

# Urban Schools And Liminality

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## Abstract

While psychologists and sociologists generally agree that the goals of schooling include academic achievement, civic values, effective work habits and self-esteem, there is little conceptualization of schooling as a "safe" place for students to critically examine and challenge the values and axioms of the society. Using the anthropological concept of liminality, this qualitative study frames schools as liminal institutions. Data were collected from 24 students at four urban high schools in a large city in the southeastern United States. The findings indicate that students in the two "neighborhood" schools did not view their schools as liminal because of the fact that they are treated as children by the faculty and administration. In contrast, students at the two "citywide" schools are treated as adults and experienced this liminal dimension of schooling. Implications for classroom management are discussed relative to this conceptual framework.

Students enter school with some sense of who they are ethnically, racially, and sexually. No longer can we think of our students as *tabula rasa* simply to be filled with knowledge during the educational process. In this article, I contend that schools serve as "safe testing grounds" for students who are in the process of developing their identities/subjectivities and who have not completely assumed their roles and statuses in the larger society. I argue for a dynamic notion of social structure so that students can engage with teachers in a safe, healthy growth process versus current misbehavior which can be nihilistic.

While psychologists and sociologists generally agree that the goals of schooling include academic achievement, civic values, effective work habits, and self-esteem, there is little conceptualization of school as a "safe" place for students to critically examine, challenge, and possibly change the social structure.<sup>1</sup> It is this contestation, the head-on collision of student and rules, that holds within itself the generating source of future structures. It could be argued that contestation of this nature is what keeps our culture dynamic, that our schools should mirror the transition between childhood and adulthood by creating an environment in which this transformation can safely take place is a key point. But how much challenging in the form of misbehavior (assuming that this misbehavior is contestation related to identity formation) should we tolerate as part of this process of identity formation?

In his recent book, Sergiovanni (1996) noted that schools are "special places" that "stand between the subjective and protective environment of the family and the objective and exposed environment of the outside world" (p. xii). Sergiovanni's "special place," can be characterized as caring, nurturing, and safe. Sergiovanni described *school* using the metaphor of community, rather than looking at school as an organization. The placement of school between the subjective and objective worlds has been referred to in anthropological literature as "betwixt and between." Alluding to this quality of "betwixt and between," Johanningmeier (1987) referred to schooling as the transitional stage that exists between the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. I hold, then, that schools are among the few institutions remaining in modern society that provide the opportunity to "safely" test, and push the boundaries and borders that are established by society. After all, it is in school that one is confronted head-on with society's values in the form of rules and regulations. It is in school that student culture and school culture collide (McLaren, 1985, 1986; Willis, 1977). It could be argued that this is especially true for minorities and those who are oppressed. As McCaleb (1994) reminded us, "Upon going to school, children from homes where the language is other than English, from homes struggling with poverty, or from cultures or ethnicity unlike those who hold power in this country frequently face the devaluing of their own reality . . ." (p. vii). In a similar vein, one is reminded of Aronowitz's interpretation of schooling. Aronowitz suggested that the major purpose of schooling, conscious or not, is the denial of identity ". . . to strip away what belongs to the student, to reconstitute his/ her formation in terms of the boundaries imposed by the hegemonic intellectuals acting for the prevailing social order" (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 200).

As I reflect upon high school experience (a Catholic, all-male school in the southeastern United States in the late 1960s), the rules were numerous and sometimes seemed strange, but I learned what was expected of me by the society I eventually entered. I learned valuable lessons of accountability and responsibility. But if I critically examined those rules, I would probably not see a one-to-one correspondence with social reality except in terms of compliance and socialization. Some students challenged and pushed (drinking, drugs, disrespect to teachers) more than others, but we all learned from this process.

