# PEDAGOGY AND SUBJECTIVITY: CREATING OUR OWN STUDENTS

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**ABSTRACT** *Education students often expect that teacher education will teach them how to 'manage' their students. This expectation is founded upon a notion that the subjectivities of teacher and students are fixed and that it is, therefore, possible to 'know' what the students are like. Using Louis Althusser's notion of 'interpellation' this paper discusses how various theories of learning position teachers and students and can create different kinds of students (and teachers). If teachers can learn to manage their own thinking about the nature of their students, perhaps by learning a wide range of conceptual systems, they can in fact call different kinds of student into being.*

## INTRODUCTION

I once saw my father, James Devine[1], a primary school teacher, 'catch' a boy of nine or ten with a rock in his hand.

"I know you!" my father said. "You're that helpful boy from room......"

"Six ," the boy supplies.

"Your teacher was talking about you... now what did she say....you did something very kind for her the other day....Miss....miss....what's her name?"

"Hopkins. Miz Hopkins."

"She said you did something for her...now, what was it – I've forgotten just what she said."

"I.......cleaned the board?"

By this time the rock has slipped to the ground. My father and the child have a very pleasant conversation about what a good teacher Miss Hopkins is, and what nice things she has said about X – who supplies his name so that my father can report to Miss Hopkins what an interesting talk he has had with such an appreciative pupil about her good work. By this time the boy is a model citizen, who cannot wait to get into class to do more good work for that nice Miss Hopkins who likes him so much. My father I am sure then reports to Miss Hopkins on all the nice things that the child has said about her, and she undoubtedly then sees herself as the only teacher in the world who really understands him and cannot wait to get to do some more work with him.

## INTERPELLATION AND GOVERNMENTALITY

Teacher education students come into class wanting to know how to 'manage' the students they have before them but, as the story shows, the students they have before them are actually not a static entity. They are to a significant degree a

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[1] I would like to acknowledge here my debt to my father, Jim Devine, for his acuity and knowledge in many facets of education including pedagogy. Jim taught in the Waikato and Auckland regions for 30 years, and died shortly after this paper was written.

reflection of what the teacher sees or, perhaps more accurately, a reflection of the reflection that the teacher shows the student.

Frantz Fanon draws attention to this phenomenon in *Black skin, white masks* (Fanon, 1970). When a child cries out: 'Look Mama, see the Black man', he *becomes* the black man, rather than the psychologist or whatever other 'identity' he might have been in the habit of occupying. He is called into being, interpellated as Louis Althusser (1984) names it, as a black man. From this point his recognition of himself is altered.

The point of this notion of interpellation, for the purposes of this paper, is that teachers have more power than they think they have. Beginning teachers tend to see themselves as having a fixed character – a 'personality' – and their students as having fixed characteristics – of gender, class, ethnicity, size, disposition, behaviour and so on.

Teachers can alter the situation markedly by recognising the power they have in calling a student to take up certain subject positions – as learner, as manipulable pigeon, as citizen, as 'good' pupil or 'bad' pupil (or even worse, as not a 'pupil' at all), as a sexed person, as a person of a specific culture, ethnicity, colour (or as a person who is specifically not of a culture, ethnicity, colour) and so on. The teacher is not an incursion into a room full of fixed identities but an active agent in creating 'identity', or subjectivity, even at the same time as their own teacher-subjectivity is worked upon by their students.

Education is at one and the same time about reproducing society, that is, engendering conformity, and about producing the hitherto unproduced, the new, the unspoken, critique, new paradigms, entrepreneurialism and so on. The teacher's role in this is ceaselessly demanding. Not only must teachers model and reward conformity, deliver the knowledge of yesterday so that the student can take part in yesterday's economy ('get a job') but they must also prepare them for the future – make them 'flexible', entrepreneurial, 'open-minded' – which is to say that they must teach the possibility of thinking differently, even as they indoctrinate their students into things-as-they-are. The teacher's role in reproducing society is well examined in the Marxist literature, from Marx to Bourdieu, and they do not miss the point that it is not the exact forms of society that have to be reproduced, but the relations between members of society. This has the result that, even as teachers endeavour to emancipate – often by teaching the skills which will enable working class children to rise above their station as it were – the world is shifting, and those skills will be required to enable those same children to remain within their station. The teaching of skills is not in itself emancipatory, there has to be something more. It may well be that the most emancipatory activity of the teacher has less to do with the content of lessons and more to do with the relations established, that is, the subjectivities and relations between subjectivities which are the ethical business of teaching.

