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ABSTRACT

The relationship between education, social class, and upward mobility is examined, along with mechanisms inherent in keeping the status quo in education. The relationship between the student and the university is also explored. Although college is often seen as a mechanism of upward mobility, particularly among the poor and minorities, colleges may serve to solidify social classes and social stratification. The process begins when schools assess students with group achievement tests, and place students in tracks (e.g., vocational, academic) and homogeneous groupings (e.g., educable mentally retarded). Attempts to offset culturally biased mechanisms in education include alternatives to traditional tests, such as the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment. Typically, the lower social classes are seen to lack certain skills, such as auditory learning abilities, which are important to college level work. Lower socioeconomic classes lack the extensive vocabulary needed for success in the heavily verbally oriented college entrance examinations. Typically, in many lower class schools, the emphasis is on objective, rote learning, which does not prepare lower-class students for writing in college. Other barriers faced by the poor are identified. (SW)

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The University as an Investment Strategy:

Social Structuring or Managing Mobility?

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Abstract

The university and higher education is frequently seen as a mechanism of upward mobility, particularly among the poor and minorities. However, this perception may be inaccurate, and colleges and universities, instead of assisting in "upward mobility" may further serve to solidify social classes and social stratification. This paper reviews "the university as an investment strategy" and examines the possibility of upward mobility from a sociology and education perspective.

For the poor, minorities, and the lower socio-economic classes, higher education and a college degree is frequently seen as a "way out of the ghetto" and the route to success in today's world. Parents sacrifice so that their children can receive a college education or, at the very least, technical training. In fact, many students do, via the educational system achieve a high degree of success in today's world. However, many other students, after graduation, obtain "dead-end" jobs or remain in a certain social class for the rest of their lives.

This paper will attempt to address three main issues. First, the relationship between education, social class and upward mobility will be examined. Secondly, the mechanisms inherent in the maintenance of the status quo in the educational domain will be explored and, finally, the present inter-relationship of the student/university will be examined and implications for the future will be noted.

Education, Social Class and Upward Mobility

Historically, high school, and later, college has been seen as of great importance in the procurement of employment. Jencks (1968, p. 283) indicates that "High school used to be the great sieve separating the well educated from the poorly educated. . . . Today almost everyone finishes high school, and college has come to play a somewhat larger role in sorting and sifting." Those who do not enter college typically cite two reasons: a) cost, and b) lack of academic requirements. Examining the second rationale first, this "excuse" stems from several sources, beginning at the elementary level and culminating in high school. Traditionally, school begins to assess students with group achievement tests, I.Q. tests, and this results in

homogeneous grouping (i.e., T.M.R., E.M.R., B.D., E.H.) and vocational, business, academic and general tracts.

Teacher expectations are thusly affected and few students have the wherewithall and motivation to overcome erroneous identification. Revisionists on the other hand indicate that the white upper middle classes conspire against the poor and minority groups. Other theorists, most notably Frazier (1950) and later Moynihan (1975) blamed the disorganized family which fails to provide adequate socialization. This issue had recently been resurrected by Cordes (1984). And, as divorce rates increase, contemporary theorists will undoubtedly blame single parent families with "latch key children" for the academic failure of their children.

There have, of course, been attempts to "offset" "culturally biased" mechanisms of control. I.Q. tests are being replaced by Sequential/Simultaneous Processing Tests, (Kaufman and Kaufman, 1983) and S.O.M.P.A. (System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment) (Mercer, 1978) have been seen as an alternative to traditional tests. Mainstreaming, PL 94-142, Head Start, and other compensatory mechanisms have been implemented. Their effectiveness has, however, been questioned.

On the other hand, there has been an increase in "hyperactive children," "brain damaged children," "learning disabled" and emotionally disturbed children. Attention span deficits are frequently seen, as are negativistic and appositional behavioral patterns.

