

Class in Schools:
Socioeconomic Stratification and Student Educational Outcomes

by Catherine J. Johnson

PART I

Inequality in the school system has a lengthy history. To quote Margaret McMillan in her 1912 article “How I Became a Socialist,” (Reay 2006:292):

Was it possible that the children of the working class, however fortunate, however plucky, could hold their own later with those who in the formative years drank deep and long of every fountain of life? No. It’s impossible. Below every strike, concealed behind legislation of every order, there is this fact—the higher nutrition of the favoured few as compared with the balked childhood of the majority. Nothing evens up this gross injustice.

In “Changing Times, Stubborn Inequalities: Explaining Socio-economic Stratification in Canadian Schooling” (2009), authors Scott Davies and Vicky Maldonado re-examine educational trends observed since the early 1990s in order to revise the explanations to fit today’s situation. Studies from the 1950s until the 1990s pointed to socio-economic status of students and their families as strongly affecting student’s educational outcomes. These outcomes bring to mind the Marx’s conflict theory whereby people start the “race” with different resources.

The authors use as evidence Canadian educational trends documented since the early 1990s, as well as research from Britain and the United States where, they believe, the “socio-economic patterns of educational inequality are “fairly similar” to that of Canada. Davies and Maldonado point out that regardless of educational attainments rising in all socio-economic groups in Canada, “educational gaps between the more and less affluent persist.” These gaps are seen in larger percentages of low-income children with such things as delays in vocabulary development, lower scores on standardized tests, and higher drop-out rates in secondary school than their higher-income classmates.

Cultural and human capital, terms used by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, are viewed as valuable resources by Davies and Maldonado. Besides coming from an affluent background, student educational attainment is significantly higher if children have grown up with “exposure to reading material” (Davies and Maldonado 2009 quote Sewell and Hauser 1980) and educated parents who spend time with them, as well as oversee their homework.

Diane Reay’s paper, “The Zombie Stalking English Schools: Social and Educational Inequality” (2006), focuses on class structure as being paramount in affecting students’ educational success. Reay feels that the subject has not been “adequately addressed” and until it has been, social class in schools will remain a problem. The historical context from which Reay launches her paper is that “(by) the late 1990s relative poverty was twice the level of the 1960s and three times the level of the late 1970s” (Reay 2006 quotes Diamon and Giddens 2005). Reay then quotes Skegg (2004) and Sayer (2005), “...that in a social context of growing inequalities there is a need to reinvigorate class analysis, not bury it” (2006). Reay (2009) states that, “[unfortunately] all the evidence seems to indicate that the contemporary education system retains powerful remnants of past elite prejudices. We still have an education system in which working-class education is made to serve middle-class interests.” She also points out that at present, in Britain, “the educational gap between the middle and working classes is growing.” Reay advocates that teacher training should include components on how social class affects student achievement. This would indeed be a huge step in eradicating the problem.

In “Choose Your Parents Carefully: Social Class, Post-secondary Education, and Occupational Outcomes” (2009), Harvey Krahn takes the position that students who have educated, affluent parents are more likely to have success in both school and the labour market. He draws on Twenty-First Century research and states that, “Young people from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to succeed in school and, subsequently, in the labour market (Krahn (2009) quotes Looker 1997; Davies and Guppy 1997; de Broucker and Lavallee 1998; Davies 1999; Butlin 1999; Knighton and Mirza 2002). Obviously a thought held by many. Krahn has found that children who grow up with cultural capital such as “preschool education, a ‘book’ culture in the home, exposure to the fine arts” and even a belief system that values higher education, are more likely to succeed in and out of school.

Although the three papers take somewhat different slants to class stratification in schools, they all agree that human and cultural capital is paramount in influencing student's educational outcomes. Reay's paper does not use these terms per se, but the stand she takes toward having teachers trained to recognize and deal with social class in the classroom speaks volumes—teachers are an integral part of a student's cultural capital.

