

SCHOOLING AS INVESTMENT: THE NEED FOR  
A POSTSTRUCTURALIST PERSPECTIVE IN  
EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for a poststructuralist perspective in studying the complex dynamics of schooling in socio-economically disadvantaged communities in the Philippines. It presents the limitations of interpreting learning in relation to learners' motivation particularly in the context where access to the language of power, English, plays a significant role in schooling. It then suggests that a more robust interpretation of schooling may be achieved by considering learning as apprenticeship to secondary Discourses. Schooling is not only an investment that allows for upward socio-economic mobility; it is also an experience of the construction of identity that positions learners in stances of power and enables them to counter hegemonic practices that further marginalize them. The paper attempts to justify the need for such perspective in research to inform educational reforms in the Philippines and raises questions that need to be addressed in such studies.

**Introduction**

Research and theory in the field of Second Language Studies in the past 15 years have challenged, extended, and supplemented the theoretical concepts of motivation as well as the extent to which learners' perceived investment in learning in general, or acquiring a second or a foreign language in particular, influence their decisions and actions in particular academic contexts (Peirce, 1995; Davidson, 1996; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). Such studies seem to indicate that students are more complex than were initially conceived. For example, Peirce's (1995) study indicates that the notion of motivation, i.e., a learners' commitment to learn a foreign language based on *instrumental* reasons, such as getting

a job or *integrative* reasons, such as the desire to assimilate into a community (Gardner, 1985), inadequately explains the dynamics of learning. This is because such notion “do[es] not capture the complex relationship between relations of power, identity, and language learning” (p. 17).

When students commit to learning a language, it is primarily because they see language not simply as an investment that allows for social and economic mobility but also as an experience of the construction of identity. This differs from instrumental motivation since such concept “generally presupposes a unitary, fixed, and a historic language learner who desires access to material goods” enjoyed by a privileged group. Motivation, therefore, is conceived as a “fixed personality trait”. Investment, however, projects the complex relationship between the learner and the “changing social world”, and considers the learner as a complex being of multiple desires and social identities. When learners communicate with powerful others in the community, they position themselves or are positioned in certain ways and constantly negotiate such positions as they organize or reorganize “a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (Peirce, 1995, p. 18). Language learning therefore depends largely on the efficacy with which learners negotiate or position themselves in relation to significant others, i.e., their ability to advance their “agency”.

However, such theoretical developments on investment, identity, agency, and language learning emerged primarily from case studies on immigrant populations SL contexts in economically advantaged countries such as the United States or Canada. In this research, I review such recent theoretical developments, explore briefly the contexts within which such theories were initially grounded, and employ such to inform a case study in an academic setting in a village high school in the Philippines. In this context, like many other economically challenged communities in the country, a) English, a foreign language to most students, is used as medium of instruction in core courses, i.e., Science, Math, and English; b) most of the participants—the community, school, administration, parents, and students constantly negotiate their identities for upward

socio-economic mobility; and c) academic resources and individuals familiar with schooling as a community of practice are scarce.

In the Philippines, as in many other countries where literacy is considered an essential part of government policy, most families regard education as the portal to social and economic mobility. It is not uncommon for economically disadvantaged Filipino families in rural villages to sell tracts of land, raise livestock, or sink into debt so that the children can complete their college education, get a well-paying job, and elevate the family's economic status. In a country of 75.33 million, an average rural family's annual income of about P73,319 (about US\$1,500), and an overall poverty incidence of 37% (<http://www.unfpa.org/modules/focus/philippines>), any opportunity at socio-economic mobility is an investment worthy of every family's efforts. In many rural communities, the school is not only an academic institution. The school is also perceived as a context where students from poor, working class families can negotiate new identities as they participate in schooling as a potentially liberating community of practice.

