

EIGHTEEN

DEWEY'S AND FREIRE'S PEDAGOGIES
OF RECOGNITION

A Critique of Subtractive Schooling

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Hey, we're Mexican and American and proud of it! It's just that nobody wants to let us be both—which is what we are.

—High school student in Houston, Texas

A critique of contemporary pedagogy in American schools as it relates to minority and immigrant students has been termed “subtractive schooling” by Angela Valenzuela. As the name indicates, subtractive schooling is a type of pedagogy that takes away or subtracts aspects of a student’s experience. I believe that this is a problem that should concern us, and I use John Dewey’s and Paulo Freire’s theories on pedagogy to argue why this is the case.

This essay is informed by sociological research as well as Dewey’s and Freire’s theories on pedagogy. Freire’s incisive social criticism coupled with Dewey’s pragmatic sensibility can help us understand the nature of subtractive schooling and suggest what we must do in order to overcome it. I have divided the chapter into three main sections. The first section lays out what subtractive schooling is as well as its social consequences. The second section, based on the work of Freire, is a critique of subtractive schooling as oppressive to minority and immigrant students on two accounts: treating students as objects

rather than as subjects, and subtractive schooling as a process that teaches self-hatred. The third section is devoted to a critical analysis of subtractive schooling based on the pedagogy of Dewey. Here the criticism is that subtractive schooling undermines the experiences of minority and immigrant students and, because of this, it is detrimental to students' development.

Dewey and Freire worked with different students and in very different contexts, but their ideas about pedagogy complement each other remarkably well. Dewey worked with American children of grade-school age, while Freire worked with adult South American *campesinos* (peasants). The language Dewey and Freire use to express their thoughts is very different as well. Whereas Freire's tenor draws our attention to the blatant oppression of one group by another, Dewey emphasizes the conditions that need to be present to overcome oppression. There are many parallels between Dewey's and Freire's theories on pedagogy; the main one that is developed here is the importance each places on the respect and recognition of the student's experience as central for the student's development. Both Dewey and Freire want students to become aware of themselves and their experience to draw from it the skills and creativity that will allow them to flourish.

Before continuing with the rest of my analysis, it is necessary to articulate some arguments in favor of subtractive schooling as well as my own position. Richard Rodriguez believes it is best for children to learn to speak English as soon as possible, and to learn that they can have a public and a private identity.¹ The public identity is to be expressed in English while the private identity (home/family) is to be expressed in Spanish. Rodriguez advocates the bifurcation of a person's identity into public and private identities because he believes this is the best way to achieve upward mobility and admission into mainstream American culture. Given that immigrant children are now in the United States, it is simply best for them to learn English since they will need it to communicate and become members of the American community. Samuel Huntington also advocates subtractive schooling; his main concern is to protect the U.S. national identity,

the English language, and American culture. Huntington believes that the United States is currently under threat of losing its national identity.² Because of the large numbers of Mexican immigrants coming into the United States, more and more Spanish is being spoken in America, whose legitimate language is English. He ultimately believes that if Hispanics want to be part of the American community they must share American values and speak English.

I agree that students in the American school system should learn English, and as many other languages as they are curious to learn, but also to retain the languages they already know and not think less of them because of the acquisition of new ones.

Subtractive Schooling

It is a relatively well-known fact that most children of minority ethnic groups do not do as well academically as their Anglo counterparts.³ Dropout rates are highest among black and Latino students, and these students generally go on to take jobs that do not require a college education. Minority students tend to remain at the same socioeconomic status as their parents. Another interesting phenomenon is that first- and second-generation immigrants tend to have high levels of social success. In his book *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, Alejandro Portes discusses how first and second generations are characterized by high levels of education and upward mobility.⁴ This success is not enjoyed by the third and subsequent generations, however, who have assimilated into the mainstream American culture. Angela Valenzuela uses the term “subtractive schooling” to describe the process of assimilation into mainstream American culture that immigrant students undergo in our American school system. Valenzuela’s book *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.–Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* explains her research and findings.⁵ Her research takes place in Seguin High, a pseudonymous Houston high school in which the student population is largely Mexican American and recently arrived Mexican immigrant students.

I am concerned here with the conclusions of her research. She tells us that subtractive schooling generates a monolingual, English-speaking ethnic minority that is no longer able to identify with Mexican culture and is also not equipped to do well in the American mainstream. Valenzuela concludes that subtractive schooling “divests Mexican youth of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure.”⁶ She proposes that the “academic deficiencies” of U.S.-born students from low-income communities are the symptoms of a schooling that subtracts cultural resources from them. In addition, schools are organized in ways that “fracture students’ cultural and ethnic identities”; she thus holds subtractive schooling partly responsible for the generational decline in academic achievement that Portes points out in his research.