Judith Butler (1997) raises a question regarding Althusser's notion of interpellation, by challenging whether or not a person would answer to the interpellation if s/he did not already position themselves in such a way. If one calls a man a 'witch' or a 'bitch', for example, the response is as likely to be incomprehension as embarrassment or shame. It is most unlikely that he will take on either of these subject positions as credible descriptions of himself – indeed, the impossibility is possibly the reason for the popularity of 'son of a bitch'. But perhaps this is because the person spoken to knows the discourse and knows that there are certain characteristics about him which makes the interpellation inappropriate, so he doesn't have to take it seriously. If a woman teacher, for

instance, is called a 'witch' or a 'bitch' she knows very well that within a discourse which is very familiar to her, these are available positions for her to take up, and her response is likely to be very personal: whether accepting or rejecting her notion of her self is called into question.

This is why Althusser positions these interpellations within ideology. 'Ideology' he defines as "a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1984, p. 162). If the ideology is completely unknown – the representation is unrecognisable, there is no imaginary or conceptual connection or the discourse amounts to a foreign language – then interpellation will not work. There is no point in calling a child a 'linguist' just because he or she has a fair mastery of language: the term will be meaningless and it will not alter her self-conception. Call her 'good at English', however, and her world begins to change.

But Althusser's notion of ideology is not just about the accidents of teaching. It is a very profound critique of the school as an agent of the reproduction of the relations of society. The school is an 'ISA', an ideological state apparatus. It has a role in rendering the child/subject governable, by causing the child to learn and adopt all those things the state needs the individuals who comprise the state to know.

The individual in question (who believes in an ideology) behaves in such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which 'depend' the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a 'subject'.

The term ideology is not, in Althusser's hands, a word denoting merely theory or some kind of abstract knowing. It is abundantly material: it embraces the kind of practical experience and expression of a way of understanding the world that is found in church through kneeling, praying and crossing oneself, and that is found in schools through the technologies of assemblies, lines, rows of desks, rolls, reports, unit standards, tests and so on. It is this lived experience of ideology which constructs the subject, which is why 'performance' of the ideology is so important. Foucault, who was Althusser's student, preferred the term 'theory' to ideology, as less charged with disapproval, and gave the term 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1991) to the notion of the rationality/mentality of government which is (also) inculcated in the individual. And in education, from the student's point of view, this performance happens more often in the classroom than elsewhere so it is here that the performance of ideology and the subsequent construction of subjectivity is most important (cf. Althusser, 1984, p. 157).

Despite significant reservations (Butler, 1997), which appear to arise from resistance to the lack of autonomy implied by the notion of interpellation, Judith Butler (1994) discusses a related idea in an interview for Radical Philosophy:

> I begin with the Foucauldian premise that power works in part through discourse and it works in part to produce and destabilise subjects. But then, when one starts to think carefully about how discourse might be said to produce a subject, it's clear that one's already talking about a certain figure of trope of production. It is at this point that it's useful to turn to the notion of performativity, and performative speech acts in particular – understood as those speech acts that bring into being that which they name. This is the moment in which the discourse becomes productive in a fairly specific way. So what I'm trying to do is think

about the performativity as *that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names.* (p. 33)

If we take on board Butler's project here, we would look at those aspects of a teacher's discourse which have the capacity to produce what they name. And I argue that the discourses/theories we have taught as 'learning theories' have precisely that capacity. In teaching that this is *how* students learn, we have encouraged teachers to produce students who do learn or who construct themselves as learners and as people in precisely those ways which the theories define. So that what is initially a 'description' of how the child learns becomes not only a 'prescription' for getting them to learn but a description of the newly developed subjectivity of the learner. A good example of this would be to take Piaget's (1924, 1955) notion of the developmental stages: originally a descriptive taxonomy, Piaget's stages now form the basis for deciding whether or not a child is 'normal' (i.e., whether s/he fits Piaget's descriptive norms), the curriculum which should be applied to bring the child up to those norms if s/he has 'failed' them and, most astonishing of all, provide a curriculum for people with brain damage who are assumed to need to reprise the developmental steps of infants. The original theory, performed by experts, has the effect of constructing persons in particular ways. Those ways of course tend to support the 'rightness' of the original theory. So it becomes impossible to test empirically whether or not the theory 'works' better than another.

