USING *DE FACTO* LEARNING THEORY

TO UNDERSTAND URBAN SCHOOL MOBILITY

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Introduction

"All children can learn," is a catchphrase currently making the rounds in education circles, particularly in staff development activities (Pankratz & Petroski, 2003). *De facto* learning theory challenges the underlying assumptions of this phrase by examining how it is that learning in schools takes place. Using theoretical foundations of Dewey, Maslow, and Vygotsky, this essay will explore the fact that all children are, in fact, learning all the time, regardless of the actions of teachers, the content of the curriculum, or educational policy and practice.

"All children can learn" suggests that some children may have not learned. This is not possible, as humans are learning creatures. Educators who believe that this phrase can unlock the key to school success have confused learning with instruction. It also ignores the dichotomy between learning that takes place from a formal "lesson" with the continuous learning that takes place as a result of both formal and informal communication. A more accurate phrase is "All children ***do*** learn." Children are learning every minute they are in school. They just don't always learn what's in the lesson plan.

Student mobility--the changing of schools at times other than those planned in the academic program--is used in this essay as an example of an educational problem that can be productively examined by using this new theory.

Student mobility

In most urban American public schools, students are enrolled and withdrawn frequently, with some students changing schools six or more times a year. This problem is known as school or student mobility, and there is evidence that high rates of mobility contribute to lower attendance and achievement (Kerbow, 1996). Mobile students are sometimes defined as those who make three or more school changes in grades K-12. Conversely, stability refers to the continuous enrollment of students. Stability of staff and students is an essential ingredient in building a positive learning environment in which curriculum delivery and child development can proceed uninterrupted. While not every stable

school is a good school, it may be difficult to find a high mobility urban school that is effective. Many researchers and practitioners believe that school mobility undercuts school-improvement efforts by taking away the continuity of instruction and human relationships (Kirkpatrick & Lash, 1990).

de facto *and* de jure

In this essay, school mobility and stability are examined in the context of a concept popularized in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. This new theory, based in social constructivism, is referred to as "*de facto* learning theory." Its roots in social constructivism reflect Dewey's assertions that humans are sensitive to experience (Dewey, 1938), Maslow's scale of human needs (Maslow, 1970), and Vygotsky's work on the relationship between human interaction and learning (Vygotsky, 1934).

Years ago, the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka ("*Brown v. Board of education of topeka*", 1954) desegregation case popularized the Latin terms *de jure* (by law) and *de facto* (in fact). The context was one in which the court distinguished between segregation in school districts where the law permitted racial segregation (*de jure*) and those in which segregation was not legal, but was practiced anyway (*de facto*).

These terms are a useful way to think about learning. Every teacher, for example, knows the gap that can exist between their written lesson plans for the day, which can be thought of as *de jure*, and the reality of what actually occurs in that classroom that day, *de facto*. Similarly, parents know the difference between the vision statements and public relations messages that a district or school espouses (*de jure*), and the reality of problems that arise in the actual daily schooling experience (*de facto*). *De facto* learning, then, refers not to the officially stated plans for what will occur in schools, but the reality of everything a child learns while s/he moves throughout the school day.

In 1938, John Dewey stated that humans were sensitive to experience, and our experiences stay with us While this seems simple and evident, the realization of these concepts is revolutionary in terms of thinking about our least successful urban schools of poverty. Proceeding from Dewey's tenets, we must accept the idea that while adults may bifurcate their days into "work" and "home," children are less likely to do so. Their experiences combine holistically into a single unit that is their life.

The child, according to Dewey's theory, combines the memory, emotions, and conclusions of all their home experiences and takes them all to school, to be combined with those events experienced within the classroom, in the halls, and on the playground (Dewey, 1938). They draw upon their previous experiences to determine how to interpret the new experiences. Their experiences are not the sum total of how parents say they will raise their children, nor the sum total of the written lesson plans of the teachers. They are the sum total of the child's authentic observations, feelings, analysis,

and synthesis of the actual human and material conditions and interactions to which s/he is exposed.

This constitutes *de facto* learning--that students are busy learning *everything* actually taught by the combination of all they experience--not *de jure*, which consists of official school/homework hours, written curriculum and lesson plans. These Latin legal terms are useful in pointing out the differences between what our society (or schooling) *says* it does by rule or law (*de jure*) and what it *actually* does in reality (*de facto*).

In the case of student mobility, we can use these terms to examine why achievement falls as mobility rises. Curricula (*de jure*) are seldom written with a variable or interchangeable order of activities. Sequencing is a critical part of good lesson design. Lessons in long division presuppose prior lessons in short division. However, in an actual classroom there may be several high mobility children who have missed the lesson on short division while their families were in transition. When the teacher attempts to teach long division to children who have never learned short division (*de facto*) it would not be surprising if the child's mind was confused or occupied with other matters.

