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Learning From Rural Mexican Schools About Commitment and Work

During the last 3 years we have made many visits to two rural Mexican primary schools. As a result of our experiences there, we believe that students' sense of responsibility in a school setting depends on the nature of the commitments they make and the work they do in and for the school. We have also learned that certain educational and social concepts expressed in Spanish can enrich our thinking about the social curriculum that teachers and students create in classrooms. In this article we explore the idea of students' "social work" by explaining what we are learning in these Mexican schools and providing examples from selected writings about life in U.S. classrooms.

Metaphors and the Social Curriculum

THE WAY WE THINK AS HUMANS is shaped by the metaphors we use to express our thoughts. A metaphor (from the Greek *metaphora*, to transfer or carry over) allows us to understand one thing in terms of something else. We can represent the new in terms of what is familiar (e.g., the Internet as a "web"), the complex in simpler terms (e.g., learning as "information processing"), or the abstract in terms of the concrete (e.g., life as a "stream").

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Management

Management, borrowed from the language of factories and businesses, is a metaphorical word to represent what teachers and students do. *Manage* derives from the Italian *mano*, meaning "hand." The purpose of managing is to "put our hand on it," to organize and control. This promotes efficiency in our teaching and helps gain student obedience when necessary. As a manager, the teacher defines what is appropriate and inappropriate, and what constitutes a problem.

There are many reasons for the emphasis on classroom management. Preservice and beginning teachers consistently ask for more information and practice related to this topic, and the great diversity of students in U.S. classrooms offers serious challenges to every teacher. Management is inherent in academic tasks controlled directly by the teacher. This is reflected in the language of instruction; for example, pedagogical terms such as *on-task* signify a teacher-controlled environment. Classroom activities such as lecture, recitation, and closely monitored individual seatwork exemplify management. At its best, the metaphor of management offers positive techniques for teachers to bring order to classroom and school life. And teachers

THEORY INTO PRACTICE, Volume 42, Number 4, Autumn 2003
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do need to control certain classroom matters, for example, how paperwork and assignments are handled, or the consequences for truly disruptive actions by students. What concerns us about this notion of classrooms is the limited worth of "management" as a way to describe the social interactions and social work of teachers and students in classrooms. Management is but one of the metaphors we can use to describe social interactions in classrooms and schools. Another useful metaphor is "guidance."

Guidance

To "guide" (from the old English *witan*, to look after or to know) is to offer our knowledge to others through modeling, explanation, and wise counsel. Guidance can be implicit (such as an adult modeling a way of talking to each other in classrooms), or quite direct (for example, giving students freedom to engage in certain tasks and then discussing what we might learn socially and academically from the experience). Classroom activities such as demonstrations, debriefing after small group work, and presenting student projects can be symbolized through a metaphor of guidance.

A recent article that reflects the metaphor of guidance (Richardson & Fallona, 2001) noted the frequent disconnection of instruction and traits of character in writing about classroom management. Traits of character refer to "who a teacher is, what a teacher believes, and how these beliefs are manifest in the teacher's conduct" (p. 707). The authors argued for "explicit instruction in virtuous conduct" (a management stance) and "virtuous traits of character" (guidance through modeling). It strikes us that even in writings where there is an articulate focus on character and guidance (as in this article), there is not a conception of what *students* can do to enact virtuous conduct, or at least a recognition that the nature of the work we do affects our character, the form of social control in classrooms, and the kind of social curriculum we enact.

The social curriculum

Management and guidance, then, are two metaphors we can use to think about classroom life. Such metaphors fit within the larger idea of a social curriculum that explicitly and implicitly influences our actions in educational settings (Charney, 1997; Powell, McLaughlin, Savage, & Zehm, 2001). The explicit social curriculum "is comprised of the knowledge, skills, beliefs, emotions, and attitudes which are deemed necessary for people to work productively and live harmoniously together in the classroom" (Powell et al., 2001, p. 23). The enacted social curriculum is carried out through the work that we do in school, as individuals who are part of a group.

Our article offers a cross-cultural perspective on educational ideas related to the social curriculum, with an emphasis on how teachers use activities to guide students toward greater social responsibility. During the last 3 years we have made a number of visits to two rural communities near Xalapa, Mexico, to spend time observing, filming, and talking with students and teachers there. El Bosque and Chopan (pseudonyms for the two) are small towns located in a lush mountainous terrain. Both communities have dirt streets and simple, colorful stucco dwellings with cement or dirt floors. There are no telephones or computers, even in the schools. Most families make a living by picking mango, papaya, and chayote (in El Bosque) and by picking coffee beans (in Chopan). The teachers' job is daunting, for these are one-teacher schools (*escuelas unitarias*) with 30-35 students in grades 1-6 (the primary school years in Mexico).

