex sociological reasons behind the achievement gap.

My first goal for this paper is to provide a clear description of Bourdieu's *theory of practice* and its constituent components of *cultural capital*, *habitus*, *field*, and *symbolic violence*, and to connect the components together to provide a narrative of how social reproduction functions within the *field* of education, particularly with respect to teachers and the institution of schools. I feel that practitioner-inquirers who would like to utilize theory of practice to understand the achievement gap need a firm conceptual grounding before they can move forward in studying achievement patterns at their own schools. Bourdieu's works are densely written, but I feel that I have been able to capture

the essence of his arguments by hermeneutically corroborating my understandings with those of other scholars who have studied Bourdieu (Apple, 2004; Collins, 2009; Grenfell, 2008; Lareau, 2011; MacLeod, 2009; Patillo, 2008; Savage, 2011; Swartz, 1997; Winkle-Wagner, 2010; Wright, 2008).

The second component of this paper provides important epistemological and methodological considerations for other practitioner-inquirers who might want to conduct empirical studies regarding their own areas of practice, while avoiding the inconsistencies that they will encounter in the existing empirical literature. Bourdieu's theory of practice provides a very clear and effective window into an accurate understanding of the achievement gap. My intention is to share with others the theoretical narrative of theory of practice in a form that will allow them to experience the full view from that window.

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and its Implications for Education

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1986, 1993, 2011) was the first to coin the term *cultural capital* to explain the disparities that exist among various social classes relative to education. Bourdieu's theory of practice is co-emergent with his four key theoretical concepts: *capital*, *habitus*, *field*, and *symbolic violence*. These four concepts function together in an overlapping and interdependent way to explain the processes of stratification among the classes, and to demonstrate how schools and educators participate in a process of social reproduction, which perpetuates social inequality.

Bourdieu's Explanation of *Capital* and *Cultural Capital*

Bourdieu determined that there are three forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural (1977, 1984, 1986, 1993, 2011). Economic capital takes precedence over all other forms, given that we live in a capitalist society that values financial resources (Swartz, 1997). Economic capital refers to financial wealth in such forms as cash, jewelry, real estate, and other commodities that can be readily converted into cash.

Social capital includes relationships and the networks of relationships that an individual holds (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1986, 1993, 2011). Having the kinds of relationships that lend assistance in a given context can confer distinct advantages upon individuals, which can enable them to accumulate further capital.

Cultural capital involves "long lasting dispositions of the mind and body in the form of cultural goods" (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 84). Cultural capital includes the verbal facility, aesthetic preferences, artifacts, attitudes, beliefs, education credentials, values, tastes, and behaviors of an individual or group, which differ from those of other individuals and groups (Bourdieu, 2011). It exists in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized.

Embodied cultural capital refers to "dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243) and essentially denotes knowledge, skills, language, and behaviors that are entrenched in an individual or within a group. An individual acquires the embodied form of cultural capital over time, but it cannot be acquired like a gift nor can it directly transferred to another individual or group.

Objectified cultural capital refers to “cultural goods such as pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Objectified cultural capital consists of physical objects that an individual or group can acquire using economic capital or by direct transfer from others. However, not every artifact constitutes cultural capital in every setting, but rather each setting values very particular types of artifacts, which correspond to the underlying goals, beliefs, values, and ideals of the particular setting (Palmer, 2001).

Institutionalized cultural capital refers to academic credentials that are “sanctioned by legally guaranteed qualifications...,” which “confer on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value” (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 88). For example, the level of education that an individual has attained (i.e., diplomas or degrees) will confer upon him/her a level of status that others may value. For Bourdieu, examining the role that education plays in providing a vehicle of upward mobility for the lower classes is critical (Swartz, 1997).

According to Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1977, 1984, 1986, 1993, 2011), the acquisition of cultural capital occurs primarily within the home. It is in the home that an individual learns particular attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms. The family is seen as the primary source for “the systematic cultivation of a sensibility in which principles of selection implicit within the environment (a milieu or habitat) translate into physical and cognitive propensities expressed in dispositions to acts of particular kinds” (Grenfell, 2008, p. 111). Hence, the home becomes a critical setting for social reproduction, because it replicates and maintains the cultural capital of a family and of the class to which the family belongs.

Bourdieu’s Explanation of *Habitus*

Bourdieu (1992) defines *habitus* as the “cumulative collection of dispositions, norms and tastes,” which “functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 82). *Habitus*, then, is a “generative principle” that orchestrates our thoughts, perceptions, motivations, and actions. This generative principle is rooted in our history and becomes the “product of our history,” which produces “individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history” (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 78, 82). *Habitus* is “history turned into nature,” and homogeneous class-based histories produce homogeneous class-based practices, “which become the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience” (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 78).

