Analyzing Subtractive Schooling and Identifying Additive Techniques for Effective Intercultural Education

By

Kathleen Shipman
Selia Waggener
Tanja Tiainen

University of Texas at Arlington

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The question of how to improve academic achievement within a diverse culture is still a challenge for American schools. *Subtractive Schooling* provides an in depth ethnographic investigation into the Latino population regarding the process of schooling at Juan Sequín High School (a pseudonym) in Houston, Texas. Valenzuela (1999) delineates a framework of schooling that disregards the basic needs of immigrant and U.S. born Latino students in order to construct an explanation of achievement and underachievement. The study reveals contributing factors of caring and education, subtractive assimilation, and social capital theory that are common themes for why students are not successful in schools due to their social identities.

It is obvious that teachers play a very important role in students’ lives and education. They can be a positive or negative influence on how students react to schooling. Throughout the book, *Subtractive Schooling* (Valenzuela, 1999), there were many shocking examples of negative affects teachers had on students. The majority of teachers were viewed as uncaring, disrespectful, and scornful. This view lead to a subtractive school environment where students didn’t care, skipped classes, or dropped out. One girl interviewed said, “I showed up every day and hanged out or did my homework but half the class dropped out. I ended up getting a grade for just showing up. This was the first time I really saw how the school didn't care for me or any of us. If I learned or if I didn't learn, so what?” (p. 51). This is a very eye opening statement and resulted in a negative effect on students.
However, teachers can build a strong relationship with students and have a positive effect on their life. It is important for teachers to invest in the student’s well being and genuinely care about their successes and failures. In fact, “the importance of relationships goes far deeper than our conversational sense that if a teacher has a ‘good’ relationship with students, students will try harder and learn more” (Oakes & Lipton, 2007, p. 268). It is essentially important to build trust and respect between each other. An authentic and caring relationship can help turn around a subtractive school because “authentic caring within an additive schooling context is arguably most productive” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 270).

Subtractive assimilation and the process of schooling are a theme of great importance in the field of education. Assimilation refers to the manner in which the dominant group depletes other groups of its culture, language, and beliefs in order to invest mainstream American culture and beliefs into these other groups. According to Valenzuela (1999), schooling is the content of the students’ education and the way it is offered to them (p. 20). The criteria for the makeup of the “other” groups can be identifiers such as ability, religion, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Assimilation affects students in many ways, including their identity, feelings of isolation, hostile resentments, and lack of achievement. One of the norms of schooling is to group, label, or track students to make order in accordance to middle-class, white norms. In an educational environment, these efforts cause students to be separated from the dominant group. This isolation occurs in the schooling process through programs such as English Language Learners, Gifted and Talented classes, and ability grouping. In the article, Where Education and Assimilation Collide, these isolated students are depicted as attending “a school within a school” (p. 1). This separation leads to groups seeing each other as unequal and
students begin to harbor resentments within the social groups. Specifically, Blumenfeld (2006,) discusses how students live with these resentments that can turn to violence on account of their social identities (p. 8). In other words, “despite the rhetoric about schooling as the great equalizer, schools were also expected to help maintain the current social and economic order with its uneven power and privilege” (Oakes & Lipton, 2007, p. 300). This was a belief from the 1900’s but this theory still exists today. Through social and academic assimilation, the norms of the dominant culture are kept in place. “[T]he process of cultural assimilation by highlighting the school—or more pointedly, the schooling process—as a powerful, state-sanctioned instrument of cultural de-identification” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 161), continues to de-value the students that do not belong to the dominant culture.

Another theme that prevails in education and significantly affects educational progress is related to the social capital theory. Many educators have discussed the impact that social capital, or cultural capital, has on students’ academic success. Students who have “positive social relations at school are highly productive because they allow for the accumulation of social capital that can be then converted into socially valued resources or opportunities (e.g. good grades, a high school diploma, access to privileged information, etc.)” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 28). Moreover, many teachers can attest that their “students were invested in schooling if their friends were invested in it or if their teachers were invested in them” (p. 8). In other words, the distribution of social or cultural capital within a school can help or hinder students from different subgroups. Indeed, many times the “possession of what sociologists call cultural capital is often used to justify and legitimize the uneven distribution of wealth and power among racial and social class groups” (Oakes & Lipton, 2004, p.98). On the other hand,
however, Valenzuela explains that social capital “emphasizes exchange networks of trust and solidarity among actors wishing to attain goals that cannot be individually attained” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21).

More specifically, Valenzuela explains that social capital is “especially appropriate for addressing the structure of relationships among immigrant and non-immigrant youth, as well as highlighting the effects of breakdowns or enhancements in the flow of school-related information and support” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 27). She generalizes that immigrant students tend to hold more social capital than their second and third generation counterparts. For this reason, immigrant students tend to be more academically stable and receive more privileges associated with higher social capital. Unfortunately though, “the maintenance and elaboration of students’ social capital is jeopardized by institutional policies and practices which subtract resources from them” (p. 29). Current educational practices indeed tend to stifle the necessary socialization that encourages academic growth, thus subtracting resources from some (or perhaps even all) of the students.

Although the solution for improving academic achievement among today’s diverse population of students is not yet clear, improvements can be made through increased caring in education, avoidance of subtractive assimilation, and awareness of social capital imbalance. By examining Valenzuela’s ethnographic study, educators can begin to conceptualize a solution for true intercultural education. Indeed, only when our school system allows for all students’ home culture to be acknowledged, respected, and valued, can we shed the educational practices
which have constrained multicultural students throughout the years and inhibited the academic
achievement of our country as a whole.

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