Social Class

Economic inequality is most pronounced among African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans in the United States, with Native Americans suffering the most poverty. Many social reformers, educators, and parents believe that education can be used as a powerful device for achieving social change and reducing poverty. In keeping with this belief, the federal government has initiated various educational programs (e.g., Head Start, Upward Bound, Title I, Job Corps, and Neighborhood Youth Corps) to help eliminate the disparity between classes and to raise economic levels for impoverished people. Unfortunately, the intended goals of improving income equity and eliminating poverty, despite participation in these programs by disadvantaged individuals, have not been realized. Some have come to believe that schools, rather than being an agent for social reform and improvement, are a mechanism for inculcating the values and developing the skills necessary for maintaining the current socioeconomic and political systems (Collnick & Chinn, 1994).

The continuation of the present socioeconomic order is supported in some ways that have a benign appearance but that have devastating consequences for lower-class children. For example, Rist (1970) found that children were categorized into reading and mathematics groups as early as the eighth day of school and that these groupings were made according to nonacademic factors. Children in more advanced groups came to school in clean clothes, interacted with the teacher more successfully, were more verbal, used standard English, and came from more socioeconomically advantaged families.

Lower-class children receive a lower-quality education. They are provided less effective learning experiences than their more advantaged counterparts. They miss out on learning that involves critical thinking. Instead, they are given compensatory education, which is essentially remedial. It is assumed that these children do not learn as quickly and cannot understand difficult concepts. They also have fewer opportunities to engage in creative thinking and instead participate in recitation activities and structured writing experiences (Banks, 2003; Gamoran & Berends, 1987).

One of the major educational practices that adversely affects lower-class children is tracking. Tracking involves assigning children to specific classes according to test scores, socioeconomic status, and teacher grades and recommendations. Once tracking occurs, students get locked into a group with common expectations. "High-ability" groups have high expectations, whereas "low-ability" groups are generally considered unable. Lower-track students get feedback from teachers as well as their peers that they are dumb and that little can be expected from them (Banks & Banks, 1989).

What should be done to provide lower-class children an appropriate educational experience? Teachers need to present these children with opportunities to acquire the knowledge and to develop the skills that can be used to overcome their poverty. Approaches must be used that are the same as those used for gifted students (Wheelock, 1992). Teachers must also systematically evaluate their interactions with students to determine if they are giving some students a disproportionate amount of their time and expecting lower-class students to respond in less sophisticated ways. Educators must also become aware of personal prejudices and understand how these are reflected in their classroom behavior. Students need to be taught about the class struggle in this country and to understand the nature and causes of inequality. The curriculum should not reflect only middle-class America. Students need to see some of their own cultural experiences manifested in what they learn. Children should understand that all persons do not share equally in material wealth but that everyone has the potential to improve their situation.
Pause and Consider

1. In your opinion, why didn’t the melting pot theory ever become a reality?
2. What can the schools do to enhance the social position of lower-class students?

Ethnic Diversity

Ethnic group membership has a significant impact on students’ perceptions of themselves as well as their school experiences. In schools, it is a common practice to place students in an educational environment based on test scores. Through this tracking process, many African American and Hispanic students get placed in classes with slow learners because of low test scores. Here the self-fulfilling prophesy takes over and students begin to act and think as though they are mentally retarded (Banks, 2000). Experts believe all forms of tracking should be abolished (Oakes & Guiton, 1995). The longer the African American, Hispanic, and Native American youth stay in tracking configurations, the further they fall behind academically (Gay, 2003). Because the environment of the school is so incongruent with the cultural experiences of many students, teachers need to make modifications that provide more hospitable and comfortable conditions in which to learn. An environment must be created in which students can learn to participate in the dominant society while maintaining distinct ethnic identities if they choose. Students who are members of the dominant culture need experiences that acquaint them with the cultures of their minority classmates.

Each cultural group within the school should enjoy sufficient status that group members do not feel inclined to oppose teachers and the educational program. Patterns of resistance and opposition are common reactions when minority students are subordinated in the school. This opposition often takes the form of breaking school rules and norms, belittling academic achievement, and valuing manual over mental work (Ogbu, 1988; Solomon, 1988).

Sometimes, understanding very subtle differences between cultural expressions can help immensely. For example, African American adults seldom ask questions that require their children to state something that the children realize adults already know. Instead, they are asked to talk about things of which adults are unaware. However, teachers commonly ask questions regarding topics they obviously know more about than their students. African American students are often puzzled by this, particularly in the early grades. In addition, African American adults usually ask questions regarding children’s experiences, whereas teachers ask about things outside children’s experiences. Children are thus unprepared to make intelligent responses. Finally, African American parents issue direct orders to their children and give specific directions regarding what they want them to do. European American teachers are usually more indirect. They may say, “Why don’t you do such and such?” African American students take these indirect instructions as suggestions rather than expectations (Brice-Heath, 1982, p. 163).

Native Americans also find themselves in cultural conflict when they enter the schools. For example, to Native Americans, exactness of time is generally of little importance. In the dominant Western European (Anglo) culture, time is of the utmost importance, and punctuality is considered a virtue if not a necessity. Native Americans hold that because the future is uncertain, preparing for unknown eventualities is an inappropriate activity and an unhealthy approach to living. European Americans put money into insurance, fret over savings and investments, and do many other things that make little sense to Native Americans. Native Americans value patience. One’s ability to wait is important. Western European culture admires quick action more than patience. In school, teachers often value punctuality, whereas actions taken to enforce it may seem alien to Native American students.