As a secondary teacher of 23 years, I continually face the challenge of maintaining an orderly classroom. Interestingly enough, I never received any formal training in classroom management. I learned on the job and, as a result, have tended to perpetuate the same practices that were used on me, which are not necessarily the best ones. But as each year goes by, I notice students being more passive about their role in education as well as less concerned about consequences for their actions. "Give me an F," responded a student to my request that he start his work for the day. Another student commented, "Call my mother, she doesn't care." DeSito (cited in Willis, 1996) noted that classroom management poses bigger challenges today than in the past. He stated, "In the past most students agreed to be controlled by the teacher. Today, students are more likely to challenge a teacher's authority. Students' role models from sports and movies promote confrontation, not obedience" (p. 1). If we teachers are to learn any practical lessons from framing

schooling as liminal, then we must look at the issues related to classroom management. Classroom management is the micropolitical environment from which we, then, can draw social, macro lessons.

What exactly is special about schools? What exactly is being tested by the students? How do we get students to develop an ownership of values, norms, and axioms that will guide them through their lives? I intend to show, using empirical data that probe the subjective experience of school life as disclosed by the students themselves, that the norms, values, and axioms of the dominant society are being tested. Schools provide the terrain upon which this testing occurs. (We no longer have rites of passage so characteristic of earlier, more traditional cultures.) Additionally, this challenging or testing behavior on the part of students, which is often interpreted by teachers and administrators as misbehavior, needs to be understood from a different perspective. But that is not to justify or romanticize this misbehavior. A balance must be achieved between challenges and boundaries. But while a balance is necessary, we must not forget that it is the very collision of these two that holds the lessons to be learned. In order to probe this alternative view, let's now turn to the concept of liminality and the tensions that exist between structure and agency.

### **School and Institutionalized Liminality: The Conceptual Framework**

A growing interest among educational researchers in qualitative research methodology and ethnographic portrayals of classroom life has sparked a developing awareness of the value of anthropological theory used in an educational context. The conceptual lens used in this study involves the anthropological concept of liminality. Originally described by Van Gennep (1960) and expanded by Turner (1969), the term liminality refers to a social state in which participants are stripped of their usual status and authority. All rites of passage or transitions are marked by three phases: separation, transition or margin (limin), and reaggregation.

The first phase, separation, comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions, or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous and the subject passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or the coming state. They exist outside of the structure of roles, statuses, and positions within society. In the third phase (reaggregation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject is in a relatively stable state once more, and by virtue of this, has rights and obligations of a clearly defined and "structural" type.

For example, while in school students are "homogeneous"—they are in the process of becoming doctors, lawyers, and teachers, but they are still all "students." Though it could be argued that students are not homogeneous, that is, members of gangs, groups and so forth, I hold that the quality of homogeneity holds for purposes of looking at students' contestation with society's values. This classification as "students" also points to the fact that they are marginal to the economy until they assume their status and position in the society (Johanningmeier, 1987). But when a student's formal education is completed, he or she is expected to be able to assume a role in society. Grimes (1982) referred to this social state as one of "social limbo" (p. 149) Miron and Lauria (1994) called this period of transition the "zombie land" (p. 8). Liminality, then, is a process of mid-transition—sometimes known as "betwixt and between"—a "period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of a culture" (Turner, 1969, p. 167). Turner referred to those in a liminal state as "threshold people" (1969, p. 95). But how does this apply to students in a school setting?

By using the conceptual framework of liminality to gain additional insights into the process of schooling, students are viewed as agents who hold the generating source of culture and "future" structure. As Giroux (1984) reminded us, "School culture is really a battleground on which meanings are defined, knowledge is legitimated, and futures are sometimes created and destroyed" (p. 133). From this perspective, students are not seen as passive victims in the process of schooling. They would be creatively engaged in the educational process, rather than passively accepting what is forced upon them by educational institutions.

Barbieri (1978) acknowledged that "young people need to rebel, and they need to progress from childish gullibility, through disillusionment and doubt, to adult discernment" (p. 506). But to do this they need standards (values) to rebel against and adult judgments to test and accept or reject. Schools provide those adult judgments and standards. Schools, then, serve as a preparation for life—students can learn what happens when rules are broken. They can learn the "risks" involved in challenging what the school (and the larger society) values. While in this transition period the consequences to one's actions and challenges may not be as harsh or harmful as they would be in the real world. These lessons, I contend, are then carried into adult life. Indeed, Miron and Lauria (1994) noted that through this process of resistance to the culture of schooling, students may actually gain the most important knowledge of all—"self-knowledge and knowledge of social identity" (p. 4). Following the anthropological concept of liminality, I argue in this article that school can provide a sanctuary or "space" where students can "safely" test and challenge the values of their society. In extreme cases, though, students may cross borders bringing violence and vulgarity into the sanctuary.