In economically disadvantaged rural communities, the school is a vital space where children from materially disadvantaged families find opportunities and discourses that contest commonly held stereotypes. In this context, the school may provide a "third space," a context or condition that "ensure[s] that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, and rehistoricized" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Schools may be the context where individuals positioned in marginalized stances could "oppose stereotypes and assert novel interpretations of their shifting identities, interest and needs" (Fraser, 1997 in Fine, Weiss, Centrie, & Roberts, 2000, p.132). However, it appears that the potential for an educational system like the Philippines to provide opportunities for socio-economic mobility is largely dependent on one's ability to use the language of power. In a study conducted among a sampling of Filipinos in Metro Manila, Sibayan and

Segovia (1984) found that “about 47.3% think the use of English as medium of instruction has made Filipinos “a greater people” and expressed their belief that it is essential for the country’s economic recovery (p.15). In the same study, “seventy-seven percent of the respondents (government and private agency employees) consider the schools as the place where they learnt most of their skills in [English],” with only 8% indicating the home as the source of learning (p.47). This study seems to show that the school is seen as the space where practices for economic prosperity is possible and suggests that English is a major vehicle to such an end.

Recently, the Department of Education implemented the Bridging Program, a system where graduates of Philippine elementary schools who do not reach the passing mark in an examination on English, Science, and Mathematics are required to take a one-year bridging course of the above three subjects before they are allowed entry in the secondary schools. Such program highlights the Philippine government’s acknowledgment of the crucial role of English in schools. Failure in English, for instance, denies them access to higher education.

In this context, the school’s potential for liberating possibilities is therefore dependent primarily on students’ ability to strategically negotiate and project their identities and voices against silencing and marginalizing particularly as regards access to the language of power. In the Philippines, English has historically been a “stratifier” rather than a socio-economic “equalizer”. This phenomenon is rooted in the introduction of English during the American colonization of the Philippine islands. According to Sibayan, because the American occupation in the islands in the late 1890s facilitated the use of the English language in most courses in higher education, “it did not take long before an elite speaking, reading, and writing English was formed” (Sibayan, 1999, p. 3). Many poor students in economically challenged rural villages (*barangays*) whose family cannot afford quality English language teaching in private schools; whose parents are neither familiar with the medium of instruction nor the culture of schooling; and whose family do

not have the academic resources at home, e.g., books and reference materials in English, are thereby disadvantaged. As such, how such students construct their identities as they invest in schooling in a post-colonial context where English is used for academic purposes is worth investigating. Such contexts can serve as a litmus test for the concept of agency as an aspect of second language use and learning, and the extent to which students can successfully navigate through systemic, socio-economic inequalities and disempowering authoritative discourses (Bakhtin, 1981, in Schuster, 1997).

In sum, there is a need for research that focuses on how poor students in a socio-economically challenged village school in the Philippines negotiate their identity and advance their agency in a context where English is the medium of instruction in subjects considered essential for academic success in spite of compelling circumstances, such as poverty; difficulty with the medium of instruction; and lack of academic resources and “oldtimers”, i.e., individuals familiar with the practices and expectations in schooling readily available to assist students when they need academic scaffolding (Wenger, 1998). Moreover, such study must draw on three concepts relating to schooling as identity construction: first, literacy [primarily in English] as mastery of secondary Discourses; second, learning as legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice, e.g., apprenticeship to the use of English for academic purposes; and third, power, agency, and identity from a post structural perspective.

### **Literacy as mastery of secondary discourses**

In problematizing the traditional approaches to the notion of literacy as one’s ability to read and write, Gee (1996), drawing on Scribner and Cole (1981), suggests that “what matters is not literacy as some decontextualized ability to write or read, but the social practices into which people are apprenticed as part of a social group” (p. 59). These practices are what he calls Discourses, “a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so

as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (p. 127).

Discourses, according to Gee, are “socially accepted association[s] among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and ‘artifacts’, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’, or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role’” (p. 131). Gee distinguishes between *primary discourse*, i.e., the discourse people are born into, and *secondary discourse*, i.e., “discourses in institutions outside of the family such as schools and are learned by engaging in their practices” (Gee, 1987, in Zamel and Spack, 1998, p. 56). Gee further posits that learners’ success at literacy is determined, to a great extent, by students’ ability or inability to be apprenticed into the secondary Discourse. “Discourses are mastered through acquisition, not through learning... [They are] not mastered by overt instruction, but by enculturation (apprenticeship) into social practices through scaffolded and supported interactions with people who have already mastered the Discourses” (Gee, 1996, p. 139).

