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Through the Looking Glass: Assessing and Enhancing the Effectiveness of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice to Understand the Achievement Gap in British Columbia's Inner-City Schools

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Through the Looking Glass: Assessing and Enhancing the Effectiveness of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice to Understand the Achievement Gap in British Columbia's Inner-City Schools

Abstract:

This paper emerges from a 2016 conceptual study borne out of an ongoing practitioner inquiry in which I, as a practicing K-12 inner-city Canadian teacher, tried to understand, on a theoretical level, why the children at my inner-city school in Vancouver consistently underperform in an academic sense despite being provided with additional learning resources. The achievement gap that exists between British Columbia's inner-city children and their more affluent peers cannot be adequately explained by differences in finances alone, but it has sociological roots, which I explored in this study. To understand the achievement gap, I chose to filter it through Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1992) and evaluate the effectiveness of his theory in being able to effectively explain the who, what, where, when, why, and how of this problem for me as an inner-city educator. Methodologically, I utilized the qualitative approach of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2013) to fuse my horizon with that of Bourdieu to develop a deep understanding of his Theory of Practice and its core concepts of cultural capital, habitus, field, and symbolic violence, and their implications for inner-city school children. Hermeneutics permitted me to uncover multiple layers of theoretical evidence that I used ultimately to make an inductive argument that finds in favor of using theory of practice to understand academic underperformance among British Columbia's inner-city school children. This paper is a presentation of the theoretical merits of Theory of Practice as an analytical lens for practitioners who wish to understand the achievement gap. This paper also explains how the efficacy of Theory of Practice can be enhanced when it is coupled with Lareau's (2011) scholarship on class-based parenting practices.

Introduction

This paper emerges from a 2016 conceptual study borne out of practitioner inquiry in which I, as a practicing K-12 inner-city Canadian teacher, worked to theoretically understand why the children at my inner-city school in Vancouver, British Columbia (BC) consistently underperformed in an academic sense despite being provided additional learning resources. There is a general consensus within academic literature of the persistence of an achievement gap

among different socio-economic (SES) status¹ and ethnic groupings of students. The argument goes that children from lower SES backgrounds and visible minorities perform academically much lower than white children from the dominant middle and upper SES groups (Savage, 2011). The predominant perception amongst many of my colleagues is that closing the achievement gap is largely a matter of closing the economic gap between families of lower and higher SES backgrounds (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). This predominant view has simplified and reduced this complex and multi-faceted problem to one of dollars and cents. And to this end, a number of costly initiatives have been implemented in BC with moderate success. For example, per-pupil student funding has increased in British Columbia by 36 percent from 2000-01 to \$8,493 in 2012-13 (BC Ministry of Education, 2013), but this has not resolved the academic underperformance of the children at my inner-city school. The government of British Columbia also injected an additional cash (\$30 million 2012/13; \$60 million, 2013/14; \$75 million 2014/15) into the educational system as a Learning Improvement Fund (LIF), but inner-city schools like mine continue to underperform (British Columbia Teachers Federation, 2015). Early intervention programs targeted at lower SES families in British Columbia such as Strong Start, or Ready-Set-Learn, have not also been able to ameliorate this problem.

The persistence of an achievement gap, in spite of the various costly programs designed to eliminate it, suggests that it may have more than monetary origins and set me off on a theoretical journey to understand why? I sought to uncover an appropriate theoretical framework which I could use to understand its true complexities, rather than the simplistic ones offered by the predominant monetary argument. This journey brought me into contact with the scholarship of French Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu and his Theory of Practice (Bourdieu, 1992). But prior to aligning myself too closely with Theory of Practice, I thought it prudent to assess its efficacy as an analytical framework. I utilized the qualitative methodology of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2013; Ricoeur, 1976) to understand Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and subsequently conducted an analysis of 32 studies that have employed Theory of Practice to understand the achievement gap. The information that was gathered from these two processes was used to establish an inductive argument which produced multiple layers of evidence in favour of Theory of Practice being a credible analytical lens through

¹ Some scholars draw a distinction between SES and social class, but for this study I will view these terms synonymously, as they are usually viewed in the mainstream context of Canadian schools, though in full knowledge that both of these terms can be contested and both are relative, not absolute. I am also aware that social class is not a homogeneous concept and that social classes are comprised of sub-classes.

which practitioners can understand the achievement gap accurately and robustly. This paper will provide a brief description of Theory of Practice, followed by brief description of how hermeneutics was employed and the studies that were examined. The main thrust of the paper will be in detailing the layers of inductive evidence in favour of Theory of Practice and the implications for *praxis*. Moreover, I will also highlight how Theory of Practice can be significantly strengthened when it is combined with the scholarship of sociologist, Annette Lareau (2011) and her descriptions of differences in parenting practices amongst parents of different social classes.

