Social Economic Status and Educational Achievement:  
A Review Article¹

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This paper provides a preliminary review of concepts and studies related to social class, educational achievement and learning styles. An attempt is made to survey the literature pertaining to the complex relationships between social economic status and educational achievement and to set out the main arguments. It is primarily intended for the educator and the interested layman. SOCIAL STRATIFICATION, SOCIAL CLASS, EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT, LEARNING STYLES, THE INDIVIDUAL.

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a general appraisal, a review of the state of many of the key issues concerning the relationships of socioeconomic status (class) to educational achievement. The theories and concepts, issues and debates raised here are intended for the consumption of the interested practitioner. This paper may appear simplistic to those scholars immersed in the subtle complexities of class, status, caste, ethnicity, race, and other forms of social distinctions within populations; but it is hoped that even they may find it informative. The material presented is from the idiosyncratic perspective of a social anthropologist. Sociologists and political scientists will find many shortcomings. But they must remember that the explication of knowledge involves a division of labor, a differential in sensitivity, emphasis, and perspective related to disciplinary interests and theoretical persuasions.

Even within the discipline of anthropology there is a marked and yet artificial distinction between those who pursue culture and those who acknowledge the primacy of things social in the study of education. The cultural anthropologist interested in the analysis of education assumes that his or her principal concern lies in exploring the "transmission of culture," and although there is little agreement on the definition of either term, this orienting phrase sets the limits of the cultural anthropologist's universe of exploration. Since culture is transmitted, anthropologist's are supposed to discover the mechanisms and procedures by which the inventory of learned experiences is selectively transmitted and to whom, under what conditions, and for what purposes it is transmitted. This orientation to transmission and commitment to culture means that cultural anthropology relies heavily on the methods, concepts, and findings of psychology and culture and personality and studies of

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acculturation and symbolic and value systems. Comitas and Dolgin aptly capture the nature of this approach as follows:

In essence, anthropologists directly involved in questions of cultural transmission focus on the forms through which values and attendant behavior are taught and the specific content of the social, cultural, or group value system. (1978:171)

“Cultural transmission” forms a focus of inquiry, but alone it is a little more than an orienting statement. It is not a theory and should not be accorded that status.

Social anthropologists, on the other hand, operate with a different set of assumptions in dealing with education. They treat education as a field of inquiry on a level with fields of investigation such as economics and religion. They are concerned with the context within which institutions operate and relate in a statistical and normative manner to other social formations and institutional arrangements. For example, if cultural anthropologists may be said to look at cultural transmission, social anthropologists are concerned with illuminating the social context of the transmission and its implication for other social arrangements in society. It is apparent that the one cannot, or rather should not, operate without the other; the interests of cultural and social anthropologists are complementary.

The preliminary intention of this paper is to set the intellectual scene for a discussion of the issues and debates surrounding the notion of class and educational achievement. To do this, it will be necessary to review an inventory of concepts as they relate to theory and to epistemology. Frequently, the principal protagonists in the debates adhere to and expound different theories of knowledge. Their theories and concepts may be derived from, and rooted in, distinct and very often incompatible assumptions about knowledge and “reality.” Hence it is often difficult to weigh the relative values of arguments when the basic assumptions are not the same. In its minimal sense a theory is here taken to be a body of interconnected propositions that “serve to map out the problem area and, thus, prepare the ground for its empirical investigation by appropriate methods” (Nadel 1969:1).

A second feature of the preliminary intention is to introduce the characters, the historical protagonists, those who have expanded, interpreted, and operated the concepts and characteristics of the sides of the debate.

Social scientists use theories and concepts to help them grasp, order, analyze, and understand the nature of the societies, cultures, and sociocultural formations with which they are confronted. Each society has specific features or attributes that may resemble or differ from those of other societies. “Societies are made up of people; societies have boundaries, people either belong to them or not; and people belong to a society in virtue of rules under which they stand and which impose on them regular, determinate ways of acting towards and in regard to one another” (Nadel 1969:8). Put simply, societies are bounded units whose members are governed by rules. Of course, the unit set out by these criteria is arbitrarily defined, but nonetheless it is a starting point for distinguishing or apprehending social differences. Firth has observed that “if society is taken to be an organized set of individuals with a given way of life, culture is that way of life. If society is taken to be an aggregate of social relations, then culture is the context of those relations” (1961:27).
A more usual definition of culture, however, is the one expounded by Edward Tylor (1838–1917), a British social anthropologist. In his book, *The Origins of Culture*, he makes the observation that “culture... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1958:1). Many of the founding figures of contemporary social sciences, such as Karl Marx (1818–1883), Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), and Max Weber (1864–1920) expounded theories of society and culture and the manner in which they are structured and change. Their arguments concerning social stratification and society inform many of the current views of class, and their theories are pre-eminent in debates both within and outside academia. The intellectual traditions they have established affect the orientations of scholars and practitioners to social problems. For that matter, their theories help to define the nature of social problems and the manner of their solution.

II. Class, Status and the Individual

By now it should be clear that human diversity in this paper refers to social properties distributed within populations, and these social properties form the basis for distinguishing and arranging people into strata. Modern complex societies in particular are internally differentiated or stratified, and one of the principal bases of stratification is “class.” Karl Marx, a German social thinker, expounded a theory of class that is accepted by many educators and social scientists. Although these scholars are usually grouped together and labeled “Marxists,” there is often disagreement among them as to Marx’s definition of class. This is understandable since there is ambiguity in Marx’s treatment of social class. Two modes of treating class may be distinguished in a Marxian position. The first is the objective classification of an aggregate of people with reference to their similar relation to the means of production. For Marx much of human history is rooted in the class struggle. As he stated in the *Communist Manifesto*, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” (Marx and Engels, 1959:45). Historical movement is thus based upon the struggle between the exploiters and the exploited. Under a capitalist mode of production, the two principal and potentially antagonistic protagonists are the bourgeoisie, “the owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor,” and the proletariat, “the modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live” (1959:45). Although the “bourgeoisie” and the “proletariat” constitute the two principal social classes in a capitalist productive mode, there may also be petty bourgeois (1959) and peasants (Marx 1975:124). Marx’s understanding of history and of society is not a static one, but progressive and dialectical; movement in history and society is seen to be rooted in the mode of production and in the nature of the contradictions and the struggle that these contradictions produce. This leads on to Marx’s second view of class. It is one based in struggle, which gives rise to a subjective but essential element in the concept of class, that is, class consciousness. Hobsbawm, an English social historian, observes that “class in the full sense only comes into existence at the historical moment when classes begin to acquire consciousness of themselves.
as such” (1972:6). This view of consciousness as an essential component of class is shared not only by Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson, but also by the late Oliver Cox in his profound and brilliant analysis of American society and the historical position of minorities (specifically blacks or Negroes) within it (Cox 1970:174–214). In gross terms, classes form a set of interrelated strata formulated in relation to the mode of production and based in consciousness. It is this consciousness, this subjective component, that makes of class an active force in history. Consciousness is not, however, given. For some Marxists it arises from struggle, and it is struggle that creates classes and class consciousness. E. P. Thompson, a social historian, is the principal exponent of the notion of classes as emergent, as the contingent outcome of struggle, not as the given starting point of analysis. For him it is struggle that produces classes. In a recent article entitled “Argument—Eighteenth Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class,” Thompson makes the following statement:

class in its heuristic usage, is inseparable from the notion of “class-struggle.” In my view, far too much theoretical attention (much of it plainly ahistorical) has been paid to “class,” and far too little to “class struggle.” Indeed, class struggle is the prior, as well as the more universal concept. To put it bluntly: classes do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class and then start to struggle. On the contrary, people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness. Class and class-consciousness are always the last, not the first, stages in the real historical process. (1978:149)

