Education for Mobility or Status Reproduction?

KARYN LACY

Abstract

Everyone is familiar with the popular phrase, "education levels the playing field." However, does public schooling really provide opportunities for everyone who is willing to work hard to succeed? This essay examines the scholarly debate that has emerged around this long-standing maxim. At one end of the continuum, scholars draw on the experiences of white ethnic immigrants to make the claim that education is the ticket to upward mobility for students from poor families. However, critics point to the experiences of marginalized blacks, and increasingly, Latinos, to reject this claim. At the other end of the continuum, scholars depart from traditional debates about racial disparities *per se*, shifting their focus to an understudied disparity—the growing gap in achievement between middle-class students and poor students. These scholars point to an important new trend in class inequality, one that has gained momentum in recent years, namely, the rising significance of the acquisition of cultural capital as a necessary prerequisite for upward mobility. Analysis of this trend is a promising step in the right direction for scholars concerned with helping disadvantaged students to climb out of poverty.

INTRODUCTION

Last year, in a speech at the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Legislative Summit, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan exhorted, "in America, education must be the great equalizer—the one force that overcomes differences in race, ethnicity, and privilege … It is time that we level the playing field." Most Americans subscribe to the conventional wisdom that a good education is the primary means by which those at the bottom make it to the top. In a world seemingly rigged in favor of the upper classes, education is typically perceived as a glaring exception, a sphere where everyone, no matter their origins, has the same opportunities to get ahead. Many believe that the school setting provides ample opportunities for individuals from diverse groups to compete fairly. Those who hold this view reason that high-achieving students naturally rise to the top. This standpoint has staying power because it

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is consistent with the most popular tenet of the American Dream, the belief that everyone has a chance of becoming economically successful so long as they are willing to work hard.

Yet, far too many racial minorities, poor people, and post-1965 immigrants have not been brought into the fold, do not see themselves as fully integrated into the American mainstream, in part because their experiences with the public school system have been largely negative, severely restricting their ability to claim their piece of the pie once adult. In terms of academic performance, whether the measure is test scores, grades, or susceptibility to tracking, black and Hispanic children are disadvantaged compared to their white counterparts. Low socioeconomic status explains some of this disparity, pointing to the need to study more closely the experiences of less privileged students. With respect to two of the most important educational outcomes, the transition from high school to college and college completion, black, Hispanic, and Native American children are less likely to graduate high school and less likely to graduate from college than either whites or Asians (Kao & Thompson, 2003). The excerpt from Duncan's speech makes clear that the federal government acknowledges differences across groups in educational attainment, realizes that this disparity is not a matter of merit alone, and understands that differential access to a quality education mirrors the social divide already present in the larger society. In that sense, the difference between the government's position on the exchange value of education and the position of the masses is striking. The public strongly believes in meritocracy, that academic achievement is rewarded and can be parlayed into the good life, while the Obama Administration is convinced that race and class discrimination potentially undermine meritocratic achievement. From the government's perspective, more federal intervention is needed to ensure fair play. This essay interrogates the two overriding assumptions driving opposing sides of the debate on the impact of public education in American society: Does education really reduce inequality? Alternatively, is the American educational system designed to perpetuate it?

EDUCATION AMERICAN-STYLE

Today, many Americans take public education for granted. However, before the introduction of universal public school in the mid-nineteenth century, formal schooling was *un*common and there was no formal federal policy designed to regulate the curriculum, teacher credentials, or surging costs of public education. In some states, *public* schools charged tuition and fees while *private* schools were subsidized by the state (Rubinson, 1986). More often than not, schooling was the province of the elite, who sent their boys to prestigious boarding schools and their girls to "finishing" schools (Lieberson,