Theory of Practice Explained

The French Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu proposed an answer to the achievement gap through his Theory of Practice (1977, 1984, 1986, 1992, 1993, 2011). Theory of Practice is a social reproduction theory (SRT)² set within an economic framework, which seeks to understand the process of how society is continuously reproduced by different social classes based upon their control of various power structures in a manner that benefits some while marginalizing others. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice applies the economic metaphor of capital to explain how socio-economic disparities among different social classes are due to differences in class-based predispositions or capital, and how institutions like schools value these predispositions differently.

Theory of Practice begins with the premise that individuals' levels of achievement in school or life are a function of their *cultural capital*, defined generally as specific class-based habits or predispositions that act as social currency and confer advantages/disadvantages in different class-based settings. Individuals acquire *cultural capital* primarily from their families, and the form of *cultural capital* that a family transmits to its children is one that conforms to that of their social class. *Cultural capital* has many different forms that accumulate and form a person's *habitus*, which refers to an individual's collective class-based habits. Because different classes have different forms of *habitus*, it is understandable that they will transmit those unique forms of *habitus* to their children, which the children then bring with them into the *field* or context of education.

² SRT emerges out of Conflict Theory, which is a master sociological theory that focuses on macro-level cultural and societal norms (Ballantine & Spade, 2008). Conflict Theory challenges functionalist beliefs that schools are "ideologically and politically neutral and that schools operate based upon meritocracy, with each child able to achieve to the highest level of his or her own ability" (Ballantine & Spade, 2008, p. 12). Conflict Theory argues that an individual's position within the social and economic system is not based on merit, but rather on his/her place within that system.

Theory of Practice argues that, although each different social class may have a different *habitus*, not all forms of capital and *habitus* are equally valued by the educational *field*, and some forms have greater value than others. Therefore, the degree to which individuals or groups are successful in school depends upon whether or not they have the specific form of *cultural capital* that is desired in the education *field*. Theory of Practice claims that, if individuals or groups do not possess the desired form of capital demanded by schools, they are marginalized, and this marginalization is a form of *symbolic violence*, which manifests itself as discrimination and lower achievement.

Methodology

The methodology of this study progressed in three phases that began with hermeneutic inquiry, followed by an analysis of 32 empirical studies that employed Theory of Practice, and concluded with layers of inductive evidence to evaluate its efficacy as a heuristic. During the first phase, I utilized the qualitative methodology of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2013; Ricoeur, 1976) to understand Theory of Practice. Contemporary hermeneutics is defined as “interpretation with the category of understanding,” where understanding is defined as “the recognition of the author’s intention from the point of view of the primitive addressees in the original situation of discourse” (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 22). Hermeneutic inquiry is conducted via its four key concepts which include historicity, horizon, and hermeneutic circle. (Gadamer, 2013). Historicity refers to a “historically effected consciousness,” which means that the consciousness of individuals is shaped by their history (Freeman, 2008, p. 387). Hermeneutics regards texts and interpreters as being contextually located within particular spatial and temporal spheres; therefore, any interaction between the two is also an interaction between their respective histories. Inherent within the concept of historicity is the idea of prejudice, which is the second of the key hermeneutic concepts, and which is regarded as a significant threat to reliability and validity within the traditional positivist research. Hermeneutics takes a different approach to the debate between subjectivity and objectivity by openly asserting that prejudices are an inescapable part of what it means to be human, and that “we do not hold our prejudices in abeyance but we situate them in our understandings,” causing them to “move with us and stand in front of and between us and the world, filtering our perceptions and interpretations” (Moules, 2002, p. 25). The third key hermeneutic concept is known as horizon, defined as a “range of vision which can be seen from a particular viewpoint” (Gadamer, 2013, p. 313). Horizon is essentially an interpreter’s world view at a particular point in time that has come to be as result of historicity and prejudices up to that given point in time. However, just as the individual has his/her own horizon, so does the text that he/she is trying to understand, and “working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry” (Gadamer, 2013, p. 313). Understanding, or appropriation of the text’s intent, is reached by the interpreter when his or her

