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Educating for Power: How Higher Education Contributes to the Stratification of Social Class

Alissa B. Strong

Educational attainment in the United States has become increasingly linked to socioeconomic mobility. In particular, systems of higher education provide resources that give power and legitimacy to a limited group of U.S. citizens: the middle and upper classes. This power translates into political influence, financial control, and cultural supremacy that further divide social classes. By breeding graduates with economic privilege and marketable skills, systems of higher education contribute to the widening gap among people in different socioeconomic statuses. Acknowledging and examining the oppressive structure in which college students are engaged may help to extend educational opportunities to more Americans and challenge our perceptions of scholarship.

An exploration of the history of education can reveal the ways in which dualistic notions have influenced societal standards. As formal education grew institutionally in the United States, social class structures also became more distinctive. The dualistic ideals that educational systems standardize often determine what truths we find legitimate and credible within U.S. culture. Teresa Córdova (1997) explains that this “legitimate knowledge” has gained enough merit to garner power for whoever has possession of it. In this way, higher education as a system allocates power and money to those who are considered the most “fit” and credible according to socially established standards (p. 209). This power imbalance contributes to the widening of social class differences and the narrowing of prospective opportunities.

The individuals who are members of the middle and upper classes gain the most societal power as higher education provides them such proficiencies as political skills and bargaining tools. Thus, higher education breeds middle and upper class citizens who gain greater benefits than those in the lower class. This inequity can be traced back to the structuring of the educational system, which has historically been revered as objective and elite (Gatto, 2003). In having the power to determine the credible truths of society, higher education has granted degrees that translate into political tools, economic mobility, and ultimately power for those who are able to gain access to a college or university. In doing so, higher education as a system

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oppresses those from the lower class. The intent of this article is to examine higher education as an oppressive force that perpetuates social class disparities through economic and cultural means.

Higher Education as a Market

Higher education has become a type of market for career advancement that is drifting out of the reach of those in lower socioeconomic classes. Scott L. Thomas (2004) writes about the effects of a globalized economy in the United States and its consequences for higher education. He explains that obtaining a degree in higher education is not only an advantage but also a necessity for gaining access into “quality jobs and economic opportunities” (p. 105). U.S. education, he claims, has become a primary vehicle to advance one’s social class. This is apparent in the vast differences between job descriptions, benefits, and compensation among those who do and do not attend college. In short, the U.S. economy has enabled the college degree to act as a mechanism that maintains or advances one’s social class and therefore one’s power.

Although the “American Dream” suggests that the harder people work, the more they will flourish economically, there are alarming quantifiable data that suggest this may not be true. David Brooks (2005) explains how economic circumstances affect one’s educational opportunities in the United States, stating that almost 75% of students in the top quarter of the population have a chance at obtaining a college degree. However, students in the lowest class brackets are least likely to obtain a degree, at 8.6% (para. 10). This drastic difference suggests that those in lower classes have a severe disadvantage in gaining access to higher education. If those in the majority of the upper and middle classes have the best chances at obtaining these degrees, they will also have the best career placement opportunities. In fact, in 2010, 42% of jobs in the United States will require a college degree (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006, p. 126).

Having these educational credentials and career experiences will help individuals advance economically and professionally. Those with a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2000 made twice the median income of high school graduates (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006, p. 126). They will have the ability to move into larger salary brackets, assimilate into higher class cultures, and increase their cultural capital or political influence. Meanwhile, those who are unable to obtain access to higher education will experience a disadvantage in each of these realms.

In relation to these statistics, students’ motivations for attending college have also shifted over the last few decades. Thomas (2004) refers to an annual study by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, which shows that in 1966, 84% of entering first-year students were pri-

marily seeking to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life” while in college. As of 1990, approximately the same percent of students were more concerned with being “very well off financially” at the conclusion of their college education (p. 109). Since 1990, financial success is still considered a primary goal of education for the majority of students. Students’ shift in perspective is reflective of how higher education’s role in stratifying social class.

The Original Intentions of Education

The focus on lucrative career goals, higher social status, and economic values has grown as systems of education have evolved. John Taylor Gatto (2003) explores the original intentions of public education by noting the perspective of Alexander Inglis, author of *Principles of Secondary Education*. By studying Inglis’ interpretation of the purposes of education, we can begin to examine how students are moving through the educational system as pawns of social class construction. Inglis describes the purpose of school as demonstrating six basic functions. The first includes teaching students how to submit to authority, which stunts the development of critical thinking and questioning. He claims that schools also function to integrate students into conforming behaviors that are predictable and assimilated. In doing so, school teachers and administrators designate a specific social role for students according to their academic records. The students’ education then trains them to perform this role. In addition, Inglis posits that schools use academic merits to filter out those who are considered unfit to excel according to societal standards. Lastly, these steps will ultimately determine which groups of students will be recruited into an elite status and which will be relegated into power structures that define those who do not excel in the same way.