To Piaget, the child appears to be a little scientist (e.g., Piaget, 1974) and the question is not so much 'how does the child learn?' but 'how much does he know?' and a great deal of his research is devoted to finding out how much children understand about the world, with certain normative and normalising consequences following on from his conclusions as to what children understand at certain stages and ages. He is interested in:

> ...the development of the intelligence itself – what the child learns by himself, what none can teach him and he must discover alone ... this development which takes time... he needs years to discover such a law. (Piaget, 1974, p. 2)

Piaget's suggestions about the process of learning mirror Kuhn's theories about the processes of scientific revolutions. Consequently, the Piagetian teacher can provide the materials for reflection but not teach the processes of reflection or learning. Obviously some children do better in this context than others; and a comment made by Piaget might give us some indication as to how the child is positioned as successful or unsuccessful scientist:

> ...there are certain subjects who inspire confidence right from the beginning, who can be seen to reflect and consider, and there are others of whom one feels equally certain that they pay no heed to the questions and only talk rubbish in their replies. (Piaget , 1929, p. 21)

This is harsh talk and while it might be – marginally – acceptable in a researcher it is not at all acceptable in the teacher.

The teacher, however, is inescapably the vector of changing subjectivity. I say inescapably because if the teacher decides not to use Piagetian theory, on the grounds that s/he may cause a child to think of itself as abnormal, or not to use

behaviour modification because s/he may turn a child into a trained mouse or a pigeon, or not to use any other set of theoretical constructs which s/he has learned in the course of teacher education, then s/he is reduced to using 'common sense', that is, (to adapt Keynes just slightly) to using common understandings based on the theories of people whose names and precise theoretical positions we no longer remember and to which we do not apply rigorous critique. So the ethical problem is not one which can be avoided by avoiding theory: it is one that the teacher should engage with regardless of what theory, or group of theories, is to be used.

Nor is the teacher alone the source of interpellation. The classic research done on New Zealand classroom interactions by Alison Jones in 1984 (Jones, 1991) shows very clearly that students can interpellate the teacher, and call a certain teacherly subjectivity or a way of being a teacher into existence, just as surely as a teacher can summon a way of being a student into being. In Jones's study, classes were divided on 'ability', that is to say, on the basis of class and ethnicity. Students of high socio-economic status or those whose 'habitus', to use Bourdieu's phrase, was compatible with that of the teacher and school system, were aware of the importance of 'doing the work themselves' and developing a deep understanding of concepts, sufficiently deep that they would be able to manipulate the concepts themselves when needed, (i.e., in examinations). The teacher understood the terms of this 'discourse' and there appeared to be little difficulty on the part of either teacher or students in constructing acceptable forms of teacher and student subjectivities. The lower socio-economic group believed that the archetypal 'good' teacher exercised 'control' and gave notes, and they exercised a certain power over their classroom teacher (through compliance and withdrawal of compliance) to ensure that she fulfilled their expectations of the good teacher. Since the teacher also believed that 'control' was a good thing and that 'control' was represented by certain forms of behaviour – quietness, orderly sitting in rows and so forth – there was enough common understanding of the discourse in both cases for the teacher to be meaningfully interpellated by the class of lower socio-economic status into a very disparate subject position from the one the higher SES class constructed for their teacher. As Jones (1994) points out, the mutually satisfactory construction of teacher and student subjectivities does not necessarily translate into effective learning so there is an obligation for the teacher to take into account a wider range of interpellative possibilities. Would it be possible for the teacher to encourage these students of lower socio-economic status and – more importantly – of different pedagogical traditions to see themselves differently as learners – and therefore to allot the teacher a different role? Yes, but the trick is to put the horse before the cart. Once students are encouraged to see themselves as having an active role in relation to the material to be learnt, they will push and pull the teacher into place.

