Documenting Reproduction and Inequality: Revisiting Jean Anyon’s “Social Class and School Knowledge”

(Curriculum Inquiry, 11(1), 3–42, 1981.)

by

ALLAN LUKE

Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

ABSTRACT

Jean Anyon’s (1981) “Social Class and School Knowledge” was a landmark work in North American educational research. It provided a richly detailed qualitative description of differential, social class–based constructions of knowledge and epistemological stance. This essay situates Anyon’s work in two parallel traditions of critical educational research: the sociology of the curriculum and classroom interaction and discourse analysis. It argues for the renewed importance of both quantitative and qualitative work on social reproduction and equity in the current policy context.

I first read Jean Anyon’s “Social Class and School Knowledge” (1981) while I was studying at Simon Fraser under the supervision of Suzanne DeCastell. I was working as a part-time ESL teacher with migrants in British Columbia. Like many teachers of colour moving into the academy at that time, I found that sociological models of social and cultural reproduction made intuitive sense.

“Social Class and School Knowledge” proved to be a landmark work for American educational research. It presented a carefully crafted description of the school-level sociological processes of social class reproduction in curriculum and instruction. Jean Anyon was explicit in the use of Marxist theoretical categories for analysis. Accordingly, it is often cited as the American counterpart to Paul Willis’s Learning to Labor (1981). But its focus was on social and interactional construction of knowledge through the “selective traditions” (Apple, 1979) of curriculum in elementary
schools (see also Anyon, 1978, 1979). This remains a very different focus from the subsequent 2 decades of critical ethnographies on the relationship of class-based youth culture and secondary schooling—and its place in the lineage of ethnographic, interactional and discourse analytic studies of inequality in the early and middle years of schooling is often overlooked.

It is valuable to discuss this work with the Australian teachers, younger scholars and graduate students I work with 3 decades on. Many of us continue at the work of curriculum reform and school renewal in lower socioeconomic elementary schools as part of an ongoing project of social justice. Several colleagues have noted Anyon’s extraordinary job of encapsulating multi-sited ethnography within the confines of a refereed article. Others argue that structuralist Marxist theory offers a mechanistic explanation of what we see in the everyday classroom life, presupposing student uptake and longitudinal ideological and material effects.

The findings of “Social Class and School Knowledge” are worth reconnoitering. Rereading Anyon, I was struck by three issues of continued relevance. First, “Social Class and School Knowledge” remains a model for how ethnographic research can instantiate and bring to life quantitative, macro-sociological documentation on persistent patterns of educational inequality. Part of the current push towards narrowly defined “evidence-based” policy entails a writing off of qualitative ethnographic and discourse-analytic work as “soft” and non-generalisable. This is a mischievous and convenient amnesia: Anyon, Willis and colleagues’ work began from and complemented a long-standing quantitative sociological demonstration of patterns of unequal and inequitable achievement by economically marginal and cultural minority students. Further, it is at the least difficult for policy makers and systems bureaucrats to model and anticipate the effects of large-scale mandates without understanding and engaging with documentation on the complex local ecologies of the schools where high-stakes policy produces idiosyncratic local blends of intended and collateral effects (for a review, see Welner & Oakes, 2008).

Second, Anyon’s description of the interactional practices of the curriculum-in-use drew our attention to persistent issues of the authority, sources and uses of knowledge. Until that point, critical curriculum studies had focused mainly on the overt ideological content of textbooks and curriculum. The fragmentation of knowledge in the pursuit of the “basics,” and an affiliated neglect of the “intellectual demand” (Newmann & Associates, 1996), critical literacy and the “technical registers” of disciplinary and field knowledge (Lemke, 1990) remains a central issue in working-class schools (Ladwig, 2007). In this regard, Anyon’s insights into the differential production of epistemological authority and disposition have continued exploratory value in debates around the collateral knowledge and cultural effects of scripted teaching and learning underpinning No Child Left Behind and similar policies.
Third, the issues raised in the subsequent exchange over “Social Class and School Knowledge” between Anyon (1985) and Peter Ramsey (1983, 1985), also featured in *Curriculum Inquiry*, remain key empirical and theoretical matters some 3 decades later. Unknotting the complex intersections of class, race and gender in social and cultural reproduction remains a task at hand. My aim in these brief comments is to revisit Anyon’s work in historical context, to précis and reframe for new readers some of its key findings, then turn to subsequent and ongoing issues about documenting and redressing social injustice in education.

