

# Chapter 9

## Ideology of Success and the Dilemma of Education Today



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### Distinctions and Inequalities

In many contemporary societies, education has a peculiar characteristic: Based on its own premises, its ultimate goals are unachievable, yet it will never fail to achieve those goals. Gustav Ichheiser (1943a) stressed this paradox some 70 years ago in what he called the “discrepancy between the norms of success and the conditions of success” (p. 139). Every society has, indeed, a general idea and some established ideal conditions specifying which type of individuals may achieve success and the corresponding ways in which success ought to be achieved. These ideal conditions represent the frame of reference and the lens through which society sees itself as “just” and “ordered.” Yet, the actual conditions under which success may be attained do not always correspond to the ideal representation of the norms for success.

A widespread term like “meritocracy,” which is the idea of a social division of labor according to individual skills which should be able to cultivate the talented (Lampert, 2012), represents a good example of the interplay between (1) the ideological assumption that “individuals ‘ought’ to attain success who are competent and worthy, and, to formulate it negatively, the incompetent and unworthy should be denied success” (Ichheiser, 1943a, p. 137) and (2) the impossibility of realizing the ideal conditions for success in an actual social context. Nevertheless, the simple existence of this general norm, attached to the value of success, is per se an evidence supporting the fairness of the existing social order. Despite the fact that citizens will probably never experience a real and complete meritocracy, the existence of the norm becomes a paradoxical justification for the very same social order that itself is not actually able to fulfill the meritocratic norm. The most common solution to the

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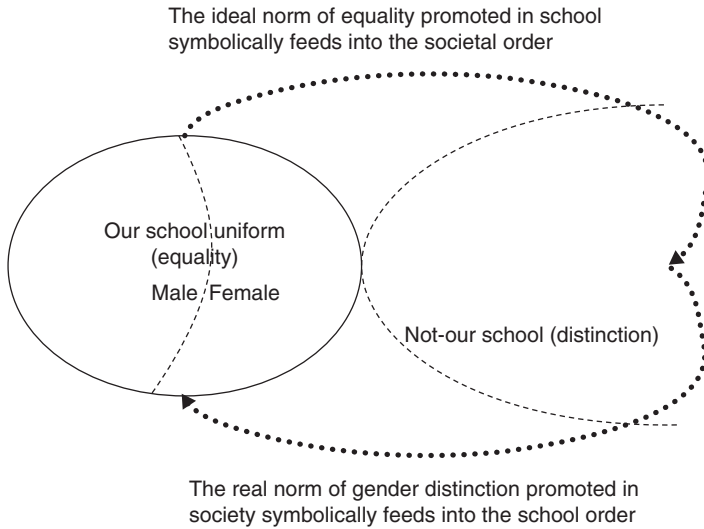
**Fig. 9.1** Engendered elementary school uniforms in the 1950s. Images licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Commons, Source Wikimedia Commons

lack of meritocracy in real life becomes a general demand for “more” meritocracy, rather than questioning meritocracy as an ideal.

Education has to do with distinctions, and distinctions have to do with inequalities. Any distinction has a preference attached, a value, and thus becomes hierarchical. Every educational context establishes several distinctions: between study and play, gender, age, subject matter, classrooms, etc. Study is generally more important than play, some subjects are more important than other subjects, etc.

School uniforms are very interesting examples of the ambivalent relationship between values, practices of distinction, and artifacts within educational contexts (Fig. 9.1). The use of uniforms clearly reminds us of the military or the religious origins of many Western school systems. At the same time, uniforms make evident the co-genetic nature of distinctions: they build a whole while differentiating the subparts of a group (Tateo, 2016). Indeed, uniforms play a twofold role: they create distinctions exactly when they aim to equalize (Fig. 9.2). The fact that both males and females wear uniforms is maintained as a promotion of equality (the circle in Fig. 9.2), but at the same time, the different features of masculine and feminine uniforms support an implicit gender difference (the dotted line within the circle). The principle of equality is supposed to feed into the larger social order, as education is meant to prepare the future citizens but is also understood as the instantiation of social values that regulate the gender issues (dotted arrows in Fig. 9.2).

