

The American Middle-Class Education System

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“Education is presumed by many to be the great equalizer in U.S. society,” (Eitzen and Zinn 2007:470). However, this does not end up being the truth. Education does formally transmit the culture of the society but in doing so contributes to inequality among the social classes (Cave and Chesler 1974). If United States (U.S.) citizens truly believe education promotes equality they need to step back and take another look at the reality of public schooling.

In the world of sociology, education is seen as a social institution. Social institutions exist beyond human thought and are patterns of normative behavior that people believe are unchangeable. Polity, family, economy, and religion are just a few of the other social institutions in the world. Despite these institutions having an unrecognized power over people, they are all human made making them imperfect and capable of being changed. The United States (U.S.) education system is set-up where children begin kindergarten at the age of five and generally spend the next thirteen years in private or public schooling. Some may then continue on to higher education at a college or university. Many people in the U.S. take education for granted believing that it is something that one must go through but it is in fact a social institution that is external, objective, exerts a coercive power, has moral authority, and has a history in society.

The history of American education goes back to the Indians but the first recorded set-up of schools began in the colonial days. It was based upon the same two-track system as the British schools. Individuals in the lower class attended, at most, elementary school, while children from the upper class attended Latin grammar school.

The focal point of education was to teach students how to read. This in turn would allow them to read the Bible and other religious texts. The ultimate goal was for the children to be saved. By 1642 the Puritans in Massachusetts were making sure all of their children would be put through school, making it mandatory because it strengthened and preserved their religious beliefs (Parkay and Stanford 2007).

Once the colonies broke away from Great Britain, the leaders of America decided education was necessary to retain the freedom they fought to obtain. Various forms of schooling were established after the United States became an independent nation. The struggle for state supported common schools, today's elementary schools, began in 1824 after having already been proposed by Thomas Jefferson in 1779. Once the schools had been implemented they began to take on the characteristics of today's schools with centralization and an increased authority with the local government. With more advancements in information and technology the secondary school system was also put into place (Parkay et al. 2007).

By the 1930's all of the states supported compulsory attendance in schools which raised the standards across the boards (Parkay et al. 2007). Schools were still highly segregated by class and race even with the abolishment of slavery. People began to realize how unequal the system was and demanded changes in the 1960's thru 1970's and then again in the 1980's. With the civil rights movement during the 1960's and 1970's came the desegregation of schools to provide equal opportunity for all students. Then an excellence movement in the 1980's occurred to raise the standards within the American school system. While both of these movements had the purpose of reducing inequality

they actually brought about new methods for creating and justifying more inequality (Rushing 2001).

Today, people do not have to think about education in order for it to exist. Schools and classrooms remind people daily of education making it an external piece of humanity, existing outside of each person's thoughts. Not only does education exist externally but society as a whole agrees with this making it objective and meet the second requirement for social institutions. The government has even set restrictions making attendance compulsory to students until they reach the eighth grade or the age of sixteen (Eitzen et al. 2007). If a child is not being home-schooled or educated in a public or private institute, he or she may be taken from his or her home. The U.S. society sees this as a trait of neglect allowing social services to come in and take the child. This is the moral authority and coercive power that education exerts upon the people. The education system in the United States while stating to have democracy in its values has continued to inadvertently promote inequality among the social classes, keeping individuals in the upper class at the top and individuals in the lower class at the bottom.

The goal of education is to teach individual and cultural survival, as well as, the desire to support one's society (Taylor 1976). Individual survival is highly promoted in the American education system with the theories following the nation's ideas of capitalism and achievement which coincide with the political and economical institutes of the United States. This means teachers are focusing on each individual child instead of teaching group collaboration. The goal then becomes academic achievement and

performance. If a student does not reach the traditional goals, failure in society generally follows (Cave et al. 1974).

Archie O. Haller and Murray A. Straus performed a research study showing that the social status of the family affects the educational and occupational aspirations of the child. Others see through research and observation that the SES of a child's family and the child's aspiration level are directly proportional (Brembeck 1971). That is, impart, due to the value of education among social classes being inconsistent. Those people in the lower class do not emphasize the importance of obtaining high levels of education to their children while the middle and upper classes do value educational achievement. This also means that the socioeconomic status (SES) of an individual will show a relationship with school performance. This also makes it consistent with the aspirations and achievements of individuals. Variables of aspirations and achievement that can be seen to have a great influence include grades, test scores, failure in courses, truancy, and the amount of formal schooling they will obtain (Boocock 1980).

