Voice from the Field

Schools as Discriminatory Artifacts

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Schools tell stories. The physical plants, including conditions, plans, locations, and embellishments provide clues to the histories of these neglected raconteurs (Butchart, 1986). Specifically, the architectural characteristics of older schools built during the Progressive Era of American education (1890s-1920s approximately), a time when the proliferation of urban schools was characterized by efficient industrial models meant to develop rationalized opportunities for growth and prosperity (Tyack, 1974), provide contextual clues to the way America once valued education and invested in the nation's future. The materials, designs, and aesthetic flourishes found in and on these schools can be examined and unpacked for their purposes, subtle messages, and audiences. This type of analysis is of great importance as many of these schools are still in use today and have served changing communities for generations. As student populations and educational goals have shifted over the decades since the Progressive Era, it is imperative that researchers deconstruct the intended and unintended messages conveyed by the inanimate artifacts that make up modern schooling environments.

My interest in the ideological imposition of educational spaces emerges from the dichotomy of my personal experiences within schools. As a student I experienced safe and welcoming schools that were maintained, revered, and preserved as community icons for generations. As a teacher, I encountered schools that were dangerous, forlorn, and compromised. The inconsistency between the two experiences made me consider the roles the educational spaces themselves played in enculturating students about the purpose and value of school as well as their place inside and outside of it.

This *Voice From the Field* unpacks these themes within the context of an urban school where I spent significant time as both a teacher and a researcher. As is common with practitioner research, the questions I seek to answer developed from my practice in the school and ultimately my findings will be applied to the context where the inquiry emerged (Ravitch, 2014). This piece stands as a commentary on conceptualizing schools as artifacts and the need for greater examination of educational iconography. In addition, it is a call to action for those engaged in similar spaces to confront the physical markers of oppression.

Educational Iconography

Before the lowest bidders built schools, local artists were invited to provide aesthetic flourishes to the exteriors of school buildings. These sculptures, carvings, and murals expressed idyllic portrayals of society and educational principles (Butchart, 1986). Through these images, the school buildings conveyed their purposes, expectations, and values. The educational iconography, or "conscious use of symbolic representation of educational ideas or themes," often harkened back to Ancient Greece or the European Enlightenment (Butchart, 1986, p. 86). Depictions of industrial progress and scholarly endeavors propagandized public education at a time when school attendance was becoming mandatory.

Educational iconography is simultaneously artistically, historically, culturally, and sociologically conceived. The educational iconography present on schools that date back to the Progressive Era are visible artifacts and can be used to explore how the notion of schooling is socially constructed by those who regularly occupy or observe the buildings. Carved in stone is a message that situates the entire school in a place and time that has drastically changed since then. Though the sculptures remain mostly intact, the neighborhoods and the ecological contexts of the schools have been altered. What is left is an old story to be interpreted by a new audience. This story conveyed by the sculptures, taken in concert with the declining condition of the entire building, portrays an image consistent with the disinvestment and challenging schooling environments often found in urban schools serving minority populations (Kozol, 1991).

James Buchanan Public School

As a specific example of educational iconography from the Progressive Era, I present James Buchanan Public School (pseudonym) as a case study. James Buchanan Public School is a K-8 public charter school as of 2012, serving students from the Kissel Hill (pseudonym) neighborhood of North Philadelphia. In 1908, ground was broken for James Buchanan Public School and construction was completed in 1909. The school served the burgeoning European immigrant population that flocked to Philadelphia and its industrial jobs at the turn of the 20th century. At the time, working class Irish and Polish immigrants and to a lesser extent African Americans populated the neighborhoods (Philadelphia Planning Commission, 2010). During the 1960s and 1970s the racial and ethnic makeup of many North Philadelphia neighborhoods changed as more African Americans moved into the area and Whites fled the city (Philadelphia Planning Commission, 2010). Today, Kissel Hill and subsequently James Buchanan Public School are predominantly African American.

