**Classism in the U.S. Education System: Gatekeeping a Quality K-12 Education**

Social Justice in Clinical Psychology

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**Classism in the Education System**

Horace Mann, a social justice advocate, believed schooling should be a common good, open to, and benefitting all (Small, 2020). Public schools and the U.S. education system were created to provide equal access to quality education to all its citizens. Historically, this country and past presidents have portrayed the importance of quality education such as Al Gore, "there is no greater test of our national responsibility than the quality of the education we provide", or George W. Bush, "Both parties have been talking about education for quite a while it's time to come together to get it done, so that we can truthfully say in America: no child will be left behind" (Hochschild, 2003, p.821).

Yet these speeches and discourses have diverted attention from the fact that U.S. Schools have consistently ranked among the most unequal in terms of inequitable distribution of resources, spending curricular offerings, teacher quality, and overall educational experience (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Bertrand et al. 2015; Hochschild, 2003; Nieto, 2005; Small, 2020). This paper will seek to explore the realities faced by the lower social classes and determine if quality education is truly equal across different social classes within the U.S. K-12 education system. In doing so, this paper will provide a definition of classism followed by a historical overview of how classism presents itself within the K-12 education system. The educational disparities among social classes, which been an issue of the past and have continued to be perpetuated through discourses, discursive strategies, theories, and political mechanisms will be explored. Finally, this oppression has had an impact on underprivileged youth, their access to quality education, the possibility of social mobility, and ways in which clinical psychologists may foster a more just system will be presented.

CLASSISM IN EDUCATION SYSTEM

**Defining Classism in Education**

Social class is determined by the combination of dominant culture knowledge and familiarity, social networks, and money a person has available to them. In other words, social class is determined by the amount of money someone has and how well that person can function within the dominant class (Langhout et al. 2007). Classism is a type of discrimination and oppression presented in ways that exclude, devalue, discount, and separate people occupying lower social class levels. As for the purpose of this discussion, classism is recognized through the exclusion of students from receiving a quality public education because of their low-income status.

A quality education is composed of various factors: resources, class sizes, teacher quality, learning opportunities, school leadership, and curriculum (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Rouse & Barrow, 2006). However, there are great disparities that continue to exist between schools in higher-income and lower income communities regarding each of these factors. These schools vary greatly in school funding, pupil expenditures, working or learning conditions, and educational outcomes. Higher class community schools receive large sums of government grants and financial donations from community leaders, parents, alumni wealthy donors, can afford up-to-date technology, and keep a five-star appearance (Small, 2020). An example of this difference was demonstrated by Small (2020), Morgan Park's yearly budget for 2018-2019 was $13,112, while Dover-Sherborn Regional High School's budget for 2017 was $9,915,962 and Weston High School's for 2020 was $41,441,391.

Low-income schools are overcrowded, lack resources in the classroom, have insufficient textbooks, hold classes in crumbling buildings, provide improper heating or cooling maintenance, encounter rodent infestations, and supply insufficient libraries (Bertrand et al.,

2015; Small, 2020). These schools are three to ten times more likely to have novice, uncertified, not adequately prepared teachers who may also be assigned to teach outside of their preparation field, resulting in higher attrition rates, teacher turnover, and disruption of instruction continuity (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Disparities in learning opportunities such as college prep courses, student, and staff expectations such as discipline and performance, curriculum, and physical structures are still present today. These things can affect students in psychological ways including self-esteem, confidence, and hinder academic achievement (Bertrand et al. 2015; Nieto, 2005; Rouse & Barrow, 2006; Small, 2020). Bertrand et al. (2015) argues these disparities play a significant role in shaping differential school outcomes, and the manifestations of systemic classism in education place working-class students at a disadvantage while benefiting middle- or upper-class students.

**The Development of the Education System**

Public schooling began when local communities created them more than 200 years ago, funded by local property taxes. The value of real estate assets determined the greatly varying amounts of revenue between communities. High property values are typically found where there are wealthier residents, and due to this decentralized system of governance, inequitable funding has been a result since then (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). More funding provides better schooling, smaller classes, better libraries and labs, higher-paid teachers, and more resources that all contribute to improved educational outcomes (Hochschild, 2003; Rouse & Barrow, 2006). The disparity in educational funding has put lower-class students at a disadvantage while middle or upper-class students have benefited from this oppression. The districts with more poor students have lower average test scores and higher dropout rates compared to upper- class schools (Hochschild, 2003). The knowledge and skills necessary to

achieve social power or social mobility that is available to higher social classes but are withheld from the lower class.