As soon as the school uniform creates a symbolic sense of equality by eliminating social distinctions embedded in clothing (all students are equal as they wear the same clothes), it creates a first distinction between the “insiders” and the “outsiders”



**Fig. 9.2** The co-genetic process of equalizing/distinguishing

(students wearing the uniform are different from others). At the same time, the uniform can become a sign of social class distinction, to the extent that it can identify affluent students from rich school. On the other hand, school uniforms are strongly gendered, so they symbolically represent a distinction between male and female students in the very same moment it aims at equalizing genders in education.

In Fig. 9.2, we see how every symbolic process of equalization is at the same time a process of symbolic distinction. While this interplay creates a distinction between the in-school and out-school context, the social distinctions simultaneously feed into the school (e.g., gender and wealth inequalities). Norms of equalities promoted in school feed into the confirmation of the current social order, generating some expectations of equality in the students.

All these distinctions are value-laden (Tateo, 2015a) and naturalized. That is understood as “matter of facts” rather than culturally and historically situated social constructions. This implies that distinctions (e.g., between “bad” and “good” pupils) immediately become inequalities, as they gain the status of statements about reality, while their evaluative character is concealed:

Markets in distinctions are ubiquitous: not just in commercial markets or on the trading floor of the stock exchange, where the distinction is even more abstractly translated into money, but in the intimate settings of the classrooms, dinner tables and cliques. A clique of nursery school kids who exclude an “outsider” from their play are practicing exclusion of others in return for the distinction of being considered “insiders.” (Bruner, 1996, p. 79)

Educational institutions have the social goal of reproducing the system of values of a specific cultural community. Educational institutions work according to an acceptable range of developmental trajectories and to a set of institutional distinctions. Such distinctions include the age steps and the transition processes that the individual can follow to become a legitimated member of the community

(Rogoff, 2003). Establishing this appropriate range also implies co-creating the boundaries of deviance and the conditions for inequalities (Tateo, 2015a).

Besides school uniforms, the school context is filled with symbolic artifacts and practices that establish this set of distinctions. The organization of activities according to age range and class groups is a symbolic reproduction of the age hierarchy in society (e.g., rookies vs. seniors). School performances are another kind of artifact that help “the school-children internalize a new set of assumptions about themselves and their world” (Coe, 2005, p. 54). School plays (performed for Thanksgiving and Christmas or other traditional celebrations) are often ways in which students actively internalize cultural values, social hierarchies, the nation’s history, and the role modeling of heroes and villains, saints and sinners, and justice and evil—including a nuance of nationalism and ethnocentrism (Coe, 2005). These and other types of artifacts support the naturalization of the sense of “rightness” and “order” transmitted by a given national community (Bayer & Strickland, 1990; Ichheiser, 1941).

## Values at Work in Development and Education

Partly due to his own biography and professional background, Ichheiser was very sensitive to the system of distinctions and inequalities within the educational context and within the society at large (Bayer & Strickland, 1990). He stressed the value-laden nature of education, in which some general principles and habits, often implicit, determine that:

certain personal traits, attitudes, and modes of behavior are “good” and certain others are “bad.” The “good” traits, attitudes, and modes of behavior have to be encouraged and developed; the “bad” have to be suppressed and eliminated. (Ichheiser, 1943a, p.139)

Any educational intervention addresses an imagined child (Fig. 9.3). Education is indeed about a child-to-be, focused on a future condition of “fitness” or “oughtness” not yet realized. Nevertheless, education also always has to do with people’s encounter with their own subjectivity. “Youth not only is a ‘step’ in the development of personality on the way to becoming ‘grown up’ but is meaningful in itself” (Ichheiser, 1943a, p.140).