It is critical to understand that *habitus* is quite resistant to change and evolution (Swartz, 1997). Because *habitus* is so deeply unconscious, any sort of evolution can be very slow and difficult, often requiring multiple generations for changes to appear. Bourdieu’s analysis of the French working class contends that the form of *habitus* possessed by the lower classes is much less adaptable to change than the *habitus* of the middle class. Bourdieu (1984) provides examples of individuals from the lower classes who have managed to ascend the social ladder but still retain the *habitus* of their original class, because it is so deeply ingrained.

Bourdieu's Explanation of *Field*

Field provides a spatial metaphor for specific environments in which habitus operates. Field refers to the particular setting or arena in which interaction and competition among individuals occurs with respect to the appropriation of scarce resources. Bourdieu (1993) describes field more clearly as "a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy," and this "autonomous universe is endowed with specific principles of evaluation of practices and works" (p. 162).

The concept of field has three significant implications for the success or failure that the members of various groups experience in their attempts to ascend the ladder of social class (Grenfell, 2008; Swartz, 1997). First, not all fields are similar, and each field has its own unique unwritten rules—referred to by Bourdieu (1977) as *doxa*—which require individuals and groups to understand and conform to them in order to function successfully in the given field. Doxa represents a form of tacit knowledge that individuals of different social classes acquire during childhood, which (un)consciously influences their perceptions and understandings of each field. Bourdieu (1993) describes doxa as equivalent to mastery over the particular unquestioned code that is required to understand a particular field. Furthermore, doxa can be described as "what is taken for granted to the reality that goes unanimously unquestioned because it lies beyond the notion of enquiry" (Grenfell, p. 120). This implies that we do not actively think about our experience of doxa, but rather accept it without reflection as a matter of established fact. Each field demands a different form of doxa or class-based code from its participants, and participants come into each field with different forms of doxa-related habitus.

There is competition for power within each field. The individual or group that wields the greatest power in a particular field is the one that has the specific form of habitus that best conforms to the requirements of the particular field. The ability of an individual to appropriate the capital that is valued in a given field is dependent upon his/her ability to accurately decode or decipher the rules of that field. However, established agents within a given field will seek to preserve their power over that field, whereas challengers will strive to overtake them, turning the field into an arena of struggle for power (Swartz, 1997). In this regard, members of the dominant class construct barriers to prevent members of the lower classes from joining their domains of exclusivity (Bourdieu, 1984).

Different classes tend to gravitate towards those fields that match their dispositions, avoiding what is described as a "*field-habitus* clash" (Grenfell, 2008, p. 59). However, being predisposed to a particular field, each class contributes to its own segregation by consolidating its position in the world. By not venturing outside of their predisposed field, each class tends toward isolation. And when members of a social class do venture outside of their familiar field, they may experience the sort of field-habitus clash that has been described as the "hysteresis effect" (Grenfell, 2008, p. 59). Hysteresis, with respect to habitus and cultural capital, results from "a mismatch between two elements which previously were coordinated" (Grenfell, 2008, p. 133). When such a mismatch occurs,

members of the outside class may fail to secure resources in the new field and, as a result, regress backward into their field of comfort, further segregating themselves.

There is also an implicit competition for legitimacy, which manifests itself in two ways. First, there is a competition for the ability to define the 'norm' and define the 'other.' When the members of various social classes compete within a given field, they are not only competing for scarce resources, but also for a broader legitimacy of the dominance by their social class. Having ascendancy within a particular field grants the dominant class credibility in the eyes of other classes. Members of the dominant class are able to tightly control who has access to a field and who is regarded as an authentic participant in that field. Bourdieu (1993) describes this as "class-centrism," which consist[s] in considering as the 'natural' (in other words, both as a matter of course and based on nature) way of perceiving, which is but one among other possible ways and which is acquired through education that may be diffuse or specific, conscious or unconscious, institutionalized or non-institutionalized. (p. 217)

Since the dominant class is able to define who should be regarded as a member of a field, they are able to exercise a monopoly over legitimacy, establish the boundaries of the field, and assume the power of defining other classes.

Bourdieu's Explanation of *Symbolic Violence*

Symbolic violence is different from the physical violence that we are commonly aware of, but it has repercussions that can be just as damaging. Also known as "soft violence," it functions largely within various forms of discrimination, which are often accepted as legitimate without question by the victim(s) (Bourdieu, 1977). Symbolic violence is the more dangerous, because it is covertly installed within social structures and works to maintain the hierarchy of classes. The covert nature of symbolic violence contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of social hierarchies, because those hierarchies are unquestioningly regarded by the dominant and dominated classes as both natural and legitimate (Bourdieu, 1977).

