

Navigating Stormy Seas: Critical Perspectives on the Intersection of Popular Culture and Educational Leader-"Ship"

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Abstract:

This article, utilizing a postmodern mediated cultural framework, critically situates the sociopolitical context of public education within the constructs of a lost ship at sea. Seeking to rupture false assumptions of popular culture and its impact on the learning community, I further explore critical possibilities regarding the intersection of popular culture and educational leader-"ship."

Entering Case Junior-Senior High School in December 2000, I witnessed a multiethnic population of students, including African Americans, Appalachians, whites, Hispanics, and biracial students, listening to and performing the latest dance moves they witnessed on BET, MTV, and VH-1. The style of clothing clearly was taken from the latest hip-hop designers' lines and labels. Sean John, FUBU, and Ecko were visibly seen in all colors, with the guys wearing their oversized pants hanging from their hips, revealing the label and names of their choice boxers (underwear), and their "Tims" (Timberland Boots) unlaced. As I listened to several teachers discussing the students on that day, one statement echoed above many: "If they stop listening to that 'rap' maybe they could learn something and stop being so disrespectful." My thoughts went back to lines from Public Enemy, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and other rap artists I listened to "back in the day," and I wanted to say, "I listened to rap as a kid and I turned out fine, so what is really the problem?" (Gause, 2001, pp. 13-14). The following personal reflection from my dissertation (Gause, 2001) laid the foundation for this project and oftentimes served as a lighthouse during those moments when I felt as if I were lost at sea.

FINDING NEMO: WHICH WAY DID SHE GO?

Upon reviewing this personal reflection 5 years later I cannot escape the notion that there are many treacherous currents presently in the sea of education and rap music is only a small ripple in a much larger undertow. I am reminded of the Disney/Pixar movie *Finding Nemo*; Nemo is a little clown-fish who has a disability, with one fin being larger than the other. On Nemo's first day of school, his overprotective father, Marlin, takes him to class. Nemo and his other classmates set out on a class field trip to discover other parts of the sea, particularly the Great Barrier Reef located in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Australia. Unfortunately for Nemo, he is captured by a fisherman. His father decides to leave the confines of his chosen sea home and set out on a journey to find his Nemo, navigating the stormy and treacherous sea with strong currents and undertows.

Who is our Nemo and what are we hoping to find? Is our Nemo adequate yearly progress (AYP) on the various standardized tests of No Child Left Behind? Is it obedience, compliance, and passivity in our students? Is it producing students who are "winners," economically and otherwise? Is it developing students who uphold the moral values of the "red states" (antiabortion, anti-gay rights)? Or is it developing students who uphold the moral values of the "blue states" (opposition to war, poverty, injustice, and environmental destruction)? Who is our Nemo and what are we hoping to accomplish in educating students?

And what makes our sea stormy? What are the treacherous currents and undertow we must negotiate in education? Is it rap music? Instant messaging and the Internet? *American Idol*, "reality" television, and Hollywood? *Grand Theft Auto*, *Doom*, and *Halo 2*? Fox, CNN, and CBS? Rush, Rather, O'Reilly, Oprah, and Jerry? Monoculturalism, multiculturalism, fundamentalism, and secularism? Is popular culture a dangerous

undercurrent or a favorable wind? Does it open students' minds or close them? And what role do the students play? Are they Nemo or are they the stormy seas? Or are some students Nemo, while others are the treacherous undercurrent? Which of these is the white, privileged student? Nemo or treacherous undercurrent? What about the student who is not privileged, or the one who is black, Hispanic, or not on grade level, or who has been retained for the third time? Nemo or treacherous undercurrent? Which is the student who has no cultural capital, who would rather download mp3s from "the net" and text message her lesbian girlfriend while watching *American Idol* or *Boston Public*? Nemo or treacherous undercurrent? What of the outspoken educator, teacher, or administrator who is embittered by the limited re-sources at her disposal? Nemo or treacherous undercurrent? What about the "failing" school that has not made AYP, with 70% of the students on free and reduced lunch and 65% of the population below the desired level on the state's report card? Nemo or treacherous undercurrent?

