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Theoretical Markers in Studying Rural Learners in a Semi-Urban Schooling Context

Desiree Pearl Larey
Lecturer
University of the Free State
South Africa

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Athens Institute for Education and Research

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Abstract

This paper aims to counter some perceptions about rural education as deficient and lacking in capital**.** I will draw on various theoretical positions and concepts, such as: habitus, cultural capital, Critical Race Theory and Generative Theory of Rural Education, to present a cogent theoretical framework. The theoretical framework is built on the following assumptions: Firstly, my idea about general curriculum designs in relation to rurality is that the curriculum does not connect to the rural, disadvantaged learner´s context. Learners have a seeming disengagement with and even resistance to the school curriculum. Secondly, I believe that rural contexts have the following capital: experiential knowledge, such as oral histories and counter storytelling in order to name their realities, as well as transformational resistance strategies to navigate their way through life. Lastly, I consider rural learners who go to school in semi-urban areas to have the following agentic properties: aspirational, navigational, linguistic, familial, social and resistant capital. This theoretical framework will assist me to conceptualise rurality differently, as well as frame the rural learners who are my prospective research participants in an agentic light. The theoretical framework will be employed to use as a lens to understand the role that rurality and rural lived experience, agency and an understanding of the spatio-temporal relationship between people and their context play in shaping individuals' behaviour and dispositions.

Keywords: rural education, school curriculum, Theory of Bourdieu, Critical Race Theory, Generative Theory of Rural Education

Introduction

This paper's aim is explicitly to counter some perceptions about rural education as deficient and lacking in capital. I will draw on various theoretical positions and concepts, such as: habitus, cultural capital, Critical Race Theory and Generative Theory of Rurality, in order to propose a cogent theoretical framework to understand the educational dilemma of historically disadvantaged Coloured rural learners in the Western Cape, South Africa.

Background of the Study

The main question to be addressed is why learners and their parents in historically disadvantaged rural Coloured communities do not know how to achieve academic success. In this regard, Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses and Seekings (2010:45) claim that "[m]ost parents make real sacrifices to enable their children to attend better schools. But most adolescents in poor neighbourhoods fail to achieve their own and their parents´ aspirations, partly because they do not understand what is required to do so."

My research interest resides in particular with poor learner achievement in historically disadvantaged Coloured rural communities. It should be noted that the historical angle to the concept ´historically disadvantaged communities´ refers to the apartheid era that still has particular consequences in what is historically referred to as Coloured communities. Mills and Gale (2010) use various thinkers' notions of the term 'disadvantaged' and argue that children from working-class backgrounds, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups are blamed that their culture is deficient and deprived (Mills and Gale 2010:56). This thinking contributes to, as well reasons why these particular learners fail academically. In this regard, I will use the concept 'disadvantaged' throughout the study purposefully, but with caution. I recognise that this is a contentious term and I do not wish to subscribe to deficient explanations of any communities.

As a former teacher working in an environment labelled as 'so-called Coloured´, I want to understand why parents and learners do not have the knowledge and ability to fulfil their own and their parents' aspirations and expectations in life. In my experience as a secondary teacher for over twenty years, I was regularly confronted with learners who did not meet their expectations in their final year of school. When most learners received their matriculation results at the end of their formal schooling, they were often devastated with their poor results. In many cases, learners did not pass or they did not reach the admission requirements for higher education. During my time at the school, I perceived that the majority of learners were wasting their time as they approached their education without the necessary gravity; however, at the end of the academic year they wanted to pass and carry on to the next grade. It seemed as if most of the children in the school did not want to be educated. McFadden and Munns (2002:359) maintain that the persistence of

culturally supported school resistance intensifies the challenge for educators committed to opening up pathways so that the students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds have greater chances of educational opportunity and success. This contributes to existing backlogs in academic work.

To offer an understanding of these learners' educational difficulties, I will use the theory of Bourdieu, Critical Race Theory and Generative Theory of Rurality (Balfour 2012:1) as a theoretical framework to engage in the discourse of inequality and educational achievement. I work with the assumption that these theories will assist me in developing insights into the multiple dimensions of the social reality with which I will engage. As such, in this paper my argument is that the cultural capital misalignment that schools and teachers normally operate within has to be addressed and challenged by an incorporation of the life world contexts of their learners. There has to be a far larger connection between the life world knowledge deployed by the learners and the school´s curriculum and the teachers pedagogical practices (Fataar 2012:56).