Connecting Bourdieu's Core Concepts

If we narrate the interconnections among the core concepts of cultural capital, habitus, field, and symbolic violence, the perpetuation of social inequality becomes comprehensible. The narrative begins with the idea that an individual's level of achievement in school or life is a function of the cultural capital that he/she possesses, which he/she has acquired from the family (or long term caregivers) and which conforms to that of the family's social class. Cultural capital has many different forms, which collectively participate in the formation of habitus. Considering that different classes have different forms of habitus, it is presumable that they will transmit those very unique forms of habitus to their children. Next, different individuals and groups come into a social field equipped with different forms of cultural capital. However, not all forms of capital and habitus are equally valued in any particular field. Therefore, the degree to which an individual or group is successful in a particular field depends upon whether or not they have the specific forms of cultural capital that are

valued in that particular field. Moreover, when individuals or groups do not possess the forms of capital preferred in a particular field, they are marginalized. This marginalization is a form of symbolic violence that is enacted upon them.

Applying Bourdieu's Concepts to Education

The role that schools play in social reproduction occupies a central position in Bourdieu's work. When we apply his general theory of practice to education, it presents serious implications regarding the maintenance of socio-economic inequalities among the different social classes. It proposes that the educational system, "more than the family, church, or business firm—has become the institution that is most responsible for the transmission of social inequality in modern societies" (Swartz, 1997, p. 190). Schools are distinct fields that are tacitly engineered based upon the cultural capital and habitus requirements of the middle SES (Flere, Krajnc, Klanjek, Musil, & Kirbis, 2010; Lareau, 1987; Morris, 2008). And those students who espouse these tacit requirements will perform better and have a more positive experience. Because schools represent middle SES cultural capital and habitus requirements, they not only exclude or marginalize lower SES students, but also contrive to maintain the structure of domination. By not valuing the cultural capital of children from the lower classes, the school excludes them from gaining upward social mobility, something which is described next.

There are four areas of schooling that privilege the views of the dominant class (Apple, 2004; Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Swartz, 1997; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). The first concerns the role that schools play in producing and preserving socio-economic inequity on a comprehensive level, suggesting that schools are not neutral fields and that they unfairly value the cultural capital of the middle and upper classes (Swartz, 1997; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Furthermore, the types of behaviors that schools demand from students are not explicit, but are rather implicit and aligned with the behaviors of the dominant class. In this respect, Bourdieu (1977) claims "an educational system based on a traditional type of pedagogy can fulfill its function of inculcation only so long as it addresses itself to students equipped with the linguistic and cultural capital—and the capacity to invest it profitably—which the system presupposes and consecrates without ever expressly demanding it and without methodically transmitting it" (p. 99). The curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation structures of schools are aligned with the cultural ideals of the dominant social group (Swartz, 1997). This inequitable situation leads to a scenario in which the children of the lower class cannot be successful in school because they are thrust into a school system that does not understand them and that they do not understand.

In his discussion of language as it is used in schools, Bourdieu (1977) identifies a second area of bias by schools in favor of middle class dispositions, revealing that schools ask for a very particular type of linguistic competency that is closely aligned with the linguistic capital of the dominant class. Students who have the desired vocabulary, style of conversation, ability to decipher tones, and ability to decode class-specific utterances will perform better in school than those who do not (Bourdieu, 1977). Linguistic competency can also be used as a means for selection that is designed to exclude. The imposition of the dominant class's language upon the lower classes also has a disempowering effect that can be described as "allodoxia," which renders the lower classes voiceless and powerless

because they lack fluency in the language of power (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 461). Since schools are oriented towards middle and upper class ideals, many children from the lower class may not be successful because they are not consciously aware of this unspoken bias, its intricacies, and consequences.

A third area of school bias in favor of the dominant middle SES interests is “channeling” (or tracking) and the lesser value assigned to credentials obtained by children from lower class backgrounds. Channeling is a systematic educational practice whereby individuals are streamed into areas of study that conform to their social status. Teachers practice channeling both consciously and unconsciously, and this results in lower SES children occupying vocational (traditionally lower paying) subject areas (for example: carpentry, plumbing, auto mechanics, factory jobs) traditionally associated with the working class, rather than academic (traditionally higher paying) subject areas associated with the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu (1984) explains that because the vocational subject areas have less value in society than traditional academic subjects, the credentials that working class children gain from school are viewed as less worthy by the dominant class and simply serve to perpetuate the existing socio-economic inequalities. Bourdieu (1984) concisely describes the devaluation of the educational credentials held by individuals from the lower class by stating, “a diploma is worth what the holder is worth, economically and socially; the rate of return on educational capital is a function of the economic and social capital that can be devoted to exploiting it” (p. 134). Consequently, the children of the lower class are disadvantaged by the school system in terms of achievement and access to opportunities because, lacking the required cultural capital of the dominant class, they are less successful in school. Working class students do not aspire to higher levels of education, because they have internalized the generational preconception of their class that they cannot succeed academically and, therefore, like their parents, they see no value in education.