## SOME INFLUENTIAL THEORIES

Let us consider, then, how some of the theories in the New Zealand tradition tend to construct the subject, both the student-subject and the teacher-subject.

Most of the theories which have been popular in New Zealand from time to time have been thought of as *scientific*. That is, they have sought some kind of legitimation as science. With this comes a kind of appeal to truth, to testing, to consistency and to a way of knowing which is, by definition, universal or equally applicable to all peoples, at all times. This scientific, universalising project arises from the traditions of Western Humanism and its goal to replace God with Man,

and to 'know' increasingly more about 'Man': the proper study of mankind is Man, wrote Pope (1870), in unspoken opposition to the mediaeval notion that the proper study of mankind was God. So all our competing theories of learning position themselves as exclusive of the others. They are 'truth', and other ways of thinking are mistaken. This puts teachers into a very difficult position. But it also puts them into the very powerful position of being able to choose between ideologies, and to use one to critique, support or undermine another. Teachers have always been eclectic and fortunately now, in the shape of post-structuralist writers like Deleuze and Guattari, they have theoretical support. Deleuze and Guattari (2002) see knowledge not as a 'tree' with one stem, that is, with one fundamental understanding from which branches/chapters/applications arise, but as a rhizomatic form, in which subjects (people), forms of knowledge, events, practices and beliefs can interrelate, create shoots and go off in various directions. So it is possible to use Dewey, Applied Behaviour Analysis and Piaget or Vygotsky in the same classroom without a blush. We are just being rhizomatic.

I do not intend to run through the whole range of theoretical positions available to the teacher and student but will consider one or two – the reader will then presumably be able to apply the technique to the theory *du jour*.

One of the most significant set of theories to affect teaching in New Zealand – so significant that his name is almost forgotten although his techniques and pedagogic principles have become almost the invisible underpinning of good teaching in New Zealand especially in primary classrooms – is that of John Dewey. Dewey was a philosopher and his interest in education comes quite specifically out of his desire to establish democracy in the U.S. through the medium of education, that is, to create the kind of democratic, inclusive and coherent society which he believed to be desirable. In this case, the manipulation of subjectivity was not a concealed purpose of a pedagogic programme – it was the heart of it. So the Deweyan teacher would teach notions of equity and political responsibility through the techniques of his classroom: through mock parliaments and debates, through negotiated rules, through discussions of fairness and modelling concern for others, through taking the child's interests seriously (this is the realm of 'child-centred' education) and through developing the talents of future citizens through motivation rather than through force. Because Dewey believed that people learn through habit, that is, through every experience, and that experience modified the person undergoing it, in order to produce good democratic society, one has to produce people whose habits and experience are democratic. So the teacher has to lead this future citizen into the full enjoyment of his or her political rights while, at the same time, developing a healthy respect for the rights of others *by making them habitual*, that is, by making them part of the ongoing, ordinary life of the classroom (Dewey, 1938). The teacher is somewhat ambiguously cast as judge and as the President/monarch in this classroom and there is large potential for dispute when the teacher fails to be as democratic as her citizen/subjects would like her to be. It is not a concept of pedagogy which appeals to all peoples. Nor are all students happy to be called into existence as political beings. Nonetheless, it is a history of which we need not be ashamed. Another major tradition which has major implications in terms of subjectivity is Applied Behaviour Analysis.

Applied Behaviour Analysis is an interesting theory which lays major claims to scientific validity and is based on one of the oldest Enlightenment conceptions of the subject: Hobbes's self-interested person, red in tooth and claw. Based on studies of animals who respond to 'stimuli' (mainly food) by learning required

behaviours, Applied Behaviour Analysis makes the conceptual leap from rat or pigeon to Man without too much trouble. And it works. Man is indeed an animal and what he has in common with these animals is an affection for food, and the ability to make a conceptual link between performing certain behaviours (pressing a key, running a maze, sitting up straight, getting work finished) and rewards. Food remains, despite the concerns of anti-junk foodists, the most effective reinforcer.