Subtractive assimilation comes about because assimilation is not a neutral process, given that it negatively affects minorities. Valenzuela tells us that even bilingual education programs that were created to meet the linguistic needs of minority students are subtractive since these programs do not recognize nor reinforce the students’ native language skills and their cultural identity. She explains how “the organization of schooling has been historically implicated in the devaluation of the Spanish language, Mexico, Mexican culture and things Mexican.”⁷ Valenzuela relates that many Mexican American students feel they are not in a position to criticize the U.S. public school system. Rather, they feel that they should be *agradecidos*, grateful for the opportunity to study in the United States. Valenzuela points out that this is a type of self-censorship, which is indicative of a deeper acceptance of the idea that the American culture and language are superior to their Spanish language and culture.

The social consequences of subtractive schooling are negative for everyone involved. Teachers who are committed to helping their students are discouraged in their efforts “since [those] kids aren’t going anywhere anyway.”⁸ This attitude among teachers communicates the feeling that Mexican students will drop out, that they are neither interested in school nor ambitious, that they will become another statistic, get pregnant and go on welfare, and that there is nothing that

teachers can do about this situation since it is the students' fault. Valenzuela concludes that instead of accepting any responsibility in the process of subtractive schooling, Seguin High's teachers deflect their responsibility by pointing to the underachievement of cultures that do not value education.

Valenzuela's research is focused on Mexican immigrant and Mexican American youth, but the effects of subtractive schooling are also experienced by other minority students such as African Americans, Native Americans, and Puerto Ricans, to name a few, since their cultural identities become progressively subtracted and their languages and cultures are "construed as barriers to overcome." Minority and immigrant students are not presented with the option of being bicultural or bilingual. As students assimilate and lose command of their native language, they also lose part of their ethnic identity and the ability to make and maintain relationships using their native language.

Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Most of Freire's work took place in South American countries where his method of critical pedagogy was implemented to teach adult literacy classes. The majority of his students were oppressed farm peasants who lived in feudal conditions. Freire's method of critical pedagogy not only taught peasants how to read and write but, most important, they also learned about themselves and their reality. Freire's critical pedagogy stands against the practice of subtractive schooling on two accounts. The first problem with subtractive schooling is that it makes students into objects instead of recognizing them as subjects. Second, assimilation through subtractive schooling causes self-hatred; Freire describes this as the process of internalizing the master.

In regard to the first criticism, Freire's critical pedagogy is opposed to what he calls the "banking concept of education" in which: "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.

Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry.”⁹ The banking concept of education sees students as empty vessels to be filled by the experience, generosity, and wisdom of the teacher. Freire considers this approach to pedagogy insulting, patronizing, and oppressive toward the students, who are regarded as ignorant objects that will be rescued by the gift of the teacher’s wisdom.

Freire’s critical pedagogy is the practice of encouraging students to see themselves as subjects rather than as objects. He tells us that when his *campesinos* students first begin their literacy classes, many of them see themselves as passive objects to whom things occur. He writes that his students would tell him that they did not see a difference between farm animals and themselves, and when they did admit a difference it was that animals were better off because they were freer.¹⁰ In other words, these peasants felt much like animals or objects without any power to affect their present and future experiences. As part of the process of *conscientização*, students become aware that they are not mere objects, but are human beings, subjects, and the makers of their own history.

Valenzuela tells us that the Seguin High School teachers see not only their minority and immigrant students as needing their help to overcome their cultural deficiencies but they also regard the students’ parents as standing in the way of their student’s success.¹¹ Her point is that Seguin High teachers pride themselves in how well their students are doing with their English acquisition and education in spite of their culture. Insofar as teachers practice subtractive schooling and regard their students as people whose culture and language must first be undone in order to then start anew in English, they are patronizing and treating their students as objects instead of recognizing them for the human subjects that they are.

Regarding Freire’s second critique of subtractive schooling—teaching self-hatred—when he writes about having the master inside Freire means that we have internalized the oppressor so that the oppressor need no longer be present for oppression to take place. Having internalized the master, we oppress ourselves. This takes place

when we have bought into the dominant ideology. Two examples follow.

The first is Freire's own: "A sociologist friend of mine tells of a group of armed peasants in a Latin American country who recently took over a latifundium. For tactical reasons, they planned to hold the landowner as a hostage. But not one peasant had the courage to guard him; his very presence was terrifying. It is also possible that the act of opposing the boss provoked guilt feelings. In truth, the boss was 'inside' them."¹² In spite of the fact that the peasants outnumbered the plantation owner, they had come to internalize the power of their master over them to such a degree that they became paralyzed in his presence.

