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# YOUNG PEOPLE AND SCHOOL

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## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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After reading this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions.

- How does schooling play an active role in maintaining and reproducing inequality in society?
- Why do some groups of students achieve consistently better outcomes from schooling than others?
- How do schools close the achievement gap for young people whose families experience socio-economic disadvantage or other forms of social exclusion?
- What types of educational research contribute to understanding the lives of young people?
- How do the political views of teachers shape their pedagogical practices?
- What are some of the ways that power operates in classrooms?

### **SORRY, BUT YOU CAN'T BLAME GENES**

Are poor people poor because of inferior genes?

In the light of the findings of the human genome project ... that idea is no longer defensible.

The implication ... is that if we changed society ... we could virtually eradicate not only low academic performance ... but also criminality and problems such as substance abuse.

... genes have been found that have a significant influence on physical traits like height ... But Britain's leading geneticist – Robert Plomin – hasn't found any specific DNA variants that have a significant effect on differences in our psychology.

Scientists call this the missing heritability. But there are strong grounds for supposing ... it's non-existent.

This is an edited version of an article by Oliver James, 'Sorry, but you can't blame your children's genes', published in *The Guardian* (30 March 2016). Reprinted courtesy of Guardian News & Media Ltd.

# Introduction

Schools work well for some groups of students, but not for all. This is an enduring and unintended feature of schooling. Young people whose families experience socio-economic hardship, or some other form of **social exclusion**, are likely to perform less well or leave school earlier than their more affluent peers. In this chapter, the negative implications of incorrectly attributing this difference to heritable characteristics are discussed, and alternative ways of understanding this feature of schooling are outlined. In Chapter 2 we elaborate on different kinds of families and the many worlds of childhood, but our concern in this chapter is to trace ways of thinking about differences between families, and how these differences are linked to young people's educational pathways.

**Social exclusion** takes into account issues other than a lack of material resources in understanding the factors that create and sustain different forms of social disadvantage. For young people, exclusion matters more than economic deprivation—and it hurts more (Skattebol et al. 2012).

## Schools, teachers and families

Schools bring individuals together for the purpose of providing young people with an education. The purpose of education does not need to be limited to ensuring that young people are equipped to contribute productively to society. In addition to this utilitarian function of schooling, education has the potential to prepare young people to pursue and enjoy their own interests, develop their talents and engage in social and cultural interactions with others that enrich their lives. Ensuring that all young people receive this type of education contributes to a just society and to the health and well-being of all its citizens.

A fair go at school for all young people is a global issue of concern and a matter of social justice. Most of us are familiar with the institution of schooling because we have been to school. Schools also feature as a common backdrop in books, films and television programs. However, the sum of these experiences is unlikely to provide sufficient intellectual resources to understand how schooling functions in society.

The fact that schools work better for some students than for others may be accounted for in a variety of ways. A common explanation is variation in individual traits, such as interests and ability that develop and change with time. The effects of place and access to educational resources are also important considerations. Inequitable outcomes from schooling are not limited to differences between individuals, they are also linked to the characteristics of groups, such as whether young people are from affluent families or families living in poverty, and whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous. While these factors may be linked to success at school, the mechanism by which they work is less clear. We begin by considering the role of teachers, then examine different ways of explaining why schools work better for some students than for others.

Teachers have the opportunity to influence the lives and chances of young people. The significance of their role is perhaps second only to that of parents and other caregivers. These professionals shape not only what young people learn but also what they value, believe and

understand. This is not to suggest that young people are uncritical of adult influences in their lives, but rather to emphasise the constant and wide-ranging nature of a teacher's influence. For this reason, the term **pedagogy** is often used to encompass the broader purposes and effects of the professional practice of teachers.

Teachers are not health workers, aid workers or social workers, although they share many of these workers' concerns. Instead, the challenges faced by teachers are pedagogical in nature. Teachers are charged with finding ways of working with and for their students to close the gaps in achievement between different groups, and to help all young people make a successful transition from childhood to adulthood.

In this chapter, a fictional teacher named Julie is introduced. Although she is not real, Julie is based on the real experiences of many teachers. Her 'story' provides a means by which to explore how teachers' pedagogical practices are influenced by their background and values, as well as the contexts in which they work and live.

### **Pedagogy**

the educational practices of teachers that are intended to support students' learning outcomes, including the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and the development of values and dispositions that contribute to their well-being and that of society.

## **JULIE'S 'STORY'**

Julie works as an assistant principal at a small primary school in the outer suburbs of an Australian city. She has just returned to work after giving birth to her second child. She and her partner need two incomes to meet their mortgage payments, pay for childcare, maintain two cars, take an annual holiday and have the occasional meal out.

Julie sees the ageing of the teaching profession as an opportunity to advance her career quickly. Although her starting salary was comparable to that in other professions, she knows that she needs to take on administrative positions in order to maintain its comparability, which will decline the longer she remains in the profession. While her children are little, the holidays provide her with added incentive to stay in the profession.

