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Review

Epistemological Obstacles to Social Studies Education

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Abstract: This article explores the role of discursive practices and epistemological obstacles in shaping educational knowledge and power dynamics within schools. Drawing on critical pedagogy and the works of McLaren, Foucault, Gramsci, and Bachelard, it examines how schools act as sites where hegemonic Discourses are either reproduced or resisted. Discourses, understood as integrated social practices encompassing language, actions, beliefs, and values, deeply influence how students form their social representations of the world. The article highlights the need for educators to challenge traditional curricular theories that prioritize technical knowledge, often presented as neutral, while masking underlying power relations. Through the analysis of Bachelard's epistemological obstacles, such as simplification, generalization, and depersonalization, the article discusses how these barriers impede students' ability to critically engage with complex social phenomena. Multiperspectivity is proposed as a key educational approach to foster critical thinking and empower students to challenge social injustices. The discussion calls for systemic educational reforms, emphasizing the importance of teacher training that encourages the identification and questioning of dominant ideologies. By adopting a critical, social justice-oriented pedagogy, educators can help students not only understand but also transform their social realities, promoting an equitable and democratic educational environment.

Keywords: critical pedagogy; discursive practices; hegemonic discourse

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1. Introduction

Discursive practices within educational contexts have a profound influence on what is expressed, who holds the authority to speak, and what must be silenced. These practices are not limited to language alone but permeate all aspects of the institutional structures that govern schools, shaping not only interactions but also the broader mechanisms of knowledge transmission. As Foucault [1] has articulated, power relations are embedded in Discourses (with a capital 'D'), as described by Gee [2]. These Discourses are not merely language-based but encompass a wide array of social practices—speech, actions, values, beliefs, and symbols—that contribute to the formation of social and cultural identities. They dictate how people interact and how they are recognized or categorized within communities.

McLaren's perspective on education and discursive practices draws attention to the ways in which these power dynamics operate in the classroom. His work, Life in Schools, reflects on his experiences as a teacher in the economically disadvantaged and culturally diverse Jane-Finch Corridor of Toronto [3]. There, McLaren witnessed the social struggles of his students, particularly around issues of racism and violence, which profoundly shaped his understanding of education and the role of schools in perpetuating or resisting societal inequalities [1]. His reflections go beyond merely recounting his experiences; they delve into complex conceptual analyses of discourse, power, and hegemony, topics that remain central to his later editions of Life in Schools [4].

One of the most significant aspects of McLaren's approach is his focus on discourse. While narratives often refer to specific storytelling structures, discourse encompasses much broader ideological and contextual dimensions. It is through the lens of discourse that

we can understand how students' social representations of the world are shaped by the power structures that govern educational institutions. McLaren, drawing on Foucault [1], highlights that Discourses regulate not only what is said but also who is permitted to speak and whose voices are marginalized. These practices are evident in the rules that govern educational institutions, shaping both curriculum and pedagogy, and influencing how knowledge is disseminated and received [5].

Schools, as institutions, are sites where these Discourses are constantly reproduced or contested. Conservative Discourses often emphasize the works of "great men", focusing on the achievements of historically dominant figures. Liberal Discourses, by contrast, seek to broaden this scope by incorporating perspectives from women and minority groups. However, it is the critical Discourse, as McLaren emphasizes, that interrogates the forces at play in the production of knowledge. It challenges hegemonic Discourses, which are often seen as "regimes of truth"—constructs that define what is considered valid, important, and relevant knowledge in society [3,6]. Critical pedagogy, therefore, does not just aim to expand the curriculum but to fundamentally question whose knowledge is valued and why.