The teacher initiates every intervention for the sake of some educational and developmental goal. While interacting with a child, the teacher points to a future, not-yet-realized, condition, suggesting an inherently ambiguous asymmetry. In fact, it is taken for granted that the child **MUST** change (namely, in the direction of preestablished and value-laden constraints). Bruner (1996) called this set of values, expectations, and theories about children’s “regular” development “folk pedagogies”:

Folk pedagogies, for example reflect a variety of assumptions about children: they may be seen as willful and needing correction; as innocent and to be protected from a vulgar society; as needing skills to be developed only through practice; as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge that only adults can provide; as egocentric and in need for socialization. (p. 49)

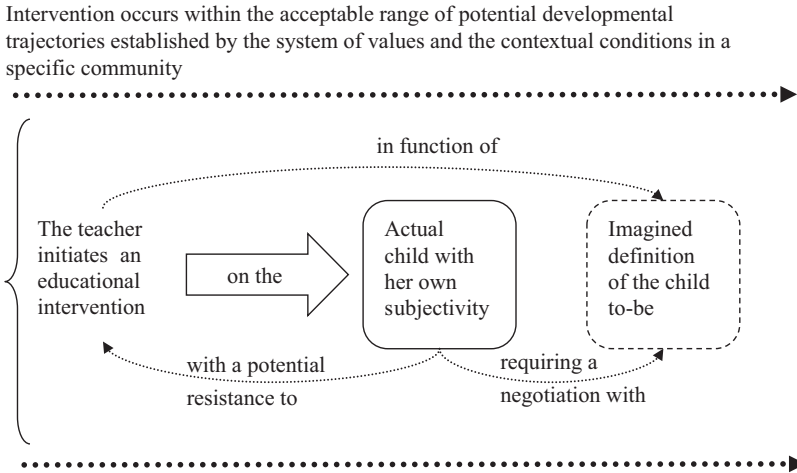


Fig. 9.3 Educational intervention in function of an imagined child

There is, of course, nothing inherently “good” or “bad” in folk pedagogies, as they reflect the *praxis* of teaching and learning in society. Nevertheless, we must be aware that they reflect a normative concept of development, independent from its epistemological foundation, that is oriented toward the child’s future condition (Fig. 9.3). The educational intervention is framed by a specific “window” of possibilities (the straight dotted lines in Fig. 9.3) that are set by the specific cultural set of values. The focus on the imagined child, as Ichheiser (1943a) warns us, risks overlooking the child’s subjectivity and the fact that the child’s experiencing is always peculiar to the child’s moment in development. According to Vygotsky (1994), the child’s “emotional experience [perezhivanie]” is elaborated in a specific way at different moments of development “dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, which are represented in the emotional experience” (p. 342).

The child’s emotional experience is thus a complex process of negotiation between her own subjective world, the window of potential future selves provided by the school, and the contextual conditions in which the experience takes place (Iannaccone, Marsico, & Tateo, 2012). The child can comply with the intervention or resist it (the backward dotted arrows in Fig. 9.3) as “a fundamental conflict between expectations and realizations and must therefore call forth some kind of self-defensive reaction from the individual in later life” (Ichheiser, 1943a, p. 139). In any case, the child and the student will have to negotiate between the potential different trajectories of the socially imagined child-to-be and their own expectations, desires, and needs. Such negotiation becomes even more complicated by the fact that “children at school are all the time confronted with the apparently opposing directions of developing independent thinking but following the teacher” (Tateo, 2015b, p. 61).

## Success as a Value and as a Measure

The problems addressed by Ichheiser concerning the relationship between educational systems and social values are still remarkably topical. School systems worldwide are currently struggling with the dilemma of an education that is more and more focused toward performance, skills, and competencies, than the student's personal traits (Ichheiser, 1943a). On the other hand, a minority countermovement is advocating for a *Bildung*-like education, criticizing the “commodification” of education as an instrumental good rather than an end in itself. It is worth noting that both views focus on a normative and value-laden teleology of education, whose goals are set sometime in the future, going beyond, and sometimes overlooking, the present condition of the students. They also share the naturalization of these values, which become taken-for-granted assumptions, axioms that are not worth questioning:

The fact, for instance, that actually we tend to judge and evaluate individuals according to the success or failure of their actions rather than according to their real personal qualities is “obvious” and will hardly be questioned by any intelligent observer of everyday life. Yet, if we, as psychologists, would realistically take into account the full implications of this “obvious” fact we could not help but restate the most of the implicit presuppositions upon which vast areas of psychology are based (especially psychology of intelligence, educational psychology, vocational psychology). (Ichheiser, 1943b, p. 206)

I think that this is the profound meaning of Bruner's concept of “folk pedagogy” (1996): the implicit teleological<sup>1</sup> presuppositions about the process of education that society attaches to its system of values and tends to naturalize as the “right” trajectory of development. The theories of children's minds, the theories about the correct teaching methods, and the theories about “ought” behavior are historically contextualized and can change over time within the same society (Bruner, 1996). But the value-laden assumptions about the imagined child-to-be and about the ultimate goal of education are more persistent exactly because they are naturalized and implicit.

