

Exceptional Youth Cultures: A Framework for Instructional Strategies of Inclusive Classrooms

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In my undergraduate group studies course on Critical School Issues, a student, Jonas, who had been a special education high school student, and is presently a special education assistant or “para” in a large urban high school, approached me and asked me if we would have to write a paper for the course. I responded that in the previous course I taught the class this way, and that I intended to ask the rest of the class what they thought. After I spoke, Jonas put his face down.

I noticed in the following class, Jonas was absent, and the class had decided to write a paragraph and share their comments of the assigned article with each other after they read each other’s paragraphs.

In the first class, the other students already took notice as to how Jonas talks; slowly articulating his words, often with long pauses between words, delays in making meaning or so it appeared. The other students looked—no glared at Jonas—then looked at me in a moment that clearly spelled out: Jonas was “slow” or “different” and, perhaps, he did not belong in our class. I said to myself, now is the time for all of us to get to know how we all can accept and engage with Jonas and, hopefully, Jonas can beat back that moment of stares and engage with us.

This was an exceptional moment, reserved only for exceptional students and teachers, I later thought.

In recent times, there has been a much needed call (Doby & Dimitriadis, 2004; McCarthy & Apple, 1988; Muggleston & Weinzerl, 2003) for wider perspectives on sub-group activity within youth cultures and their existence within larger, more adult, corporate, and institutional cultures that filter and permeate school communication and relationships. This call cannot be met without examining the cultures of exceptional students, a newly organized and institutional category that seeks to integrate all students together, including students who had been previously separated from the mainstream of school life in “special education” tracks, separated from their “regular” or “mainstream” peers in high school and secondary

classrooms by their name “special” or disabled, learning and emotionally disturbed.

Presently, I am developing an online Exceptionalities course, mandated by the state for a new graduate teaching (MAT) program for a state university college. The course requires that teacher candidates learn teaching or instructional strategies for inclusive classrooms, combining special and regular students together, while attending to their individualized learning styles and identities.

In this article, I will discuss the cultures of exceptional adolescent and teenage students within three dimensions: resistance to inclusive classroom, post-structural qualitative research on language as a discourse system or formation, and finally, how the method or strategy of having students and teachers trans-identify. Trans-identifying or “seeing” how those links between institutional structures of authority and labels are connected to various identity and discursive formations associated with interactive, linguistic, and cultural sub-group activities of youth culture social formations. When students articulate expressions of and resistance to the dominant powers relations of both school and society, they may begin to see or read those power relations as not merely the simple power relations of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and race as reflected in schools; but, further, see how these relations are linked together in language structures that layer or imbricate the macro institutions of society to the micro sub-groups and youth cultures of the school and classroom.

Adolescent and teenage resistance has been written extensively from a variety of research perspectives in the last three decades. The ethnographic work of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and, more specifically, Paul Willis’ study on *Learning to Labor* (1977), reveal how working class students in East London, England, resist middle class students and the overly academic school curriculum. Willis’ study also demonstrates, in part, how one sub-group of students, The Lads, reproduce class, race, and gender power relations as they resist each other by self-identifying themselves and each other by name-calling: For example, the lads often refer to the ear-oles as effeminate or “cissies.” They further discredit their achievements in learning the middle class school curriculum as “good-doers.” They further separate themselves from other students, as immigrant students, by identifying them into unified categories as “Pako’s.” Their treatment of girls and their girls friends are also categorized as “the missus” and “easy lays,” while other students are referred to as “fags” (pp. 26-45, 153).

While Willis’ study focuses on language and labeling of the sub-group youth cultures within the mainstream or dominant adult or societal cultures, his study goes no further in examining how the lad’s resistance can break out and see their co-option as institutionally ascribed or how both students of the working and middle classes can begin to penetrate and cross-over their class, gender, ethnic, and sexual boundaries. Willis’ study does not answer the pedagogical question: How may the lads and ear oles and other sub-groups of the school’s various youth cultures begin to engage each other on a dialogical basis? How they can begin to question and

instruct each other why it may not be to their class and intra-institutional interests to remain divided.

With a framework or perspective to identify those spaces in language within which a more penetrating resistance can emerge by having students and their teachers take notice of those several yet shifting layers and formations of discourse mediating between the institutional identities and labels and sub-group youth cultures, this article will show additional dimensions of discourse ignored by previous youth culture ethnographic school research. As Coward and Ellis (1977) exclaims, ideology operates best when people are put into individualistic subject-positions, and like American ideology emphasizing competition and “everybody must be out for themselves to succeed” that, despite contradictory and contrary evidence, manages to maintain a self in a subject-position of identity that coheres itself in a self-consistent and self-identical way.

