

The Educated Person

Why read this text...

The notion of 'the educated person' helps us think comparatively about what constitutes an educated person. It opens for exploring the many different ways in which a person may be seen as educated and what 'being educated' entails in and across different contexts.

Extensive formal education is often seen – in Europe and elsewhere – as a prerequisite for being considered 'educated'. We tend to view lawyers as more educated than master carpenters, and clergymen as more educated than ER nurses. We tend to view people with practical knowledge based on long experience as not really 'educated'. Yet, while doctors are highly educated, much of what they know may prove useless in the engine room of a freighter, the cockpit of an airplane or on the musical stage.

This raises important questions of how we learn to judge who is educated and who is not, and which assumptions about education guide our thinking. The concept of 'educated person' is a vital tool for thinking critically about whether the educational ideas and hierarchies we live with and produce are worthy and expedient, and how we might want to transform them.

Historical context

Working in small-scale societies across the world, anthropologists have long noted how institutions of modern schooling introduced by missionaries, colonial or national governments tended to disregard, devalue and over time, dismantle local, indigenous educational and knowledge systems, often thought of as 'inferior,' 'backward' or 'useless' for upcoming generations.

In his study of the Chaga educational system in Kilimanjaro, Otto F. Raum (1940) looked at both formalized instruction (initiation rites) and peer-to-peer learning among boys herding family livestock. His aim was to raise awareness of indigenous educational systems among colonial policymakers working to establish formal English-medium schooling modelled along European lines. In this, Raum makes a distinction between *education* and *schooling*.

In anthropology education refers to non-formal modes of acquisition and appropriation of cultural knowledge, such as language, forms of social exchange and relationality, normative emotional and moral conduct, spirituality and worldview. It also refers to particular forms of training and sets of criteria used to identify people as more or less knowledgeable or skilled. In *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person* (1996:2), Levinson and Holland delineate 'education' as "culturally specific practices by which particular sets of skills, knowledges, and discourses come to define the fully 'educated' person". Schooling, on the other hand, refers to state organized or regulated institutions of intentional instruction i.e. modern institutions of mass education, both private and public (Levinson and Holland 1996:2). Instituted in the 1800s and later, modern state educational systems standardize certain forms of knowing

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and knowledge as 'knowledge'; they organize people in age and/or ability grades, and rank these according to a formalized hierarchy of primary, secondary and tertiary 'levels' of schooling.

The distinction between *education* and *schooling* is important for recognizing that learning takes places in all aspects of everyday living and that not all ways of becoming knowledgeable require formal schooling. This is of import in the current world in which modern institutions of nation-state schooling have gone global (Anderson-Levitt 2003).

a) Discussion

Despite the historical rise of mass public educational systems, bringing common forms of school organization, and powerful and convergent constructions of 'education,' there are constant struggles around definitions of 'education' and 'the educated person'. All cultures and social formations develop models of how one becomes a fully 'knowledgeable person'. Both across and within cultures and societies, mainstream populations as well as subgroups defined by gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc., may develop their own distinct conceptions of the educated person and ways of knowing (Levinson and Holland 1996: 21). These may be developed both within and beyond school settings, and both in extension of and against dominant notions of 'the educated person' (Luttrell 1996).

Schools and other venues of childhood education are contested sites of cultural production. Policymakers, educators, parents and many others do not necessarily agree on one definition of education, or what 'being educated' should entail. Scholars still debate whether schools empower or discipline students (Cf. Jules Henry) and criticize how personal trajectories of 'success' and 'failure' are shaped by schooling (cf. Varenne and McDermott). They also critique the moral and economic ranking of different 'schooled identities' and how these impinge on people's lives and livelihoods (Valentin 2003).

The concept of the educated person is useful for 1) decentering privileged conceptions of proper knowledge and conduct and 2) bringing a wider range of conceptions of what being educated entails to the table (Cf. [Funds of Knowledge-hyperlink!](#)). Exploring the cultural production of the educated person in both local and global contexts allows us to better understand how dominant conceptions of education are constantly challenged, contested and even transformed in the practices of everyday life.

b) Ethnographic Example(s)

Measuring a child's 'maturity' in terms of chronological age broken down into months is not a global phenomenon. Being 'five and three-quarters' or 'a December child' are culturally specific ways of defining and measuring childhood, which have gained salience through children's enrolment in modern institutions such as schools, summer camps, sports and other recreational venues. Kathryn Anderson-Levitt's important ethnographic work on how schools 'batch-produce' children critically questions the practice of characterizing children as 'young' or 'old' on the basis of chronological age measured precisely in months, and assumptions that elusive notions of 'mental age,' 'maturity' and 'level' can be measured with equal precision (1996:57). In ethnographic studies of reading classes in France and the US,

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she focuses on how teachers use concepts of age and maturity to evaluate a student's 'progress,' and to determine whether they are 'ahead,' 'on time' or 'behind' schedule. Anderson-Levitt suggest that this novel model of childhood and its obsession with age and maturity, is a cultural construction that has grown out of the 'assembly line-like' organization of mass schooling, with 'race-track-like' arrangements for sorting children. She argues that age-graded instruction, compulsory school-entry age, and batch instruction that constructs 'stupidity,' has sanctioned "an ideology that rationalizes the re-segregation of the 'precocious or 'advanced' children of the elite from the children of the masses" (1996: 58).

In 'Becoming Somebody in and against School', Wendy Luttrell (1996) addresses this important question of how schools produce selves and how people fashion selves both with and against schools. Drawing on an ethnographic study of women enrolled in adult literacy education in two US cities, she shows how women speak of going back to school to attain a high school diploma as 'bettering themselves' and finally getting to 'feel like somebody'.

What 'feeling like somebody' refers to in different contexts depends on how educational and occupational 'success' is culturally figured. In places where people have learned to identify as 'backwards' or 'behind,' success may be measured by attaining a 'school identity.' Laura Rival's study (1996) of 'modern schooling' versus 'forest education' among the Huaoroni of Ecuadorian Amazonas gives a unique look into how the forest-educated Huaoroni, aspiring to become 'modern,' embrace state schooling, which in turn reforms their everyday habits of eating, dressing and personal hygiene, reorganizes their social practices, values and beliefs, and creates new social identities. Rival shows how establishing state schooling in a forest village installs a new social distinction between the 'backward' people of the forest and 'modern' citizens of the town.

Karen Valentin's work (2003) in a squatter settlement in Kathmandu reveals similar desires and dilemmas of aspiring to a 'schooled identity.' Here youth had high expectations that becoming a 'schooled person' would better their chances for employment, economic security and greater social prestige. Youth who obtained formal schooling found themselves balancing between two worlds, between their parents' observance of conventional caste practices and the egalitarian ideology promoted by NGOs and schools. Binaries of modern and traditional, urban and rural, schooled and unschooled played into how youth defined themselves, by virtue of their schooled identity, in opposition to their parents' generation. This in turn led to experimenting with inter-caste marriages and new lifestyles as pop stars and actors. Valentin's study reminds us that while the educated person is culturally produced in specific sites, the educated person also produces new cultural forms (Cf. Levinson and Holland 1996).

Thinking further:

- How do people in your country/region) come to be seen, and see themselves, as educated? Which kinds of knowledge, skill, and behavior comprise 'being educated' in different settings and social contexts?
- What does being seen as 'educated' imply for a person's access to particular jobs,



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goods, esteem and 'membership' in society?

- Which forms of individual or collective authority and voice does 'being educated' bestow?
- Which hegemonic definitions of the 'educated person' are presently being produced on a global scale?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Education, knowledge, funds of knowledge, privilege, schooling, socialization, identity

Sources:

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