MORE POPULAR THAN PARIS HILTON: YOU BETTER ASK SOMEBODY

Utilizing a post-postmodern perspective, I set out in this article to utilize the platform of the movie *Finding Nemo* to situate critical perspectives regarding the intersection of popular culture and educational leader-"ship." According to Cusic:

Popular culture is market-based rather than aesthetic based . . . it is the culture that is most "popular" in an economic sense; i.e., what TV programs receive the most viewers, radio the most listeners, recording the most buyers, and movies the most ticket-buyers. Although the study of popular culture encompasses a wide variety of issues—from clothing to popular activities to material culture it is rooted in entertainment. While some popular culture entertainment may be viewed as "art" or even elitist, the bulk of popular culture involves the transmission of mass culture through entertainment from producers to consumers. (2001, p. 1)

This critique by Cusic is accurate when operating out of a purely economic business discourse. However, from a social scientist or critical theorist perspective, popular culture goes beyond just the delivery of information to audiences for mass consumption, although consumption is the primary mitigating factor.

Popular culture is the very sea of our existence. In today's society, particularly U.S. society, we are bombarded on a 24-hour daily basis with mediated imagery and sound that shape our values, belief systems, and moral structures. The social institutions of our society—including families, public schools, and the communities in which we live and work—are affected and *infected*, as are those institutions engrossed in their own "traditions"—the legal, religious, and political communities. Because of the constant bombardment of "popular culture," how we and, particularly, present-day youth form our identities and cultural politics is influenced and based upon what is "popular." Gause posits:

Culture is considered to be the meanings that we construct from the images, languages, and formats of our day-to-day lives. Culture is the things in which we live and interact with on a daily basis and how we understand the world in which we live every day. This version of culture is referred as "pop culture," the everyday forms of communication, art, and language that represent "the people." (2001, p. 31)

Popular culture is experienced every day whether we want to have that experience or not. From blogs (Internet web-based information logs) to music, fashion, car buying, and the like, popular culture is embedded in our day-to-day experiences. We have reality television, scripted and unscripted, from *Real World* to *Boston Public*, which specifically speaks to the life and culture of an inner-city high school and plays out educational policy in the media. Angry parents have utilized popular culture and the media to influence school board elections, city council appointments, and employment decisions regarding principals at "choice" and "magnet" schools in the southeastern part of the United States.

CNN: CULTURALLY NAVIGATING NOISE-24-HOUR ACCESS

Because culture is considered to be the meanings that we construct from the images, languages, and formats of our day-to-day lives, Damen (1987) argues that "culture is learned and shared human patterns or models for

living; day-to-day living patterns; those models and patterns pervade all aspects of human social interaction; and culture is mankind's primary adaptive mechanism" (p. 367). I believe popular culture is the back-ground noise of our very existence. The media has been the single most dominating force in shaping not only today's global culture but also school culture.

Schools are social; they are filled with real people who live in real communities and have real concerns (Carlson & Apple, 1998; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1997). People with multiple perspectives send their kids to schools. These perspectives are often shaped by what is popular. Shapiro and Purpel (1998) assert, "Public schools brings [*sic*] together in one setting children, who regardless of their class, race, gender, or ethnicity, may acquire the capacity for critical intelligence, a sense of community, and the cultural literacy that are requisites for democracy" (p. 234).

Currently modern society is exposed to massive doses of violence and sex in the media. Gulf war conflicts, the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, school shootings, and murder are reported continuously via cable news channels, the Internet, and local satellite broadcasts. Music has evolved along the continuum as well. Popular music has always had an impact upon the lives of young people.

Throughout history parents and teachers alike have strived to teach young people to arm and protect themselves from the ideological power of popular music. The 1950s and 1960s ushered in the era of rock and roll. Little Richard, Elvis, and countless others gave the American public music that encouraged dancing and hip swaying to a level that could not be shown on public television. Subsequently, the new genre of music brought politicians and parents together for a call to censorship. No time period was more pronounced in this undertaking than the late 1980s to the early 1990s.

Tipper Gore, wife of former vice president Al Gore, and 20 wives of influential Washington politicians and businessmen formed the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). The PMRC's goals were to lobby the music industry for lyrics printed on album covers; explicit album covers kept under the counter; a records ratings system similar to that used for films; a ratings system for concerts; reassessment of contracts for those performers who engage in violence and explicit sexual behavior on stage; and a media watch by citizens and record companies that would pressure broadcasters to not air "questionable talent." The phrase "questionable talent" was considered by many urban artists as a way to identify rappers. This censorship campaign against "gangster rap" is unparalleled to any other time of censorship in our history. Hip-hop culture and rap music have reached global prominence, and young people from all classes and ethnic backgrounds appear to identify with this genre of music.