In this study, for instance, English, the language for academic purposes, is a secondary Discourse into which students need to be apprenticed. In the absence of “old-timers”, students in rural communities are faced with the difficult task of efficiently participating in schooling as a community of practice and at the same time apprenticing themselves into the use of English for academic purposes, e.g., note-taking, summarizing, discussing, and reporting in English. Such a daunting task, recorded by an American educator who evaluated the use of English as medium of instruction in 1950, continues to present a challenge to the Philippine government today:

[It] is as if an American child had to learn Turkish before he could be taught anything else... [It] is indeed a disheartening experience to visit a barrio school in the Islands, see this average child, sense his many

imperative needs, but find him devoting most of his efforts in learning a distorted smattering of a language for which he has little need and which he will probably forget (Prator, 1950, in Sibayan, 1999, p. 3).

Although the role of English in the socio-economic life of Filipinos has certainly changed, the fact remains that many students experience the same difficulties observed by Prator in the 1950s. Students need to grapple with the complexities of Math and Science in a language that they are not proficient in. If they have to gain access to schooling, they have to gain access to the language of power. If they have to gain access to the language of power, they have to efficiently apprentice themselves into the use of English as a secondary Discourse. Learning the language is not simply memorizing vocabulary lists or working on grammar exercises. It encompasses embracing a new identity, a new way of communicating, a different way of dealing with novel circumstances, a new way of knowing.

Because Discourses reflect “certain concepts, viewpoints, and values” that may disadvantage other Discourses and influence the distribution of power in society, people’s control of dominant Discourses can give them wider access to social goods, such as money, power, and status. People whose primary Discourse is congruent with the Discourse of the dominant group therefore have greater access to social goods while those whose primary Discourse differs from or conflicts with the secondary Discourse are immensely disadvantaged (Gee, 1987, in Zamel and Spack, 1998, p. 56).

While mainstream middle class students simply extend and expand what they already acquired in their homes, non-mainstream students have to negotiate the difficult process of learning a novel dominant Discourse (Gee, 1987, in Zamel & Spack, 1998, p. 57). Mainstream students have the advantage of what Gee calls “filtering, a social group building into its primary Discourses practices and values of later school-based Discourses” (1996, p.157). For example, students who are raised in an environment

rich with literacy resources, e. g., printed materials and audio-visual equipment and are exposed to literacy practices such as being read to at home do not find literacy resources and practices at school a novelty. On the other hand, students who are not exposed to such literacy practices need to apprentice themselves into such new secondary Discourse.

Moreover, these students lack opportunities for apprenticeship into the dominant Discourse because of 1) power relations and social structures that marginalize them or constrain their opportunities to gain access to the dominant discourse; and 2) the failure of schools to invest on the wealth of knowledge about language and language learning that students already have when they go to school (Willett, 1995; Watson-Gegeo & Welchman-Gegeo, 1995; Peirce, 1995). For example, some teachers fail to recognize the rich oral tradition of some groups of students and consequently fail to use it as a learning resource in the classroom. As a result, instead of using the students' primary Discourse as a bridge to the acquisition of the secondary Discourse and position them as sources of knowledge, the teacher positions students in a stance of powerlessness.

However, Gee's position has been criticized for failing to focus on the learner's agency. Delpit (1998), for instance, argues that while she agrees with Gee's theory on literacy and discourse, she disagrees with his contention that people who are not born into the dominant Discourse will find it difficult, if not impossible, to acquire such discourse. She argues that teachers with a critical approach to literacy can successfully teach what Gee refers to as "superficial features" of middle class Discourse, e.g., grammar, style, mechanics, and move beyond that by using these Discourses to develop or find their "true authentic voice". In other words, they can use the Discourse of power to gain access to the dominant group without abandoning their home identity and values. Delpit asserts that "discourses are not static, but are shaped—however reluctantly—by those who participate within them and by the form of that participation" (p. 215). If learners decide to gain access to the second language culture, it should be because they know they



can invest in the second language to acquire a wealth of “symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital” and subsequently vest in them the power to re-examine their identities (Norton & Toohey, in press).

Delpit (1998) further suggests that the teacher’s role is to a) “acknowledge and validate students’ home language without using it to limit . . . their potential”; b) recognize the conflicting Discourses students might have and invest on the socio-cultural and linguistic knowledge they already have; and c) “acknowledge the unfair ‘discourse stacking’ in the society... [by openly discussing] injustices” and hegemonic practices that marginalize certain groups of people (pp. 215- 17).

