

Higher Education

Diversity Initiatives in Higher Education

Multicultural Education as a Tool for Reclaiming Schools Organized as Breeding Grounds for Prisons¹

By Christine Clark

Introduction

Most teachers, and students alike, know what a “good” education is, at the same time they also know that, most often, they are not providing and receiving one, respectively (Cho, 1999; Clark, 1993; Jenkins, 1994; Stowers, 1998). This begs the obvious question, why is this the case?

While the plethora of public discourse surrounding curriculum standards and outcomes-based instruction suggests a national investment in the development and implementation of a good education that leaves no child behind, unfortunately, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that schools are today — as they have been especially since the advent of public education in the United States — systematically designed to privilege some students at the expense of others (Cho, 1999; Foucault, 1977; Irons, 2002; Stowers, 1998).

While various forms of private education have always been synonymous with privilege, public education has been hailed as the “great equalizer.” But, from its inception, even public education has been structured in a two-tiered fashion, one tier aimed at educating leaders and the other for skilling workers in the context of, first, an agrarian society and, subsequently, a capitalist economy (Stowers, 1998; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kozol, 1991).

“Skills and Drills” Instruction

The ways in which most teachers incorporate technology into classroom practice differs in relation to a number of their students’ social identity group characteristics, most notably, race, language, and socioeconomic class status (Becker, 1985; Bolt & Crawford, 2000). Students of color, students

who speak English as a second language, and working-class students are most often encouraged to use computers and the Internet in what is commonly termed a “skills and drills” manner (DeVillar, 1986; DeVillar & Faltis, 1987; Merino, et. al., 1990; NTIA, 2000; NCES, 2000a, 2000b). That is, they use the technology to memorize facts, figures, formulas, and so forth by rote and then demonstrate that they have done so via the regurgitation of this trivia on pre-fabricated tasks and tests (Bigelow, 1999a; 1999b).

In contrast, computers are most often employed with White students, native speakers of “standard” English, and upper-middle-class students to cultivate creative thinking abilities (DeVillar & Faltis, 1987; NTIA, 2000; NCES, 2000a, 2000b). With these students, facts, figures, and formulas are taught in concept-based contexts, through reading, reflection, and response. Rather than being taught as if they were isolated pieces of information, facts, figures, and formulas are discussed as relationally located with respect to each other and fitting into a larger whole. Consequently, they can be recalled with greater reliability and adjusted to accommodate increasing information input and the ensuing complexities of information (Banks, 1997; Nieto, 1998; 2000).

Adding insult to injury, a study by the NCES (2000b) found that, between 1994 and 1999, students in schools with low concentrations of poverty were most likely to be assigned computer-related tasks that focused on active learning, while students in schools in which 71% or more of the student body was eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch were more likely to be assigned practice drills than *any* computer-related task.

Thus, the digital divide is extended to

include not only how different kinds of students are taught with technology, but also whether or not they are afforded access to that technology at all. Likewise, a “skills and drills” education is not limited to technology-based instruction.

“Skills and drills” students are educated to be future workers, skilled at and drilled into completing boring and repetitive tasks, whereas students cultivated as creative thinkers are educated to be future leaders through learning activities that encourage and nurture critical thinking, problem solving, and knowledge construction (Clark & Gorski, 2001; Clark, Jenkins, & Stowers, forthcoming; Damarin, 2000; Stowers, 1998).

With the still relatively recent advent of widespread technological innovation in the global marketplace, leading to the “information age,” massive automation, and corporate capital flight to Third World labor markets, future leaders are still needed, but increasingly, future workers are not. As a result, students previously educated to be future workers are now educated, or rather miseducated or even diseducated, to be future prisoners.

In this way, the digital divide takes on an entirely new dimension, digital as in the digits in an inmate’s number, divide as in the walls, bars, fences, gates, and guards that separate “them” from “us” (Clark & Gorski, 2001; Damarin, 2000).

Education for Incarceration

In 1977, Foucault posited our society as one predicated on a system of control originating from our disciplinary structures, beginning with indentured servitude, evolving into slavery and the military industrial complex, and culminating today in the prison

industrial complex. These disciplinary structures impart social order throughout the population — into each family and individual — by means of the institutions of schools, social service providers, and places of worship, among others.

Though disciplinary structures that employ negative sanctions are generally the least effective form of social control, the kinds of disciplinary structures our society has used and continues to use are, in fact, based on the idea of social control through the imposition of ever-increasing negative sanctions (Foucault, 1977). The following statistics clearly illustrate the impact of this approach to social control on the establishment and proliferation of schools as breeding grounds for prisons:

- ◆ While 17% of public school children are Black (African American), 41% of special education placements are Black, and of those 85% are male;

- ◆ Black males are 8% of public school students nationwide but constitute 37% of the suspensions;

- ◆ Approximately 800,000 Black men are in prison while 500,000 are in college;

- ◆ More Black males receive their G.E.D.'s in prison than graduate from high school;

- ◆ 80% of incarcerated men and 93% of incarcerated women, regardless of race, never finished high school;

- ◆ The cost of incarcerating a felon is more than the cost of educating two students at a public flagship university, three students at a public state university, or seven students at public community college;

- ◆ Ex-convicts, regardless of race, who receive at least a bachelor's degree while incarcerated (for non-pathological crimes) are 97% less likely to re-offend than are those who do not;

- ◆ Prison construction surpassed college construction for the first time in 1995,

Prison-building expenditures jumped by \$926 million,

University construction dropped by \$954 million.