Foucault's analysis of power and truth is crucial in this discussion. He argues that truth cannot exist outside of power relations; every form of truth is shaped by the dynamics of power that govern society. Educational truth, for example, is not an absolute entity but is deeply relational, contingent upon historical, cultural, and institutional contexts [1]. This insight challenges the idea that schools merely impart neutral knowledge; instead, they are active participants in the construction of social realities, with teachers and students both engaging in and being shaped by these Discourses. Educational praxis, according to McLaren [4], should be guided by phronesis—the practical wisdom to act truthfully and justly in the face of these power relations. However, truth in education must be earned through critical engagement with these dynamics, rather than accepted as given.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony further elucidates how power operates in educational settings. He suggests that the ruling class maintains its dominance not through overt coercion but through the consent of the oppressed, who unknowingly participate in their own subjugation [7,8]. In the context of schools, this hegemony manifests when students are not encouraged to critically engage with the dominant values and norms of society. If educators fail to foster this critical engagement, schools risk becoming spaces where unequal power relations are reinforced, rather than challenged. The dominant class secures its hegemony by embedding its values, symbols, and representations within the cultural fabric, making these inequalities appear natural and inevitable [9]. This process, described by McLaren [4,8], results in a form of cultural imprisonment, where both the oppressors and the oppressed accept these conditions as common sense.

Understanding how Discourses operate in educational institutions leads to important questions about the nature of knowledge and empowerment in schools. What types of knowledge should be prioritized? How can education empower students not only to understand the world but to challenge and change it? McLaren [4] suggests that true empowerment in education involves equipping students with the critical tools necessary to question and resist the Discourses that perpetuate inequality. Empowerment, in this sense, goes beyond cognitive understanding; it is about cultivating the courage and capacity to challenge and transform the social order when necessary.

2. Epistemological Obstacles

Traditional curricular theories prioritize technical and organizational aspects, emphasizing scientific knowledge as neutral and objective, and aim for efficiency in education by focusing on objectives, planning, methodology, teaching, learning, and evaluation. From this perspective, knowledge is seen as something external to the subject, devoid of connections with experience and contextual dynamics [10]. However, as we have previously argued, the nature of knowledge and the curriculum is contingent and constructed through Discourse, challenging the notion of universal and stable truths. It is worth emphasizing

the fluidity and context-dependence of knowledge, as meanings are constantly changing and shaped by social interactions and power dynamics.

An example of the relational and contextual logic of knowledge is epistemological obstacles. Bachelard [11] used this concept almost a century ago to analyze the opportunities and challenges of learning natural sciences, and the origins of people's knowledge about the natural world. We recover this concept for learning social sciences and hegemonic Discourses, as a tool to understand how they operate and shape social knowledge. When Bachelard [11] (p. 16) writes that "it is not about considering external obstacles, [...] it is in the very act of knowing, intimately, where delays and problems appear, by a sort of functional necessity", he refers to all those arguments that are articulated in Discourses, and that hinder a scientific and critical understanding of the world. We discuss below seven epistemological obstacles that we consider relevant to understanding the construction of hegemonic Discourses:

1. The obstacle of first experience: In the formation of a scientific spirit, the first obstacle is initial experience, which is situated before and above criticism. In the social world, the first experience is that of the family, which sometimes proposes simple, simplistic, and/or biased arguments to the questions of their children. We know that what is learned within the family has a determining weight in shaping students' social representations [12], providing them with knowledge linked to their identity and difficult to question. The first experience can also originate from contact with cultural products, the media, and sometimes, school knowledge.
2. The obstacle of general knowledge (or generalized): Knowing the general phenomenon and using it to understand everything is dangerous, as it is possible to fall into hasty and easy generalizations. This second epistemological obstacle emphasizes inadequate generalization, commonly present in simplistic interpretations of the social world, whether due to the simplicity of discourse or the intention to convince people dishonestly. Teachers identify this element as part of the construction of hate discourses and a resource increasingly present in traditional and digital media, as well as in informal conversations [13].
3. The verbal obstacle: Creation of false or ambiguous explanations using words that appear clarifying. This error occurs when we try to develop thinking by analyzing a concept in isolation instead of integrating it into a broader idea. In social sciences, floating signifiers, as noted by Laclau [14], can be any term whose meaning changes according to the context. For example, terms like freedom or justice can have a positive connotation in their abstract description, but they can also refer to economic deregulation or the punishment of ethnic minorities.
4. The substantialist obstacle: Refers to the tendency of people to think in terms of immutable substances, focusing on static and essential entities instead of dynamic processes and relationships. This way of thinking hinders the understanding of phenomena that are intrinsically changing and interdependent. By considering substances from a broad perspective, we can draw a parallel with social elements such as power, economic, or cultural structures, understanding them as immutable or petrified, when they are in constant interrelation, construction, and deconstruction.
5. The realist obstacle: Substitution of abstract thinking with concrete ideas, images, analogies, or metaphors that hinder access to this abstraction. This is common in populist discourses [15] when they include simplistic analyses of reality. For example, when comparing the economy to machinery that can be fixed by replacing some parts. Or when a series of public policies are described as a "cure" or a "vaccine" for the state.
6. The animist obstacle: The attribution of human qualities to objects or elements that are not, to simply explain their development. "Quasi-characters" are a clear example of this obstacle [16]. These are abstract entities like the State, the Market, Society, or Culture, to which human characteristics are attributed or personified to facilitate the understanding of complex processes. With such discourses, we run the risk of excessively simplifying and distorting reality, as these entities are the result of

