

WorldCanvass: Why School? Education and Social Transformation

Part 2

Joan Kjaer: Hello, and welcome to WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. I'm Joan Kjaer, and we're coming to you from MERGE in downtown Iowa City. Our topic tonight is Why School? Education and Social Transformation, and in this segment, our guests will look at schools in the US a little more closely, and discuss whether and how they serve as agents of change within society. Just next to me is Sarah Bruch, assistant professor in the UI Department of Sociology. Thanks for being here, Sarah.

Sarah Bruch: Thank you.

Joan Kjaer: Next to her is David Cassels Johnson, associate professor in the UI College of Education. Thanks, David.

David Johnson: Thank you.

Joan Kjaer: At the far end, we have Mimi Young, assistant professor in the UI College of Education. Thank you, Mimi, for being here.

Jemimah Young: Thank you for having me.

Joan Kjaer: Sarah, let me first turn to you. What do you see happening in American schools? You've heard the first segment here, and we kind of had an overview of education and philosophies behind education. But what do you see happening in American schools today?

Sarah Bruch: Yeah, thanks. I think that's a great question. I think for me, as a sociologist, one of the things I think a lot about is how schools are places of contention. So, a lot of times we like to think that things will get better over time, that each generation, there will be less inequality or less inequity, and that schools are one of the places where we'll see that happen. But one of the more critical ways to think about the role of schools and what's happening in schools, especially in the US context, is that actually, change won't occur unless you make it happen, that it is a site of contention, that it is a site of struggle, and that there are different interests competing for what we do in schools in the US.

Sarah Bruch: And a couple of examples of that would be, in terms of equity, especially around race. We like to have integrated, diverse schools, but how we go about doing that, and what happens when we do that, in terms of how do the students actually experience those diverse or integrated schools, and whether or not that's a positive experience for them, is something that we should talk a lot

more about, and I think that's kind of where the crux of a lot of the conversations are.

Sarah Bruch: And I think a second thing about that is how students experience schools in terms of the mission of creating citizens in schools. So, we heard in the first segment about, yes, schools create workers. They also create citizens. That was one of the reasons we started public schools in the US. But how they go about doing that, and what are the sites of contention around that, I think is one of the big issues on the table.

Sarah Bruch: So, because it is a site of disagreement, much of what we've done in civic education is really pull back what we teach kids, in terms of their formal curriculum. So, we teach them the structure of government. We teach them how to be a citizen, in terms of what are the knowledge and skills you need to have to be a citizen. But we pay a lot less attention to things that would actually educate youth, in terms of how to think about social issues, and how to critically evaluate evidence and arguments, which is really another part of being a citizen in the US.

Joan Kjaer: Could I just go back to one of the first remarks you made, and just ask you whether it is a universal truth that we in our schools are looking for diversity? Are there not places in the country where people would be quite happy not to have any diversity?

Sarah Bruch: I think that's obviously a big question, obviously. In a lot of surveys that are done in the US public, people ask whether or not people want their children to go to diverse or integrated schools, whether that be racial diversity, socioeconomic diversity, or just any kind of social demographic or social identity diversity. And I think the vast majority of people would say yes to that question, whether there's some social desirability bias in those responses, sure. But I think a lot of businesses, a lot of folks from a more utilitarian perspective say, "Diverse teams make better decisions." Those kind of utilitarian reasons. But I think also, from a more value-based perspective, a lot of folks would say, "I think I want my kids to be exposed to different." What that kind of difference is clearly can be different in different context, but I think that understanding that we're not all the same, that that's actually something that is a benefit.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. In some communication we had before the program, you said that a lot of attention is on formal curriculum and citizenship creation, but the way people learn from their broader circumstances and their friend networks and so on really affects the way they behave in school, the way they're treated in school?

Sarah Bruch: Yeah. One of the things I look a lot at is how students experience schools more broadly, not just what the curriculum or teaching is, in terms of the formal curriculum. And a lot of what I and other people focus on is, how do young people experience different forms of public authority? So, whether that be a teacher or a principal or a police officer, and how that experience with that

public authority affects how you think of yourself, not just as an individual, but as a civic or as a citizen. A civic being or a citizen.

Sarah Bruch: I think it's important, because it teaches you lessons. It teaches you lessons about how do people in authority think about people like you? How do people treat people like you? And then, based on that treatment and how you perceive what's going on, do you think that authority is legitimate? Do you trust your teachers? Do you trust the government? Do you trust the folks in positions of authority would do things right by you or people in your group?

Sarah Bruch: And I think that that's a really important thing that a lot of people are looking at, and there's some really sort of disturbing results from the research in this area, which really suggest that much like you might expect, people with more socially marginalized identities are treated in specific ways across our public institutions, not just in schools, in a way that further marginalizes them, and makes them less likely to participate in their communities and in our political system, and that has pretty large ramifications, in terms of being a democratic society.