The upper and middle class teach their children values which correspond with the schools because the people within these classes control what is being taught. These are goals and values which encourage academic and occupational achievement with the purpose of success later in life. Meanwhile, the lower class families focus their values on the family and the present time. They are concerned with making enough money to pay the bills they have (Boocock 1980).

Parents in the lower class do not have the same amount of time to spend with their children as parents of the upper and middle class have. Lower class parents are

constantly working to provide for the whole family and the education of the child does not support the rest of the group. This also means that resources available to children of the lower class are null. They are not able to obtain basic school supplies or resources to contribute to educational attainment such as textbooks or a desk (Marks et al. 2006).

Local, state, and national governments all have their roles within the education system. The national government plays the smallest role providing 10% of the financial budget. The state government sets the standards for all of the students and teachers and provides around 40% of the funds. Finally, the local government has the most control over the school determining the curriculum, providing a large portion of the finances, and determining faculty. This puts the majority of the importance of the school on the school board and local community (Eitzen et al. 2007).

Those people holding positions on the school board and local government tend to be the elite business people within the community (Brembeck 1971). The curriculum is then based on the values of the business world. Researchers have found that children from the upper and middle classes are more inclined to succeed because they have similar cultural understandings to those which the schools are based upon (Marks et al. 2006).

The belief in the U.S. is that the higher the level of education someone obtains the higher status they will be able to achieve. A flaw in the human established system is seen then when researchers come across statistics that show upward mobility does not generally occur even though that is what educators express to their pupils. Sociologists have found that approximately 80% of individuals will remain in the social class they are

born into and of the other 20%, only 2% will move up a class while the other 18% will move down a class (Clark and Gorski 2002).

The curriculum, set by the local school board, is established on middle class values making communication a key to inequality upon entering the public school. Middle class parents encourage their children to express themselves through verbal communication. These children learn the abstract abilities of linguistics and how various expressions are used in all sorts of situations. Children in the lower class are limited on their linguistic development because parents do not have time to help those children understand concepts. The language they do acquire is limited to their own life experiences (Boocock 1980).

Finances for schools mainly come from the local tax payers. This means that the status of the community someone is living in has a great influence on the resources the schools have available to them. Neighborhoods with many upper and middle class residents are able to provide children with a better education than districts with lower class residents (Eitzen et al. 2007).

Urban schools, in a sense, are segregated. The districts are often set-up so the schools are homogeneous by race and social status. If the school districts are redefined to be more equal, parents who are of a higher status will send their children to private institutes where peers will have similar values. Even middle class families that may not be able to afford private schooling have found ways around the predicament. They move to suburban areas providing their children with a middle class environment. The lower

class does not have these opportunities. They must continue to send their children to schools that are not able to provide equal educational opportunities.

The financial differences among schools cause barriers to equal education through what the schools are able to purchase such as various forms of technology, building improvements, and faculty members. The more money a district has means a larger variety of technical resources are available to its students. Even the government realizes this issue but believes that those with money should have access to the latest, up-to-date forms of technology. This leaves individuals in the lower class and sometimes the middle class behind (Clark et al. 2002). Private schools and those with a majority of the student body being upper class are able to obtain technology quickly because the lower class has been given a reputation of destroying and vandalizing almost anything they are given. This stereotype has been given to them by the elite within society to keep the social stratification system in place. While some do vandalize and destroy educational materials, this is not true for all members of the lower class. Technology has been proven to aid in achievement in education but the citizens of America cannot expect to have equality without providing opportunities to all of the children attending U.S. schools.

The public schools in areas of low economic standing are generally old and run-down. Communities cannot afford to update the school building with the tax base they have and students are left with learning environments that are more equal to prisons. Schools in richer areas are found to be castle-like and more inviting in appearance. The financial situations of these areas have even been found to affect the teachers students receive.

Sociologists have found that many educators are reluctant to teach at schools in areas of low economic standing because they feel they will spend more time as a monitor of behavioral issues. When they obtain the opportunity to leave these schools they do, making the children have less experienced, motivated, talented and qualified teachers. The children's lives are already unstable and the addition of teachers who do not stick around longer than they have to makes it even worse. These schools then remain to have oversized classes, not enough faculty members, and few specialized services if any (Cave et al. 1974). This makes finances a crucial problem among the inequality of schools.