Since then, various political and social mechanisms have been put in place to explain this achievement gap and keep this system of oppression. The working class has mostly been Blacks or recent immigrants since class biases are closely interwoven with racial and ethnic inequities (Hochschild, 2003). Therefore, a political mechanism put in place that supported classism within the education system was the "separate but equal schools" law put in place by the Jim Crow doctrine that promised equal education, but black schools were always inferior to white schools in terms of infrastructure and resources. Other communities that were also affected by this segregation were Mexicans, Native Americans, Chinese, and Japanese children. In 1954, the Brown V. Board of Education decision and civil rights movement created a sense of hope for educational equality but failed to deliver (Nieto, 2005). Instead, theories were put in place to explain the achievement gap and divert attention from structural education inequities.

In the 1960s, the Harvard educational review article explained that poor achievement of minorities (mostly working-class) was explained by genetic differences and student failures were explained by their "deficits" including their genetic makeup, language skills, and inadequate mothering. These viewpoints held great influence during the 1960s. In the 1970s, activists, educators, and researchers challenged deficit theories by insisting that structural inequality and poverty issues were overlooked it would provide a better explanation for students' poor academic achievement. Joel Spring, Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, and Michael Katz argued that these deficit theories served the interests of the dominant class, required students to adjust to the norms imposed by the dominant group, reproduce the status quo, and the economic and social relations of society (Nieto, 2005; Swartz, 2009). The government focused more on the labor market

purpose of schooling and the arguments of these theorists were considered explanations of school

success or failure that were unable to be changed.

The deficit explanations adapted into a series of theories that explained the achievement

gap between working and middle- or upper-class students. Cultural incompatibility theory

explained that the cultural clash of home and school cultures would affect students learning. The

more congruent home and school cultures are, the more successful students will be. Cultural

mismatch theories continue to evolve with different names and subtle differences providing

explanations for the achievement gap instead of genetic inferiority explanations (Nieto, 2005).

Another highly influential theory viewed students as caste-like minorities. Voluntary

minorities were those born in the United States, and because of their self-esteem, they will

perform better in school due to their interaction within the U.S. society. Involuntary minorities

were those incorporated into the U.S. against their will and have a caste-like status in society,

being distrustful of the education system. These involuntary minorities engaged in cultural

inversion, the resistance to acquire and demonstrate the dominant group's culture and cognitive

styles which included behaviors like being studious, hardworking, speaking English, going to

museums, and getting good grades (Nieto, 2005).

In 1983 the resistance theory was established to add another explanation of school failure

amongst lower classes. This theory argued that not learning what schools teach was interpreted

as a form of political resistance and over time a consistent pattern of refusing to learn arises.

Therefore, students were considered actors within the education system and learned to react to

schools, supporting their resistance (Nieto, 2005).

In the early 1990s the "ethic of care" was used to explain student success or failure,

which argued that loving students enough to have high expectations and make rigorous demands

would make a difference in how students experience schooling. Institutional agents such as teachers, counselors, and other adults, could provide networks and institutional supports for students to access gatekeepers and opportunities that are usually closed to disadvantaged students (Nieto, 2005).

In 2002, the second provision to the No Child Left Behind Act states that all students are ensured access to highly qualified teachers. This indicates that teachers must have a full certification that demonstrates their competence in the subject matter or field that they teach. However, there are a significant number of schools that indicate 25% of teachers are uncertified and 75% are brand new, assigned to teach out of their field, or scored a low performance on the licensure exam. Therefore, the act that was put in place to ensure educational equality did not change the systemic inequity but perpetuated the oppression more covertly. Under the Bush administration, the US Department of Education created regulations that allowed candidates who had not yet completed a program to be counted as highly qualified teachers to solve high teacher attrition rates. These regulations were argued to allow inadequate teaching and masked the fact that students were being underserved since these teachers would be highly concentrated in low-income schools. In 2011, congress attempted to lower standards for qualified teachers so that teachers who were not fully prepared would be deemed qualified. Constant efforts to focus on surface-level solutions to reduce pressure on policymakers and look over the large disparities in salaries and working conditions between low-income and higher-income schools. (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

The theories that emerged from the beginning of public schooling now have shifted their explanations concerning the achievement gap between lower working-class students and middle- or upper-class students. They began from attributing school failure to the individual and morphed

to attributions concerning the school environment and institutional agents within the education system. However, all social and political mechanisms have portrayed an effort to help solve these educational disparities by focusing on surface-level remedies and diverting attention from the structural inequity that has been taking place and continues to take place within the K-12 education system. The structural inequity caused by classism within the K-12 education system continues to influence the differential education outcomes between classes. Therefore, the social and political mechanisms put in place over the years have continued to allow oppression. This oppression continues to affect the educational outcomes of working-class students, inhibiting their possibility of social mobility, and keeping them in the working class.

