The Literacy Gap: An Investigation of the Role of

Hegemonic Ideology in Literacy Education

by

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Abstract

In this research the notion of hegemonic ideology is explored within the stories told by three returning adult students. These students were unsuccessful in attaining literacy skill in their elementary and secondary education and were later enrolled in an upgrading program. They described in recorded interviews how their lives unfolded in terms of education and progress in literacy. The study is a phenomenological investigation that ties the potential hazards of hegemonic ideology grounded in capitalist values to the educational outcomes for these students in terms of individual success valued over community support, misdirected violence, powerlessness, self-blame and acquiencence to the status quo.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

The present study examined some of the complicated situations that undermined individual successes in attaining adequate literacy skills. These situations were identified through interviews with returning students who had been unsuccessful within the regular schooling structure. Specifically, I examined possible influences on both the students themselves and the treatment they received and conceptualized them in terms of "hegemony" or "ideological hegemony" as formulated by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) (Boggs, 1976). The term refers to the "direction" or "organizing principle" that the ruling elite follow to coerce and manipulate the working class to accept for themselves the values of the capitalist class. I drew from these theories about hegemonic ideology in education with respect to class in order to explicate how these students may have been affected by the treatment of teachers and administrators influenced by classist attitudes. This research was done in an attempt to understand what hegemony might look like when experienced by a child in the school system. I put a more personalized face on hegemony by asking two questions. First, through a literature review I sought to understand what the face of hegemony might look like when experienced by a child in the school system. Then, I used the interviews with participants to match those expectations with the realities experienced by these students. Some of their perceptions of their experiences were consistent with identified hegemonic ideology including acceptance of the myth that there is equality in education, a tendency toward self blame, and an unquestioning acceptance of the status quo.

I have taken an interest an interest in adult literacy and issues of class as I have been an educator of adults with low literacy skills for twenty years and have seen that they often have come from difficult backgrounds and have had unfortunate life experiences. Often, I wondered if societal attitudes and prejudices played a role in their struggles to be educated and to find prosperity. I was curious about the barriers to education that they faced and how opportunities that were open to others were closed to them.

My personal experience in learning to read was the opposite. I come from a working class blended family. My mother was widowed as a young mother of three children, and she married a divorced father of three. My twin brother and I were the youngest of six children. We were three years old at the time, and the oldest child was seven. We were the children of second generation immigrants, from Finland on my mother's side and Germany on the step-father's. We did not have money for entertainment, so the older children were expected to read to the younger ones to keep them occupied. As a result, because I was read to a lot as a child, I was able to match the words to the sounds, and I was already a reader when I went to kindergarten at five years old.

As an adult when I became a teacher, I questioned why what had come so easily for me was such a challenge for others. At the same time, I began to question current political and economic conditions and read about socialist ideology and history. When I was introduced to Peter McLaren's book, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*, I was astonished. Here was a man who was articulating what I had felt my whole life but was never able to express. The word "hegemony" had always intrigued me. I knew that it had something to do with power, but that was all. After reading McLaren and Giroux, I began to

understand the idea of hegemony and critical pedagogy and wanted to do some research to make other people, especially teachers, aware of these issues. I hope that I can establish that hegemonic ideology and classist attitudes do influence literacy education.

In this study, three interconnected ideologies are used as the lens by which to examine the experiences of three students. These are hegemony, critical pedagogy and the economic connection to literacy. Hegemonic ideology is similar to other ideological forms of thinking in that it is at one and the same time revealing and concealing. Levin (2001) described ideology as a framework for thinking about social and political matters that "simultaneously allows us to see and understand certain things and, as the obverse of the same coin, prevents us from seeing other things" (p. 79). Hegemonic ideology directs action and thought in a certain direction influenced by capitalist ideals, and at the same time conceals the inequalities that exist between classes. The acceptance of capitalist ideals is translated into the education system in such a way that the public is acquiescent to and accepting of authority structures and traditional practices in education.

In response to this, a theory of critical pedagogy has emerged in which theorists examine and question the political structures of schooling "to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices" (McLaren, 2007, p. 186). Proponents of critical pedagogy see schooling as a political and social construct that needs to be challenged and a venue where inequalities need to be disclosed. For instance, they suggest that learners from the working and poor classes are treated differently from those in the upper classes. The notion that the values of the ruling upper class are those that everyone should have is ideologically hegemonic. Because most teachers and administrators share these values, they

may have lower expectations of the abilities of learners from the lower classes. Therefore, they may, even if unknowingly, offer them fewer opportunities or provide fewer resources than they would to higher class students in literacy education (McLaren). Often, the teachers and administrators are well-intentioned and sincerely want the best for all students, but ingrained hegemonic beliefs shape the way they treat the students from the working class and poor and this treatment is different from that received by the children from upper class backgrounds.

Existing power imbalances and social structures are supported by school policy through "pro-capitalist positions . . . [that] support a curriculum and pedagogy that produces compliant, pro-capitalist workers; and ensure that the schooling and education carry out the ideological and economic reproduction that benefits the ruling class" (McLaren, 2007, p. 27). According to McLaren, capitalist values are so entrenched in the beliefs of the school administrators, the teachers and even the families, that students are never encouraged to question these ideals. These values are held to be the ideal for all to strive for, and so critically examining them would be considered by some to be tantamount to being unpatriotic and wrongheaded. McLaren views literacy education as one of the victims of hegemonic ideology that surmises that there is equality in education. In reality, the wealthy have the advantage in learning and the poor are disadvantaged. For example, McLaren explains that in 1988 fewer than 25% of children whose families earned less than $10,000 a year were enrolled in preschool programs, while 56% of those earning $35,000 or more were enrolled (p. 44).

Theoretical Framework

There are a multitude of possible reasons for students to emerge from schools without the literacy skills required for successful transition into further education or into the workplace. This statement in itself is laden with hegemonic ideology since it supports the assumption that all people will want to continue with their education or enter the workforce and assumes that students do not, by choice, opt out of those opportunities**.** While acknowledging the complexities of the phenomenon of low literacy, this study is based on the idea that, broadly speaking, people with low literacy skills are not necessarily responsible for their situation, but rather that they may have been left behind because of complicated situations associated with people with low incomes. Based on ideals that stem from hegemonic ideology, the learner whose literacy skill acquisition is interrupted is deemed responsible for that interruption (Giroux, 1988). Although the schools might be expected to take responsibility for undiagnosed learning disorders, lack of teacher engagement or skill, or lack of support for students encountering difficult curriculum, more often, students affected by these school based oversights are treated as failures and the lack of literacy progress is considered a sign of weakness within the individual students affected. Children with the resilience and opportunity to replace these gaps in their learning through other means are able to overcome these temporary setbacks. Other students, with fewer resources and weaker support systems, may accept the failure as their own (Sticht, 1999). This can, in turn, lead to life-altering choices that affect earning potential and opportunity. Students who are too poor to find alternatives when school systems fail them may be prevented from changing their status and are likely to remain poor. The situation can be exacerbated by classist assumptions about children who do not

thrive in school and attitudes in society and in schools that perpetuate the mythology around individual responsibility for failure (Giroux).

Research Question

The descriptions of the treatment of children in schools, provided by individuals whose education has been disrupted, allows a glimpse at the possible effects of hegemonic ideology on these individuals. The research question was:" How does hegemonic ideology inform the literacy education of students in the lower classes; that is, how do the students themselves perceive the practices that affected them within and beyond the school systems in a milieu of a prevailing capitalistic hegemonic ideology?"

As shown in the literature review, there is much research on the relationship between economic well-being and literacy level in that how much education people have impacts on their ability to earn money. There is also much written about hegemonic ideology and how political, social and educational institutions maintain an invisible domination of one class over the other. My aim in this study was to link economic well-being and literacy level and explicate that not only is there an economic cost to lack of literacy skills, but also there is a powerful mechanism in place that perpetuates domination of the capitalist value system in schools at the expense of lower class students.

Limitations

I acknowledge that it is not fair to say that the experiences of these three participants are representative of all students who end up in upgrading programs. However, the stories I heard are rich in meaning and represent issues that arise in discussion of hegemonic ideology and classist attitudes as they relate to education, especially literacy training.

I also acknowledge that I have relied on the memories of the participants which may be coloured by their own desire to be seen in a certain light. They may have wanted me to have a good impression of them and may have left out information or distorted it for that reason. Also, some of the stories took place decades ago and the memories may not be reliable. As well, I do not have the perspective of the teachers and administrators who knew the participants as children, so I do not have their side of the story. However, the data that the participants provided is important in that the stories illustrate how school systems may fail certain students.

Chapter 2: Background from the Literature

In this literature review, I provide a definition for literacy, discuss the connection between literacy levels and economic well-being, and suggest barriers to adult literacy training. I then draw from the work of Giroux, McLaren and others to identify ways in which hegemonic ideology might be playing a role in the way students are treated in schools and to identify features of hegemonic thinking within individuals whose literacy education has been disrupted.

Defining Literacy

Schellenberg and Shalla (2001) define literacy as the "ability to understand and use written information to function in society, to achieve goals, and to develop knowledge and potential" (p. 2). Schellenberg and Shalla investigated three types of literacy: prose, document and quantitative. Prose literacy refers to the ability to understand and use text such as newspapers and fiction. Document literacy refers to text found on the job such as payroll forms and maps. Quantitative literacy refers to arithmetic skills such as balancing a chequebook (Schellenberg & Shalla, p.1). Their survey placed literacy on levels in each of these categories from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest level and 5 the highest. People with skills at level 1 were defined within the survey as those who were able to recognize their own names and read things such as street signs. Those at level 2 were able to read and write practical, everyday items such as grocery lists and basic forms such as job applications. Those at level 3 were able to read newspapers and magazines such as Readers' Digest, and those at level 4 were able to read and write well enough to complete some college level programs. Level 5 was a post-secondary level of reading and writing. This definition of literacy and the conceptualization of literacy levels was used in the current study.