Joan Kjaer: That kind of leads very naturally into the conversation we might have with you, David. Your work is as an educational linguistics ... you research educational linguistics and teach in this area?

David Johnson: I work in language education. That's my background, is educational linguistics.

Joan Kjaer: So, tell us what educational linguistics means.

David Johnson: It's sort of leveraging the tools from linguistics to focus on educational problems.

Joan Kjaer: So, educational language policies are one of the ways in which there may be attempt to minimize differences between students, or to accept the variety of language backgrounds that students may have?

David Johnson: Yeah, historically, that really hasn't been the case. I hate to echo what Sarah said, and what Amanda said and David said, at the risk of turning this forum into a real bummer, but the history of educational language policy has been one of linguistic marginalization, subjugation, intentional eradication of languages, in order to maximize the differences. So, you said minimize the differences. That's sort of the history of language policy throughout the world, actually, is they are used to secure privileges for the ruling class.

David Johnson: And so, that's of the history of language policy in this country and everywhere in the world, but there have been exceptions to that, for sure. Think about the US context, 1974, Lau vs. Nichols, unanimous Supreme Court decision. In that decision, they decided that the same instruction for what we call English language learners, or kids that don't speak English as their native language, the same instruction for them as their native English-speaking counterparts is

unequal instruction, exact opposite way that it works in France, actually. In order to be equal, everyone is educated in French.

David Johnson: And in fact, to not provide accommodations, and they didn't specify what kind of accommodations you could provide, but to not provide any kind of accommodations violates the students' civil rights. They relied on the Civil Rights Act for that decision. So, that's a landmark decision in educational policy in the US. Most schools have to have what they call a Lau plan. You have to have a plan in place for how you're going to accommodate these students.

David Johnson: The Bilingual Education Act of 1968, which ushered in the ability for schools to offer education in two languages, the goal of which is bilingualism, biliteracy, and content knowledge in both languages. The Native American Languages Act of 1990, which provided funding for the education in indigenous languages in the US. Most people, a lot of people would say, too little too late in this case, because the state did a pretty good job at eradicating most indigenous languages along the way.

David Johnson: But there are these opportunities that educators have, these federal policies. I think a lot of the work happens on the local level, though. For example, in the state of Iowa, we've experienced about a 300 percent increase over the past 20 years in the number of English language learners in schools. There's still a lot of work to be done.

David Johnson: At the same time, the number of native English speakers has shrunk. So, Iowa is not really a state where people move to. It seems to be a state that people leave, a lot of times. But so, we're experiencing a demographic phenomenon in which there's rapidly-changing linguistic ecology, and educators are tackling these issues, I think, in ethical, pedagogically astute, responsible ways. So, there's a lot of good work, I think, that happens on the local level, so I put a positive spin on it.

David Johnson: So, there is social transformation. Bilingual education is alive and well in the state of Iowa. There are schools around Iowa in which kids are educated in more than one language. So, I'm encouraged by the talent and the capacity in Iowa schools, it's just we need to realize the full potential that we have with this changing linguistic ecology and diversity in Iowa, and everywhere in the United States, for that matter. And the world.

Joan Kjaer: Could I ask you, and I may also ask Mimi this question. If you look at a minority student here in Iowa. Our black population is very small, considering the population of the state. If you have black students in the classroom who carry with them a different kind of social interaction, the way they might talk, the way they're most comfortable talking or behaving, it's very natural, it feels good to them, it's culturally where they come from, but it doesn't sort of fit with the standard kid in a white Iowa classroom. Are those students automatically likely to suffer because of this difference in the way they present themselves linguistically?

David Johnson: Yeah. I mean, it's not just different languages. There's definitely different dialects of English. As a kid who moved to Iowa ... I moved to Iowa when I was a kid. I moved from the South, from the Appalachian Mountains, and I had that dialect, and I remember sort of how my interactions with teachers at that time, and the expectations that they have. I mean, language ideologies are deeply entrenched, the way that we judge other people based on the way that they speak is deeply entrenched. It's part of our human makeup. I mean, people ...

David Johnson: So, yeah, I mean, there's a history of marginalizing, not just minoritized languages, but minoritized dialects. And African American language is definitely one of them, one of the ones that's gotten the most attention in US educational policy, it's gotten a lot of attention from linguists. But there's a lot of work that goes on as well, to sort of overcome those obstacles and try to encourage those students to achieve equal educational opportunity.

David Johnson: We're all socialized into language in different kinds of ways. It's not just ... Appalachian English is another good example, in which kids are socialized in a language in kinds of ways that might not reflect what happens in school. There's this sort of language ... there are these sociolinguistic norms of interaction that are privileged in schools, which are based on primarily white, middle class sociolinguistic norms.