1980). In doing so, the elite sought to instill in their sons the kind of toughness necessary to fulfill their future roles as leaders capable of supervising subordinates. In these exclusive single-sex institutions, what mattered most for the male children of the upper-class was not so much academic excellence (that was perceived as effeminate), but rather grit and character, qualities schoolmasters insisted could be nurtured only through rigorous participation in an organized sport. Endicott Peabody, the founder of the exclusive boarding school, Groton, required all students to play football whether they wanted to or not, whether they possessed the physical frame required to excel in the sport or not, arguing, "I'm not sure I like boys who think too much" (Karabel, 2005, p. 30). In any case, for some time, only a small percentage of Americans were educated in formal institutions.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the majority of children in the United States were not enrolled in *any* school. During the Colonial Era, children learned the skills required for economic stability once adult from their family of origin. Boys learned how to farm as they worked alongside their fathers in the fields, while girls learned how to keep house as they helped their mothers complete the daily tasks associated with running a household. Because the status of low-income families was predetermined, the notion that working-class children would rise above the status of their family of origin was virtually inconceivable (Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Coleman, 1968).

Education for the elite alone came to an end with the rise of the Common School Movement in the 1840s led by the Commissioner of Education in Massachusetts, Horace Mann. Concerned that the moral fabric of society was unraveling, Mann instituted in Massachusetts a universal, nonsectarian, public school system funded through taxation under the assumption that education would prepare the lower classes for the demands of citizenship in a democratic state. Far from a Marxist, Mann refused to believe that the rich accumulated wealth at the expense of the poor, arguing instead that "fully four-fifths of the pauperism in [his] state could be attributed to liquor," meaning the immoral choices of the poor stalled their upward mobility (Bowles & Gintis, 1977, p. 166).

The agenda of the Common School Movement was expansive. On the one hand, by "common school," Mann meant that the children of the rich and the poor would together study the same curriculum, inclusive of the usual suspects—math, reading, and writing—as well as new subjects, such as foreign languages and geography. However, Mann also pushed for the elimination of the one room school in favor of schools organized by grade and age cohort, each with its own teacher. In the nineteenth century, schooling available to the masses typically meant an elementary-school education; few high schools existed. Organizing students into grades would facilitate the establishment of a standardized curriculum, introduce texts matched to grade

level, and allow schools to construct measures of progress for each grade level. Male teachers, once dominant in the profession, were pushed out in favor of women, who were not only less expensive to hire, but also conformed to the public image that the school had gradually come to replace the family as the source of expertise when it comes to education. Moreover, Mann firmly believed that public, not private schools should educate the country's children (Graham, 2005). Following the onset of the Common School Movement, enrollment rose dramatically in public schools and declined significantly in private schools, just as Mann hoped it would. The belief that the rich should help to finance the education of the poor through taxation was institutionalized too, and student expenditures increased. Perhaps most importantly, Mann's "common school" model was gradually adopted by states all over the country, although most southern states, far less enthusiastic about public schooling than were northern states given that the policy would extend education to former slaves, waited nearly sixty years to pass legislation mandating universal public education (Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Lieberson, 1980).

EDUCATION AS AMERICANIZATION

Although Mann called for public schooling decades before mass migration of southern and eastern European immigrants to the United States escalated in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the influx of 18 million white ethnic migrants whose culture and religious beliefs differed from those of native-born whites was troubling to Nativists and led to a shift in the intended purpose of public schooling, from moral socialization broadly defined to *Americanization*. The American elite decided that recent immigrants would be allowed to hold on to their Catholic churches, Jewish synagogues, newspapers, and ethnic enclaves, singling out public schools as the one institution that would Americanize immigrant children by socializing them to adopt mainstream cultural beliefs and norms (Graham, 2005; Walters, 1999). Because Nativists perceived immigrants as culturally deficient, the upward mobility of immigrants was conditional on their ability to "become American," to demonstrate that they had overcome serious deficiencies in language, absorption of mainstream culture, and adherence to democratic ideals (Rumbaut, 1997, p. 489).