Apple (2004) offers a fourth area of bias by schools in favor of dominant class dispositions. Apple (2004) argues that schools are not neutral institutions but, in effect, they are subservient to the hegemony of the economic system, which coincidentally benefits particular classes of people that do not include the lower SES. Apple (2004) argues that what gets taught in schools is not accidental, but is deliberately selected information that promotes and preserves the economic power of particular classes of individuals at the expense of other classes, all the while being cloaked as natural and normal. Apple (2004) contends that individuals from different social classes are taught different information, have different educational expectations, and are exposed to different pedagogical practices that correspond to their social class and are designed to maintain their position in that class order. The goal of curriculum designers in producing differentiated curriculum for differentiated social classes is to produce an “education for leadership and an education for what they called followership” (p. 72). Members of the working class are regarded by curriculum designers as individuals who complete very narrow tasks that require a limited amount of knowledge, which extends no further than their immediate procedures. In contrast, members of the managerial classes are required to complete more complex tasks that require more detailed and comprehensive knowledge, which extends beyond the scope of the immediate organization. Therefore, schools and

curriculum act as filters that process “both knowledge and people,” thereby “latently recreating cultural and economic disparities” (Apple, p. 32).

If we delve deeper into the role that education plays in establishing and perpetuating inequalities among the classes, the underlying covertness of the inculcation process becomes evident. Bourdieu (2011) recognizes the reason that education goes unquestioned in its ability to produce socio-economic inequalities among classes, arguing that it has much to do with how education is perceived by the various social classes, which, in the literature, is described using the term “achievement ideology” (MacLeod, 2009, p. 98). The general perception among most classes is that education is a credible vehicle for transmitting what society at large regards as normal and acceptable behavior and practices. There is a general unspoken consensus among all classes that education is autonomous, neutral, and meritorious, and it enables members of all classes to ascend the class ladder based on their individual skills and knowledge, or what Bourdieu (2011) refers to as “technical requirements” (p. 177). Bourdieu states, “an educational system is more capable of concealing its social function of legitimizing class differences behind its technical function of producing qualifications” (p. 164). These “technical requirements” are regarded as objective and class neutral and, therefore, they are readily accepted by the lower classes without question. However, the objectivity and neutrality of these “technical requirements” is actually a façade designed to conceal the functions of categorization and exclusion they perform, because the technical requirements comprise very specific skills and knowledge that are usually specific to the habitus of the dominant class. Contrary to the common perception, therefore, schools are not meritocratic institutions, because the academic skills and knowledge that they require from students are tacitly derived from those of the dominant class. Schools demand very specific types of cultural capital from students, which are not available to all.

If we consider the deeper implications of this arrangement in terms of the important class legitimation function it performs, it is reasonable to argue that the education system is misunderstood as being neutral and objective, and this misunderstanding legitimizes the current hierarchical social order, which furthers its acceptance by all classes as natural and normal. The common misperception of the neutrality and objectivity of the education system by the different social classes grants the education system the authority to legitimize inequitable relations and advance their acceptance by all classes as normal. However, the consequent de-legitimization of the non-dominant class culture has an erosive effect, which significantly reduces the credibility of the non-dominant class in the eyes of other classes, as well as within the minds of its own members. The recognition given to the legitimacy of the dominant class by the dominated classes constitutes a powerful “force which strengthens the established balance of power because, in preventing apprehension of the power relations as power relations, it tends to prevent the dominated groups or classes from securing all the strength that the realization of their strength would give them” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 15). Because the dominated classes tend to regard education as naturally self-legitimizing, they are less inclined to challenge any biases in the roles that education plays and, by doing so, to realize the strength of their collective abilities. This means that when students from

lower SES backgrounds underperform in schools they do not blame the structures of the institution that were covertly biased against them from the beginning, but rather blame themselves because education is widely regarded as being a neutral and objective measuring stick that is freely available to all (Goldthorpe, 2007, MacLeod, 2009).