David Johnson: So, if you didn't grow up around being socialized into those norms, the way that teachers ask questions, the way that they read books to the kids and hold up the book like this. The way that they ask questions to which they already know the answer, display questions. Not a very common speech act in every community in the world. But kids who grow up in homes that reflect those sociolinguistic norms are obviously advantaged when they go to those schools, and kids who don't are disadvantaged.

David Johnson: And so, I think that it's important to establish critical language awareness among the teachers for these types of differences, and to encourage the linguistic and different cultural diversity that kids bring to the class.

Joan Kjaer: Thank you. Mimi, you're an assistant professor of social studies education, if I understand correctly, and I think much of your work focuses on achievement and educational outcomes for marginalized and minority populations, and also special focus on black women and girls. Can you reflect on what you've heard so far here, and then share your own thoughts?

Jemimah Young: Sure. Just kind of segueing a little, speaking of linguistics, there's a documentary called Talking Black in America, and it's actually a documentary from a team of linguists, and educational linguists, if I'm saying that correctly, in which a lot of the context relates to education. And when we talk about this whole notion of what is standard English, who speaks standard English, and what English is standard? The way we speak, we ... I would say "y'all." I'm from Texas. The way y'all speak here in the Midwest is very different from how people speak. You

guys. I'd never heard that. You guys speak, compared to how we speak in Texas, as well as adding those different dialectical differences.

Jemimah Young: For instance, in the school setting, you may have a student who says, and I talk to my students about this, a black student, a black child, a black girl, says, "Miss, can I ax you a question?" Right? And the teacher, I think probably as part of some kind of compulsion, or probably what they've been taught in their teacher ed program, honestly, they correct the students and say, "Do you mean, you want to ask me a question?"

Jemimah Young: And what that does to a child who, in their mind, already has an oppositional view of their teacher, and has a great deal of respect for people who speak like them ... Their pastor says "ax," their coach says "ax," their grandmamma says "ax." Everybody says "ax." The only person who doesn't say "ax" is this white female person standing in front of them.

Jemimah Young: And so, I think it's important to affirm these different languages, as well as vernaculars and dialects, because they're part of who we are as people, and no one is absent for an accent or dialect. We all have accents and dialects, and that speaks more to this system of hegemonic oppression that we see in the school system. To say that there is a standard means that there is things that are not standard. So, just speaking to that point. As far as, did you have a question embedded in the second part of what you were asking?

Joan Kjaer: Oh, I don't remember, but what you've just said is terrific. So, what does social transformation in the context of education mean to you?

Jemimah Young: That's a great question. One, I think it's something we need to talk about, because it's not a new notion, right? It's just been packed and unpacked and packaged again. We call it social transformation. Previously, we called it social change. That's how I'm more familiar with this term, as a concept, as social change. Previously, we're kind of vacillating back and forth about the notion of social justice. And then previous to that, it was social action. So, we've seen a history, and to me, it patterns, this terminology patterns whatever new reform is in place, in my opinion.

Jemimah Young: But I say that to say, what do we mean when we say social change? When this was first presented to me, it was presented as social change in our education system. And I don't know that you can talk about change in a system in a complementary type of way. Change is the antecedent of a system, not the other way around. When we say change, is that a proxy for control? Is that a proxy for confusion? And what do we mean by change? Do we talk about change so that we don't have to enact it? So, I'm obviously a little bit more critical of this notion of social change, social transformation, because I've yet to see it, as far as the demographics of students that I research. I've yet to see it serve to their benefit.

Jemimah Young: Previously, we talked about, for instance, in a K through 12 setting, as compared to higher ed, for example. I'll go into my background as a multicultural and urban education. So, I can go into a very large school district. All of the property taxes pool into the school district, and they're supposed to be equitably, another word that's been repackaged. Equity, diversity, equality, and the like. But they're supposed to be equitably distributed.

Jemimah Young: But when we look in these schools, I'll go into one school in the very same district, you have an ID that swipes you to get into everything. You wave your hand, water comes, toilet paper, paper towels, and the like. But then, I'll go literally two miles away in the same school district, and you have students who have to use the toilet paper as their hall pass to go to the bathroom. They don't even keep the toilet paper in the bathroom. Everything is broke. The books are recycled. And the demographics of these schools look very similar to pre-Brown vs. Board of Education.

Jemimah Young: And so, when we talk about social change, I don't see that as something that benefits all students, and in fact, to the group that it benefits, it serves as the same detriment to other minoritized and marginalized populations. When we look at higher ed, an example that was brought up earlier was the GI Bill. That is something that wasn't afforded for all people, especially people of color. And this is not something ... I think some of you all may be ... we have a younger crowd in the audience, but when we think about the precedence of this, this is not something that was 50 or 100 years ago.