Johanningmeier (1987) noted that between the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood there is a transitional stage. At one time in our history, the beginning of adulthood was marked by the age at which people were granted the right to vote, the right to drink alcoholic beverages, the right to marry without parental consent, and assumed their "position" in the world of work. Now, however, our social, economic, and cultural circumstances seem to require a longer transitional period. While young people, a few generations ago, were pressed into work as soon as they were physically able, today they do not assume their position until much later in life. Additionally, college and graduate school help to postpone the assumption of one's responsibilities. In support of this observation, Johanningmeier (1987) acknowledged that youth, in effect, remain marginal to the economy.

### **Research Design**

The research for this article was part of a larger research project<sup>2</sup> into the nature of schooling and student resistance. In the larger research project, 48 students were interviewed in four inner-city high schools located in a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. All four schools are in the same urban school district. Observations and documents were also used as data sources. For example, standardized test scores (CAT), grade-point averages, socioeconomic status, and other demographic information were collected for each of the students interviewed. Purposeful sampling techniques were employed. Care was taken to assure that the students were typical of the larger school populations. More specifically, maximum variation sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993) or quota sampling techniques were used to make sure all ethnic groups, socioeconomic levels, genders, and grade-point averages were represented in the interviews as they existed in the school populations. Students were assured that the data collected would not be shared with any of their teachers or administrators and that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity.

Two of the schools are "neighborhood schools" drawing their populations from the school boundaries that are drawn by the governing school board. The other two schools are "citywide schools" (magnet schools focusing on accelerated academics) and draw their students from the entire school district utilizing entrance, as well as retention, standards. One of the neighborhood schools is 100% African-American, while the other is racially and ethnically diverse (79% African-American, 15% Caucasian, 4% Asian-American, and 2% Hispanic). While one of the citywide schools is also 100% African-American, the other is 65% African-American, 19% Caucasian, 12% Asian-American, and 4% Hispanic. As evidence of socioeconomic status, 67% of the neighborhood students receive free or reduced lunch, while 50% of the citywide school students receive free or reduced lunch.

For this article, qualitative research techniques, including in-depth interviews and focus-group interviews, were used to document empirically the students' perspective on schools as liminal institutions. Four focus groups were conducted with six students in each group (24 of the original 48 students were included in this phase of the data collection process). The data collected for this study were triangulated with the data collected from the larger research project (Anfara, 1995). In addition to asking students to describe their experiences in school in relation to their teachers, administrators, and peers, students were asked three

questions to focus more closely on the issue of liminality. These three questions included: (a) What do you think about the rules at this school? (b) Do you ever challenge these rules?, and (c) Do you feel safe when you challenge these rules?

Data were analyzed with the help of The Ethnograph, a qualitative textual analysis program. Initial codes, based on the data and the review of literature, were combined into themes. The themes that emerged from the data are presented in the following analysis. In an attempt to ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretation that follows, students from each focus group were asked to take part in a "member check" process. The interpretation that follows was validated by the students as an accurate representation of their experiences.

### **Analysis: School as a Liminal Space**

In trying to document "school as a liminal space" striking differences were noted between the neighborhood schools and the citywide schools. I found no strong evidence that students at the neighborhood schools thought of school as a liminal experience. They seemed bogged down with issues of being treated as children, the irrelevance of the curriculum to their lives, their voices being nonlegitimated, and issues of a lack of trust in the pedagogical and administrative practices of the school (Anfara, 1995; Anfara & Miron, 1996). Appendices A and B are offered to assure the reader that these themes emerged from the data collected from the larger research project.