This mode of class analysis acknowledges the contingency of class, but it is one which is not usually contenanced by empirical sociologists concerned with the relationship between class and educational achievement. Rather, such sociologists assume class and, one may suggest, in doing so negate the dialectical perspective of historical process. In Schooling in Capitalist America, Bowles and Gintis, who are within the tradition of Marxist sociological analysis, offer the following statement on class:

A class is a group of individuals who relate to the production process in similar ways. A class structure emerges naturally from the institutions of U.S. Capitalism. Property relations are an essential aspect of class; no less important are the relations of control. Considering the class structure in the broadest outline, capitalists own and control the means of production. Workers, conversely, do not own the products of their labor, nor do they own or control the tools, buildings, and facilities of the productive process. (1976:67)

Class, as Bowles and Gintis use the term, is expressed concretely in the relations of groups and in their performance in an educational situation. They observe that “classes are important because individuals in U.S. society do not relate to each other as individuals alone, but as groups. That is, class is a social concept, and classes are defined only through how they relate to other classes.” (1976:67) For them, classes are given and not in the making through struggle. The assumed concreteness of class makes it easier to apprehend, quantify, and use
in discovering significant correlations, those of class and educational attainment.

Social scientists employ dichotomous categories to sort out and organize facts, knowing full well that their dichotomy may be arbitrary and subsequently discarded. Categories are used to provide order, often as scaffolding in the construction of a paradigm. Once the scaffolding is discarded, it is hoped that the paradigm will be able to stand on its own, that is, that it will possess some degree of explanatory power. In an attempt to represent aspects of the traditions of Weber and Durkheim pertinent to this paper, such a dichotomy will be introduced to classify and order, so as to present as succinctly as possible these two further traditions.

Two frames of analytical reference may here be distinguished: methodological individualism (see Ahmed 1976:3; Cohen 1974:40; Wallerstein 1971:5) and methodological holism. The former derives much of its sociological inspiration from Max Weber and emphasizes social action and the actor as the center of analysis. The individual, although of society, retains a certain autonomy and through his actions may confront and affect society and his position within it. He has choices and makes decisions to improve or maximize his chances. The individual is thought of as an active agency in history and society, manipulating and reordering social arrangements to better his position. He operates in an instrumental world that allows considerable freedom to the individual, yet it is one not devoid of constraints. To no small extent this orientation toward “action theory” and the individual as an active agent represented a swing of the pendulum away from the theoretical emphasis of both Marx and Durkheim, specifically their assigning of primacy to the mode of production or to society itself.

Max Weber elaborated a complex set of propositions relating to class and status, and since a detailed exposition of his theory would be inappropriate here, an adumbrated view of his formulations will be presented. Weber, like Marx, recognized classes. For him, class was objective and intimately related to the market, a situation involving speculative economic action oriented toward acquiring profit through competition. This market situation presupposes an economy based on the use of money. A class consists of an aggregation of individuals who occupy a similar position in relation to the market situation. In a complex exposition, Weber presents his view of class as follows:

In our terminology, “classes” are not communities; they merely represent possible, and frequent, bases for communal action. We may speak of a “class” when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, in so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity of Labour Markets. (1947:64)

Class is here viewed as a quasi or potential group, an aggregation of individuals standing in a particular relation to the market and governed by its principles. Their potential as a group is realized through common economic interests. The relation of class situation to market situation means that class divisions could be as minutely graded as economic positions. Although Weber does
distinguish several classes (1947:424–425), the ownership or nonownership of property is historically the most significant criterion. There is then an objective notion in Weber’s concept of “class” and “class situation” that is intimately related to the “market situation.” Although class refers to an aggregate of individuals and not to a self-conceived community, nonetheless it is thought by Weber to influence the actions of individuals and groups. Status accounts for that component of subjective recognition of shared similarities, a style of life, education, and the acquisition of corresponding modes of life, or prestige of birth, or of an occupation (Weber 1947:428). Giddens, an astute ethnographer of social theory and social theorist in his own right, observes that

the status situation of an individual refers to the valuations which others make of him or his social position, thus attributing to him some form of (positive or negative) social prestige or esteem. A status group is a number of individuals who share the same status situation. Status groups, unlike classes, are almost always conscious of their common position. (1971:161)

The extreme extension of status groups closure is represented by castes in a system of castes.

Three important elements emerge from this brief discussion of Weber. The first is an objective dimension of class in relation to the economic properties of the market; the second is a subjective recognition of shared commonalities; and the final element is the recognition that individuals occupy positions within a social system. The three elements are significant in the social sciences, particularly in the evaluation of class. They form a point of departure for analyzing intraclass relations and status and roles. Weber, in his theory of action, also allows for another, less formal, strand in sociological analysis—the individual as an active agent. This strand has found its adherents in network analysis and in the “big man” theory of history and society, for example.

Distinguished social scientists such as W. Lloyd Warner, Robert Merton, and Peter Blau have followed in, extended, and revised the Weberian tradition within sociology. They are of the mainstream of sociological thought, and through their analysis of social class, status and role, and formal organizations, they have contributed significantly toward advancing Weber’s positions.

W. Lloyd Warner was a social anthropologist who, after studying an indigenous Australian population, turned his attention to the analysis of his own society, the United States. He was a pioneer in American community studies and of systems of social stratification. His was a view that never excluded the individual as actor and agent of change. In his analysis of a New England city (Yankee City) and a small midwestern town (Jonesville), Warner rejected a Marxian approach to class and, although, according to Blau and Duncan, he was unaware of Weber’s conceptual scheme, he nonetheless came to the same conclusion, that individuals were differentiated into various prestige strata on criteria other than strictly economic ones. (Blau and Duncan 1967:5) It would seem that he developed his own conceptual scheme for class analysis, one which was to provide a touchstone for subsequent studies of class in the United States.

For Warner, social class is understood as “two or more orders of people
who are believed to be, and are accordingly ranked by the members of the community, in socially superior and inferior positions (1969:36). He sought to combine both an objective and subjective approach to class analysis. In the former the investigator ranks the population into classes according to stipulated criteria, while in the latter situation it is the people of the community who do the ranking. The subjective assessment of class was formalized in the “method of evaluated participation.” This method assumed that the members of a community could rank their fellows according to techniques such as evaluation of social reputation and institutional membership. The total configuration of evaluated participation represented an individual’s ranking on the subjective scale. The objective assessment of class was formalized in the “index of status characteristics,” which is supposed to distinguish the socioeconomic levels of the community. Four criteria are associated with this index: occupation, source of income, house type, and dwelling area. These subjective and objective indexes were supposed to provide an accurate evaluation of the class structure of a community (Warner, Meeke, and Eels 1949:53). The classes identified by Warner and his associates were not closed. Yankee City (Newburyport, Massachusetts), for example, was viewed as an open society in which social mobility was possible among its six classes.

