

How and Why Education Varies in Communities with Different Socioeconomic Backgrounds:

Education Disparities in Communities

Kerrigan I. Adkins

University of Hawaii at Manōa

**Introduction** The sociological, political, and economic communities are well aware of the academic disparities pertaining to socioeconomic background, on its primary levels. Because of the academic disparities, many school districts continue to be largely segregated, not as much in race but in social class. This issue could be recognized as a legacy of slavery or a preference that is clearly found and practiced in societies across the world. However, neither hypothesis can dispute the variation in education and the effects that it has on today's generations. A text that delivers in-depth details about inequalities within nations and across nations is *Cross-National Differences and Accounting for Social Class Inequalities in Education* by Gary N. Marks. In the text, Marks gives a list of explanations for what he calls the "class-based inequalities in education." The three explanations include: "those that emphasize income or other material resources", "those that emphasize cultural factors" and a third group that focuses on the "role of schools"(Marks 2005: pp.485). Using these explanations this paper aims to sociologically identify and analyze how and why education varies in communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Synthesis** One of the most familiar explanations for the issue of disparities amongst education is the contrast of the quantity of material resources available to varying educational institutions with discernible socioeconomic backgrounds (Marks 2005: pp.485). Marks refutes the significance of the explanation with the statement "The implicit assumption is that schooling involves costs, and well-off parents are in a better position to meet those costs. The essence of this approach is that children's educational success can to a considerable extent be bought." Directly following, Marks invalidates the assumption that the extent is considerable. When

referring to the previous statement Marks goes on to comment, “This conclusion is consistent with the general finding that income has only moderate or weak effects on a range of children’s outcomes (Mayer, 1997).” To dispute this, individuals will pull data that shows that some of the worst schools can be found in some of the wealthiest states, simply because of varying access to material resources. Data found in the Atlantic is a clear example of this, “Connecticut recently implemented a system called NextGen to measure English and maths skills, college and career readiness.” The states’ poorer districts had significantly lower averages than those of more affluent communities “Bridgeport’s average was 59.3 percent and New Britain 59.7 percent; Greenwich, by contrast, scored 89.3 percent and Darien scored 93.1.” The article went on to further compare the districts. “Graduation rates are lower in the poorer districts, there’s more chronic absenteeism,”(Semuels 2016). Similar data can be found when comparing the school districts in surrounding suburbs and major cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and Houston. Nevertheless, a plethora of outliers: high test scores of students, and low absenteeism in poorer districts, plague this data, thus leaving it to be consumed but not digested. Condemning all disparities on material resources fails to account for the blamelessness of impecunious citizens. This macro-level of thinking relates to that sociological perspective of conflict-theory. Conflict theory is established as “ the sociological perspective that claims society is in a state of perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources. Conflict theory states that social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than consensus and conformity,” (Marx 2011). This can be seen as big picture thinking, the big picture explanation (Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World 2015). By using conflict theory to justify the dissimilarities in education amidst socioeconomic backgrounds, one would reason that educational disparities

serve the purpose of maintaining social order. However, very little empirical evidence supports this perspective. Assuming that society is required to be a “source of inequality that benefits some groups at the expense of others,” without evidence to support that variations in education, based on socioeconomic backgrounds, benefit a group, sociologists cannot assume this perspective to be the “why” in the question “why and how education varies in communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds (“PowerPoint #3:Classical Sociological Theories).

Culturally, different groups have different expectations and standards of success. In one household high school graduation may be seen as a major accomplishment, while in another a postsecondary degree is unexceptional. Because higher economic status is usually complemented by higher levels of education (NCES 2001),<sup>1</sup> one can assume that those with higher socioeconomic backgrounds come from backgrounds with higher education. Additionally, when an individual has more educated parents, they are more likely to pursue higher education, as well as have the academic and economic resources to be accepted to institutions with academic preeminence.

“As parents’ education increases, so does students’ likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education. Among 1992 high school graduates whose parents did not go to college, 59 percent had enrolled in some form of postsecondary education by 1994. The enrollment rate increased to 75 percent among those whose parents had some college experience, and to 93 percent among those whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree.” (Nces.ed.gov, 2018).

---

<sup>1</sup> For young adults ages 25–34 who worked full time, year round, higher educational attainment was associated with higher median earnings; this pattern was consistent from 2000 through 2016. For example, in 2016 the median earnings of young adults with a master’s or higher degree were \$64,100, some 28 percent higher than those of young adults with a bachelor’s degree (\$50,000). In the same year, the median earnings of young adults with a bachelor’s degree were 57 percent higher than those of young adult high school completers (\$31,800).