Implications for the Institution

A particular merit of Bourdieu's theory of practice is that it shines a light on institutions and the mechanisms that produce socio-economic inequality (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Bourdieu recognized the power of the institution to shape daily lives differently for different people, so that some live in abundance, while others live at a subsistence level. This means that institutions such as public schools can have a strong impact because they do not treat individuals from different SES groups in a uniform way, but privilege higher SES groups, often at the expense of the lower SES groups (Lareau, 2011). Furthermore, institutions such as schools, which were envisioned to reduce socio-economic inequalities, have had the ironic effect of actually reproducing and sustaining them (Willis, 1977). In other words, "progressivism has had the contradictory and unintended effect of helping to strengthen processes within the counter-school culture which are responsible for the particular subjective preparation of labor power and acceptance of working class future in a way which is the very opposite of the progressive intentions of education" (Willis, 1977, p. 178). In this sense, the merit of utilizing theory of practice is that it seeks to reveal how stratification is produced and maintained by institutions, particularly those that function, like schools, under the cloak of meritocracy (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

Bourdieu's theory of practice has enabled me, as a reflective practitioner, to examine the institution of my school critically and discern the tacit internal mechanisms by which it operates differently for students from different SES groups. I am no longer under the illusion that school is a meritocracy that is based entirely upon objective principles of fairness. The institution of school is shaped by teachers like me, who give it life, and it follows reasonably that, if these very teachers come from a particular habitus—the middle SES habitus, for instance—then that habitus will (un)consciously permeate the culture of the institution. Theory of practice has prompted me to reexamine myself and my school in order to understand how middle SES teachers, not unlike myself, shape the entity of the school and the ways in which the school views and treats students from different SES backgrounds. Bourdieu's theory of practice helps me to understand how my middle SES habitus and that of my predominantly middle SES colleagues gets woven into the fabric of Maple in very discrete and deliberate ways, without anyone, including the teachers, thoroughly recognizing it. I am beginning to look at the structures within my school and to understand how they have come to exist and their differing consequences for students from lower SES backgrounds. And I am coming to understand that because the institution of school mirrors those individuals who are charged with operating it, any meaningful change at the institutional level will require those who operate the school to become sensitive to such perceptions and their consequences. For example, aspects of schooling that are generally taken for granted, such as the curriculum content, the pedagogical

practices, and the school's expectations of students and parents regarding (in)appropriate attitudes, behaviors, style of dress, and form of speech, are all rooted in the middle SES background to which, according to research, most teachers belong. It is no coincidence that there are strong parallels between the middle SES habitus of teachers and the expectations of the school, because the institution of the school reflects its middle SES gatekeepers. The school is a mirror image of its predominantly middle SES teachers, and vice versa.

Implications for the Institution

In exploring the issue of how ascribing the title of "expert" to a teacher contributes to his/her unquestioned power, Apple (2004) and Lareau (2011) echo Bourdieu's (1992) argument regarding the unquestioned position that teachers occupy due to societal reverence. Giving the title of expert to an individual infuses him/her with an immense amount of power, authority, and influence in society that "non-experts" are willing to accept and unlikely to question. "Professionals have issued standards for what constitutes incorrect child rearing and teachers and administrators have adopted these standards" and "encoded them in schools" (Lareau, 2011, p. 232). Considering that the majority of teacher/gatekeepers come from the middle class, (Dumais, 2006; Hall, 2001; Knapp, 2001; MacLeod, 2009), it is reasonable to argue that teachers would tend to (un)consciously favor students whose habitus mirrors their own. Bourdieu's theory of practice reasons that students who have the middle SES habitus that matches the habitus of most teachers will do better in school than students who do not. However, experts are not above being influenced by societal forces that are larger than themselves and, in fact, they may be "strongly influenced by the dominant values of the collectivity to which they belong and the social situation within the society which they fill," and "these dominant values necessarily affect their work" (Apple, 2004, p. 138). Experts such as teachers may (un)knowingly mimic the beliefs, values, and ideals of the dominant culture, which may benefit some social groups, while limiting the socioeconomic progress of others (Apple, 2004).

On the flip side, Lareau (2011) demonstrated how schools penalized and sometimes even shunned *natural growth* child rearing strategies. Natural growth is a parenting strategy that is commonly practiced by low SES families, where beyond the basic food, clothing and shelter requirements, the children are left to develop on their own like wildflowers (Lareau, 2011). Children and parents from lower SES families in Lareau's (2011) study generally felt ill informed, fearful, mistrustful, and frustrated towards the school, as they repeatedly felt compelled to defer to the superiority of the professionals in whom they placed blind faith. Consequently, the children of these lower SES parents did not attain the same level of achievement at school, and this continued throughout most of the participants' adult lives. Like Bourdieu, Lareau (2011) concluded that social class matters. The SES level that an individual is born into has important implications for the successes and failures that the individual will experience when dealing with a range of institutions that predominantly value the middle SES ways of being and doing.

Bourdieu (1977) contends that most teachers utilize curriculum and pedagogical strategies that conform to the ideals of the dominant class (their class), thus making them more entrenched and

concentrated among students with the passage of time, because change is not welcomed within the pedagogical realm. Hence, examining the role that cultural capital plays in how teachers might assess students differently assumes importance, because “teachers are the filters through which forms of cultural and social capital are valued or rejected” (Savage, 2011, p. 8).