So while the lesson plans and state standards for the day may indicate that the highly mobile child is to learn long division, the actual learning may consist of the lesson that food is hard to find in the new house, mom is too tired to help anyone get ready for school, and the people in the new school are not very friendly. The child who learns one day that s/he is "on his or her own" or that the new adults or peers in his or her life act mean learns something very different than long division. Furthermore, his or her ability to focus on long division that day may be significantly altered.

Conversely, if educators are able to construct a warm, welcoming environment, the child learns a different *de facto* lesson: that adults and peers are there to help, glad to meet and get to know the child, and are open to learning about this child as a person with individual talents and skills. The child's fears may be alleviated, and s/he can proceed with hope rather than out of fear. It might even be okay in such an environment to think about long division.

Besides breaches to the curriculum that frequent moves cause, disruption to peer and adult relationships affects the development of the child (Bruin & Lewis, 2000). The frequently mobile child is more likely to suffer developmental delays in speech and hearing and is more likely than the stable child to need special education services (Wood *et al.*, 1993),

Military children attend schools that include welcoming processes and streamline the transfer of test scores and other records. However, the mobility of children in urban schools is largely ignored by policymakers and practitioners. The result is a set of messages that communicate to the child that their presence may not be noticed, cared

about, or needed.

De facto learning, explained another way, refers to learning that is a combination of the written curriculum and the "hidden" curriculum, consisting of both the verbal and non-verbal messages that children receive at school from school personnel as well as their peers.

In understanding student mobility, the number and frequency of changes are important, but so are the reasons for the change and the results (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) . Changing schools because the family income is increasing is less likely to produce negative results than changing schools because the family was evicted. This is because the child in the upwardly mobile family is more likely to experience positive changes as a result of the move--such as a better house, school, or neighborhood--to offset the disruption.

In order to see why school change is so disruptive to the learning process we can look to Maslow's scale of human needs. According to Maslow's theory, a person's needs for survival, safety and security are prerequisite to a sense of belonging. All of these are prerequisite to self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). Maslow's scale has been used to equate the level of thinking skills that teachers use in their instruction. As basic human needs are satisfied, the student is able to focus outward and upward in terms of skills. It follows that a highly mobile child can be expected to be distracted by safety, security and belonging issues before s/he may be ready to tackle curricular tasks.

If the child is fed, their fears addressed, the child is made to feel as though s/he belongs to this new grouping, then all three foundation issues on Maslow's (1970) scale have been resolved. This is the power of a good school, and the impact such a school can have on the total quality of a child's life, even if other factors outside of school are not under the child's or school's control. Such a school becomes a haven and can "balance out" some of the negative experiences involved in poverty, sub-standard or temporary housing, and other stressful and traumatic life conditions. The result for children of poverty is the possibility of an increase in locus of control--the sense that the child's actions can determine future outcomes--the rejection of victim status, and the development of resiliency.

Maslow's well-known self-actualization theory is a conceptual model that is contradicted by high mobility, whether in housing or schooling. In Maslow's triangular model, known as the hierarchy of needs, survival, self-worth and a sense of belonging are foundations necessary before self-concept and self-actualization, which enable students to use their experiences for creativity and higher-order thinking skills.

Highly mobile students suffer from a reversal of the direction of Maslow's scale. These students are routinely asked to ignore their previous experiences, exhibit problem-solving skills and perform academically before being assured of their survival needs

(food and shelter) or personal safety. This explains why high-poverty schools find it so difficult to make achievement gains, as their clientele consists largely of families who have had their lives turned upside down as they move through losses, uncertainty, and other experiences associated with poverty. It may also explain the perennial astonishment of the middle-class regarding the strategies and techniques of the poor.

Researchers have also tried to determine whether the child's self-concept is affected by the experience of mobility. Responses were measured to questions in a survey format for junior-high aged students who moved and had to change schools as a result (Hendershott, 1989). Previous work indicated a significant relationship, though not necessarily causal, between residential moves and self-concept (Vernberg, 1990). Both researchers documented issues of school adjustment, adolescent depression, and social support. Henderschott (1989) found that for adolescents, moving is related to a sense of mastery over their environment, that depression can follow a recent move and social support from meaningful others can mitigate a negative effect on self-concept.

There is some risk that educators may still presuppose that the cause of problems from which mobile students suffer is low self-esteem. In fact, current research contradicts this belief, still pervasive among educators. It appears more likely now that significant factors are the gaps in instruction, teacher attitudes and expectations, attendance, sequencing/pacing issues, and loss of instructional time, but, as Rumberger (2003) points out, there is no definitive "cause" agreement in the literature to verify this. It seems likely that both students' self-concept and their achievement are affected, even structured, by their previous experiences.