horizon is fused with that of the text to arrive at a new understanding, thereby rendering the fusing of horizons into the “culmination of the act of understanding between the interpreter and the interpreted” (Butler, 1998, p. 289). The final hermeneutic concept is known as the hermeneutic circle, and this represents the overall spatial metaphor for the process of interaction that occurs between the text and the interpreter. Both the text and the interpreter enter into the circle with their individual horizons, and a process of interaction occurs between them. This process of interaction is dialectical and continues in a cyclical manner until the interpreter appropriates the meaning of the text (Schwandt, 2007).

Before I employed hermeneutics to understand Bourdieu’s work, I inquired into the appropriateness of this qualitative strategy. Hermeneutics was an effective tool to conduct inquiry into Theory of Practice because of the respective parallels that exist between key hermeneutic concepts of historicity and horizon, and key Bourdieuan concepts of *field* and *habitus*. Bourdieu’s concept of *field*, or context, is critical to Theory of Practice and modulates all of the related concepts and, similarly, hermeneutics is strongly shaped by the importance it places on context, via its concept of historicity. The concept of *field* is the concept that breathes life into Theory of Practice and from which Bourdieu’s other key concepts of *habitus*, *cultural capital*, and *symbolic violence* emerge and gain a value. It was pleasantly surprising to me that hermeneutics, like Theory of Practice, is animated by context, and this occurs through the hermeneutic concept of historicity, which contends that an individual’s history shapes one’s outlook or horizon. Hermeneutics is interested in the ways that specific spatial and temporal spheres (contexts) influence how an interpreter can come to understand a text differently, and how that understanding changes over time as the context changes. Similarly, there are parallels between the hermeneutic concept of horizon and the Bourdieuan concept of *habitus*. Both horizon and *habitus* refer to an individual’s outlook, and again I find it surprising that hermeneutics and Theory of Practice both give prominence to concepts so similar in nature. In hermeneutics, the horizon influences how the interpreter views and understands the text and, in Theory of Practice, *habitus* has the same impact with respect to an individual’s overall practice. Hence, just as Theory of Practice places a significant importance on context (*field*) and *habitus*, so does hermeneutics. This makes hermeneutic inquiry a compatible and effective methodological tool, which I used to understand and evaluate various interpretations of Bourdieu’s theory of practice.

After understanding Theory of Practice from the inside, I chose to examine how it has been employed in empirical research. I chose to examine a

cross-section (32) studies³ that employed Theory of Practice. The studies that I examined were: (a) peer reviewed and involved qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methodologies; (b) employed Theory of practice in Canadian, American, European, and Asian countries; (c) conducted at the national, provincial, school district, schools, or the individual student level; (d) frequently cited by other researchers; and (e) several were outliers.

These 32 studies were filtered through inductive logic to assess the suitability of Theory of Practice as being an effective lens to understand the achievement gap. Induction is a bottom-up approach to logic, which begins with the presentation of the individual components of a topic, progresses to uncovering patterns and regularities among them, and concludes with a hypothesis (Copi, Cohen, & McMahon, 2011.) It is these layers of inductive evidence that I will present next.

Strengths of Theory of Practice

For me, the journey of assessing the usefulness of Bourdieu's theory of practice has required the coupling of hermeneutic inquiry with inductive logic. Hermeneutics has allowed me to fuse my horizon with that of Bourdieu, in order to approach the elements of his theory as he envisaged them. As I was engaged in hermeneutics, I also employed inductive logic, which indicated to me that Theory of Practice was an effective lens through which practitioners can view the achievement gap. Inductive logic allowed layers of evidence to emerge, converge, and reveal themselves as understandings, and it is these layers that I will describe next.