Yet, more problems arise when sociologists find that educators also contribute to inequality student success. A newer concept to schools is known as the tracking system where students are tested and evaluated by teachers and put into groups based on their ability level. However, these levels are predominantly class biased. The lower level is disproportionately lower class while the upper and middle levels have a majority of upper and middle class individuals in them. The students within each level are then given assignments aimed towards their abilities. This often results in students at the upper and middle levels achieving at a higher rate than those in the lower level (Eitzen et al. 2007).

Students in the lower stratum of the tracking system often face reification. The teachers do not expect much of them and in turn they do not succeed to higher levels. A study done in 1968 by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson showed how the teacher's expectations affect their pupils. After taking an IQ test, a list of students was compiled and teachers were told these students would achieve higher academically over the course of the next year. At the end of the year, the students were retested and the students who

had been labeled as “spurters” had indeed raised their IQ scores and grades. The only difference between these students and the rest of the pupils was the expectations the teachers had of them (Eitzen et al. 2007).

Without being given an idea of who will succeed in the classroom, teachers have other methods of determining a pupil’s potential. They regularly use judgments from previous tasks a student has performed. This stays with the student throughout the time in the particular teacher’s classroom and affects the achievement level. Students of low SES tend to receive negative reinforcement from the school system which makes their failure even more probable (Boocock 1980). This may seem like higher dropout rates would make sense in the lower class due to rebelliousness. This is; however, incorrect. These pupils dropout because their families are not able to afford the necessities for living; therefore, the students are encouraged to leave sooner and obtain a job to help support the family (Cave et al. 1974).

The IQ and standardized tests typically given to students within the U.S. are used to determine the pupil’s success. These tests; however, do not determine intelligence, attitudes, or qualities of character. They are bound to the middle class culture and measure those skills needed for obtaining a job that is considered “good,” if someone will have the potential to move up in his or her career and if he or she can fully participate in the society that is becoming more and more technical. These test scores then determine what opportunities students have upon completing their schooling (Cave et al. 1974).

Even in advanced education socioeconomic status plays a large factor in attendance and completion. The lower the socioeconomic status the less likely one is to

obtain a bachelor's degree from an institute of higher education (Titus 2006). It is not that the individuals of the lower class do not wish to obtain a degree from a post-secondary institute it is that the financial resources are not available to them. It has been found that when economic barriers are relaxed through various forms of financial aid, students in lower classes are working towards attainment of higher education (Cave et al. 1974).

Using various studies and performing their own research, Russell W. Rumberger and Gregory J. Palardy found that the social class composition within a high school has an impact on student achievement (2005). Students within a school that has an average of students within a higher social class achieve better than those within a low mean value. It is not just the factors of the individuals but many other factors that are attributed to the social class composition of a school. Students who attend schools with a higher social class composition feel the teachers expect more, spend more time completing homework per week, feel safer in school, and have more opportunities for advanced and college courses. (Rumberger and Palardy 2005). It is not to say that nothing is expected out of students in lower class schools, but faculty members are harder to retain and feel they are not able to expect much from those students.

Because social institutions are human made and imperfect they can be changed. In order for the U.S. to fix the situation of inequality in the current education system, many factors must be considered. What is it exactly that causes inequality among the schools? If it is the education system that is at fault then ways of improving it would be to have teachers bring about competence through paying more attention to all of their

students, treating them in pleasanter and more encouraging fashions, using new and different teaching techniques, evaluating differently, and demanding more (Boocock 1980).

If the composition of students is to blame then the ideal method of fixing that would be to restructure the schools so that there is equal opportunity to attend any school of the student or parents' choosing. Districts also need to be structured to incorporate students from various backgrounds, not districts that are set-up to keep the "slum" away from the middle and upper class. These solutions may not be very feasible and there are smaller steps that are possible to take in order to fix the inequality in the education system.

If the control on education is the problem, then the finances and curriculum need to be looked at from a national level. With each school district having a curriculum set by their school board and community, curriculums will be vastly different between schools within one state and within the entire country. National standards could be set so all schools are expected to teach their students the same information even if the curriculum may not be the exact same and more money from the national government could be provided to make the schools equal in financially standing. Concerns with this do arise because America was established after Great Britain had over taxed the colonies and abused their power creating political manipulation (Taylor 1976).

Students who do well in school typically do well in life and if students do poorly in school have a difficult time in life (Brembeck 1971). The United States expresses equality can be achieved through education. The current education system; however, is

set-up to keep the social stratification system in place despite the feeling of upward mobility many citizens feel they have a chance at. The status they are born into ends up being the basis for their life chances. The U.S. needs to redefine the system if they really believe that equality and the option of moving up in social standing is available to all of its citizens.

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