Boudrieu felt that people's surroundings (including family and friends) greatly influenced them, and set the scene for their futures. He was of the mind that individuals adjust their expectations to their social position ("habitus"), and desire "largely only what [they] can expect" (Davies and Maldonado 2009.) This is precisely the thinking that we must fight against and guide our children away from or the results can indeed be, as shown in the three papers, Boudrieu's "self-fulfilling prophecy."

Gaps in education are noted by Reay and by Davies and Maldonado as persisting between lower and higher income students despite rising attainment in both groups. Krahn's paper does not directly visit the topic of educational gaps but he does point to a program being used in some provinces where apprenticeship programs are combined with academic course work to give students options. Two of the papers addressed streaming in schools as counter-productive, the other, Reay's, did not address streaming. Reay did suggest though, via a quote by Roberts 2001, that "one of the greatest illusions of modern times, [is that] of society becoming fairer while consistently failing to deliver a more open society."

All three papers cover vital aspects of class stratification in schools. I found Reay's paper the most comprehensive as she discussed pertinent historical concepts as well as possible solutions. Her paper presented the idea of middle-class hegemony persisting still, with "the subordinate class [acquiescing] in their own class aspirations" (Reay 2006 quotes Green 1990). To continue with this thought, when the lower classes become fed up with holding aspirations unworthy of them and subsequently recognize their rights, we may see breakdown theory in action—perhaps a revolt of some sort due to historical inability to obtain these rights by conventional means. Most importantly in Reay's paper, she has included voices of students themselves which serves as a powerful device for understanding.

PART II

Part II looks at three current media accounts and their tie-in with Part I—the effects of socioeconomic stratification in schools. An on-line CBC story entitled, “Toronto May Get Low-Income Private School” looks at a U.S. model of private school, called Cristo Rey, that offers quality education to low income students. Father Michael Redican, president of Toronto’s St. Michael’s College School, is the brains behind the idea and says the U.S. schools “speak for themselves with ‘nearly 100 per cent of the graduates going to a college program’” (CBC 2011). With enough support, he hopes to open the first Canadian Cristo Rey school in September 2012. The Toronto District School Board states that they already have a number of specialized schools, so have no plans to open another one themselves.

Journalists Sharona Coutts and Jennifer LaFleur of ProPublica, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winning investigative news service, have written an article entitled, “Some States Leave Low-Income Kids Behind.” Their analysis was “drawn from a nationwide survey by the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights” (Coutts and LaFleur 2011) which looked at the presence of discrimination based on race, gender or disability. Coutts and LaFleur then compared the results with poverty levels in order to determine the link between family income and students enrolled in higher level classes. Findings will be publicized, but as it stands Kansas shows as having “some of the largest opportunity gaps in the nation” (Coutts and LaFleur 2011) after a long history of same, yet “Florida leads the nation in the percentage of high-school students enrolled in high-level classes, Advanced Placement and advanced math. That holds true across rich and poor districts” (Coutts and LaFleur 2011). In 2000, Florida formed a partnership with the College Board and the non-profit group that manages courses and exams and has set as the state goal, “to prepare, inspire, and connect students to post-secondary success and opportunity, with a particular focus on minority students and students who are underrepresented in post-secondary education” (Coutts and LaFleur 2011).

“‘Save Our Schools’ March Won’t Unite Us, but That’s Fine” is the title of Jay Mathews’ article in the *Washington Post*, July 28, 2011. Mathews says the “march organizers want equitable funding for all public school populations, an end to high-stakes tests, locally developed curriculums and policymaking by teachers, families and local leadership.” The gist of Mathew’s

short piece is that if people could figure out how to work together we'd get more done. In this case, it would be for the sake of students and their educational success.

These three media articles show that there are many people out there who want to eliminate class stratification in schools and get students on an even footing. Exposing problems is a first step and that is where media can help. Marx would likely have said we need social transformation to overcome class struggle in order for people to realize their full potential.

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