Marxist Criticism of Public Education Funding and Social Reproduction

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CORE 152

The primary source of funding for public schools in the United States serves to perpetuate the composition of social classes from one generation to the next. Currently, the majority of public schools rely on local property taxes as their primary source of funding.

The funding gaps that arise between schools located in wealthy districts and those located in poor districts create discrepancies in curriculum and instructional quality that result in what researcher Jean Anyon refers to as “reproductive” learning and knowledge amongst the various classes (31). When public schools rely on local property taxes, their students are married to the social class from which they originated. Linda Darling-Hammond and Jacqueline Ancess write, “The entrenched system used to finance public education makes systemic inequalities in education inevitable” (157). The popular financial structure of public school systems in the United States today promotes reproductive learning and perpetuates the current composition of the social classes. A nation-wide transformation of public education funding is necessary if the country is to approach a more socially mobile society.

Capitalist Root of Social Stratification

Marx and Engels open their manifesto with, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (39). It is a natural tendency for economically unequal classes to arise and struggle for dominance within a capitalist system. Bowles and Gintis argue, “... inequality has its origins in the structure of the capitalist economy ...” (85). The force that drives the class divide is the exploitation of the working class by the upper class, specifically those who control the capital in a capitalist system. Marxist scholar Phil Gaspar summarizes one of Marx and Engels’ arguments as, “Capitalists will only buy [a worker’s labor] if they think they can get more out of the worker than she receives in wages ... capitalism is based on exploitation. Capitalists want to pay their workers as little as possible and to make them work as hard as possible” (Marx and Engels 24). The reality of capitalist accumulation that results from this exploitation causes wealth to become concentrated in the hands of a privileged few, while the majority of the population receives far less wealth than they contribute to their employer. The profits gained by the wealthy capital holders are then reinvested in additional capital that earns these elites an ever-increasing proportion of available wealth. Anyon charges that the inevitable divide
between the classes is exacerbated and perpetuated by discrepancies in the quality of public education received by the varying classes.

Socio-Economic Stratification of Public Schools

In the 1970s, Jean Anyon carried out a now classic but controversial case study of school stratification. She concluded that important divisions exist between “working class,” “middle class,” “affluent professional” and “executive elite” schools (Anyon 5). She observed that curriculum, quality of instruction, attitudes and expectations varied in patterns that correlate with the social classes she identified. These curricular and instructional discrepancies enforce a cycle of reproductive learning, Anyon reports, through which each class is taught in a manner that ensures, or at least encourages, the perpetuation of that class across generations (Anyon 3-39). Specifically, Anyon writes, “… students in [working class] schools were not taught their own history – the history of the American working class and its situation of conflict with powerful business and political groups, e.g. its long history of dissent and struggle for economic dignity” (32). This vital hole in working class education inhibits social progress across generations. Working class students would be far more likely to seek political power and social change later in their lives is they were exposed to the history of past workers’ movements in school. In contrast, students in the upper echelon of the socio-economic spectrum are educated about social class stratification. “The executive elite students – in different and more social profitable ways than the working-class students – may see more clearly . . . the raw facts of class and class conflict” (Anyon 37). The upper class students will be able to use their privileged knowledge of societal structure to help them assume the upper class social positions of their parents (Anyon 37-38).

Beyond reproductive learning, the rising importance of post-secondary education helps to further polarize students whose families can afford to provide them a college education from those whose families cannot. This reproductive, or conserving, force related to higher education has grown in prominence over the past century or so. According to Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, “As late as 1870, only 1.7 percent of eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds were enrolled in higher education . . . At the end of World War II, slightly under one-fifth of the eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds were enrolled; now, roughly half of the relevant age group go on to postsecondary educational institutions” (201). As higher education becomes more necessary for financial success, it becomes even more difficult for students from lower-class backgrounds to experience any positive social mobility. In the Anyon study, one of the distinguishing characteristics between the schools of different social classes was the number of students who expected to attend college. In the working-class school, only three of twenty interviewed students expected to attend college. Eleven students cited poor grades as their primary limitation, two questioned their ability to pay (Anyon 10-11). In contrast, the majority of students from the affluent professional and executive elite schools not only expected to attend college, but also expected to attend a prestigious
college (Anyon 23, 30). Bertell Ollman comments on the education gap between social classes. “There is such a strong correlation between students’ family income and test scores, however, that the radical educational theorist, Ira Shor, has suggested (tongue-in-cheek) that college applications should ignore test scores altogether and just ask students to enter their family income” (48). Though many exams are “standardized,” wealthy students consistently outperform poorer students due to educational inequalities (Ollman 48). As long as students from the upper class are better prepared, both academically and financially, to obtain higher education, public schools will continue to be a force of social reproduction.