**RESEARCH TRADITIONS IN THE STUDY OF CLASSROOM REPRODUCTION**

In a recent seminar on the persistence of issues of social class and ethnicity on school performance, Courtney Cazden (2008) offered the following recount. When she entered Harvard Graduate School to study the relationships between language, social class and schooling in the 1960s, she was directed to educational psychologists and linguists as possible supervisors. The educational literature on social class then offered two conventional pathways: larger-scale survey and assessment studies that pointed to “deficit” cognitive and linguistic effects of home socialization, and linguistic and psychological research that attributed poor educational achievement to developmental delay. She tells of exchanging typewritten letters with a young British sociologist named Basil Bernstein who was also interested in the effects of class on schooling. Bernstein’s focus was both on the social class differences in children’s language development and on modeling the formation of school knowledge in pedagogy and curriculum.

Key to Cazden’s account is her description of the available disciplinary discourses and research paradigms—in the midst of the unfreezing of the McCarthyist era and the escalating Cold War (Reisch, 2005)—for naming, talking about and analyzing social class and education. Both she and Bernstein found that psychological models tended to locate the matter internally in the human subject, in “lack” that could be described in terms of acquired but internal cognitive and linguistic capacity.

What is missing from many current accounts of the rise of “critical” educational studies over the past 3 decades is due recognition of the fact that our work was grounded in larger quantitative-scale studies of school achievement undertaken by educational sociologists, persistent and disturbing patterns of large scale reproduction of educational inequality by Bowles and Gintis (1976) in the United States, Karabel and Halsey (1977) in the United Kingdom and others. This is Anyon’s starting point, well cited in the original article. But while the patterns and effects were apparent, there was considerably less research on the classroom practices of unequal education.
As readers of *Curriculum Inquiry* over the period would know, two powerful strands of investigations into educational equality emerged. The now-old “new” sociology of education was marked out in Michael Young’s collection, *Knowledge and Control* (1971). This was followed by a formalisation of a critical sociology of curriculum in Michael Apple’s (1979) *Ideology and Curriculum* (for retrospective reviews, see Weis, McCarthy, & Dimitriadis, 2006). At the same time, the “ethnography of communication” was introduced in Cazden, Vera John-Steiner, and Del Hymes’s (1972) collection, *Functions of Language in the Classroom*. These set out two lines of investigation into the production and reproduction of inequality in schooling: one sociological/ethnographic, drawing together neo-Marxian, symbolic interactionist and structuralist sociology (Whitty, 1986); the other ethnographic/linguistic, using sociolinguistic, ethnomethodological and later, incorporating sociocultural psychology and critical discourse analysis. They converge in classroom analysis. In the 1980s, many of us attempted to bring these two traditions together, using Marxist and affiliated social and cultural theory to inform the study of classroom and textbook discourse (for a review, see Luke, 1995). The aim was to examine the practices raised by quantitative sociological studies and critical ethnographies like Anyon’s via a closer, contextual analysis of language, discourse and textual interaction. While summarizing Anyon’s findings about the reproductive effects of the curriculum for new readers, I want to briefly re-examine some of her classroom accounts, using some of the tools of this later tradition of research into the classroom construction of knowledge.

**THE STRATIFICATION OF THE CURRICULUM-IN-USE**

“Social class and school knowledge” documents four social-class differentiated versions of the curriculum-in-use in primary schools. Beginning each case with narratives on school setting and ethos, Anyon develops an account of how school philosophy, the official curriculum and affiliated resources, staffroom and teacher understandings of the students’ communities and lives, and an enacted classroom curriculum together contribute to stratified versions of knowledge, with ramifications for students’ cultural capital. Focusing on social studies curriculum, she describes the explicit ideological messages about agency, power, political economy and class position. As important is her focus on the differential structuring of knowledge. That is, the social organization of knowledge, the pedagogic message structure, is taken to constitute access to and agency with different kinds and levels of thinking, understanding and knowledge—with longitudinal effects in terms of education, employment and class position. Although there are no data presented on student outcomes (e.g., test scores, pathway tracking, achievement levels or the analysis of student artifacts), we see the dispositional configurations of knowledge/power relations shaped in classroom interaction and subsequent student accounts.
Four school types, each representing a homogenous socioeconomic and cultural background are described. In each, distinctive “stances” towards knowledge acquisition and construction are at work. Anyon’s heuristics are elegantly simple: She asks students “what knowledge is,” “where knowledge comes from” and whether you can “make knowledge.” In the working-class schools, knowledge is presented as fragmented bits, with a curriculum focus on acquisition and automaticity of basic skills and rule recognition. Students tend to locate the sources and construction of knowledge through other authoritative sources (e.g., “the Board of Education,” books, teacher talk). Anyon also notes the absence of the use of mental process verbs that foreground cognitive and metacognitive agency. She unified the case around the key theme of resistance: both active disruption and passive resistance.