Robert Merton, a distinguished sociologist in the Weberian tradition, has contributed important concepts (inter alia) for the analysis of social structure (or structures) and education. He elaborates two concepts, status and role, which may be attributed to Ralph Linton, an anthropologist. For Linton, status was a social position in a social system occupied by an individual and role was the acting out of that position according to the expectations attributed to it by members of a society. Status mediated between the individual and society and transformed him into a somewhat predictable social actor. A society could be reduced to an inventory of interconnected and interdependent statuses and roles. Statuses were more enduring than the individuals who passed through them. Linton’s view of statuses and roles was, however, too simplistic and mechanical and could provide only a gross approximation of the behavioral “reality.”

Merton’s concept of role set introduced a more accurate notion for apprehending the diversity constituent in the behavioral stream of human interactions. By role set he means that “complement of role relationships which persons have by virtue of occupying a particular social status” (Merton 1961:369). This concept needs further explication since it is an important one. As Merton himself indicates, the status of teacher, for example, “has its distinctive role set, relating the teacher to his pupils, to colleagues, the school principal and superintendent,” and so on (1961:369). The behavior of the individual occupying the status of teacher assumes a degree of predictability. The diversity within his behavioral stream is intimately related to his perception of his audience and their social attributes. Thus a teacher may behave in one way toward his pupils and another toward their parents. But there may not necessarily be a consistency in the teacher’s behavior toward either pupils or their parents. The factor of the socioeconomic backgrounds of both the teacher and the parents may intrude into the interaction and
redefine the relation of teacher to pupil. More specifically, a middle-class teacher may behave in a very different manner toward a middle-class parent than toward a lower-class parent. This picture may be rendered more complex through the introduction of other variables, such as the race, ethnicity, and religion of teacher and parent. The notion of role set encompasses this complexity and permits a powerful explanatory formulation of situational interaction to emerge. Though there is this recognizable complexity there remains a certain simple elegance in the formulation; the status is still that of teacher with an accompanying inventory of behaviors contained within the role set. Variables such as class, race, and ethnicity trigger particular responses mediated by categorical or cultural expectations, which may be shared or understood but neither agreed upon nor accepted by those involved in the particular interaction. As far as the teacher-pupil relationship is concerned, there is, however, a transfer effect in that children are often perceived as bearing the social attributes of their parents. The children of lower-class black parents in the United States will be treated in a particular manner by a middle-class white teacher who operates in categorical terms. A modified behavior will be extended to the parents mediated through the cultural prism of ascriptive attributes such as age and sex. Again the picture is complex and brings to the fore the diverse determinants of behavior in social situations. This complexity based upon diversity, of course, affects the situation and conditions of learning. Class, although an important determinant, constitutes only one.

It should be apparent that status and role transform and fracture the individual into a series of social components. There is to a degree the assumption that statuses and role sets are given, although there is the recognition of behavioral variation within situationally and categorically stipulated limits; simply, all teachers do not behave in the same way under the same conditions. There is room for maneuver and the possibility for the individual to create his own network of social relationships. From the egocentric perspective, the individual may seem to generate new social arrangements and to effect social change. But as Karabel and Halsey point out in their criticism of Jencks, relationships that are objectively indeterminate for the individual may be anything but random when perceived from the perspective of social structure (Karabel and Halsey 1977:24).

The preceding leads directly into a discussion of methodological holism. This position assumes the priority of society; that is, individuals are born into a matrix of interacting and largely fixed social patterns and positions (Ahmed 1976:4). While methodological individualism emphasizes the individual as an autonomous agent in society, methodological holism stresses the autonomy of society in the individual. So cryptic a phrasing demands further explication, and here we may turn to Durkheim.

Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, was at one point in his academic career a professor of pedagogy. In his book, Moral Education, actually a series of lectures, he makes the astute and insightful observation that “a science of education is not impossible; but education itself is not that science” (Durkheim 1973:1). One may argue that for Durkheim education was an appropriate field of activity for elaborating (or demonstrating) the essential
significance of one of his most basic concepts, the “social fact” (Durkheim 1958:1-46). According to Durkheim, social facts were to be treated as things. Their importance was that they mediated between society and the individual and made of the individual a social being. Social facts were external to the individual, generalized in society, and imposed constraints on human behavior (Durkheim 1958:3). The basic opposition lay between society, on the one hand, and the individual, on the other, and that which made the individual social was his partaking of things social. It is here that one may observe the second Durkheim, the one who is not the father of structural functionalism, but the stepchild of Hegelian dialectics.

Durkheim attributed primacy to society, and one of its principal institutions for socializing the individual was education. In western societies the formal organization of education in school systems meant that schools became the principal purveyors of social facts and, thus, as formal institutions they were linked with other institutions in determining the structure of society and the attitudes, values, and behavior of the public.

The educational arrangements of a society require a close scrutiny. The educational system may be treated from a number of perspectives, for example, as one of the principal channels of social mobility and, by this same token, as a mechanism by which existing class arrangements are maintained and preserved. Individual mobility (upward or downward) may occur through academic achievement, but not the dissolution of the class structure. That is, one could interpret education in radical or conservative terms, a point that will become apparent later.

Education should not be narrowly conceived or defined since it is one of those fundamental facets of the human species. It occurs under numerous conditions in a multitude of places. Lawrence Cremin defines it as “the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, or sensibilities, as well as any outcomes of that effort” (1977:viii). In these terms, it is eminently social and part of the historical process that binds individuals and transforms them. From this perspective, it is superorganic. So broad a view of education encompasses a wide field, only a few facets of which will be treated in this paper. The methodological holism of the Marxist and Durkheimian traditions, the primacy of productive modes and of society, as well as the methodological individualism of the Weberian tradition (as exemplified in “action theory”), pervades the study of the relation of socioeconomic status and educational attainment. It is clear that the separation is artificial and that both perspectives are essential for attempting to apprehend this complex social inter-connection.

III. Social Class, Nutrition, and Education

The preceding section has attempted to outline some of the major theoretical issues underlying concepts of class and status. As used by many sociologists of education, however, the term class, or socioeconomic status, is often loosely used to classify children within the educational system. In much of the literature the term “socioeconomic status” is used in preference to “class,”
presumably because the former is considered a more neutral term, and not necessarily because the users of the terms adhere to different theoretical positions. There seems to be a tendency by British writers to use the term “class” and by Americans to prefer “socioeconomic status;” whether they in fact are describing different entities is dubious. It may be that in some instances “socioeconomic status” is used in an attempt to grasp a more refined concept. In Britain, sociological allocation to classes is often based on occupation alone. “Socioeconomic” status, as the name implies, involves often a combination of factors—occupation, income, and educational level—therefore allows for greater flexibility than a classification based solely upon occupation.

The adequacy or otherwise of the indexes used to determine socioeconomic status may be questioned, and the term permits a greater or lesser degree of refinement, depending upon the views of the researcher. In the section of this paper that considers some of the literature relating to the relationships between educational achievement and socioeconomic status or class, the two terms will be used interchangeably, since this is how they are in fact used by many writers. When the British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein talks of “lower working class children” there is no reason to suppose he is using a basically different category from that of an American writer who uses the term “low SES student” (SES, socioeconomic status), even though the two writers may adhere to vastly different theories of the nature of society.