Literacy Level and Economic Well-being

In their report, *The Value of Words: Literacy and Economic Security in Canada*, Schellenberg and Shalla (2001) state that "The risk of living in a household below the low income cut-off was six times greater for working age adults at level 1 than for those at level 4/5 (47% vs. 8%)"(p. 2). The low income cut-off is determined by the "proportion of total income that a Canadian family spends on food, clothing and shelter. Statistically, a family is considered to be low-income if it spends 55% or more of its income on these three essentials" (Schellenberg & Shalla, p. 2). Working age adults with level 1 skills make only two thirds the personal income of those at level 4/5. *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*, a Government of Canada (2001) report, suggested that, "there appears to be a large income penalty for those with weaker skills, and conversely a large income bonus for those workers with high skills" (p. 8). In short, adults with low literacy skills are more likely to earn low wages or be on social assistance.

Low literacy levels are implicated in a cycle of poverty that describes the economic lives of many adult Canadians and continues to further generations. The poverty cycle is exacerbated by societal attitudes formed from hegemonic ideology where people accept that those living in poverty are expected to fail at school and in life (Giroux, 1988). Sticht (1998) tells us that "the less literate are more likely to be found in poverty, on welfare, unemployed, in poor paying jobs, and in the lower status jobs that require less education" (p. 82). The effects are felt on individual, family and community levels. People with low literacy skills face barriers in finding employment, accessing services in the community, and understanding health related materials. They may not be aware that they are eligible for housing or training opportunities as they are

unable to understand the pamphlets and literature advertising them (Literacy in Canada: It's

time for action, 2004). This situation is further exacerbated by cultural and linguistic divides:

> Many families do not have access to (informal referral) networks and may not be
>
> aware of the resources available in their communities—reaching these families
>
> may be difficult especially when linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic barriers
>
> are present. (Family Literacy, Brief No. 19, 2007)

Low literacy levels even affect health. For example, medical information on

prescriptions or care of certain maladies is written at a level that low literacy adults have

difficulty understanding: "Families are at risk due to difficulty reading medication prescriptions,

baby formula instructions and health and safety education materials" (Rootman & Ronson,

2005, p. S62). People with low literacy often overuse healthcare because of relatively poorer

overall health due to poverty (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2004, p. 4).

As useful as these theories are for examining the relationship between low literacy and

poverty, the concept of hegemony and its relationship to literacy is not as easily addressed.

Smith (2008), for example, identified the need to name

> the form of oppression that operates so that poor and working class people are
>
> systematically disadvantaged through our society's institutions (like health care);
>
> attitudes and stereotypes (like deficit models of homelessness); and policies, procedures
>
> and economic structures: classism. (p. 899)

Individuals with high socio-economic status may believe that they have a right to enjoy a

higher standard of living because they have worked hard or they have made significant

contributions. This concept serves to legitimize the corollary which is a belief that lower socio-

economic status people deserve their lower standard of living because of laziness or lack of intelligence. Smith suggests that the higher income people have acquired their riches not from their own work, but from the work of the people who earn the lower incomes. It is the productivity of the working class that fuels the wealth of the upper class in a "form of socio-political dominance by which some groups systematically prosper at the expense of others" (p. 900).

Studies on the relationship between literacy and economic well-being suggest that it is in a country's best interests to fund literacy programs. For instance, the report, *Literacy in Canada: It's time for action*, (2004) used Statistics Canada data from 2004 to show that a "1% increase in adult literacy levels would generate a 1.5% *permanent* increase in GDP per capita. This would amount to about $18 billion a year that could be re-invested in Canadians' priorities" (p. 3). Unfortunately, there is little public funding to support such adult literacy initiatives.

Ministers in the provincial and federal governments may be influenced by the dominant ideology of equality of opportunity and the belief in meritocracy and thus believe that funding cuts are justified. When official sources place the blame for failure on the learner, they move the responsibility for becoming educated from the state to the individual. An example of a recent cut in funding for a literacy program was when the Canadian Centre of Excellence for Literacy in London, Ontario, had its funding cut in March of 2008. Goar (Feb. 11, 2009) observed that the effect on literacy would be felt across Canada as "Ottawa was pulling the plug on the cross-country network of researchers, educators, librarians, speech therapists and literacy advocates" (p. 1). This would have profoundly negative results for literacy education.

Meanwhile, Stephen Harper's federal government cut funding from literacy programs by 17.7

million in its first budget in spite of the fact that the C. D. Howe Institute's 2005 study

concluded that, "investing in adult learning 'at the bottom end of the economic spectrum'

would have a much larger payoff than putting more tax dollars into post-secondary education"

(Goar, Feb. 9, 2009, p. 1). Adequate funding would not alleviate the other, less obvious, barriers

to adult literacy training, but support for research in the area would contribute to the

identification and discussion of the issues.

Other Barriers to Adult Literacy Training

Even when programs are available and funded, adult learners face many other barriers

when trying to access literacy programs. "The main barriers are socio-economic, circumstantial

factors such as lack of support for child care, transportation, and attendant care for disabled

persons, long working hours, family needs, poor health, discouragement and lack of

confidence" (Literacy in Canada: it's time for action, 2004, p. 4). Those who do find their way

into a program may be faced with systemic problems within the institution offering the

program. Sticht (n. d.), for example, tells about students seeking information about adult

literacy programs who did not enrol because of program or policy related problems: "many

students did not enrol because of not being called back, long waiting lists, inconvenient course

times, wrong content or teaching structure, and unhelpful program contact" (p. 1).

Financial, emotional and cultural factors may have implications for individuals' lives at

the personal level. As Timmons (2008) observed, potential participants may be embarrassed or

self-conscious about admitting their literacy level. Sometimes, programs do not take into

consideration the cultural background of the student. Programs for Aboriginal students, for instance, may need to situate the curriculum in the Aboriginal world view and tradition; and immigrant learners may need to have their religion, traditions and language acknowledged. As Timmons suggests, the families themselves should be "authentic partners in the design and delivery of family literacy programs" (p. 98). Literacy programs need to be open to the historical background, culture, and different situations of the learners.

At the secondary school level, Smythe (2007) blames poor teaching for many of the problems in literacy development. He suggests that teachers need to develop strong teaching and learning identities to help them overcome the stigmatization experienced by the learners. Because low literacy is sometimes seen as shameful, teachers need to build bonds of trust with learners. Smythe suggests that teachers who simply follow the rules will not be successful in changing literacy levels: "[Teachers need] teaching contexts in which it is expected, and teachers are encouraged, to take risks and experiment with their teaching in the knowledge that risk-taking is a normal part of being a literacy teacher" (p. 411). Teachers need to have a strong sense of themselves and of their place to have the confidence to be risk-takers.

Howard (2005) gives us an example of one such teacher who helped him to achieve academic levels that would allow him to go to college and escape poverty. In grade 7, while many of his peers had already dropped out of school, his teacher took an interest in him and encouraged him to achieve his goals: "I knew more than anything I knew at that time that he cared for me; he respected me and my experiences and knowledge" (p. 76). Although the teacher did not understand the life of poverty that he came from, as Howard described it: "he understood that my experiences living in poverty had determined values, standpoints, and

interests, and realized that these experiences were often in conflict with what I encountered in formal schooling" (p. 77).

A shift in view of literacy means not only reading and writing; it also encompasses a complicated framework that includes cognitive and social abilities. Smythe (2007) explains that, "this shift represents part of a much wider emerging view in which literacies are acknowledged as being an 'integral part of the socio-cognitive and cultural lives of individuals and communities'" (p. 412). This broader definition of what literacy is provides a conceptual lens through which we can view people with low-literacy skills anew rather than as failures. From what Smythe argues, people are literate in various ways and at different levels which are dynamic and fluid and develop not only with literacy training but also with life experiences. These life experiences may have been situations and choices that kept people at low income levels.

As well as encountering the many barriers listed here, people face hidden obstacles in their life path because of classist attitudes and hegemonic ideology. Dominant ideologies about equality of opportunity and meritocracy remain entrenched in social attitudes, so those who are considered illiterate, therefore, are widely blamed for their own failure, and often internalize that belief and blame themselves (Giroux, 1988).

Hegemonic Attitudes and Literacy Opportunity in Schools

Gramsci as cited in Forgacs (1988) argues that by using structures such as the labour unions, the church, political parties, the schools and the family, the dominant elite convince the masses to internalize the view that they need to support the established order and promote the

perpetuation of wealth and power for the ruling class. In this way, in Forgacs' collection of readings about Gramsci, Boggs explains that established order became "common sense" and unchallengeable. Boggs further explains:

> Where hegemony appeared as a strong force, it fulfilled a role that guns and tanks could never perform. It mystified power relations, public issues, and events; it encouraged a sense of fatalism and passivity towards political action; and it justified every type of system serving sacrifice and deprivation. In short, hegemony worked in many ways to induce the oppressed to accept or 'consent' to their own exploitation and daily misery. (p. 39)

Giroux (1981) and McLaren (2007) argue that hegemony continues to be a guiding principle or world-view that allows one class to dominate the other. Giroux presented a chapter on hegemony in his book *Ideology, Culture and the Process of Schooling* , and McLaren addresses this in *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*. Hegemonic ideology maintains a domination that is invisible and largely accepted by both those who dominate and those who are dominated. Complex systems at work in society, in schools, churches, and in the media, provide support for the ruling, wealthy class and keep the poorer, working class in submission by maintaining a myth that all people are equal and active participants in the economic structure. They argue that the people in the classes that are being dominated do not recognize it as domination and freely engage in the promotion of the myth. Giroux (1981) explains:

> Hegemony refers to the successful attempt of a dominant class to utilize its control over the resources of state and civil society, particularly through the use

of the mass media and the educational system, to establish its view of the world as all inclusive and universal. Through the dual use of force and consent, with consent prevailing, the dominant class uses its political, moral, and intellectual leadership to shape and incorporate the "taken-for granted" views, needs, and concerns of subordinate groups (p. 130).

Langston (n.d.) asserts that classist attitudes are maintained because we believe that the present economic status is the best one. "In order to perpetuate racist, sexist, and classist outcomes, we also have to believe that the current economic distribution is unchangeable, has always existed, and probably exists in this form throughout the known universe" (p. 1).