I had hoped to hear in the neighborhood students' discourse connections between school and the larger society. I expected to hear, "You're supposed to challenge the rules. It's part of learning and growing up." But these words were not spoken by the neighborhood students. They were excessively concerned with being "stuck back here"—a phrase many of those interviewed used to express the disconnection between school and their "real" lives on the "outside."

When asked, "What do you think about the rules at this school," students at the neighborhood schools responded:

**CH:** "There are too many rules. Everything has a rule. You can't do nothing at this place. It's like a prison."

**DG:** "I don't see the point in all this . . . the rules the school makes. I think they like to see us get in trouble"

**MM:** "I don't like all these rules. I mean what's the reason for them? I feel like a child at school. Have to ask to go to the bathroom—at home I'm an adult."

The second question probed in the focus groups was: "Do you ever challenge these rules?" The neighborhood student responses included:

**CW:** "Yes! Of course. But I get in trouble constantly . . . more with some teachers than with others. My afternoons are filled with detentions."

**MM:** "I challenge some rules more than others. I don't like how I'm treated here so I cause trouble when I can. Why should I follow their rules. I didn't agree to them or help in making them."

**DG:** "The rules here at school don't have no purpose in life for me. All this is for children. We should be treated more mature."

Finally to the third question, "Do you feel safe when you challenge the rules," typical neighborhood school responses included:

**DG:** "No. I'm tired of being told what to do all the time. We don't need all those rules. I feel like I'm in prison."

**MM:** "I don't know. You can't trust the adults around here. You never know what they will do or when they will turn on you."

In contrast, students at the citywide schools made the connection between school and the larger society. But they also noted in their discourse that they were respected by their faculty and administrators, that they were treated as adults, and that they saw relevance in the curriculum (Anfara, 1995; Anfara & Miron, 1996). Listen to the typical answers given to the three questions by students at the citywide schools: (a) What do you think about the rules at this school?

**MS:** "We need them so we won't be always fighting and stuff. Also, we need to learn to obey rules and laws for when we get out into the world. The laws and stuff are a lot bigger and more serious out in the world. This is good practice. And the punishment is a lot lesser here at school."

**BA:** "The rules are 'OK' for the most part. They are just trying to get us to realize that we need to follow something. When we leave school, there has to be some order out there. Look what's going on now with all the murders."

(b) Do you ever challenge these rules?

**KG:** "I don't like so many rules. I think things could be different so I try and bend and push the ones I think I'll get away with. Like eating in school, dress codes, and going to lockers at certain times."

**MA:** "Yeah! All the time, that's what school is all about. You're supposed to be able to challenge the rules. That's how you learn. If you just accepted everything, life would be pretty boring."

**RC:** "My teachers tell us to challenge things all the time. When we talk in social studies or sometimes in English literature about a story, we always talk about challenging what isn't right. Isn't that what Martin Luther King was all about?"

(c) Do you feel safe when you challenge these rules?

**MS:** "Sure, the worst that could happen is you get a detention or something. I'm not that stupid to challenge something that will get me expelled. School is where you learn about stuff like that. My father tells me stories about things he did in school. It's how your values are formed."

**KG:** "There are a lot of people around here that I know care about me. If I got in trouble they would talk to me and we'd turn it into a learning situation. That's how they are here at [school name]."

### **Some Thoughts on Student Resistance and Liminality: From the Perspective of Two Very Different School Cultures**

In the larger study (Anfara, 1995) I undertook, I noted that there was much resistance to the negative school culture found at the neighborhood schools. Typical responses to "Will you describe for me what it is like being a student at this school?" included:

**CH:** "I hate being at school. School sucks! Teachers come here for life and instead of all that stupid stuff . . . Nothing because it's boring back here . . . just come to school in the morning, eat breakfast and wait 'till the bell to ring. The best thing I do is go to lunch."