Such a setting may seem too far removed from the everyday concerns of teachers in U.S. schools. Yet, we believe there is much to learn from teachers who deal with students in six grade levels, because in this challenging situation each teacher manages and guides students to develop a strong sense of social responsibility and social control. Their social curriculum merits our attention.

Spending time in these schools has led us to some fundamental conclusions about the nature of curriculum, teaching, and learning from a different cultural position. Specifically, we have come to believe that the depth of one's sense of social responsibility in a school setting depends on the nature of the social commitments that one makes and the social work that one does in school. By "work," we mean the tasks and jobs students are expected to do as part of their education.

We have learned also that there are concepts expressed in Spanish that can expand our thinking about the social curriculum. In this article, we

explore the idea of students' social commitments and social work by explaining what we are learning in these rural Mexican primary schools and by providing examples from selected writings about life in U.S. classrooms.

The Idea of Work in School

The work that students do reflects educators' individual and social values. Kohn (1991) argued that two approaches to developing positive student behaviors and attitudes are "encouraging commitment to values" that "help that child see himself or herself as the kind of person who is responsible and caring," and "encouraging the group's commitment to values" (p. 501). From our experience teaching and supervising in schools, we see that most students wish to take responsibility for something and to belong to a community.

We are aware that "work" may seem an odd word to use when we discuss classroom management. But if we think more broadly about the social curriculum we wish to create in classrooms, work is an important concept for us to consider. For some cultural groups, such as Mexicans who live in Mexico or who have immigrated to the U.S., work is at the center of what it means to be an "educated person." This has been clearly demonstrated by research on the attitudes of Mexican immigrant parents and children.

For example, Lopez (2001) interviewed Mexican immigrant parents and found that they valued hard work and introduced their children early to manual labor. This strategy was not utilized to remove children from academics. Instead, parents believed that engaging their children in hard work would make them value their education more, while also teaching them useful life skills. Lopez stated, "in this regard, work was an important factor in shaping their children's consciousness and attitudes toward school" (p. 431).

Orellana (2001) conducted a study of Mexican and Central American immigrant children's participation in schools, families, and communities, and came to similar conclusions. The author urged us to recognize these children as "actors, agents, and experiencers" who contribute in various ways inside and outside the household, through activities such as running errands, taking care of siblings, and translating for parents and friends. Orellana asserted that the work the children in her study engaged in can "help children forge particular kind of identities for themselves that facilitate their movement into the education and work worlds" (p. 379). She further stated that studies of "high achieving Chicano professionals" show that they believed their responsibilities in the household while growing up were connected to their "academic orientation" (p. 379).

Lopez's and Orellana's studies dealt with the place and power of work in Latino immigrant family life and in students' identities. We found in our study the same beliefs among students and families in Mexico. Work is what bound them to their family and what connected them to their community. In our view, educators' conceptions of student work in U.S. schools is often quite narrow in scope, and there is seldom a connection between work and education. For example, "holding students accountable" is generally construed in U.S. schools to mean that students should turn in homework and comport themselves well in school. Students are supposed to be individually responsible for academic achievement—and frequently little else. These notions of accountability were present in the two Mexican schools we studied, but students there were also held to a high standard of being responsible to and with others through the work they do. In the following sections we provide examples of work in school that can promote social responsibility, both in the United States and in Mexico.

Students' Social Commitments in School

In terms of the social curriculum, one aspect of students' work should be to engage in activities where they learn how to live up to social commitments about their own actions. The concept of social commitment is quite complex. In the following sections we discuss two aspects of commitment: *compromisos* and *confianza*.

Educators in Mexico refer to students' and teachers' commitments to act in a responsible manner as their *compromisos*. These commitments are social because they reflect a commitment to act responsibly with others.

In the two school settings we describe, *compromisos* are made in a public way because they

are written by every student, posted on a classroom wall with a column labeled *A cumplir* ("to complete") and *Cumplido* ("completed"), and frequently referred to by the teacher in a public setting. Here is an example of what one student wrote (translated into English but retaining the key Spanish concepts):

> Raquel (third grade): My *compromiso* is to do my *comisión* (a certain job taking care of the school) and to do my *tareas* (a word connoting both homework and other schoolwork) and to take care of things in the school and not to puncture the balls and also to keep the roses from dying and to clean the bathrooms so that they don't get filled with paper or soap. (El Bosque, field notes from 2/16/01)

These charming lists of *compromisos* are not merely words attached to a wall. For example, one day the teacher referred to a boy's commitment to talk less when doing his work (this was a big older boy who could be aggressive when not concentrating on his studies). The teacher asked the boy whether he remembered what he had committed to do. The boy said "*Sí, maestro*," and the episode was over.

