

"If we could change ourselves," we can change the world:

Empathy & the Possibilities for Transformative Education

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Introduction

Pursuing an Education is Pervasive

By the time we are taught to tie our shoes, we off to kindergarten. It is here, around the age of five, where we begin our educational careers that often last through our twenties. With a yearly average of 77 million students attending either an elementary, secondary or higher educational institution in the United States, it is evident that education plays a central role in our lives from childhood to adulthood (*New Research Center*).

How We Learn Influences Us

We can all close our eyes and envision ourselves at a school desk with a teacher instructing us on a new topic we hadn't thought about before. The way in which this imagined or former educator has taught us has a lasting influence on the way we socially, politically, and economically see and interact with the world around us. In this frame, our educational system can instill an ideology that can promote a set of narratives, such as profit and power over human needs, by simply regulating what information is taught and how that information is disseminated to a student.

Methods

Extensive Literature Review

Works on education from various disciplines including but not limited to:

Sociology: Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis. *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. Haymarket Books, 2012. Giroux, Henry A. *On Critical Pedagogy*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. DeSilva, Drew. "Ready or Not, 77 Million Kids and Adults Heading Back to School Soon." *New Research Center*, 12 Aug. 2013.

Philosophy/Theology: Nussbaum, Martha. *Upheaval of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, 2003. Nussbaum, Martha. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton University Press, 2016. Prete, Thomas Del. *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person*. Religious Education Press, 1990.

Creative Non-Fiction: Alexis, Sherman, and Ellen Farnay. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Little, Brown, 2007. Kasel, Jonathan. *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home: A chilling indictment of our public school system*. Simon & Schuster, 1990.

Educational Theorist: Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Hooks, Bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge, 2017. Postman, Neil. *The End of Education: Rethinking the Value of School*. Vintage Books, 1996.

Purpose

Vigilant and Curious

With John Berger's help in his work, *Ways of Seeing*, I discovered why seeing is significant to the way we see and interacted with others and the world. Thus, my research situates our own understandings of education inside the microcosmos of our everyday lives, which makes it necessary to adopt a kind of vigilant and curious perspective demonstrated by Berger's conjectures:

- o "Seeing comes before words...The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (Berger, 7).
 - Students can interpret what they see and learn causing those teachings to become central to their ideological worldviews.
- o "We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach" (Berger, 8).
 - Our educational system shapes what information we see, which can cause an ideological permanency to the way we think about things.
- o "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves" (Berger, 8).
 - Students can see the interconnectivity of thoughts and ideas in relation to themselves and others that can lead to a cooperative interdependency, causing them to critically re-think the things they see, broadening their perspectives.

Significance

Empathy & Transformative Education

In Dr. Brian Goldman's work, *The Power of Kindness: Why Empathy is Essential in Everyday Life*, he defines empathy as "the ability to use your imagination to see things from the point of view of another person, and to use that perspective to guide your behavior," which is central to how we must educate (Goldman, 23).

- o Education must "provide the necessary conditions (that) respects and cares for the souls of... students," for that is "where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (hooks, 13).
- o Education must be "about what it is to approach another person as a soul, rather than as a mere useful instrument or an obstacle to one's plans; about what it is to talk to someone who has a soul to someone else whom one sees as similarly deep and complex" (Nussbaum, 6).
- o Education must involve the "formation of the whole person," which "implies an effort to foster an increased openness, attentiveness, and truthful responsiveness to a deeper reality and a deeper experience and understanding of the whole self" (Prete, 10).

Reflection

In the United States, our education system can be described as "the god of economic utility," in which the "driving idea is that the purpose of schooling is to prepare children [or students] for competent entry into the economic life of a community" (Postman, 32). The consequences of viewing education in such an economized way are the following:

Stratification:

Socio-economic hierarchical grouping of the higher and lower classes stratifies students to either high-performing or lesser schools that determines one's life potential.

Competition of Obedient Workers:

Students learn to compete with their peers to be the one that knows the most by proving themselves to be well-trained and obedient to class curriculum and pedagogy.

Othering:

As stratification and competition separate the academically strong from the weak, we begin to perceive struggling students as lesser than students that are obediently succeeding.

Dehumanization:

Since the "economy produces people" and education prepares a student for economic life, students are seen as producible commodities that can be purchased and exchanged in the workforce (Bowles & Gintis, 53).

Future Research

I have continued my research through the Kock Humanities Fellowship Program this school year with an emphasis on dominant hegemonic pedagogies within education.



Panopticon developed by Jeremy Bentham & analyzed by Michel Foucault

"If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him." ~ Mahatma Gandhi