Julie and her partner are salaried middle-income earners. They both completed school and received some form of post-school training. Before they had children they enjoyed travelling, and regularly went to the theatre and concerts. Julie and her partner have a large circle of friends who lead very similar lives; they met many of those friends through their first child Sophie's pre-school friendships. This group of families shares many characteristics. For example, they have secure housing, they have similar leisure interests and they share an expectation that their children will complete school and go on to university or some other form of post-school training.

In contrast, many of the children who attend Julie's school have insecure housing, which means that they often have to move from one school to another. Languages other than English are spoken in about four in ten households. Unemployment is about twice the national average. The most common occupations are clerical and

administrative work, technician and trade work, labouring, machinery operation and driving. Most children come from parent couple families, but about three in ten are from one-parent families.

It is not unusual for Julie to lie awake at night worrying about how to make a difference in the lives of her students. The kind of difference she wants to make is to ensure that her students receive similar outcomes from schooling as their more affluent peers.

### Pause and reflect

- 1 What do you think are the main challenges that Julie faces in working in this school?
- 2 How might she prepare herself to meet these challenges?
- 3 Do you think that Julie can make a difference in the lives of her students?

Paulo Freire (1994) described the kind of teaching that contributes to justice and equity in the world as the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’. Central to his work and writing was a way of thinking about power that explained how it is unfairly distributed, and how it may be transformed through radical social awareness and liberating action. Freire offered a critical way of understanding education and described how teachers can play a part in contributing towards social justice, as discussed in the ‘Theory to practice’ box.

## THEORY TO PRACTICE

### The politics of practice

- Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Teachers and others who want to make a difference engage in different forms of advocacy that are linked to their political beliefs. Paulo Freire was a radical thinker who believed that teachers should engage their students in critical liberating dialogue involving reflection and action leading to independence. Freire referred to this as ‘praxis’. Freire believed that teachers must value and respect the experiences of their students, including how they speak (syntax) and other markers of their family background and origins, while also giving them access to dominant forms of language and knowledge. Freire claimed that political views are linked to action, and that teaching is a form of political action that is exercised through institutional power and

results in a range of outcomes. Freire described a range of political beliefs and their associated actions. While he was a radical thinker, he was concerned about the impact on education of other ways of thinking, such as elitism and conservatism. Below are some contemporary political beliefs. Read these descriptions and pause to reflect on the questions below.

- **Neoconservatives** believe that markets provide the best mechanism for delivering education and health care, and that individuals are responsible for making use of markets to obtain economic independence and well-being. They believe that through enterprise and hard work individuals can take care of their basic needs and gain additional benefits.
- **Socialists** intervene to ensure that those who are marginalised have access to support and resources that will enable them to participate in society. They believe that the economic processes and social structures in a society should be used for the benefit of all its members, and that governments should intervene to ensure that resources are more equitably distributed.
- **Radicals** attempt to subvert political, economic and social structures which they consider oppressive. They believe that these structures need to be transformed in order to achieve justice and a more equitable society.

### Pause and reflect

- 1 What is the likely impact on educational policy of the political beliefs listed above?
- 2 How would you describe your own political stance? How might this stance influence the type of teacher you become?
- 3 What contemporary political views are not represented in the above classification?

## Researching inequity

What happens at school really does matter. Achievement and participation at school are not dependent only upon the characteristics of children, since there is great variation in what schools and teachers are able to achieve. Therefore, it is important to understand why some groups of students generally do better at school than others, and why some schools and teachers are more successful at closing this achievement gap. This has been a long-term issue of concern in education, and researchers have drawn upon a range of ways of thinking (epistemologies) and investigative approaches (research methods) to understand the problem of inequality in educational outcomes.

For example, psychologists have looked to concepts such as motivation, historians have traced the impact of changes in society, and sociologists have considered the impact of class, race, ethnicity and so on. Each of these ways of thinking about differences in educational outcomes can be matched to appropriate investigative approaches. For instance, psychologists might develop scales perhaps in the form of surveys, historians commonly engage in documentary analysis that is sometimes supplemented by interviews, sociologists also use surveys and might supplement these with, for example, interviews, observations and policy analysis. A form of educational research that has proven particularly useful in exploring differential outcomes in education is called **ethnography**. This approach is used mostly by sociologists of education.

### **Ethnography**

an approach to conducting research that combines sustained field work in particular contexts with methods of inquiry that produce historically, politically and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations and representations of human lives, actions and interactions.

