

Social Class, Poverty, and Education: Policy and Practice

reviewed by Thomas J. Cottle — 2002

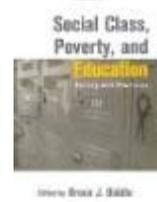
Title: Social Class, Poverty, and Education: Policy and Practice

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A friend recently was attempting to describe for me the purpose of a committee devoted to studying public education on which he sits. In a sense, he began, all we're trying to do is "wrap our brains around these utterly complex matters." His point is well taken, especially when one reads, for example, a report such as the one my colleague David Steiner prepared for the Bertelsmann Foundation, "Educational Achievement and Reform Strategies in the United States of America," (2001) in which, after pages of truly elegant prose, he concluded that much of public education is really a mess.

That said, where does one begin with this brain wrapping exercise? One place is Bruce J. Biddle's impressive new anthology, *Social Class, Poverty and Education*. The volume is the third major publication from the Missouri Symposia on Research and Education, and each chapter, if not a gem unto itself, yields all sorts of thoughtful riches and empirical insights.

The war horses of public education continue to be captured in that proverbial gap, not only in academic performance but also in resources and opportunities, between the proverbial have's and have not's. Nothing surprising here, write Biddle and his colleagues, who recognize that if public education doesn't consciously or unconsciously perpetuate the often egregious inequities of social class, as Bowles and Gintis (1977) wrote, (and a theme picked up in Peter M. Halls' essay that concludes this volume), then at least it reflects this palpable economic bifurcation. Not only that, as Biddle and Peter Cookson note, (the latter's chapter, "First Person Plural: Education as Public Property," offers a magnificent portrait of schooling and social class), when we consider America's obsession with individualism and private property, and an abiding insistence on freedom over equality, or equity, we begin to see the social structural components that come to define public education. And if there is no one America, there is no one American school, no one single description of American poverty, and most assuredly, no one single antidote to the poison of human impoverishment in the form of law or policy.

Amazingly, with America leading industrial nations in the degree of poverty it condones, Americans continue to believe, Biddle claims, that schools represent the ultimate savior; diplomas are passports to mobility. Whether one believes in the doctrine of essentialism, namely, that one is born with genetic gifts, or the lack of them, or in the concept of a culture of poverty, it is difficult to escape the late Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital or James Coleman's notion of social capital. Students clearly bring something to the classroom, what Bourdieu refer to as *habitus*, a collection of dispositions, and evidently the rich bring, well, something richer in the form of preparation and connections to that classroom. No wonder America's teachers prefer middle and upper class schooling; no wonder the rich carefully safeguard the possibility of private education for their children in their back pockets, or is it their deep pockets.

One of the great contributions of this valuable book, and something found in every chapter, most notably in the essays of Annette Lareau, David L. DuBois, Michael S. Knapp, and the aforementioned Cookson, is the utter complexity of this matter of poverty. It is a human self, a human mind, a human brain growing and evolving in impoverished homes and neighborhoods, perpetuating values, standards, linguistic codes, world outlooks, and in-looks too, for that matter. The structure of these evolving organisms is so much more complicated than ever we dared to imagine, so much more tangled than any single policy statement or regulation could possibly define, much less transform. Little wonder that after digesting volumes of reports and policy statements, Steiner could find no other word to describe what he felt than "a mess."

Take only the matter of SES, social economic status. In reading these eight essays we are again reminded that social psychological variables, not unlike individual life stories, are themselves filled with variables. To believe that one variable, SES, for example, tells the complete story is dangerously misleading. To wit, parents' income may lead us to one set of predictions about a child's educational future, but parents' education levels will lead us to totally different predictions. Even more, the age of the child living in poverty makes a huge difference in the development of the self, and how that self perceives and defines itself inside and outside academic settings. Adolescents, apparently, have acquired some psychological antibody that mitigates the pain and oppression of poverty; the smaller child, as always, remains more vulnerable.

Jeanne Brooks-Gunn has continually been a wellspring of information about children and adolescents, a scholar constantly digging at the essential matter of academic achievement and its relationship to poverty. Over the years she has been as relentless as she has been erudite. Her contribution with Greg J. Duncan, a frequent collaborator of hers, in this volume is indispensable reading. Intriguing is the way these authors can communicate the subtle workings of statistical correlations with the narratives of the people from whom their statistics are drawn. Poverty directly cuts into cognitive development, Bourdieu's *habitus* as Annette Lareau would remind us. But Duncan and Brooks-Gunn are quick to note that poverty can cause a mother and father to battle over the tensions caused not merely by an inability to pay the bills, but a fear that they will not give to their children all they feel they must.

One begins to feel somewhat depressed reading Ricardo D. Stanton-Salazar's essay, "Defensive Network Orientations as Internalized Oppression: How Schools Mediate the Influence of Social Class on Adolescent Development." The shadows of Bowles and Gintis (1977) begin to creep into the early pages as he explores the so-called hidden agendas of schools, namely the socialization of oppression and sense of inferiority or defectiveness in the minds of adolescent students. Then, suddenly, we encounter proposals for reform, strategies for what he calls "radical interventions," even in communities experiencing the direst forms of oppression and anomie. Stanton-Salazar trumpets the familiar theme of integrating the school within protective social and economic institutions that eventually come to underwrite the most essential ingredients of human development, along with something called knowledge. Not so incidentally, Hall picks up Knapp's message on the need for outstanding teachers, reminding us that the conditions, circumstances and structure of the school not only attract or repel potential teachers, they also make it possible for great teachers to be just that.

In the end, this anthology screams for equitability and equality, just as it underscores human differences, most notably in the ways people teach and learn. Although his theory is nowhere here developed, I find John Rawls' momentous volume, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), serves as the cauldron in which these valuable and illuminating propositions and findings are gathered.

Three notable reminders from the Rawls doctrine seem relevant to the formidable and impassioned essays comprising this volume. First, one must question utilitarian theory and insist that the rich cannot get richer until the poorer among us reach what Stephen Nathanson calls a level of decency. Second, Rawls' famous "veil of ignorance" reminds us that we must write policy as if we ourselves might be the ones inheriting the consequences of our own proposals. And finally, no one deserves anything! The concept of *habitus* illustrates this position. We neither deserve our opportunities, nor our lack of them, unless of course we assiduously researched our grandparents' and parents' educational histories before being conceived. Pure chance accounts for our educational and academic evolution, our achievements as well as our failures, at least it does in a society that has not yet constructed a public school plan that is truly equitable and just.

So where to start? What to read? What to begin to wrap our brains around? Quite obviously, Bruce J. Biddle's *Social Class, Poverty, and Education: Policy and Practice*. It is an entire academic course whose contents every teacher and policy maker ought to know well, just as they ought to come away feeling a bit of sadness about the conditions of a putatively great country's most significant institution, not to mention the children and adults who everyday inhabit it.

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