Anatomy of social interaction among low track students in an urban school in Singapore

Presenting Author: Masturah Ismail
Institution: Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice
Address: National Institute of Education
1, Nanyang Walk Singapore 637616
E-mail: sitimi@nie.edu.sg

Abstract
This paper provides an anatomy of how individual seatwork is appropriated by students in a low track class in Singapore to enact ‘groupwork’ as a counter-activity to the norm. Using the theories of agency-structure dialectics and contentious local practices, I argue that in their local struggles with structural influences, students create their own practices using groupwork as a cultural form to negotiate identity politics and hegemonic behavioral control at micro, meso and macro levels. Classroom observation and interview data are analyzed using qualitative methods (ethnographic and video discourse analysis) to reveal the dynamics of social interactional practices as the at-risk students use their identities-in-practice and agencies to position themselves heterogeneously despite their being streamed into the same low ability space.
Anatomy of social interaction among low track students in an urban school in Singapore

Objectives

Singapore is an Asian country with little primary industry and natural resources. The nation-state’s ideology of economic nationalism, coupled with its constant emphasis on the development of the educational potential of its citizens, have been driving educational innovations and investments at a dizzying pace. The country’s multicultural population, comprising mainly Chinese, Malay and Indian races, are schooled from as young as 3 years old, and taught two languages (typically English and a mother tongue). Tracking was implemented from 1980 during an era of ‘efficiency-driven’ reforms, and the economic ideology has translated into classroom practices that emphasizes order, efficiency and effective teaching. Good teaching in general, therefore, has always focused on the practical mastery of skills and procedures as well as the maintenance of classroom order and discipline (Alexander, 2001; Deng and Gopinathan, 2003). Whole class direct instruction and individual seatwork are the primary means by which teachers impart knowledge and maintain order, with a heavy emphasis on the external behavior of students rather than their internal dispositions and learning processes (Luke, Freebody, Lau & Gopinathan, 2004).

In this paper, I provide an anatomy of how individual seatwork is appropriated by students in a low track class to enact ‘groupwork’ as a counter-activity to the norm. These students, largely from the Malay and Indian minority races and from the lower socio-economic classes, constitute the lowest 17% of achievers in the nationally-administered elementary school leaving examination in Singapore. In a society and culture where these students are perceived as ‘at risk’ of academic failure and given differential treatment (Cazden, 2001), rather than using tracking to contribute developmentally towards common educational outcomes, such at-risk students are often subjected to pedagogically inferior practices largely aimed at classroom behavior.

Using the lens of agency-structure dialectics (Sewell, 1992) as well as the theory of contentious local practices (Holland and Lave, 2001), I examine why and how these students use their socio-cultural capital and limited resources in the field to actively engage and transform the teacher’s structure and practices into ways of working preferential to them, making the argument that teachers should be cognizant of the students’ capital and resources, and aim to provide a formative space that resonates with their dispositions in ways that facilitate student agency to participate.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, I begin by analyzing the historical structures of educational access, rooted in a meritocratic ability-based tracking system that privileges and
differentiates. In particular I describe how such structures are brought to the present in the form of local, situated practice in Singapore. My premise is that the social and cultural structuring of the social existence of these at-risk students is constituted in their daily practices and lived activities as they participate in the structures of schooling, struggle with them, and generate cultural forms that mediate them.

Utilizing the dialectical relationship between structure and agency (Sewell, 1992), I argue that in their local struggles with structures that affect their lives, the students create their own practices. These practices provide the means by which marginalized subjectivities thicken and sediment, and become potentially transformative in shaping pedagogical practices. Groupwork, imposed in classes, is appropriated by students as a cultural form important in establishing and developing such alternative subjectivities. These in turn impact upon contentious local practice, and through these into struggles over national discourses around the assumptions of a Singaporean deficit model of homogeneous low-track students. As a cultural form, therefore, groupwork facilitates the development of identities which position the students and reidentifies them as agentive selves.

According to Sewell (1984) and Tobin & Carambo, 2004, in practice, human, material and symbolic resources are distributed unequally across social actors and generate different social relations and schema among such actors (). Constructed to contain traces of past experiences, historical structures infuse and restrain current practices. These structures are the source of resources for individuals and their practices, and leave traces in their experience as well as affecting the classroom culture. In this study I am interested in the extent to which at-risk students are able to enact agency in their learning by accessing and appropriating resources in the field in ways that work for them. I argue that they are frequently in the process of enacting themselves through enacting the culturally identified activities of others – in this case via groupwork which is commonly used by high track classrooms as positive learning participation structures rather than regulatory devices.

Through classroom observation and analysis, I find that groupwork is not the sole device in which hegemonic categories and positions are inscribed into the students' habits, to define and control them. I argue that groupwork, rather than remaining a form of classroom management, is appropriated by students to become a cultural form as a means to gain some limited control over their own identity formation. Local contentious practices are thus viewed as the sites of complex negotiations between identity practices on the one hand, and on the other, hegemonic behavioral control.

