Loosely coupled organizations, misrecognition, and social reproduction

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Almost 25 years ago, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) explained how educational systems foster a ‘misrecognition’ of the part that schools play in social reproduction. They noted that it is to the advantage of the dominant elements of society and educators themselves to perpetuate a strong belief in the legitimacy of schools as institutions that facilitate upward mobility, although, in fact, they do not. This article explores how loose coupling in school organizations serves the purpose of misrecognition and social reproduction. Although other sources of misrecognition and reproduction are acknowledged, it is proposed that loose coupling among various elements and processes in schooling both contribute to and conceal the failure to provide access to higher status for members of groups outside mainstream society. Recent efforts to change schools through systemic reform, including standards and high stakes testing, are considered in light of their likelihood to reinforce or disrupt misrecognition.

Introduction

Even during this time of global turbulence and uncertainty, much of the international public continues to look with hope to education as the most readily accessible vehicle for social and economic advancement. This confidence is so great in the United States, that business management theorist Peter Drucker once described public education as America’s foremost secular religion (1989). Believers point to the few individuals who are able to surmount poverty and cultural difference as proof that the system works for anyone who is willing, able, and persistent. Yet, both research and experience indicate that education does not provide a reliable ladder of opportunity for most poor and ethnic minority groups. Somehow, despite the seemingly good intentions of educators and the sincere efforts of students, inequalities and power relations among groups are continuously reproduced from one generation to the next (Skrla et al. 2001).
Awareness of academic underachievement is increasing among the general public as government agencies and business interests demand more accountability from schools. The logic behind demands for better performance in the USA is grounded in the notion that if overall student achievement does not improve, the world’s remaining superpower will lose its competitive edge. For other nations, achievement in education is seen as one of the few opportunities available for securing economic survival in a global economy.

We now live in a post-cold war world where security and prosperity do not hinge on power relations between nations alone, but are also influenced by disenfranchised transnational groups. In the major thesis of *Transformative Learning: Educational Vision for the 21st Century*, O’Sullivan (1999) states that:

> . . . the fundamental educational task of our times is to make the choice for a sustainable plenary habitat of interdependent life forms over and against the dysfunctional calling of the global marketplace. (p. 2)

In order to achieve such a goal, scrutiny must be placed on the current models of education that are responsible for preparing the youth of today who will act on and in the world of tomorrow. Specifically, we must consider and reconsider the way by which public institutions perpetuate local and global power relations that are marked by the domination of many for a few. Precisely how the education system contributes to reproduction of hierarchy remains something of a mystery. This article sets out to shed light on cultural and social reproduction through the work of the late Pierre Bourdieu, and also examines possible strategies for resistance.

Twenty-five years ago, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) explained that educational systems foster a ‘misrecognition’ of the part that schools play in cultural and social reproduction. They noted that it is to the advantage of both the dominant elements of society and educators to perpetuate a strong belief in the legitimacy of schools as institutions that facilitate upward mobility, although, in fact, they do not. Recognizing and labelling reproduction is an important first step, we believe, toward creating sustainable reform of education for the benefit of those who are not being well served. While it is certainly possible for small numbers of individuals to improve their relative status, facilitating social mobility is not the primary purpose of the educational system, but rather an occasional secondary by-product. Upward mobility for an entire group or class would be impossible, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) observe, for the practical reason that higher level social and economic positions are limited in number and would require displacing the current occupants of those positions. All cultures and societies depend to some degree, therefore, on misrecognition, ‘the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: xii).

At about the same time that Bourdieu and Passeron’s *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977) was translated into English, organization theorists began describing schools as ‘loosely coupled systems’, which suggested that schools operate much less rationally than was commonly
supposed (Meyer and Rowan 1975, March and Olsen 1976, Weick 1976). The term ‘loosely coupled’ means that school organizations are characterized by weak or relatively absent control, influence, coordination, and interaction among events, components, and processes. Such organizations are described as being held together by a ‘logic of confidence’ among participants, a series of tacit understandings that are characterized by avoidance, discretion, and overlooking of processes and outcomes in the name of professionalism (Meyer and Rowan 1975).

This article explores how loose coupling in schools as traditionally organized and the accompanying logic of confidence serve the purposes of misrecognition and social reproduction while masking the culpability of educators, even from themselves. The point is not that loose coupling alone leads to social reproduction. Certainly, indoctrination enforced through centralized testing and sorting procedures can also result in social reproduction. Rather, it is proposed that loose coupling in the education system simultaneously contributes to and conceals the failure of schools to provide access to higher status for groups outside the dominant culture and social structure. Efforts to reduce cultural reproduction by introducing multicultural perspectives are acknowledged, as well as their limitations. Recent attempts to change schools through systemic reform, including standards and high-stakes testing, are also considered in light of whether such action may disrupt or perpetuate misrecognition and, eventually, social reproduction. Finally, possibilities for exercising leadership are considered that might make schooling more equitable and responsive to student needs.

Cultural and social reproduction

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) begin Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture with the axiom that ‘every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations’ (p. 4). The propositions that follow this premise present educators with some very difficult challenges and choices. The raw power at the foundation of all cultures and societies, assert Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), is masked by symbols and meanings that serve as indirect mechanisms of control. These controls are imposed so subtly, particularly in modern democratic societies, that the masses of people experience them as legitimate. This sense of legitimacy obscures the objective nature of the relationships among the different classes and groups that constitute society, making possible the imposition of symbols and meanings favoured by economically and socially dominant groups without having to resort to visible forms of enforcement that might be openly challenged.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue further that educational systems perform two fundamental functions: (1) they reproduce the dominant culture (cultural reproduction); and (2) they reproduce the power relations between the groups or classes that comprise society (social reproduction). Schools accomplish the first of these functions by rewarding the linguistic
and cultural patterns of behaviour, style, and preference associated with society's dominant groups. The second function, the transmission of hierarchical positions from generation to generation with a minimum of vertical mobility, is accomplished much less obviously. That is to say, the underlying processes at work in the latter case are more difficult to detect, understand, and counter.