Layer 1-Bridging Economic Determinism and Human Agency

A major strength of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice balances both economic determinism and individual autonomy, which is not characteristic of traditional social reproduction theories (MacLeod, 2009; Collins, 2009; Winkle-Wagner 2010; Lareau, 2001; Collins, 2009; MacLeod, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2010) like those of Bowles and Gintis (1976). Traditional SRT theories have

³ Studies examined were: (Aschaffenburg & Mass, 1997; Baicai & Jingjian, 2011; Bergerson, 2007; Byun, Shofer & Kim, 2012; Christ & Wang, 2008; DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Dumais, 2002; Dumais, 2005; Dumais, 2006a; Dumais, 2006b; Farkas et al., 1990; Flere et al., 2010; Grayson, 2011; Griffin, K., del Pilar, McIntosh, & Griffin, A., 2012; Ingram, 2009; Jaeger, 2009; Jaeger, 2011; Kostenko & Merrotsy, 2009; Lareau, 1987; Lareau, 2011; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Weininger, 2009; Lehmann, 2007; Lehmann, 2013; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010; Roscigno & Ainsworth 1999; Skourdombis, 2010; Tramonte & Willms, 2010; Vryonides, 2007; Wildhagen, 2009; Xu & Hampden-Thompson, 2012).

established a dichotomy by creating either/or models that regard structure and agency as mutually exclusive. However, structure and agency are inseparable, and individuals are “always structurally situated, and . . . human agency is socially constructed,” such that “structure is at the heart of agency but also that agency can reach to the heart of structure”; therefore, they must be considered simultaneously in order to appreciate how social reproduction operates within a given *field* (MacLeod, 2009, pp. 257-256).

What would be helpful are “heterarchical structures” that “presume neither bottom-up construction of the social world by aggregate individual action nor top-down determination by large scale entities” (Collins, 2009, p. 43). Heterarchical structures blend both approaches (Collins, 2009), and this is one reason why Theory of Practice provides an effective lens through which to view the achievement gap. The centrality of Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice, in terms of its not being an either/or approach, enables practitioners to capitalize on the strengths of both sides of this spectrum of economic determinism and human agency. Theory of Practice recognizes that there are socio-economic constraints that function like straightjackets, but such constraints can be lessened through human action. Theory of Practice works to “highlight the interaction of agency and structure, or the way that one may be able to use agency to influence social structures in some instances while being affected, even unconsciously, by the social structure in other instances” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 4). By considering both sides of the continuum together, Theory of Practice enables me to realize the socio-economic rigidities of problems that face lower SES students but, at the same time, offers flexibility and a sense of hope in navigating those rigidities.

Achieving a balance between structure and agency is necessary for the practitioner. On the one hand, “structuralist theories are of value because they can quite clearly show why the end result turns out to be much the same, but in doing so they obliterate human agency by ignoring the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint” (MacLeod, 2009, p. 150). On the other hand, agency enables us to “contextualize attitudes and behaviours” and examine how individuals respond to them, but fails to adequately acknowledge the shadow of rigid “structural forms of class domination from which there is no escape” (MacLeod, 2009, p. 150, 152). By striking a balance between structure and agency, Theory of Practice adds a very necessary voice of pragmatism to my *praxis* as a practitioner. This balance allows practitioners like me bridge and temper my ideals about how schooling ought to function and still be hopeful that I can initiate meaningful change and make a difference, and not become jaded or burned-out by accepting a *fait accompli*. The agency afforded to me as a practitioner within Theory of Practice allows me to utilize the strengths of the *habitus* that my inner-city students bring with them to the

classroom but to balance these strengths against the structural constraints of the school system in a way that achieves a sensible and pragmatic middle ground.

Layer- 2 More than a Deficit Model

Another strength of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice as a conceptual and analytical lens stems from its strength as a bridge between structure and agency. Theory of Practice has the advantage of not being a "deficit model." Deficit models of education explain inequalities in educational achievement and attainment by placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of the individual (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Harry et al., 2007; Knapp, 2001). Deficit models argue that the reason particular individuals do not perform well in school is because they are deficient in the knowledge, skills, and motivation that are required by schools and these deficits will carry forward unless they are addressed. Deficit models do not acknowledge the role that institutional structures play in reproduction, but link the failure of children from lower SES groups exclusively to their inferior genetics or to the reproductive power of a perpetual culture of poverty (Bomer et al., 2008). From this perspective of deficiency, the only solution for resolving educational inequalities is for students who lack mastery of the mainstream educational requirements to fill up their half empty cups by assimilation. However, by asking lower SES children to assimilate the mainstream culture, deficit models reproduce the very stratification that they are trying to eliminate.