Delpit’s work has been widely applied to the acquisition of Standard American English by African-Americans and may be applicable to the acquisition of EFL in post-colonial situations like the Philippines. In fact, influential Philippine educators such as Andrew Gonzalez have initiated programs and conducted pilot studies to identify means of using English for restricted purposes and empowering communities through the use of the home language in schools. In a seminar on Language and Development, Gonzalez (1999) states that

... considering present economic realities, English is still the language of aspiration and social mobility. . . The need for English for utilitarian purposes [therefore] demands differentiation of society, degrees of competence, and topics (or registers). In other words, in Philippine society in the twenty-first century, who needs English? To what degree of competence? In what domains? For which topics (or registers?) up to what proportion of society’s members? (p. 68)

### **Power, agency, and identity from a post-structural perspective**

Anthropological studies on identity and academic engagement among minority students in the United States in the

late 80s and early 90s have primarily focused on “how cultural differences or the group’s minority status (immigrant or involuntary) shape behaviors and perceptions” (Davidson, 1996, p. 3). Such studies (Suarez-Orosco & Suarez-Orosco, 1993; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Matute-Bianche, 1986) seem to indicate that “the nature of the history, subordination, and exploitation of a group affect the meanings that its members attach to ethnic and racial differences, and thus the willingness of group members to assert an academic identity” (Davidson, 1996, p. 3). Ogbu (1987) asserts that “involuntary minorities” such as African-Americans who were forced to migrate to the US through slavery or colonization “develop an oppositional identity in which succeeding in school is perceived as selling out to one’s oppressors”. On the other hand, Asian-Americans tend to succeed in school because they come from families who “volunteered” to settle in the United for the proverbial greener pastures and see schooling as a portal to economic and social mobility (p.3).

Davidson (1996), however, argues that although such hypothesis and research advance dialogue about “differences in minority group achievement” and “the role that broader historical and economic circumstances play in day-to-day classroom activity”, they could be dangerous when taken to the extreme. The danger is in the implication “that the meanings, behaviors, and perceptions associated with a specific background are relatively fixed, exerting a constant influence on students’ academic work”. It is important, therefore, to consider “the role of school and classroom processes in nurturing, resisting, or shaping the meanings students bring with them to school” (Davidson, 1996, p.3).

Davidson posits that schools, being “primary cultural arenas in which issues of identity are enacted” therefore “structure and guide the meaning of social categories and the construction of ethnic and racial identities”. She further argues that students’ “voices and experiences . . . demonstrate the connections between identity and academic engagement, and justify the “critical need to consider school-based practices and processes in the analyses of student action” (p. 5).

Davidson (1996) further argues that a more careful analysis of the “links between ethnic and social self-conceptions, academic engagement, and factors within school setting” must employ poststructuralist conceptions of power and identity. This includes the emphases on *disciplinary technology* and *serious speech acts*. According to Davidson,

disciplinary technology and serious speech acts both contribute to a definition of what is ‘normal’ in advance and, therefore, can be viewed as practices that teach, or ‘discipline’ participants to the meaning of institutional and (social) categories. . . . In schools, for example, the hegemonic projection of academic tracks as an objective classification of students may be considered disciplinary technology since ‘tracking highlights differences and disciplines students and teachers to particular conceptions about the meaning of high and low achieving students’ (p. 4).

An example of academic tracks would be a class for immigrant students and another for “mainstream” students. In the Philippine context, categorizing students for “bridging” and another for “mainstream” (as suggested in the Department of Education proposed bridging program) could be considered academic tracking.

In similar manner, when students consider school authorities (e.g., guidance counselors, teachers, etc.) privy to specific knowledge that enables students to legitimately participate in schooling and access to cultural capital, their assertions may be viewed as serious speech acts—knowledge to be studied, repeated, and passed on to friends. A network of serious speech acts may come to constitute a discursive system; that is, the system that works to control both what is said and how others are conceptualized (Davidson, 1996, p. 5).