Such indictment of educational systems is consistent with other scholarship. Carnoy (1974) presents similar arguments, for example, in describing the plight of former colonies. The leaders of poorer countries are convinced that by increasing expenditures on schooling, their nations can ‘develop’ themselves, increase per capita income, and raise their status relative to other nations. In fact, Carnoy tells us, schooling serves primarily to maintain socio-economic inequalities between groups within industrialized societies as well as among the nations of the world. According to Ingersoll (1993, 1994), the centrality of the incultation and sorting functions in schools (i.e. cultural and social reproduction) was recognized as early as Durkheim (1925/61) and has been noted by Parsons (1959), Dreeben (1968), Bowles and Gintis (1976), and others.

But Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) raise the stakes by profoundly challenging educators on multiple levels, calling into question some of our most cherished beliefs. Two of their most troubling assertions include the provocative ideas that educators are all directly implicated in: (a) committing acts of symbolic violence against students by imposing the arbitrary culture of dominant groups, and (b) perpetrating a conspiracy that maintains the illusion that education and schooling provide an avenue for lower classes to attain upward social and economic mobility. This misrecognition of education’s role in perpetuating inequities, we propose, could very well be partly responsible for thwarting needed reform. Unlike other critics of education, who point to forces like capitalism and government as the main culprits behind inequality and defence of the status quo, Bourdieu and Passeron place a substantial portion of blame squarely on the shoulders of professional educators who unwittingly reinforce existing structures by seeking to protect their own interests and the interests of the institutions they serve. A critical perspective that acknowledges the reproductive functions of schools can lead to reforms that equalize educational inputs and outcomes for poor and minority students.

The first of Bourdieu and Passeron’s troubling ideas is unequivocally stated in their initial proposition that: ‘All pedagogic action (PA) is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 5) (emphasis in the original). The second assertion is buttressed by three propositions stating that ‘pedagogic authority (PAu) and the relative autonomy’ it enjoys are both derived from and essential to masking these purposes (pp. 11–12) (emphasis in the original); that the principles of the cultural arbitrary must be internalized by students to a degree that they are perpetuated long after pedagogic action has ceased (p. 31); and that the very structure and processes of ‘(e)very institutionalized educational system’ are premised on incultation and the successful ‘reproduction of the relations between groups or classes’ (p. 54).
Cultural reproduction and symbolic violence

Claims that the act of teaching is fundamentally an act of symbolic violence and that the tenuous autonomy that teachers possess serves to mask the reproduction of social relations from generation to generation initially sound outrageous and pernicious to those who have devoted their lives to teaching. It is understandably difficult for well-intentioned practicing educators to accept the bold accusation that the essential function of their work and the foundation of their authority rest on the imposition of symbols and meanings that are favoured by society’s dominant groups, and further, that teaching, no matter how apparently benevolent and gentle, inevitably represents a form of symbolic violence enacted upon students. Was it not care and concern for children that originally brought us into the profession of education? Is it not evident that the imperative to teach is based on the purest form of altruistic service? Are not educators fellow victims, rather than perpetrators, of an oppressive system? Such common sentiments make it difficult, yet all the more important, for educators to recognize the part that institutionalized schooling plays in cultural and social reproduction.

In the English language, significantly enough, when we want to communicate our wish to harm another person, it is common to say that we ‘are going to teach that person a lesson’. And if we are feeling particularly hostile, we are likely to emphasize our anger and determination by saying that we ‘are going to teach that person a lesson that they will never forget!’ These phrases, so readily used and seemingly innocuous, highlight the essential truth within Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) first assertion. Educators might derive some passing solace, though not exoneration, from the observation that no one is entirely relieved of responsibility for acts of symbolic violence against the young. The propositions apply to family groups as well as to those agents of society to whom teaching is officially delegated. In fact, the violence Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) refer to is derived from the differential power relations typical among family group members.

The inevitability of symbolic violence was anticipated and expressed in Anna Freud’s observation that, ‘Step by step education aims at the exact opposite of what the child wants, and at each step it regards as desirable the very opposite of the child’s inherent instinctual strivings’ (1930: 101). A similar definition of education as ‘interference’ with the wants and instinctual strivings of children informs Britzman’s (1998) important insight that this conflict, acted out externally, is simultaneously mirrored within the learner and the teacher, and provokes a crisis of the self. Education is properly understood, she tells us, as an unsettling encounter between the internal and the external, the psychical and the social, and as a crossing of the boundary between self and other (Britzman 1998). Changing the nature and functions of educational institutions, therefore, is very much about redefining professional identities. In fact, Britzman’s work posits identity formation as the central task of education and offers original insights into many of the themes addressed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) – culture, power, privilege and control, as well as teaching and learning. Psychoanalysis can potentially illuminate unconscious processes that influence
education (Pitt et al. 1998), but it requires brutal honesty and a particularly formidable risk, ‘the capacity to risk love and work’ (Britzman 1998). The alternative is to allow what we do not acknowledge to continue to defeat our best intentions.