**MM:** "You don't feel privilege to be here, not at all. The only privilege you feel is maybe air conditioner. I mean, but other than that it's just like anywhere else you go and you don't feel safe as you used to, you know . . . you see dogs walking around. You know, guard dogs. And they sniff you sometimes. "

As the neighborhood schools impressed themselves (their dominant ideology) on the students, the students engaged in reaction—acts of resistance (Apple, 1982; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1985, 1986, 1989). Resistance behaviors, documented through observations at all four schools, included: talking, ignoring the teacher's instructions, sleeping, leaving the classroom without permission, blurting out comments, laughing, belching, turning off the classroom lights, and giving the teacher a "look that could kill."

In contrast, at the citywide schools I found little evidence of student resistance. But I also found little, if any, student discourse describing their school culture in negative terms. Students typically described their school culture in the following manner:

**CM:** "It's like—it's like once you get into the school, it's like a whole bunch of doors just opened for you. It's like opportunity is there for you to take it, you know."

**JW:** "Well, I think being a student—a student at this school (umm) is great because they let you feel the academic intensity in the air. They . . . the students help me excel because they push me to go forward not backwards."

While the neighborhood schools seemed concerned with controlling and containing their student bodies (e.g., canceling activities to prevent anticipated fights, etc.), the citywide schools seemed to celebrate their students. The student cultures were characterized by trusting and caring relationships at the citywide schools (Anfara, 1995). Student voice was encouraged. As Alston (1993) reminded us: "The voice of all must be allowed to be heard, even voices of conflict and dissent" (p. 125).

At the onset of this study, I expected that where I would find the most evidence of student resistance I would also find the most evidence of liminality. I expected that the two would exist side-by-side. But this was not the case. I believe that this can be explained by the fact that the neighborhood schools treat their students as children, while the citywide schools related to their students as adults (Anfara, 1995). After all, those who typically experience liminality in rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960) are "girls becoming women" and "boys becoming men." Children, essentially, are not viewed as capable of assuming their adult roles in the larger society, and are treated accordingly. They are not "of age" and are not afforded the opportunity to engage in liminal experiences.

This unexpected finding can also be attributed to the difference in school cultures. The characteristics of care and trust (a nurturing environment) that are found at the citywide schools are sufficient to foster liminal experiences. On the other hand, the authoritarian nature of the administrative and pedagogical practices of the neighborhood schools squelches liminality.

Finally, this unanticipated finding is tied to the students' perceptions of the connection between school and the larger society. As I noted, the students at the citywide schools saw a strong connection between school and society. School work was relevant to the students and was intimately connected to their future employment and well-being.

As **MB**, a student at one of the citywide schools, noted: "They give you work that you needed to know. They don't just give you work to be like babysitting you or something. You know, they give you work (ah) that you need in life." In contrast, the students at the neighborhood schools saw no connection between

school and their everyday lives. If the liminal experience is a period of preparation for something in the future, how can the students at the neighborhood schools view school as offering this experience?

I offer these thoughts as possible explanations for consideration. There is, indeed, need for further study on the relationship between liminality and resistance. These findings also point to the necessity of looking at issues of care and trust in both administrative and pedagogical practices as well as refocusing on the relational nature of the educational process. Palmer (1983) wrote:

But what scholars now say—and what good teachers have always known—is that real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject. We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom. (p. xvi)

### **Liminality and the Educational Process: Some Possible Lessons**

According to the functionalist view,<sup>3</sup> one of the purposes of schooling is to prepare students for their place in society. If this is the case, I contend that we must look more seriously at the issue of liminality and its relation to the educational process. Schools must be connected to the larger society. Students must see the relevance of the curriculum to their future lives. For students to perceive the relevance of the curriculum and see the connection between school and the larger society, I hold that they must be treated as competent partners in the educational process. If we as teachers and administrators continue to treat students as "children," as is evidenced in the neighborhood schools, then we are doing them a tremendous disservice. This formulation of students as children negates what is central to the students' emerging conception of themselves as adults. This formulation of "student as child" denies them the opportunities of challenging the values and axioms of the dominant culture. The very possibility of social change is drawn into question. The status quo would be preserved without question.