Moreover, Davidson argues that studies on academic engagement and identity need to consider the concept of power

as an “action upon action” (Foucault, 1983, p. 221). Power relates to positionality, not ownership. Power is exercised, not possessed (Foucault, 1977, 1990). Drawing on Foucault, Davidson (1996) argues that

embodied and enacted in personal relationships, power relations are present as individuals make active efforts to force others into comprehensible categories. At the same time, individuals are not inert objects; rather, individuals can and do resist the meanings they encounter even as others seek to push them toward comprehensible categories. In short, power is not a system of domination that leaves no room for resistance, but rather practices and discourse that define normality in advance. (p.5)

This conception of power relates to current understandings of human agency in the area of second language studies. Individuals are not conceived of as passive entities. Rather, they are considered, in Peirce’s view, as “both subject of and subject to relations within a particular site, community, and society. Individuals have human agency. Thus the subject positions that a person takes up within a particular discourse are open to argument. Although a person may be positioned in a particular way within a given discourse, the person might resist the subject position or even set up counterdiscourses which place him/her in a powerful rather than marginalized position” (Peirce, 1995, pp. 15-16).

Within this framework, Peirce challenged the concept of motivation because it fails to “capture the complex relationship between relations of power, identity, and language learning” (p. 17). The conception of motivation presupposes individuals as “fixed” language learners who are moved into action by the desire to access material goods possessed by a privileged group. Investment, however, projects the complex relationship between the learner and the “changing social world”, and considers the learner as a complex being of multiple desires and social identities.

When learners communicate with powerful others in the community, they position themselves or are positioned in certain ways and constantly negotiate such positions as they are “constantly organizing or reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (Peirce, 1995, p. 18).

How individuals position themselves to advance their agency as they invest in schooling as a potentially liberating community of practice where the language of power [English] is not easily accessible to poor students has not been thoroughly explored. Moreover, there is a need for studies that identify the strategies students and other participants in a school setting employ to counter existing disciplinary technologies and serious speech acts. This is particularly compelling in contexts where the agency of supposed persons of authority such as teachers and administrators is constrained by socio-economic difficulties.

As Davidson (1996) points out, “because schools participate in negotiating the meanings students attach to their identity, the ways in which teachers and schools handle power... become relevant to the conceptualization of students’ behaviors” and the molding of their social identity (p. 5). Since learning is constrained by one’s positionality and identity, academic institutions must look into how school practices and Discourses influence students’ identity construction as they negotiate their way through the realization of socio-economically liberating spaces. The need for such research is particularly relevant in school settings where students coming from disadvantaged families are not familiar with academic discourses and where disciplinary technologies and powerful speech acts are hegemonically perpetuated. Specifically, the following questions may be asked:

- A. What school practices position students in stances of power and powerlessness as they engage in apprenticeship into the secondary Discourse? How do students and teachers in this school context position themselves to advance their agency in situations that hinder or limit opportunities for apprenticeship?

- B. What role do students, parents, and teachers play in students' participation or non-participation in schooling? What factors influence students' ability to visualize imagined communities and invest in education as a meaningful enterprise?
- C. How does the school participate in negotiating meanings students attach to students' identity? To what extent can students project their agency in a school context where disciplinary technology and serious speech acts are hegemonically perpetuated?
- D. How does the use of English as a secondary Discourse in a context where most students have limited access to academic resources and "old-timers" further constrain students' agency? What strategies could students use to advance their agency?
- E. What strategies could educators and other stake holders in students' schooling employ to assist students' acquisition of dominant secondary Discourses so they could have access to upward socio-economic mobility?

The above questions need to be addressed so that educators, students, and parents would be informed on the complex dynamics of schooling in specific contexts. Any educational reform must be based on a thorough examination of power relations, investment, and agency of students, teachers, parents, the community, and the larger environment, e.g., government policies, that influence decisions and actions in the school setting. To do anything less would defeat the purpose of the school as a site for potentially liberating possibilities, e.g., upward socio-economic mobility. To do anything less would position the school as an environment where existing power differentials and oppressive practices are maintained and reproduced to further benefit persons in power and further marginalize the poor.

### Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Dr. Kathryn Davis, my adviser, and Dr. Graham Crookes, SP reader, for their insightful comments and suggestions in the conceptualization and writing of the Scholarly Paper (SP) I submitted as a requirement for MA-Second Language Studies degree at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Much of this paper is lifted from the introduction of the aforementioned SP. My participation in the program was funded by Fulbright and Delta Kappa Gamma International. Dr. Fred Abraham refereed this article for the Silliman Journal.

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