Media and Sex: The End of the Innocence?

Children will spend approximately 18,000 hours of their childhood in front of the television before they complete elementary school (Chen, 1994, p. 23). Presently young people will only spend 13,000 hours of their lives in school from kindergarten to grade 12 (Chen, 1994). With the great availability of information available via the Internet, music videos, "chat" rooms, and other digitized media, young people are becoming more sexually aware. Sexual content is broadly defined to include sexual references or innuendos, anatomical/genital references, homosexual acts or references, heterosexual acts or references, references to prostitution, adultery, nudity, masturbation, or oral acts of stimulation.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, policymakers, parent organizations, and children's rights groups believe that early sexual intercourse and risky sexual behavior among adolescents is becoming a major health problem in America (Halpern-Felsher, Cornell, Kropp, Tschann, 2005). These individuals have joined in the six-decade-old debate that television and the media are the primary causes in the increase in sexual promiscuity among teens. According to recent data, 61% of all high school seniors have had sexual intercourse, about half are currently sexually active, and 21% have had four or more partners (CDC, 2000). Although other developed countries have similar rates of early sexual intercourse, the United States has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the world and the highest adolescent sexually transmitted disease rates (CDC, 2000).

Researchers and policymakers argue that this increase is due to the over-exposure that U.S. teens have to the irresponsible sexual messages and sexual portrayals of individuals in the media, including magazine advertisements, product commercials, and the availability of pornographic materials via the Internet. Studies conducted by both the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics present findings that articulate that in the absence of effective, comprehensive sex education at home or in schools, television and other media become the leading sex educators of children and adolescents. In many of these studies teens rank the media second only to school sex education programs as a leading source of information about sex (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002).

Within the past 20 years sexual messages in film, television, and music have become more explicit in dialogue, lyrics, and behavior. Because of these alarming trends, the Parents Television Council was founded to serve as a nonprofit watchdog agency to advocate and monitor children's television programming and the "family hour" for violent and sexual content that was deemed inappropriate for general public viewing.

MEDIA AND VIOLENCE: KILLING AS A SPECTATOR SPORT?

Over the past 60 years researchers, policy analysts, media executives, and clinicians from the public health sector have debated the role the media have played in serving as the catalyst to the increase of violent acts in U.S. society. Violence is defined as the utilization of any physical force to harm, injure, damage, or destroy an individual, groups of individuals, or property.

In 1993, the National Cable Television Association commissioned the National Television Violence Study. This study was conducted by the Center for Communication and Social Policy at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) (Center for Communication and Social Policy, 2002). This groundbreaking study was the first to undertake the monumental task of analyzing almost 10,000 hours of broadcast and cable programming that covered programming randomly selected from 23 channels over the course of three television seasons from 1994 to 1997. For this study, researchers defined three main types of violent depictions: credible threats, behavioral acts, and harmful consequences. The study found that (a) nearly six violent acts occur per hour of television, which suggests that nearly two out of every three television programs contain some violence; (b) violent incidents occur more in children's programming (67%) than in regular programming (57%); (c) the average child viewer who spends at least 2 hours per day watching cartoons will view approximately 10,000 violent incidents per year on television; and (d) the number of prime-time violent programs increased over the 3 years of study.

NAVIGATING STORMY SEAS: THE ROLE OF LEADER-"SHIP"

Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations—to boldly go where no man has gone before. (Star Trek, 1966-1969)

The U.S. public education system continues to battle budget cuts, high-stakes testing, accountability, and capitalism. Has the U.S. public education system become the final frontier? While we, the U.S. public, are still exploring space, have we lost the desire to explore education? Because of the ability to access news and information on a 24-hour basis, we are bombarded with global spectacle. Teachers, parents, administrators, and students are now confronted with the Iraq war, the recent tsunami and earthquake tragedy in South Asia, the ability to witness death at the click of the mouse. The present sociopolitical environment continues to navigate through the "waves" of corporate scandals, terrorism, racial inequalities, and poverty.

Nationally and locally, educators, parents, administrators, and students are confronting issues around gun violence; "hit lists" (lists that target individuals with possible acts of violence) in schools; acts of violence; and all-out gang-style fights and brawls that are digitally recorded, placed on DVDs, and sold for profit or posted to Internet websites for access and consumption. As Watkins (2004) states, "Public education is in the eye of the storm" (p. 2).