multiple individual and collective actions and decisions, and not actors with their own will.

7. The quantitative obstacle: The use of numbers without real meaning, merely for curiosity observations. This obstacle, in addition to hindering a scientific and critical understanding of the social world, also dehumanizes it [17]. Using figures about people killed or displaced in a war, for example, can depersonalize the tragedy and reduce it to mere statistical data. Another example is quoting poverty percentages without contextualizing the living conditions of the affected people, which can hide the severity of the situation. This approach reduces human complexity to simple figures, losing sight of the human and social dimension of the phenomena studied.

Hegemonic Discourses often incorporate epistemological obstacles as a means to reinforce their dominance by oversimplifying complex realities or employing vague terms that can be interpreted differently depending on the context. These challenges are further compounded by curricular standards, which predetermine significant aspects of pedagogy and content, limiting opportunities for critical inquiry. To effectively address these epistemological obstacles, it is essential to critically reflect on how such standards restrict both educators and students from engaging with alternative perspectives and critical discourses. These constraints pose significant challenges for teachers, as they inhibit the development of students' capacity to critically analyze and deeply understand social phenomena, ultimately limiting their ability to question and transform established power structures.

To overcome these obstacles, it is crucial to promote an education that encourages critical and reflective thinking, urging students to question simplistic interpretations and consider the contexts and power dynamics at play. Additionally, it is fundamental for teachers to be aware of these obstacles and actively work to avoid them in their teaching, providing students with the necessary tools to analyze and understand the complexity of the social world. One opportunity to do this is by "interrogating multiple perspectives" through the analysis and questioning of texts and situations from different viewpoints to better understand the various influences and meanings they contain [18]. This proposal suggests a critical reading, where students do not simply accept the information presented but also consider the possible intentions of the author, the voices that have been silenced, and the social and political implications of the content. By doing so, it seeks to foster a deeper and more complex understanding of society, developing their ability to recognize and challenge inequalities and biases in texts and in society.

3. Multiperspective

The concept of critical thinking is central to education, and the most widely accepted approach is the classical one, which emphasizes the development of thinking skills. This definition focuses on critical thinking as the ability to identify biased reasoning, inadequate generalizations, unsupported claims, and incorrect information. In this line, critical thinking, according to Ennis [19] and Lipman [20], is a reflective process oriented towards making decisions based on information. Lipman emphasizes self-correction, judgment, confidence in one's criteria, and contextual sensitivity. Paul [21] and McPeck [22] suggest methods to foster it and highlight the importance of specific teacher training. Although the classical approach recognizes the relevance of attitudes in critical thinking, it prioritizes the development of cognitive skills.

Giroux [23] argues that this approach presents a problem of internal coherence. According to this author, the problem with this perspective is not what it offers, but what it excludes: knowledge cannot be transmitted independently of human interests, norms, and values. The way information is selected, ordered, and sequenced to construct an image of social and historical reality is more than a cognitive operation; it is a process linked to individual and collective beliefs and values. Gee [24] also argues that the classical approach to critical thinking training has so far yielded limited results, as critical thinking is something people do in the world and in society, not just in their own thoughts, and therefore, it must be taught and studied as a situated practice.

