Let’s Have a Conversation about Cultural Capital

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First introduced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s, cultural capital refers to non—financial resources that allow a person to obtain status or social mobility, by signaling whether they belong in certain circles.¹

In other words, it’s not just our money that matters, but our outward displays too, which can include language, behavior, and the clothing we wear. As educators, we may sometimes refer to cultural capital as the soft skills we hope our students gain so they can excel in college and future careers. This includes the practice of going to professor’s office hours or knowing how to appropriately construct emails. In our schools, students express, learn, and acquire new forms of cultural capital as they socialize with one another and adults, learning what it means to be a functioning human and citizen in a modern world.

The idea of cultural capital works by being exclusionary—helping us to understand the signals of who fits in and who does not—given our expectations of certain spaces and the people who should inhabit them. In our rapidly changing and diversifying world, a basic problem that arises related to cultural capital is how the concept relates to “underrepresented” students, or those from minoritized backgrounds and low— income homes.


Race and Cultural Capital in Education

Our expectations of what these students and our understanding of their inherent cultural gifts is colored by our perceptions of capital and belonging. As these students are less represented in coveted higher education spaces and in the professionalized workforce, they often find themselves attempting to defy negative stereotypes about their culture while simultaneously pursuing the so—called “American Dream.”

For example, at our undergraduate institutions—the University of Chicago and University of California, Los Angeles—we noticed that our Black college classmates were often questioned on campus by university police personnel and asked to show student identification, an experience that was rarely, if ever, shared by our White peers.

Within the field of education, several scholars have taken up these questions around race and cultural capital. Cartwright critiques our common conceptualization of cultural capital, arguing that it is inherently racialized and thus effectively delegitimizes the cultural norms of many.² The racialized nature of cultural capital is evident in recent movements to delegitimize and vilify Critical Race Theory for the fear that it threatens Whiteness and the status quo of acceptable and comfortable curriculum. In urban education discourse, Tara Yosso poses the important question, whose culture has capital, explaining that the many existing skills, competencies, and behaviors of diverse students are characterized as atypical and thus in need of reform to conform to the mainstream.³

We build on these scholars’ works to ask: If a student does not feel that their culture or identity is respected or valued in school, how could they be expected to excel? Why would they strive to demonstrate their worth if they do not feel like they belong?

Students of Color sometimes experience what we could consider to be an unsustainable double standard to which their actions and accomplishments are measured. On the one hand, there is the trap of trying to succeed in a society marred by White supremacy . . . On the other hand, there is then a trap where we expect that young people of Color need to not only succeed but to do so “authentically,” and without “selling out.” This fails to consider the various expressions that cultural capital can take on and disregards the different manifestations through which giftedness can present itself.

Whether intentionally or not, we ultimately end up placing our own unfair judgements and preconceived notions upon students. As a result, some students are often critiqued by their peers for turning their backs on their communities as they work to bridge their existing cultural assets with forms more often rewarded.

Our thesis is that this kind of labeling comes from a commonplace, narrow view of students’ cultures and cultural assets, both of which are dynamic and dynamically expressed. In a world where students of Color from lower—income homes already can feel less valued and less welcome, we can alleviate the burdens they experience by ourselves striving to consider and uplift the multiple, varied forms of giftedness we may encounter.

If we begin to reframe our stagnant notions of what and who success looks like, attempting to recognize brilliance in the many unique forms it might be presented, we can work toward helping more students fit in as well as achieve in a way that showcases their special talents and the various forms they may take.

Judging J-Stud

Anindya Kundu’s (2020) The Power of Student Agency includes many narratives of student success and individual agency overcoming structural barriers.4

One such story is that of “J-Stud.” J-Stud is from Jamaica Queens, where he was born and raised by his single mother and grandmother. Like many of his peers from the same low-income NYC neighborhood, he became disinterested with (and disenfranchised from) school. He sat in the back and kept his head down in all his classes, writing away in a tattered notebook.

One day, his high school English teacher took an interest in what he was scribbling. Curiously, she asked if she could see the contents of his journal. Flipping through the pages, the teacher became astonished at J-Stud’s passion and talent for writing rap lyrics. The teacher then offered J-Stud, a student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), the rare opportunity to record his lyrics at a friend’s studio in exchange for him displaying more effort in her class. This seemingly trivial exchange between a shy student and a passionate educator ultimately led to a series of events, opportunities, and mentors where J-Stud realized he was interested in the accounting side of the music business. J-Stud, through the help of others, embarked on a new path to pursue his associate’s and then bachelor’s degrees in Finance. Over time, he climbed the ranks of a large investment bank where he is currently employed as a high-ranking Director.

Surprisingly, some might admonish J-Stud’s upward mobility by accusing him of “selling out” by working for the same capitalist system that

has arguably kept communities of Color underresourced. For example, once, when lecturing at New York University, one of Kundu’s undergraduate students questioned why this story—where J-Stud works at a financial institution likely associated with displacing low-income people of Color—epitomizes successful agency. This critique came from a self-proclaimed progressive student who was working on the Hillary Clinton campaign, highlighting that unfair judgements can come from anyone, even those with equitable intentions. It seems that some students, J-Stud in this case, cannot catch a break in the current system—whether directly experiencing barriers or skepticism around their accomplishments because of how we narrowly perceive success and identity.