In contrast to the deficit line of argument, Theory of Practice takes a progressive and more hopeful approach in highlighting the positive elements of the *habitus* of individuals from lower SES backgrounds. Theory of practice takes the position that individuals from all SES backgrounds have *cultural capital*, albeit in different forms. For me as a middle SES practitioner, this means that rather than regarding the *habitus* of my lower SES students as an impediment, I am coming to view it as an asset that produces an alternative way of making sense of the world, which is neither worse nor better than my own middle SES *habitus*. As result of Theory of Practice, I am coming to understand, embrace, and utilize the distinctive *habitus* of my inner-city students in my daily practice, and to use it as an inroad into their distinctive *field*. As a teacher of inner-city students, I am now seeking new and creative ways to turn their learning into a process that taps into and utilizes the strengths of their *habitus*.

Layer 3-Utilizing all Operational Mechanisms of Social Reproduction

The ability of Bourdieu's theory to encompass the three key mechanisms⁴ by which social reproduction operates is a credit to its strength in explaining the complex and multi-layered sociological means by which socio-economic inequalities arise and are maintained. Theory of practice is not only a blending of economic determinism and human agency, but also a blending of the three mechanisms by which SRT's are seen to function. Theory of practice takes a broad view when examining inequality, which enables and empowers me as a practitioner to capture the many different sociological angles and complexities of social (re)production that other SRT theories and the predominant monetary argument miss. In order to understand social reproduction in its entirety, we need a comprehensive definition and research tools that enable us to capture the micro and macro processes of social reproduction, which is what Bourdieu's theory provides (Conley, 2008; Wright, 2008). Theory of Practice helps me to unearth the dynamics of the complex networks of relationships within and across different social classes, and their relationships to the economic, political, and social structures that provide them with different levels of access to resources. Theory of Practice permits me to understand the complex narrative of social reproduction in education, and do so in a manner that fully encompasses all of the actors and events, as well as the conditions under which they interact to produce educational success for some and failure for others.

Layer 4-The Usefulness of the Economic Metaphor

Bourdieu was able to expand the economic concept of capital to include many intangible aspects such as norms, values, and beliefs, rather than simply the tangible aspects that are easiest to measure (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Theory of Practice enables researchers to view the intangible aspects of human conduct that also have strong influences on social reproduction and to regard them as concrete and measurable. Bourdieu helped to make aspects that were previously thought to be significant but invisible (and therefore unquantifiable) into items that were visible, quantifiable, and appealing to quantitative researchers.

By using an economic metaphor, Bourdieu demonstrated recognition of the capitalist system that dominates Western societies. Consequently, "personal biographies are inextricably linked with the changing structure of the economy"

⁴ Wright (2008) describes three mechanisms by which SRT theories operate and which contribute to their relative strengths or weaknesses as explanations of inequality. These are: (a) individual attributes and life conditions, (b) opportunity hoarding and social closure, and (c) domination and exploitation.

and, therefore, we cannot examine inequalities without exploring their relationships to the economy within which the inequalities are set (MacLeod, 2009, p. 161). The concept of capital recognizes the commercial underpinnings of Western societies and enables practitioners to examine socio-economic inequalities against their influential “for-profit” economic backdrop, which underscores daily life for the majority of Canadians. The influence of consumerism on Canadian society cannot be ignored in any meaningful discussion regarding the socio-economic inequalities that Canadians face, because it is within the realm of consumerism that those inequalities arise and manifest themselves.

As a practitioner who has worked in both inner-city and non-inner-city schools, I can state from experience that children from low SES backgrounds are much more sensitive to financial matters, particularly with respect to the scarcity of money and the power money confers. Therefore, an economic metaphor provides me as a practitioner access into their *field* and *habitus*. Bourdieu’s metaphor of capital enables me to understand the distinct *habitus* and *field* of lower SES inner-city children, which is heavily rooted in and regulated by financial scarcities and financial crises. Generally, children from higher SES backgrounds do not take financial scarcity seriously because it is not a recurring problem and, therefore, it does not play a prominent role in their *field or habitus*. But, since inner city children, like those at my school, are doing without on a daily basis, acute financial awareness is an intrinsic and inescapable part of their *field* and *habitus*. The economic metaphor offers a deeper view into the realities of their *field* and the grip scarcity has on their *habitus*.

