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CEPS Journal 1 (2011) 2, S. 45-58



Empfohlene Zitierung/ Suggested Citation:

Theodoropoulos, Eftyhia: Off to school: a comparative study of schools in the U. S. - In: CEPS Journal 1 (2011) 2, S. 45-58 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-opus-61534

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:



University of Ljubljana
Faculty of Education

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Off to School: A Comparative Study of Schools in the U. S.

EFTYHIA THEODOROPOULOS¹

≈ This study compares the physical structure of two schools of differing socioeconomic backgrounds: one is a private day school servicing the children of some of the most affluent families in one of the biggest urban cities in the southwest; the other is a technical or vocational high school with the majority of the students living in »economically disadvantaged« homes. The research has been carried out with traditional qualitative methods, as well as with the aid of photography. The juxtaposition of photographs of the built environment of the two schools creates a concrete visual manifestation of the differences in the daily experience of the students who attend the schools. The visible differences lead to the emergence of research questions such as whether the experiences are different for the students in the two locations and, if so, in what way, as well as the question as to why both of the locations are termed »schools« when they are evidently so vastly different. The photographs give the viewer the impression that the educational experiences of the students attending the vocational school are detrimental to their development of autonomy and a sense of identity and self, while the private day school provides an environment much more conducive to the fostering and development of both autonomy and a sense of identity and self. The research is important because it indicates how the educational experience of the students might have implications for future mobility within the existing hierarchical social structure, thus making an important contribution to social pedagogy.

Keywords: Class differentiation in schooling, Critical pedagogy, Educational disparity, Educational visual study, School environment, School environment and learning, School-to-prison pipeline, Urban education, Zero tolerance policy

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Introduction

»On a typical weekday morning between September and June some 35 million Americans kiss their loved ones goodbye, pick up their lunch pails and books, and leave to spend their day in a collection of enclosures known as elementary school classrooms... The school attendance of children is such a common experience in our society that those of us who watch them go hardly pause to consider what happens to them when they get there...« (Jackson, 1968, p. 94).

Although Philip Jackson wrote this in 1968, there is a vital point made here that remains very relevant to this day. As a society, we send our children off to school without really thinking about what »school« is or what it looks like. In fact, the actuality of school is very different for children with a differing socioeconomic status.

The problem addressed in my research is the universal use of the word »school« to describe the obligatory lived daily experiences and reality of children in the United States. Progressive educators value universal compulsory education; it is viewed as not only a privilege but also as a human right held by every individual, a cause to crusade for. Despite the fact that this »human right« is already available, free of cost, to children in their fundamental stages of development in the United States, education looks different for students in different neighbourhoods and provides different outlets for employment upon graduation/drop out depending upon the location and status of the school.

The fact that schooling is compulsory is important to emphasise since the compulsory schooling experience can prove to be detrimental to the future quality of life for many students, especially those with a lower socioeconomic status. I argue that the compulsory schooling experience has the potential to impede some students from receiving an education that is beneficial to their development and growth as individuals, and can have negative implications for the future lives of students from impoverished urban and rural neighbourhoods. This is due to the fact that not only is the educational experience differentiated in order to school those students from poor families for working-class positions, but in the existing post-industrial U.S. society, where production has moved abroad, this differentiation in the schooling experience also exposes many poor students to the criminal justice system. Increasingly, students with a low socioeconomic status are funnelled into the prison system through what has been referred to as the »school-to-prison pipeline«.

The term »school-to-prison pipeline« emerged in the 1980s and is used to describe the correlation between students with a low socioeconomic status

and the funnelling of students into the criminal justice system through their school. Data suggests that the adoption of zero-tolerance policies in school districts across the country and the increased police presence in schools coupled with the enactment of laws that mandate student referral to law enforcement authorities for various school code violations have contributed to a »significant increase« in the suspension and expulsion of students, as well as an increased involvement of students with a low socioeconomic status with the criminal justice system (Ward & Losen, 2003, p. 10). Additionally, »Not surprisingly, those most frequently targeted for punishment in school often look - in terms of race, gender and socioeconomic status - a lot like smaller versions of the adults who are most likely to be incarcerated in society« (Noguera, 2003).