Theoretical framework

Bourdieu's Social Theory

The starting point of this discussion is the use of the social theory of Bourdieu. Bourdieu´s insight will be explored to give an account of why "[t]he dispositions of working class are, in effect, out of alignment with the middle-class cultural or knowledge capital that guarantees school success" (Fataar 2012:54). This author proceeds further and claims that it should be understood that the school code involves a dispositional receptivity for middle-class capital at the institutional site of the school and that this helps explain why the school´s ability to actively engage disadvantaged students is circumscribed (Fataar 2012:54 – 55).

The Concept of Social Space and Social Groups

It is important to remark that in constructing a theory of social space, Bourdieu presupposes a series of breaks with the Marxist theory (Bourdieu 1985:723). Furthermore, contrary to Marx and his theory of- class-in-itself and class-for-itself, for the working class and the proletariat, Bourdieu presupposes the social world as a space constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation of distribution constituted by the set of properties (Bourdieu 1985:723-724). Bourdieu explains that these sets of properties can give agents and groups strength and power within that universe (Bourdieu 1985:723-724). An important consequence of this state of affairs is that the holders of these properties are thus defined by their relative positions within that space. On the whole, according to Bourdieu, these social topologies consisting of a structured space of positions and position-takings are fields (Ferrare and Apple 2012:8).

Bourdieu (1989:16) relates this relational mode of thinking to the social world, a contribution from the structuralist revolution which is that of modern mathematics and physics. He points out that in sociology, in its objectivist moment, an analysis of relative positions and of the objective relations between these positions occurs. Paradoxically, he claims that the groups that must be constructed in order to objectivise the positions they occupy, hide those positions. Bourdieu calls the space of positions of power, the field of power (Bourdieu 1989:16). By implication, these objective relations are the relations between positions occupied within the distributions of the resources. As a result, these objective relations are or may become active in the competition for the appropriation of scarce goods of which the social universe is the site. Each agent occupies his or her position according to his/her possessions in social space. Subsequently, each field has its own logic and its own hierarchy, it is in this sense that fields are relatively autonomous since they operate according to their own logics and are not completely determine by any outside force (Ferrare and Apple 2012:8).

In addition, Bourdieu reports that according to his empirical investigations, these fundamental powers are in reality capital, *i.e.* economic capital (in its different forms), cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital, perceived and recognised by agents as legitimate (Bourdieu in Bourdieu 1989:17). Moreover, in broad, these different kinds of capital that may exist in the objectified form, *i.e.* material properties or, in the case of cultural capital, *i.e.* in the embodied, objectified and institutionalised state, represent a power over the field. Cultural capital is not transmissible, but is acquired over time and over the accumulated product of past labour. Bourdieu (1985:724) claims that the volume of cultural capital and aggregated chances of profit in which cultural capital are effective, thereby helping to determine an agents' position in social space. In other words, the success experienced in the cultural field gives agents their specific place in social space.

Thus, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (2013:296), social groups and especially social classes, exist twice in the objectivity of the first order, bestowing to distributions of material properties between the different social groups. Furthermore, social groups exist in the objectivity of the second order by producing different classifications and representations on the basis of a practical knowledge of these distributions. Consequently, this will eventually be expressed in the lifestyles of the different social groups.

These two modes of existence are not independent – the representations that agent's form of their position in social space is the product of a system of schemata of perception and appreciation (habitus). An agent's habitus is the mediating force between a definite position in the distributions of material properties (objectivity l) and of symbolic capital (objectivity ll) (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013:296; Bourdieu 1985:728).

Constitution of Social and Mental Structures

In this section of the paper, I will proceed to participate in Bourdieu's second foundational hypothesis which anchors his sociology: Bourdieu, according Bourdieu and Wacquant (2007:12) postulates that there exists a correspondence between social structures and mental structures, *i.e.* between the objective and subjective divisions of the social world.

Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:12) works with the insight of Durkheim and Mauss (1963) and contests that the cognitive systems operative in primitive societies is derivations of their social system. They believe, in fact, that categories of understanding are collective representations of different social groups, and the underlying mental schemata are patterned after the social structure of the group (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:12). In this regard, Bourdieu extends the Durkheimian thesis of the "sociocentrism" of systems of thought in four directions. First, Bourdieu argues that the correspondence between cognitive and social structures observed in traditional communities is also reflected in advanced societies, in which their homology, for the most part is produced by the functioning of school systems (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:12). Bourdieu (2003:345) avers that "in a society where the handing of culture is monopolised by a school, the hidden affinities uniting the works of man (and, at the same time, modes of conduct and thought) derive from the institution of the school, whose function is consciously (and also, in part, unconsciously) to transmit the unconscious or, to be more precise, to produce individuals equipped with the system of unconscious (or, deeply buried) master-patterns that constitute their culture".

Second, Bourdieu proposes that social divisions and mental schemata are structurally homologous because they are genetically linked, the mental representation are nothing other than the embodiment of the social structures (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:12-13). In addition, cumulative exposure to certain social conditions instils an ensemble of durable and transposable dispositions in individuals, which internalise the necessities of the extent of the social environment, subsequently inscribing the social conditions inside agents. Bourdieu implies that if the structures of the objectivity of the second order (habitus) are the embodied version of the structures of the objectivity of the first order, then the analysis of objective structures logically carries over into the analysis of subjective dispositions (Bourdieu and de Saint Martin in Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:13).

Thirdly, and for Bourdieu the most critical, the correspondence between social and mental structures fulfils a political agenda. These symbolic systems are not simply instruments of knowledge; they also signify mechanisms of domination. Bourdieu (in Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:13-14) opines that "[t]he conservation of the social order is decisively reinforced by … the orchestration of categories of perception of the social world which, being adjusted to the divisions of the established order (and, therefore, to the interests of those who dominate it)".

The fourth way in which Bourdieu departs from the Durkheimian problematic is that systems of classification constitute a stake in the struggles that oppose individuals and groups in the routine interactions of daily life, as well as in the solitary and collective contests that take place in the fields of politics and cultural production (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:14). Moreover, Bourdieu and Boltanski (in Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:14) maintain that in a class-divided society, the social taxonomies, such as occupation that organises the representation of groups are "at every moment produced by and at stake in, the power relation between classes". He continues by pointing out that social and cognitive structures are recursive and structurally linked and the correspondence that emerges between them provides one of the most solid props of social domination (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:14). Of great significance here is that the latter thinker infers that social groups and other antagonistic social collectives are continually engaged in a struggle to impose the view of the world that is most congruent with their particular interests. Bourdieu (1985:731) adds that in the struggle of social groups to impose their particular interests as universal is also determined by the distinct symbolic capital the particular groups possess.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (2007:14-15) declares that the sociology of knowledge or cultural forms implies a political sociology; a sociology of symbolic power. Bourdieu and Wacquant (2007:14-15) further believe that the essence of Bourdieu´s work may be interpreted as a materialist anthropology of the specific contribution that various forms of symbolic violence make to the reproduction and transformation of structures of domination. This thinking Bourdieu offers is to explain why the dispositions of the working class are out of alignment with the middle-class cultural or knowledge capital that guarantees school success. This implies that social reality has a profound impact on learners´ positions in social space. Reporting on Bourdieu´s work, Robbins (2002:321) remarks that praxeological knowledge is concerned with the dialectical relationship between objective structures and the structured dispositions which tend to reproduce them, *i.e.,* the dual process of the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality. In other words, working class and middle class habitus tend to produce and reproduce themselves.

Critical Race Theory

I intend also to use the Critical Race Theory (CRT) in combination with the theory of Bourdieu and Generative Theory of Rurality, as Delgado Bernal (in Yosso 2005:74) suggests that "goes beyond disciplinary boundaries to analyse race and racism within both historical and contemporary contexts ...." The intention is to give an account of people living in a racial society, give voice to their aspirations and expectations and their struggles in life to better their positions. Ladson-Billings (1998) maintains that the main tenets of CRT is how citizenship and race interact; the reality of a racialised society and its impact on people in their everyday lives.