Layer 5- Illuminating the Role of Institutions

A particular merit of Theory of Practice is that it shines a light on institutions and the mechanisms that produce socio-economic inequality (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). As Mills (1959, cited in Lareau, 2011) articulately expressed it, “the life of an individual cannot be adequately understood without references to the institutions within which his biography is enacted” (p. 14). Bourdieu recognized the prevalence and the power of the institution to shape daily lives differently for different people, so that some live in abundance while others live in subsistence. This means that institutions such as schools can have a strong impact because they do not treat individuals from different SES groups in a uniform way but privilege higher SES groups, often at the expense of the lower SES groups (Lareau, 2011). Furthermore, institutions such as schools, which were envisioned to reduce socio-economic inequalities, have had the ironic effect of actually reproducing and sustaining them (Willis, 1977). In other words, “progressivism has had the contradictory and unintended effect of helping to strengthen processes within the counter-school culture which are responsible for the particular subjective preparation of labour power and

acceptance of working-class future in a way which is the very opposite of the progressive intentions of education” (Willis, 1977, p. 178). In this sense, the merit of utilizing Theory of Practice is that it seeks to reveal how stratification is produced and maintained by institutions, particularly those like schools that function under the cloak of meritocracy (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

Theory of Practice has enabled me, as a reflective practitioner, to examine the institution of my school critically and discern the hidden internal mechanisms by which it operates differently for students from different SES groups. I am no longer under the illusion that school is a meritocracy, which is based entirely upon objective principles of fairness. The institution of school is shaped by teachers like me, who give it life, and it follows reasonably that, if most of these teachers come from a particular *habitus*⁵—the middle SES *habitus*, for instance—then that *habitus* will (un)consciously permeate the culture of the institution. Theory of Practice has urged me to re-examine myself and my school and understand how middle SES teachers, not unlike myself, shape the entity of the school and the ways in which the school views and treats students from different SES backgrounds. Theory of Practice helps me to understand how my middle SES *habitus* and that of my predominantly middle SES colleagues gets woven into the fabric of my school in very discrete and deliberate ways, without anyone, including the teachers, recognizing it. I am beginning to look at the structures within my school and to perceive how they have come to exist and their differing consequences for students from lower SES backgrounds. And I am coming to understand that because the institution of school mirrors those individuals who are charged with operating it, any meaningful change at the institutional level will require those who operate the school to become sensitive to such perceptions and their consequences. For example, aspects of schooling that are generally taken for granted, such as the curriculum content, the pedagogical practices, and the school’s expectations of students and parents regarding (in)appropriate attitudes, behaviours, style of dress, and form of speech, are all rooted in a middle SES background⁶. It is no coincidence that there are strong parallels between the middle SES *habitus* of teachers and the expectations of the school, because the institution of the school reflects its middle SES gatekeepers. The school is a mirror image of its predominantly middle SES teachers, and vice versa.

Layer 6- Illuminating Differences between Lower and Higher SES Habitus

⁵ Research demonstrates most teachers come from a middle SES background and tend to (un)consciously favour students who hold similar middle-class values, while limiting those who do not (Dumais, 2006; Hall, 2001; Knapp, 2001; MacLeod, 2009).

⁶ Social classes are not necessarily homogeneous groups and may be further divided into subgroups.