Adorning the north side of James Buchanan Public School is a series of intricate educational iconographic carvings strung just across the top of the doorway. The north entrance to the building was used primarily by the 7th and 8th grade students, serving as the entryway into the building in the mornings and the exit in the afternoons. During my time working at James Buchanan, roughly 120 students and seven teachers passed through that doorway and by those examples of educational iconography twice a day for the 182 days that school was in session. In the afternoons, waiting just outside the gates beyond the north entrance, parents gathered waiting to take their children home from school. As they stood

on Berkey Street, waiting for the doors to open and their children to emerge, the most prominent architectural feature that would have drawn their attention was the depiction of seven men looking out from an otherwise nondescript brick wall.

In accordance with the neo-gothic or collegiate gothic styling of James Buchanan Public School, there are decorative sculptures or chimera located above the Berkey Street entrance. Seven carvings of Caucasian men, each representing a various facet of education, look northward from the school. The carving on the far right has been damaged and what it once held is no longer discernable. From left to right, the six remaining carvings depict a man reading from a book, a man writing in a book, a man holding a mortar and pestle, a man holding two scrolls, a man holding a gear, and a man holding a globe.

Though these figures may have been intended to simply represent select fields of education such as science, mathematics, composition, literature, and geography, what they in fact represent is the cultural incoherence of the institution and the community it currently serves. These images completely ignore the funds of knowledge that exist within the now predominantly African American neighborhood of Kissel Hill as well as the cultural competencies that differ from the White Western cannon (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2013; Yosso, 2005). Disregarding any and all contributions to the vast world of knowledge made by women or ethnic minorities, these sculptures reflect the image of those for whom the school was originally intended to serve. These seven gatekeepers silently scream to all children who enter, parents who wait outside, and community members who pass by, "This is not your school."

Marginalization

Over time, the symbol becomes the substance. The message is so deeply embedded in the visual representation that the two are inextricably linked. In our example, deconstructing the symbolic significance of educational iconography is a particularly relevant topic as older schools that are still in use today often include obvious examples of the form. As a student brought to light in the 1994 documentary *School Colors,* singular cultural representations of education and civilization have the potential to alienate and psychologically harm those who do not identify with the depictions (Olsson, 1994). This potential for symbolic violence that exists within these structures necessitates a thorough and thoughtful dialogue regarding their appropriateness. Research indicates the significance of culture in understanding how minority adolescent students living and going to school in high poverty neighborhoods such as Kissel Hill construct their identities and the subsequent difficulties they experience (Gullan, Hoffman, & Leff, 2011). Therefore, if schools are truly meant to serve as safe spaces for all students, there must be an effort to eliminate any and all malicious gatekeepers that intentionally or inadvertently discriminate.

Critical scholars in the field of education (cf. Anyon, 1981; Apple, 1979; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983) have exposed schools as instruments of reification for social inequality (Levinson and Holland, 1996). Too often, the students that suffer as a result are individuals of color, and the friction that exists between them and their schooling is a product of cultural discontinuity (Adams, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999). For that reason, efforts to reform the American schooling model that is failing so many must address concerns regarding all barriers to equitable education.

In the absence of culturally relevant pedagogy or pragmatic assimilation (Ogbu, 2003), students who feel as though they are outside of the institutional norms of schools have few options. Resistance has been documented by a number of researchers (MacLeod, 1987; Ogbu, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999) who witnessed students rejecting either their cultural identities or schools depending on their responses to the obstacles encountered in school. With neither of those options presenting a sustainable solution, it becomes all the more important for educational stakeholders to identify how schools subvert minority students and thusly transform the system. This is where the analysis of educational iconography becomes important. Understanding the transmission of culture through building design and aesthetics opens up a dialogue about how schools themselves are not necessarily innocent or neutral structures. Deconstructing the dynamic interplay between students and iconography can go a long way in ensuring that schools do not represent sites of covert prejudice.

Conclusion

Though school buildings are inanimate objects, they indeed tell stories. They tell stories of societal values, curricular goals, environmental histories, and educational expectations. In the case of older schools, the condition, original purpose, and intended constituency of the school plays a major role the messages conveyed to the populations who currently occupy these spaces. The lingering monuments of exclusion and oppression that remain since the racial shift in housing patterns still offer hurtful messages that need to be identified and contested. However, there exists a hopefulness about the future of such spaces as those who take an interest in addressing their power through culturally responsive action can redefine the spaces and find ways to make them both representational and encouraging. Just as students construct their identities within the walls of the schools, the schools can and must construct a reflective identity in relation to the students they serve.

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