Assimilating white ethnic immigrants into mainstream society quickly became a national priority as the belief that education formulated as Americanization would facilitate the upward mobility of immigrants gained traction. Schools targeted the children since elites assumed that immigrant parents were too heavily invested in their country of origin, but that the second generation could be socialized to assimilate into American society. Schools got to work, stripping children of their immigrant culture, installing

in its place a carefully packaged American culture. Immigrant schoolchildren were required to speak English; they were not allowed to speak the language of their country of origin. They learned the customs and norms linked to American patriotism, and virtues such as a strong work ethic and honesty were drilled into them. Put simply, immigrant children were compelled to study the very same curriculum that native-born children were expected to master (Graham, 2005).

As enrollment in public schools increased, the purpose of public school shifted yet again, from Americanization to more explicit preparation for the labor force. High school, once reserved primarily for the elite, was established to serve the lower classes as well as white ethnic immigrants. In the 1890s, less than 10% of students eligible to attend high school were actually enrolled. By the 1930s, continuing through high school gained momentum; over 50% of teenage children were enrolled (Lieberson, 1980). Industrialization meant that factories began to replace farms as the primary mode of production. Supervisors wanted white ethnic immigrant laborers fluent in English and capable of carrying out basic mathematical computations. However, many immigrant parents were reluctant to leave their teenage children in school through twelfth grade. The wages they could earn if they were to drop out would help to sustain the family. Moreover, many immigrant children did not want to attend high school, especially those for whom the course work was too hard, or the lure of factory work, even low-status work, too appealing. The solution was to create two distinct tracks, one for high-school students who wanted to attend college, another for those who intended to go straight into the labor force. Students on the first track studied courses necessary for admittance to college, such as algebra, a foreign language, and history. A distinct vocational track, a watered down version of the traditional curriculum, was introduced for the noncollege bound, who took courses in shop or home economics (Graham, 2005). As a result, public high schools helped to create the blue-collar class, and served as a pathway to college for the much smaller group of high-achieving white ethnic immigrants.

The notion that public schooling made education available to everyone, allowing anyone to convert educational achievement into social mobility is rooted in the experiences of white ethnic immigrants who, as a broad group, have ascended the class ladder overcoming ethnic discrimination in employment and housing along the way. Today, white ethnicity does not determine who you may marry, where you live, or your position in the labor market (Waters, 1990). However, access to public schooling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was either withheld or severely restricted in the south, where poor, native-born whites and blacks, in particular, were less likely to receive an education than the northern concentration of newly arrived white ethnic immigrants and their children (Walters, 1999).

Unlike the north, the south did not contain large pockets of white ethnic immigrants deemed worthy of assimilation via Americanization by elites and the general public. Northern immigrants would need to learn English, many believed, in order to properly exercise the right to vote and work efficiently in factories. However, educating blacks to participate fully in the democracy was not essential as blacks were denied full citizenship in the south. Moreover, southern whites were heavily invested in maintaining the existing racial hierarchy. Instead of providing valuable skills that could be converted into a lucrative job, the limited public schooling made available to blacks was designed to "prepare [blacks] for the caste position prescribed for them by white Southerners" (Lieberson, 1980, p. 135). Despite the success of the Common School Movement in the north, there was no public will among southern whites to extend quality public schooling to blacks (Graham, 2005, pp. 19–20). Compulsory education laws and child labor laws, established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were rarely enforced with respect to southern black children.

Yet, disparities by race in access to public schooling did not emerge right away. During the Reconstruction Era, when federal intervention allowed blacks to exercise the right to vote, there was little to no difference in state funding allocated for white and black students. In North Carolina, for example, where black children comprised 38% of public school enrollment, black schools received 1/3 of the state support allocated for public schools. Although some whites still opposed tax-supported, public schooling for blacks, so long as blacks could wield the ballot, "proposals to divide taxes according to the racial origins of taxpayers … were consistently defeated" (Lieberson, 1980, p. 138). This meant that black and white teachers earned comparable salaries (about $22 per month for the former, $23 per month for the latter) and the length of the school year was the same for both groups (Graham, 2005; Lieberson, 1980). However, as Reconstruction came to an end, so did southern states' equitable funding of public schools.