A legacy of misrecognition

While promising to be an avenue for Blacks in the USA to attain upward mobility, educational institutions have frequently posed a serious impediment. More than 30 years ago, Newby and Tyack (1971) published ‘Victims Without Crimes: Some Historical Perspectives on Black Education’. This article chronicles the post-slavery pursuit of education by Blacks in their quest for economic and social survival. After emancipation, upward mobility included the fundamental struggle to be considered human, something that had previously been denied. Newby and Tyack (1971) describe how the major architects of Black education descended upon Black communities in the name of education, not to liberate them so much as to benefit from them as human resources. Rather than a history of upward mobility through education, this poignant work chronicles ‘a socialization in what it means to be powerless’ (p. 192).

Early on, Blacks were led to misrecognize what education could do for them. Touted as a palliative for centuries of physical and economic shackling, the education of Blacks was promoted by organizations like the John D. Rockefeller General Education Board, which contributed more than $20,000,000 to the education of Blacks before 1930. Although such a gesture of philanthropy appears to be generous, on the surface, it masked the ulterior motive of improving the human resource potential of slightly educated ex-slaves and had little to do with benevolence toward fellow citizens.

Even as Black educators gained the right to control schools in their communities, the struggle for liberation schooling (i.e. schools that are critical of the social status quo and seek to counter it rather than reproduce it) was in competition with the need to survive the existing racist Jim Crow environment, which begrudgingly provided the meagerest resources for the education of Black students (Deschenes et al. 2001). Schools controlled by Blacks, therefore, adopted reproductive stances that were practically indistinguishable from white-controlled Black schools.

One can deduce from the work of Newby and Tyack (1971) and other historical accounts well into the era of desegregation (Deschenes et al. 2001), that the upward mobility myth was well ingrained into the collective psyche of Black people as well as those involved in their education. The enduring power of this myth resides in the fact that it resonated powerfully with the hopes and dreams of an oppressed people. Misrecognition is further reinforced today, in the face of objective reality, because excess material wealth obtained through capitalism helps buttress the myth’s plausibility.

A critical perspective on education, particularly regarding the misrecognition or misrepresentation of its role in society, must begin, as Coleman (1969) suggested, with a thorough conceptualization of education.
that is primarily over the structure, content, and function of schools. Such a critique, especially as it relates to those groups who have consistently experienced academic failure in spite of multiple efforts at compensatory education and school reform, will challenge the myth of upward mobility. Furthermore, a critical analysis of cultural reproduction and its associated resistance may yield solutions to chronic institutionalized educational underachievement. For example, resistance to cultural reproduction may be a viable perspective from which to understand student disengagement (Abrams and Gibbs 2002, Faiman-Silva 2002).

Although educators and policy makers, during the last several decades, have attempted to address the charges that schools bear responsibility for cultural reproduction and social reproduction, these groups have difficulty finding common ground and sometimes even work at cross purposes (Scheurich et al. 2000). Dynamics underlying the hidden dual functions of schooling – cultural and social reproduction – are scrutinized below in turn, with particular attention to how the educational system in the USA contributes to misrecognition of reproduction and the resulting consequences for students.

**Cultural reproduction and the limits of multicultural education**

During the last quarter century, educators have responded to accusations that schooling contributes to cultural reproduction by attempting to infuse multicultural content and sensitivity into curriculum and instructional practice (Bennett 2001). Surveying the progression of this trend, Olneck (2000) explains that Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) concept of ‘cultural capital’ is embodied in styles and manners as well as intuitive ‘modes of bearing, interaction, and expression’ (p. 319) that characterize particular groups in society. The behaviours, tastes, and responses of the dominant groups are given voice in the ‘stories, music, dance forms, and art’ that comprise the humanities and are enshrined in ‘museums, libraries, monuments, historical sites, university syllabi, and school texts’ (p. 320). Schools not only inculcate the dominant culture, he reminds us, they also award or withhold academic qualifications and credentials according to how well students are able to display the favoured knowledge, attitudes, and especially forms of linguistic expression.

A growing number of educators have deliberately attempted to counter the monopoly on cultural capital in schools by challenging the false neutrality of prevailing curricula, pedagogical practices, and forms of assessment. According to Olneck (2000), ‘multicultural education aims to resist and to displace Euro-American cultural domination of schooling’ (p. 318). These efforts are manifested, he suggests, in greater representation of diversity in textbooks; acceptance and incorporation into classroom routines of students’ native forms of expression and dispositions toward learning; the displacement of the western canon with literature, music, and art from other cultural traditions; and alternative forms of assessment.
Despite such evidence of success within the academy, Olneck (2000) is not optimistic that multicultural education will eventually displace the dominant forms of cultural capital in society. He describes three forces that constrain the complete transformation of cultural capital. First, it is uncertain whether employers will continue to accept the school’s certification of students if the dominant culture is not conveyed. This is particularly important because the economic arena is where diplomas and degrees are accorded tangible value. Second, a vocal and influential movement opposed to multicultural education has appeared during the last 10 years. Conservative critics have authored articles and books that attack the multicultural perspective and seek to reassert and reaffirm the knowledge, symbols, and meanings of the dominant culture. Third, contradictions within the premises of multiculturalism itself may undermine the school’s ability to redistribute cultural capital. For example, by demonstrating that knowledge and dispositions are arbitrary constructions, adherents of multiculturalism may dilute the importance of cultural capital and strengthen the influence of economic and political capital that are more likely to be acquired outside of school (Olneck 2000).