How are educational leadership preparation programs educating future practitioners who will utilize popular culture to inform their leadership in the development of transformative learning communities for social justice? Deal and Peterson (2000) assert:

Culture arises in response to persisting conditions, novel changes, challenging losses and enduring ambiguous or paradoxical puzzles. People create culture; thereafter it shapes them. However, school leaders can nudge the process along through their actions, conversations, decisions, and public pronouncements. (p. 202)

The educational leader-"ship" must be able to critically read and shape the culture of their school. Deal and Peterson (2000) offer the following metaphors for school leader roles, borrowed and coined from anthropology: "historian, anthropologist, sleuth, visionary, symbol, potter, poet, actor and healer" (p. 203). I would like to add my own: navigator. The educational leader must be able to navigate the vessels of education, knowledge, and hope, to rescue Nemo from the drowning abyss.

School leader-"ship" must circumnavigate the treacherous terrains of the stormy seas to find Nemo and return him to the rightful owner, the American public. Nemo is not just one student, in one school. Nemo represents the many members of all the learning communities, public and private, in the U.S. public educational system. Within this great abyss is educational leader-"ship," looking to return to safe harbors.

Shield (2004) argues:

Educational leaders are expected to develop learning communities, build the professional capacity of teachers, take advice from parents, engage in collaborative and consultative decision making, resolve conflicts, engage in effective instructional leadership, and attend respectfully, immediately, and appropriately to the needs and requests of families with diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. (p. 111)

The intersection of classes, cultures, and ethnic identities occur in public spaces (Robbins, 1993). Schools are public spaces that foster social solidarity, group identification, and community (Carlson & Apple, 1998). Depending upon the culture and climate of schools, these public spaces may also produce alienation for some students (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Some schools are, in fact, sites of ongoing conflict and struggle for control (Gause, 2002; Weis, 1988). Public school administrators and teachers who seek to transform schools must operate from a position of understanding how critical pedagogy forces educators to critique the fundamental issues of power and its relationship to the greater societal forces that affect schools (Weis, 1988). Teaching and learning are a part of real life, and real life includes politics and people (Freire, 1970). Within the construct of real life is scripted and unscripted reality. Educational leaders must be able to utilize their positions to launch into the deep and ask hard questions, those to which there are no perfect answers.

Those in leadership positions must raise questions that ask how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not (McLaren, 1997). Is it because of multibillion dollar media conglomerates that control and manipulate the production of popular texts, discourses, and images for prepackaged consumption? Educators who work with students who are not a part of the privileged class in America are faced with great challenges unless they elect to empower themselves and their students to deconstruct taken-for-granted notions of power (Giroux, 1988; Quantz, 2003). Absent empowerment, the abyss will continue to swallow up the educational leader-"ship" and Nemo will never return to safe harbors.

CONCLUSION

Violence and violent acts are a part of our history. Depictions of violence have been a part of our society from the beginning, as documented in historical texts. The ability to witness violence instantaneously through various media has increased astronomically and exponentially within the past 100 years. From Greek tragedies to the

first showing of *The Great Train Robbery* to Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* to the ride through Baghdad with embedded reporters during Operation Iraqi Freedom to the rise and fall of Tupac Shakur to Biggie Smalls, and Lil' Kim: war, violence, and sexual exploitation are in the very fabric of our nature. As media conglomerates such as AOL Time Warner, Liberty Media, and Viacom continue to exist, the thirst and desire for violence, sexual exploitation, and spectacle will remain a part of our human condition.

IMPLICATIONS

"Pop" culture is the background noise to our daily existence; it presents enormous possibilities for researchers in assisting educational leaders in re-thinking leadership, culture, and schooling, while serving as a roadmap for "leaders of the new school." It is imperative that academicians continue to explore emergent thinking on transforming schools by infusing educational leadership preparation programs with cultural studies. Cultural studies are essential because reality is made through human action. The "popular" is the political terrain in which people struggle to exist; therefore, political struggle must be carried out in the contemporary public sphere. The leader-"ship" of K-12 schools and school districts must recognize that "schooling" is a political act and that cultural politics in the areas of race, class, and gender are at work. Institutions of higher learning, specifically educational leadership and teacher education programs, must infuse cultural studies into their curricula. Popular culture is a dominating force in our society. We must acknowledge its effects and usages in the educational process.

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