An early ethnographic study conducted by Oscar Lewis used a detailed description of five days in the lives of five Mexican families to paint portraits of the experiences of families living in poverty. In *Five Families*, Lewis (1966) developed the idea of a ‘culture of poverty’. It suggested that families who live in poverty lack or are deficient in the resources, values and attitudes that contribute to success, and that these deficiencies explain, at least in part, why they are poor. While Lewis’ study was conducted at a much earlier time and in a specific context, the concept of a culture of poverty continues to inform how some people answer the question, ‘Why do some groups of students do better at school than others?’ This kind of logic is illustrated in an ethnographic study of a Western Australian high school, in which Martin Forsey (2007) spent many months as a ‘fly on the wall’, particularly in its staff common room. He described how some of the teachers (pseudonyms used) explained the impact on the school of more affluent families moving into a nearby suburb.

Warraville was sometimes reported to be a dangerous place. On two occasions, Deputy Principal Liam used the public address system to announce reports of unsavoury characters lurking in Warraville. He warned students to be extra careful if they had to move through the area. Teachers commented often enough on Warraville’s propensity for producing the rougher students, the ‘bad eggs’, as Donald, one of the senior staff members, called them. He described the general student body as comprised of ‘nice, basic kids who get on very well and don’t have too many problems with bullying or pecking orders’. Linking this to the their ‘white Caucasian, middle-class background’, he suggested that ‘even if they come from different cultures’, by which he was referring to students who were not white, ‘well, they almost fit that mould, and they get on very well’. When I asked him to clarify this point he nodded in the direction of Warraville and said, ‘Well, we have a socio-economic group that were over there and they seem to be disappearing very quickly.’

In addition to his teaching job, Donald also works as a part-time real estate agent. His reference to the current Warraville population disappearing reflected his knowledge of land values in the area. Based on this he surmised that: ‘The general middle-class to lower socio-economic population in the school is changing, because the lower socio-economic group is moving. Warraville is disappearing. It is now a very sought-after area so you will see the socio-economic group lift.’

Kate, one of the science teachers, expressed a similar sentiment about the socio-economic status of the student population being ‘on the rise’. She spoke to me about how rough the school was when she first arrived there in the mid-1980s, but over the years this had changed and the kids were now much nicer and happier. When asked to account for this shift, she hypothesized that the school’s loss of roughness might be attributable to recent gains in local real estate prices and the increased affluence of the people moving into the area (Forsey 2007, p. 67).

The teachers associated the socio-economic group that was in decline at Warraville with danger. They identified the ‘bad eggs’ in the student population as coming from that particular group. These views are not limited to teachers and they are not representative of how all teachers think, but they are commonly used to explain differential outcomes from schooling. Such explanations are underpinned by ways of thinking that associate success or failure at school with the presumed behaviours and attributes of groups, often informed by stereotyped assumptions, rather than how these groups are positioned within society through larger historical, political and economic forces. Importantly, teachers who hold these views are likely to expect students from families who experience economic hardship, or some other form of social exclusion, to not do well at school. Importantly for teachers, deficit ways of thinking about difference in education offer weak solutions for bridging the achievement gap between students from different backgrounds.

Other types of ethnography have focused on the lived experiences of students and their families, thus providing a different account of the link between poverty and education. Paul Willis’ (1977) classic *Learning to Labour: How Working-class Kids Get Working-class Jobs* focused on twelve working-class ‘lads’ growing up in the English Midlands; it illustrated in rich detail their understanding of how working-class culture was poorly valued within the context of schooling. Their accents, their parents’ jobs, and their social and sporting interests counted for little within the educational institution. Willis related how, through the development of an oppositional school culture, many of them railed against the way they were positioned, but in so doing effectively sealed their fate as underachievers at school. The ‘lads’ faced an unenviable choice: success at school or retaining their working-class identities, including family bonds and traditional pathways to blue-collar employment. Willis’ study details how society and schooling play very active roles in maintaining and reproducing inequality. It represents a sophisticated form of what is often called ‘reproduction theory’, which posits that institutions created by societies, such as schools, and the practices of these institutions, such as pedagogies, contribute to some groups of students consistently doing better at school than others. (See the ‘Research in action’ box in Chapter 3 for further discussion of Willis’ work.)

The landmark Australian study *Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division* (Connell et al. 1982) was written when reproduction theory (as illustrated by Willis 1977) was challenging deficit theories (as illustrated by Lewis 1966) about inequity in education. The authors acknowledged that ‘The reproduction paradigm wrought a revolution in theory, but has had rather thin effects on practice’ (p. 28). They ‘were bothered by the increasing abstractness and dogmatism

of this literature, and thought that “a good dose of awkward facts” was the right kind of cure’ (p. 29). Along with feminist and critical theorists, Connell and colleagues were concerned with the ways in which individuals and groups asserted their own experiences and contested or resisted the ideological and material forces imposed upon them in a variety of settings. Their research combined an acknowledgment of social reproduction with an interest in the complex realities of students and teachers in schools. They interviewed 100 clusters of participants, generally comprising two parents, the student and a number of the student’s teachers. Their approach emphasises the importance of getting close to individuals in the contexts in which they live and learn, and understanding the ways in which they live their lives. The nature and status of educational research, and the implications of choosing different paradigms, are treated more fully in Chapter 14 of this book.