The insights of Bourdieu regarding the power of professionals and the ramifications of their decisions have been transformative to my practice as a teacher. I have become more aware of how my educational decisions are based in middle SES assumptions, and the differing consequences that my decisions can have on students from an SES that is similar to or different from my own. Bourdieu’s theory of practice has made me aware of the weight carried by my decisions as a teacher, and the impacts that they can have on the current and future schooling and life trajectories of my students.

Methodological and Epistemological Recommendations

On a theoretical level, I have concluded that Bourdieu’s theory of practice affords an effective means to understand social reproduction in British Columbia’s inner-city schools and the roles that teachers and institutions play in that process. In using Bourdieu’s approach to social reproduction and having glimpsed its transformative power first hand through inductive reasoning, I have come to realize that practitioner-inquirers who wish to use Bourdieu’s theory of practice appropriately need to be made aware of some key issues with respect to epistemology and methodology.

Field Should Be Seen as a Primary Concept.

Most of the quantitative studies (20) that I have reviewed have applied the concept of cultural capital without paying significant attention to the concept of field. Field is the arena in which cultural capital is activated and given value; therefore, to discuss the latter without the former is extremely problematic. Field is the marketplace in which cultural capital and habitus are assigned a value. If there is no defined market, there can be no relevant cultural capital, habitus, or resulting symbolic violence. Field represents the unique world in which cultural capital and habitus are born, making it a primary concept in theory of practice. What is important to theory of practice is not necessarily the cultural capital or the habitus themselves, but rather their relationship to a particular field. The concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and symbolic violence all flow from field and, therefore, field needs to be given the primacy that has been neglected in much of the quantitative research. Without reference to a particular field, the concept of cultural capital is rendered irrelevant and even ceases to exist.

By not situating cultural capital within field, the quantitative scholarship has created several additional problems that also need to be addressed. The first of these involves several misleading impressions: (a) there exists only one universal field, (b) its corresponding cultural capital is the only cultural capital of value, and (c) a high SES field and its high SES cultural capital are all that matter. This problem is compounded when the quantitative literature continues to employ a very literal definition of high status cultural capital as primarily beaux-arts cultural capital that originates in

higher SES classes. Scholarship that takes the literal approach that high status cultural capital is synonymous only with higher SES cultural capital neglects (and actually negates) the concept of field. Bourdieu argued that there are multiple fields and that each has its own cultural capital requirements; however, by applying a single beaux-arts interpretation of cultural capital to all fields, the scholarship leads to the incorrect inference that there is only one field with only one form of cultural capital that has any value.

Adopting a single definition of cultural capital that means simply beaux-arts participation is a mistake in regard to fields that are different from those that Bourdieu examined. Bourdieu acknowledged that French society during the 1960s and 1970s was stratified upon class lines and, therefore, it made sense for him to equate high status cultural capital with beaux arts, which, in his specific research context, did originate in higher SES groups. However, this is not the case in North America, which is stratified more upon racial lines (Lareau, 1988) and, therefore, high status cultural signals are different in this context. North America represents a number of different fields, in which high status signals do not necessarily come from and equate with the traditional beaux-arts habitus of higher SES groups as was the case in France, but can take on significantly different configurations instead. Similar to Bourdieu's views (1977), many of the studies I reviewed have taken a very literal approach that equates high status cultural capital with higher SES cultural capital (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Aschaffenburg & Mass, 1987; Dumais, 2002; Vryonides, 2007; Jaeger, 2009; Flere et al., 2010; Jaeger, 2011; Byun et al., 2012; Xu & Hampden-Thompson, 2012; DeGraaf, 1986; Katsillis & Rubinson, 1990; Kalmijin & Kraaykamp, 1996; DeGraaf, 2000; Moss, 2005; Noble & Davies, 2009; Roscigno & Ainsworth, 1999; Dumais, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Wildhagen, 2009). Quantitative researchers who have studied cultural capital outside of the French field have failed to make their version of cultural capital conform to the specific doxa requirements of their contextual fields and, therefore, have perpetuated the idea that beaux-arts cultural capital is the only real form of cultural capital that matters and that, by extension, it is objectively better than other forms of cultural capital.

Ignoring the crucial concept of field and focusing exclusively on a beaux-arts cultural capital as the standard against which other forms of cultural capital are measured, has contributed to exacerbating the notion that different forms of cultural capital are objectively superior or inferior to others. However, Bourdieu did not intend for cultural capital to denote the superiority of one group over another, and in fact he argued for what he termed "the cultural arbitrary" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 23). Cultural arbitrary means that aspects of class-based culture are not grounded in some objective truth governed by natural laws, whereby some forms of culture are factually better than others, but rather that all forms of class culture are equally arbitrary.