In my opinion, the most significant strength and weakness of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice is that it illuminates the differences in *habitus* between lower SES students and higher SES students and exposes the consequences of those differences. Bourdieu addresses the differences in *habitus* among lower and higher SES classes in his book titled *Distinction* (1977), but deals only with differences that relate to tastes in food, art, and clothing. Understanding students' *habitus* is critical for practitioners, but this area that was not thoroughly developed by Bourdieu, and where the scholarship of Annette Lareau (2011) can fill this gap. In her seminal work, *Unequal Childhoods*, Lareau (2011) reveals the differences in *habitus* between lower and middle SES families in a detailed way, such that coupling her work with that of Bourdieu strengthens the efficacy of Theory of Practice. Understanding the *habitus* of lower SES students and the *habitus* of the dominant middle SES groups has been very helpful to my *praxis* as an inner-city teacher. By understanding the distinct mindset of the children and their parents, as well as how it differs from my own, has helped me realize the wide chasm that separates them from me as a middle SES teacher, with respect to how differently we view, understand, and respond to the world, and the consequences of these different responses. Uncovering and understanding the differences in *habitus* have been instrumental in shifting my practice when dealing with the students in my classroom. The work of both Bourdieu and Lareau (2011) on *habitus* has come as a revelation that has allowed me to understand the question, which gave birth to this conceptual study, The work of Bourdieu and Lareau's (2011) provides me, as a teacher, with a clear and deep perception of the inner workings of lower SES families regarding the way they make sense of the world, which is very different from middle SES families like mine, whose interests tend to dominate public education.

Lareau (2011) examined the childrearing practices of middle class, working class, and lower SES families (similar to those at my school) and exposed their various forms of *habitus* and *cultural capital*, which can confer institutional advantages or disadvantages. Lareau (2011) argued that "some students are born on third base but believe they hit a triple," and that "*cultural capital* helps to explain why some kids are seemingly destined to hit a triple while others cannot seem to get to first base, despite their efforts to swing the bat" (p. 65). It has been helpful to me, as a practitioner and as a parent, to get an appropriate and effective handle on the childrearing practices of different SES groups.

Lareau (2011) found that Middle SES families practice the childrearing strategies that she described as "concerted cultivation" (p. 2). This pattern of concerted cultivation has distinct *cultural capital* traits that emanate from a middle-SES *habitus* which is also tacitly asked for by schools. As I came to understand concerted cultivation, I could not help but find humour and irony

when I examined my own parenting practices and the ‘schedule’ of my young son who is ‘registered’ in a number of different sports, preschool, and social activities in order to ‘make’ him into a well-rounded child. It was strange to be confronted with the reality that I too practice concerted cultivation, whereby I deliberately try to mould my own son into the type of person whom I believe typifies success, and then to realize that this is linked to a distinctively middle SES *habitus*.

In order to pursue the development of their children, the life of middle SES families, such as my own, revolves around and becomes consumed by the frequent and numerous extracurricular activities of their children, and this becomes a defining feature of their *habitus*. For example, my boy, who is only 3 years old, attends Strong Start School on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings. He attends Stay and Play Sports on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Every Friday morning, he goes to gymnastics, and this is followed by skating every Saturday morning. On Monday evenings he attends soccer, and on Tuesday and Thursday evenings he has skating lessons. Our lives are planned around his activities, but as a parent I feel compelled to enrol him in multiple activities, in order to give him the best possible chances in life, and I would feel a deep sense of guilt if I did not do so.

In contrast to the middle SES *habitus* of concerted cultivation, Lareau (2011) describes the *habitus* of working and poor SES families as the “accomplishment of natural growth” (p. 3). The daily struggle to cover the essentials of life overshadows and regulates the childrearing practices of lower SES parents. Poverty tends to compound the childrearing tasks for many lower SES families, depriving them of the luxury of engaging in concerted cultivation of their children.

Natural growth means that parents see a clear boundary between themselves and their children, unlike concerted cultivation, which fuses both worlds. In the *habitus* of the lower SES families, it is seen as the job of the parents to provide the fundamental necessities and the children are given more freedom with respect to meeting their own self-actualization needs, which are not a priority for their struggling parents. In order to manage and facilitate their own natural growth, the children of lower SES families develop the unique, class specific cultural *capital* traits which reflect those exhibited by the children at my school. The distinct *cultural capital* traits of lower SES children not only frame a childhood that is markedly different from that of middle SES children, but also constrain the performance of these children in institutional settings.