Jemimah Young: My own dad served in the military for 30 years, and he retired, and he did not have a GI Bill. GI Bills oftentimes are passed down to their children. So, I went to school with people that I had to pay for my education, and my white counterparts had this GI Bill, which is substantial, to help pay for theirs, and our parents served side-by-side fighting for this country. So, when we talk about educational change, I have yet to see it realized in a broader context.

Joan Kjaer: Are there policy initiatives that you ... are there things that you can point to, that you have your hands around, and say, "This is what we need to do?" Are there a couple of things you can say would make a big change right away?

Jemimah Young: No.

Joan Kjaer: So, it's all about the larger culture? It's about the way we treat each other in the full community?

Jemimah Young: I think there are ... this is, again, a system, an education system. Systems are not designed to necessarily benefit people. It's designed to benefit the system. And so, there are so many components to this that have to be interrogated, disrupted, dismantled, and I think the way that we, I don't consider myself as part of the we, but the way in which we've gone about this notion of social change is, we want to keep the system the same while still having the goal of

serving or changing or enacting or transforming, and that's not what transformation is. Norms must change. The system must change. People must change.

Joan Kjaer: Yes. I'm going to turn to you guys, and ask for a response to some of these very challenging thoughts.

Sarah Bruch: Yeah, I mean, I think I would say that I completely agree that things are systemic, that inequities or inequalities are systemic, not just in educational systems. I think that one of the biggest challenges to creating change, whether it's social or otherwise, is that there's a mismatch between what we say we want, in terms of we want everybody to have an equal chance, we believe in the American dream, we want to reduce inequities, and what it would actually take to see those through. Because I think a lot of people want to stay in their comfort zone. So, they want to have that neighborhood school. They want to be able to, if they're in a privileged group, they want to be able to go and say, I can buy into a neighborhood where my kid will go to the good school.

Sarah Bruch: And I think that both of those things are not compatible with each other, and that because a lot of times folks that, on the one side will say, "I value diversity and I want everybody to have an equal chance," but then will turn around and buy a house in a good neighborhood, so their kid goes to this good school, and lobby the school district or other officials to say, "These are the advantages that I want for my child." Those aren't compatible, and that's a mismatch that I think a lot of people as individuals don't really grapple with, and that's one of the things that's reflected in our policies and practices now, of that sort of ambivalence of whether or not we'll actually make ourselves accountable to live by the principles that we espouse.

David Johnson: Yeah, I mean, I agree with both of you that schools are a part of a larger network of systems, which serve to basically reinforce social inequity. Education can't escape this larger network of systems. Maybe we shouldn't expect it to, either. I mean, it's sort of a lot to ask, for schooling to solve these problems, to engage in social transformation. I'm interested in Mimi's interrogation of that term.

David Johnson: But I would say though that, at the end of the day, when I want to feel good about the profession, because this is what we do for a living, I do think about the educators that I work with, who are committed to whatever their vision of social justice is for the kids that they work with. And so, I do think there are talented, committed individuals out there working to provide equal educational opportunities for the kids' lives. But it's a tough job.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah, absolutely. And Mimi, we had a chance to talk before we started this segment, and you have some thoughts on homeschooling.

Jemimah Young: I do. I think that parents, we have to recognize that parents are a child's first educator, and the value in that, and I think that there's something to say, especially if you would kind of poll the homeschooling community. If parents felt like they were the first educator, that they were a valued member of their child's education team, and that they were a stakeholder, that perhaps they wouldn't be pulling their kids from our systems to begin with.

Jemimah Young: I also think that parents are very resourceful in finding ways to create an education for their child that reflects their own values and morals. And then also, within the body of my work, one of the largest-growing groups within the homeschooling community are black parents, and that's due to things that, again, serve as counters to this notion of social change, like the criminalization of black children in schools, and the opportunities or the lack thereof, and just the social conditions, the trauma that a lot of black students, particularly black girls, face when they go to school. And this is not just K through 12, it's higher ed. And we have a lot of testimonies to that.

Jemimah Young: And so, I think that I just wanted to make sure as educators, we affirm other mediums or outlets for schooling, because remember, when we talk about schooling and education, those terms are oftentimes used synonymously, and they're not, right? Schooling is the system by which we educate, and education is what we receive. I've seen a lot of students who are very happy, well-adjusted, successful, professional homeschooled children.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah, thank you. Well, wow, this has flown by, and I want to say thank you so much to Sarah Bruch and David Johnson and Mimi Young for being with us in this segment. Please stay with us for the next panel, where we'll take a cross-cultural look at the role of schools in both enforcing cultural and social norms and transforming them. WorldCanvass programming is available on iTunes, the Public Radio Exchange, and the International Programs website. I'm Joan Kjaer. Thanks for joining us for the segment.