There have been attempts by some researchers to examine the dimensions of stratification more closely, and although some of these efforts may be criticized for leading to methodological empiricism, they deserve attention. Numerous measures of social stratification have been developed, most of them based on single variables such as occupation, education, and income. Some scales, such as Hollinghead’s two-factor index of social position (combining occupation and education) and Warner, Meeke and Eel’s index of status characteristics (combining occupation, source of income, type of house, and neighborhood), are based on several variables in an attempt to furnish a useful analytic tool. As Stricker (1978) has pointed out, these indexes have been criticized for ignoring certain dimensions of stratification. In addition, there has been debate over whether the indexes are applicable to American blacks, since the social structures of blacks and whites may differ (Stricker 1978:2). Stricker claims that his research shows that not all the indexes are uniformly applicable to blacks (1978:6), and he maintains that stratification is more complex than much current conceptualization has anticipated.

An example of the complexity that may be achieved by attempts at multidimensional analyses of social stratification is provided by the tables included in Stricker’s article “Dimensions of Social Stratification for whites and blacks” (n.d.). Over 150 variables relevant to social stratification are listed. (Examples of relevant variables are buying behavior, type of punishment used with children, the number of rooms in the house). While complexity of this order may be welcomed for leading to greater scientific accuracy in measuring status, it may also be criticized by those who feel that classes cannot be reduced to these terms. According to Giddens, Marx maintained that “class must not be identified with either source of income or functional position in
the division of labor. These criteria would yield a large plurality of classes” (Giddens 1971:37). In addition, such methodological empiricism would obscure the dynamics of the relationship between classes, a relationship that constitutes a vital moving force in history.

Socioeconomic status, or class, is a variable that may be seen to relate to many other aspects of human experience. This relationship of the socio- and economic status category to the dimensions of human diversity is extremely complex, leading to numerous theories and disagreements over cause and effect. There are those for whom socioeconomic status is the decisive factor governing other aspects of human diversity such as cognitive responses, health and nutritional status, identity and interests, language and dialect, and motivation and aspiration. This relationship between socioeconomic status and some of the above mentioned aspects of human diversity has been discussed more fully elsewhere (see E. Gordon, NIE Report, 1978).

The relationship between socioeconomic status and health and nutritional status is perhaps more striking, or rather, more understandable, than the relationship between socioeconomic status and educational achievement, and has been explored by, among others, Birch and Gussow (1970). They claim that poverty contributes toward educational failure, not simply because poor children are “culturally disadvantaged” but because their health and nutritional status is inadequate to allow for the maximum mental development and for the realization of their educational potential. From the moment of their birth, and even before, poor children are at greater risk of deficient development. Birch and Gussow stress that society should concern itself with “the full range of factors contributing to educational failure, among which the health of the child is a variable of potential primary importance” (1970:9), and they produce evidence that there are correlations between children’s socioeconomic status and their exposure to physiological hazards that are relevant to education. For example, the incidence of low birth weight (recognized to be frequently associated with neurological and physical defects) is higher among the poor; moreover, Birch and Gussow cite (1970:62) an interesting Scottish study (Illsley 1967) that demonstrates that among the lowest social classes the IQ scores of the prematurely born are more depressed than are the IQ scores of the prematurely born in the upper classes. The data suggest that a favorable postnatal environment can serve to compensate for handicaps associated with prematurity and offer striking evidence of the complex interaction between physiological condition, mental ability, and social class. Thus, whereas premature birth may be viewed as positing a threat to any child’s intellectual development, it is only among the poorer classes that the threat is fully realized. Other researchers have confirmed the view that prematurity presents a greater hazard among some socioeconomic groups than among others (Drillien 1964). And Douglas (1960), in an attempt to equate fully the background variables relative to achievement in a study of the academic performance of preemies, identified three groups of significant variables: social and educational background of parents, maternal care and management, and interest of parents in school progress. All these factors, claims Douglas, have an effect on school performance, and he demonstrates that prematurity presents a greater risk to children from a poor environment.
The complex interaction of biological and social factors is also demonstrated by statistics on perinatal deaths of multiparous women; although all grand multiparae are at risk compared with women who have had fewer children, the risk increases markedly for lower-class women. Similarly, the risk of producing a stillborn child is higher for the lowest socioeconomic groups.

Much of the data cited by Birch and Gussow come from British sources, and in fact, in order to gain as clear a picture as possible of the complex relationship between socioeconomic status and physiological and intellectual status, it is obviously often more helpful to examine data on class-related conditions that are relatively unclouded by factors of race and ethnicity. For example, it is known that black babies born in the United States are smaller, on average, at birth than are white babies, and it might appear that this is an ethnic or racial rather than a class phenomenon. But in a relatively ethnically homogeneous population such as that studied by Drillien in Aberdeen (1964), the distribution of underweight babies is quite clearly related to socioeconomic status. Moreover, as Birch and Gussow point out, in some instances the U.S. statistical material is inadequate. Whereas there is quite rich material on the relationship of height, social status, and reproductive performance in Great Britain, in the United States very few data are available. Birch and Gussow attribute the obstacles to similar research in the United States to the fact that ethnicity is confounded with social class in this country. Birch and Gussow also maintain that interclass movement is freer here than in a country such as Britain (1970:121), although they do not offer any data to support this assertion.

Birch and Gussow quote several sources that demonstrate a correlation between malnutrition among children and lower IQ scores and poor academic performance, but they caution against assuming that malnutrition directly affects either nervous system development or intellectual growth (1970:194), since “malnutrition in man does not occur in isolation from other important biologic and social circumstances.” Similarly, “intellectual development does not take place in relation to some artificially isolated segment of the environment—the verbal environment, the social environment, the cognitive environment—but in relation to the child’s total environment, physical as well as psychological, and prenatal as well as postnatal” (1970:266). Birch and Gussow go on to say that “the environments in which disadvantaged children develop from conception on are far less supportive to growth and health than are those of children who are not disadvantaged.” While they admit that intervention at any point in the cycle of failure linking poverty and educational failure may serve to break the chain, they caution that such intervention will only have a limited effect.

In the preceding paragraphs, a correlation has been assumed between poverty, poor nutritional status, and low socioeconomic status, even though, theoretically, low socioeconomic status need not necessarily imply poverty and malnutrition. In practice, however, even in countries that are generally affluent, low socioeconomic status does tend to expose people to greater health and nutritional hazards.
IV. Social Class and Educational Achievement

Analysis of the factors that affect individual success or failure in educational competition has come to occupy a major place in educational research, the more so since educational achievement is popularly viewed (rightly or wrongly) as a necessary precursor to advancement in a theoretically "open" society. The greater the importance attached to education as a factor in social mobility, the greater the attention paid to reasons for, or correlates of, educational failure. One factor that seems generally to be accepted as having a bearing on academic achievement is socioeconomic status. "Academic achievement" is here used to cover a number of separate, though related, areas of achievement, including performance on IQ and achievement tests, school success (grades), and entrance to higher education. It is generally accepted that children from lower socioeconomic groups do less well in all these areas than do their counterparts from higher socioeconomic groups. The relationship between class and academic achievement was particularly noticeable in the United Kingdom during the period in which the "eleven plus" examination was used to direct children into different types of secondary schools. Although, theoretically, admission to "grammar schools" (the English term for academically oriented high schools) was open to any child who succeeded in the selection examination, in practice a child's class position strongly affected his or her chances of gaining admission to a selective high school (Floud and Halsey 1957).