In contrast to classical critical thinking, social justice-oriented critical thinking arises from critical theory and critical pedagogy and is based on the works of Freire [25], Giroux [23], Apple [26], among many others. It relates to Westheimer and Khane's [27] proposal on citizenship and emphasizes civic action. The relationship between critical thinking and citizenship is especially relevant for social sciences. These authors argue that students need opportunities to analyze and understand the interaction of social, economic, and political forces. Educational programs that emphasize social change aim to prepare students to improve society through critical analysis and addressing social issues and injustices. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteering as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about social movements and how to effect systemic change.

Teaching social sciences from a multiperspective is an opportunity to develop social justice-oriented critical thinking and address social issues from a polyhedral and critical perspective [28]. Examining social knowledge through different lenses invites us to reconsider issues from less common viewpoints, recovering alternative Discourses. It is essential for students to learn to question, evaluate, and critique all the information they receive, developing an awareness of the relativity and complexity of social reality, understanding that social justice values and dignity narratives are the horizon upon which to build their own arguments.

Information on social issues is never neutral, as it is always shaped by individuals or groups with specific intentions and interests. To navigate this complexity, students must first grasp the concept of positionality and then ideology, understanding how these elements influence knowledge, textbooks, and educational practices. It is essential to critically question which voices are represented and which are excluded, while examining issues and ideas through the narratives of those historically marginalized in traditional texts [29]. One of the most pressing challenges in overcoming epistemological obstacles is the enduring presence of Eurocentrism and dominant narratives. These often elevate White, male-centric perspectives while sidelining diverse subaltern voices, thereby perpetuating systemic inequities and limiting students' ability to engage critically with multiple dimensions of diversity. A multiperspective approach must actively interrogate whose voices are amplified within the curriculum and whose are systematically silenced, fostering an educational environment rooted in pluralism and equity. It is also important to learn to interpret the ideologies of opposing discourses by consulting contradictory sources and dialoguing with people with contrary perspectives. A valuable resource for working on multiperspectivity is the book "Histoire de l'Autre" [30], written by twelve history teachers, six Israeli and six Palestinian. The book narrates the conflict between Palestine and Israel from 1917 from both perspectives in parallel, showing different, sometimes contradictory and sometimes complementary, views on the same events. Resources like this demonstrate that the multiplicity of views on controversial topics is essential to enable committed participation in the construction of a freer and more democratic society. Social justice-oriented critical thinking is necessary to carry out actions through reflective, honest, and profound dialogue, not imposing new Discourses on people but opening a range of possibilities to be valued.

4. Discussion

A key consideration is the need to incorporate teacher education that emphasizes multiperspectivity. Teachers should be equipped not only to identify hegemonic Discourses but also to promote approaches that enable students to critically understand the world and develop the capacity to transform it. Beyond delivering content, teachers must guide students in recognizing and analyzing the ideologies underlying the knowledge transmitted in the classroom [2,4]. This transformative role of educators is deeply tied to the broader political context, which shapes discursive practices within education [15]. As Gramsci [7] and Foucault [1,5] have shown, power operates through hegemony and Discourses, reproducing inequalities while also creating opportunities for resistance. By fostering spaces

for critical reflection, teacher education can empower educators to challenge dominant narratives and support students in critically engaging with their social realities.

Hegemonic discourse permeates every level of the education system, from curriculum design to policies that often reinforce unequal power structures. When these Discourses are reproduced without critical reflection, schools risk becoming mechanisms that perpetuate social inequalities. To counter this, it is vital for educational institutions to continually evaluate their practices, ensuring they reflect the social and cultural contexts of their students [1,4,5]. Equally significant is the intrinsic link between curriculum design and the economic system. In many Western contexts, education is deeply intertwined with standardized testing, college readiness metrics, and capitalist frameworks. These structures often leave students, teachers, and educational leaders feeling powerless to drive meaningful change. Addressing these economic dimensions is essential to dismantling the epistemological obstacles that hinder transformative education and entrench systemic inequities.

Underlying these challenges is the relationship between knowledge and power. As Foucault has argued, knowledge is neither neutral nor detached; it is inherently shaped by power relations [1,5]. Therefore, education aimed at fostering emancipation and social justice must actively challenge these dynamics, equipping students with the tools to critically interrogate and resist established truths [1,4,5].