In the middle-class schools, Anyon documents a shift from practice and automaticity of basic skills towards rule recognition. She tables this sample of classroom talk:

[1] T: Remember, more than one mouse is called mice. Remember what we said the other day: it’s an irregular noun. I’m glad you gave me that one [that example] so you won’t use the wrong one.
[2] S: Everybody was going to say that one. (pause) It wouldn’t sound right if you said mouses.
[3] T: Yes, (pause) but who can give me a better reason [than how it sounds]? Remember what it’s called? Remember what we said the other day? (Anyon, 1981, p. 13)

This is an instance of the I/R/F (Initiate/Response/Feedback) function (Cazden, 1990), where the teacher initiates a “closed question,” and solicits responses until s/he finds the answer s/he was seeking. Hence, turn 2 (“it wouldn’t sound right if you said mouses”) is a candidate answer, which the teacher acknowledges before reinitiating with a request for another answer (“Yes, but who can give me a better reason?”). This triggers another I/R/F sequence, here unreported. This is, Cazden (1990) argues, a ubiquitous, “default” mode in much classroom talk. Its repetition builds a lattice-like structure, which entails a ‘second guessing’ of the correct answer in the teacher’s head—the oral correlative to filling in short answers on a worksheet. But in this example of “lower order” discourse work, the stress is on finding a recitation of a “correct” rule or answer (Baker & Freebody, 1988)—as against the generation of more extended, speculative talk that requires thinking aloud, a making audible of cognitive strategy and speaking position (on the achievement effects of sustained classroom dialogue, see Hattie, 2009). In the middle-class school, Anyon describes this as an instance where instruction is focused on the naming and internalization of the grammatical rule in question. In turn 1, the teacher is leading the collective (“we”) towards a “right” naming of a grammatical generalization. The reasoning process sought in turn 3 is focused on recognition and naming of a categorical type of noun (the irregular noun).
Anyon argues that there are identifiable social class–based constructions of epistemological stance, with middle-class students coming to grips with their agency in contending with knowledge, referring to the need to “study,” “learn” and “remember” and exercise “brains” and “intelligence.” But the sources of knowledge remain “beyond criticism” (Luke, DeCastell, & Luke, 1983), with a strong emphasis on learning from “the book” as a form of “official knowledge” (Apple, 1980). Here it is as if students have been repositioned on a “coding to comprehension” developmental hierarchy (Paris, 2005), with a strong emphasis on the recitation and generalization of isolated information recovered from texts and teacher utterances. The general theme Anyon identifies is around “possibility”: academic success through this particular version of the pursuit of knowledge, concentrated engagement with school learning from textbooks on a taxonomy from recall to comprehension.

By contrast, the affluent professional school works from what could be broadly termed progressivist ideologies, focusing on student questioning, inquiry and experience. Here again the discourse shifts, with overt teacher questioning tossing the responsibility for agency back to students: “How should I do this?” “What does this mean?” “You decide?” “Does this make sense?” Anyon offers but a brief passage of teacher talk:

T: Yes. It pollutes. It’s a vicious cycle, and nobody knows what the solution is. We do know we need alternative sources of energy. What would happen if we had no energy? [And then they got into a discussion of what life would be like “if we had no energy”—i.e., no coal, oil, or electricity.] (Anyon, 1981, p. 20)

Here a level of speculative thinking is elicited: that students envision and narrate possible worlds that do not exist in their background knowledge and immediate experience. The use of “we” marks out and signals a collective consciousness, modeling the liberal humanism that Anyon identifies as part of a dominant, though contradictory ethos in the professional affluent school. The focus appears to be on the connection between science and “real life”—rather than with the introduction of specific technical/disciplinary vocabulary and register (e.g., grammatical nominalization: pollution, conservation; see Lemke, 1990). I would assume, following Anyon’s description, that this would figure in the depth technical exploration of “nascent empiricism” that features in the Executive Elite school. The point of much subsequent work in systemic functional and applied linguistics is that technical register constitutes what David Corson (1985) referred to as a “lexical bar” for working class and cultural minority students, Bernstein’s (1990) elaborated code that is masked in basic skills instruction and personal growth/experience models alike.