Financial Inequalities Among Public Schools Due to a Flawed Funding System

A primary factor that causes public schools to vary in quality is the nature of their financing. Most public school systems in the United States are funded by local property taxes. This funding system creates a vast imbalance between the budgets of schools in wealthy areas and those of schools in poorer areas. Darling-Hammond and Ancess describe this problem as such, “The reliance on local property taxes ensure that districts with higher property values will have greater resources with which to fund their schools, even when poorer districts tax themselves at proportionally higher rates” (157). As a result of this financial inequality, the quality of education in school districts of different social classes can vary greatly. Ultimately, this education divide is a form of social reproduction. Poor public school districts cannot afford to hire quality teachers or purchase acceptably challenging curriculum; they also have greater social and disciplinary problems (Darling-Hammond and Ancess 158). The working-class children that attend these schools are therefore poorly prepared for postsecondary education, where they will be forced to compete with wealthy students whose schools could provide a quality education. According to Darling-Hammond and Ancess, “[Inner-city] schools are typically funded at levels substantially below those of neighboring suburban districts and of schools in their own districts that serve more-advantaged students” (158).

The amount of funding a school receives has been directly tied to the performance of the school’s students. Large-scale research done by Ronald Ferguson shows, “. . . that school expenditures [are] directly and substantially related to student achievement, particularly as they are used to purchase highly qualified teachers and lower class sizes” (qtd. In Darling-Hammond and Ancess 160). This evidence for social class reproduction is a disturbing and unsurprising force of social reproduction, creating a feedback cycle that prevents poorly funded and poorly performing schools from improving.

Socialization of Public Education

Bowles and Gintis argue that educational reforms are unable to totally resolve the problem of social reproduction, preferring revolution to reform, due to the greater degree of change that accompanies a revolution. They write, “. . . the extent of [economic] inequality is . . . hardly susceptible to amelioration through
educational policy” (56). Marx agrees, arguing that revolution is inevitable if a majority of the population is to be oppressed as poorly educated wage-laborers. “But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians” (Marx and Engels 49). Marx and Engels later elaborate, writing, “[The bourgeoisie’s] fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (57).

Though Marx, Engles, Bowles and Gintis rightly praise a revolution’s potential for the elimination of class differences, far subtler education finance reforms are still capable of inhibiting class reproduction and inheritance without the violence and unrest inherent in a social revolution. In addition to weakening social stratification, improved equality of opportunity through equal public education funding would lend legitimacy to the system of meritocracy that is presumed to exist in the United States. Bowles and Gintis take exception to the current acceptance of this false meritocracy, writing that, “. . . beneath the façade of meritocracy lies the reality of an educational system geared toward the reproduction of economic relations . . .” (103). Bertell Ollman has also rejected as illegitimate the current meritocracy after analyzing the effects of exams on education. “The crush of tests gets students to believe that one gets what one works for, that the standards by which this is decided are objective and fair, and therefore that those who do better deserve what they get” (48). Ollman dispels this belief with evidence of social reproduction, however. Though exams are often believed to promote a legitimate meritocracy and equality of opportunity, Ollman argues, “. . . if some students consistently do better on exams because of the advantages they possess and other students do not outside of school, then directing society’s main benefits to these same people compounds the initial inequality” (48). The proliferation of exams is an example of a socially reproductive force unleashed by public education. Though testing may appear to be fair and blind to class distinctions, there are clear differences between class performances that have actual causes in and out of classroom instruction (Ollman 48). However, if public education funding were equalized, instruction quality were improved, higher education made accessible to all, and curricula were more standardized, the public education system would help legitimize the currently unfair meritocracy in America.

Proposition

In light of the evidence gathered from Marxist scholars, I have determined it necessary that public school systems be funded not from local property taxes, but from a state- or nation-wide pool of funds. An increase in taxation is not necessarily required, but a redistribution of funding is. While elements of this system already exist, such as state supplementary funding to poor school districts, public school funding must become far more universal in order to be a non-reproductive element of society (Darling-Hammond and Ancess 158).

Darling-Hammond and Ancess note that financial restructuring alone is not enough to make public education truly equal in regard to opportunity. “Equalizing opportunity will require
attention to school finance policies, teacher recruitment and preparation policies, and curriculum policies . . .” (170).

Curriculum must also become more standardized. One of the primary examples of reproductive learning in the Anyon study was the failure of working-class students to learn of social class conflict history. If curriculum were standardized (not necessarily though the use of additional standardized testing), instruction that was previously reproductive (such as the selective teaching of historical class) would become non-reproductive when taught universally.

In addition, higher education must become socialized. As higher education grows in popularity and prominence, those that are unable to receive a postsecondary education become further and further distanced from upper class privileges. Socialized and publicly accessible higher education is a necessity of any legitimate meritocracy.

These proposed public education reforms would not be able to completely eliminate social class reproduction, but they would be capable of diminishing the role played by public education in social reproduction.
Works Cited