I do not mean that because cultural capital might not operate in Canada through participation in beaux arts activities, cultural capital is no longer relevant, but quite the contrary. I suspect the realities and contexts of cultural capital are alive and well in Canadian society, but they arise from the middle SES group rather than the higher SES group, just as in the example of Australia described by Turner and Edmunds (2002). Rather than exclusion along higher SES lines, as was

prevalent in France during Bourdieu's time, exclusion now will take place along middle SES lines. In other words, the monopoly on what is regarded as the 'legitimate' culture has been appropriated by the middle SES group; therefore, future educational research should analyze cultural capital from the point of view of the middle SES perspective rather than the higher SES perspective that has been traditionally emphasized.

Since different fields function according to different doxa requirements, there can be no objective or ultimate truth regarding which form of cultural capital is better or worse, because there is no single field that alone exists. Society consists of multiple fields, with each having its own cultural capital concomitants. All individuals have cultural capital, albeit in different forms, and the requirements of the field in which they are operating will be the primary determinant of which form of cultural capital is viewed as high status. The concept of field has primacy in all respects over cultural capital, and the use of one without the other is a significant misapplication in the scholarship.

Habitus Should Be Given Primacy Over Cultural Capital.

In my view, the concept of habitus is more robust than that of cultural capital because habitus involves the sum of one's cultural capital. The importance of habitus was made clear by Bourdieu (1977) when he stated that habitus is the "strategy-generating principle," (p.72) and "is the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience" (p. 78). This implies that habitus should be given primacy over cultural capital, but this has not been the case in much of the empirical research, which has concentrated on cultural capital, and specific aspects of cultural capital at that. Many researchers (Aschaffenburg & Mass, 1987; Dumais, 2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Flere et al., 2010, Tramonte et al., 2010; Byun et al., 2012; Katsillis & Rubinson, 1990; Moss, 2005; Noble & Davies, 2009; Wildhagen, 2009) have taken a very narrow view of the markers of cultural capital and have utilized select markers, such as preferences, goods, and credentials that are concrete and simpler to measure, while ignoring the more abstract but equally important markers such as attitudes and behaviors. Utilizing the more tangible markers of cultural capital and ignoring the less tangible ones has created a fragmentary understanding of the concept, particularly within the quantitative scholarship.

For cultural capital to be a meaningful concept that explains social reproduction, it cannot be divided into individual components but, instead, it needs to be animated in its entirety within habitus, which is a more difficult but necessary task to accomplish. In order to overcome the difficulty of dealing with a concept as large and vibrant as habitus, many researchers have parsed it into the individual components of objectified cultural capital that are most concrete and simple to measure. However, cultural capital cannot be viewed as piecemeal, but must be viewed in relation to habitus, in order for it to be applied as a concept that explains social reproduction.

The Need for a Common Approach to Cultural Capital.

My literature review confirmed that scholars have defined cultural capital in a multitude of ways, and this has made it extremely difficult to compare various studies and to draw meaningful

and accurate conclusions. For cultural capital to be meaningful from an empirical standpoint, its parameters must be consistently defined and applied by scholars; otherwise it simply devolves into a shapeless pseudo-concept that cannot be precisely described. The challenge with crafting a common definition of cultural capital is to avoid defining it so narrowly that it cannot be applied to multiple settings, or defining it so broadly that it becomes unspecifiable and therefore meaningless. For this concept to assist with a meaningful understanding of social reproduction in schools, researchers will need to utilize a definition that strikes a crucial balance between specificity and generality.

I believe the definition of cultural capital advanced by Lareau (1988, p. 156) as “institutionalized, i.e. widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” is currently the most effective and complete definition available, because it captures the core of this concept, as well as its various components. This definition gives prominence to three key aspects of cultural capital, which include high status signals, institutionalization, and exclusion. It also highlights the six constituent indicators or markers of cultural capital, which include attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials. These six markers address the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms of cultural capital identified by Bourdieu. In order to gain a complete and accurate understanding of how cultural capital functions in a given field, equal attention must be paid to all six markers and not only to certain selected markers, as in the work of many of the quantitative researchers whose studies I have reviewed.

I propose an extended practitioner’s understanding of cultural capital that accepts the definition advanced by Lareau (1988) but blends it with the concepts of field, doxa, and symbolic violence:

Widely shared, tacit high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) that arise out of and are specific to a particular *field*, and become institutionalized within the structures of that *field*, so as to be referenced by the dominant group in that *field* for purposes of social and cultural exclusion.