The idea of *compromiso* is linked with the accompanying concept of *confianza*. This important term refers to trust between people based on a confidence in the other person. We make commitments to other people because we trust them to have our best interests in mind. *Confianza* is dependent upon the networks we build with family, peers, and our elders. In some settings there are cultural blocks to *confianza*, as in this analysis from a study of Latino students, mainly of Mexican origin, in a large U.S. high school.

> Students' *falta de confianza* (literally, the absence of trust), the subtle antagonisms between students and [school] agents, and students' avoidance strategies were pervasive in almost all our discussions with students. . . . Optimal self-reliance occurs not merely to the extent that adolescents learn to take considerably more responsibility for accomplishing important tasks and resolving personal problems, but also and more importantly, that they do so in large part by mobilizing—on their own—the supportive capacities of various network members. . . . (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 213)

Stanton-Salazar believed that a lack of *confianza* in this setting is the result of "individuation" (p. 212), a tendency to place all emphasis on the individual and not on the family or group. The author asserted that we can head off student resistance and failure by creating support networks for all students—if we understand the cultural dynamics of the students and their families.

Making *compromisos* on the basis of *confianza* is not easy to do. As Manke (1997) and others have noted, students' agenda in U.S. schools is often to maintain their freedom of action while pleasing adults or their peers. Student resistance, however, is to some extent a product of rigid rules, lack of intercultural connection, and teachers' oppressive sense of responsibility for students' every move. Alberto, the teacher in El Bosque, tries to foster children's autonomy and the development of social responsibility for many purposes. Autonomy in El Bosque involves the freedom to act, but it is linked to the development of social commitments. The teacher sets the initial directions for student academic work when he comes around to work with the age-level groups at each set of desks. When he leaves, however, the students are expected to work with little supervision over extended periods of time (in comparison with most U.S. classrooms). They go outside to the bathroom, check on what other groups are doing, and talk freely with their classmates. Alberto doesn't constantly monitor children's actions, but in the end they are responsible for showing him what they have done. And he holds all of them to high standards of work. There are strong cultural controls in this Mexican rural setting (children almost always do as adults tell them), but our observations also note the freedom of talk, movement, and pacing of work that students enjoy.

Students' Social Work in School

Social control and responsibility in the Mexican schools

Students in El Bosque and Chopan have a wide set of social responsibilities and forms of social control. They are expected to care for the school's physical environment, care for other students, and participate in community activities as part of their school experience. The aim is, in our terms, to be socially responsible. They do this in part by fulfilling their *comisiones*, which are daily and weekly jobs at school. Students learn responsibility by being placed in situations where they have to prove that they are responsible. But to whom are they

responsible, and for what purposes? Consider an example from our field notes at the primary school in Chopan beginning at 12:35 p.m. one day:

> Six boys in the middle right are sitting slouched, one with his head on the table, while the teacher works at the board with other students. Within minutes, the *comisiones* begin. Two children are cleaning the floor with pails of water and other children are now carrying their packs out the door. Four girls toss water on the porch in front of the bathrooms and wipe the faucets clean. Arturo, a sixth grader, cleans the sinks and the bathroom with a wet mop.
>
> Three boys clean the area in front of the school, two girls sweep the floor inside, and two more girls wipe the school floor with a wet mop. Teacher checks the work of the sixth-grade girls, then tells them to go pick up trash from a large pile along the front wall of the school. Not one child complains to the teacher or requests another work assignment. (Chopan, field notes from 6/14/01)

The students in this scene were responsible *to* their teacher and their families who support the school. Their parents built the bathrooms along the front walkway, and the students take great care in keeping them nicer than anyone's private bathroom in the community. Together, students are responsible *for* cleaning their environment.

Another example of social work focuses on children's school leadership. In El Bosque's rural primary school, every week or two the students held an *asamblea* (a class meeting) to decide which activities would be done that day, and to assign a priority for the activities. The meeting was led entirely by students. First, the standing "president" of the school called the meeting to order. Then, with student helpers, the president called for nominations for a new president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. All students voted, after which the new president took the chalk from the prior president and led a discussion about upcoming activities. Students then offered ideas for different activities.