CRT is an ideological tool to uncover racial oppression and how this knowledge can deconstruct and reconstruct structures, through experiential knowledge, so that societies become more socially just. Ellison (as quoted by Yosso 2005:73) asserts that: "CRT adds to the efforts to continue to expand this dialogue to recognize the ways in which our struggles for social justice are limited by discourses that omit and thereby silence the multiple experiences of People of Color". Contrary to social and cultural reproduction theories (deterministic reproduction models of schooling), resistance theories demonstrate the human agency; the confidence and skills to act on one´s own behalf (Solòrzana and Solòrzana in Sòlorzana and Bernal 2001:315-316).

Utilising a CRT lens, Yosso (2005:70) challenge traditional interpretations of Bourdieuean cultural capital theory (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and introduce an alternative concept called community cultural wealth. Importantly, critical race theorists value the experiences of People of Colour and demonstrate that "community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso 2005:77).

Learners in historically disadvantaged communities possess subjectivities / experiential knowledge and use this cultural wealth (in the traditional sense, cultural capital), such as inspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital to navigate their ways in the educational arena (Delgado Bernal in Yosso 2005:77). The assumption is that schools should recognise this wealth and connect it with school knowledge codes to build on capital for disadvantaged learners to achieve academically.

For historically disadvantaged learners to live with racism is a constant condition; their being perpetually subjected to objective and subjective oppressive forces. This is a state that marginalised people can never escape. Ladson-Billings (1998:13) posits that the use of voice or ´naming your reality´ is a way that CRT links form and substance in scholarship. Naming one´s own reality is stories that serve as an interpretative structure by which the oppressed people can help free themselves. This is the first step in understanding the complexities of racism and the voices of the marginalised that are required for a deep understanding of the educational system.

I believe that rural contexts have experiential knowledge such as oral histories and counter-storytelling as a revenue to "name their realities" and to express as well as the *transformational resistance strategies* to assist historically disadvantaged Coloured learners to navigate their way through life. For example, the case of learners from farms (in the Western Cape) in Wolseley, Stellenbosch, Wellington and Grabouw demonstrating agency to access a better school transport system. These rural learners face dark and dangerous roads on a daily basis in order to attend their schools. About 200 learners handed over a memorandum to the Western Cape Education Department in Cape Town during June 2015, stating the difficulties and challenges they encounter pertaining school transport from the farm to the semi-urban neighbourhoods where they attend school (Network 24:2015:1). The Critical Race Theory is a way to give account to learners' agency to

critique social domination and oppression and to accomplish *transformational resistance.*

Another methodology employed by CRT in order to interpret the realities of those on the margins of society is called counter-storytelling. Solòrzana and Bernal (2001:327) argue that these counter-stories (not the stories of the dominant), can build community among the marginalised of society to build human agency. For the historically disadvantaged people in the region of the Western Cape, there is a need for their untold stories, to be captured and then to mediate ways for them to define pointers towards increased chances of success. It is through this ´populist´ or everyday culture that rural working-class learners express/ exhibit a habitus that is creative, inventive and agentic. Schools currently, have to acknowledge this knowledge and these skills in order to work toward social justice in curricula.

Generative Theory of Rurality

In the next section I will explore the social theory of Generative Theory of Rurality. As Chisholm (in Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane 2008:98) points out: "[i]t is perhaps unsurprising … that education in the rural areas remains beset with problems and challenges simply not considered within policy, theoretical and pragmatic initiatives". In this regard, Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay and Moletsane (2011:344) propose instead to fix the problem, rather than problematising the issue of compatibility between curricula designed for urban largely middle-class contexts, and with little applicability beyond these. For this reason, the former authors suggest the need to conceptualise a new theory of rurality that might account both for the diversity of lived experiences and drivers that enable or disable the transformation of rural contexts (Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane 2008:98). In doing so, it is an attempt to advance adequate understanding of rurality and rural education (Arnold *et al.* in Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay and Moletsane 2011:347).

Rurality as Context

Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008:98) consider three broad areas in conceptualising the theory: rurality as a context; forces; agencies; and resources. They proceed to point out that rurality as a context, the context of poor people in rural areas, remains unchanged despite initiatives by national governments. In a similar vein, Moore (in Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane 2008:97) suggests that "ideas of rurality are concerned with space, isolation, community, poverty, disease, neglect, backwardness, marginalization, depopulation, conservatism, racism, resettlement, corruption, entropy, and exclusion". In this respect, Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay and Moletsane (2011:345) comment that they remain aware of the damaging legacy in which the rural means sustained under-development, poverty, injustice and hatred, thus serving a prejudicial race and gender agenda.