The hierarchy that maintains crucial to the socialization process of members of different subgroups is a straightforward model of functionalism. The major assumptions of functionalism are: society's social institutions perform important functions to help ensure social stability; slow social change is desirable, but rapid social change threatens social order (Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World 2015). Culture has a lot to do with this ideology. Returning to Marks' remarks on how culture plays a role in how education varies in communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds the author considers an extremely familiar sociological theory, "The most well-known theory is Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1974, 1984) argues that social reproduction is maintained by the education system. The success of students from high-status backgrounds, who are adept in the dominant culture, is enhanced because teachers and other gatekeepers judge and assess students by the criteria set by the dominant culture." Standards set by administration and guardians play a large role in the academic success of student "the place of parental involvement in academic achievement holds no matter what level of parental education one examines (Bogenschneider, 1997) and at all levels of economic background (Shaver & Walls, 1998)." As well as studies showing that "family income, educational expectations, academic preparation, parental involvement, and peer influence also independently affected graduates' likelihood of enrolling in a 4-year institution by 1994 (Horn and Nuñez 2000)." These findings exclude the explanation of an "emphasize cultural factors" existing as the "how" in the question "why and how education varies in communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds."

**Discussion** The final explanation is the "role of schools." For the purpose of consistency, school is defined as and encompasses the finances, the school size, the class size,

the buildings. These are “important as they must be there in some form for a school to exist,” as well as the staff; excluding teachers, and Student Service Assistants (Hattie 2003: PG 2). By looking at each institution individually, one can identify and eliminate characteristics of educational establishments that differ and echo respectively. This micro-level of analysis is best accompanied by the micro-level sociological theory of symbolic interactionism which “focuses on the relationships among individuals within a society,” (Blumer, 1969). If an individual is to take account of all factors of educational variations and the disparities among communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds one must look at all of the relationships held by the school. The teacher-school relationships, how the school equips the teacher to perform, as well as the student-school relationships, how the school interacts with the students, and vice versa. Because less than an estimated 20 percent of the variance of achievement is that of the schools, simply comparing the exceedingly high number of school districts in the United States fails to show the individual perspective (Hattie 2003). Therefore one must also analyze the student, including home life, and the teachers.<sup>2</sup> The true reasoning for “why and how education varies in communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds” lies in the two latter groups. In every other explanation outliers, and contradictory evidence could be shown, thus discrediting the explanation, however, one cannot discredit personal experience and since every process of academic achievement and completion is unrepeatable, even by those in the same household, outcomes are expected to be and accepted as heterogeneous.

---

<sup>2</sup> Peer effects being excluded for the purpose of staying on topic.”Which accounts for about 5-10% of the variance. It does not matter too much who you go to school with, and when students are taken from one school and put in another the influence of peers is minimal (of course, there are exceptions, but they do not make the norm). Certainly peers can have a positive effect on learning, but the discussion is too quickly moving to the negative powers with the recent increase in discussion on bullying (which is too real), and on the manner students create reputations around almost anything other than pride in learning.”(Hattie 2003)

Students and home life make up approximately 60 percent of the variance of achievement (Hattie 2003). As early as the late stages of pregnancy some factors affect only students belonging to low SES<sup>3</sup> families. “Low-SES mothers tend to have less adequate access to health care, so their babies are at greater risk for low birth weight, which is a risk factor for cognitive impairment<sup>4</sup> with consequences measurable at least into middle childhood,” continuing through childhood with the higher possibility of lead exposure, and a higher probability to have a nutritionally inadequate diet (Willingham 2012: PG34). If a student does not encounter physical health issues it is assumed that the student will encounter other problems, such as the inability to focus in the home. “Kids in low-SES families are also more likely to share a room and generally to live in more crowded conditions, which is known to affect academic performance. This effect may be due to the simple fact that a more crowded home is noisier, making it more difficult to concentrate, but crowding also likely makes it harder for parents to maintain a calm, orderly home, which also impacts cognition.<sup>5</sup>” Presuming none of the above are true, Willingham presents ‘Stress Theory,’ “The basic idea behind stress theories was well captured by a policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics published in January of this year. Low SES is associated with chronic stress that, if not buffered by supportive relationships, has long-term, negative consequences on brain development, which are expressed in cognitive performance,”(2012). It is said that after-school programs as well as “school interventions, would be necessary,” for low SES students to “fulfill their educational potential.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Socioeconomic status

<sup>4</sup> Maureen Hack, H. Gerry Taylor, Nancy Klein, Robert Eiben, Christopher Schatschneider, and Nori Mercuri-Minich, “School-Age Outcomes in Children with Birth Weights under 750 g,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 331, no. 12 (1994): 753–759.

<sup>5</sup> Jean E. Dumas, Jenelle Nissley, Alicia Nordstrom, Emilie Phillips Smith, Ronald J. Prinz, and Douglas W. Levine, “Home Chaos: Sociodemographic, Parenting, Interactional, and Child Correlates,” *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology* 34, no. 1 (2005): 93–104.

In a scenario where a student in an affluent community attends their ‘neighborhood’ public school and a student from a low socioeconomic background attends their ‘neighborhood’ public school, supposing neither is benefitting nor suffering any more than the other, health-wise, where can one pinpoint the educational disparity.

“Teachers can and usually do have positive effects, but they must have exceptional effects. We need to direct attention at higher quality teaching, and higher expectations that students can meet appropriate challenges - and these occur once the classroom door is closed and not by reorganizing which or how many students are behind those doors,” ( Hattie 2003:PG3).