This is also the sense of Ichheiser's discussion about the “ideology of success” (Ichheiser, 1943a). In fact, as he points out, contemporary Western societies consider success as both a goal in itself and a measure of “worthiness”—a successful person is a person who deserves to be successful because we all live in the best of possible societies. Of course, the question arises: How do we “measure” success in the educational context?

## Conclusion

Let me now come back to my initial statement and try to explain it: The ultimate goals of education are unachievable, based on its own premises, yet it will never fail to achieve them. As I have discussed above, the ultimate goal of any educational

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<sup>1</sup>And sometimes also “theological,” to the extent that, for instance, the assumptions about what a child shall become and how to measure the success of education are rooted into the religious system of beliefs

intervention is an imagined one. It is a condition yet-to-be that is true by definition. It is so because the educational goals are value-laden ideal conditions that become naturalized and unquestioned. What an educational system should do (namely, to educate) is one of those “obvious facts” (Ichheiser, 1943b) that psychology overlooks. Thus, any educational system will always be successful in “educating,” because it is in its own premises and implicit assumptions.

Nevertheless, the contemporary educational systems have a discrepancy between the norms of success and the actual conditions of success. They set some ideal conditions (e.g., meritocracy, equal opportunities, competences, etc.) that rely upon the ideological assumption of the “right” and “just” “order” of society. In doing so, this ideology is, at the same time, equalizing and distinguishing. For instance, whether the principle of meritocracy or equal opportunities policies fail to provide citizens with the expected improvement of life and work conditions, the commonly adopted political response is to claim for more meritocratic or affirmative actions, rather than questioning the social order.

On the other hand, a distinction is made between “our” system, which is implicitly “fair,” and the “other” systems, which are “less fair” by opposition (see Fig. 9.2 above). In the same vein, educational systems set up assessment methods of students’ individual success. These methods are based on implicit assumptions about what is a “good” or a “bad” student-to-be. Assessment methods thus “judge and evaluate individuals according to the success or failure of their actions rather than according to their real personal qualities” (Ichheiser, 1943b, p. 206). As a former vocational and educational psychologist in Austria, Ichheiser was aware—already before the WWII—that this was a major problem in psychology. The naturalization of value-laden assumptions in education leads to making implicit the facts we should be questioning:

We hope that these remarks will suffice to make clear why the contention in psychological discussions that certain facts or statements are quite “obvious” must be considered not only as meaningless, but even far worse than that: as a device of blocking the analysis of basic phenomena and preventing the incorporation of those phenomena into psychological theory. (Ichheiser, 1943b, p. 207)

If the goals of the educational system are to educate and assess, then it cannot fail. Yet, as the very same process of education is generating distinctions and inequalities, the fact that some individuals comply with the conditions of success at school becomes a confirmation of the norms of success. By contrast, if others fail in attaining success, these individuals must be “unworthy” of it, as the school will preserve the positive ideological vision of the norms of success.

As psychologists, Ichheiser reminds us, we should first of all question and try to explain what we sometimes take for granted: First is the fact that every educational system generates the conditions for equality and the conditions for distinctions at the very same time. Second, contemporary societies generate a discrepancy between the norms and the conditions of success. When people experience such a discrepancy (e.g., when they experience that competence is not enough to obtain a good social position in a meritocratic society, especially in times of economic crisis), ideology tends to preserve the “rightness” of the order by attributing the failure to the “unworthiness” of the person. Finally, we need to look at the complex interplay

between the unique trajectory of development of each individual and the sociohistorical conditions under which such a trajectory unfolds, avoiding trivializing them by naturalizing them.

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