## THEORY TO PRACTICE

### Theoretical perspectives in education

- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.

Action is informed by ways of thinking about a problem. In other words, how a problem is understood shapes what we think should be done. Every person has their own way of thinking about the challenges they are confronted with each day. When people have shared ways of understanding a problem and a common language for describing it, then we say they have a shared perspective or framework, and their action is informed by a particular theory. According to Patty Lather (1991), theories make different claims about knowledge. Some theories claim to provide knowledge that supports understanding, other theories claim to provide knowledge that supports emancipation, while others claim to deconstruct knowledge and destabilise our certainty in what is taken for granted.

These different purposes may be illustrated through a consideration of gender and feminism. Feminists understand gender as a key determinant of the opportunities made available to individuals. Feminists believe that women and girls have less access than males to basic human rights and life opportunities. For example, in all societies women are more likely to experience sexual harassment than men; in most societies women do not receive equal pay to males for their labour; and in some societies women and girls are denied access to education and to some forms of labour. Feminism is a project of emancipation since feminists advocate for equal rights for women and girls, and the removal of barriers that limit their participation and life chances.

This project takes on different forms depending on the knowledge claims made by feminists. For example, interpretivists attempt to contribute knowledge that deepens our understanding of gender by inquiring into how it operates, phenomenologists inquire into how gender is experienced, constructivists inquire into how it is produced and post-structuralists attempt to deconstruct taken-for-granted notions about gender and to destabilise it as a category.

Qualitative research is not usually undertaken on the same large scale as *Making the Difference* (Connell et al. 1982), which increases the significance of that study within the field, but smaller projects have provided some ‘awkward facts’ that help us to understand how groups of young people are positioned within schooling practices, and the ways in which they respond to this positioning. For example, Dorothy Bottrell (2007) interviewed twelve Aboriginal girls as part of a study of young people who had left school early and who lived on a public housing estate in inner Sydney. Bottrell used pseudonyms to identify the participants in her study. While they acknowledged their part in getting into trouble at school, they were also critical of what they saw as petty rules, a boring, irrelevant curriculum, teachers who did not care and the process of labelling by teachers and peers. The comments of four of the girls are given below:

One of the universal and most vehement critiques is of being spoken down to, of being made to ‘feel low’ and ‘like shit’. Sarah sums up this experience:

‘Oh, they’re sort of like, high standards, you know, they treat me like I’m low ... School is background, school is even where you live, what, who you hang around ... It’s not just about work. Most of the time it’s all about social stuff at school ... They treat me like I’m low ... They’re so stupid in the way they react to where you live and stuff like that. I hate it.’

When Sarah speaks of ‘high standards’, she is describing ‘the popular ones’ who seem to be identified by peers and teachers as better than girls like her. Jodi locates status with ‘the ones that have the money’, referring to some locals outside the estate and other classmates who live in ‘better’ and more affluent suburbs. Linda believes that teachers only care about the high achievers:

‘If you need help, oh well, you know, get a tutor or something ... Oh you weren’t here yesterday, oh well you missed out on a lot of work, that’s not our fault ... they don’t care.’

Rose claims that a hierarchy of prestige across subjects operates to differentiate students and exclude the less successful:

‘They didn’t care about us, just the talented ones in their subjects. And some subjects were higher status. If you weren’t in them, you didn’t count. It was all for the reputation of the school, that’s all they cared about. We didn’t fit the image.’

Educational differentiation of students as achievers or failures merges with social status in school relations. Whether or not teachers overtly favour high achievers, the competitive academic curriculum (that sorts young people according to family background), so that students and teachers are very clear about who is successful and who is not (Epstein & Johnson 1998; Teese & Polesel 2003). The understanding the girls construct out of their experience is that they are 'not worth bothering about'. Both educational and social relations of schooling are implicated in marginalised youth resistance. The problems of schooling may have significant and lasting consequences for those who are 'pushed out' or 'give up trying' and 'vote with their feet' (Bottrell 2007, p. 605).

### **Sociological imagination**

an understanding of how the lives of individuals are influenced by the contexts in which they live. This way of thinking takes into account a range of influences including historical, social, cultural and economic conditions. Imagination is needed to 'walk in the shoes' of others whose life circumstances are different from our own. This concept was developed by the US sociologist C. Wright Mills to distinguish the interests and research of sociologists from those of other scholars.