Finally, although the predominance of Euro-American cultural capital may be gradually eroded, Olneck (2000) believes that multiculturalism ‘is unlikely to create an alternate state of enchantment that occasions the “misrecognition” required for cultural capital to exist’ (p. 336). He therefore urges advocates of multicultural education to become actively involved in the education reform movement, particularly in opportunities to define academic standards and assessments. Raising issues surrounding current and historical social injustice among underrepresented and underachieving students, for example, is one strategy for countering misrecognition and social reproduction (Williams 1993). While multiculturalists may have a long way to go before they can usurp definitions of what students ought to know and be able to do, Olneck suggests that they can at least demystify the unquestioned legitimacy of prevailing definitions by becoming engaged in the debate.

Increasing the diversity of the prevailing canon certainly has merit as an approach toward reducing the effects of cultural reproduction. The quest for a multicultural, multi-perspective curriculum is a tribute to the spirit of Bourdieu, but may be incomplete, as Olneck (2000) suggests. In order to realize the full potential of the late Bourdieu’s sociology of education, changes in educational content must coincide with deeply rooted changes in the structures and processes of educational organizations, especially with regard to instruction and assessment. What follows is a discussion of a critical approach to education that is conscious of the part that education plays in social reproduction and seeks to reduce its deleterious effects on disenfranchised groups.

**Standards, accountability, and social reproduction**

A brief quotation from Rousseau that begins Book I of *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) is easily
missed. It reads: ‘Prolixity and rigmarole might be somewhat curtailed if every orator were required to state at the beginning of his speech the point he wishes to make’ (1977: 2). Today, as Olneck (2000) notes, academic standards for students and close monitoring of their performance are being advocated to demystify content so that schools will serve the interests of all students. Academic standards are sometimes defined as ‘public statements of what all students should know and be able to do’ (Mitchell 1996: 3). The emphasis on the word ‘public’ means that standards are supposed to be widely known and understood by students, teachers, parents, potential employers, colleges and universities, and members of the general community. It also implies that if standards are not being met, then everyone quickly becomes aware of that fact. This awareness, in turn, is expected to increase the likelihood that something will be done to correct problems when they do arise (Ravitch 1995). The stated intention is to get all students to reach high levels of achievement, not just those who are exposed to the best teachers or who know in advance what is expected of them in school, whether due to mastery of cultural symbols (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), access to official knowledge (Apple 2000), or accumulated social capital (Stanton-Salazar 1997).

Proponents argue that standards are needed to ensure that uniformly high quality educational opportunities are available to every student, in every school and classroom, everywhere in the country (Fuhrman 1993, Ravitch 1995, National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future 1996, Diez 1998). Standards are portrayed as a way to improve the quality of education for all students, while lessening the wide variation in curriculum content, quality of instruction, and grading practices that exist from school to school, and even from one classroom to another within the same school. More often than not, existing disparities in expectations and opportunities negatively affect students from poor and minority backgrounds. These students are far more likely to be labelled and placed in lower-ability tracks (Oakes 1985, Education Trust 1998) with teachers who are less skilled and less well prepared (Darling-Hammond 1990, 1994, Choy et al. 1993).

A supposed advantage of using standards to guide instruction is that they focus curricular goals, instructional units, teaching, student work, and assessment on the content and skills that are considered most important for success in school and in life. They are intended to ensure that important content is not overlooked and that students are appropriately exposed to new content as they advance from one grade to the next (Hill and Crevola 1999). When implemented in schools, standards are usually accompanied by scoring guides or rubrics that provide teachers and students with formative feedback on learning. Discrete benchmarks of performance (e.g. novice, apprentice, proficient, distinguished) are designed to provide a way to clearly communicate expectations to students and their parents, as well as convey specific feedback about concrete examples of student work.

Skril et al. (2001) echo Olneck’s (2000) call for educators to become engaged in the development of standards and accountability policy as a means to further equity and social justice. They draw attention to two related failings of American education with respect to students from low-
income and ethnic minority family backgrounds. The first injustice is the widespread and persistent under-achievement of those students by virtually any measure. The second injustice is the injurious inequitable treatment the students receive while in school. Children from low-income backgrounds and children of colour:

... are consistently routinely over-assigned to special education; segregated, based on their home languages; tracked into low-level classes; over-represented in disciplinary cases; disproportionately pushed out of school and labelled ‘drop-outs’; afforded differential access to resources and facilities; and immersed in negative, ‘subtractive’ school climates. (2001: 238)

These deficiencies of American education are not easily explained, however, except in terms of policies, procedures, practices, and structures that are somehow, covertly, racist. No individual or group seems to be overtly culpable for the twin failings, which remain paradoxical:

Despite nearly a half-century’s worth of national- and state-level policy initiatives driven by dozens of reports and commissions calling for school reform, despite billions of dollars spent on remedial and compensatory programmes, and despite the often heroic efforts of administrators and teachers in individual schools, the fact that, broadly speaking, our children experience differential levels of success in school that is distributed along racial and social class lines continues to be the over-ridingly central problem of education . . . (2001: 239)

While acknowledging that abuses of testing have been perpetrated in the past, Skrla et al. (2001) question the assumption that children of colour and children from low-income families are inevitably hurt by state-sponsored accountability systems. Citing student achievement data over multiple years from Texas and other states, they make a strong case that accountability systems can and, in some instances, do improve overall student achievement and particularly the achievement of low-income and ethnic minority students.