Despite the affluent professional school’s stated focus on “experience” and knowledge construction, Anyon notes, the domains of scientific knowledge and, indeed, literacy are still areas where students will discover and
reach “right answers”—exemplified through the widespread use of self-contained, scripted curriculum materials like the then-and currently popular SRA (Scientific Reading Associates) reading package. In terms of ideological content, controversial issues (e.g., pollution) are opened for debate with a careful avoidance of controversy and a steering of divergent responses. The result again is a different epistemic stance towards knowledge, where students refer to their capacity to “think” and generate ideas. The sources of knowledge included books, traditions and canonical figures, but also were located internally: “in the brain”—with one student offering: “You can make knowledge if you invent something.” The dominant theme that Anyon draws from the affluent professional schools is “narcissism,” a variation upon what Apple (1979) described as the “possessive individualism” optimally suited for upward mobility within the orders of competitive capitalism. This sits in binary tension with the collective humanist “we.”

Anyon’s fourth site is an “executive elite school,” which resisted racial integration. There students were described by teachers in terms of their “breeding,” attributed to their parents’ cultural styles, positions of power and education. In an early 20th-century throwback, one teacher comments: “It’s in their genes. They’re handsome, you should see their fathers. They almost look like executives.” The school ethos and stated curriculum stress analytic thinking and reason, with a strong stress on disciplinary concepts in social studies and a neoclassical focus on Greek and Roman civilization. Here Anyon’s questions yield student descriptions of “knowing”, offering different strategies of knowing and learning “existing knowledge” in specific fields. Yet agency for the production of knowledge lies in canonical sources outside of the knower: “from tradition,” “from information,” reinforcing a reverence to historical sources and knowledge traditions. Anyon’s view is that the theme of “excellence” is achieved through a combination of reproduction of existing knowledge, and the testing of it through what she refers to as a “nascent empiricism” that moves them toward scientific/rational judgement. She provides the following example of classroom talk on the topic of strikes:

[1] T: OK, suppose I’m the manager and you ask me, and I won’t give you a raise. Then what do you do? David?
[2] S: Strikes are not a good idea: the public is always affected. Students don’t learn if teachers strike.
[4] T: I’m asking you question to help you think this through, I’m not saying I’m not agreeing with you.
[5] S: It goes both ways. Take the newspaper strike. A worker may have a family he or she has to support, but without newspapers, we don’t know, as David said.
[7] S: (cuts off the teacher) If you really feel strongly, you should.
[8] S: No. The students were hurt by the strike of the teachers. (He begins a monologue about how the teachers shouldn’t strike because it hurts the public. The teacher finally calls on another student.)
S: Workers say, “I think I deserve a raise for building really good cars.” But the managers are against strikes. They say, “Workers only work eight hours and I work twelve. Why shouldn’t I get more?”

T: A lot of you are concerned about the public. But suppose you have a boss who really takes advantage of you. What then?

S: I’d probably try to find another job. I wouldn’t stay with that creep!

T: I want you to think about this. We won’t have time to discuss it: I’m the boss.

S: You’re always the boss (Laughter, teacher smiles).

T: I say, “Strike or I’ll fire you. I don’t need to. . . . I’m going to buy a machine!” Think about that. (They get up for lunch). (Anyon, 1981, pp. 27–28)

Anyon’s view is that exchanges like this “may play a politically liberalizing role in the children’s upbringing” (p. 28). The IRF operates differently, with the feedback move deferring teacher judgement. She uses various strategies to extend and redirect the content of student utterance. These include paraphrase (turn 10), humour (turn 12) and agreement (turn 4). But additionally, she uses meta-discourse (Edwards & Westgate, 1994), explicitly framing her intents and naming the kinds of discourse moves and cognitive processes at work (e.g., “I want you to think about this” [turn 12]). The result is an extended exchange, with student mean length of utterance considerably expanded from classroom talk in the working- and middle-class schools. While the talk is still personalized in the realm of “opinion,” there is a shift in student expression of agency: the first four student turns do not use the personal pronoun “I.” Instead, the students begin using generic, hypothetical or exemplary human actors (“the public,” “students”—even modeling hypothetical speakers (turn 9). This marks a genre shift from first-person narrative and description to expository talk. However, in this particular passage, there is little introduction of specific elaborated vocabulary or technical register (the systematic renaming of phenomena via nominalization into terminology and discourse of employer/worker industrial relations [e.g., industrial action, grievance, contacts]).