Understanding the experiences of the girls in Bottrell's study is aided by a **sociological imagination**, which enables us to place our experience within a broader set of contexts (Mills 1959). Such an imagination enables us to see that the girls interviewed by Bottrell had less certain futures than Willis' lads who experienced schooling thirty years earlier. The working-class jobs that provided sure employment for Willis' subjects have, for the most part, disappeared in industrialised countries due to advances in technology, or have been displaced to countries where they can be undertaken more cheaply due to the global economy (see Chapter 13). In addition, the kinds of jobs that were open to boys in the 1970s were never as accessible to girls. Sex segregation continues to be a feature of many occupations. Despite understanding how the practices of schooling worked against them, the girls in Bottrell's study valued education and the importance of a school credential. Leaving school early, at the turn of the century, was much riskier for them because there were fewer jobs waiting for them. (Historical changes to the relation between schooling and social classes are detailed further in Chapter 5, and new, often more precarious, educational pathways are illustrated in Chapter 3.)

In summary, there are many ways in which young people's narratives can be interpreted. Thinking in deficit terms would have us see both the 'lads' and the girls described above as lacking what it takes to succeed. By contrast, reproduction theory emphasises how teachers and schools play an active role in creating the conditions that limit and constrain their retention and achievement. More recently, Bottrell (2007) illustrates a critical reading of the girls' resistance to schooling and their ultimate rejection of its limits and constraints as a form of resilience and positive adaptation, despite adversity. By characterising the girls' experiences in this way, she highlights the active role of the girls in rejecting school, and their understanding of the injustices they faced individually and collectively:

In dealing with marginalisation, difficult circumstances and competing demands, young people's resistances are attempts to counter negative images and to create new 'centres' for themselves. At school and in the community, their resistances in protecting reputation and chosen identity, in refusing to identify with images which denigrate oneself or one's people, and in opposing the requirements of a mainstream participation which does not engage with or value marginal life experience, can all be

understood as acts of resilience. These young people do not simply accept or comply with subordinate status assigned them on the margins (Lyman 1981, cited in Bottrell 2007, p. 611).

Culture and society make possible certain forms of identity while excluding others, or making them harder to express. The concept of resilience focuses our attention on how the girls in Bottrell's study live their lives, and how they actively resist the imposition of a negative identity. Instead of accepting external negative images of themselves, they reconstruct their identities in more positive terms from a range of shifting, competing and changing possibilities. As young Aboriginal women, they are aware of their cultural responsibilities to immediate and extended family; as 'school refusers', they reject the forms of educational provision they are offered; and as young members of a society in which they are marginalised, they push the limits of what they know to be acceptable behaviour, and inhabit marginal spaces that occasionally get them in trouble with the police. They are young women who identify as, among other characteristics, Aboriginal, poor, strong, determined, vulnerable, smart, stropky, hopeful and marginalised. Their identity also encompasses many different facets such as age, gender, race, class, outlook and sexuality.

Lather (1991, p. 89) describes these kinds of responses as a 'double movement of inscription and subversion', that occurs when individuals and groups recognise the ways in which they are unfairly positioned within relations of power and take action to contest, subvert and disrupt this positioning. This way of understanding identity is informed by post-structural thinking, which conceptualises race, class and gender as discourses, or the difference between what we could say at one period (under the rules of grammar and logic) and what is actually said (Foucault 1991). The term 'discourse' emphasises that categories that are often taken for granted and generally unquestioned should be understood as conditional, and constructed by systems of language and relationships of power. Such categories are not natural but fabricated and fashioned from a range of possibilities. A reading of the girls' narratives informed by post-structuralist thinking accounts for their marginalisation within discourses of schooling while, at the same time, recognising that they occupy positions of value and significance within other cultural discourses. Unlike the concept of resilience which relies upon the expression of an individual trait, which some young people may be able to activate and others not, a post-structural approach emphasises the multiple and shifting identities available to the girls due to their shared characteristics, such as their Aboriginality and gender. Importantly, in these terms, these identities are not fixed but discursive in nature, and shaped by different relationships of power and knowledge.

## Different families—different lives

The writings of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offer a commonly used framework for explaining how inequities are reproduced and maintained in society. According to Bourdieu (1986), capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: economic, cultural and social.

We are most familiar with the first kind, which takes the form of money or something that may be easily converted to money, such as jewellery or property. Like economic capital, cultural capital may be acquired. It is embodied in how we speak and is reflected in the cultural goods that we possess and value, as well as in the cultural competence and status we acquire through qualifications. Finally, social capital is made up of social obligations ('connections') and it depends on the size of our network and the value of our associations (Bourdieu 1986).

Bourdieu held that the status or relative importance of the places people occupy depends upon the amount and form of economic, social and cultural capital they possess, as well as the times and society in which they live. Individuals and families who possess more valued forms of capital tend to hold more powerful positions in society and to have more influence than those with less valued forms of capital. What is valued or devalued reflects the way that power operates in society, and this may change over time.

