

Book Review

Schooling in disadvantaged communities: Playing the game from the back of the field

Carmen Mills and Trevor Gale (2010)

London: Springer

With their reduced access to the cultural capital of the dominant, marginalised students are at a disadvantage in the classroom, suffering educational repercussions for having a cultural capital that is in the wrong currency.... We contend that teachers, parents and students ... are all involved in the game of reproducing disadvantage in schooling, but similarly, they can play a part in opening up opportunities for change to enhance learning for marginalised students (Mills & Gale, 2010, p.2).

Schooling in disadvantaged communities draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical constructs to demonstrate the role school systems play in reproducing social and cultural inequalities through hidden links between scholastic aptitude and cultural background. This book also discusses what schools might do to enhance disadvantaged students' life experiences. The authors use the perspectives of teachers, students and parents at one secondary school (which they call Crimson Brook Secondary College) in a disadvantaged rural Australian community as a window through which to explore these issues.

This book gives a detailed description of Bourdieu's work with which many readers will be familiar. He contends that, while appearing to provide equality of opportunity, education systems reproduce social and cultural inequalities which favour dominant groups. Bourdieu argues schools draw on middle-class knowledge, ways of thinking, values, language competencies, and attitudes to and relationship with academic culture. He considers much of this occurs unconsciously with those involved unaware that they are reproducing the social order. Thus, while middle-class students possess the required attitudes, values and competencies and therefore succeed in the school environment, students from marginalised backgrounds not only start school at a disadvantage, but due to the implicit nature of academic culture's rules find it difficult to take advantage of the opportunities schooling supposedly provides.

Mills and Gale argue that while the current view of student achievement is that teaching quality determines whether or not students do well at school, the broader social, political and economic context is also a key factor. The authors demonstrate the broader context's effect at Crimson Brook; a school with a significant Indigenous population located in a rural community characterised by high unemployment and high welfare dependency. As few post-school employment opportunities exist prospects are poor and this affects student attitudes. Many students feel hopeless and purposeless and view school success as pointless.

The authors also consider the effects of teacher transience and inexperience on teaching quality at Crimson Brook arguing these contribute to the reproduction of disadvantage especially as they limit student access to the dominant cultural capital. Crimson Brook not only has difficulty

attracting and retaining high quality teachers but the teachers that it does attract display limited commitment to the community with many choosing to commute from a nearby regional centre. Mills and Gale argue that low staff retention affects the transmission of cultural capital because this takes a considerable time to convey and is also dependent on the quality of the teacher-student relationship. They note that students in disadvantaged communities are heavily reliant on their teachers who may be the only adults possessing the dominant cultural capital that they interact with. Thus students who most need time in the company of those with cultural capital are the least likely to experience it. To address the teacher transience issue and its impact on student learning, the authors advocate the 'transformation' of staffing policies to create opportunities for teachers to grow and develop in rural schools rather than needing to move on to gain advancement.

The authors go on to discuss how institutional stances of low student achievement expectations and low parental engagement work against students' best interests. Mills and Gale assert that efforts to improve student underachievement need to engage with the broader social, political and economic structures that adversely affect disadvantaged students. The authors suggest this might be achieved by adopting a 'transformative' rather than a 'reproductive' habitus. While the latter disposes students to be constrained by their circumstances, students with a transformative habitus recognise possibilities and generate alternatives not immediately apparent.

Mills and Gale then explore educational approaches that might make education a transformative experience. Suggestions involve focusing on the schooling *process* rather than the characteristics of individual (disadvantaged) children. Mills and Gale advocate creating environments that value the students' worlds and recognise education as a process that takes place both within formal institutions and within families and communities. They also urge teachers to: set high expectations for students and provide intellectually challenging tasks corresponding to these expectations; use visible pedagogical models which make the rules of the school knowledge explicit; enhance students' classroom experience by expanding students' cultural capitals by teaching the academic skills and competencies required to succeed in mainstream society (at the same time as valuing students' existing cultural repertoires); and build strong teacher-student relationships based on trust and mutual respect.

This book succeeds in its aim of stimulating an understanding of Bourdieu's work. Indeed, the book's main contribution is its explanation of Bourdieu's theoretical concepts and their application in an Australian school setting. Unfortunately, the content is quite complex in places and this is not helped by the way the book is organised. Unhelpful headings and repetition of both key points and quotations make this book difficult to navigate in places. While the authors argue that the chapter on factors affecting parental participation in schools draws the book to a close, I consider it would have benefited from a concluding chapter focused on schooling's potential to enhance disadvantaged students' life experiences. This material was presented in several different chapters which made it difficult to appreciate in its entirety. These factors will lessen the book's appeal to practitioners. This is a pity as, in urging readers to think differently about their attitudes and approaches to disadvantaged students, the concepts outlined have much to offer classroom teachers.

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