Responsible for 20 percent of the achievement variance teachers can be said to make a considerable difference in a school ( Hattie 2003: PG3). The foundation of “adult life” is learned in the classroom and facilitated by the teacher. While many schools and districts set curriculum and mandate certain activities teachers do have some creative outlet when it comes to lesson planning. Hattie distinguishes expert teachers from experienced teachers and notes the key difference “Experts and experienced teachers do not differ in the amount of knowledge they have about curriculum matters or knowledge about teaching strategies. But experts do differ in how they organize and use this content knowledge. Experts possess more integrated knowledge, in that they combine new subject matter content knowledge with prior knowledge; can relate current lesson content to other subjects in the curriculum; and make lessons uniquely their own by changing, combining, and adding to them according to their students’ needs and their own goals” (2003). With this in mind, it is safe to assume that there is a high probability of education disparities within one school. If the latter statement is hypothesized, then why is there such a stark difference between communities with low SES? One could argue it is the inability to hire



expert teachers. When looking at the financial data from 2011 contributions to education from local governments are almost equivalent to those from the state. In-state revenue, \$267,762,440<sup>6</sup> only trumps local revenue, \$264,550,594<sup>7</sup>, by approximately \$3.2 million<sup>8</sup> (NCES 2013-344). An individual would suggest that the way in which the districts appropriate their money is the reason for academic disparities in different socioeconomic backgrounds. When comparing suburban to urban public schooling parents are much more involved in the decisions made by the school district<sup>9</sup>. While appropriating these funds teachers are not the priority. We see this in constant battles for higher teaching salaries, school board scandals, and the constant reminders that academic programs are not valued as much athletics. In low SES school districts, if expert teachers and their programs were seen as investments, one could suppose that educational disparities would be reduced.

**Conclusion** Early in the paper ‘material resources’ were discussed and argued that they did not define the academic experience and therefore could not be the “why” in the question “why and how education varies in communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds. If two teachers working within the same building, given the same materials and there is an educational disparity amongst those classrooms, materials cannot be blamed. Previously this paper expounded on “emphasize cultural factors.” By once again saying that children in the same household vary amongst academic achievement, the culture in which they are socialized cannot be stated as the “how” in the question ‘why and how education varies in communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds’ (Howe, Recchia 2014).

---

<sup>6</sup> In thousands.

<sup>7</sup> In thousands.

<sup>8</sup> In thousands.

<sup>9</sup> This is easier because fewer students are usually in suburban school districts

Education varies in communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds because the priorities of the schools' administration do not reflect the needs of the students. Teachers are short-changed, students are completely left out of their academic discussions, and both are left out of school administrative decisions. If students were introduced to school programs and schools intervened with their students, educational disparities would be reduced. Additionally if the average teacher, in communities with low socioeconomic background, became a larger part of their schools fiscal and administrative conversation, society would benefit abundantly.

### References

- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Hattie, J.A.C. (2003, October). Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence? Paper presented at the Building Teacher Quality: What does the research tell us ACER Research Conference, Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved from [http://research.acer.edu.au/research\\_conference\\_2003/4/](http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference_2003/4/)
- Marks, G. (2005). Cross-National Differences and Accounting for Social Class Inequalities in Education. *International Sociology*, 20(4), 483-505.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2011). *The communist manifesto*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Nces.ed.gov. (2018). The Condition of Education - Population Characteristics - Economic Outcomes - Annual Earnings of Young Adults - Indicator April (2018). [online] Available at: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cba.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cba.asp) [Accessed 7 May 2018].
- Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts: School Year 2010–11(Fiscal Year 2011)(NCES 2013-344). See <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2013344>.
- Rist, Ray. (2000). Student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy of ghetto education. Author's introduction: The enduring dilemma of class and color in American Education.(reinforcement of social class through education). *Harvard Educational Review*, 70(3), 257-265.
- The Benefits of Socioeconomically and Racially Integrated Schools and Classrooms.” The Century Foundation, 14 June 2017, [tcf.org/content/facts/the-benefits-of-socioeconomically-and-racially-integrated-schools-and-classrooms/](http://tcf.org/content/facts/the-benefits-of-socioeconomically-and-racially-integrated-schools-and-classrooms/). [Author removed at request of original publisher]. “Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World.”
- University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing Edition, 2015. This Edition Adapted

from a Work Originally Produced in 2010 by a Publisher Who Has Requested That It Not Receive Attribution., 8 Apr. 2016,  
[open.lib.umn.edu/sociology/chapter/1-3-theoretical-perspectives-in-sociology/](http://open.lib.umn.edu/sociology/chapter/1-3-theoretical-perspectives-in-sociology/).

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment, NCES 2001–126, by Susan Choy.  
Washington, DC: 2001.

Willingham, Daniel. Why Does Family Wealth Affect Learning. *American Educator*, 2012. Web. 7 May 2018.

Nina Howe & Holly Recchia (2014) Sibling Relationships as a Context for Learning and Development, *Early Education and Development*, 25:2, 155-159, DOI: 10.1080/10409289.2014.857562