The post-Reconstruction Era was characterized by the reversal of a number of civil rights for black citizens of the south, among them, unfettered access to public schooling. Blacks lost political influence just as public school enrollment among whites swelled. Still reeling from the economic downturn created by the Civil War, southern states, with much smaller pots of state funds at their disposal, elected to reduce significantly funding allocated to schools for black children. In Alabama, politicians passed new legislation stipulating that it was not necessary to distribute state funds for public schooling proportionately among the races. The impact of defunding was immediate. While just a few years before, black and white teachers in Alabama earned nearly identical salaries, by 1910 white teachers were paid nearly twice as much as black teachers. Expenditures per pupil now varied by race too: Alabama

spent $33.40 annually for each white child, compared to *a single dollar* annually for each black child (Graham, 2005, p. 22). Legislators in Mississippi established different certification processes for black and white teachers in 1886, linking salary increases to the credentials reserved for white teachers. By the 1890s, black teachers earned only about 2/3 of white teachers' salaries (Lieberson, 1980, p. 141). As southern whites regained control of the economy and the political system, state policy and federal legislation perpetuated racial exclusion in public schools under the banner of "separate but equal" (Graham, 2005; Lieberson, 1980), a policy the federal courts would not reverse until the 1954 *Brown* ruling.

EDUCATION AS SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Readers may not be surprised to learn, given the tumultuous history of public schooling, that the black–white gap in educational achievement persists to this day, although racial disparities have narrowed somewhat over time. In their place is a new, equally persistent achievement gap, one stemming from social class. Indeed, some researchers are beginning to extend the flawed concept of "separate but equal" to *social class* inequities, arguing that poor students require not merely an education *equal* to that of their middle-class counterparts, but one that is *significantly better* if they are to climb out of poverty (Tough, 2006). Still, class disparities in educational achievement have received less attention from scholars than racial disparities. In a society obsessed with race, divisions along class lines are not as visible as racial conflicts, but that view is changing. One indication is that disparities between lower-class and middle-class blacks on certain social outcomes are greater than those between blacks and whites (Lacy, 2007). Another indication that the public is beginning to fixate on class conflict is a study conducted in 2012 by the Pew Foundation, in which respondents ranked conflicts between the rich and poor as *the most important problem* dividing Americans, not racial divisions, differences between younger and older cohorts, or even tension between immigrants and natives, the most important source of conflict identified by respondents in 2009 (Morin, 2012).

The Pew study also assessed respondents' views on meritocracy through a question about how the rich became wealthy. We tend to think of achievement as resulting from individual effort, believing that, in a meritocracy, those who work the hardest reap the greatest rewards. However, findings from the Pew study suggest individuals are more divided in their perceptions of meritocracy then we might assume. To be sure, 43% of the sample reported that the rich accumulate wealth through "hard work, ambition, or education." However, a slightly larger percentage of the sample, 46%, indicated that the wealthy have an edge, they get ahead because they "know

the right people" (Morin, 2012). Respondents who hold this view may believe the deck is stacked against them, that no matter how hard they try, their low origins prevent them from ascending the class ladder.

The growing division between the wealthy and everyone else bleeds into the debate about the relationship between education and inequality. That educational attainment facilitates upward mobility is one side of the debate. On the other side, scholars known as *social reproduction theorists* argue that affluent groups rely on credentials acquired through the educational system to maintain their privileged position in society (Gamoran, 2001; Rubinson, 1986). How can this be when the Common School Movement extended universal public schooling to everyone, regardless of class position? One explanation is that once free, universal schooling was established, the elite changed the rules. For many years, the lower classes completed eighth grade, then entered the work force. However, once high-school completion becomes normative, a college degree, not a high-school diploma, became the new criteria required for economic success. As Gamoran explained, "[w]hen saturation is reached … inequality simply shifts upward, so that relative differences are preserved" (p. 144). For this reason, social reproduction theorists argue that the American educational system is designed to prepare children to reproduce the class position of their family of origin, not to rise above their class position. In other words, while schools *appear* at first blush to reduce inequality between groups, in actuality, they perpetuate it (MacLeod, 1987).