Lareau (2011) found that having the concerted cultivation *habitus* and associated *cultural capital* traits gave middle SES parents and children an advantage in institutional settings such as schools. She found that “schools selectively validated certain cultural practices as legitimate,” and these practices

were in line with middle SES ideals (Lareau, 2011, p. 230). To clarify these tacit demands made by schools Lareau (2011) coined the term “cultural repertoire” (p. 4): The cultural repertoire that schools advocate arises from concerted cultivation, and schools tend to reward those parents and children who engage in it. Furthermore, in Lareau’s (2011) study, teachers were shown to espouse the belief that concerted cultivation was the optimal way to raise children. In fact, Lareau (2011) noted that teachers actively promoted concerted cultivation among their own children, as evidenced by my own style of parenting. And when teachers were unable to discern the signs of concerted cultivation, they viewed it “as a sign that parents do not value schooling” (Lareau, 2011, p. 26).

Layer 7-Illuminating the Role of the Professional

Another strength of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, which was also supported by the findings of Lareau (2011), concerns the influence that professionals wield on the *field* of education regarding both what is expected from parents and students and who succeeds and who does not. The professional’s opinion is seen as an absolute or scientific fact. Giroux (1981) describes the power that professionals wield in influencing others by referring to them as “the cult of ‘experts’ and ‘professionals’ who become avatars trained to guard as well as transmit sacred knowledge” (p. 155). Therefore, when “professionals who work with children, such as teachers, doctors, and counsellors, generally agree about how children should be raised,” their beliefs go a long way toward legitimizing the *cultural capital* of the middle SES while undermining that of the lower SES (Lareau, 2011, p. 4). “Professionals have issued standards for what constitutes incorrect child rearing and teachers and administrators have adopted these standards” and “encoded them in schools” (Lareau, 2011, p. 232). The *habitus* that predominantly middle SES teachers expect from their parents and students is one that matches their own. And theory of practice reasons that students who have the middle SES *habitus* that matches the *habitus* of most teachers will do better in school than students who do not.

On the flip side, Lareau (2011) demonstrated how schools penalized and sometimes even shunned natural growth child rearing strategies. Children and parents from lower SES families in Lareau’s (2011) study generally felt ill informed, fearful, mistrustful, and frustrated towards the school, as they repeatedly felt compelled to defer to the superiority of the professionals in whom they placed blind faith. Consequently, the children of these lower SES parents did not attain the same level of achievement at school, and this continued throughout most of the participants’ adult lives. Lareau (2011) concluded that social class matters. The SES level that an individual is born into has important implications for the successes and failures that the individual will experience when dealing with a range of institutions that predominantly value the middle SES ways of being and doing.

The insights of Bourdieu and Lareau (2011) regarding the power of professionals and the ramifications of their decisions have been very transformative to my practice as a teacher. I have become much more aware of how my decisions are based in middle SES assumptions, and the differing consequences that my decisions can have on students from an SES that is similar to or different from my own. Theory of Practice has made me aware of the weight carried by my decisions as a teacher, and the impacts that they can have on the current and future schooling and life trajectories of my students. And, therefore, my next step in this evolution is to seek remedies for these issues. Furthermore, the fact that the acts and decisions of teachers are consecrated by the institution of the judiciary (Bourdieu, 1977) has made me far more aware of the seriousness with which I must discharge my duties as a teacher and the need to be extremely careful and reflective when I make my decisions.

Closing

For inner-city practitioners like myself, understanding the achievement is crucial to any efforts made to ameliorate it. In the context of BC, the predominant argument that is advanced to understand and address the achievement gap is monetary in nature. This simplistic argument contends that differences in achievement amongst inner-city children and their more affluent peers are largely due to differences in parental income and school resources. However, evidence from BC demonstrates that even when more financial resources are pumped into inner-city schools the achievement gap still persists. This apparent contradiction suggests to me, as a practitioner, that perhaps this problem was being viewed through the wrong analytical lens and set me off on a journey to find one that could capture this problem correctly and offer solutions. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice is one such lens that correctly and comprehensively captures the achievement gap, and its efficacy is strengthened when combined with the scholarship of Lareau (2011). By using hermeneutics to appropriate Theory of Practice and then examining how it is employed in empirical research, this paper has been able to induce layers of evidence for inner-city practitioners as to why they may want to use Theory of Practice to understand this issue and the implications for *praxis*. The next step in my journey is to present practitioners who wish to use Theory of Practice with recommendations on how to use it effectively, which I will do in a successive paper.

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