Giroux (1988) and McLaren (2007) argue that the schools themselves are a part of the mechanism through which hegemonic ideologies are perpetrated, perpetuated and preserved. Illiteracy itself, public perceptions of how illiteracy occurs and the mechanisms that connect literacy and poverty levels are based on hegemonic ideology. McLaren describes the link between poverty and literacy: "It has long been known that poverty (linked to the division of labour via the extraction of surplus value from workers by capitalists) is a major factor in determining the success of students at school" (p. 44). Elementary systems of education are designed to create a literate population, yet community colleges and government agencies spend millions each year providing upgrading and special courses to enable people to re-enter the workforce or take advantage of educational opportunities. McLaren, in particular, identifies schools as agents of hegemonic ideology. Classrooms are constructed around an inherent power imbalance that teachers have over students. Teachers, and the structures such as policy,

teacher education programs, and Ministry regulations surrounding them, ensure a continuation of the accepted situation and the mythology that maintains it. The mythology is the commonly accepted belief in equality of educational opportunity.

Some of the barriers to literacy already identified can be linked to theories of classism and hegemonic attitudes surrounding distribution of wealth. Scarcity of resources, feelings of exclusion or inferiority, misunderstandings about cultural expectations and unsupportive teachers could all be related to hegemonic attitudes toward access to opportunities. All these factors could have an impact on the ability of individuals to find their way through the literacy support systems. Hegemonic theory describes ways in which schools may be responsible for sorting children into pre-determined categories assumed to be the norm (McLaren, 2007). According to Knapp, Shields and Turnbull (1995) in high poverty situations, teachers place the children into "ability groupings that often harden into permanent tracks at an early age" (p. 1). People are granted different kinds of opportunities depending on their place in society or class (McLaren, 2007) and "low-achieving students often become permanently segregated into these groupings or tracks" (Knapp, Sheilds & Turnbull, 1990, p. 7).

Teachers and administrators often have lessened expectations of those children who come from disadvantaged homes based on a conventional wisdom that assumes that lower class children have deficiencies caused by poor preparation by their families for school life (Knapp, Sheilds & Turnbull, 1990). Knapp *et al* advocate that teachers should challenge the children from poorer communities to "expand their repertoire of experience and skills" (p. 5) rather than lowering the teachers' expectations.

Equality of opportunity remains a dominant ideology in North America disseminated through media and in schooling (McLaren, 2007). Children are taught that if they work hard enough, they will have equal opportunities for success. The rare examples of people coming out of poverty and becoming rich and famous such as Oprah and Eminem serve to perpetuate the myth. The reality for most disadvantaged people is a life of hard work at menial jobs without advancement and a condition of poverty that continues from generation to generation, which is the result of lack of opportunity rather than lack of hard work. The illusion of equality is prevalent in the school systems "mediated under the guise of 'neutrality' and the promise of social mobility" (Giroux, 1981, p. 223). Opportunities for education are more accessible to the children of the upper classes, and the education system works for them but not so well for others.

McLaren (2007) argues that "under such a system, the schools are complicit in providing the skills, knowledges, physical abilities, work skills and social skills" (p. 27) without affording the upward mobility. In schools, the emphasis is likely to be on the power of the individual to achieve his or her dreams through hard work regardless of class. The ideology of equality of opportunity presumes that all children have equality of access to educational opportunities. A critical perspective, such as McLaren's, highlights how many students are disadvantaged in their schools. Those who live in wealthy neighbourhoods usually have privileges that those who live in poor communities do not. Giroux (1983) attests that "schools are not neutral institutions that prepare students equally for social and economic opportunities in the wider society" (p. 207). Most people have been conditioned to accept the way most education systems work; thus, few think to question them.

Langston (n.d.) agrees that the poor are locked into positions of servitude because of classist assumptions that create false hope. "[Classist attitudes] perpetuate the false hope among the working class and poor that they can have different opportunities in life. They hope that they can escape the class position they were born into" (p. 1). She reiterates that people believe in the myth that hard work and ambition will afford them a better station in life (p. 1). As Forgacs (1988) explains, Gramsci used the term 'hegemony' to refer to the 'guiding principle' by which the ruling class maintained its power and wealth. If the ideology of capitalism is embedded into all areas of everyday life, people will likely internalize the capitalist values and adopt them as their own. Individuals become convinced that the goals and aspirations that should be pursued are those of the dominant class. Those goals include aspirations of success based on capitalist notions of achieving success through accumulating wealth.

Giroux (1988) notes that in schools, "the needs and interests of those in the dominant class are treated differently from those in the working class" (p. 206). Anyon (1981) found this to be the case when she compared four schools based on socio-economic class. She examined the schools in a working class community, a middle class community, a professional class community and an elite upper-class community and reported on differences in school facilities, textbooks used, attitudes of teachers and expectations. The school in the working class community focused on a mechanistic, rote learning of facts and knowledge. Expectations were low. Learning was based on "fragmented facts" and "knowledge of 'practical' rule governed behaviours" that required little thought (p. 12). The middle class school exhibited "more flexibility regarding procedures" and a "recognition that a cognitive process of some sort was involved" (p. 13). The school in the affluent area encouraged "discovery and creativity" (p. 17).

For example, teachers said that "scientific knowledge . . . is intended to result from children's experience and attempts to discover for themselves" (p. 18). However, at the elite school, teachers emphasized "intellectual process such as reasoning and problem solving" (p. 24). The focus was on excellence as the students at the elite school were expected to be the leaders of the future and needed to be prepared to compete with people from other elite schools.

As Anyon (1981) described it, the students from the elite school "are provided with other kinds of symbolic capital as well—practice in manipulating socially prestigious language and concepts in systematic ways" (p. 37) while those from the working class were often treated as if their stories and experiences did not count for much. As Giroux (1983) points out, "working class students receive education from the vantage point of powerlessness" (p. 215).

In Anyon's (1981) study, students who came from the dominant class viewed the future as a world of opportunities, while those from a working class background tended to see the future as something within which they had no agency. Giroux (1981) argued that differences in life expectations are fostered in school, especially working class situations in which "classroom relations produce students with attitudes and dispositions that make them docile and receptive to the social and economic imperatives of a capitalist economy" (p. 92). When the underclass takes on the same aspirations as the dominant class, their failure to succeed may be seen as a personal failing caused by not working hard enough or by being inferior in some way. The notion that opportunities that are easily accessed by others are not available to all tends to be obscured. According to Anyon, "the notion that knowledge is generated externally may yield a passive stance before ideas and ideology and before the creation or legitimization of new

ideas" (p. 33). The application of critical literacy would change the way people are taught to acquiesce and encourage them to challenge accepted norms.

Hegemonic ideology in schools promotes individual success over the communal notion of people taking care of each other. Anyon (1981) found that in the professional school there was "a priority on personal expression, personal 'meaning making' and the 'construction of reality' (which) mitigates against collectivistic values and meanings and solutions; it is thereby reproductive of values important to an individualistic, privately owned, and competitive economy" (p. 35).

Giroux (1988) summarizes how hegemony influences administrators and teachers in their inability to meet the needs of students, especially those who come from the marginalized class. He discusses how "relevance" is met for privileged students but ignored for the rest:

Within this discourse [on relevance] there is little recognition that what is legitimated as privileged experience often represents the endorsement of a particular way of life that signifies its superiority with a 'revenge' on those who do not share its attributes. More specifically, the experience of the student as other is cast within a discourse that often labels the experience as deviant, underprivileged, or uncultured. Consequently, not only do students bear the sole responsibility for school failure, but there is also little or no theoretical room for interrogating the ways in which administrators and teachers actually create and sustain the problems they attribute to the students in question. (p. 93)

Also, McLaren (2007) argues that hegemony serves to legitimate practices in the school:

By legitimizing the school system as just and meritocratic, as giving everyone the

same opportunity for success, the dominant culture hides the truth of the

hidden curriculum-the fact that those whom schooling helps most are those who

come from the most affluent families. (p. 206)

This false legitimization of the school practice is what leads many students like those in this

study to have experiences that prevent them from succeeding academically. Hegemonic

discourses within education exist through differing teacher expectations, lack of real neutrality

within the institution, lack of opportunity for individuals, powerlessness of the children of the

lower class, and a tendency toward self-blame eventually felt among students unable to change

their status within the promise of the school system.

Critical Pedagogy

Hegemonic ideologies in schools can be countered by critical pedagogy which would help students understand that individual success and equality of opportunity can be understood and altered and that attitudes based on classist assumptions regarding expectations of success for those in the lower class can be changed. Theorists of critical pedagogy aim to improve the lives of the oppressed within a structure dominated by a ruling class. Giroux (1983) suggests that "radical teachers will have to establish organic connections with those excluded majorities who inhabit the neighbourhoods, towns, and cities in which schools are located" (p. 237). He explains that working class people, minorities, and women need to become the subjects of school policy, not the objects. As objects, they are the passive recipients of decisions made by others. As subjects, they would be active in the decision making regarding school policy, curriculum, and allotment of resources. They need to be actively involved in shaping school policy.

Freire's (1978) notion of 'conscientization' illustrates that the awareness of the learner of his or her own place in the political power struggle is important (p. 157). Conscientization refers to cultural reflection and action. Literacy is a quality of human consciousness where people need to have a full understanding of where they stand in the tension between the classes. Communities need to become fully aware of their role in hegemony and work together to stand against it.

It would have been interesting to examine the counter narrative of the students in this study; that is, to find out how their hopes and dreams fit into the hegemonic structure and how

aware they are of those ideological forces. However, that examination is beyond the borders of this study.

Giroux (1988) explains that as educators we need to redefine "literacy" so that the term includes reading critically, so that students learn to question and challenge the prevailing values that colour their perceptions and experiences (p. 84). Giroux reminds us of Freire's ideas that "literacy must be linked to a theory of knowledge, one that is consistent with an emancipating political perspective and one that gives the fullest expression to illuminating the power of social relationships in the act of knowing" (p. 84). Literacy needs to be a dialogue free from authoritarian top-down structures. We need to turn people into social agents with the promise of emancipation from oppression.

