

**The Role of Social Structural Location in Education: Examining the Consequences of
Identity on Academic Achievement**

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There is little worse than feeling powerless. Yet, schools often strip power—both intentionally and indirectly—from students. Many schools tout the necessity of personal responsibility and self-cultivation while simultaneously minimizing the practical scope of student agency. In essence, schools encourage students to use their meritocratic skills to ensure high academic achievement without acknowledging the fact that skills are not enough to overcome an oppressive system. This tension often makes students feel accountable for academic shortcomings that result not from a lack of effort or ability but from structural problems with school itself.

The United States sells itself a story of social and economic mobility—a story that oversimplifies mobility by portraying it as contingent exclusively on hard work. At worst, this is often an excuse for powerful people to ignore their ethical and political obligation to address structural barriers, including racism, income inequality, and education accessibility. At best, it is a false ideology embodied by those who have not witnessed the true determinants of traditionally defined success. Schools are a microcosm of the United States' national culture. Within the classroom, academic achievement is framed as being a byproduct of intellectual ability, hard work, and dedication. However, Baker-Bell (2020), Delpit (1995), Valenzuela (2005), and Kinloch (2017) contend that a student's social structural location can partially explain their academic achievement. Thus, I argue that academic achievement is not solely based on individual merit, but rather, it is shaped by factors such as linguistic background, cultural conformity, preconceptions of schooling, and class status.

Commented [JC(1)]: This introduction is really engaging, and the thesis is clear. Nicely done.

Commented [JC(2)]: Yes--and well-put.

Commented [JC(3)]: Minor comment: In APA, you want to cite the year parenthetically (so as to index particular pieces to your reader). When I see (Delpit, 1995), for example, I know that's her book "Others People's Children," as opposed to, say, her more recent scholarship.

One way in which a student's social structural location can impact their academic achievement is through linguistic racism. In her article, "Dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism in English Language," Baker-Bell (2020) highlights the contentious nature of language for marginalized students, as linguistic practices often perpetuate the cultural hierarchical structure. Baker-Bell's approach of "critical language awareness" reveals how language is used not as a tool for connection and mobility, but as a tool to maintain power and dominance. (p. 10). The rejection of certain languages, instead requiring English, alludes to the fact that schools often recognize English as being superior to other languages. This makes students who predominantly speak other languages feel like they are not fully accepted within the classroom. For example, if a student speaks with a noticeable accent and non-traditional grammar, they may be stigmatized by teachers and peers. Ultimately, situations like this put students at an academic disadvantage since they must learn to operate in an uncomfortable atmosphere where they are not fully respected or accepted. Baker-Bell's argument reflects the necessity of embracing linguistic diversity, as the current linguistic hegemony prevents academic achievement for some students.

Similar to Baker-Bell's recognition of the language of power, Delpit (1995) argues that there are cultures of power. Delpit claims that "the culture of power in the United States is white, middle class, and highly verbal" (p. 24), and that students who fall outside of these descriptions may automatically be perceived as deficient and uneducated. For example, students who come from low-income families may struggle to access the resources that their wealthier peers take for granted, which creates an achievement gap that derives from systemic wealth inequality. This may appear in visible forms such as access to clean clothing to wear to school, but it also manifests in less obvious forms like disparities in technological and internet access. Likewise, Delpit notes that because "all teachers bring their own cultural biases to the classroom," certain

Commented [JC(4): Indeed, ideologies of the "right" way of speaking (and even ideologies of the "correct" way to write!!) serve as exclusionary metrics.

Commented [JC(5): Yes--and we saw this in the Bucholtz (2016) piece that started our class.

Commented [JC(6): Yes--imagine having to enter a space where your linguistic resources are unwelcome and devalued. Even when I've studied other languages, for example, my prestige-variety English still assists me in asking questions, etc. (in a way that Mandarin-dominant students in my Italian classes could not, when I lived in Italy).

Commented [JC(7): An example here would solidify your point--e.g., as we see in Lareau (2011), access to clean clothing is inequitable and can lead some students to have to miss school (as in the case of Katie Brindle).

demographics of students may be stereotyped, unfairly graded, and simply misunderstood (p. 38) By no fault of their own, these students must overcome significant barriers just to keep up with the achievement of their privileged peers. Pope (2001) highlights this point by illuminating the effects of work obligations on school performance. Compared to Eve's ability to focus exclusively on school, Berto was expected to contribute financially to his family, which reduced the amount of time he could dedicate to schooling. Consequently, Berto's numerous priorities infringed on the time and effort he was able to exert to school, making it difficult to keep pace with students like Eve.

Commented [JC(8)]: Again, an example here would really solidify the point, particularly as many people reject similar arguments (in the wider sphere).

Valenzuela's (2005) research about subtractive schooling contributes a meaningful additional to Baker-Bell and Delpit: some students have justifiable reasons to not demonstrate care for or commitment to schooling. Valenzuela claims that students from marginalized backgrounds may approach school in stoic or confrontational ways since they have not received care from teachers or administrators. Essentially, students will only care about school if they are cared for at school. For immigrants, students with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ students, this is particularly salient because school has the potential to be an unsafe place for them. If their focus is predominantly on keeping a low profile and staying safe, then it is logical that their achievement will decline. In fact, students may develop hostile feelings towards schooling and teachers if they perceive that their identities are being disrespected. For these types of students, Valenzuela indicates that "success in school is not just a matter of individual effort but is heavily influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are situated" (p. 91). To preserve achievement, classroom environments must cater to the diverse needs of each individual student, rather than appealing simply to the average middle-class white student.

Commented [JC(9)]: Bingo.

Commented [JC(10)]: And, as we see in Valenzuela's (2005) piece, some students even develop hostile orientations toward schooling when schools degrade their values and identities (as you note well).

Finally, Kinloch's (2017) observations on performances of resistance reveal how the lack of culturally-sensitive practices manifests into resistance against the dominant cultural practices. When it comes to standardized testing, for example, students may refuse to spend time preparing if they feel that the test does not accurately represent their abilities (p 29). Thus, the score is unlikely to be a meaningful reflection of their knowledge, yet it will cause them to be viewed as academically inferior. Since school evaluation techniques are centered on dominant cultural norms, students who fall outside of the dominant culture are disadvantaged by the system, even though their intelligence is undoubtedly equivalent; those who know how to play the game succeed, while those who refuse are inaccurately labeled as unintelligent. Furthermore, some students may reject schooling norms because they refuse to conform to a system that will label them as underachievers simply because they fall outside the dominant framing.

The United States school system values conformity over practical ability. For those students who are unable or unwilling to conform, no amount of hard work, intelligence, or meritocratic tools will allow them to succeed. As Baker-Bell, Delpit, Valenzuela, and Kinloch illuminate, academic achievement is primary determined by linguistic background, cultural conformity, preconceptions of schooling, and class status. The U.S. classroom parallels greater society: effort is not enough to propel upward social and economic mobility. Yet, normatively, effort should be enough. Thus, the goal both within and out of the classroom must be to even the playing ground for all people, allowing individual factors to be the sole determinant of achievement.

Commented [JC(11): (frame? Practices?) (I see where you were going--no worries).

Commented [JC(12): And, as we see in Kinloch's (2017) piece, some students reject schooling norms because they don't want to be framed as failing within that system (e.g., the girl who says, "I don't write").

Commented [JC(13): Your writing is very clean and well-organized, Zach--it's really a treat to read your work. cj

References

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