## DIFFERENT TIMES—DIFFERENT LIVES

Most afternoons, Julie picks up both her children from childcare and takes Sophie to one of her weekly swimming, dance or music lessons. On the way, she often sees her students hanging out together on the street or in the local shopping mall. She worries that they seem to spend big chunks of time unsupervised by adults. They tell her that they watch lots of television and DVDs. While Julie wishes they had access to a broader range of after-school activities, she also acknowledges that her students have the kind of freedom she experienced as a child.

Annette Lareau's (2003) detailed ethnographic case studies of working-class and middle-class families reveal important differences in their respective life experiences. Her research draws upon Bourdieu's theory of forms of capital to explain social class differences and differential outcomes from schooling, and provides a way of understanding Julie's concerns and the lives of her students. The 'Research in action' box contains an excerpt from Lareau's book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family*.

### RESEARCH IN ACTION

#### Daily life in middle and working-class homes

- Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: class, race, and family*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

In our study, the pace of life was different for middle-class families compared to working-class and poor families. In the middle class, life was hectic. Parents were racing from activity to activity. In families with more than one child, parents often

juggled conflicts between children's activities. In these families, economic resources for food, clothing, shelter, transportation, children's activities and other routine expenses were in ample supply. Of course, some parents often felt short of money, at times they were not able to enjoy the vacations that they would have liked. But ... families routinely spent hundreds and even thousands of dollars per year promoting children's activities.

Because there were so many children's activities, and because they were accorded so much importance, children's activities determined the schedule for the entire family. Siblings tagged along, sometimes willingly and sometimes not. Adults' leisure time was absorbed by children's activities. Children also spent much of their time in the company of adults or being directed by adults. They also had informal free time, but generally it was sandwiched between structured activities. In the organization of daily life, children's interests and activities were treated as matters of consequence.

In working-class and poor families, the organization of daily life differed from that of middle-class families. Here, there was economic strain not felt by the middle-class families. Particularly in poor families, it took enormous labour to get family members through the day, as mothers scrimped to make food last until they were able to buy more, waited for buses that didn't come, carried children's [washing out to laundrettes], got young children up, fed and ready for school and oversaw children's daily lives. Children were aware of the economic strain. Money matters were frequently discussed.

Although money was in short supply, children's lives were more relaxed and, more importantly, the pace of life was slower. Children played with other children outside the house. They frequently played with their cousins. Some children had organized activities, but they were far fewer than in middle-class families. Other times, children wanted to be in organized activities, but economic constraints, compounded by lack of transportation, made participation prohibitive. When children sought to display their budding talents and pursue activities more informally around the house, adults often treated children's interest as inconsequential. In addition, since they were not riding around in cars with parents going to organized activities or being directed by adults in structured activities, children in working-class and poor families had more autonomy from adults. Working-class and poor children had long stretches of time during which they watched television and played with relatives and friends in the neighbourhood, creating ways to occupy themselves. In these activities, there was more of a separation between adults' worlds and children's worlds.

In sum, there were social class differences in the number of organized activities, pace of family life, economic strain of family life, times spent in informal play, interest on the part of adults in children's activities, domination by children's activities of adult lives, and the amount of autonomy children had from adults. To be sure, other things also mattered in addition to social class. Gender differences were particularly striking. Girls and boys enjoyed different types of activities. Girls had more sedentary

lives compared to boys. They also played closer to home. Race also played a role, particularly as racial segregation of residential neighbourhoods divided children into racially segregated informal play groups (although race did not influence the number of activities children had) (Lareau 2003, pp. 35–6).

Lareau's research (2003) provides a possible explanation for how Julie's students occupy their time outside school, based on an understanding of the economic constraints faced by their families, and the nature of the relationships between them, their family and their relatives. Instead of thinking of Julie's students as missing out on or lacking the experiences of their middle-class peers, Lareau's application of Bourdieu's theory of types of capital highlights some of the benefits for them—more leisure time, more autonomy from adults and more contact with extended family. She also highlights the problems for some middle-class children of being constantly supervised by adults, having very little informal time to play, and having their time captured by the interests and activities of siblings. Lareau's analysis also provides an explanation for why middle-class children might feel more 'at home' at school—they are accustomed to organised activities and close supervision by adults. In working-class families, however, the world of adults is more separate from the world of children.

## Feeling 'at home' in school

Schools are imbued with the economic, cultural and social capitals of teachers. While some teachers may have less affluent origins, their qualifications and income levels position them as middle-income earners. It is not surprising, then, that children brought up in homes with similar economic, cultural and social capitals are accustomed to the forms of language and types of interactions with adults that generally characterise schooling. Bourdieu's theory of various capitals suggests that schools recognise and build more effectively upon the experiences of children from middle-income families. Feeling 'at home' in school is also easier for children who speak the same language at home as at school.