At the same time, social reproduction theorists have produced compelling evidence to show that schools reflect the culture and value of the upper classes, and that this is yet another way in which the elite reinforce their class position (Willis, 1981). At the forefront of this research is Bourdieu's *cultural capital* concept. The term refers to a person's proficiency in and familiarity with "dominant cultural codes and practices … linguistic styles, aesthetic preferences, styles of interaction" (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997). Bourdieu (1984) insisted that middle-class and upper-middle-class children enter the school system already in possession of varying degrees of cultural capital—skills that they have learned from their parents. Children from families whose lifestyles mirror the skills and preferences of the dominant culture are better prepared to negotiate the educational system (which is itself constitutive of the dominant culture), and ultimately achieve greater success in school. Possession of cultural capital puts a young student on the fast track to success, not because she is necessarily smarter than those who lack this resource, but because "she can navigate structures of power with greater ease, feeling relaxed and comfortable in the social settings they define and thus interacting with other persons of influence to get things done" (Massey, 2007, p. 18). Thus, the core issue for scholars concerned

with educational disparities today is *the rising importance of the acquisition of cultural capital for getting ahead* in life.

As journalist Paul Tough (2006) outlines, the research on the impact of cultural capital on important outcomes suggests that poverty is not simply a lack of *material* resources, it is also the condition of bounded information, a lack of the *knowledge* required to get ahead. Behavioral economist Sendhil Mullainathan (2013) insists too that being poor is not *only* about the absence of money. It is also about the absence of "freedom of mind." When you are poor, you are extraordinarily focused on your poverty, which means you are not free to think about other aspects of your life that also require your attention. This is why, he argues, the poor are more likely to forget to take their medication, for example. The poor are not necessarily noncompliant; the real problem is that poverty affects people at a cognitive level and this nagging distraction alters behavior.

If poor students are preoccupied with the finer details of life, middle-class students are presumably free to concentrate on excelling academically. There is theorists posit, something about being middle-class that is helping these children to get ahead. Increasingly, scholars and journalists are beginning to argue that this "something" is cultural capital. Middle-class children enter school with the requisite noncognitive abilities—"self-control, adaptability, patience, and openness" that are valorized in mainstream society and contribute to academic achievement (Tough, 2006). This focus is itself not new. Recall the previous discussion of Groton's headmaster, Endicott Peabody, who positioned the development of elite character well above the acquisition of knowledge. However, the literature on culture capital raises new questions about how to help poor students excel. If we inject poor students with cultural capital, will they succeed?

A relatively new set of charter schools have set out to accomplish this task. One such school is the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). Originating in Houston in 1994, KIPP schools are now strategically located in predominately poor and minority neighborhoods all over the country. The administrators of these schools believe that poor students do not only need to catch up academically, they also need to catch up culturally. Put simply, they need a strong dose of cultural capital. What kind of cultural capital are the KIPP schools dispensing? Like Groton, the KIPP schools are concerned with character. The administrators introduced the acronym SLANT that means "sit up, listen, ask questions, nod, and track the speaker with [your] eyes." The school also rewards students who are well-behaved, exhibit a strong work ethic, and our respectful of one another. The administrators teach the students that people who exhibit these qualities are more successful in school and, later, on the job market (Tough, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Does education level the playing field? This essay has examined the debate around this important social outcome. The most common response is that education is a pathway to assimilation, which, in turn facilitates upward mobility. However, this explanation is rooted in the experiences of white ethnic immigrants. There is disagreement about the generalizability of the model to more recent immigrants of color who face persistent racial discrimination. A different explanation, one that is attentive to social class inequities, is gaining traction. These theorists argue education fosters a hegemonic sense of group position, preserving the higher status of the elite and the lower status of the poor. Charter schools have experimented with providing poor students with the cultural capital so essential to getting ahead, but most poor students are not enrolled in these special schools. Additional research is needed to determine how best to help larger percentages of poor children to reap the benefits of a high-quality education.

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Karyn Lacy is Associate Professor of Sociology and African American Studies at the University of Michigan.

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