Would this NYU student hold J-Stud equally accountable for his success if he were a White male who grew up in SoHo or the West Village and attended a prestigious NYC private school? The NYU student’s critique of J-Stud is ultimately harmful, and in a sense, is much like the commonly and controversially referenced scenario of children being chastised by their peers for either “sounding White” or not being “Black enough”.

While we are more likely to recognize that this premise is absurd, we may not realize that equally damaging can be our perception of who should live and work in certain spaces.

Breaking down the exclusivity of certain high-status spaces—even including the investment banking profession—is a necessary but potentially uphill battle.

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value.\textsuperscript{7} Thus, for members of marginalized communities, achieving Bourdieu’s type of cultural capital can be a double-edged sword, creating an existential crisis where some may feel the pressure to sacrifice their own cultural norms and identities to achieve mainstream success, or chance sacrificing the latter to achieve social acceptance by conforming to the demands of “authenticity.” For many, achieving Boudreau’s cultural capital may seem necessary in the pursuit of upward mobility and advocating for others. In other words, individuals may strive to leverage their hard-earned entry in dominant spaces to mobilize important changes in policy and practice from within.

Problematically, our networks with the highest status and privilege—those in our higher education and workforce sectors—remain arenas where people like J-Stud are underrepresented and thus feel less degrees of freedom to express themselves naturally. There are real costs to these constraints. For example, walking the tightrope of meeting other’s expectations even leads to higher stress levels can and lower life expectancy.\textsuperscript{8} These dilemmas are particularly problematic for young people entering adulthood, where one’s life choices carry immense weight and consequences for the ability to obtain financial stability and security in relationships.

Understanding why “keeping it real” versus “selling out” is a hypocritical dichotomy requires a more thorough interrogation of deficit perspectives and their prevalence in explaining educational outcomes. Deficit perspectives assess students per their perceived weaknesses and shortcomings rather than focusing on strengths. This fails to acknowledge multifaceted forms of giftedness is causing us to “mistake difference—particularly difference from ourselves—for deficit”.

Yet, problematically, influential education and social sciences research continues to implicitly and explicitly indicate that underrepresented youth are often more drawn to “keep it real” and express apathy or resentment toward activities like schoolwork than to improve their circumstances\textsuperscript{9}. What much of these dialogues fail to realize or consider is that students can in fact be true to themselves and strive toward academic and professional greatness.

In fact, this is the kind of achievement we should wish for all our students, where they succeed and do so by showcasing their individually unique talents and gifts. Ideally, we can work toward creating an education system that embraces and fosters this kind of distinct, student agency.

Finding and Supporting More J-Studs

What is the true value of cultural capital if achieving it means losing oneself in the process?\textsuperscript{10}

Likewise, why does achieving cultural capital come at the cost of authenticity in the eyes of some? The self can be viewed as both malleable and in direct relationship to the concrete community and situation that one finds oneself in at


\textsuperscript{10} John Dewey likewise questioned “to what avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to gain the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul.” John Dewey, \textit{Experience and Education} (1938), https://archive.org/stream/ExperienceAndEducation_JohnDewey/dewey-experience_djvu.txt. The soul in this context refers to one’s relative appreciation of things deemed worthwhile, and the desire to apply what has been learned.
any moment. Ultimately, only a student herself can tell us what it means for her to succeed authentically. Our measuring of student success by premeditated assumptions and judgements of who belongs where is exclusionary.

As all young people embark on the journey of finding their selves, we as educators and youth advocates should support them with open minds and open hearts. This means nurturing each student’s personhood and encouraging fulfillment as well as achievement, as they seek self-improvement. That is how adolescents will be able to contribute back proudly and uniquely to society. Educators can support growth by acknowledging the importance of uplifting various forms of giftedness. We need our students to continue developing their identities as they enter spaces that may be unfamiliar to them.

Reflecting on the tragic death of Tamir Rice, it seems that children of Color, particularly young Black boys, are not granted the ease of childhood that other are in our nation. From youth they are feared as pariahs by courts and store owners alike, the mere sight of “unredeemable hoodies” invoking the clutching of purses. After the death of Trayvon Martin, Geraldo Rivera said that the killer, George Zimmerman, was as much to blame as the hoodie Martin wore that night.

Educators have a special capacity and ability to change these deeply ingrained social narratives as young people come of age in schools. Through working to embody the broadest sense of inclusivity in our classrooms, we can directly shape our community toward obtaining a better and more equitable future for all. This begins with us reframing discussions on success and achievement to be more inclusive of people of all backgrounds and profiles. We do this by acknowledging and celebrating varied forms of giftedness, from being good at accounting to being able to write rap lyrics.

J-Stud is doing powerful work reconstructing what it means to be a New York investment banker. Still living in lower-income area of Jamaica, Queens where he once was a boy, J-Stud wants other kids in the neighborhood to see him as he dresses sharp on his way to his banking job in the city, so they too can see another, unique representation of what success could look like for them. He also serves on boards within his company that looks to diversify their talent pool by opening doors to opportunity that are traditionally closed for underrepresented people.

J-Stud does not have to do these things to be accepted by anyone. His ability to transcend limitations of poverty should be praised regardless of his background. Still, it is a great testament that he does. We should allow ourselves to find and support more J-Studs by acknowledging that interest in one thing can often lead to another. In this way, we invite students into spaces where they have traditionally been excluded and make them their own.

One way to start is to create the conditions for our students to express themselves in their own way and thereby allow them to challenge our monolithic ideas of what and who success looks like in both academic and professional settings.

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mental health in higher education, race & inequality, and social justice.

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