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Sociology 122

## The Maintenance of Inequality within the U.S. School System

### **Introduction**

Many aspects of the American education system uphold forms of inequality that have a history of being created and maintained by the upper-class. It is important to focus on the U.S. education system's maintenance of inequality because one's education is often determinative of their class standing in the future. As education is the primary mechanism for mobility and social reproduction (Tober, 2021), lower-class American students are stuck in a cycle that forces them to be immobile, where the upper-class students can pursue elite, high-class careers.

### **Residential Segregation and Education**

Where a family lives can have an impact on the mobility of their child. Massey and Denton have argued that "residential segregation is the principal organizational feature of American society that is responsible for the creation of the urban under-class" (Massey and Denton, 1993: 210). This affects the learning outcomes of the child because "areas with higher test scores (controlling for income levels), lower dropout rates, and smaller class sizes have higher rates of upward mobility" (Chetty et. al., 2015: 306), and these areas tend to be the wealthy, upper-class neighborhoods. Thus, residential segregation limits the ability of children to become upwardly mobile. This level of inequality is maintained by wealthy families who continue to choose residential segregation and see no issue in living amongst other upper-class families because the effects, such as upward mobility, benefit them.

### **Money Equals Power**

There is an unequal distribution of resources for school children that is created and maintained by one force: parental monetary support. When a particular level of schooling is not

universal, elites use their advantages, rather, their money, to secure that level of schooling (Tober, 2021). Reardon explains that “middle- and upper-class parents engage much more commonly in “concerted cultivation” - the deliberate organization of childhood around intellectual and socioemotional development,” (Reardon, 2011: 260). This deliberate organization of coerced cultivation for children could refer to one-on-one tutoring or after-school programs and extracurriculars. In the podcast *Nice White Parents*, reporter Chana Joffe-Walt explains a situation in which white parents enrolled in a school in which most children were black, Latino, and Middle-Eastern and came from working-class, poor families. One parent, Rob Hansen, had the idea of starting a dual-language French program at the school to attract other white, upper-class families that would involve after-school activities taught solely in French, including sports, theater, and culinary arts. Joffe-Walt criticizes the ways in which money was powerful at this school because the white parents donated money to support this French program that was claimed to be open to all students, but only the new white children knew how to speak French, and thus were the only children that could actively participate in these after-school programs. These elite parents, like Rob Hansen, would seek out a different education for their children and were able to do so because they had money. The children of the elite parents benefit from these programs that children of poorer families do not have access to. All of these factors - tutors, after-school extracurriculars, the dual-language French program - require money for children to grow intellectually outside of the regular school hours. High-income families have the power to stimulate their children intellectually and thus are more likely to provide opportunities for their children to develop cognitive and academic skills. In turn, this contributes to growing inequalities among upper-class children and lower-class children which is, more often

than not, created by wealthy parents. These are the clear and obvious advantages that upper-class, wealthy, mostly white families have.

### **Invisible Advantages and Disadvantages**

As a child, there are certain advantages and disadvantages that one may face depending solely on their origins. Origins could include the hometown of the child or the social status that the child was brought up in, indicating that the advantages and disadvantages that any child faces are deeply dependent on their parents. The parents determine the town that their child will grow up in, whether that is by choice for the middle and upper-class families or, for the lower-class families, the only option. The social status of a child is also regulated by parents based on their educational levels of attainment and income. As mentioned earlier, this creates a cycle that maintains inequality because wealthier parents can pay for tutors or intellectually stimulating programs, thus increasing the child's chances of getting into college and finding a well-paying job. At the same time, there are some 'invisible' advantages that students who come from families who have long gone to college have in the school system over those who are the first in their families to attend college (Tober, 2021). If your parent has attended college, not only might they pay for a college counselor to help you with your application - that would be the visible advantage because the parent is providing the monetary support to get the child ahead - but they will also be more knowledgeable about the application process, including essays, scholarships, and interviews. Compare this to a first-generation college student who needs to seek out assistance for applying to college without monetary support or any prior knowledge. This is an invisible advantage for upper-class students and an invisible disadvantage for lower-class students. Invisible advantages feed the cycle of inequality in ways that are damaging for lower-class families because they are the ones that may remain stuck in the poor end of the cycle.

Unconscious biases of educators can also lead to invisible disadvantages for lower-class students or students of color. American educators, in this sense, create and maintain the intense racial and social inequalities in the school system today, without even understanding that they are doing so. In an article about race, class, gender, and discipline in urban American schools, Edward W. Morris explains how Latino boys are treated differently in the U.S. school system compared to other racial and gender classes: “Latino boys, for example, currently have the highest high school dropout rate of any major racial or ethnic and gender group in the United States (U.S. Department of Education 2001). How educators interpret these boys’ presumed cultural capabilities or deficiencies, and attempt to reform them through bodily discipline, could constitute a key factor in their alienation from school,” (Morris, 2005: 29). This generates a specific type of inequality, created by American educators, in which students of color are disadvantaged in hidden ways in comparison to their white peers that may include different (worse) treatment and increased reprimanding. Of course, race tends to be a visible trait of any person, but the racial biases of educators are often unconscious, thus rendering them invisible disadvantages for students of color.

### **Preservation of Inequality**

Research shows that schools end up dividing students in ways that preserve existing systems of inequality (Tober, 2021). Leadership classes, Advanced Placement and Honors, and specific academies all need to be applied to or tested into. As mentioned earlier, elite families have the resources (the money) to prepare and support their children in applying to these programs. For example, a child who has taken private violin lessons her entire life is more likely to get into a ‘gifted music program’ than another child who is interested in trying to play the flute

but has never had the resources to do so before. This preserves the inequalities that the lower-class student has faced their entire lives.

Hidden curriculum within American schools teaches working-class children to stay in working-class jobs and elite children to stay in high-class jobs. Marxist theorists see hidden curriculum as the unofficial norms, behaviors, and values that schools teach to different children conducive to maintaining dominant and subordinate positions in the workforce (Tober, 2021). Some schools teach obedience and the following of orders, which prepares children of working-class families to stay in working-class jobs, where other schools allow group work and encourage discussion and disagreement, preparing elite children for leadership jobs (Tober, 2021). Hidden curriculum literally teaches children to maintain inequalities by encouraging them to stay in the same class as their parents. Once again, this benefits the elite children and burdens the lower-class children.

### **Consequences and Conclusions**

The cycle of inequality that is preserved and continued by elite families has harsh consequences for the children of the lower class. A child from a working-class family may be a prodigy or a genius, but may never have the opportunity to explore their talent because the U.S. school system forces them to maintain their class position. The monetary support from parental figures allows upper-class children to have a plethora of opportunities and access to special forms of education. Inequality is preserved by upper-class families and educators in ‘invisible’ ways as well because they provide the experiences that prepare those children to follow in their elite footsteps. Dismantling the systems that maintain inequities would benefit everyone because people of all classes, races, and genders would be able to take more control over their futures.

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