The latter above-mentioned authors advocate that these notions should change. In effect, they assert that there was, at all times, a strong link between the rural and the urban. Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008:99) assert that "in South Africa, it is true that adults who have moved from rural areas into urban centres pursue, or at least share in, that idea of the cosmopolitan, though the links to the rural community remain strong". They continue to claim that many South Africans do not experience it as a clash between modernity and tradition. On the whole, Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008:99) note for this reason that movement between the rural and urban is variable and dynamic. Three variables, named as forces, agencies and resources are identified to best address the challenges of the rural.

Variables: Forces, Agencies, and Resources

The first variable to be discussed is Forces: Space, Place and Time. According to Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008:100), Weber (1996) suggests that space is defined as which is inhabited (or place – the *habitus* and that which is moved within) and Lahire (2003) in this respect, proposes that habitus "focusses on social factors that may account for behavioural variations and changes rather than for irreducible differences between social groups".

Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008:100) further note that habitus, in this instance, refers to habitus' dynamic operation. Thus, these authors suggest that any journey out of the rural is also a journey inwards an individual. (Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane 2008:100). A person can simultaneously inhabit both the rural and the urban.

The last constituent of force is time. It should be noted that one of the pivotal features of rural life is the time it takes to move from place to place (Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane 2008:100). These authors maintain that the elongation of time affects rural identities, since these are mostly constituted in relation to communities that exist in relative isolation in space and time from one another, and in greater isolation from urban centres (Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane 2008:100).

Furthermore, the second variable to be discussed is Agencies: Movement, System, and Will. The concept of agencies are critical to a theory in which the generativity and dynamism of the rural are emphasised (Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane 2008:101). On the one hand, the perceptions of rurality are negative (passive, static, backward and ignorant) and on the other hand, rurality is perceived as transformative, capable of changing behaviour and affecting the motivation of teachers, community workers and learners. Importantly, in some ways, the concept of the agency coincides with that of habitus in relation to Bourdieu. In Bourdieu's (1989) terms, *habitus* is a defined system of durable and transposable "dispositions". The individual agent develops these dispositions in response to the determining structures (such as class, family, and education) and the external conditions they encounter (Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane 2008:100). An agent´s disposition in social life could determine, according to Bourdieu (1989), his/her path in life.

Agencies may also refer to the 'organisations' of the community and consequently be expressed as a system of regulation (Balfour 2012:13). Agencies involve the exercise of will towards action or entropy. The concept of agency, contrary to entropy, is a particular type of will that seeks to stratify the relationship between space, time, and agency, such that these three drivers remain in static balance with one another.

Resources (Situated, Material, and Psychosocial) will be discussed as the third variable of a generative theory of rurality. According to Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008:102) the effective deployment or use of resources is largely dependent on the influence of agencies and forces and the extent to which these variables might delimit not only their availability but also their use. For instance, in the Western Cape Province learners use (political) agency to possible obtain resources, in order to transform the relationship between space and time. In this regard, the commitment and connection to an area (Budge 2005) has the potential not only to extend access to resources but also to transform the relation between space and time (Balfour 2012:14). According to Balfour *et al.* (2008) the recognition of dynamic and unique experiences in the rural context could provide a different kind of a teacher, and potentially*, a different kind of curriculum in which the ´assets of the rural´ become features of curricular design, and knowledge production.*

Conclusion

It is through this theoretical lens of Bourdieu that I intend to critically report on systematic factors that reproduce educational inequality for learners from non-dominant socio-cultural backgrounds. In addition, through the theoretical underpinnings of CRT, historically disadvantaged Coloured rural learners' experiential knowledge will be recognised and valued, opposite to the knowledge of the dominant in society. Lastly, the framework of GTR will be used to elucidate these rural learners' subjective experiences and how they make use of time, space and resources to advance their educational journey in such context. To conclude, historically disadvantaged Coloured rural learners tend to demonstrate dispositions which are vibrant and dynamic, and this could contribute to greater awareness about this group of learners and their educational endeavour.

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