Centralized accountability, Scheurich et al. (2000) point out, can have the effect of drawing the public’s attention to the dismal fact that schools are not succeeding in teaching poor children and children of colour. Such understanding has begun to galvanize the public’s commitment, they contend, as well as that of politicians in some states, to high academic achievement for all students, regardless of their race or socioeconomic level. Not only has the academic success of children of colour and from low-income households been improved, but substantially improved equity is also becoming apparent in some schools and districts in some states. The authors call for ‘tactical anti-racist’ work (Skrla et al. 2001: 239) in the spaces created by accountability movements. Instead of distancing themselves from such movements and rejecting a ‘powerful tool’ (p. 255), they argue that educators should deliberately contribute to the momentum already started by becoming vocal advocates of socially-just outcomes for all students at the school, district, state, and national levels.

The accountability systems being put into place across the USA today can potentially make evident the inequities inherent in schooling and gradually undermine the misrecognition that Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) describe. Enacting strict accountability measures for all schools will expose underperforming systems in a manner consistent with the advice of Franklin
Who, when speaking of the educational experiences of Blacks in the 1870s stated, ‘the sooner we document and interpret this experience, the sooner Blacks will be able to chart their educational future’ (p. 485). Demanding better accountability for public school performance, in other words, will produce evidence of intrinsic inequities across the country. A careful and critical analysis of this evidence can also reveal the contributions to social reproduction made by the very same education structures that are falsely believed by many to be the primary vehicle to higher status.

Skrla et al. (2001) advocate using results from accountability systems to leverage both resources and services for children from poor and minority backgrounds. They also suggest that educational practices can be borrowed from schools and districts where high levels of success for all students already exist. Though no specific practices are cited, examples are available in the literature (Navarro and Natalicio 1999). A broader conceptual understanding of exactly how institutionalized inequities in schools contribute to social reproduction would be helpful for selecting such practices and for making tactical anti-racist work more strategic. The theoretical construct of loosely coupled systems may offer a framework for understanding of how traditional forms of school organization contribute to social reproduction and then determining what can be done to remedy this situation.

Loose coupling and institutional survival

Discussions of systemic change and school structure tend to evoke images of monolithic bureaucracy, where logical and consistent systems of highly controlled relationships exist. However, during the last quarter century, organization theorists have called attention to some characteristics of schools that make them less rational than is often supposed. It is commonly assumed that goals and procedures are logically selected and pursued, for example, leaving little room for creativity and individual discretion. In fact, the goals that schools pursue are multiple and shift frequently, often accompanied by great fanfare, while the standard internal processes of classrooms actually change very little, if at all. Early in the last century, Anna Freud (1935) observed that society’s ever-changing and conflicting demands on schools were equivalent to requiring that a single industry produce featherbeds in times of peace and cannonballs in times of war.

A related contributing factor is that the processes and techniques that educators employ are generally unpredictable in their consequences. A teacher cannot easily guarantee that all students will learn what is taught, for example, even if they do exactly what is prescribed for them. Too many physical, psychological, social, cultural, and environmental factors outside the teacher’s influence inevitably interfere. Teachers in most schools are essentially limited to creating a set of conditions under which they believe learning is more likely to occur than not. But the results are never entirely certain.

Schools are very much unlike steel mills, according to this view, where a certain proportion of iron, coke, and lime, when combined at a known temperature and pressure, can be counted on to produce a particular grade
of steel time after time. Schools traditionally operate more like brokerage firms, which provide information and advice in the form of recommendations based on experience and informed hunches about how clients should invest their money, but which cannot predict the specific outcomes with certainty because of the volatility of the marketplace and the fact that investment decisions are ultimately made by the client (Pajak 1989). Importantly, the quality of ‘investment advice’ provided and the availability of ‘insider’ information vary tremendously from school to school.

Making matters more complicated, learning outcomes defy easy measurement, the formal organization of schools is highly fragmented and compartmentalized, turnover among students and faculty is frequent, and the economic, social, and political environments of schools are turbulent. Upon recognizing these characteristics in the late 1970s, organization theorists began describing schools as ‘loosely coupled’ systems (Meyer and Rowan 1975, March and Olsen 1976, Weick 1976), a view that contrasts sharply with the more common view of schools as ‘tightly coupled’ bureaucracies.

The source of loose coupling has been attributed to the poorly defined central task of instruction, combined with the unsettling environment that educational institutions inhabit. Because the precise technical requirements for instruction cannot be determined, the influence of the environment becomes paramount. External forces are able to impose upon schools the form of organization that has most meaning for society. Due to this condition, Meyer and Rowan (1975) proposed, schools typically maintain tight control over categories of teachers, students, subjects, resources, time, and space, instead of carefully inspecting processes and outcomes related to instruction.

Meyer and Rowan (1975) observed that tight control is maintained over categories that give meaning and legitimize schools’ ambiguous internal processes to external audiences. Students are conscientiously categorized according to grade level, ability, and area of concentration, for example; teachers are scrupulously categorized according to grade level and subject specialization; and academic subjects are carefully assigned to particular grade levels, teachers, and departments. Finally, the different categories of students, teachers, and subject matter are painstakingly assigned to specific categories (i.e. classrooms) of time, space, and resources through elaborate and precise rules.