My second example involves a friend of mine who shared his mother's experience growing up Mexican in Dallas. He tells me that his mom refused to teach her children Spanish because as a child she was beaten by her teachers when she was caught speaking Spanish at school. Today his Mexican mother believes everyone should speak English and she thinks little of her native language. This is a perfect example of self-hatred, what Freire states we experience when we internalize the oppressor. My friend's mother no longer has to have her teachers beat her with a yardstick and tell her to speak English; the master inside controls her thinking, her behavior, and certainly her language.

Richard Rodriguez argues that if Mexican immigrants want to preserve their Spanish language and heritage they should do so in the privacy of their homes, and that they should embrace the English language and the American identity publicly instead of acknowledging the child as bilingual or bicultural. I do not believe that having to hide aspects of their identity is healthy for a child's sense of self-worth. This is analogous to being in the closet about their bicultural identity.

Subtractive schooling does not enable students to realize their agency as subjects and makers of their own history. Instead, by subtracting the student's native language and cultural experiences, subtractive schooling is an instrument of oppression and the subjection of one culture by another.

Dewey: Recognition, Experience, and Growth

In this section I argue that Deweyan pedagogy is opposed to subtractive schooling because subtractive schooling does not recognize the students' experience, which is detrimental to their development as students and people. Subtractive schooling is also a practice that is opposed to Dewey's description of America as a democratic and pluralistic community; this last argument addresses Huntington's concern for the loss of what he believes is the American identity. In contrast to subtractive schooling, a central aspect of Dewey's pedagogy is the recognition of the student's experience as the source of creativity, curiosity, and development. The teacher's role is to help students explore and foster their inclinations to promote healthy development into an adult.

The loss of the student's native language is not merely the loss of an ability to communicate in that language. The most harmful aspect of subtractive schooling is that the student loses the ability to form social relationships in the language lost. Assimilated students may understand Spanish, Korean, or Navajo when they hear their parents speak, but do not feel comfortable enough in the language to speak it themselves. For Dewey, the more and the more varied types of relationships that we have, the more opportunities we have for further education and enrichment. A whole world of relationships, possibilities, social networks, and experiences are lost to assimilated students because of subtractive schooling.

Dewey believed pedagogy was the ability to learn from our experiences, to reconstruct them in order to enrich our present experience. The ability to think critically about our previous experiences helps us in dealing with the difficulties of later situations. By undermining the students' experiences, subtractive schooling undermines the same source from which they are supposed to derive the capacity to deal with future problems. Dewey believed that the school setting was the place where children learned the American values of democracy and toleration. The lesson learned through subtractive schooling is anything but that of toleration since immigrant students learn that their

language is inferior to English. Dewey explicitly argues against this situation, stating that the school ought to do “whatever is necessary to enable the child intelligently to recognize all his social relations and take part in sustaining them.”¹³ Samuel Huntington believes that the United States has become what it is because of its Anglo-Protestant values. He observes that previous immigrant groups have assimilated American values and learned English, and have thus become American. Huntington argues that Hispanic immigrants, particularly those of Mexican descent, are not like previous immigrant groups. According to Huntington, Mexicans are not assimilating quickly enough; they want to maintain their values and language. This, he warns, will lead to the fracturing of the American identity.

In order to articulate his argument, Huntington makes an important assumption, namely, that there is a fixed and unchanging American identity with a set of permanent values and characteristics. He fails to acknowledge that, historically, immigrant groups have both been affected by and have themselves contributed to the American identity and values. One such example is the Irish Catholic immigrants who came to the United States between 1820 and 1860. At the time the American identity was largely Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. The Irish immigrants did not assimilate into the native Protestant religion; rather, they kept some of their values (religion) and in turn changed the American identity without fracturing the United States into two groups. Furthermore, Huntington’s assumption also denies the historical fact that the American identity and values began to take shape before the Anglo-Protestant peoples and values became mainstream. Instead, he assumes that the Anglo-Protestant identity and values to which he belongs are indeed the legitimate, pervasive, and permanent characteristic of the United States.

In his essay “Nationalizing Education,” Dewey reminds the reader that America is “interracial and international in its make-up,” and it is composed of a multitude of people who speak different languages, who have inherited different cultural traditions, and who cherish different values.¹⁴ Dewey is critical of the person who proclaims his Americanism loudly if this person assumes a special code or tradition

to which other cultures must conform; he calls this person a “traitor to an American nationalism” and describes him/her as being “false to the spirit of America.”¹⁵ Huntington is doing precisely what Dewey is critical of, namely adopting the Anglo-Saxon Protestant values as the one tradition to which other cultures must conform rather than acknowledging that America’s history is interracial and international in its make-up.