Freire (1990) based the principle of pedagogy of emancipation of the oppressed on the engagement of the learner in the process of his/her education. He proposed that the learners be the agents of the education, in the choice of curriculum, the processes followed and the purpose. Freire explains the importance of students decoding their own realities before they can understand the relations of dominance and power. He describes the current education as "banking" (p. 58). Depositing information in a person as if he/she were a bank account is not effective. What we need to do is to engage learners in their own education. If the learner has a say in the content, form and goal of his/her learning, that learning may take on an immediacy and meaningfulness instead of disengagement and disenfranchisement. Learners should be at the core of their own literacy education, taking control of the content and process for their own needs.

Literacy is a quality of human consciousness. Giroux (1981) explains the importance of literacy in the pursuit of societal change: "to be voiceless in a society is to be powerless and literacy skills are emancipatory only to the degree that they give people the critical tools to awaken and liberate themselves from their often mystified and distorted view of the world" (p. 236).

In Summary: The significance of the current study

Hegemonic ideology is a complex issue when manifested in the lives of students who are expected to mirror an acceptance of a hegemonic ideology. The current study was done to examine how hegemonic ideology might have affected individuals who were unsuccessful in school. Although this articulation of the expectations of hegemonic ideology did not guide the questioning, the students exposed to hegemonic ideology could be expected to accept the hegemonic point of view. In doing so, they could be expected to assume responsibility for their own failure within the school system. Also, they would accept the use of marks and credentials as necessary components of future success. They would be optimistic that they would be able to change their situations through hard work. In Chapters 4 and 5, I provide aspects of these conversations, and examine how the participants' remembered experiences might reflect hegemonic, classist attitudes within the schools they attended and within themselves.

Hegemonic ideologies that pertain to literacy are those that depict poor and working class students as substandard or lacking in some way (Giroux, 1988). The values of the capitalist elite, when taken on by the lower classes as their own, mean that they are treated as if they are inferior and they themselves internalize that feeling. The dominant ideology of "equality of

opportunity" provides the basis for the belief that students, especially if they are from poorer

backgrounds, are themselves to blame for their lack of success. The process is cyclical as the

lower class learner who does not acquire literacy skills often goes on to remain poor in

adulthood, unable to break out of the being poor and being poorly educated cycle. Only by

visualizing the effects of hegemonic ideology can we understand its effects on those individuals.

A relationship between level of literacy and economic status is evident in Schellenberg

and Shalla's (2001) findings that "working-age adults with weak literacy skills were far more

likely to be living in low-income households than those with strong literacy skills" (p. 2). There is

a clear link "between literacy and economic security, showing that Canadians with weaker

literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed, work in lower paying jobs and live in low-

income households" (Reading the future, 2001, p. 4).

Changes to those literacy levels could affect the well-being of individuals, communities,

and societies. Illiteracy and low literacy levels may be perpetuated by the effects of hegemonic

ideology in that societal attitudes serve to make the individuals who are not successful feel

inferior and deficient because they do not meet up to the expectations of the values of the

dominant class. The same people may buy into the myth of "equality in education", and

internalize the notion that they had the same opportunity as those who are well off, but failed

because of a personal inadequacy.

By doing research on the influence of hegemonic ideology on the success or failure of

students in literacy acquisition, awareness can be raised on how educators, administrators and

the general public accept hegemonic ideas to be legitimate. The research promotes thought

and discussion about critical pedagogy to encourage students in education programs, practicing

teachers, principals and school administrators to learn more about critical pedagogy, start to question policies and procedures, and spread interest in learning how students are affected by classist attitudes.

Awareness of classist attitudes and the influence of hegemonic ideology may influence policy makers regarding the unequal treatment of lower class students in schools and allow those in a position to make change to improve the treatment of students so everyone can be successful in school and, in particular, in literacy acquisition. It is hoped that practices and policies in Canadian schools can change to better address issues of unfair treatment caused by hegemonic ideology.

Hegemonic thinking is subtle and veiled in what seem to be common sense notions about the value of the capitalist political system. Teachers and administrators are, for the most part, well-intentioned and sincerely wish to do the best for their students. However, hegemony pervades the ideals of North American society, and if educators are not aware of it, they perpetuate policies, curricula, and processes, and educational standards that promote capitalist ideology. If people become more aware of the dangers of hegemonic ideology, they may make changes in political systems to make improvements at individual, community, and societal levels. This is the significance of the research.

Chapter 3: Method

In order to understand the possible contributions of hegemonic ideology to the outcome of schooling for disadvantaged individuals, I spoke to students returning to school as adults to complete their education. I conducted an examination of the perceptions of a group of adults who did not reach literacy standards necessary for employment or further education and were, therefore, referred to upgrading. I examined the individuals' perceptions of their experiences within the K-12 school system and from analysis of the data, identified systemic problems and suggest potential policy or procedural changes that may help to support literacy acquisition in elementary and secondary school.

The initial question was, "What is your perception of why you did not acquire adequate literacy skills in the regular school system and, therefore, are now in an upgrading program?" This question opened the discussion, but the direction of the conversation was flexible and open to allow movement into issues that the participants brought up or things that may not have occurred to me to ask. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Participants

The participants were volunteers from an upgrading program offered at a Community College in a small city in Ontario. The upgrading program offers high school equivalency to students who need it, either to go on to post-secondary studies or to go on to employment. Students may begin in the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program or in pre-LBS program called Personal Career Development (PCD). PCD is a 12 week program that has a life skills component and an academic component. At the time of the study, I was teaching the communications part of the academic component and had been teaching in the upgrading program for 17 years. The

class lasted for only one hour a day, five days a week. I asked for volunteers and briefly

described the purpose of my study. From a class of 12, I had one volunteer, whose pseudonym

is Ariel. I also asked for volunteers from the regular upgrading classroom and had one volunteer

who I call Arthur. The third participant was a college student who had completed the upgrading

program and was enrolled in post-secondary studies. He is called Leonard.

Interviews

I made arrangements to speak with the three students individually in a study room in

the library where we could talk privately without interruption. The informal setting was used to

make the participants as comfortable as possible, so they would be willing to divulge personal

information in a non-threatening environment. The interviews lasted approximately one and a

half hours each.

The interviews were held outside of the participants' class time. I audio recorded the

interviews with participant permission. I made it clear that they should feel free to not answer

any question that they felt uncomfortable answering and that they could stop at any time. I

reiterated this in a letter that I gave them to sign, following Lakehead University Senate

Research Ethics Board protocol, and we each kept a copy.

During the interviews, I was sensitive to the body language of the participants. If a

participant seemed reluctant to continue at any point, I respected that and did not press. For

instance, when I was talking to Leonard about his father, I questioned him about the criminal

activities but Leonard tensed and looked at the floor and said, "He was a pretty bad father"

(3.29). Then, he changed the subject. Nonetheless, the participants openly shared family

histories, both negative and positive; school experiences, good and bad; and their hopes and

aspirations for the future. The students were enthusiastic to talk to me. They seemed eager to tell their stories. For example, when I began my interview with Leonard and asked him why he thought he had not learned to read, he answered, "That's one thing that nobody's been able to figure out and I've really wanted to tell that part of the story" (3.1).

I did not ask the ages of the participants but I can assume from their experiences what their ages were. Ariel is the youngest, around twenty years of age, a mother of two. Judging from the years that the men attended school, I would say that they would be in their forties. Both of the men were parents as well. Arthur was the single father and Leonard was married and the father of three. Although I did not ask about the economic status of the participants when they were growing up, I can assume from their stories what their status was. Ariel left home at fifteen to live on the street. Although I do not know the economic status of her family, being homeless tells me that she was poor at that time. Arthur grew up in a military family and may have been middle class, but as an adult he was struggling to find work and go to school on a low income. From the stories that Leonard told about not having adequate clothing to go to school in the winter and having to work as a child to help feed the family, I assume that his family was living in poverty.

The data collection method comprised open-ended (Jahoda, Deutch. & Cook, 1951), non-structured interviews. Bogdan and Biklen (2002) described in-depth interviewing this way: "the researcher is bent on understanding, in considerable detail, how people such as teachers, principals, and students think and how they came to develop the perspectives they hold" (p. 3). By using a single opening question, I provided a venue in which the participants were able to respond more freely than by having a set of prearranged questions. I asked one key question

and let the participants lead the conversation into areas that were important to them. The question was, "What is your perception of why you did not acquire adequate literacy skills in the regular school system and, therefore, are now in an upgrading program?" Through follow up questioning, I used informal conversation to illuminate the school experiences of each participant prior to the time that he or she entered the upgrading program. My aim was to ask about the participants' recollections regarding learning to read and write.

Ariel and Arthur were both working at literacy level 3, which would be comparable to grade 6. That is, they were able to read text that would be found in Reader's Digest Magazine and could write complete sentences. Leonard, however, did not learn to read or write at all until he was an adult. In the Findings and Discussion sections, I discuss what I found out from the participants about the barriers they faced from their homes and from the school. These are their stories.

Analysis of Data

In my analysis of the data, I examined the relationship between literacy levels and opportunities to improve socio-economic status of the students and their families. A second goal was to investigate the influences of hegemonic ideology that had precipitated situations that the participants had experienced in their education. The numbers in brackets that follow quotations made by the participants refer to the interview transcripts. The first number is the number of the participant, that is 1 for Ariel, 2 for Arthur and 3 for Leonard. The second number refers to the quotation as I numbered all the statements from the beginning to the end.

When I started to categorize the data I noticed that the students described their home environment and their school environment and I expected that there would be some interplay between the two. I categorized the data by setting up two poster boards, one for home and one for school. I colour-coded the three transcripts of the interviews and attached pieces of the data to each poster board. In this way, I was able to keep track of whose transcript I was using under the different topics. I could then sort the data according to themes I expected to see based on the literature review and themes that emerged from the data.