### **SAMENESS VERSUS DIFFERENCE**

Julie's students come from diverse backgrounds. A small number are of Aboriginal descent, some are recently arrived refugees from war-torn parts of the world such as Somalia and Afghanistan, and there's a large group of children from a range of Pacific Island countries including Samoa and Tonga. Julie is aware of the fundamental tension in her class between sameness and difference. On the one hand, she wants her students to develop a shared sense of identity aimed at helping them develop empathy

for children who are different. On the other hand, she wants to acknowledge the students' differences, help them value different cultural customs and nurture different skills and interests. (The influence of culture, language and identity in Australian education is discussed further in Chapter 6.)

In *Schooling the rustbelt kids: making the difference in changing times*, Pat Thomson (2002) uses what she refers to as 'narrative justice' (p. xv) to describe the 'everyday realities' of young people living in communities with high levels of unemployment. As reflected in the book's title, Thomson focused on communities where once-thriving industries were memorialised only by rusting factories. Thomson applied Bourdieu's concepts of capital to explain the differences between the educational pathways available to two young people through the school system. The stories of Thanh and Vicki are told in the following boxed extracts. She introduces her discussion of these children in the following way:

Imagine two children about to start school. They are both five years old and are eagerly anticipating their first day. Imagine that each brings with them to school a virtual schoolbag full of things they have already learned at home, with their friends, and in and from the world in which they live (Thomson 2002, p. 1).

## THANH

The first child is a boy called Thanh. He lives in an extended family and has been chatted and read to in Vietnamese and Chinese since he was very small. He has watched Australian television, visited shopping centres and worked with his family in its restaurant doing small tasks like collecting dishes, giving out menus and change, and washing vegetables. His parents spent much of their married adult lives in separate refugee camps and were not reunited until they arrived in Australia. Thanh's father carried a *nguyet* (a guitar-like instrument) with him on the long walk from the town where he was born to the camp in Thailand and kept it safe until he reached his new home in Australia. When he is not too tired he plays it, and Thanh loves to listen to the traditional songs that have been handed down through the generations. He also loves to hear his older brother and sister talk about school. His parents' formal education was disrupted by civil war, but both of them are literate in two languages and treasure books. They have worked long hours and several jobs to finally open, with the help of the *hui* (community financial system), the restaurant where they now work most days and nights. Thanh comes to school with three spoken languages in his virtual schoolbag, with a love of music, an understanding of the restaurant trade, a capacity to get on with a wide range of people, knowledge about Vietnam, China, Thailand and Australia, and an understanding that school is important (Thomson 2002, pp. 1–2).

## VICKI

The second child is Vicki. Her parents are both university-educated and Vicki's mother runs a small catering business from home, supplying gourmet cakes to cafes. Her father is a teacher at the local secondary school and is currently researching his Irish family heritage. She is the oldest child and has one younger brother. Vicki has been to both childcare and pre-school and has already begun to read, much to her parents' delight. Vicki loves to help her mother and regularly plays on the family computer, which contains a database of recipes, customers and accounts. Vicki has a small dog and her current ambition is to be a vet. She watches a lot of television and sings along with all the advertisements, much to her father's disquiet. She loves being read to at night and knows that her parents expect her to join in and comment on the connections between the illustrations and the story. She knows that when she is read to, she is expected to sit still and listen. Vicki's virtual schoolbag consists of spoken and written English, well-schooled reading behaviours, knowledge about the white colonial history of Australia and understandings about popular culture, animals, business and computers. Both children's schoolbags contain roughly equal but different knowledges, narratives and interests (Thomson 2002, pp. 1–2).

Despite the rich and different backgrounds these two students bring to school, we know that Vicki's educational pathway will probably be smoother than Thanh's. The curriculum operates in her first language and foregrounds Vicki's cultural background. Thanh's language and background, on the other hand, may not be mentioned, except in cultural diversity events like Harmony Day. These differences illustrate how the experiences that Vicki brings to school are more valued and recognised than Thanh's. Moll et al. (1992) describe young people's different background experiences as 'funds of knowledge' that reflect the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being.

## RECOGNISING AND VALUING DIFFERENCE

A difficulty for Julie—and indeed for all teachers—is that her personal biography and her cultural and historical position shape how she interprets behaviour and judges its significance. Julie is aware that her students and their families may have very different perspectives and life experiences, and may associate quite different meanings with the same behaviours. As a result, it is possible that Julie will misread subtle forms

of difference associated with things like eye contact, discomfort with aggressive questioning, non-standard language and so forth (Burbules 1997).

Julie's experiences suggest that teachers generally assume that their students come from heterosexual families. She and her partner are preparing Sophie to deal with these assumptions, but they anticipate that when Sophie starts school they will need to introduce themselves to each of Sophie's new teachers as a same-sex couple, to let them know that Sophie lives with two mums. They would like Sophie's teachers to inquire about her experiences in ways that communicate that she and her family are valued members of the learning community without being intrusive about personal matters. They hope that Sophie's life experiences, and her parents' choices, will be respected, valued and represented so that Sophie can feel safe in the classroom, share knowledge and make links between existing and new knowledge.