**Deficit Discourses and Discursive Strategies**

Another reason why classism within the K-12 education system continues to oppress the lower classes is because of how the *winners* justify this systemic inequity. Policy insiders explain inequity using discourses and discursive strategies that covertly perpetuate oppression. The use of deficit discourse locates the source of education failure within the individuals, in this case, working-class students and their families. They perceive internal deficits of these students and divert attention from structural classism (Bertrand et al., 2015). Current discourses continue to position marginalized groups and predetermine them as low achievers by labeling them as "at-risk" or "disadvantaged. These views use working-class communities to justify school segregation and a more basic curriculum that limits learning opportunities for students of the working-class. They also disparage the student's individual and cultural characteristics because they do not adhere to those of the dominant groups and support arguments against public investment in tackling school inequality, therefore preventing other possibilities of receiving aid and resources (Swartz, 2009). All while leaving neglected the greater cause for these inequities

and perpetuating the social class inequality that is taking place within the education system

(Nieto, 2005).

In conjunction with the deficit discourses, policy insiders use masked discursive strategies

that help promote these ideas concerning the lower social classes. Through controlling the

narrative, they conceal the inequitable power relations and identity of those benefiting and those

harmed by the system of oppression while continuously advancing their classist ideas. They

highlight the deficits of marginalized groups by providing contrasting cases and explaining these

differences as natural occurrences (Bertrand et al. 2015; Swartz, 2009). At the same time, their

use of metaphors negatively presents the "other" groups and characterizes the lower social class

as problems. Those who influence policy self-present themselves positively as non- classists by

promoting issues that divert attention from the structural inequity and providing surface-level

remedies. In the study by Bertrand et al. (2015), fifty policy insiders were interviewed

anonymously to measure the discourses used to justify this oppression and whether they were

believed automatically or planned precisely. Results indicated three main discourses that were

used to blame the inequity: social structure such as the listing of disparities in resources between

schools, family and community deficits, and teachers' unions and seniority policies for the

inequitable distribution of teachers instead of addressing funding differences between low

income and high-income schools.

**The Beneficiaries and The Victims**

The funding disparities between low-income and high-income community schools have

affected individuals in upper, middle, and lower social classes. Small (2020) argued that the

middle, upper classes live in richer communities and go to schools that receive much more

funding compared to low-income communities. More funding results in the employment of

highly qualified and experienced teachers holding much smaller classes and high expectations for their students and staff. These schools also had a more open physical structure and curriculum that provided students with more autonomy and opportunities for creative thinking, while learning the knowledge and skills required for social power and advantage. The middle- and upper-income parents tend to choose schools that are wider and wealthier, avoiding schools with higher percentages of non-white students and providing high quality and bountiful resources for their children to succeed (Rouse & Barrow, 2006; Small, 2020). At home, middle- and upper-class students also benefit from the cultural and social capital that their parents provide and learn from the privileged informal curriculum of their environment. There is little limit to the amount of funding, resources, learning opportunities, and social capital that are available to these classes. Therefore, the middle and upper social classes are the *winners* over the sustained disadvantaged position of the *losers*.

The lower social class is also affected by this system of oppression, but unlike being beneficiaries, they are victimized by it and are the *losers*. The working class is mostly made up of minority communities whose parents don't have the choice of sending their child two affluent public schools. These parents are mostly not available because they are busy trying to earn a living and put their trust in the educational system to educate their children. The lower social class and minority students continue to be disproportionately concentrated in high-poverty areas. Historically, these students have had no choice but to attend lower-income schools. Unlike the advantaged groups, skills required for social power were withheld and instead manual skills and clerical knowledge were offered. The lack of resources, unqualified staff, less rigorous curriculum, and poor learning conditions negatively influence their educational outcomes. According to Nieto (2005), these schools are also built like fortresses that operate with a bell

system and other controlling mechanisms that discouraged critical thinking (Swartz, 2009). The relationships formed between students and teachers reflect a more dominant-dominated relationship than in middle class and wealthy communities which result in teaching these students to lead a submissive and inferior position within society from the beginning. Teaching them to abide by dominant group norms such as comply with the authority and follow the hierarchies of human worth (Swartz, 2009).

These disparities and educational inequity have been in place for years but are not being fought by the *winners*. The *winners* may dismiss the reality of there being an issue and draw upon notions of individual choice and economic liberalism to draw attention away from the systemic inequality. The *losers* fight the biased odds of students' achievement between classes, the disparities in resources, funding, teacher salaries, and learning opportunities. These fights are either given surface-level remedies or any proactive efforts for change that do rise, quickly lose steam over time and the losers fall back into the cycle that American culture has created and maintained from the beginning.