Recent post-structural qualitative research on discourse and discursive formations (Fleischer, 2001a, 2001b; Muggleton & Weirzel, 2003), inspired by postmodern theorists on language (Deleuze, 1991; Foucault, 1972, 1980; Pecheux, 1982), along with the need to expand how cultural forms and reproduction theories alone are not sufficient to break with the notion that schools merely carrying out the ideology and reproducing the dominant class society (Apple, 1982; Dolby & Dimitriadis, 2004; Giroux, 1992, 1994; Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Willis, 1980). This article proposes to be a lens from which to view these struggles against the limits or parameters of ideology in student group cultures and resistance by examining how exceptional students within hegemonic struggles offer counter-hegemonic responses in classroom discourses. This means exploring those layers of discourse or the layers of various meanings that intertwine themselves in and through youth culture expressions and language use in which students can “trans-identify” as opposed to “self-identify” themselves.

While there are many ethnographic studies based on student “self-identifying” the power relations that constitute their identities and roles (Ogbu, 1994; Weiss & Fine, 2000), trans-identification or seeing one’s self as circulating and crossing over into and through various discursive formations, aligning their identities, youth cultures, and sub-groups with the larger identity formations of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and cybernetic-media formations (Formas, Klein, Ladendorf, Sunden & Sveningsson, 2002), is yet another dimension open to students who seek to have their resistance and questioning extended by penetrating how collectively formed groups and youth cultures veer into isolated or individualistic subject-positions of self-defeating relations illustrative of the dominant corporate world cultures and institutional school environments.

As an alternative to self-identification, then, trans-identifying provides exceptional students, formerly special education, behavior problems, and disabled students, along with their “regular” or “mainstream” counterparts, a lens or theoretical basis to see the extent to which their interaction in the dominant or mainstream or

“regular culture” is fractured and filtered in their *de facto* segregation in at least three ways: on the macro level by administrative hierarchies, instrumental curriculum packages and preset teaching pedagogies, and assessment tools; on the micro level, the extent that their youth and sub-group cultures become identified with the norms of the dominant school and classroom culture; and finally, in between the macro and micro, the extent that there remain spaces to renegotiate with their peers and teachers new spaces for trans-forming themselves as new partners in making inclusive classrooms as a place of acceptance, engagement, and embracing differences dialogically on the basis of but not necessarily adhesive to their individual and group abilities, races, classes, genders, sexualities, and ethnicities.

In trans-identifying moments, then, students no longer reflect on their subjectivities, wishes, interests, and desires from isolated or individualistic subject-positions, thereby perpetuating sub-group and youth cultures within the parameters of the dominant cultures and institutional boundaries on the basis of separating ability, race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. This is why Jonas elicited the stares of his “regular” undergraduate classmates. Rather, how students and their teachers may *trans-act* as inter-subjective units and micro-rhizomatic communities, re-conceptualizing the micro-macro matrices of power present in their classroom, school, and community. Thus, a moment may be seized in which the instructor or another student may have intervened and said: “O.K. Jonas, so you are up tight about showing your writing to others. But, hey, we are going to be there for you—we are a group that supports you. O.K.?”

In these trans-identifying moments, student and teacher may see how their interaction and potential solidarity is fractured and filtered into complex subject-positions by sub-units of language known as “signifiers,” circulating within and through their sub-groups and cultures by chains of associated meanings. Once they see how “chains of signifiers” position them to act in counter-productive or hegemonic ways, they may be disposed to act to “break the chains,” re-define the meanings of the signifiers, and act in solidarity against social inequities, injustices, and power relations penetrating their cultures and sub-groups. Thus, in the following week, Jonas re-appears, we read his paragraph. We stop short of quickly “correcting” his use of grammar, but get more involved and interested in listening to what he has to say and get to know his thinking. We ask him some questions if we are not sure or clear as to what he is saying. We converse. We listen to his responses. Jonas begins to recognize our support as a group, he listens more, he nods more, and if confused, asks us questions. Jonas does not avoid coming to class.

By this engagement we are not becoming a group of merely isolated or egocentric individual selves conversing with one another. We are more than that as new group norms have been established, sometimes with difficulty and objection, because people as a rule don’t want to be so generous or giving. But, we all persist and Jonas becomes a part of the community being constructed in the class discussion.