Throughout this time, the teacher stood at the back of the group, as older students in fifth or sixth grade constantly interacted with and served as models for students in lower grades. After the list of activities was completed, the students decided how to group themselves to accomplish these tasks, and voted to work by *grupo* (an open-ended and cross-grade grouping).

Students' social work in this context was to practice leadership skills and decision making, and to take care of each other with little direct supervision from the teacher. The aim was to teach students a form of social control that depends on their social commitments and group social work.

There are two ways in which the social work in these Mexican classrooms differs from most U.S. classrooms. First, students take public leadership and work in teams across grade and age levels. Also, for writers on character or on classroom management, "work" usually refers to studying hard and getting good grades (an individual achievement that reflects only self-control), and not to students' social commitments and social work (a social accomplishment that reflects processes of intra-group social control).

Social work in U.S. classrooms

Students' social work should call on a complex set of competencies that enhance their social skills and help the classroom environment to be positive. We want to summarize two wonderful examples of social work activities in the U.S.

Rogovin has written inspiring books about inquiry projects in which students interview family and community members (1998), and a "research workshop" in her elementary classroom (2001). Children's work of planning, engaging in the interviews, and determining what they have learned reflects a meaningful social curriculum. In one sense, the inquiry projects are part of students' individual growth: "Interviews give children an opportunity to build self-awareness and self-esteem. . . . For those children who are unfamiliar with their background, the classroom interview [of family members] may be the introduction to their own family's history and culture" (pp. 22-23). The interviews and research also constitute social work in which first-grade children inquire about how U.S. society deals with people who have disabilities, about the everyday reality of being a construction worker and doing other jobs, and about people's working conditions:

> A rather large research group formed. For nearly one month it met during Reading and Writing Workshop to learn more about child labor and sweatshops. Children wrote down their questions in their reading and research journals. They wanted to know if the children could go to school, how old the child laborers

> were, and what kinds of health and safety problems the children faced. . . . Crescencia, the mother of a former student, came for an interview. She had been a child laborer in Mexico and now works in a sweatshop in New York City. She talked about working conditions. . . . Crescencia came to class to volunteer during a period of lay-off from the factory. (Rogovin, 1998, p. 129)

Imagine, first-grade students are learning about serious social issues related directly to their lives! This work is also potentially powerful because Rogovin teaches children vital social skills such as how to talk with adults and how to communicate socially in writing.

Levy (1996) took a different route with his fourth graders by creating a curriculum centered on the lives of the Pilgrims. Students arrived at an empty classroom in the fall, and had to work together throughout the year to construct their own desks and chairs, grow and cook food, communicate with key community members for financial support, and make decisions collaboratively. Students in Levy's class also engaged in social inquiry about questions that interested them, such as "Why are our shoes made on the other side of the world?" and "What is the biggest change in your town since you were born?" Levy's social curriculum was predicated on the idea of working together to decide, build, communicate, and question—to develop the "habits" that make up "character" (one of Levy's major concerns) through social practice. Although these two examples from the U.S. are tied to a particular curriculum project, which differs in some ways from what we described in Mexico, both Rogovin and Levy guided students in making social commitments and doing social work.

Conclusion

The examples offered in this article epitomize social commitment and social work within classrooms, schools, and communities, based primarily on a metaphor of guidance. We have much to learn from good teachers even in the unlikely setting of rural Mexico. The idea of schoolwork assumes a different form in places such as El Bosque and Chopan. Children's central role in preparing for and participating in community events, and their leadership in school activities, means that they are workers in the school and community. We commonly do not see students as workers in the United States. Many parents and educators in the U.S. would oppose the notion that children should wash bathroom floors or spend a Sunday at school constructing banners for a community Father's Day celebration, because they are not used to giving social purposes priority over individual purposes.

We do not argue that this cultural context can simply be transferred to any U.S. school. However, we believe that as educators we need to ask ourselves some tough questions:

1. What *compromisos* should students—and teachers—make in order to enhance the social curriculum and foster positive social control by students? What form should they take?
2. What are the varied ways that good teachers develop *confianza* with their students, especially in quite diverse settings? How can we build networks of social support for students?
3. How can we help students monitor themselves and give them enough autonomy to make real decisions about their actions?
4. What sort of social work can benefit the student, the class, the school, and the community?

Thinking seriously and talking with each other about such questions will enable us to explore how we can guide students to make social commitments, do social work, and develop a form of positive social control in classrooms.

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