This cycle within American culture has sustained the oppression of lower social classes since the slavery era. Years ago, the minority communities were oppressed, colonized, devalued, and excluded, which led to a great disadvantage and inhibited these communities to the possibility of social mobility. Many kinds of oppression continue to exist in a variety of systems and continue to be sustained because, unfortunately, each one has a purpose. The oppression of classism within the K- 12 education system has supported the functioning of the American culture because a well-functioning school system requires the dominant group to sanction norms that should be followed (Swartz, 2009). Our country, as a system also relies on people to adhere to the dominant group norms, have different kinds of skills, and are willing to fill every type of

job. Therefore, the harsh reality is that the purpose of classism within the education system is to keep people conforming to the dominant group norms, staying within their position in society, no matter how unfavorably it may be, otherwise, it would not be a sustained system.

**Clinical Psychologists' Role**

In this sustained system, clinical psychologists are agents of oppression because they had the opportunity to receive a higher education, a privilege that the majority of the lower classes are unable to access. The preparation that a clinical psychologist attains to be an evaluator is knowledge that many working-class members of society are not prepared to learn because of such disparities inherent in the U.S. education system. As treatment providers, clinical psychologists form part of a dominant social group in the United States by virtue of their education. These clinicians may have come out of lower or middle social classes, but through their educational and employment opportunities, they can find themselves in the middle or upper classes. As a researcher, clinical psychologists also have access to many resources, social, and cultural capital that is otherwise not accessible to individuals who are the targets of oppression.

As agents of oppression, clinical psychologists can work towards eliminating classism within their communities. The more professionals work towards eliminating the oppression, the greater the impact will be, creating a possibility for more equality between social classes. Clinical psychologists can focus their efforts towards making psychology more accessible for working-class students to bridge the gap between clinicians and the disenfranchised, diminish the stigma of seeing a psychologist, and help their clients.

Various students live through environmental and societal sources that impact them and their ability to succeed in school. However, problems that impact a student's achievement, including poor health and nutrition, family instability, less safe communities, and fewer resources

are more prevalent within the working class. These students would benefit from psychological services, but some barriers exist within the system that impedes their access to these services. Therefore, psychologists can help combat the effects of oppression by raising awareness and making psychology more accessible to these schools and students. For example, providing workshops at schools to students and teachers on options available to help cope with various life stressors. Another option is to offer an online chat function where students can connect with a professional and receive the help they need more effortlessly. An alternative may also be improving social media presence for psychologists where videos can provide tips for students on how to endure various life events and provide a platform for them to connect with other students who are experiencing similar situations, ensuring them that they are not alone. These are all methods to make psychology more accessible to working-class students, bridge the gap between psychological services and the disenfranchised, and ultimately build resiliency within these children. Building resiliency within working-class students will strengthen their confidence in school and create the possibility for students to overcome barriers presented to them. Leading to the improvement of their school performance, eventually achieving a smaller attainment gap between social classes.

Clinical psychologists may also challenge classism within their communities by diminishing the stigma of seeing a psychologist for help. The stigma being, only extreme cases see a psychologist, which is common within working-class communities. Parents who believe this are under the impression that their child does not need help which hinders the ability of psychologists to reach more students. To combat this belief, psychologists may also create a website, make videos, or use social media to translate various research articles and findings into layman terms to raise awareness of milder cases, how people are impacted psychologically, and

options available to help them. The videos can also humanize psychologists and enable them to share their knowledge and preparation to raise awareness and make seeking help less intimidating so that working-class parents are more inclined to help their children.

For those individuals who can and do obtain help from a psychologist, become clients. Psychologists may also provide low-cost services or assessments for low-income communities to receive help. Working class students would benefit from these services. Clinicians can help them process and cope with any stressors they are experiencing. Receiving psychological services may also help them become aware of any learning modifications they require to enhance their learning capabilities. The provision of low-cost services would increase working class access to these services and strengthen their confidence in school, advancing their school achievement.

Understanding the psychological impact that working-class students experience and how it can affect their school achievement is an initial approach to how clinical psychologists can combat classism within their communities and the attainment gap between social classes. It is through sharing our knowledge with lower-class communities and helping our clients that will assist clinicians to hinder the psychological impact that these systemic oppressions have caused. Increasing access to help, building resiliency, and strengthening confidence within working-class students will improve the possibility to reduce the attainment gap and achieve social mobility.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the harsh reality is that oppression exists to sustain the system they occur in. Classism within the K-12 education system has prevented working-class students from receiving a quality education, hindering their possibility of social mobility through inadequate funding, lack of resources, and unqualified teachers. As a result, an achievement gap amongst students between social classes has existed since the establishment of public schools. Over the years,

social and political mechanisms were placed to justify this gap while diverting attention from the

ongoing systemic inequity, and perpetuating classism within the education system. However,

increasingly more clinical psychologists and agents of oppression can work towards eliminating

classism within their communities and expanding the impact, creating the possibility for more

equality in education between social classes.

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<div align="center">Resources</div>

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