What actually happens in these classrooms is not as closely monitored as the physical presence or absence of teachers and students. The larger category ‘school’ is similarly defined and maintained by detailed record keeping and subsequent certification by higher authorities, regardless of the actual nature of the educational processes or their quality (Meyer and Rowan 1975). It is worth noting, as well, that the imposition of schedules of uniform class periods and grading periods facilitates control over the categories, and typically takes precedence over the obvious consideration that all students do not learn at the same rate or require the same amount and kind of instruction. Education ultimately becomes understood by the public as ‘a certified teacher teaching a standardized curricular topic to a registered student in an accredited school’ (Meyer and Rowan 1975: 19).
Because categories (e.g. mathematics, gifted and talented, 12th grade, learning disabled, etc.) are what society understands about education, they provide the basis for continued accreditation and funding. It makes sense for administrators to generally ignore instructional processes and outcomes in order to ensure the survival of the institution. Too close scrutiny might threaten the legitimacy of the categories and needlessly complicate the functioning of the system. Schools traditionally protect their interests by concentrating energies on ensuring that teachers and students accept their roles, that quality of education is measured by inputs rather than outcomes, that coordinative costs are minimized, and that no questions are raised about the legitimacy of its categories. Furthermore, by increasing the number and kinds of categories they possess (e.g. special programmes, majors, degrees, etc.) schools can enhance their own prestige and increase the resources allocated to them (Meyer and Rowan 1975).

In addition to matters relating to continued accreditation, schools exercise tight coupling over categories of certification. Only teachers who have completed a certain number of courses in a particular area of study within a certain length of time are allowed to teach. But once the certification requirement is met, teachers’ actions and effectiveness are almost never closely monitored. Meyer and Rowan (1975) refer to a ‘logic of confidence’ prevailing throughout education that emphasizes discretion, avoidance, and overlooking of process in the name of professionalism. In the USA, the chain of confidence extends from the state, to the local district, to the school board, and on down to the superintendent, the principals, and the teachers. Confidence in principals and teachers is the result of confidence in teacher and administrator preparation programs, which are deemed worthy of confidence because they are accredited by the state, through the universities, and the university administrators and faculty (Meyer and Rowan 1975).

According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), placing the internal processes of schools in the hands of a group that has been certified as to cultural and academic respectability reinforces the illusion that the internal processes of the school are ‘unrelated to the power relations between the groups or classes that comprise society. Ironically, the more liberal the organization appears to be in its policies and the more its teachers rely on personal charisma and planned improvisation in the classroom in place of traditional or institutional authority, the more difficult it becomes to detect the hidden function of schools, which is maintenance of the status quo’ (p. 65). While academic standards and centralized assessments may foster social control as much as loosely coupled systems, with the former, power relations are at least out in the open, intentions are more transparent, and can be more easily resisted. With ambiguity, ostensibly good intentions, personal charm, and cleverness, however, power relations are hidden and become that much more effective (Bourdieu 1982).

**Loose coupling, misrecognition, and social reproduction**

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) propose that education systems display certain properties that simultaneously contribute to misrecognition and
mask social reproduction. A definite time lag exists, for example, between societal changes and corresponding adjustments in schools, which ensures that only real and permanent power relationships get reproduced, and not temporary aberrations. Another factor that obscures perception of the educational system’s reproductive function is the creation of conditions that are ‘most likely to exclude, without explicitly forbidding’, practices that are incompatible with this function (p. 57). Otherwise, the interest of schools in maintaining power relationships would be unmasked and popular support jeopardized. They also point out that reproduction is most effective when as homogeneous and durable a set of beliefs and behaviours as possible is inculcated in the population continuously, in regular batches, and at least expense.

These characteristics of education systems that contribute to misrecognition and social reproduction are similar in many ways to the outcomes of loosely coupled systems identified by Weick (1976). For example, loose coupling is said to allow systems to remain relatively independent of changes in their environment. Archaic traditions and innovations are just as likely to be perpetuated, but change is difficult to introduce on a system-wide or large-scale basis. The tendency exists in such a system to respond to a demand for curricular change or deal with a societal problem such as drug abuse by simply adding on a course or unit of content. A school can claim to have dealt with virtually any pressure to change in this way (e.g. adding a Black History Week) without having to make any significant adjustments to its structure or processes.

Loose coupling in an organization simultaneously prevents standardization and serves the function of adjusting easily to local conditions (Weick 1976). In an educational system heavily financed at the local level, as in the USA, continued support of schools is therefore ensured even in regions where almost all students might be classified as failures if measured against a national norm, because instructional processes and outcomes are never compared. Although two students from two different states or high schools within the same state may both graduate with similar grade point averages, the actual worth of their diplomas in terms of representing an adequate preparation for life in a competitive society is likely to differ tremendously. Yet the experiences they have in high school which govern their beliefs and attitudes about schooling and society will be much more similar. The routinized, ritualized, and repetitive things that happen to them during sorting and screening are unlikely to vary greatly from school to school, though beliefs and attitudes about themselves will differ profoundly. Those who are inadequately prepared at one level will likely experience frustration at the next level of schooling and eventually drop out without ever understanding that the system, rather than their own intelligence or motivation level, is to blame for this failure.

Due to the separateness of its elements, a loosely coupled organization allows a large number of idiosyncratic teaching styles to coexist, but the loose structure also inhibits the diffusion of practices that may be more effective. Dysfunctional and ineffective components can be easily isolated to minimize any negative influence on the rest of the system. But the weak influence works in both directions, and the defective components are more
likely to be ignored and to persist than to be remedied (Weick 1976). A classroom or school where instructional processes have deteriorated or even broken down is more likely to be sealed off from the rest of the organization than it is to be assisted in re-establishing effectiveness. Obviously, this has particularly devastating implications for classrooms and schools that serve poor students or students of colour.