I sought to know the participants' perceptions of how hegemonic ideology influenced their education in that they accepted the hegemonic point of view, assumed responsibility for their own failure within the school system, accepted the use of marks and credentials as necessary components of future success, were optimistic that they would be able to improve their own situations through hard work, and believed that they had had equal access to the opportunities for education. In particular, I sought to know their perceptions of whether or not their particular school system failed them by complacently accepting the status quo in education policy. Did they accept the failure as their own or recognize the situation as one in which the school had been unable to meet their needs as learners? This question regarding their perceptions of their lived experience of learning to read and write formed a foundation for the study, in hope of enhancing understanding of the literacy gap.

Chapter 4: Findings

I started the analysis by sorting the findings for themes associated with the home and with the school. In the process I found descriptions that illustrated barriers to learning that differed from participant to participant. Ariel's experience could be classified in a broader category of general "Lack of family support" but in Leonard's case, his inability to attend school was because of constant moving and lack of resources. Although Arthur did attend school, his progress in learning was hampered by moving from province to province. Ariel and Arthur were both put in a class for special needs students. Leonard, who did not know how to read at all, managed to avoid what Ariel called "The Dead Kids' Class." In my analysis, I determined the categories by what stood out as surprising or important to me, such as the "Dead Kids' Class" and also by topics that related to the research that I had done on hegemonic ideology and classist attitudes, such as self-blame for failure in school, misdirected violence by those in oppressed situations, and teachers and administrators' low expectations of children in lower class status. In this section, I present information from the transcripts that illustrates the situations that led each participant to leave school at an early age.

Factors in the Home

The participants in my study experienced many barriers to their educations that may have originated in their homes such as transience, poverty, and abusive and/or unsupportive family relationships. These situations in their youth mitigated against their learning to read and continued to complicate their lives as they attempted to return to school. All of the participants confirmed some common factors that interfered with their education.

One form of interference was transience. Two of the participants, Leonard and Arthur, switched schools so often that their education was disrupted or confused. Leonard was forced to move from school to school because his family moved from province to province to get away from the criminal activities of his father. Leonard explains that, "We weren't really living with my dad. My dad had run away. He was causing trouble everywhere we went. We had to keep going" (3.37). He recalls, "He was a pretty nasty kind of a father. That's the big thing that caused a lot of problems for my family. When I was younger, we moved around 47 times in 5 years" (3.2). Leonard's comments give clear indication that transience interrupted his educational progress time and time again.

Arthur also moved from province to province because his father was in the military. Because of the many moves, Arthur often arrived at the new school in the middle of a term and found fitting into the curriculum in the new school difficult. He describes what happened in one instance when he said, "Yes, it was grade 2. When we left Ontario, it was halfway through grade 2. We were learning to write, practicing writing the letters of the alphabet. Nova Scotia only had grade 12, so they were more advanced" (2.3). Arthur found that because of the moves, he did not fit in at the same point in the continuum of the curriculum from one school to the next, from one province to the next. When he landed in the new classroom, he was always behind or ahead of the class.

As well as being unable to attend school because of moving, the participants attended school rarely even when they were in a stable place. For example, in one of these places, Leonard and his siblings took turns attending school or did not go to school at all because of the weather. He explained, "We lived in a town in the North . . . It was so cold there that we didn't

go to school. We didn't go half the time" (3.5) and "For quite a while, we lived near a western

city on a farm where we didn't go to school because we came from a very broken down home.

We took turns going to school" (3.3). At another time, he explained that he did not attend

school because he was working on the farm to help feed his family: "So I grew up, 7 years old

and I was working taking care of my brothers and sisters helping to raise them" (3.29). He said:

> Same as my brother. As for entertainment, we'd go out early in the morning and drive
>
> the combine. When we came in at night, we'd be too beat for anything. There was no
>
> TV, so we would go straight to bed. We'd be putting in twelve or thirteen hour days.
>
> (3.59)

Although Leonard viewed his combine work as "entertainment", clearly he was

exploited as a child labourer working on the farm at the age of seven. Arthur was also truant for

work reasons. In high school, he quit to go to work at McDonalds. He explained, "I just stopped

going. It wasn't drugs. I didn't do drugs. I didn't drink. I worked at McDonalds 7 days a week, my

two hour shift from 5 to 7" (2.61). It was more important to him to make a little bit of money

than to continue in school. There seems to have been no support or encouragement at home

for him to continue going to school. This happened in grade 11. Later, at the age of 19, he tried

again to get back into school, but his attempt was short-lived.

Arthur suffered from a lack of support in the family because his father was absent and

his mother had a "hands-off" attitude to raising him. The military life-style was difficult. Arthur

explains how the military isolated his family, not only the nuclear family but also the

grandparents, aunts and uncles. Although Arthur was neither abused nor exploited as a child at

home, he was largely ignored. His mother lived mostly alone as his father was away with the

military: "From very early in life, my mom played the role of the single mother because my dad was overseas for one and two year periods" (2.22). He recalls being an only child: "I remember in Nova Scotia with the hurricanes being in the basement with her, just her and me alone. He explains that he had little contact with his father: "We never really knew him" (2.51).

The effect of the military life was intergenerational and caused the family to disperse and lose contact with each other. Arthur describes his grandfather:

After the war it really affected him being Catholic and having to go to arms. That really devastated him. It bothered Grandpa. And he also had the health effects because he was in World War I and got the full shot of World War II, and by 1955 they moved the family to the States, to California. (2.51)

Military life led to estrangement of the family. "My grandparents passed away there, and they're buried there. My dad has 3 sisters and a brother, and he hasn't seen them, well he saw them 3 or 4 years ago, but before that he hadn't seen them for 35 years" (2.52). Consequently, Arthur was unable to benefit from having both a mother and father, nor extended family. Also, he explained that his parents had been independent and had gotten no help from extended family. "My mom and dad had nothing from anyone. Their families left them nothing" (2.29).

Similarly, Leonard never had the benefit of a loving father. He, his mother and siblings were on the run from their father who was involved in criminal activities. The children, especially the boys, were out of school and working on the farm or for other employers at a very early age. Leonard said that his mother wrote poems and stories and worked as an editor at newspapers. He explained that his mother read her own poems and stories, "My mom would read. But she'd read the stuff that she wrote, the poems that she wrote and stories, short

stories. But for our entertainment on the farm, I was driving a combine and I enjoyed that" (3.58).

Ariel became homeless because of her family situation. She left home rather than live with an abusive adoptive mother. "I come from being homeless. I'm adopted. I thought my mom was dead. I don't know my family" (1.10). She was thirteen years old at the time and lived on the street for two years.

All three participants experienced lapses in their education caused by their home situations. They struggled with being able to get to school regularly because of transience, and they were truant even when they were in a place where they could attend school.

Factors in the school

There is a common belief among educators that school success depends largely on the motivation of the student, and that lack of motivation is often the cause of failure (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). When the participants in this study described their lives, it was evident that they were highly motivated to learn, but in spite of their motivation they were unable to succeed.

Ariel is the most obvious example. She described her attempt to stay in school even when she was living on the streets with her small children. When this proved impossible, it was her motivation to learn that helped her to get back into school as an adult:

For me I have my whole life statement. I want to go into social work, and I want to be a counsellor. I eventually plan to be a motivational speaker. I want to work with people who have all kinds of problems. (1:10)

Arthur expressed similar feelings toward his school. He had dropped out in his early teens to take a job at Macdonald's but later decided to get back into the system: "So I went back to the Catholic system here … being critical and being angry is something that a person has to say no to. And my reasons are because I wanted to be a good person" (2.8). Arthur explained that he had stopped going to school in order to work, but he tried hard to get back in school and found it very difficult. "Getting back into school wasn't easy. There was no avenue to get back in. They seemed to, you know, keep a record of who you were" (2.66). Although he was highly motivated to get back to school, the school system was not eager to give him the opportunity. Leonard, also, was eager to learn. He explains,

> I didn't believe in goofing off in class at any time, and I saw lots of kids in class
> that did act up. I wanted to learn whatever it was. I wanted to learn, so I had to
> try hard because I knew I wouldn't get much chance to remember it as we would
> have to move on to someplace else. So I had to try extra hard to remember it.
> (3.17)

As an adult, Leonard was motivated to succeed in the upgrading program. One of the English teachers was of Eastern origin and Leonard recalled, "I looked at him and thought, 'He's not even from Canada, but he learned to read, so if he could learn to read, I could learn to read'" (3.51). He explained his persistent nature:

> I wanted to be successful. I kept saying I can do it. I wanted to do it. As a matter
> of fact, in aircraft maintenance, I failed the theory of flight three times. That was
> the only one I failed, but I did fail three times. I was persistent to do it. (3.55)

Although the three participants were eager to learn, their motivation did not overcome the other barriers that kept them from success. Ariel and Arthur described their experiences in what Ariel dubbed the "Dead Kids' Class" while Leonard found ways to convince people that he could read and avoided that circumstance. Neither situation served the students involved and both treatments ended in failure.

Both Ariel and Arthur were placed in special education classes although their problems were not of a special needs nature. As a teenager, Ariel acted out violently and then she got pregnant, and the school reacted by putting her in the slow learners' class, which she called "the dead kids' class". She recognized this placement as a way for the school to put all of their troubles into one place:

> I was violent. I beat somebody up. And then I got pregnant with my first right
>
> after that. They had us in the dead kids' class. They put everybody together, the
>
> trouble makers, the handicapped and if you got pregnant, in the basement.
>
> (1.44)

Arthur was put in a class for slow learners as well. Because he would arrive at a school in the middle or at the end of a term, the schools' solution was to put him in a class for special needs. At the time, he did not understand why he was being placed there. He explains, "I was in a class where people had disabilities or other issues, but I had no problems. If someone had explained that to me, then that would have been OK" (2.41). He later recognized the class as a means for the school to deal with deviation from the normal attendance pattern, but at the time, he was aware that he did not belong there but there seemed no way to escape. He recalls practicing writing and watching the others struggle:

In fact, from the very first day I was in that class when they gave me work to do,

it was just unbelievable to watch the others in the class go over the letters and

words over and over, and I knew the words. But there was never any getting out

of that class. (2.90)

He further recalls:

I remember in grade 2, we had children with real behavioural problems and

anger issues and I'm a regular person and I went from home, a regular home,

into a regular class and found myself separated from the other students. You

see, we all started the day in the same class, but I was one of the 8 kids who had

to go to that special room for the day, every day. And of course, there were

people with emotional issues. I'll never forget the fellow who was rocking all the

time and he'd shout. He may have had the Tourrette's syndrome. And they, they

thought, 'Let's stick him [Arthur] in there." (2.46)

In another instance, Arthur remembers being put in the slow learners' class in grade 6 because

he had moved to the school close to the end of the school year.