In this way, schooling continues to mirror society at large. »The prison system is the largest growth industry in the United States. Levels of inequality and correlated poverty, violence and human suffering, are quickly approaching those at the beginning of the 20th century« and »... the realities of the incarceration of poor people... are related to the high levels of educational inequality« (McGrew, 2008, p. 32). With the decrease in the demand for physical labour in the United States, the increase in the flight of factory production abroad and the continuing development of the prison industrial complex used to house and control an increasingly unemployed poor sector of society, prisons have become a substitute for a factory job and school failure can now be said to lead to incarceration for students with a low socioeconomic status.

Theoretical approach and methodology

The critical approach to schooling, which has spawned a multitude of theories, does not ignore the reality of compulsory school and the circumstances of its inception. Margolis et al. (2001) credit the »correspondence theory«, developed by Bowles and Gintis, as the most »influential examination of the process by which schools reproduce these dominant interests« (p. 7). This theory argues that »through formal and hidden curricula schools reproduce the social relations necessary to maintain capitalism: competition, and evaluation, hierarchical divisions of labor, bureaucratic authority, compliance, and the fragmented and alienated nature of work«.

The various critical theories that have evolved differ in ways that are very valid and of importance. I do not offer an analysis of the intricacies of critical education theories here. I simply wish to emphasise a notion central to the critical approach to education: that of reproduction. In other words, schooling is a social institution that aids the recreation of the existing hierarchical society.

The main criticism of the reproductive theory is that it does not give human beings agency. In other words, it fuses human beings to social institutions and renders them powerless to make a change in their oppression; unable to resist or create their own history, doomed to recreate the existing system. In response to the lack of human agency and the limitations imposed by the reproductive model, there emerged an approach that aims to give some power back to the individuals that exist within social institutions. Resistance theory gives, »... central importance to the notions of conflict, struggle and resistance« (Aronowitz, 1985, p. 71). It is a theoretical framework that allows specific school locations and individuals to be explored as unique places where resistance can and does occur. There is no need to examine this theory in detail, rather it is an important addition to the theory of reproduction and allows for a better understanding of schooling and the ways in which approaching issues can lead to a more beneficial outcome for the participants of the compulsory schooling system. I draw on both the reproduction theory and the notion of human agency in my critical approach to my research.

The use of multiple methods allows for the emergence of greater understanding in a specific situation, a better picture of the reality that exists in a particular social setting. In addition to traditional qualitative methods, I have employed photography in my research inquiry. This has served to enrich the data collected, but it can also enhance the readers' experience.

Collier argues that the camera is beneficial to the observer when he writes, »The camera is another instrumental extension of our senses, one that can record on a low scale of abstraction. The camera, by its optical character, has whole vision... the camera faithfully records this specialized subject and also all other associated elements within the focus and scope of its lens. This capacity makes the camera a valuable tool for the observer« (Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 7). Furthermore, the photograph also functions as data, as Harper suggests: »The photograph can be thought of as 'data'; in fact the unique character of photographic images force us to rethink many of our assumptions about how we move from observation to analysis in all forms of sociological research« (Harper, 1998, p. 35).

In my research, I took photographs of the physical environment of two school sites, concentrating on areas such as classrooms, grounds, designated play areas, administrative offices, etc. These photographs served as empirical data, which I analysed in a comparative fashion. The first school site was a private day school in a large south-western city. My original study design included a juvenile detention facility as the second school site, but I was denied access to a juvenile detention facility. Instead, I used photographs of a school site in a

poor neighbourhood of the same south-western city. Although this was not my first choice for this comparative analysis, it does adequately provide an image of what »school« looks like for students with a low socioeconomic status.