Because the relationship between means and ends is ambiguous, similar outcomes can be achieved in a variety of ways. Also, when the consequences of an action are ambiguous, the stated intentions of the action may be used to justify it (Weick 1976). A student may be assigned several questions to answer for homework, for example, not because this is the best way for him or her to learn the material, but because the teacher intends for the assignment to help the student learn. Whether answering the questions actually does the student any good is an entirely different matter. The loose coupling between actions and outcomes also makes it difficult for both the teacher and the student to understand how well or poorly they are doing at any given time, which again helps to mask the locus of responsibility for success and failure.

Finally, a loosely coupled system requires little coordination and has the advantage, therefore, of being inexpensive to operate. Because it is difficult to justify the spending of more or less in one area than another when outcomes do not seem to be affected, funds tend to be allocated on the basis of criteria other than instruction (Weick 1976). Teachers are usually paid according to a salary scale based on seniority and university credit, for example, instead of their success in getting students to learn.

Thus, outcomes of loose coupling, such as the inability of schools to respond to social problems in meaningful ways, the difficulty of introducing and sustaining innovations, the resistance to diffusion of effective teaching strategies, the adaptability to local conditions without equalization of educational quality, the tolerance of both mediocre and exceptional performance with neither positive nor negative sanctions forthcoming, the lack of relationship between actions and outcomes, the unevaluated confidence and reliance on accreditation and idiosyncratic solutions to problems, the low cost of coordination, and the allocation of funds on other than instructional considerations, can all be understood as serving the purposes of misrecognition and social reproduction that Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) describe.

Weick (1976) mentions, in passing, the handling of disciplinary issues and social control within schools as potentially fruitful areas for research that could shed light on the nature of coupling. Meyer and Rowan (1975) bring up the question of social control as well, but discuss it only as an important historical impetus toward categorization as schools in the United States took on responsibility for integrating waves of immigrants into the formal structure of society as workers and citizens. In fact, Meyer and Rowan seek to discredit the idea that education serves the interests of certain groups at the expense of others with the argument that the entire population would have to be afflicted with a ‘false consciousness’ about education. They ask rhetorically, ‘If education is fraudulent, why does the system attract so much popular support?’ (Meyer and Rowan 1975: 12). The answer, of
course, is that everyone continues to view education as the most promising avenue for achieving higher social and economic status, specifically because of this misrecognition. But Meyer and Rowan never answer their own question, and fail to return to the matter in subsequent publications (1977, 1978), so the more pertinent question of whether schools in the United States hinder or facilitate upward social mobility is never adequately addressed.

Leadership, equity, and resistance

Standards and assessments are being embraced today as a means to disrupt the inequitable outcomes and inefficiencies of schooling that are attributable to endemic loose coupling in the education system (Fuhrman 1993, Elmore 2000). As one advocate optimistically proclaims:

The logic of standards-based reform is fundamentally at odds with the logic of loose coupling, and this difference is not likely to be resolved in the usual way, by simply bending and assimilating the new policy into the existing institutional structure. (Elmore 2000: 8)

The premier example of such expectations is the current Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Modelled after the education reform movement in Texas that has shown promising results (Scheurich et al. 2000, Skrla et al. 2001), the stated intention of this legislation is to improve the academic achievement of all students and close the gap between identifiable higher- and lower-performing groups.

Professional associations of educators have been the earliest developers and foremost advocates of academic standards at the national level in the USA. Such enthusiasm, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) would caution, clearly signals an attempt to re-legitimize the institution of education to an increasingly sceptical public. Indeed, the stakes are much too important to be entrusted to educators alone. Members of the general public, especially those representing diverse local communities, must be involved in the development of standards to ensure that multiple cultural, social, and economic perspectives get represented.

However, evidence suggests that celebrating the demise of loose-coupling in the education system may be premature. Linn et al. (2000) note, for example, that the No Child Left Behind Act is limited nationally by the fact that each state continues to define and determine its own standards, tests, and performance measures. Because the quality and rigor of assessments vary tremendously from state to state (i.e. as in a loosely coupled system), the possibility of meaningful comparisons is minimal.

A recent news report underscores how enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act makes visible and explicit the contribution of schools to social reproduction, as well as the unyielding resistance of loosely coupled systems to any change that threatens this function. The Act requires states to identify ‘failing’ schools so that corrective action can be taken to ensure student success. Parents of students who attend ‘failing’ schools are eligible to transfer their children to better performing schools. Their children may also be provided with private tutors who would supplement regular instruction.
Across the USA, some 8,652 schools have been identified as ‘failing’ (Fletcher 2002).

Under federal law, the 50 states set their own academic standards and definitions of success and progress. The nations’ 15,000 local school districts, in turn, select curriculum and set policy. According to an article in the Washington Post (Fletcher 2002), authorities in the state of Arkansas, which is ranked 49th in the percentage of students who complete college, effectively circumvented the influence of the law by simply asserting that no failing schools exist in the entire state. The article focuses on a particular local school system that is so impoverished the girls’ and boys’ basketball teams are forced to share uniforms and 90% of eighth grade students score below ‘proficient’ on a state administered assessment of English.

A veteran teacher with 27 years experience and the superintendent of schools are both quoted by the reporter as identifying low student ‘motivation’ and student ‘apathy’ as the primary reasons for the school district’s lack of academic success. Ironically, a curriculum monitor appointed by the state to ensure implementation of the prescribed academic standards reported that, when asked, only 5 out of 20 teachers claimed to have read the state curriculum and just a handful of teachers attended training sessions that were scheduled during the summer. Thus, students who are inadequately prepared are blamed for their low achievement, while educators who are directly responsible project their own failings onto the students and deny personal culpability. What is to be done?