Deweyan pedagogy encourages immigrant children to maintain their cultural heritage and language. Dewey saw nothing inherently wrong or threatening with the idea of being bicultural. In fact, he tells us that:

the way to deal with hyphenism, is to welcome it . . . the point is to see that the hyphen connects instead of separates. And this means at least that our public schools shall teach each factor to respect every other, and shall take pains to enlighten all as to the great past contributions of every strain in our composite make-up. I wish our teaching of American history in the schools would take more account of the great waves of migration by which our land for over three centuries has been continuously built up, and make every pupil conscious of the rich breadth of our national make-up.¹⁶

Subtractive schooling does not welcome and does not encourage biculturalism or, as Dewey calls it, “hyphenism.” Minority students are not made to feel that they are contributing something of their culture to the national makeup; on the contrary, they are schooled into forgetting their culture.

Dewey believed that nationalism becomes dangerous when one factor of the national makeup isolates itself, tries to keep itself intact, and “refuses to accept what other cultures have to offer.”¹⁷ Also, to insist on a national character by assuming a particular type as defining what being American means is dangerous because it ossifies what is inherently changing: our identity. A nationalism that is exclusive is pernicious and contrary to the American values of pluralism and democracy.

Dewey had an equally strong faith in democracy and education and believed that we could teach the democratic values of respect for

people's experience and tolerance in our schools. He writes, "Our nation and democracy are equivalent terms; that our democracy means amity and good will to all humanity (including those beyond our border) and equal opportunity for all within."¹⁸ Dewey believed that students should develop these values for the sake of communication and the growth of the community. For Dewey, the lesson was as important as the way in which the lesson was taught. Subtractive schooling teaches students that bigotry is an acceptable value in a "democratic" community.

Furthermore, Dewey describes human beings as biological organisms in a social environment. He believed that humans do not so much interact with their environment but rather transact with it, and the environment with them. This transaction is emphasized because both the individual and the environment are continuously affecting each other, as opposed to engaging each other and then going back to their original conditions. Both the American culture and values and immigrant groups are affected by each other. Immigrants contribute to the American culture and values and they themselves are changed by this experience. The historical transactions that have taken place between the native and immigrant cultures show that the American identity is not something fixed and permanent as Huntington assumes, but rather an open-ended process of becoming.

From a Deweyan perspective, one also has to question the public and private bifurcation of the student's identity that Rodriguez recommends. Dewey was critical of the level of importance we attribute to dualisms, which are nothing more than the product of human reflection as we make helpful distinctions when describing aspects of our experience: "What has been completely divided in philosophical discourse into man *and* the world, inner *and* outer, self *and* not-self, subject *and* object, individual *and* social, private *and* public, etc., are in actuality parties in life-transactions. The philosophical 'problem' of how to get them together is artificial."¹⁹ Dewey believed that we make the mistake of granting these dualisms ontological status and this mistake has in turn led philosophers to become concerned with the artificial problem of how to explain their cohesiveness.

Likewise, Rodriguez mistakenly assumes that because persons are bicultural or bilingual, they can leave half of their identity at home when going out in public. The ability to speak two languages (or more) is simply an aspect of their identity as a whole. A bicultural perspective is not something a person can turn on and off. Although the distinctions between different cultures are certainly helpful when describing our experiences, a bicultural perspective is a person's life's experience and is an integral part of that person.

Conclusion d54420bcbea51d68ed72642721797ca6
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My goal in this chapter has been to assess subtractive schooling using both Paulo Freire's and John Dewey's theories on pedagogy to point out the harmful effects subtractive schooling has on immigrant and minority students. I have argued that Valenzuela, Freire, and Dewey stress the need for schools to value students as they are, and that schools need to build from the current experiences of students. I believe a maintenance model of bilingual/bicultural education that maintains the student's current language while adding English would be a better approach than subtracting the student's native language and culture. Practically speaking, it is a shame that a child who is able to communicate in a language loses this ability because that language is dismissed as a barrier to overcome, since knowing how to communicate in different languages is a valuable skill.

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Dewey and Freire are helpful to us today as we think through the negative effects of subtractive schooling and come up with possible solutions. The transactions between the American culture and the immigrant groups and their cultures have resulted in the development of bicultural and bilingual people, which is consistent with Dewey's model of democracy as a pluralistic community that thrives on contributions from everyone. Pedagogies based on both Freire and Dewey recognize the value of the bicultural experience of minority and immigrant students instead of attempting to do away with it.

In closing, Valenzuela proposes that students learn about the ideological struggles that take place in our societies and how different institutions (the school institution being one of them) socialize its

members. She believes that this would be the surest, best way to teach children that their experiences and their language are no better or worse than those of other people. Dewey suggests that our schools teach students about the contributions of immigrants to the U.S. makeup and history precisely so that we do not forget our history and the value of immigrant contributions to the national identity of the United States.