The English example is chosen because it demonstrates so clearly a correlation between social class and educational opportunity in a largely ethnically homogeneous society. (Similar findings have been demonstrated in other European countries where children are admitted to secondary schools on a selective basis; Girard 1961.) Although there is ample evidence that social class determines educational achievement in the United States as well, here the picture has been blurred by factors such as race and ethnicity and by the lack of a selection procedure such as the English "eleven-plus" examination.

Although there is widespread agreement on the existence of a socioeconomic status/academic achievement correlation, there is considerable controversy over the reasons for the correlation. As Peter Rossi has pointed out, "while . . . studies . . . uniformly find socioeconomic status playing a role in achievement, it is not entirely clear how it does so" (Rossi 1961:269). Numerous explanations have been put forward, and, at the risk of oversimplifying, it would seem that most of these explanations for the socioeconomic status/academic achievement correlation fall into four broad categories. Briefly, these are (1) a genetic argument, (2) a cultural argument, (3) an argument positing unequal educational treatment, and (4) an explanation of educational differences as part of class analysis.

(1) The first explanation posits the genetic inferiority of lower socioeconomic groups. Proponents of this position maintain that certain groups have low status because they are genetically inferior. The assumption is made that social mobility is open to anyone with the requisite talents and that natural endowment is reflected in privilege. For advocates of "genetic theory" (such
as Jensen 1969; Herrnstein 1973; Eysenck 1971) talent is believed to be inherited and society is believed to reward genetically inherited abilities. An inevitable assumption follows that it is impossible to boost scholastic achievement, using compensatory educational methods, by more than a small degree (Jensen 1969). According to this argument, those children from low socioeconomic groups who perform poorly in school do so largely because they lack the genetic ability to perform otherwise. While Jensen does not ignore social factors altogether, he feels that genetic endowment is the decisive factor. Herrnstein argues that contemporary political and social policies will lead increasingly to the establishment of a “virtually hereditary meritocracy” (Herrnstein 1971). Arguments along these lines have also been produced to demonstrate the intellectual inferiority of certain ethnic or racial groups. According to opponents of this argument, it is almost impossible to determine the relative shares of environment and heredity in measured intelligence (despite statements made by Jensen to the contrary). Since, as Bowles and Gintis have pointed out, one of the basic premises of the “genetic inferiority” argument—that intelligence is automatically rewarded with privilege—is demonstrably false (Bowles and Gintis 1972), the value of explanations based on this argument would appear to be slight.

(2) Another set of explanations of the socioeconomic status/achievement correlation concentrates on the different cultural environments of children from various socioeconomic groups and the effect that these cultural factors may have on school performance. One problem here is that the term “culture” is often used loosely, and the supposed class cultural differences range from vague concepts such as “motivation” (a lack of which is supposedly more common among lower-class children) to more closely defined distinctions such as variations in speech patterns. Much attention has been paid to language use as the “means by which the diverse influences of the socio-cultural environment are synthesized and reinforced” (Bernstein 1961). Based upon his observations of “lower working class” and “middle class” children in Britain, Bernstein has suggested that “the middle class child and the lower working class child are oriented to different orders of learning as a result of the implications of their forms of language use” (1961:307). Bernstein maintains that the overall class structure of society penetrates the structure of life experiences within the family, and therefore middle-class children and working-class children undergo different socializing experiences. Accordingly, the mass of the population has been “socialized into knowledge at the level of context-tied operations,” while only a small, privileged minority has been “socialized into knowledge at the level of the meta-languages of control and innovation” (Bernstein, 1977). He goes on to postulate the existence of two “orders of meaning,” one universalistic and the other particularistic. Children, according to Bernstein, are socialized toward speech codes that control access to either relatively context tied or relatively context independent meanings. The “elaborated codes,” typical of middle-class speech, free speech from its “evoking social structure” and have their basis in articulated symbols. “Restricted” codes, on the other hand, are more tied to a local social structure.

While both working- and middle-class children may in fact possess similar
vocabulary and share the same linguistic rule system, they nevertheless, according to Bernstein, may use language differently in specific contexts. The educational implications are that a working-class child will be at a relative disadvantage in school, since schools are “predicated upon elaborated codes” and the working-class child is accustomed to the restricted code. Bernstein argues that “linguistic performance is basic to educational success” (1961:291), a position that he has termed “linguistic determinism.” Some characteristics of British working-class speech that Bernstein has noted are an “inability to hold a formal subject through a speech sequence, thus facilitating a dislocated informational context,” “frequent use of statements where the reason and the conclusion are compounded to produce a categoric utterance,” and a simplicity of sentence construction and of the use of conjunctions and adjectives and adverbs (1961:297). It is a “language of implicit meaning” (Bernstein 1961). Bernstein also uses the somewhat confusing term “public language” (1961:291) to denote the supposedly more “context-based” language characteristic of the working class; he contrasts it with what he terms “formal language,” where meaning is classified and made explicit.

In his article “Social Class, Language and Socialization” (1977), Bernstein illustrates the difference between the two types of language with two stories constructed by a sociologist at the London Institute of Education as a result of analysis of the speech of middle- and working-class five-year-old children. All the children were shown the same series of pictures and asked to tell a story about them. It was found that the middle-class children tended to tell a story that would be intelligible even to someone who had not seen the series of pictures; the working-class children, on the other hand, told stories that were much more closely tied to their context. Given that, according to Bernstein, “linguistic performance is basic to educational success” (1961:291), and that grossly different environments affect aspects of language structure and vocabulary, it follows that children from different classes will not perform at the same level in school. Not only will a working-class child experience difficulty in the formal language arts expected by teachers in schools, he will also encounter difficulties in mathematics beyond the mechanical understanding and manipulation of numbers. He will be a disadvantage in dealing with any verbal problem requiring logical ordering before using arithmetical operations.

Bernstein goes further to state that these same sociolinguistic factors are responsible for the poorer performances of working-class children on IQ tests. Following on from his sociolinguistic studies, Bernstein has furthermore emphasized the narrow limits of time, place, and specific context of working-class orientations, leading to a discordance between working class “outlook” and that of the schools (Bernstein 1961).

Closely related to the arguments put forward by Bernstein are all those that relate school failure among lower-class children to qualitative intellectual differences in these children caused by deficiencies in the “culture” in which they are being raised. The “culture of poverty” argument, which postulates a deficient intellectual environment for lower-class children, has, in various forms, attracted considerable attention. Whereas British studies of class cultural differences relevant to educational opportunity have been largely
those which, following Bernstein, have focused on linguistic patterns, in the United States the conception of a “culture of poverty” has had important implications for educational research and government policy.