Southwest country day school: a photo landscape

My first impression of the Southwest Country Day School (SCDS) campus was quite impressive. The K-12 campus unfolds in 40 acres of meticulously landscaped grounds, running across a mountain chain bordering the privileged northern region of the city. The campus is spotless. There is no trash on the grounds. Concrete sidewalk pathways weave in and around the campus.

Buildings are well maintained, mid-century modern structures that dot the landscape. Due to the warm south-western weather, classrooms are contained within independent structures and, contrary to traditional notions of a school building, there are no lengthy hallways to be found.

Like the cleanliness of the outdoor environment, the classrooms at SCDS are fresh and inviting. Recently purchased student desks and spotless carpets coupled with smoothly painted walls create an atmosphere of warmth, although it is easy to see that these rooms have a scholastic purpose. Student work adorns the walls, teachers' desks sit in corners and whiteboards make it obvious to an observer that, indeed, schooling takes place here. Some classrooms have couches, plants and other items reminiscent of a home. Things in the classrooms are new, clean and organised.

An important element to understanding the daily experience of students on the campus is the physical environment. Photos taken on campus were instrumental in the understanding and analysis of the environment and allowed for an interpretation of the environment that would be hard to attain purely through the use of words. They provided a robust depiction of life on campus for SCDS students.

Photo 1 offers an accurate first impression of the campus. The serene, resort-like ambiance is captured in this photograph. The crisp, clean feel of being present in this



Photo 1: The Grounds

place can be felt when looking at the image. There are some subtle hints that might suggest that the location is perhaps a college campus or some sort of recreational building exhibiting art or theatre. That which does not come to mind is precisely what is actually depicted in this photo: a secondary



Photo 2: The Secondary School Area

school serving students in the seventh and eighth grades. Compulsory schooling laws dictate that students must attend school, and doing so in a setting such as that shown in Figure A could be a pleasant experience.

In Photo 2, it is more obvious that the location observed may perhaps function as a school setting, although this is not a definite observation. The picnic tables suggest that people spend time here. It is not clear that this is definitely a school setting, but once suggested it would make sense. The type of school would definitely be one that serves a more privileged population, since it bears no resemblance to a typical public school in the United States. It would also be more typical of a college setting than one that serves a seventh and eighth grade population. Again, the grounds are immaculate. The landscaping is breathtaking. Nature is a big part of this experience. Photo 2 really showcases the natural lighting typical of this campus, both indoors and out.

Although there are no indoor hallways leading to classrooms at this campus, lockers are tucked into overhangs that shelter the unsecured belongings of the students. The locker areas, as seen in Photo 3, resemble outdoor hallways, but do not function as such. Students do not file down these pathways single file to get to their next class; they walk in and around these pathways during intervals between classes, free from



Photo 3: Student Lockers

the constrictions of walls.

Photo 3 highlights the windows that line the walls and the entrance to a typical classroom on the campus. The door and the windows are made of clear glass. This allows for a vast amount of natural lighting to filter in throughout the day. This south-western city has plenty of days full of sunlight to offer, and the school takes full advantage of this. Again, the space is new and meticulously maintained.



Photo 4: The Library

Photo 4 shows the computer-lined far wall of the middle school library. The wall is lined with small windows that let in the sunlight. All of the furniture and carpeting is new and clean. The Mac desktops are available for student use. Student work adorns the wall. The library provides a studious cove for students to work independently or in groups for school projects. Yet again, the space is inviting, fresh and clean.

The final image of the campus is that of one of the multiple sports fields on campus (Photo 5). The landscaping creates a pastoral feel. There is quite a bit of greenery, atypical of the geographic location. The field looks more like a resort than a school campus,

although the fencing around the field does intrude on the resort feel. This image shows a space where students can run free with plenty of room for them to do so. The paved pathways make transportation for the P.E. teachers possible, as they navigate between the various fields on their golf carts.