Because it was grade 6 and the Catholic system had grades 7 and 8 in another

school, it was the last year of elementary school. There was the school for grades

7 and 8, junior high. So back to the system concept, there's no place for you.

Basically, it's the end of the year, and next year you're somebody else's problem.

(2.36)

Rather than deal with Arthur's needs, the school set him aside to be the next grade teacher's

problem.

As a child Arthur remembers being very insulted by being put in with the slow learners. "I could clearly recognise the feeling of being insulted. And never having it lifted. I never, ever had that feeling lifted" (2.87). At the beginning, Arthur felt insulted and felt that he didn't belong in the slow learners' class: "I identified the feeling that I didn't belong there" (2.84). Later, however, he finally acquiesced and eventually agreed that he was, indeed, a slow learner. He then set out to make the best of it:

> No, it wasn't a conundrum because I assumed that everyone was right. I'm slow
> and I accepted it with a smile, and I got along very well with my teachers, thank
> you very much. They seemed to like me very much. In fact, there's one constant
> report ever since I was little, how they liked me. I was pleasant and a pleasure to
> have in class. (2.78)

When Arthur talked about being put in the slow learners' class, I asked if his mother questioned that. "Education, no she didn't talk to me about that. I think they left it up to the school" (2.29). He explained that the school was the authority, and the parents did not want to question the decisions of the school. "Yes, they were independent. But, also, you're vulnerable too. You're just going to do your best and not rock any boats. It's a survival existence too" (2.30). His mother trusted the school to make the right decisions and did not want to question authority.

Sometimes students who are not able to read and write are able to pass themselves off as readers. Leonard was one of these children. He did not learn to read, but because he was able to talk and act in a mature way, teachers and school administrators took it for granted that

he could read. His own mother thought that he could read. He could remember verbal

instructions and repeat things so that it sounded as if he was reading. He explains:

> I never had one school that I really got to know. Every time I went to school, the
>
> teachers would automatically figure that I understood what I was reading and
>
> everything because I could speak clearly enough that they thought, 'OK, he's
>
> learning,' but I wasn't learning. I never read. (3.3)

Leonard spoke about the techniques that he used for this "passing": "I just talked clearly

enough that I looked like I could read" (3.7). Leonard's use of visual clues was very good, so that

he was able to follow diagrams or maps without being able to read the instructions. He

explains:

> Even maps and instructions. I used to build models all the time. Things with
>
> colours on it and things like that and even if it had pictures on it, I could
>
> understand it. Especially if there was a picture on it, I could understand it. I
>
> always could. I don't know why. You give me a puzzle with a thousand pieces to
>
> it, I could put it together. I could never read which piece was which. I could
>
> always put it together because I could see from the picture the point where one
>
> piece fit into the other. And that's the same thing with maps. I could see from
>
> one place to the next how it was going to go. (3.33)

Leonard also had an excellent aural memory. He would get someone else to read

something first, and then he would be able to memorize what was said; so that when it was his

turn to read, he would recite what he remembered, and it looked as if he was reading. He

explains:

What I would do would be to get someone else to read the thing and I would say

that I agree. I paid attention to how they sounded professional and made myself

sound professional. I was speaking the same way when I was away from them.

(3.49)

In one example of this Leonard describes his experience in his mother's church:

One of the things that they [Jehovah Witnesses] do quite often is they put on

small skits in the front of the hall in front of all the people. One time when I was

seven years old I had to read a speech. Someone read me the speech, and I

memorized it. And to this day, I remember it. It was a mind game that I kept on

repeating it and repeating it until I remembered it. (3.48)

The teachers' reactions to Leonard were that they found him charming. He describes

one incident that occurred when he was getting ready to move away from a school:

I remember one time in a Western town, we had to move on. When we were

getting ready to leave, I go to my desk and the teacher has all my books packed

up after music class and there was a big model airplane. I was so excited about

that. I didn't touch it though, and she said, 'No, that's yours too'." (3.23)

Leonard never failed any grades. His skill at "passing as a reader" was so good that

neither the teachers nor his own mother recognized that Leonard could not read. Leonard's

mother was a highly literate person who wrote short stories and poems and worked as an

editor at newspapers in different towns that they lived in. Leonard explains that his mother did

not find out that Leonard could not read until late in her life:

My mother was a real good poet and a writer. I was completely the opposite. My

mom didn't know it until just before she passed away a couple of years ago that I

couldn't read. She used to give me all of her poems to read to see what I thought

of them, and I would tell her that was good, that was good even though I didn't

read it. It was kind of a bonus. It was sad that she was gone when I was able to

read them and understand them. She didn't know I couldn't read them, but then

it was nice when I could. (3.8)

The fact that Leonard's mother was known as a writer in the community probably aided

in Leonard's passing as a reader as teachers would expect the son of a writer to be reading and

writing as well.

Leonard was different from the other two participants because his inability to read was

not recognized and dealt with by his teachers. The other two were able to read and write, but

they were put in special education classes for the convenience of the teachers. It is ironic that

the only participant who was unable to read was able to pass as a reader and, therefore, was

never placed in any form of special class or remedial situation. He removed himself from the

school system as soon as he could. The other two participants, both of whom knew how to

read, were placed in special needs classes that neither of them felt were appropriate for their

abilities. These classes were ultimately inadequate for helping them acquire the necessary

literacy standard since both of them were eventually expelled. All three participants eventually

dropped out or were forced out of the school system before graduation. Within their

education, the three participants were abandoned by well-meaning teachers and

administrators. Ariel and Arthur were put in special education classes which Ariel called the

"Dead Kids' Class". Once there, they were excluded from the kind of instruction that may have led to success at school. The teachers failed Leonard in a different way by not recognizing that he could not read and write. The teachers accepted how he "passed" himself off as a reader; as a result, his educational needs were not met.

Leaving School

All three participants left school very early. Ariel was fifteen when she was expelled. Arthur would have been close to fifteen when he left in grade 11 the first time. He did try to get back into school during his teenage years until he was nineteen years old but he was forced out because he missed a deadline on his re-entry contract. Leonard was the youngest when he left school to work. He was employed at the age of 12 and had left school entirely by the time he was fifteen.

Ariel and Arthur were both expelled from school. Ariel was expelled for violent behaviour. She explains:

When I was thirteen I had moved out of my house. I was thirteen and homeless. So I spent two and a half years on the street, doing whatever. I tried to go to school. I got kicked out of school in grade 11, and I got pregnant right away.(1.33)

A lack of support from the community exacerbated her situation. There was no help for the adoptive mother to get out of her own cycle of violence and she continued to use violence as she tried to raise Ariel. The violence perpetrated by the adoptive mother provoked Ariel to act out violently at school which led to her expulsion in grade 11. Ariel left home to live on the

street, and she became pregnant. "I was homeless. I started doing all the searching myself. I did

all my prenatal classes. I quit smoking. I did everything that I had to do for a living and got my

own place. I got away from the boyfriend" (1.26). Even though she was homeless and living on

the street, she continued to attend school. She tells how her family was unsupportive at that

time.

> Nobody valued any of that. I was still just the young mom with the stupid
>
> boyfriend, and that just crushed me, so I'd go back to him. It breaks you down,
>
> but I've got to the point now of realizing that that's what those people are like.
>
> Instead of using them to break me down, I use their hate to elevate me. (1.26)
>
> I asked Ariel if there were people who were proud of her for being able to move

from homelessness and being in abusive relationships as a single mother to returning to

school. She answered, "There probably were people who were proud. I feel more like I

have more people who were big haters who never thought I could do it. In my family,

there are those people" (1.20). Also, "there were people who were giving me crap. But I

didn't let it be part of me and the fact is that I feel shiny inside at the same time" (1.23).

A lack of supportive home and family led Ariel to homelessness and eventually a gap in

her education. Ariel explained how she tried to continue in school even after becoming

pregnant:

> Yes, they judged me. They didn't know me. Like in school, they would say, 'What
>
> are you all about?' But I said, 'What do you know about me. Are you homeless?
>
> Are you living on the street?' But then I got pregnant with my baby, and we were
>
> in it together. But I never missed school. I kept going to school even when I was

homeless. I did everything. I had to do everything to live. But I was a volcano. I couldn't control my emotions. I was violent. I got kicked out of school in grade 11. (1.43)

Arthur, on the other hand, was expelled for being late too many times. He had stopped going to school to work at McDonalds; but later, when he managed to get back into school at the age of 19, he had to sign a contract promising no more than three lates or expulsion would result. "Yeah, and so the one time I managed to get back, I had to sign a credential saying 3 lates and you're out. Well, yeah, I went for most of the year. But the third late, that was it" (2.69). Even though Arthur had attended on time for most of the year, the contract was binding and he was expelled.

Leonard was working for wages by the time he was twelve and had completely left school by the age of fifteen. I reminded him that there are laws in Ontario that children must go to school until sixteen, and I wondered if he had lied about his age. He replied, "No, they didn't know. We were moving all the time. So they didn't know where I was. I had not been registered for school" (3.100). In the end, Leonard did not attend school very much at all. His school attendance was sporadic, and he disappeared from the school system at a very young age. All three participants were either allowed to leave school early or were forced to do so by school administrators.

Although the participants left school at an early age, they did find opportunities to return to school later. In the next section, I tell the stories of barriers that they found as they attempted to access literacy programs as adults.

Continuing Barriers

The participants faced barriers in their attempts to get education as adults as well. For instance, Ariel needed to arrange for transportation, housing, and child care. Arthur, too, had become a parent but his problems were quite different as he spent time, money and energy gaining parental access to his children. For Leonard, it was the need to come to terms with the fact that he had to learn to read and his difficulty in adapting to reading.