Stability theory

Educators and psychologists are not the only theoreticians who have sought to explain the value of stability. Continuity theory in mathematics includes a path to the state of equilibrium--a state of stability and balance. Students who achieve equilibrium in their lives are surely more likely to be able to focus on their academic achievement. In business this is known as "continuous optimization" (Nemirovski & Yudin, 1983), and it involves such concepts as problem-solving and complexity in what is known as operational research. Decision-making is also a fundamental concept in work on continuity and non-continuity theory regarding inductive reasoning (Cooper & Fox, 1997). That reasoning, according to Dewey and Maslow, would be shaped by the sum total of their previous experiences.

Likewise, stability theory in math and science includes linear, non-linear, hydrostatic, and geometric concepts (Goberna *et al.*, 1996). All are concerned with stability or equilibrium in the state of matter or in mathematical equations.

We can think of student learning as an equation, though a complex one. In order to

achieve student and school stability and satisfy the foundations of Maslow's scale, our unknown formula for school success must remain balanced. If negative variables are introduced on one side, positive variables must be added in. We can think of it this way:

de facto school success and stability = self actualization + opportunity = survival + safety + sense of belonging+ self-concept = resiliency> negative life factors.

De facto learning theory describes the *real* success or failure of students and is not limited to standardized test scores, which we can think of as a *de jure* measure of success. Real or authentic learning is marked by curiosity, creativity, amazement, exploration, understanding, and intrinsic rewards. *De jure* learning is represented by test-taking skills, extrinsic rewards, and the exercise of rote skills that tend to please adults, such as good handwriting. The "pretty handwriting syndrome" is a concept advanced by junior high administrator S. Thurman (personal communication, Sept. 9, 2004). It describes the phenomena of students who have earned good grades from mastering the trappings of form--such as good handwriting and neat papers--rather than substance, such as learning how to truly comprehend what they read and generate their own ideas.

De facto learning, then, is not necessarily evidenced by success at school, as the child may be mirroring all the experiences from which s/he has learned, and the lessons may not have been that "success' is anything to be achieved or rewarded.

In systems theory (Miller, 1978), every organization, from a classroom to a household, has its system of rewards and punishments. As in learning, this system may not be what it is represented (by parents or teachers) to be. The rules (you must make good grades) may be contradicted by the reality (you get a lot more adult attention by acting out and wasting time than by silent reading). *De facto* learning means that students will act off the actual things they learn, including from all their collected systems of rewards and punishments, not what we say we "teach" them. Hence the perennial educator's conundrum: "I taught them but they didn't learn it."

Implications for schools

What is the implication of *de facto* learning theory for practitioners? It means that teachers and administrators themselves must be perceptive and analytical in thinking about their students' motivations for their actions, both positive and negative. Some teachers and principals are more versed in psychology than others, but academic knowledge of psychology may not be enough. Without insight, empathy, and reflection upon the combination of experiences that children bring with them to school, there is little chance of the practitioners being able to design new experiences that further hope and confidence, rather than disinterest and despair.

Because of *de facto* learning, lesson "planning" should be replaced by instructional design. Secondary lesson plans, for example, tend to be focused on the material, rather than the students and their development. This is a classic dichotomy, and one that many teachers seem to end up on the wrong side of as their students move further beyond the early grades. By designing instruction, teachers recognize that they must take the students' previous experiences into account and use them to build understanding and interest.

While *de facto* learning theory is derived from social constructivism, it extends the concepts to recognize in modern education the significant differences in planned institutional intentions and the actuality to which children are exposed. It is useful in examining not only student mobility but other educational problems, such as the persistent racial achievement gap, or any other issue where delivery of instruction to diverse students confounds school improvement efforts.

De facto learning theory is simply the reality that practitioners must accept if they are to advance authentic learning and rescue urban schools from substandard performance. Many are so focused on *de jure* learning, however, in the form of pressure for higher test scores, that they may lose sight of the power of instructional design. The superficial (teaching to the test) replaces substance, and teachers become as frustrated and disinterested as students.

Policymakers have unwittingly narrowed the focus of schools to *de jure* learning by their unrelenting emphasis on standardized testing, school ratings, and sanctions. In doing so, they create the same discouraging base of experiences for teachers that teachers pass on to their students. Learning ceases to be fun and becomes a chore, and no one feels very successful. The low expectations that can ensue produce a cyclical effect on students' interest and achievement.

In order to embrace the reality of *de facto* learning and realize the promise of Dewey, *Brown*, and Maslow, policy makers, practitioners, and even parents must decide that authentic learning is its own reward, and it can only come about when everyone involved commits the effort to rethink our basic premises of how schooling and learning work.

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