Formulated by Oscar Lewis (1966), the notion is, as Westergaard and Resler (1976) point out, a variant on commonly held stereotypes about the poor who are believed to be maintaining the very conditions that consign them to failure. The alleged deficiencies of lower-class life that are thought to have relevance for the educational performance of lower-class children include a lack of verbal interaction between mother and child and between family members in general, a lack of interest in intellectual activities for their own sake, lack of parental involvement in the schools, and a lack of emphasis on reading. According to Riessman (1962), a “pragmatic intellectualism” prevails among the “culturally deprived.” All these deficiencies combine to lock the lower-class child into a self-perpetuating cycle of educational failure and poverty. It is assumed that if the deficiencies could be corrected the lower-class child could be expected to improve his performance in school.

Various researchers have attempted to demonstrate a correlation between social class and methods of socialization, the assumption being that children in different socioeconomic groups are raised differently. Zigler, in an article entitled “Social Class and the Socialization Process” (Zigler 1970), has summarized many of the findings of these researchers and describes much of the material as “contradictory and too inconsistent” (1970:93). Zigler himself favors what he terms a “developmental approach” to social class differences, an approach that has been strongly influenced by the work of Piaget and is an attempt “to understand some of the effects of the sociological variable of social class membership in terms of the psychological variable of personal development level” (1970:101). The assumption is made that lower-class children are developmentally younger than middle-class children of the same chronological age. According to Zigler, proponents of this “developmental approach” have purposely avoided speculation concerning the causes of the developmental differences between middle- and lower-class children, and one may question whether the approach really contributes anything of significance to a discussion of class behavioral differences. Explanations of lower-class behavior in terms of a “culture of poverty” argument have been criticized for leading to the formation of a caricature of working-class life and for failing to grasp the roots of the problems of poverty and educational failure.

Ernest Drucker and others have criticized those who maintain that “working class language” is inadequate for conceptual development. In particular, Drucker is opposed to the view that lower-class children can only think in “concrete” terms, that abstract concepts are too difficult for them to grasp, and that working-class children’s thought is organized primarily in terms of sensory features of the world. Drucker relates such attempts to categorize working-class language as comparable to early stereotypes about the thought processes of primitive peoples. While Drucker does not deny that lower- and upper-class children often tend to give predictably different answers to various test questions, he denies that these differences reflect “differences in level of conceptualizing and abstracting ability, or in the
capacity for the adaptive use of thought” (Drucker 1971). He maintains instead that the differences reflect “an arbitrary dichotomy which has been imposed by a particular theory and a particular social system upon a mass of data which lends itself to many interpretations and differentiations.” Leeds has pointed out that the “apathy,” the inability to defer gratification, and the orientation toward the present, all characteristics supposedly found among the poor, may be seen as practical responses to certain social situations (Leeds 1971). In fact, they are characteristics shown by most people under certain circumstances.

Any consideration of the “cultural” aspects of poverty must also take into account the effects of the actual physical conditions of poverty. It has been demonstrated by Pasamanick (1969), among others, that a defective diet may affect a child’s ability to respond appropriately in a school situation; furthermore, overcrowding and inadequate living conditions in general will have a disadvantageous effect on the academic performance of poor children. However, there is a vast difference between acknowledging the harmful effects of lower-class living on children’s academic performance and ascribing all these harmful effects to the self-perpetuating “culture” of the poor.

In the United States, an acceptance of the theory of cultural deprivation of lower-class children has helped to initiate compensatory education programs, such as Head Start. All these programs associated with the “war on poverty” have been criticized for attempting to cope with a massive problem by combating the culture of the poor, rather than by altering the fundamental arrangements of society (Valentine 1971). Programs such as Head Start are intended to help alleviate the “culture clash” experienced by lower-class children when they enter school where the outlook and aspirations are those supposedly more familiar to middle-class children. Studies of the educational impact of Head Start programs show somewhat ambiguous results. According to Bronfenbrenner (1974), an initial gain in performance as measured by IQ scores tends to disappear after the first two or three years of elementary schooling. Of course, this fact in itself does not necessarily demonstrate the futility of compensatory education, since it could simply mean that the compensatory program did not last long enough. Moreover, Zigler maintains that adherents of the “fadeout” notion have “ignored a relatively large and consistent body of evidence which indicates that the benefits of participating in a preschool intervention program have much greater staying power than currently popular views would have us believe” (1978:72).

(3) The third set of explanations for the correlation between socio-economic class position and educational achievement centers around the theory that lower-class children receive inferior treatment from the educational establishment, that they are more likely to have inadequately trained teachers, to be placed in crowded classrooms, and to have less money spent on their education than are middle-class children. Although both the Coleman Report in the United States (1966) and the Plowden Report in England (1967) concluded that “family background” was more decisive than school characteristics in determining success or failure among school children, and thus gave support to the belief that explanations of school failure should be given in “cultural” terms, it is nonetheless possible, as
Karabel and Halsey have pointed out (1977), that all schools may inhibit the academic performance of poor children. Leacock (1969) maintains that the reason many lower-class children fail to achieve in school is that their teachers, consciously or unconsciously, project a basically nonsupportive attitude toward them. From the observations of pupil-teacher interaction in city schools, Leacock stated that “lower status roles were being structured for these children.” According to Leacock, the low expectations held by teachers for lower-class children create a self-fulfilling prophecy, since children tend to perform according to the expectations held for them.

Support for this theory of a “self-fulfilling prophecy” comes from Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). Their research involved administering a test to 500 children in an elementary school. The teachers were then informed that a small number of children had been diagnosed as being likely to show academic improvement during the following year. When the children were tested at the end of the next year, it was found that the children for whom the teachers had high expectations had in fact improved academically, even though there had been no factual basis for the original determination of their success. Other researchers have also demonstrated the influence of standardized tests of intelligence and achievement on teachers’ expectations and have documented, along with Leacock, that teachers expect less of lower-class children than they do of middle-class children. Rist (1977) suggests that research on the “self-fulfilling prophecy” be incorporated into the wider field of labeling theory, and states that the analysis of teacher expectations produces results similar to those found in the study of deviance.

Although Leacock recognizes that the condition of poverty itself creates scholastic difficulties for many children, she nonetheless feels that the schools serve only to aggravate these difficulties. Arguments similar to Leacock’s have been offered by Levy (1969) and Rist (1977) and have been popularized by writers such as Kohl (1967) and Kozol (1966). Rist’s account of teaching methods in a St. Louis school demonstrates the complex relationship between the attitudes and behavior of teachers and the class positions of the children. What emerges from his account is that the poorest children do in fact enter school with more limited vocabularies and general knowledge than the children from more affluent homes, but, according to Rist, it is not so much the inadequacies of the children but the indifference with which they are treated that is responsible for their poor academic performance.

Ogbu (1978) has presented an argument that may be seen to be related to those put forward by Leacock and by Levy, even though his theoretical framework is different from theirs. He suggests that performance in school is directly related to future expectations; black children perform (on the average) less well than white children since they lack what Ogbu terms “incentive motivation.” Using data from Great Britain, New Zealand, India, Japan, and Israel, as well as the United States, he argues that whenever a group possesses “low caste status” and has limited job opportunities its children will perceive the limitations imposed upon their advancement and will, accordingly, fail to develop competitive skills. To reinforce his position, Ogbu points out that black females in the United States, whose job opportunities are less limited than those of black males, perform better in school than their male
counterparts. It would seem that the chief difference between Leacock's argument and that of Ogbu is that the former relates school failure to low teacher expectation, while the latter relates it to the students' own low expectations of their future chance of success in a racist society. The two positions are thus different sides of a single empirical coin, although the theoretical positions of Leacock and Ogbu are quite different. In her writings, Leacock emphasizes the significance of class analysis while Ogbu seems indifferent to it, failing to grasp its importance for differential educational achievement.