In her response to the high stakes testing debate, Darling-Hammond, (2000), reminds us that previous standards dating back to the compensatory efforts of the late 1960s have never successfully addressed issues of substandard educational resources for poor and minority students. She predicts that top-down reforms that call for identifying and designating certain schools as underachieving, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, will similarly fail because no allowance is made for vast disparities that schools face in the availability of financial resources, physical facilities, qualified and capable teachers, challenging curriculum, and effectiveness of instruction. Darling-Hammond (2000) reasonably calls for the legislative adoption of ‘opportunity-to-learn’ standards (NCEST 1992) that would guarantee equitable inputs before imposing expectations for equivalent outcomes, a need acknowledged as well by Scheurich and Skrla (2001).

Loose coupling theorists suggest a number of other options for exercising leadership in educational organizations. One long-standing suggestion is to improve coordination by enriching communication:

> . . . the chief responsibility of an administrator in such a system is to reaffirm and solidify those ties that exist. This can be done by a combination of symbol management, selective centralization, consistent articulation of a common vision, interpretation of diverse actions in terms of common themes, and by the provision of a common language in terms of which people can explain their own actions in a meaningful way and communicate with one another in similar terms. (Weick 1982: 676)

Given such a scenario, however, it is essential to recall Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) warning about the deceptive powers of charm and charisma. Even seemingly non-coercive strategies must be solidly grounded
in data and the deliberate task of overcoming cultural and social reproduction. Improved communication, in other words, must be accompanied by brutal honesty to counter the human propensity for self-deception.

Recently, Elmore (2000) has proposed distributing leadership responsibilities more widely among educators in schools, in conjunction with adopting standards-based instruction and assessment, as a way to overcome the ‘(b)ane of “loose coupling”’ (p. 5). Noting that current governance in schools, ‘is designed to support the logic of confidence . . . not to provide stability, guidance, or direction for the long-term improvement of school performance’ (p. 7), he prescribes a decentralized solution that would be highly collegial as well as relentlessly focused on student learning (2000, 2002). Yet, even with diverse community representation, a plan focused solely on instruction may not be enough to eliminate misrecognition and reproduction.

In a series of important articles with implications for leadership, Ingersoll examined the loose coupling construct as it applies to schools, both conceptually (1993) and empirically (1994, 1996). He analysed data from the 1987–88 Schools and Staffing Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics and found that a majority of secondary school faculties reported having substantial autonomy ‘only in reference to instruction within classrooms’ (1994: 160) (emphasis in the original). He reports that teachers’ autonomy is highly constrained and controlled administratively, however, by school policies that relate directly to cultural and social reproduction. Like Meyer and Rowan (1975), Ingersoll (1994) explains that classroom instruction is not highly controlled because it is not the most important function of schooling.

Ingersoll (1993, 1994) is critical of advocates of school reform who overlook the centrally important question of who controls the enculturation and sorting processes. When teachers struggle to balance the conflicting needs of students against the imperatives of the organization by bending rules and devising evasive strategies, he suggests, they unwittingly and inadvertently ‘maintain the same organizational structure that denies them the power, autonomy and resources to adequately accomplish their task in the first place’ (1993: 104). Instead of seeking more teacher influence over instructional and curricular issues or more teacher participation in traditionally administrative decisions like hiring and budget expenditures, he proposes that school reformers might better focus on expanding teacher influence on academic tracking, testing and evaluation, student attendance, and codes of behaviour (1994).

Further analysis of the same data led Ingersoll (1996) to conclude that the amount of power teachers hold does influence how well schools function, but it depends on the processes that teachers can actually influence. His findings indicate that autonomy and control over instructional activities matter little if teachers lack ‘power over fundamental socialization and sorting activities’ (p. 173). Teachers who do have power over these kinds of decisions ‘can exert influence; have a greater sense of commitment and higher aspirations; and, in turn, garner respect from both’ students and administrators (p. 172).
The truly unfortunate thing about standards and ‘high stakes testing’ is that the stakes are so very high. Underperforming schools may very well be affected by mismanagement, low expectations, and inequitable support, but unless these problems are viewed through a lens that focuses on social and cultural reproduction and resistance to reproduction, the victims of misrecognition are more than likely to be further victimized. School failure and the persistent achievement gap between cultural groups and economic classes, after all, can reasonably be interpreted as a form of resistance to cultural and social reproduction (Foucault 1978). Nonetheless, individual teachers who are trusted have been shown to benefit adolescents by providing them with social capital through ‘tutoring, academic counselling, and guidance about educational decisions. Remarkably, ‘(a)lthough teacher-based forms of social capital are generally beneficial for all students, those who benefit most are students most at risk of dropping out of school’ as indicated by ‘low educational expectations and a history of school-related problems’ (Croninger and Lee 2001: 568).

We believe, therefore, that educator’s definitions of instructional quality and effectiveness should include a large measure of sensitivity to students as human beings, not just learners. Reflections on professional practice ought to acknowledge the crisis of self that is inherent in both learning and teaching to ensure that the ‘adult’s capacity to control, predict and measure’ is used to benefit students and not to satisfy the narcissistic ego needs of adults for control (Britzman 1998). Instruction should access the student’s internal literacy, that is, the inner dialogue every capable human being uses to make sense of his or her world (see Bausch 2001). By validating the student’s self-talk and inviting that dialogue into the classroom, teachers can connect it with the fundamentals of an established curriculum, even a multicultural curriculum. Such a learning experience, especially if begun early in childhood, will become a motivation to students as they come to know school as the place where emotional and intellectual worlds are accepted and appropriately addressed.

References