All of the aforementioned factors operative at the elementary and high school level may serve to diminish both student and parental aspirations. The concept of "cultural deprivation" has also been cited as a factor in

educational achievement. Typically the lower social classes are seen to be "culturally deprived," i.e., they do not possess adequate language skills, lack a wide background of information, and are bereft of the vocabulary skills, abilities in abstraction and verbalization necessary for success in school.

The aforementioned skills become even more important, of course, at the college level as work becomes more complex and more intellectually demanding. The lecture situation makes greater demands upon students' auditory learning abilities and lower-class students are generally more visually oriented due to the effects of television and now, video games.

The cumulative effects of the aforementioned variables must be devastating, and in addition, it would appear that societal forces work to prevent upward mobility. Thus various mechanisms function blatently or latently to transmit social inequality from generation to generation.

Thus even though ideologically "all men are created equal," the more intellectually endowed or the more socially endowed appear to possess "the edge" in upward mobility, specifically in the academic realm.

There are also mechanisms operative at the university level which further prevent upward mobility. These will be discussed in the following section.

Mechanisms in the Maintenance of the Status Quo

Bourdieu (1973) has indicated that education's function is to maintain rather than minimize social inequality. The university, and to a lesser extent, education, operate to transmit privilege, allocate status and to instill respect for the existing social order.

A central factor in this "maintenance of the status quo" is the idea of "cultural capital." Bourdieu sees culture in objective forms (i.e., books, works of art, published papers), practices (museum visits, concerts, travel) or the accepted idea of academic diplomas, i.e., Ph.D. from Yale, M.B.A. from Harvard, etc.

Bourdieu and others, e.g., Michael F. D. Young and Basil Bernstein in England are concerned with how social class and stratification shape the educational system and the practices therein. This sociology of education perspective posits that the selection process in education is very specifically related to social class structure and maintains social stratification.

There are essentially three main themes that recur in Bourdieu's work that directly relate to the maintenance of the status quo.

Primarily, academic ability and performance is essentially related to cultural background. This is also related to the idea of "cultural deprivation" utilized in America.

Thus, the greater the "cultural background" the greater the degree of success. This cultural background is reflected in "bourgeois language;" its tendency "to abstraction formalism, intellectualism and euphemistic moderation." Bourdieu (1973)

In addition, general world knowledge, literary finess, ostentatious rhetoric and clarity of verbal expression, grammar, and syntax inevitably aid the upper class student in his/her pursuit of grades.

The student of course is expected to learn traditional upper and middle class values as dictated by the curriculum makers of the upper classes. Thus, the teaching process is the "imposition of legitimate symbolic meanings by the instructor" (Keddie, 1968).

Lower socio-economic classes lack the wide scope of vocabulary words necessary for success on the heavily verbally oriented PSAT, SAT, ACT, and later the GRE and LSAT. Furthermore, the aforementioned tests heavily discriminate against lower social classes who have not been socialized to read and against those who have not pursued reading as a hobby or literary diversion. This also impairs learners during their college careers.

Granted, some students may be able to overcome these obstacles. Schwartz (1977, p. 550) has indicated that

> These few lower-class survivors have compensated for their initial lack of cultural capital by acquiring a scholastically based cultural capital through exceptional intellectual ability, individual effort and unusual home or social circumstances.

Thus, a James Joyce who was described as "a rose blooming in the desert" in his early school years may succeed in later life. Jack London's character Martin Eden further exemplifies this idea. By utilizing academic concepts, Bourdieu argues, the interests of the ruling class can be preserved without demeaning our basic democratic principles and ideological stances of equality and freedom. Thus, our social structures can be transformed in an alchemical manner into academic hierarchies. Bernstein (1958) has indicated that the language manifested by parents in the home has much to do with their children's academic success. He indicates two codes, elaborated or restricted, to describe different forms of language.

Restricted language essentially does not express information. It is utilized to control, is often imprecise and rather global. It frequently contains collopquialisms and idioms, and sentences are short, incomplete and grammatically incorrect.