4. Explanations of lower-class school failure in terms of unequal treatment in school are often part of a wider analysis of the educational system as a means of maintaining class differences. Those who hold this view of education maintain that as long as society remains divided along class lines, lower-class children must, of necessity, perform poorly in school. This argument is expressed by Levy in his book Ghetto School. "When ghetto education fails to accomplish its public goals . . . people blame the inadequacy of the children if they are liberals, and the inferiority of the children if they are conservative. Few educational ideologies focus on the political task of ghetto schools" (Levy 1969: preface, xiii). This task, according to Levy, is to fail to train their children for middle-class life. The more the educational system is popularly viewed as providing a channel for social mobility, the more likely, according to this argument, it is that personal failure will be accepted with resignation. It would seem that acceptance of failure as the fault of the individual might be more likely to occur in lower-class children of the same racial or ethnic group as the middle and upper classes; where racial and ethnic distinctions serve to blur class distinctions, one might expect that individuals in an underprivileged group might be less willing to blame themselves for scholastic failure and more likely to blame a society that relegates those groups to a subordinate status. But in the view of writers such as Clark (1960), the schools help to "legitimize inequality," in a society that should theoretically be "equal," by "internalizing" failure.

As viewed by scholars such as Bowles and Gintis, it is fruitless to attempt to analyze educational systems without first considering social relations of production. Along with Louis Althusser, who has termed schools "ideological state apparatuses," they regard the educational system as serving to reproduce division of labor in a capitalist society. Bowles states that "inequalities in education are . . . seen as part of the evils of capitalist society, and likely to persist as long as capitalism survives" (Bowles 1977:137). Bowles regards the separation of the worker from control over production and the resulting social division of labor between the controllers and the controlled as a crucial element in shaping the role of schooling in capitalist society. Viewed in this light, education is seen as a mechanism that helps to ensure social control and political stability. By determining the positions of children within the class system, education serves to legitimize the social structure. Bowles points out that children from the 90th percentile in the class distribution (social class being defined by the income, occupation, and educational level of the parents) may be expected to receive over four and a half more years of schooling than children from the 10th percentile. Moreover, according to
Bowles, those children who remain in school (or college) longer receive an increasingly large annual public subsidy.

Bowles also argues that the social division of labor gives rise to distinct class subcultures, with different values, personality traits, expectations, and child-rearing practices, all of which affect children’s responsiveness to a school situation. Since the social class differences in scholastic achievement are greater than would be accounted for by differences in financial resources alone (Coleman 1966), Bowles maintains that

class differences in the total effect of schooling are . . . due primarily to differences in . . . class sub-culture. The educational system serves less to change the results of the primary socialization in the home than to ratify them and render them in adult form. The complementary relationship between family socialization and schools serves to reproduce patterns of class culture from generation to generation (1977:147).

In this, his argument may appear to be closely related to those of Coleman (1966) and of Bernstein (who, like Bowles himself, claims a Marxist inspiration) and to adherents of the “culture of poverty” theory, even though Bowles’s basic ideological framework is quite different, if not from Bernstein’s, at least from most American proponents of a theory of cultural deprivation.

The implications for policy are very different. Those who accept a “culture of poverty” explanation for the school failure of lower-class children usually believe that compensatory programs such as Head Start can help to remedy the situation; Marxists such as Bowles are more pessimistic. In his view, as long as society remains divided along class lines, lower-class children must inevitably perform poorly in school, and no amount of intervention (short of rearranging the economic structure of society) can help them to any significant degree.

In view of the fact that inequalities of educational opportunity and performance have been demonstrated to exist in socialist countries such as the Soviet Union, it is probably more accurate, as Bowles and Gintis have in fact pointed out, to relate educational inequality more specifically to a hierarchical division of labor (which exists in the Soviet Union as well as in capitalist countries), rather than simply to “capitalism” (Bowles and Gintis 1976:266). It is obviously a simpler matter to abolish capitalism than it is to eliminate a labor hierarchy.

V. Social Class and Learning Styles

Although the explanation of educational inequality offered by writers such as Bowles and Gintis is satisfying in its apparent comprehensiveness, on closer examination it possesses many of the drawbacks common to other types of explanations of the problem. Although most writers on the subject would acknowledge that it is possible for some lower-class children to achieve, and some writers will even say that the class system needs to allow some upward mobility as a “safety valve” for class discontent, few of the arguments presented in any way help to explain individual successes or failures. Obviously, socioeconomic status must be considered in conjunction with other factors, such as individual differences in personality and learning style.
The work of Marjoribanks has demonstrated that the “learning environment” of the home can affect a child’s performance on certain mental ability scores. Marjoribanks has identified eight “environmental forces” (Marjoribanks 1972), and he has examined their effect on test scores. His results show that verbal, number, and reasoning abilities are the most influenced by the environmental forces he has isolated, while spatial ability is the least affected. It may be that personality characteristics that contribute to academic success in one socioeconomic group are not necessarily those that would guarantee success in an individual from another socioeconomic group. Individual differences in verbal and cognitive style presumably interact with socioeconomic and other factors to affect any one individual’s chances of academic success or failure.

A discussion of individual verbal and cognitive styles is outside the scope of this paper, but it may be relevant to consider research that seeks to explain the relationship between these individual differences and class distinctions in the educational system. According to Witkin (1965), individuals may possess one of two basic types of cognitive style: “field-dependent” and “field-independent.” A “field-dependent” individual, Witkin maintains, is one whose cognitive and perceptual processes are poorly differentiated and articulated. The “field-independent” individual has a greater ability to abstract important features from surrounding detail; he apparently also possesses a greater sense of his own separation from the outside world, is better at sorting problems requiring the isolation of essential elements. Witkin claims that there is no significant correlation between these two basic types of cognitive style and socioeconomic class.

Drucker (1971) has illustrated the range of stylistic and personal responses that children may demonstrate in test situations. He maintains that these styles are associated with certain class-bound styles; furthermore, he states that in some circumstances different styles may “become maladaptive, and lead to functional failure for quite different reasons” (1971:53). Drucker cites the different responses he obtained from children to whom he was administering a test of number conservation. Development of the concept of conservation is generally considered to demonstrate a certain level of conceptual maturity, and some researchers have found that lower-class children tend to do less well in tests of number conservation than do adults. Drucker, however, points out that the individual, as well as class-bound differences in children’s responses to the tests, must be considered in any interpretation of findings based on the tests, and emphasizes that conventional techniques of testing and measurement have yielded distorted impressions of ability.