In the middle and high school experiences there are crucial changes in the relationships between adults and adolescents from the previous situation of a child's blind faith in adult wisdom. Teachers and administrators need to relate to their students in terms of greater mutuality and reciprocity, recognizing their students' growing autonomy. As we have hopefully learned from Everhart's (1983) research, students like teachers who respect and listen to them and who do not treat them as if they were "third graders." In short, teachers who employ a mediated dialectic would see early adolescents as persons who are neither dependent children nor fully independent adults. They would respect the sense of identity and subjectivity that students bring to the educational process. Our students do not arrive with empty slates or "tabula rasa." They arrive in our classrooms and schools with some sense of who they are ethnically, racially, and sexually. The educational process must begin at that point. We, as teachers and administrators, must relate to our students with a sense of respect and mutuality for who they are and what they bring to the educational process. For what they bring (their subjectivity) is their lens that colors all that happens and is taught.

Additionally, I believe that the concept of liminality helps in modeling schooling as "purposeful social cooperation" (Biesta, 1994). From this perspective the student can be treated as a competent partner in the educational process. The goal of schooling, then, would more clearly focus on the transformation of self and society. The role of the teacher would be transformed from "clerk of the empire" (McLaren, 1989) to "teacher as intellectual" (Giroux, 1989). Teachers and students would engage in inquiry together and produce knowledge rather than consume knowledge. They would question "why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture and others are not" (McLaren, 1989, p. 169). Student behavior/misbehavior could be more fully utilized as learning situations in which the clash between society's and students' values are discussed.

### **Implications for the Classroom: A Balance of Freedom and Boundaries**



Ask any classroom teacher if he/she would like to increase students' opportunities of challenging the values and axioms of the dominant culture on a regular basis in order to help students pass through this "betwixt and between" period and guess what the answer will be. Emphatically, "NO!" The undertone of "let them rebel—it's good for them," unfortunately rears its ugly head. So this gets us back to the question we asked at the onset of this article, "How much challenging should be tolerated as part of this process?" After all, both freedom and boundaries must be present for schools to properly equip students for life. And without this common sense approach that clearly points to a balance of freedom and boundaries, most classroom teachers will reply, "Oh, get real!," and the concept of liminality will do little to assist teachers in aiding students who are trying to find their way into an adult world. But we cannot get lost in the image of the perfect classroom with no misbehavior.

What then can we do? We can seek new approaches to classroom management where students help determine the rules and the consequences for breaking them (Curwin & Mendler, 1988). Kohn (1996), author of **Beyond Discipline From Compliance to Community** agrees that telling students your rules is simply a way of getting them to position themselves as either rebels or automatons. By involving the students in this process of setting limits, they are more likely to follow the rules and learn important lessons to be carried into adulthood. As we heard earlier from MM, a neighborhood student, "Why should I follow the rules. I didn't agree to them or help in making them."

By seeking new approaches to classroom management, we can work at reframing the educational process as "purposeful social cooperation" (Biesta, 1994). Through this reframing, we can work actively to engage students in the process of deciding which rules are necessary and which are not. We can actively engage our students in the educational process and fight the passive attitude that so characterizes our students' approach to education. Together teachers and students can make decisions that will affect their lives.

### Endnotes

1. According to Waters (1994), structure refers to patterns in social arrangements which underlie the immediacy of experience. For some sociologists, structure is an analytic abstraction from subjective experience. However, the theorists who have the most to say about structure (e.g., Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, & Weber) are those who argue that it has an ontological status which privileges it over agency (see pages 92-129). Agency is the ability to choose among alternative courses of action. For more on agency see Waters (1994) and Giddens (1976).
2. I am indebted to Louis F. Miron of the University of California, Irvine and Mickey Lauria of the University of New Orleans for the database that was used in the larger study that resulted in my doctoral dissertation (Anfara, 1995). The research for this article moved beyond that database with focus group interviews conducted by myself.
3. See Feinberg & Soltis' (1992) **School and Society** for an excellent explanation of the functionalist paradigm. The functionalist paradigm generally sees the school's primary responsibility as socializing students to adopt and conform to the economic, political, and social norms and practices of the larger society. Functionalists, then, see the school as "an integral, functioning part of society, vital to its continuation and survival" (p. 6).

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