Photo 5: The Sports Fields

Valley technical school: a photo landscape

The Valley Technical School (VTS) campus is a high school located on the west side of this south-western city. The »West Side« is an area notorious

for high crime rates, poverty, and issues concerning illegal immigration due to the city's proximity to the Mexican border. It is a part of the city where police presence is a constant. The aim of the school itself is to give students an opportunity to develop technical skills, while also developing their academic background. Career path choices include cosmetology, automotive, photography and food service, amongst others. The typical graduate seeks post-secondary training or a community college setting, if not immediate employment.

The first image of the campus is that of the administrative building. Photo 6 shows the school prior to one's entrance onto the campus. The entire campus is fenced off with the entrance point being monitored by privately contracted security staff. Both students and staff are required to wear identification at all times to prove that they are indeed permitted to be on the campus. A photo of the actual entrance reveals the school name, and so Photo 6 was chosen in lieu of the front entrance. Photo 6 shows the concrete and secured atmosphere of this campus, whose architectural design promotes functionality over aesthetics.

The centre of the campus (Photo 7) reveals a continuation of the concrete grounds and buildings. Most of the area is paved over with concrete, while there are shrubs and trees planted in small plots of unpaved ground. Although difficult to see in the photo, there is a



Photo 6: Gated Campus



Photo 7: The Grounds

problem with pigeon droppings in all areas of the school grounds; the unsanitary bird droppings can be found in every corner. In addition to the bird droppings, student-produced litter is also prevalent. The maintenance crew appears to be engaged in campus projects at all times but seems to be unable to create a picturesque upkeep.

On the VTS campus, students move from building to building in the span of their daily class schedule. In Photo 8, there is a view of the hallway in one of the main academic buildings. The photo depicts a long hallway lined with lockers used to store student possessions. There is no natural lighting and the artificial florescent lighting produces an atmosphere reminiscent of a warehouse, a factory or some such enclosed building. A mustard-coloured piece of what was once a drinking fountain stands next to a rusting and weathered grate. Although the fountain does not work, it has not been removed. The tiled ceiling contains pieces of stained roofing that should perhaps be replaced. The grey-themed colour scheme is carried through to every aspect of the hallway and students walk to class on linoleum tiles very indicative of an institutional building.

Although most of the campus is older, it does contain a few remodelled structures. Photo 9 shows the recently refurbished library. Grant money has provided students with access to both PC and Mac desktop computers. However, students spend little, or none,



Photo 8: Hallway



Photo 9: The Library

of their day in the library. Teachers sign up for access to the computer labs in order to complete special projects. Students are also given access to the library both before and after school for school-related activities. The library is large and can service many students simultaneously. It is clean and well maintained with brand new carpeting and fixtures. There is no natural lighting and so fluorescent lighting is again present. The library is one of the most well maintained areas on the campus.



Photo 10: The Sports Fields

The sports area of the campus is quite a distance from the academic buildings. Although not easily perceived in Photo 10, a busy street, private homes and local businesses border the sports fields. The sounds of the city can be heard in the background. The concrete area of these basketball courts is cracked and weeds have pushed through over time. The area is fenced in and the basketball hoops are dotted with rust. This entire part of the campus shows the passing of time. It is hard to imagine that the school basketball team would use these courts. There is no shade from the sun as the trees in the backyards of private homes are far from a student athlete at play here. The courts have an atmosphere of neglect and lack maintenance. The fencing reinforces the feel of security and enclosure.

