Pragmatism and Poststructuralism: Cultivating Political Agency in Schools

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While the differences between pragmatist and poststructural views may often appear insurmountable, I argue here that putting the two in dialogue offers solutions to particular problems within each tradition, especially as they relate to agency. I describe John Dewey and Judith Butler’s theories of agency and analyze the political acts and educational implications to which each account gives rise. I show how each theory rescues the other from pitfalls and, when read together, a more robust vision of agency and political change relative to education is formed. I conclude by depicting how this agency can be cultivated in classrooms.

The field of philosophy of education traces a strong legacy to the work of the American pragmatists. Their interest in knowledge through inquiry, the process of growth, and the flourishing of democracy have greatly impacted the ways educational theorists have depicted the process and goals of education. While not as obvious as in more overtly political philosophy, central to pragmatist theory has been an account of the human subject, its role as an agent, and its ability to effect political change. Recently, many philosophers of education have posed serious challenges to the underlying assumptions pragmatists hold regarding the nature of the student and the best approaches to living life well that schools foster. In particular, contemporary philosophers of education persuaded by the work of Michel Foucault and that of more recent poststructuralists, often struggle to make sense of agency, intention, and the role of the individual subject, especially in the context of social justice issues, identity, and education.

While the differences between pragmatist and poststructural views may at times appear insurmountable, I will argue here that putting the two in dialogue and artfully combining them offers solutions to particular problems within each tradition, especially as they relate to agency. When each is critically informed by the other, a fruitful way for understanding political change is revealed. Finally, this new sense of agency and political change
gives rise to suggestions for implementation in a primary location of agency cultivations, schools.

Within this paper, I will describe two theories of agency offered by key figures within each tradition: John Dewey, who has offered the most comprehensive pragmatist understanding of agency, and Judith Butler, whose contemporary interpretation of agency is particularly intriguing. The theories show considerable similarity as well as important points of difference and the fruitfulness of reading them together has largely been overlooked. I will begin by delineating Butler’s theory of agency, including the political acts to which such an account gives rise. Then, I will do the same for Dewey, highlighting the philosophers’ points of contention and agreement along the way. Next, I will show how each theory rescues the other from certain pitfalls and, when combined, a more robust vision of agency and political change relative to education is formed. While I will allude to educational aspects of each theorist’s account of agency as I go, the concluding section will draw out some educational implications in more detail.

1. Judith Butler, subjugation, and discursive agency

Understanding Butler’s theory of agency entails first understanding her unique depiction of the process of becoming an embodied subject. Drawing on Foucault’s theory of power as productive, Butler describes a process of discursive construction, where the circulating power of cultural norms and practices brings the subject into being and produces the effect of a bounded, identity-marked, material body. Through continual repetition of identity defining acts and being interpellated by others, a stable subject with an apparently coherent identity results. The subject is forced to continue the performance of such an identity in order to maintain its constitution as a viable being — to have a social position that is recognized and which affords the subject the ability to speak and be heard. This process of subjugation is not a single act or event, but rather a series of discursive reiterations that cite norms and cultural constraints. For Butler, performativity is the repetition of cultural norms and codes, the activity of which styles and constitutes us because it has the ability to produce what it names. The traits and identities imparted are then sustained through bodily comportment and the continued force of cultural structures. Traits that appear natural or as essences, like gender, come from without with such force and constancy that they appear as though internally sprung and their seeming naturalness goes largely unquestioned.

The subject is compelled to perform identity constraints and cite norms and it is in this regard that Butler breaks from her humanist forerunners, including the pragmatists. Working against the notion of a prediscursive agent who chooses to do a deed, Butler shows that the subject must performatively