In trans-identifying subject-positions, then, the dominant or hegemonic group—

class, race, and gender relations—of society are viewed as weaving through and sliding between many discursive formations (“trans-discourse” as referred to by Pecheux) and their chains of signifiers and their associated meanings, becoming attached and linking themselves between the larger as well as smaller socially interactive, norm-making, group and identity formations of discourse. Once disconnected from their sub-group norms, and corresponding chains of signifiers and associated meanings, these group identities circulate and move onto other chains and their sub-group meanings, crossing-over and suturing one chain over another, as one set of words and meanings become intrusive for another. As Lacan (1977) theorized, the subject or identity of a person becomes “a signifier for another signifier.” Identity, to Lacan, does not begin and end in the individual as an originary source, but rather through and across individuals as circulating signifiers and, as one sutured moment, an individual. As Coward and Ellis informs us further (1977), at the moment of articulation, the subject is crossed, caught in contradictory and circulating subject-positions and signifiers, making it possible for the subject to act, to represent itself, and speak by identifying or fixing one’s self(ves) as not merely a him or her self, but as a trans-self or attaching one’s self onto a meaning(s) on a chain or other group chains of signifiers (pp. 2, 6, 22).

So, Jonas’ head moving down, and the stares by the other students communicating to the instructor and themselves perhaps that Jonas is not smart enough to be in their class, nay, in college, would require those signifiers or exactly those moments when those parts of their word use, gestures, and silent pauses put some of us in subject-positions to think and act on our thoughts verbally and non-verbally.

Beyond Coward and Ellis, one may further theorize the Jonas situation by how identity is formed within trans-identification as a third realm: a trans-self that neither constitutes one’s self as himself or herself, but rather as a circulating or rhizomatic self, constituting one’s self as emergent, circulating, accumulating meanings and connections, often contradictory, and becoming intertwined and interactive, defining one’s self as an assemblage, a community, and an entity based on their own group and inter-group norms (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987; Fleischer, 1998; Grossberg, 1992; Zipin, 1998).

No longer is meaning of a word, immutable, unreachable, or the “natural order of things,” to be accepted without question. To pry open a complex of chains of words and meanings, each sound and meaning is linked and intertwined into the chains of other groups or larger collectivities, producing on discursive levels, between the micro and the macro, words and expressions in a labyrinth of what the word “ability” or “disability” mean. So Jonas and the rest of us may reflect and trace not only how but why thoughts and actions through our language use or our identification of Jonas’ language use bring about stares, comments, jokes, and eventually what every special education student goes through, humiliation and teasing by other students and teachers (Fleischer, 1998, 2001b).

Likewise, class words/signifiers, race words/signifiers, gender words/signifiers,

sexual words/signifiers, global words/signifiers, computer-mediated words/signifiers similarly become affected between the vortex of the dominant society and the youth cultures and their sub-groups. Words or signifiers, then, position one to trans-identify with each word uttered and listened to and, sometimes, produce not only self-enclosed or isolated or individualistic subjects held and sutured by hegemonic forces. But, further, trans-identifying also produces a social identity, a subject or group subject-position of persons who penetrate self-identifying practices of the dominant relations of the group and find themselves penetrating and identifying new spaces to create new norms within the dominant chains of signifiers and identities of schools and society.

How trans-identifying affect students and teacher relations, then, will be discussed in a book the author is presently preparing (Fleischer, 2006) recommending new and alternative ways of constructing instructional strategies for countering co-opted subject-positions and identities of students who had previously suffered institutionalized ability separations and labels—as Jonas—and how their teachers may take on a role formulating with them new instructional strategies for their inclusion with regular students and the school's curricula, pedagogy, and assessment structures. Adhering to a separate and individualistic mode of self-identifying, however, may further allow new instructional strategies for interacting and relating with and between students and teachers to become further hegemonized into the dominant relations of power reproducing *de facto* relations of ability in separate spaces, whether within inclusive classrooms or replicating old tracks of special education as removed and segregated from regular education classrooms.

While trans-identifying may lay the basis for students and teachers to create new spaces for more effective resistance and penetration into such “separate” discursive formations, breaking open the circulation of previous fixed chains of signifiers and meanings constituting such formations into new formations of discourse and group identities, one thing may occur overriding all other considerations: Communities may be brought about to sustain and nourish different, diverse, and disabled students in their engaging more proactively with regular students and teachers in building new instructional strategies for acceptance, translation and toleration as to how they talk and write, a basis for further dialogical constructiveness and collaboration.

In this process, the macro dimensions of power will become dis-embedded and continue to circulate in the micro domains of talk, manners, dance, music, and other expressions of youth culture, while new terrain is cut through for the creation of counter-hegemonic instructional strategies for accepting and working with able and disabled students in exceptional and inclusive classroom environments.

I have just spoken to Jonas on the phone: Jonas will return to our class.

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