What is at work here is not simply the differential formation of curriculum knowledge. The work of the enacted curriculum is done through repeated and habituated patterns of talk and exchange. These selectively make available and foreground particular content discourses (e.g., grammar, ecology and conservation, economic/industrial relations). The speaking positions are different—and through the “nascent empiricism,” executive elite students begin to move beyond the personal recount that was elicited in the professional affluent school.

Here I want to make two logical jumps beyond Anyon’s initial description. The first is that what is being taught and learned here is more than specific content or field knowledge and beyond the behavioural categories of skills and competencies. The construction of “cultural capital” that Anyon refers to entails the building of a specific epistemological standpoint—a sense of where agency about and around knowledge exists, where authoritative knowledge is sourced, and, accordingly, what this
particular human subject can potentially “do” with knowledge. This is, as I will comment later, hardly airtight in effect. But it does entail the construction of habitus with particular dispositions and capabilities of cognitive and symbolic distinction and discrimination (Bourdieu, 1987). Second, these brief reanalyses enable us to see that the stratification Anyon describes entails differential access to spoken and written discourses: both familiarity with genres of classroom talk, textbook and other textual resources, and rules of recognition for what particular “orders of discourse” (Fairclough, 1993) enable and encourage by way of talk, critical analysis and pragmatic use. In effect, different social classes of speaking and hearing, reading and writing “selves” are produced.

We have a half-century trove of data-driven analyses of social and cultural reproduction—quantitative/empirical, sociological, economic and ethnographic, discourse analytic, linguistic. “Social Class and School Knowledge” is a key part of that corpus. But it also showed many of us who wanted to create new bridges between these two traditions of educational research, sociology of curriculum and the ethnographic study of discourse, a way forward: that we had the methodological tools to link macro and micro, quantitative and qualitative sociological explanations of inequality, and relatedly, to “scale up” the study of classroom discourse via the use of social theory and critical linguistics (Luke, 1995). Logically and historically, this led us to rich descriptions of the everyday tensions that Anyon describes between reproduction and transformation, between structural determination and agency, between interpellating formations of school knowledge and their more idiosyncratic realization in classroom talk and text.

CLASS COUNTS—BUT HOW, WHERE, FOR WHOM AND IN WHAT CONTEXTS?

The subsequent exchange between Anyon (1985) and Peter Ramsey (1983, 1985) in Curriculum Inquiry raised issues about the place of categorical definition and generalisability in critical ethnography. It also tabled the issue of the relationships between social class, gender, culture/ethnicity/race, and other forms of difference.

In his response, Ramsey (1983) relies on his own New Zealand work with mixed Maori and Pakeha populations. Ramsey’s commentary turns on two points: He raises queries about methodology and, perhaps more importantly, questions whether the focus on social class failed to track the complex reproductive intersections of culture, language and gender that his New Zealand studies found. In her rejoinder, Anyon (1985) amply responds to Ramsey’s methodological queries, clarifying issues about sample, context and data. But rereading the exchange, it is clear that Ramsey’s findings and, indeed, analytic lenses would of necessity be different than Anyon’s, given the distinctive cultural, linguistic and distinctive
class structure of New Zealand in the 1970s. Simply, he studied different populations, cultures and political economies—that his approach and findings would be different are unsurprising. Nonetheless, the exchange is important insofar as it raises the methodological/theoretical question about which social analytic frameworks should and can be brought into play in theory-driven critical ethnography post-Willis. It marked the beginning of 2 decades of work in critical ethnography that would document the complex and intersecting ways that class, race, linguistic difference, gender and sexuality play out in the educational production of cultural capital—drawing upon then emergent theoretical models of multiple subjectivity, hybridity, and, most recently, intersectionality (see reviews in Gadsden, Davis, & Artilles, 2009).