These functions stifle the development of critical examining skills as well as students’ abilities to make autonomous choices. Inglis’s description of assimilating knowledge or determining one’s fitness for social roles can be perceived as the placement of students within social class structures. Neglecting the development of these critical skills in an educational experience enables the dominant values of those in power to unknowingly persist. With an inability to challenge dominating values, students find themselves entrenched in this system even as they progress into higher levels of education. Without the skills to critically consider the implications of academia, students become cogs within an oppressive structure at a young age. Higher education offers the opportunity to transform and challenge these structures; yet, those who are gaining the most access to higher education are the ones who have excelled most according to these standards.

The Dualistic Nature of Education

Historically, those who obtained an education would be considered “better” than

others by society's standards. Saying that a particular type of knowledge or way of learning is better than another, however, enhances the societal expectation that all people should find such revered things as education desirable (Downie, Loudfoot, & Telfer, 1974). Using these labels places more value on an education or a degree compared to goals that have less credibility or clout. This point reinforces a binary of what is right and wrong and the elitist culture of higher education.

Anne Bishop (2005), author of *Beyond Token Change*, suggests that there is an expectation that those with an education are considered "good" or "better" (p. 121). She explains that the use of such words prematurely places a dualistic lens on the value of education. If one is seen as "good" by pursuing an education, can another who does not pursue an education be perceived as "bad?" Furthermore, is there an accepted notion that our personal best can only be assessed and realized through the formal standards of an "education?"

Bishop (2005) also explains that U.S. culture relies on this type of dualistic meaning-making: "We tend to think in mutually exclusive categories: bad or good, subjective or objective" (p. 121). Assigning values to education is just one example of how higher education as a system is able to convert knowledge into bargaining tools for power.

This is one way society has been able to delegate credibility and power to those who know their rights and wrongs (as determined by the elite) within a dualistic framework of U.S. culture. Institutions of higher education easily measure such merit in "a unique hodgepodge of standardized test scores, grades, and extracurricular activities" (Thomas, 2004, p. 114). Those who excel within these areas will be considered the best students and most fit individuals for society. This kind of merit serves as a type of currency within U.S. society. By determining who is best by the academic standards of an institution, education begins to stratify those who succeed within the structures of a university and those who do not or never make it there.

This merit is based on middle- and upper-class standards of excellence that give benefits to certain people over others. Such examples include excelling on particular types of examinations, demonstrating skills in certain subject areas, and valuing narrowed ideals of intellectualism. Donna Langston (2004) examines one example of how education is structured as a classist system that divides students according to these standards:

The classist system is perpetuated in schools with the tracking system, whereby the "dumbs" are tracked into homemaking, shop courses, and vocational school futures, while the "smarts" end up in advanced math, science, literature, and college-prep courses. If we examine these groups carefully, the coincidence of poor and working-class backgrounds with

“dumbs” is rather alarming. . . . To do well in society presupposes middle-class background, experiences and learning for everyone. (p. 145)

Many educational experiences are created and evaluated in ways that give advantages to one type of student over another. Examples of this culture can be seen in academic expectations of using appropriate language and formal writing. Both of these presuppose, as Langston argues, knowledge of middle-class culture. As individuals gain academic merit through these expectations, they also gain credibility in society. Since American society places value on these attainable merits, it also determines who is fit to have the most power over decision making and culture creating. Therefore, educational tactics that separate the “dumbs” from the “smarts” contribute to the growing divide of social class and societal power.

Merit and Legitimate Knowledge

Córdova (1997) explains the power of higher education in determining legitimate knowledge and its function as a source of credibility in society. She writes, “The University is a central location for establishing knowledge as a discourse of power, where the power to decide what is considered truth or not, is tied to the power to legitimate that truth (or non-truth)” (p. 209). In other words, the university acts as an authority of scholarship and knowledge, thus influencing the truths of society. If U.S. society values the truths associated with legitimate knowledge, then those who have access to education will also have access to influence and power, thus becoming part of the dominant class. Institutions of higher education serve as a major source of legitimate knowledge that can later translate into power for the middle and upper classes.

For each of these reasons, higher education acts as a resource from which individuals can access merit, social mobility, and ultimately power. Higher education continues to heighten class mobility for some and stunt it for others; therefore, it oppresses individuals in lower socioeconomic statuses. Bishop (2005) explains that such institutional structures as higher education set “strong norms about who is valuable and who is not, and what actions are out of bounds and who can punish those that cross the lines or do not have the right to be where they are” (p. 77). By identifying who is valuable and limiting what actions are acceptable, systems of higher education further perpetuate class inequities. Bishop’s explanation reinforces the oppressive consequences of how higher education functions within U.S. society.