From these statistics, it becomes clear how even the mildest offense (for example, the student who brought an over-the-counter painkiller for menstrual cramps to school in her book bag) and its resultant punishment (suspension for "drug possession") is established and maintained by the system of control imparted through escalating negative sanctions that are, simultaneously, increasingly violent (Foucault, 1977; Stowers, 2000).

If the system worked, in terms of behavioral modification, we would have less need of suspensions, expulsions, prisons, and the death penalty instead of a constantly growing need for more. Unfortunately, it becomes evident that disciplinary structures manifest in schools and prisons are ultimately based on the idea that violence is an acceptable means of solving societal problems (Foucault, 1977; Stowers, 1998).

Mirroring the two-tier education system, while those with formal power in society are rewarded when they employ violence — even hailed as brave leaders — those with no formal power are punished for its employ, thus creating the context in which schools become breeding grounds for prisons (Clark, Jenkins, & Stowers, forthcoming; Foucault, 1977; Stowers, 1998).

An example of how this power dichotomy is manifest in the educational arena may be found in an examination of current trends in teacher education. These trends show that 80% of both pre-service and in-service public school teachers are White women (NCES, 2000a, 2000b). White female teachers are least likely to refer White girls for special education placements and most likely to refer Latino and Black boys for such placements, regardless of the educational context (rural, suburban, urban) in which they teach or the enrollment demographics (high or low minority or income) they face (Clark, 1993).

Ascribed with formal power in making these referrals, these teachers often give little thought to alternative strategies for addressing the behavior prompting their referral. Any attempt by students at risk for referral to thwart such action — through appropriate self-advocacy or out-and-out resistance — is viewed as grist for the referral mill. As these dynamics of power play out, little regard is given to the violent impact such referrals have on the lives of referred students for whom such referrals are all too often but the first step on the road to incarceration (Clark, 1993; Stowers, 1998).

Likewise, the practice of making such referrals leaves a hostile classroom and

school climate in its wake by sending the message to students — especially minority students of White teachers — to be complicit in their skilling and drilling if they have any hope of escaping referral into the next phase of the breeding grounds (Clark, 1993; Stowers, 1998).

The Promise of Multicultural Education

These trends are deeply disturbing, strongly suggesting the need for the comprehensive integration of multicultural educational theory and practice into teacher education curricula, as well as for sustained and fortified recruitment and retention efforts to engage minority teacher candidates (Banks, 1997; Clark, 2003; Clark & O'Donnell, 1999; Nieto, 1998, 2000). Recent White teacher flight from majority minority and, thus, increasingly rapidly resegregating schools across the country has further exacerbated the proliferation of schools as breeding grounds for prisons, leaving these schools in the most dire circumstances — with the fewest and most poorly trained teachers (Clark, 2003; Clark & O'Donnell, 1999; Kozol, 1991).

Thus, minority students in majority minority schools are faced with a "choice" between an education that disproportionately tracks them into special education or that unilaterally offers them a substandard one — hence, they are faced with no choice at all. In recognizing the hostile nature of this predicament, many of these students deliberately self-select out of the education system (Clark, 1993). Others meet the same fate with less deliberation — being kicked out, pushed out, encouraged to opt, stop, or drop out by the teacher attitudes or aptitudes, curricular or pedagogical practices, and/or disciplinary structures that build schools into breeding grounds for prisons (Clark, 1993; Stowers, 1998).

It is in the context of this very thick bleakness that leaders and practitioners in all facets of the field of teacher education must now work to develop plans for progressive action to, first, reveal and, second, dismantle schools functioning as breeding grounds for prisons, in order to, third, create a context for a good education to be realized (Banks, 1997; Clark, 1993, 2003; Clark & Gorski, 2001; Clark, Jenkins, & Stowers, forthcoming; Clark & O'Donnell, 1999; Damarin, 2000; McLaren, 1997; Nieto, 1998, 2000; Shaylor, 1998; Sleeter, 1996).

What those plans for progressive action must include and how they must be

implemented to be successful requires careful deliberation. The vehicles through and the circumstances under which a good education — for *all* students — can be realistically achieved implore equally thoughtful consideration.

Conclusion

Toward the development of multicultural education as a tool for reclaiming schools organized as breeding grounds as prisons, multicultural educators must:

(1) Provide a point of entry for the schools as breeding grounds for prisons theme within the field of education by locating it in relationship to parallel ones in economics and criminal justice, among others, from both an historical and present-day context;

(2) Offer an overview of the roles that the field of education as a whole, and teacher education in particular, must play in seeking to prevent schools from becoming breeding grounds for prisons and to reinvent those already functioning in that manner;

(3) Examine the current curricular and pedagogical practices in teacher education that encourage the proliferation of schools as breeding grounds for prisons;

(4) Investigate the educational practices of in-service teachers that make schools into breeding grounds for prisons;

(5) Articulate, in great detail, what good education looks like it — the kind that dismantles schools as breeding grounds for prisons and reconceptualizes them as imparters of critically conscious learning, laboratories for the practice of democratic citizenship, and producers of leaders and practitioners predisposed to progressive action in all academic and professional arenas;

(6) strategize as to how to establish and maintain schools that can and do provide the kind of good education that precludes the breeding of students for prison, given the economic and political machinery invested in the status quo; and,

(7) Discuss the specific responsibilities of leaders and practitioners in teacher education, teacher education policy, teacher education professional organizations, teacher education schools and colleges, in-service teachers, students, and parents, among others, in revealing and dismantling schools functioning as breeding grounds for prisons, as well as in creating the new context in which good education can be realized.

Note

¹This introductory article, the first in a non-consecutive series of articles on the schoolhouse to jailhouse link, is based on the forthcoming book, *Schools as Breeding Grounds for Prisons*, edited by Christine Clark.

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