The debate, theoretically framed, would appear to be about whether social class can be construed as the structural point of determination in reproduction. Ramsey cites Henry Giroux’s important contribution: to question the doctrinal hypothesis that social class was the principal and determinate category of exclusion (cf. Giroux, 2001). Three decades later—we know that class is not a stand-alone determination, but works in relationship to gender, ethnicity/race, affiliated culture and subcultural context, linguistic disposition, and sexual preference of student. It is always a factor in the formation of background knowledge and capacity via the differential uptake as student habitus for exchange value in the field of the classroom. But, like race and gender, it is never “stand alone.” Thus, the emergence of poststructuralist feminist models of multiple subjectivity, postcolonial debates over hybridity and hyphenation, postmodern theories of representation and fragmentation of meaning, and, indeed, critical race theories of intersectionality—have established the significance of difference within difference, that variable markers of material position and relational identity are constructed, assigned, deployed and used by and on human subjects (Luke, 2009). As I have argued here, we can study these ethnographically and discourse analytically, as they are defined and deployed in schools and classrooms by students, teachers and institutions. However, we can also begin to examine them on a larger, population scale through statistical modeling of which population characteristics (ascribed and self-ascribed, positioned and positioning) tend to account for the variance in overall educational achievement and outcomes, narrowly or broadly defined (see reviews in Luke, Kelly, & Green, 2010/in press). So the refinement of an understanding of the intersecting influences of social class on educational equity and, indeed, social justice—continues, but tempered by an understanding that social class is a necessary but not always sufficient or comprehensive explanatory category for the analysis of educational practice and attainment.

But there are two related matters that “Social Class and School Knowledge” raises of immediate importance for the educational research community. These concern the actual efficacy—both longitudinal and
intersubjective—of these class differentiated forms of school knowledge. Let me explain further.

Following prototypical work on the reproductive nature of curriculum content, curriculum form and the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1979)—Anyon’s contribution at the time was to document how these came together to constitute a “curriculum-in-use” (Luke, DeCastell, & Luke, 1983). Similarly, Bernstein’s (1990) models of classification and framing, even in their later formulations, model the textual and interactional constitution of knowledge. In and of itself, a critical sociology of school knowledge as it was then formulated had to presume longitudinal discourse and cognitive effects.

To fill in the picture of how social, cultural and economic reproduction works has required two further moves. The first is a move to microanalytic work on the differential construction and “uptake” of discourse in classrooms by teachers and students. Anyon’s work succeeds in capturing the formation of the curriculum-in-use. But a microanalytics of classroom discourse and exchange enables us to track variable student uptake—sometimes falling along the identifiable fault lines of race, culture, language groups, gender—but as readily taking idiosyncratic patterns and discourse forms of student agency (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999; Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Farris, 2004; Moje, 2000). The result, Erickson (2007) points out, is not an airtight efficacy of class reproduction but rather “a paper-thin hegemony,” always contested and somewhat unstable.

Second, and related, is the need to account for the longitudinal “remediation” of this school knowledge as these or any group of elementary school students move through other learning “zones” of teaching/learning, through different educational institutions, and through the non-synchronous linguistic markets of workplaces, communities and civic life. To return to the large-scale sociological data on achievement by class, gender, race and language that Anyon began from: We well know that differential kinds and levels of knowledge/power, both content knowledge, linguistic mastery, and cognitive capacity will yield differential educational pathways, outcomes, with consequent stratified effects on access to material and discourse resources, and differential relations of power to dominant means of production and modes of information. These fields, with their structures of class and distinction, are not static but diachronically evolve—rendering distinctive educationally acquired capital of variable and field-specific value (Luke, 1996).

Tracking studies (e.g., Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 2005), re-analyses of National Assessment of Educational Progress data (Lee, 2006) and other academic and non-academic outcomes data shows longitudinal patterns of differential reproduction in action. These pathways are not ensured or seamless, but vary by national, regional, population and systemic factors. So if Anyon’s work, then, began from the need for a school-level description of
broader quantitative patterns of inequality—to fill out the picture, subsequent work logically telescoped inward towards exchange structures, discourse and interactional work in the classroom, and outwards towards qualitative and quantitative longitudinal inquiry, with the aim of documenting the ongoing re-mediation and reframing of these or any students’ cultural capital, as it is taken into successive and overlapping, historical and non-synchronous social fields of exchange.

EVIDENCE AND CURRENT POLICY

Over the last decade, the most debilitating and effective mythology about educational research is a binary distinction: between qualitative “critical work” which has been portrayed as scientifically “soft,” politically correct and ideological by the press, politicians and educational bureaucrats—and empirical, quantitative scientific research, which is presented as unbiased, truthful and the sole grounds for rational policy formation.