In this sense, multiperspectivity provides an opportunity to foster deeper critical thinking, not just academically but also in terms of social activism. Students should be able to recognize the multiple narratives surrounding any social issue and understand how these narratives are constructed, maintained, and challenged by different sources of power [4]. This reinforces the idea that truth is always relational, as argued by Foucault and McLaren, and can only be understood through its connection to the social structures that produce it [1,4,5].

Finally, considering the limitations and challenges of implementing critical and emancipatory education within a traditional educational framework, how can meaningful educational transformation be achieved in contexts where educational policies, institutional demands, and teacher training are often misaligned with the principles of social justice and critical pedagogy? In this regard, there is a need for systemic reforms, not only in educational content but also in the structures that support it, promoting collaboration between universities and schools to work towards a more equitable and transformative education [4,7].

5. Conclusions

In the words of McLaren [4] (p. 19), as educators and cultural workers, we need to recognize the diverse manifestations of oppression that affect society in general and our students in particular. He argues that the meaning of oppression has changed from the practice of colonial domination and conquest, and can no longer be simply thought of as the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group, but as the systematic reproduction of oppressions in the main economic, political, and cultural institutions, forming the basic fabric of social life. Sometimes oppression is related to "unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-intentioned people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural characteristics of bureaucratic hierarchy and market mechanisms, in summary, the normal and continuous processes of everyday life" [31] (p. 6). Young [31] summarizes oppression into five forms: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Hegemonic Discourses legitimize all of them. The school should be one of the ways to end these oppressions, including those practiced by ordinary and well-intentioned people in everyday life. However, we know that children continue to suffer from and perpetuate them. Our studies show that primary school students are particularly vulnerable to hegemonic Discourses and reproduce them. For example, a recent study conducted in Spain, documented in two publications [32,33], involving 450 students aged 8 to 10, highlighted how exposure to conflicting narratives significantly shapes their

perception of social realities. Students were presented with two contrasting accounts: a dominant narrative associating chocolate consumption with happiness and childhood, and an alternative narrative exposing the use of child labor in cocoa production. The findings revealed that students struggled to critically evaluate the hegemonic narrative. While the majority initially adhered to the dominant account, structured activities enabled a notable proportion to identify and challenge its underlying assumptions, demonstrating the potential for fostering critical literacy from an early age. These results emphasize the need to implement educational practices that expose students to diverse perspectives and encourage them to critically examine and question dominant societal narratives.

Such results reinforce the idea that it is imperative to continue advocating for critical social sciences that challenge and question hegemonic Discourses. To do this, it is important to continue working on the initial and ongoing training of teachers, helping them to identify and overcome the epistemological obstacles that hinder the construction of complex, critical, and scientific social knowledge. We must insist on working with multiperspectivity, especially in a context where information overload and easy answers, like those offered by Wikipedia or artificial intelligence, are increasingly common. It is crucial to keep seeking references, contrasting, evaluating, and discussing. Multiperspectivity is a valuable opportunity to develop the critical thinking of students of any age. Moreover, it is essential that universities maintain close collaboration with schools. We must preserve a connection, perhaps revisiting McLaren's perspective, who wrote his work in a context of poverty and extreme difficulty to address the problems and challenges of school, but also its wonderful opportunities.

6. Future Directions

Moving forward, the focus must be on expanding critical pedagogical practices that challenge hegemonic discourses and foster more inclusive and reflective educational environments. Teacher education will need to continuously integrate social justice-oriented critical thinking at both the theoretical and practical levels. This involves not only revising curricula to position social issues as central content drivers but also transforming the broader institutional structures that underpin education.

Furthermore, it is crucial to deepen our research into epistemological obstacles within social studies education, examining them individually to better understand how they are transmitted and reproduced across different educational stages. By doing so, we can uncover the specific mechanisms by which these obstacles manifest in the classroom and curriculum, while developing effective strategies to resist and dismantle them.

Additionally, future research should continue exploring innovative methodologies to support multiperspective teaching, ensuring that students learn to critically engage with diverse viewpoints. Close collaboration between universities and schools will be essential in fostering environments where critical dialogue and transformative educational practices can truly thrive.

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