## Power and cultural groups

As an English-speaking person, Julie belongs to the largest cultural group in Australia, which is also its most dominant. This group traces its origins to convict migrants from Britain in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as free settlers from Britain and elsewhere. It is dominant because its forms of cultural expression—including language, customs and traditions—are taken for granted or normalised, while those of other groups are ignored or marginalised. At the same time, Julie and her partner experience marginalisation due to their sexuality. For example, while they have access to the same rights and obligations as heterosexual couples, they are not able to marry legally in Australia. The process of normalisation and marginalisation is not fixed but changes over time and according to identity characteristics. In Australia, English-speaking cultures have been enforced through government laws and policy, sometimes violently. In his 2008 apology to Aboriginal people on behalf of the Australian nation, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd acknowledged that this had occurred in Australia through 'the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians', as well as 'the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country' (Rudd 2008). We should not lose sight of the fact that the **normalisation of culture** is a form of power that operates in society and its institutions, such as schools.

The African-American scholar Lisa Delpit (1995) has identified how what she calls 'the culture of power' operates in classrooms.

- 1 Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
- 2 There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a 'culture of power'.
- 3 The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.

**normalisation of culture** the process by which the features of one culture are taken for granted and privileged over other cultures, which results in a silencing of other cultures, because their language, social structures, values, and narratives are not recognised or valued.

- 4 If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
- 5 Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence (Delpit 1995, p. 24).

Delpit understands power as something possessed by those who belong to the culture of power. In a school setting, this might be teachers and the students of middle-income earners. Delpit also acknowledges that power may be acquired by those who do not belong. In a school setting, this may be the children of low-income earners and those from non-dominant cultural backgrounds. She explains that knowing the rules provides access to the culture of power, and that it helps to be told what the rules are and how they work. So, not only do teachers need to teach students like Thanh the official curriculum, but they also need to support such students to participate in the curriculum and to understand how it works, at the same time recognising and valuing their cultural backgrounds and the range of experiences that they bring to school.

There is a tension here: acquiring forms of powerful culture can result in feeling compelled to shed one's original culture, or to see it as weaker and of less value than the culture of power. It is teachers who must manage this tension in classrooms and schools through pedagogical practices that value and respect the cultures of their students, while at the same time inducting and introducing them to the culture of power. In the case of Aboriginal children, Karen Martin (2005) emphasises the need for teachers to learn about their culture, in particular, the deep significance of relatedness to an Aboriginal worldview—how it is developed and how it is not limited to people, but extends to everything in the environment:

Aboriginal people don't want schools to teach our children to be Aboriginal but we do want schools to support our cultural heritage, to have a respect for Aboriginal ancestry and to understand that this can never be replaced or supplanted by non-Aboriginal heritage or ancestry even though this is taught in schools (Martin 2005, p. 38).

Supporting the cultural heritage of students does not require teachers to think any less of the families or cultures of young people who tend not to do well at school. Instead, it challenges them to consider how their pedagogical practices and other schooling practices produce inequities, and how they might make a difference for students. (These issues are also discussed in Chapter 7 with particular reference to Aboriginal students.)

## Conclusion

The ways of thinking about differential outcomes from schooling outlined in this chapter are simply that—ways of thinking or theories. As times change, and as research and practice produce new knowledge about teaching and learning, we can expect these theories to develop and change. These theories provide teachers like Julie with a means of understanding and responding to the challenges they face every day. How they respond influences the lives and chances of young people in powerful ways.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

This chapter has been framed by the questions listed at the beginning. Draw upon the theories discussed above to compare and contrast how you might now answer these questions.

- 1 Why is it much harder to achieve equity in some educational systems than in others?
- 2 Propose an ethnographic approach to investigating why schools do not close the gap in achievement between students from different social class backgrounds.
- 3 Distinguish between the kinds of classroom practices suggested by:
  - a the pedagogy of the oppressed
  - b deficit theory
  - c a virtual schoolbag.
- 4 Give some examples of how the culture of power is likely to be experienced by Aboriginal children in Australian classrooms.

## FURTHER READING

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## INTERNET SOURCES

- Australian National Schools Network (ANSN): [www.nsn.net.au](http://www.nsn.net.au)  
 Big Picture Education Australia: [www.bigpicture.org.au](http://www.bigpicture.org.au)

Dusseldorp Skills Forum: [www.dsf.org.au](http://www.dsf.org.au)  
 Essential Schools (USA): [www.essentialschools.org](http://www.essentialschools.org)  
 Jesuit Social Services: [www.jss.org.au](http://www.jss.org.au)  
 The Smith Family: [www.thesmithfamily.com.au](http://www.thesmithfamily.com.au)

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