These claims took front stage in the ongoing saga of No Child Left Behind. The myth has been built over the last decade by leading U.S. government officials like Bill Bennett and Reid Lyon, whose famous statement that they should “burn down faculties of education” is on the public record. The caricatures re-emerged in the 2008 U.S. elections, when the policy splits between the “old” (Left, union, academic) reformers and “new” (accountability, testing, marketisation) reformers documented in outlets like the New York Times and Politico.com, and in the reporting around the Darling-Hammond transition team and the Obama/Ayres connection. We see these claims paraded in media discussions of “phonics wars” (Snyder, 2008). In 2008, the chair of Australia’s National Panel on reading referred to those who would not accept the phonics rationale as “puddling around in postmodern claptrap” (Milburn, 2008).

This is a strategic misrepresentation of the track record and findings of 4 decades of critical educational research.

For the qualitative lines of development pursued by Anyon and a generation of critical researchers were set against the backdrop of compelling sociological work on school performance and achievement, particularly the achievement of lower socioeconomic families, and cultural minorities. Young, Bernstein, Apple, Cazden, Hymes, and others—coming from very different foundational and methodological bases—began from the empirically and quantitatively documented social facts of educational inequality. The most recent demonstration comes from sources like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2000) Progress on International Achievement data, which routinely reports regression analyses of the comparative impacts of socioeconomic background on conventionally measured achievement in middle-years literacy, numeracy and science by national system. Simply, in some systems the
patterns of class determination and stratification of achievement are much stronger (e.g., the United States, United Kingdom) than in systems with better funded, more equitable approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (e.g., Finland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) (Schleicher, in press). Not coincidentally, the latter cluster of systems has to date moved more slowly towards neoliberal marketisation of schools and other public services (Luke, Woods, & Weir, in press). My point is that we have compelling quantitative and qualitative, empirical and interpretive, realist and discourse-analytic documentation on how schooling, curriculum and instruction works towards reproduction, on students’ and communities’ responses—at times coherent and systematic, at times less—and on uptakes of dominant forms of school knowledge in the complex ecologies of schools and classrooms. And we have, as mentioned, an empirical description of students’ longitudinal pathways through nested and simultaneous social fields that, given the current ailments of corporate/state capitalism, remain in a state of transition and volatility.

It is the case that NCLB and the transnational shift towards “evidence-based” and what are now commonly termed “neoliberal” models of educational governance have shifted the vocabulary and the foundational grounds of educational research on equality and inequality (Luke & Woods, 2008). This has raised foundational questions over what might count as evidence, and the requisite information, data, knowledge, and experience that might be required for the formation of educational policy, for the translation of facts to norms (Luke, Kelly, & Green, 2010/in press). Yet governments continue to insist on an evidence base that turns on narrow measures of educational achievement that have demonstrable technical and scientific limits (cf. Moss, Girard, & Haniford, 2006)—with policy makers eschewing as “soft” and “non-generalisable” documentation of the actual classroom, pedagogic, interactional and teacher/student variables at work in specific local contexts (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). The lack of policy engagement with research data on teachers’ and students’ actual work in classrooms is indefensible. Worse yet, it precludes any properly governed process of reform that must occur via classroom curriculum practice. To turn or, at best, ameliorate, many of the patterns of inequality that are contingent on the structural elements of teaching/learning and schooling, what is needed is a broad, rich, multidisciplinary, quantitative and qualitative, generalisable and local canvas of research data and findings. Further, the task of policy formation is hermeneutic and normative—for the data never speaks for itself.

At the same time, Anyon’s focus on the construction of distinctive epistemological dispositions has direct relevance to current policy debates over scripted and test-driven instruction. A key lesson is that social class reproduction is not just about limited access to high and low stakes, canonical and revisionist versions of dominant ideological knowledge. It is about how the enacted curriculum, in tandem with overall school ethos effectively
structures and codes knowledge differently, in effect constituting different epistemic stances, dispositions and attitudes towards what will count as knowledge. The key policies of scripted, standardized pedagogy risk offering working-class, cultural and linguistic minority students precisely what Anyon presciently described: an enacted curriculum of basic skills, rule recognition and compliance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the spirit of this volume, I have focused on Jean Anyon’s early work, and not commented on her subsequent, outstanding contributions to the field. Thanks to Dennis Thiessen for editorial encouragement, and Carmen Luke, Courtney Cazden and Geoff Whitty for comments.

REFERENCES