This extended definition of cultural capital is hermeneutically more comprehensive because it includes all of Bourdieu’s core concepts of cultural capital, habitus, field, and symbolic violence, as well as capturing the sequential narrative that they communicate. Furthermore, this definition also gives appropriate weight to the concepts of field and habitus, which are the two most essential concepts in theory of practice, and it clarifies the tacitly exclusionary nature of the process of social reproduction. The purpose of this extended definition is not to cobble together a new theory, but to increase its immediate relevance for the practitioner-inquirer.

The Need to Conduct a Cultural Capital Assessment of Field.

As I have argued earlier, the concept of field is critical to the successful application of theory of practice. As the literature suggests, cultural capital is context specific. Therefore, discussing the former in the absence of the latter is extremely problematic, in that it paints an imperfect picture of cultural capital and gives the illusion that perhaps there is some universal form of cultural capital that

can function irrespective of field. Each field has its own distinct form of cultural capital that is valued over others. For research to be meaningful, it must pay attention to the specifics of “widely shared high status signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials” that are endemic to each distinct field (Lareau, 1988, p. 156). Cultural capital does not function at such a general level and, by emphasizing generality over specificity, much of the quantitative research is providing us with little useful information regarding how one field differs from another with respect to its cultural capital requirements.

I suggest that future researchers should define the parameters of their selected field and then conduct a cultural capital assessment of that particular field. By first developing a thorough understanding of what distinct forms of cultural capital are valued in a selected field and then uncovering the demarcations of that field, researchers will be able to direct their subsequent research more effectively toward understanding specific phenomena. By establishing a baseline of field-specific cultural capital, researchers will be able to compare and contrast it with other forms. As a concept, field has spatial limits. The more researchers widen the spatial parameters of what constitutes a particular field, the more they dilute the accuracy with which they can capture the cultural capital that is valued in that specific field.

The Need to Apply All of the Concepts.

Bourdieu’s theory of practice proves most insightful when all of its concepts are applied together. Bourdieu did not intend his four key concepts to be subdivided and used individually without reference to one another, and this can be verified hermeneutically with respect to the close relationship between the parts and the whole in any interpretable text. Social reproduction in education forms a complex narrative, which can only be unfolded accurately and completely if all of the concepts that underlie social reproduction are applied together and interdependently. Theory of practice should be used not only to describe how social reproduction functions in British Columbia’s inner-city schools, but also to identify ways to ameliorate this problem. In order to access the generative and transformative power of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, its four core concepts must be applied together.

By selectively utilizing very specific elements of theory of practice, prominent researchers such as DiMaggio (1982) have painted an incomplete picture of how social reproduction functions, which is “problematic because cultural capital is highly dependent on the other concepts, the concept of *field* in particular” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 94). Lareau (2001) points out how all of the individual components of Bourdieu’s theory, such as cultural capital, habitus, field, and symbolic violence, are dependent upon one another in a functional sense; the integrity of each component in helping to explain social reproduction is discovered in its interconnections with the other core components. Utilizing a contextually specific approach and setting it within the full framework of theory of practice has enabled Lareau (2011) to combine the micro and macro processes of social reproduction, as also advocated by Conley (2008) and Wright (2008), in order to gain a sharper and more comprehensive picture of how social reproduction functions in schools. Although the core

concepts of Bourdieu's theory of practice can appear to be separately self-sufficient, they arose interdependently within his scholarship. Therefore, to my mind, the effectiveness with which they can evoke a coherent narrative of the achievement gap in inner-city schools is diminished if they are not used together.

Closing

The gap in educational achievement that exists between lower and higher SES students is a reality that must be contended with on a daily basis. For me, this reality has been so unsettling from a moral and pedagogical standpoint that I have devoted my doctoral study to developing a deeper understanding of it. I realize that addressing this issue is not as simple as infusing more money, teachers, counselors, and resources into the school (things that we have already done, unsuccessfully). There are complex underlying sociological factors at play, an understanding of which can help to explain and potentially reduce this gap in achievement.

With a view to understanding this problem in greater depth, I entered into a hermeneutic dialogue with Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of practice. Bourdieu's theory of practice utilizes an economic metaphor to explain why the odds are already stacked against children from lower SES backgrounds when they arrive at schools that are (un)consciously structured for children who have middle SES predispositions. After examining Bourdieu's theory, I was able to find numerous layers of inductive evidence which demonstrate that theory of practice can effectively explain the critical questions regarding social reproduction for lower SES children in British Columbia's inner-city schools. Bourdieu's theory of practice proves to be a highly generative conceptual lens for understanding the achievement gap between lower and higher SES children. I hope that the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological information that I have provided will make the journey of other practitioners and inquirers who are in similar circumstances easier, more meaningful, and certainly more effective in understanding and diminishing the achievement gap at their respective schools.

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