The Hope in Higher Education

As higher education has the ability to contribute to this culture of elitism, it also carries the potential to play a crucial role in the development of its students. Although theorists like Inglis argue that students are taught from a young age not to

think critically (Gatto, 2003), others like Paulo Freire (2004) offer some hope to be realized within structures of higher education. In a dialogue at the University of Mexico, Freire explains his perspective on the dialectical relationship between the oppressive dominant culture that higher education promotes and the students that are actively resisting its oppression. Although Freire agrees that systematic education serves to reproduce “the ideology of the dominant class,” he describes the contradiction of the educational system as providing tools to fight against itself (as cited in Escobar, Fernandez, Fuera-Niebla, & Freire, 1994, p. 32). In his discussion, Freire offers a viewpoint that shines some glimpse of hope on oppressive educational systems.

As class interests are embedded in the historical and structural foundations of education, Freire (2004) believes that the main purpose of education is to reproduce the values and expectations of the dominant culture in order to maintain its power. From Freire’s theoretical perspective, education would qualify as a type of structure that oppresses others:

Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in ‘changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them’; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated. (Freire, p. 74)

At the same time, he claims that opportunities, such as attending institutions of higher education, offer the chance to work against this reproduction of dominant values if the institution encourages action and critical thinking. He thinks of education as “our” possession, which we can use to our advantage in counteracting the dominant culture. Yet, there remains uncertainty in challenging the dominant power if all students are embedded in it. Further, can those in lower classes find ways to gain access to higher education and then the tools to confront these oppressive systems?

If education persists in oppressing populations by promoting classism, students need to counteract its dominant forces continuously. Students must be aware of the privilege they gain as part of “one of the great inequality producing machines this country has known” (Brooks, 2005, para. 1). Higher education professionals must acknowledge the systemic reproduction of middle- and upper-class cultures in order to expand the truths that control society. Most importantly, higher education professionals must reconsider how higher education can include other populations in the pursuit of knowledge. These suggestions are in no way finite solutions to the inequitable consequences of higher education but rather a responsibility of the academy and the students.

Freire (2004) states, “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform”

(p. 49). Heeding Freire's advice, administrators and faculty alike must transform the ways an institution standardizes and limits access to knowledge. In addition, they must encourage students to think critically and question their inherent domination. Students must engage in open dialogues that bring to light the endless facets of knowledge that have not been traditionally valued. Such transformations may enable students to feel less like a tiered population of learners and more like equitable peers. Also, dialoguing in this way can encourage more collaborative efforts and open-mindedness in pursuing change. This in turn will aid the development of educational achievements, political representation, and financial resources of oppressed classes of people over time.

Attempting to undermine the oppressive constructs within higher education can be both daunting and intimidating. It is appropriate after exploring this topic for the reader to gain some tangible ideas that can be implemented to stimulate change. The most obvious suggestion (and also the task that would cause the most upheaval) would be to restructure a university to model values and beliefs that are not exclusively based on the interests of historically White upper and middle class culture. This restructuring could include redefining curricula in ways that encourage exploration, interaction with communities different from one's own, and openness to subjective truths. Enhancing curricula and campus life in ways that acknowledge the cultures and values of various social classes and backgrounds would help students become aware of the privileges their knowledge affords them. Pedagogies like service-learning or experiential education could involve students in ways that would heighten their awareness as individuals and as members of society. As universities continue to graduate students with legitimate knowledge and marketable skills, they should simultaneously acknowledge how higher education acts as an oppressive structure within U.S. society. In addition to this recognition, students should be encouraged to challenge and critically examine which dominant structures are oppressive, how they are dominating, and whom they are oppressing. Universities and students could foster opportunities for collaboration and dialogue. Finally, by reconsidering the ways knowledge is measured and labeled within educational systems, universities can implement equitable ways to afford working-class students access to higher education.

Escobar (1994) states, "it is not possible to think of education without thinking about power" (p. 32). Higher education in the United States is currently breeding the next generation of powerful leaders. They will gain abilities and skills that will be converted into benefits and power within a country that values educational meritocracy. Those who have no financial access to higher education will be at a dramatic disadvantage in seeking representation and support. Because of the differences in culture between social classes, a lack of understanding between individuals as well as stratified groups will continue. This will widen the growing cultural gap between classes, which exacerbates financial and political circumstances.

Bearing in mind Freire's thoughtful words, "World and human beings do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction" (as cited in Escobar et al., 1994, p. 50), we can begin to understand how these differences can be acknowledged and appreciated. Recognizing each other as humans in constant interaction can help us to focus our energy on distributing resources and educational opportunities equitably. Only by transforming the way students gain access to and engage in scholarship can we begin to broaden our cultural, class, and educational values.

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