To frame notions of structure/agency and the theory of contentious local practice, I examined the students' interactions as structured by the classroom, the groupwork tasks and their own evolving dynamics of social interaction at the micro, meso, and macro levels. The micro level involves the interactions and
practices of students and teachers with resources and the praxis of action and resistance. The meso level revolves around lived social life within a single field, and it is at this level that relations between enduring struggles and historical subjectivities are mediated through local situated practices. The macro level implicate multiple, nested fields which intersect to create complex social networks which simultaneously enable and constrain social life in other fields. Students as dialogic selves are constantly engaged with others in local struggles, animated in part by the power of social norms about their position in society and school, and by hegemonic discourses circulating widely locally and beyond. The impetus of enduring struggles – carried out for and against structures and discourses that disproportionally distribute human, symbolic and material resources to favored (high track) student class – is realized from the macro to the micro through local practice. I therefore explore how students use their available resources gained from other fields to problematize the macro views of their low track class as homogenously low ability, via the cultural form and practice of groupwork.

Data and Methods

I draw on a variety of qualitative research methods appropriate in school contexts, including ethnography (Erickson, 1986) and micro-analytic approaches in videography (eg, the Special Issue of Discourse Processes, see Koschmann, 1999). Data presented here are drawn largely from ethnographic fieldnotes taken during classroom observations of multiple subject lessons in a year 7 low track classroom in an urban school in Singapore. Close attention was paid to the teacher’s structuring of the class activity, student movements during the phase of individual seatwork and how groups were inevitably formed. Lessons were either audio or videorecorded and talk in the groups was later transcribed and analyzed for engagement with the task. Teachers and students were informally interviewed for perceptions of their participation in the class activities. Video was used both as analytical tool and as heuristics to supplement the interview – salient vignettes were clipped and shown to select participants to elicit their response in more focused discussions.

Findings

In Singapore, the practice of tracking or “streaming” based on exam performance is done so as to enable teachers to pace instruction according to different levels of ability, reduce education wastage and ultimately generate equitable educational outcomes for all students (Cazden, 2001). Contrary to expectation, such grouping does not mean that the class is homogenous in academic ability. In fact, students in the class under study displayed a range of subject-specific and language abilities, bring to the classroom funded knowledge which owes in large part to their diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.
Spaces in low track classrooms are typically structured towards single column rows and individual seatwork to maintain orderly behavior as students are tasked to work in compliant isolation. The typical lesson shows students moving around on their own initiative to form groups to talk about tasks or non-task related topics. Many students often prefer to get their work done in groups when this is tolerated by the teacher, who has observed that they “can play and socialize while doing their work at the same time”. In addition, students acted according to how they felt at the particular moment during the lessons. At the micro level, therefore, individuals determine their participation in the current activity based on their current disposition. The structures in place in the classroom enabled the students to appropriate the time, space and practices in whatever ways they liked. Ultimately, the practice of students forming groups both creates a double reality, home to a rich subjective sense of self and labor, and identifies students in the class as being socially heterogenous. Both types of identification give students a more pleasurable environment and schooling experience that would be missing were the critical groupwork practice reduced to a purely utilitarian purpose.

At the meso level of interaction, students worked with one another and the teacher to achieve immediate goals, be they to finish the work, fool around or both. The teacher often coached the group that would otherwise have just misbehaved, and provided a structure that brought these students back to the task at hand. In other words, there should be resonant conditions for particular student dispositions to enact a conducive learning classroom culture, and I argue that it is the symbolic and material affordances of the field that can be utilized to enact such participatory resonance for students. From the macro perspective, students’ ability to get along in diverse groups across racial and socioeconomic background reveals how their involvement in other fields outside the classroom do not delimit their interaction with one another. In this classroom, rules governing social inclusivity or exclusivity for students are indeed very loose. Formal groupings made by students’ own choice in another activity supports the assertion that students are able to interact freely in the class across gender, race and socioeconomic background. This alludes to the possibility that students in the class have developed individual “grids of specification” (Foucault, 1972) and schema to position others and use their social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to form social configurations within the classroom.

In summary, the study indicates that the dynamics of groupwork as practice, and the flexible rules regulating social interaction and activity, enable particular spaces for students to develop capacities for learning. How they use their agency and identities-in-practice have reciprocal generative implications for both their local performative practices and the global, structuring discourses that constrain their normative classroom behaviors.
Significance

Recent reforms for the low track classes focused on the need to include more practice- and technical-oriented curriculum and teaching methods in preparation for these students to enter vocational training. Low track class teachers are encouraged to use student-centred activities such as groupwork, hands-on activities, and oral presentations to manage the class. Despite their 'othered' position in society in terms of their race, class and schooling ability, low track students are aware that within the supposedly homogenous classroom, there exists students with different ability levels for specific subjects. They are able to enact schema and practices, and utilize their resources to organize themselves in ways that allow them to achieve individual goals. The formation of groupwork as cultural form indicates that student subjectivities are formed in practice through the often social act of evoking, improvising, appropriating and refusing participation in practices that position them. The students own capacities to self-organize heterogeneously in the classroom is indicative of their attempt to secure future possibilities for themselves, as they struggle to affect the implications of different meanings of ongoing practices for their future lives.

References