Discussion and analysis

The daily experiences of the students at Southwest Country Day School differ vastly from the daily experiences of students with a low socioeconomic status. These differences suggest dire consequences for those students who lack the privilege afforded to students who attend SCDS, and schools like it, across the country. Class delineates these differences in experience. As highlighted by McGrew (2008), »In our current historical period society is generally compassionate towards the children of privilege, who enjoy extended periods of adolescence, and are valued and forgiven. Poor children, and children of color in particular, on the other hand, are viewed with a racially charged gaze that defies known human biology in an effort to conceive of them as adults, evil in their motives, and threatening...« and that this conception is often, »... exploited,

promoted and at times shared by the professions and industries that benefit from their destruction», as in the prison industrial complex, etc. (p. 168).

The photos of the SCDS campus reveal a luxurious atmosphere that caters to student needs. How does this make an impression on the students? A student who is accustomed to an educational setting such as that provided by SCDS would have a hard time compromising the expectation of being in such an environment. A student used to this campus will seek out similar environments upon graduating. A college campus would make for the perfect transition from this situation. In this way, students are taught by their environment to seek out similar settings. This necessitates a privileged situation and environment.

The photos from Valley Technical School tell another story altogether. The physical environment on this campus can be said to teach something very different to this student population. The students of this campus have differing expectations from those of the students of SCDS. In fact, the images from the SCDS campus are quite contrary to those of VTS. As with the educational experience of poor students, the school environment is much less than it could be. For example, buildings could be well maintained, but they are not. The school grounds could be well manicured and landscaped with an abundance of plants and trees, but they are not. The campus could be clean, free of trash, graffiti and chipping paint on the wall, but it is not.

The typical school environment attended by poor students is emotionally taxing, dingy, devoid of natural lighting and reminiscent of a factory or prison. Access to outdoor areas is strictly monitored, fenced and regulated. Students in most urban schools enter the building through security checks and metal detectors.

Experienced daily, an environment such as that of VTS can only lead a student to accept such environments in his adult life. This physical environment does not teach a student how to learn and grow as a human being, it teaches him how to exist in a highly regulated environment that leaves little room for him as a person. If the United States did have sufficient factory positions available, the learning experienced at such a campus would be very conducive to life within the confines of a factory. Since such jobs are not readily available, the options for these students increasingly include a future in an adult facility. A college campus would not provide these students with the rigid structure to which they are accustomed.

Implications for further research

The conclusions of this study necessitate a need for further research. A correlation between schooling experienced by students of low socioeconomic status and the criminal justice system has been established in recent research. This problem must be further addressed and changes must be made. A society that perpetuates a class system must be challenged. This perpetuation must be reversed in order for individuals in that society to reach their true human potential.

Specifically, schools do not exist in a vacuum. Schools are situated within a larger system, one whose economy is based on the stratification of class. The few benefit from the exploitation of the majority. This majority provides the labour that leads to the economic proliferation of the privileged class. However, very little change can be achieved within this existing system because schools function as a socialising agent that prepares students for their adult positions within the existing hierarchical system. Without addressing this specific system as a whole, educational reforms will have no impact on the future lives of students.

There is a difference between schooling and education. Essentially, it is education that human beings crave as they develop into adulthood, education that caters to individual interests, fuels creativity and intellectual growth, and ultimately fosters the development of a whole human being. Education does not necessitate the existence of schools and schooling. Reformers look to schools as a potential arena for radical changes in society. Due to the nature of their existence, I would argue that schools cannot be a location for these changes. Schools do a great job of teaching students their position in the pre-existing stratified society. Such schooling is multidimensional and is perpetuated by an overarching system.

»Equal educational opportunity is, indeed, both a desirable and a feasible goal, but to equate this with obligatory schooling is to confuse salvation with the church. School has become the world religion of the modernized proletariat, and makes futile promises of salvation to the poor of the technological age« (Illich, 1970, p. 10).

As such, this research suggests a candid look at the daily lives of children in the United States. The compulsory practice of schooling in the United States and the implications of this experience for students with a low socioeconomic status must be addressed. This must be done at a systemic level. Further research may bring about a more complete understanding of action that can be taken to eradicate the social injustice of compulsory education.

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