Ariel: The necessities of life

Transportation proved to be a problem for Ariel as she had to accommodate the schedules of her boyfriend who had a vehicle in order to be able to get to school. She elaborates:

> I live nearby and I usually get a ride. I have a vehicle with my boyfriend. It's his vehicle. And that's a part of it too. Getting to school and stuff like if I promise my boyfriend that affects how I am going to get here. It affects my boyfriend because I have to get the kids to daycare, so I have to get up earlier. So sometimes I have to take the bus. Okay, so I have to work something out with day care, or I have to make it fit with my boyfriend's classes. So, I have to miss a class. (1.4)

Another obstacle to schooling that Ariel encountered is inadequate housing. Ariel explains how she struggled to find a larger apartment for herself and her two children:

> So that's a big thing too, I guess. I live in a bachelor apartment and I have two kids and I have been trying to get a house so I'm living with that. I'm looking for a new place.

Literally, like my apartment is this big (indicating the size of the study room where the

interview is taking place). I have no space. I have nowhere to go. If I do need some

space, I spend time sitting in my bathroom where I try to be by myself. Even that creates

anxiety for me. That was the hard part for me. There's this big pressure to find a bigger

place because I'm going into [Literacy and Basic Skills] and I will have more work than I

do now. (1.36)

Finding adequate child care was another obstacle. Arranging for day care was just part

of it; she also had to deal with the emotions and demands of her children when she was home

from school. She explains:

It's a lot of things to think about. I'm still thinking about what I have to do when I go

home. I have to clean up. There is a pressure because I only have three hours with my

kids because they go to bed at 7:30. This used to be a stressor for me because the space

that my kids and I have is small. I don't even get my coat off and they're after me, so I've

been teaching my daughter to just give Mommy a second. Just let me take off my stuff. I

know what it's like for my daughter. I've never been away from her before. So I had to

deal with my own emotions. Just dealing with my emotions and my children's emotions

is a lot. (1.32)

The worry of being able to care for her children stayed with Ariel during the school day

and may have prevented her from fully concentrating on learning, though she did not explicitly

connect these things.

Another stressor on Ariel was that she felt that she had to be a perfect parent and keep

a perfect house because, as a single mother on Ontario Works, she feared that the social

workers would be able to take her children away from her. She explains, "You have to be so careful. The house has to be clean. Everything has to be perfect or they can come and take your children away. So you always have to remember that" (1.45). Fear of having her children taken away from her might be another stressor that would hinder her ability to learn.

Arthur: The rights of a father

Arthur, as well, experienced problems with children by which he was frustrated. He had fathered twins with a woman in a very short-term relationship, and the mother separated herself and the children from him very early. He fought a bitter and difficult court battle that lasted nine years in order to gain visitation rights and partial custody. (2.79) Sadly, he had very little contact with his children. He explained, "It's really too late now. I think we've had now 10 or 12 times that we've been together for 8 hours"(2.92). The frustrations that Arthur experienced with the courts spilled over into his school life and made it hard for him to deal with anger. Arthur made outbursts in school about minor issues and had to remove himself from the upgrading program temporarily.

Leonard: Coming to terms with Reading

Leonard faced barriers when he returned to school in the upgrading program. He knew that he was not good at reading and writing, so he tried to avoid the English program by taking the Mature Student Test. He tells us,

> I did learn an awful lot here (in the upgrading program) but there were ways of
>
> getting around it that I think I hurt myself a little bit too. Like the English. . . I
>
> started in the upgrading program. I was killing time waiting for the next semester

to start the Pre-Technology program. So what I did was I wrote the Mature

Student Test. (3.24)

He explains that reading is still not something that he enjoys. He tells us, "Yeah, truthfully I still have to force myself to read. I'm spoiled to the point that I don't like reading. I have to force myself to keep doing it"(3.44). He explains: "I still have trouble with it in the last four years. I can read now. You put something in front of me and I'll read it. But acknowledging what I read is still a problem"(3.53). He relates how he never enjoyed reading, even after learning to read as an adult: "I never really found any books that I could read that were interesting. For example, when I got into the Aircraft, I loved reading the manuals, Transport Canada aircraft manuals"(3.43). Even though Leonard did learn to read, he still prefers manuals.

As adults, the participants continued to struggle to achieve literacy acquisition while balancing parenthood, finding adequate transportation and housing, and for Leonard, coming to terms with his need to learn to read.

The discussion chapter will focus on the barriers at home that the participants faced such as lack of family support, transience, and truancy. Then it will address barriers that presented themselves at school such as the "dead kids' class", the motivation myth and passing as a reader. It will consider how hegemonic attitudes may have contributed to the participants' personal difficulties around literacy and how literacy affects their place in a classist society.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

I pointed out in the literature review how mechanisms that connect literacy and poverty may be influenced by hegemonic ideology. Classist assumptions may colour the attitudes of teachers, administrators and families, who accept as fact the myth of equality of opportunity ingrained in North American ideology.

Identifying Hegemonic Ideology

Theories of hegemonic ideology, particularly those of McLaren (2007) and Giroux (1988), can be applied to the stories told by these participants to demonstrate the ways that hegemonic ideologies continue to affect the lives of children and adults as they pursue their education. Hegemonic influences were seen in both the home and school situations of the participants. Four attributes of hegemonic ideology were especially evident in the stories of these participants: 1) Emphasis is on individual effort rather than on a communal structure of supports (Giroux, 1988); 2) Hegemonic ideology may lead to misdirected violence by those experiencing it; 3) Hegemonic ideology leads individuals in the disadvantaged classes to accept powerlessness; 4) Hegemonic attitudes encourage self-blame because members of the society learn that the individual should be responsible for his or her own well-being; 5) All of these contribute to acquiescence to the status quo. In this section, I identify how hegemonic influences played out in the homes and in the schools for these participants in these five areas.

Individual success valued over community support

Anyon (1981), in her study of classism in schools explains: "A priority on personal expression, personal 'meaning making' and the 'construction of reality' mitigates against collectivistic values and meanings and solutions; it is thereby reproductive of values important to an individualistic, privately owned, and competitive economy" (p. 35). Schools, then, are complicit in perpetuating this ideology. Hegemonic ideologies promote a society based on individual efforts, so individuals in marginal situations are expected to rely on themselves. Lack of support from the community often means that poverty is perpetuated, and people have little hope of rising out of difficult situations.

Leonard's case demonstrates a missed opportunity since people failed to recognize the fact that a child had been removed from the school long before the legislated time for school leaving. Leonard lived in a situation where he missed school because poverty necessitated that he and his brother work on the farm rather than go to school. At the age of 12, he worked sweeping floors in a grocery store. The owner paid him in groceries. When I pointed out that it is illegal to leave school before 16 in Ontario, he explained that because of the transient nature of their lives, no authority desired to, or had the time or resources, to notice. Although this is Leonard's conjecture, it probably is what happened.

Because of the situation where Leonard's mother was on the run from the criminal father, the family moved from province to province, and school attendance was erratic. At least in part, as a result of the moves, both Leonard and Arthur were lost to the education system. Arthur's mother was alone because his father spent long periods of time away in the military. Arthur explained how his mother was very independent, and that nothing was given to her. She

had no support from immediate family, extended family or the community. Being self-reliant

and living independently is an ideal supported by the ruling class. Capitalist values promote

individual efforts over the notion of community working together to support each other

(Anyon, 1981). For both Leonard and Arthur's mothers, there was little support from their

communities, and they were expected to struggle independently.

<div align="center">Misdirected Violence</div>

McLaren argues that internalized oppression is often the effect of dominant ideologies

upon oppressed groups in society. Hegemonic ideology "is a message system that distributes

and reinforces self-deprecation, fatalism and misdirected violence characteristic of the

oppressed" (McLaren 2007, p. 134). The violence is apparent in the actions of Ariel. She left

home at 13 to live on the street because her adoptive mother had been abusive. She explains,

"She was abused herself and she was abusive towards me. . . . She created the scenario

because she ended up pushing me" (1:36).

Ariel's story is somewhat different from Leonard's and Arthur's. She was raised by an

adoptive mother who was physically and verbally abusive to her. She talks about her adoptive

mother:

> She was abused herself, and she was abusive towards me. But she would say it
>
> was out of fear that I was going to turn out like my mom and dad. She made
>
> stereotypes on me. She created the scenario because she ended up pushing me.
>
> Anyway, even though she tried so hard, I feel that she just went about it the
>
> wrong way. (1.36)

In her response to the abuse at home, Ariel was not able to engage in learning but instead acted out using violence. She was treated with violence at home and transferred this action to her interactions at school. Ariel told me that when she was in high school she was expelled for fighting. "I was in a fight. I was very aggressive. I fought a lot during high school and a lot of it came from at home because she [her adoptive mother] was abusive herself " (1.34). Ariel also suffered abuse later in life, not only at the hands of her family, but from the boyfriend who was the father of her two children. As she describes it:

I had been in an abusive relationship for six years with my ex, the children's

father. I got out of that. I went through the whole court process and I went from

being a scared teenager with a little girl . . . to turning my life around. (1.11)

The cycle of violence continued in her life when she left home and set out on her own.

The only way that Ariel could get a feeling of being in control was through violence. At school she beat up other students. Being violent can be read as resisting because it is outside the accepted behaviour in the school. For Ariel, living on the street seemed to be her only choice apart from living in an abusive home. Her resistance against the school resulted in her being expelled. Her resistance ended her schooling at the time. McLaren (2007) claims that "resistance is part of the process of hegemony, which works through the ideology shaping characteristics of the school" (p. 228). When schools set limits of behaviour, they are doing so within the cultural and social confines of hegemony. Of course, beating up peers is not acceptable behaviour as it creates an unsafe environment, but aggression was the only tool that Ariel had to cope with her frustrations. It was behaviour that she had learned at home. She chose to leave home because she felt dominated by her adoptive mother. Also, because

violence was the norm at home, Ariel used violence in her dealings with the outside world. Ariel

beat up her peers at school as beating someone up was the way frustrations were dealt with at

home. There were eventually support systems as Ariel lived in a residence at a family centre

after the time that she was homeless (1:40), but the aid was inadequate to help her with her

education at the time.