So, how does this theory affect learner and teacher subjectivities? Students do not learn to see themselves as pigeons but they do quickly realise that the game is about reward and about performing tasks which are related exactly to what is required. The Hobbesian (Hobbes, 1642/1983) concept of the self-interested individual which lies at the heart of Behaviour Modification has a great deal in common with the self-interested, atomized individual who lies at the heart of Public Choice theory and other similar economistic theories about the way people are and behave. Consequently, there is much likeness between the student as constructed by Behaviour Modification and the teacher constructed by New Public Management principles. This makes for 'consistency' throughout the system and encourages the application of 'management' principles to the classroom and to the management of teachers. But, in both cases, there is a problem in the self-limiting nature of the concept. The teacher, or the employer or the government, depending on whether the setting is that of the classroom or the staffroom, sets up the description of what counts as behaviour to be rewarded. Knowledge does not really come into the picture. The focus is on performance – 'emitting' the desired forms of behaviour which merit the rewards. Like many other auditing systems (benchmarking, appraisal, etc.) the emphasis is on a legalistic definition of 'work' to be done. In part this is to make it less confusing, and to establish clearly a connection between the behaviour and the reward, but the consequence is that of a performer who expects nothing for initiative (unless 'initiative' is specifically asked for, and it would be very hard to arrive at a scientific description) and expects a great deal for conforming to expectations. It is not, therefore, surprising that, as a set of techniques, Behaviour Modification tends to be used most for 'difficult' students, who are not seen as motivated by the rewards available to their less difficult, more academically successful peers. The system is essentially conformist and, as such, carries its own downfall. In terms of Foucault's notion of 'governmentality', Applied Behaviour Management prepares students for lives of submission and acceptance of goals and standards laid out for them by others – the highest values are docility and governability. The 'ideology', in Althusser's terminology, is one of physical compliance in which the self-interested individual is called into existence as an anxious subject of the will of others. Even Skinner, who advocates the development of the 'science of behaviour' to solve all those inconvenient problems brought about by human behaviour in relation to technology (overcrowding, overpopulation, pollution, etc.), pauses briefly at the problem of a completely determinist view of the human subject:

> Who is to construct the controlling environment and to what end?
> Autonomous man presumably controls himself in accordance with a
> built-in set of values; he works for what he finds good. But what will
> the putative controller find good, and will it be good for those he
> controls? (Skinner, 1973, p. 22)

Skinner does not answer his own questions, merely observing that "questions of this sort are said ... to call for value judgments" (p. xxx). Unfortunately, teachers cannot sidestep the issue so neatly. They live the practices which Skinner writes about and have to live with the position they take up within them. The subject position which these practices allocate to the teacher closely approximates that of God. The teacher defines what is to be done and what the rewards or lack of rewards or active punishments will be. The chaos of experience is to be brought into order by instituting a consistent manipulator of causality – who is the teacher. There are certain attractions to this role, undoubtedly, but beware! The world doesn't really conform to this pattern even though generations of politicians, businessmen and teachers have aspired to it. There are dangers to being held responsible for the failure of the world to correspond to a kind of Calvinist association of hard work with material success.

## CONCLUSION

In the course of this paper I have, briefly, used Althusser's theory of 'interpellation' and Michel Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' to look at the implications for the subject positioning of both students and teachers of various educational theories: Piagetian concepts; what we might call nineteenth century missionary concepts, as in Alison Jones's 5Mason (Jones, 1991); Deweyist theory; and Behaviour Modification. These theories by no means exhaust the possible range of educational and learning theories which might have major implications for the teacher and the student in terms of how they see themselves and are seen by others but they serve as models for the process. The challenge is for teachers to become aware, to the extent that they are able, of the theories they use in terms of these effects and to deliberately choose, in an ethically conscious fashion, those which will give the most productive results. Teaching, in this way, is not primarily a set of skills – theories to be put into practice – but an ethical practice, of discriminating among theoretical positions, all of which remain available, for the best one to use, for each child, at different times. The wider the teacher's range, the wider his or her ethical options are. This in itself is an argument for a form of teacher education which does not focus on a 'best practice' (defined by whom? judged by what criteria?) but embraces as best practice precisely a wide variety of practices and an ethical consciousness of the implications of those practices.

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