On the other hand, elaborated language is often replete with ostentatious rhetoric, is explanatory and contains much information. It is extremely precise and grammatically correct.

The school system, of course, places a high degree of emphasis on correct expressive language. This advantage that those with elaborated language have, of course, continues throughout their academic careers. Language, of course, also transmits culture.

Culture, in the form of "class ethos" also helps to maintain social strata and prevent upward mobility. The idea of "class ethos" refers to a "system of implicit and deeply interiorized values which among other things, helps to define attitudes toward cultural capital and educational institutions (Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, 1974, p. 32).

Case in Point: The Jews

"In the U.S. where less than 3% of the population are Jews:

1. Jews have won 27% of Nobel Prizes awarded to Americans.

2. Jewish violin virtuosos occur at 12 to 25 times expectancy.

3. 16% of Jews are professionals, compared to 10% of the entire population.

4. 10% of all college faculty members are Jews; 19% of faculty members at elite colleges are Jews.

5. 70% of Jewish faculty members are at research oriented universities.

6. 32% of Jews are at the highest quality universities, compared to 9% of non-Jewish faculty.

7. 33% of Jewish faculty members have over 10 publications, compared to 11% of Catholic and 15% of Protestant faculty members.

8. 28% of Jewish faculty members are full professors and at a younger age (38 versus 40) than non Jewish faculty.

9. 25% of law professors are Jewish.

10. 22% of medical faculty are Jewish.

11. 21% of biochemistry faculty are Jewish. (Hayes, 1981, p. 227)

The data are comparable in Europe where less than 1% of the population are Jews. To reiterate statistics here would be superfluous. Suffice it to say that the "class ethos" mechanism is substantially at work in this sub-culture.

Essentially, this sub-group focuses on those socially valued areas in education and endeavors to assimilate as much broad general knowledge in said domains as possible.

The Present and the Future

In this present age, students no longer bring the teacher an apple unless it is a "c" or "e." The well-to-do of course own their own home computers, and computer literacy appears to be becoming the "fourth r." Thus, the poor may be further handicapped. Their access to information via computer terminals may be minimal, their ability to perform basic computer functions (via SPSS, SAS, OR BIMED) may be negligible and their past experience scanty.

Typically in many lower class schools, objective, rote learning is emphasized, and this mode of instruction does not prepare lower-class students for the many term papers, essays and in-depth studies they may need to perform.

In addition to the many barriers faced by the poor that have already been mentioned in this paper, the Reagan assault on education and on a variety of income-maintenance programs that aid the poor (i.e., AFDC, School

Feeding Program, Food Stamps, and others) will provide further grist for the bottle neck that presently exists to prevent upward mobility.

In addition, a variety of mechanisms already exist within vast educational bureaucracies on the state level. Many "certification programs" are required for entry level positions in education, and licenses in other domains.

Once students enter into these "certification programs" they are inevitably channeled into a specific social class by dint of their occupation and their perceived "social mobility" stops at that point.

Over-specialization, credentialing and other issues such as these appear to lead to the question posed by Duberman (1976), "Is a college degree necessary for doing a job or merely for getting a job?"

The concept of "grade inflation" also poses many questions of sociologists of education. If in an increasingly technocratic society, more and more education is needed for more and more people for increasingly specialized jobs, at what point will a "point of diminishing returns" be reached? Or will one's "network of social contacts" become increasingly important as a means of upward mobility in the future? In America's "quest for competence," will applicants be judged on the basis of transcripts or on the basis of the "good old boy" network?

Summary and Conclusion

It would seem that several variables function not only to prevent upward mobility but also to solidify the social class structure.

For those idealistic enough to quixotically yearn for upward mobility, they should be armed with the appropriate "cultural capital." For those

in the ivory towers of windmilldom, the terms of the joust should be specified. Only then can our modern day knights seek out the grail of upward mobility, hopefully in a meaningful manner, consistent with the principles of democracy in America.