Powerlessness

The role of hegemony is seen in the reactions of teachers and administrators to

different classes of children. Giroux (1988) asserts that while children from the upper class

receive constant support and confirmation from the school system, those from the lower class

do not: "the subordinate class experiences and language practices do not count for much;

working class students receive it from the vantage point of powerlessness" (p. 215). The name

"Dead Kids' Class" illustrates the hopelessness that they feel and the absence of possibilities

that they see for themselves in the future. Leonard, as well, was an example of powerlessness.

He had no power as a 12 year old who left school to help his mother support the family while

on the run from a criminal father.

Leonard's story of missing school because of inadequate clothing could be viewed as

neglect and the need to work to help in the family income draws a direct link between poverty

and literacy. Arthur, too, was largely left alone. He was an only child and did not have a father

at home because he was away in the military. His mother made a point of not "spoiling" him:

"That's her way," Arthur said. "She didn't want me to be spoiled like an only child. She treated

me as if I had siblings. I didn't get everything. It was quite the opposite" (2.28). The poverty

experienced by these students meant that they were in a position of powerlessness within the

school itself. Their needs were overlooked by a system that paid little attention to children whose parents had no status in the community.

Ariel and Leonard came from families that were marginalized and living on the edges of society. They were not fully participating in society in a positive way as Ariel's family was violent, and Leonard's mother and siblings were running away from criminal activities of his father. Patterns of truancy, transience, abuse and neglect originated with their families; these patterns became barriers to their progress in school. Leonard was working on a farm as a child in order to help his mother raise her family while on the run from a criminal father. Ariel was an adopted child in an abusive household who acted out in violent ways. Arthur's situation was different. His family life was probably more middle class, and his problems in school were partly caused by frequent, interprovincial moves. Despite these circumstances out of their control, the participants each accepted their failure as their own. Arthur, however, had been critical of the school's decisions early in the interview, but he reported that over time he came to acquiesce and agree that he was a slow learner. The participants' stories demonstrate missed opportunities for bringing them back from the brink of literacy failure and thus changing the course of their lives.

Self-blame

Hegemonic ideologies promote the idea that individuals are responsible for what happens in their lives. According to McLaren (2007), Ryan explains that self-blame for school failure by the oppressed can be attributed to constructs based on capitalist structures of the division of labour. The student who has failed sees himself or herself as deficient or inferior in some way. Often unwittingly, teachers and administrators are complicit in accepting the notion

of inferiority of the underclass, thus relieving themselves of any blame. Giroux (1988) argues

that Freire made the point that the poor reinforce the idea of their inferiority and responsibility

for their place in the class structure. Giroux (1988) expounds further in his discussion of the

school system: "The content, pedagogical styles and forms of evaluation within the educational

setting all function, in part, as message systems to distribute and reinforce self-deprecation,

fatalism and misdirected violence characteristic of the oppressed" (p. 134). The self-

deprecation is evident in Arthur's acceptance of his being a slow learner and his blaming

himself for being "dumb" (2.78).

Arthur illustrates the self-blame in his response to questions about how he felt being

put it the class for slow learners. Although he was indignant at first, he eventually acquiesced

and accepted that he was indeed a slow learner. Ariel took the responsibility for what

happened to her as well. She blamed no one else. At the time that she left home to live on the

street, she saw it as her choice, and that she was in control. Then, when she became pregnant,

she took it upon herself to go to prenatal classes and learn how to be a mother. She took the

blame for having been expelled from school and admitted her violent behaviour. Again,

hegemonic ideology emphasizes taking care of oneself over a reliance on community based

supports.

The participants in this study either explicitly or tacitly demonstrated that they blamed

themselves for their failure to complete school. Arthur took responsibility for being expelled

from school. The school had placed a rule that valued punctuality over his individual progress.

He may question the value of the rule, but the rule turned the situation so that Arthur was

responsible for leaving, not the other way around. Ariel was expelled for violent behaviour. The

cause of her behaviour was never questioned; her behaviour was her responsibility and she is left to take the blame for growing up with no support system and an abusive mother.

Leonard, as well, did not blame the teachers or administrators even though they did not recognize that he could not read and write. Because he was eager to please and acquiesce to the situation, he preferred to pass himself off as a reader. Hegemony provides the setting for the schools to create environments that create passive students who are discouraged from questioning authority (McLaren, 2007). Leonard's passing himself off as a reader is an example of a student going to extraordinary ends to fit in and not cause problems. If people had recognized that Leonard could not read and write, there would have been a lot of consequences. It was easier for him to pretend that everything was alright.

Acquiescence to the status quo

Giroux tells us that schooling "functions through its classroom relations to produce students with attitudes and dispositions that make them docile and receptive to the social and economic imperatives of the capitalist economy" (p. 92). Arthur exemplifies the same kind of acquiescence to the system in the reaction of his mother to his being put in a class for slow learners. He explains that she did not question the decision and left it to the authority of the school. Arthur explains that his mother did not want to "rock the boat". The words, "It's a survival existence" (2:30) show the vulnerability of the mother. She is willing to accept the decisions of the authority rather than risk repercussions that may affect her negatively. On the other hand, Ariel did resist by being violent and living on the street. Her resistance resulted in

her being expelled from school. Her resistance ended her schooling at the time. The result was

the same whether the child resisted or acquiesced.

Although Leonard once mentions a teacher who took an interest in him and gave him a

parting gift as he left a school, none of the participants mentions teachers who intervened or

reinterpreted the structures that perpetrated the systemic failures. Their stories illustrate how

hegemonic influences keep the classes separate: children with advantages continue to benefit

from the capitalist economy, while the disadvantaged suffer from lack of opportunity,

powerlessness and lack of agency to fully participate in society. The influence of hegemony

maintained the structures that kept the participants marginalized in their home environments

and allowed them to be abandoned by the people who were responsible for their education.

Hegemonic ideologies that operate in homes as they do in schools reinforce acceptance of

existing policies, procedures, curriculum and allotment of resources and impinge on the ability

of those in the working classes to reach self-fulfillment as active participants in an equal

opportunity society:

> Not only do students bear the sole responsibility for school failure, but there is
>
> also little or no theoretical room for interrogating the ways in which
>
> administrators and teachers actually create and sustain the problems they
>
> attribute to the students in question. (Giroux, 1988, p. 93)

Recommendations

Based on my analysis of these individual stories, I could make specific recommendations

for changes at the community and school levels. On one level, I could recommend that teachers

and schools make changes so that people like the ones in my study would be better served. Literacy testing could be (and has been) implemented so that someone like Leonard would not get through elementary school passing as a reader. I could recommend that teachers and schools offer real support for students with needs, rather than grouping them in special education classes and then abandoning them there as was the experience of Ariel and Arthur. I could recommend that social services be improved to provide help for people in violent situations, so that abuse at home would not be so common. Social programs could be implemented to help house homeless teenagers. There are many junctures at which the stories of Leonard, Arthur and Ariel might have been different.

However, these would all be shallow recommendations. What is needed is a true societal shift in thinking, away from the capitalist values of acquiring wealth and toward a more socialist perspective that may offer emancipation from oppression and equal access to opportunities. Persons striving to learn to read and write should have equal opportunities to learn and equal access to resources rather than the lack of access that exists based on prejudicial policies based on class. Literacy skills need to be fostered that include not only the ability to read and write, but the ability to think critically and question established processes and policies. Class structures and policies perpetuated by hegemonic ideologies of equality of opportunity and achievement based on meritocracy need to be challenged at the community level, in the schools, and in wider society. Teachers and administrators need to foster an environment where students are encouraged to think critically and question established economic structures. Teachers need to undergo teachers' education programs that promote critical pedagogy so that teachers become aware of the inequalities and find ways that they can

promote change. Educators need to allow the students to truly take ownership of their learning.

Critical pedagogy is a movement of educators who strive to challenge structures and policies where classism exists. Although many are caught up in the myth of equal opportunity, some are beginning to be aware of radical theories and are beginning to question classist ideas. McLaren (2007) explains that "empowerment means not only helping students to understand and engage the world around them, but also enabling them to exercise the kind of courage needed to change the social order where necessary" (p. 211). School experience needs to reflect the reality of all the students, not only those from the dominant class. As well, students need to have the environment and encouragement from teachers, administrators and families to challenge commonly accepted procedures and curriculum. McLaren goes on to suggest that "school knowledge should help create the conditions productive for student self-determination in the larger society that can only be achieved when class society is abolished and a community of freely associated producers is created" (p. 211).

Freire (1978) tells how students need to "decode their own reality before they can understand the relations of dominance and power" (p. 58). In order for students like those who participated in my study to be better served by the home and school in the pursuit of their education, changes need to take place in the structures that surround home and school. Class structures and policies perpetuated by the status quo need to be challenged.

Conclusion

By telling the stories of these three students and their struggles in literacy acquisition and connecting those struggles to broadly accepted hegemonic ideologies, I hope that I have raised awareness in the education field and beyond of the importance of critical pedagogy. Educators, administrators, government officials and the general public accept hegemonic ideas to be legitimate, and this does not have to be the case. Theorists of critical pedagogy such as McLaren and Giroux have opened the discussion, and change in attitudes regarding class and access to educational opportunities can take place. A societal shift in attitude may take time, but as people are increasingly educated and made aware of inequalities that exist in education and in wider society, they may promote change. A capitalist economy, where opportunities exist so much more for the wealthy class than for the poor, is not the only option. Practicing teachers, principals, administrators, students in education programs, families, and the general public should question existing policies and practices with an interest in fostering community based notions of equality and fairness rather than an emphasis on wealth and class.

Students need to be taught to speak with their own voices and believe in the potential to change society. Students should be encouraged to question current structures, policies, content and procedures in their lives at home and in the community, as well as in the school. Only when critical pedagogy becomes more prevalent and teachers and administrators have the courage to question and make changes will people like Ariel, Arthur and Leonard be better served, so they do not experience the literacy gap.

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