Colin Lacey, in his 1970 study of an English selective high school, attempts to seek out the reasons why working-class boys do not achieve as well as middle-class boys. What is impressive about his study is that he is aware that socioeconomic class is only one of many variables determining educational success. By contrast, school studies such as those by Leacock, Levy, and Rist appear sadly one-dimensional. Lacey is concerned to discover the factors leading not only to working-class failure, but to working-class success, and, in turn, to both success and failure of middle-class boys. In the school studied, cases of middle-class “high achievers” with a high level of parental
encouragement were fairly common, as were cases of working-class “low achievers” with a low level of parental encouragement. However, these cases by no means exhausted all the possibilities, and cases of working-class high achievers with low parental encouragement and cases of middle-class low achievers with high parental encouragement also occurred, although admittedly with less frequency. Lacey views the boys and their parents as competing “teams” in the educational process, with the boy “filling the role of competitor and the parents that of coach” (1970:125). Lacey isolates three types of resources of the family teams: psychological, social, and cultural. Although the family’s social position is only one of the factors influencing achievement, it may not always be possible to isolate it from the psychological and cultural resources of a family.

One of the cases given by Lacey, that of a working-class “high achiever” with a low level of parental encouragement, is interesting in that it demonstrates yet another set of factors leading to achievement, that is, encouragement and support from the teachers. In the particular case described, the boy was able to achieve in spite of an apparently “disadvantaged” home background and an uncooperative father. The support and encouragement from the school, combined with the boy’s own high intelligence and ability and psychological strength to withstand the ambivalence between his school culture and that of his peer and neighborhood cultures, all served to contribute toward high achievement in this particular boy’s case. However, as Lacey points out, it would not have been surprising—in fact, it would have been more usual—if the boy had joined the “anti-group” culture within the school, to which many of the working-class boys are predisposed. On two occasions the boy was on the “threshold of deterioration,” but fortunately never fully embarked on the path that Lacey outlines as “bad behavior --> punishment and damaged reputation --> low motivation --> poor work and no homework --> more punishment --> eventually inability to do the work” (1970:143), a path which many of the working-class boys followed.

In discussing the value of support and encouragement from parents, Lacey makes the point that middle-class parents are able to demonstrate their support in more effective ways than are working-class parents. He cites instances of middle-class parents exerting successful pressure on the school to place their son in an advanced class, demonstrating the ability of “articulate, ambitious, middle class parents” to “manipulate the ideology of the school” (1970:76). In the school that Lacey studied, streaming (tracking) of pupils was practiced, and the parents were concerned less with the diagnostic and pedagogic aspects of the process than they were with its associated subcultural effects. Whereas both working- and middle-class parents were likely to have fears about the socially undesirable consequences of a boy’s being placed in a low stream (track), the middle-class parents tended to be more aware that any objections they had should be expressed to teachers in purely educational terms. The working-class parents tended to be less sophisticated and to state openly their reasons for not wanting a boy to be placed in a particular class and to fail to convince the teachers of the reasonableness of the arguments. In general, there appears to have been a greater willingness on the part of the
teachers to listen to middle-class parents who were able to manipulate the ideologies accepted by the teachers. “Their status in the general social structure . . . helped to make this manipulation acceptable” (1970:136).

Instances that do not conform to the established correlation between academic achievement and social class (e.g., a working-class boy from a large family succeeding in school, or an upper-middle-class boy from a smaller family failing) highlight for Lacey an important point:

There is a degree of autonomy in the system of social relations in the classroom which can transcend external factors and even differences of intelligence. External factors, such as social class, and intelligence have to be fed through the internal system of relation within the classroom. If the possessor of advantages in the external system fails to feed them in correctly (some factor in the internal system might intervene) they can be misunderstood or even ignored. On the other hand, positive rewards can come from skill in manipulating internal relations; they can make up for lack of external advantages and even intelligence, as measured by an IQ test (1970:56).

Lacey demonstrates that “differentiation” and “polarization” occurred as students moved through the school, and “the resulting pro- and anti-school subcultures were also linked to class differentiation” (1970:187). By “differentiation,” Lacey understands that “separation and ranking of students according to a multiple set of criteria which makes up the normative, academically oriented, value system” of the school. It is a process that is carried out mainly by the teachers, whereas the “polarization” process occurs within the student body itself and includes the formation of an “anti-group” culture (1970:57). Students may join such a group because they are doing poorly academically, and once in the group their work will tend to deteriorate even further.

Lacey contrasts his model of the school with the idea of the “deferred gratification patterns,” which has been suggested as characteristic of middle-class behavior, and an absence of which may be considered to contribute toward a “culture of poverty.” Lacey found very little evidence in the school he studied that deferred gratification in any way determined success. Instead, he observed students competing for a “flow of short-term gratifications” (1970:191), and he suggests that the working class has probably internalized similar achievement norms to the middle class, but owing to their position in a stratified society are satisfied (and rationally so) with less actual achievement.

Considerable attention has here been given to Lacey’s book, “Hightown Grammar,” because it is one of the few works that seek to give more than a simplistic account of the relationship between academic achievement and other factors. While recognizing that, on the whole, working-class children do not perform as well as middle-class children, Lacey provides a model that nonetheless accounts for the successful working-class child, as well as the middle-class failure. Rather than denying the importance of class as a determinant of educational achievement, Lacey emphasizes the complexity of the relationships between class, individual personality characteristics, and the social system of the school.

The complexity of factors determining educational achievement is also
stressed in the report of a study of high- and low-achieving black low-socioeconomic-status children, which was carried out by Shipman. It concluded that a “multiplicity of positive and negative factors” were responsible for the academic performance of the children studied. “It is not a particular parent, teacher, or child’s attitude, attribute or behavior, or a particular social setting, but the cumulative effects of their multiple interactions” (Shipman et al. 1976:50) that determine success or failure, and “for different children, different clusters of variables appear to be differentially effective, suggesting the need for multidimensional assessment of individuals and their environments.” Shipman et al. suggest that a child’s cognitive gains are likely to be largest when there is support “in the total ecology of the child” (1976:52).

Rossi (1961) has attempted to set out determinants of achievement (including socioeconomic status) that can be related to differences among students, teachers, schools, and communities. He maintains that the most important variable in determining educational achievement is the IQ of the student, since variations in IQ levels accounted for between 40 and 60 percent of variations in levels of achievement. Part of the remaining variation may be attributed to other factors, such as socioeconomic status, “achievement motive,” teachers’ characteristics, educational practices, and community differences in academic achievement. Rossi does not consider the implications upon his statements about IQ of research establishing a relationship between socioeconomic status and IQ. Obviously, if differences in IQ scores may be attributed, to whatever degree, to differences in socioeconomic status, then the role of socioeconomic status in determining achievement would be greater than Rossi implies.

Rossi points out that regional differences within the United States are related to differences in educational achievement, with students in the North scoring higher than those in the South. Here, again, the socioeconomic differences between regions may account for much of the discrepancies between North and South.

Sewell carried out a longitudinal study of approximately 9,000 high school students in Wisconsin (Sewell 1971) in order to examine inequalities in opportunities for higher education and to establish significant variables. It was demonstrated that

when we divide one cohort into quarters ranging from low to high on an index based on a weighted combination of our indicators of socio-economic status, we estimate that a high S.E.S. student has almost a 2.5 times as much chance as a low S.E.S. student of continuing in some kind of post-high school education. He has an almost 4:1 advantage in access to college, a 6:1 advantage in college graduation, and a 9:1 advantage in graduate or professional education. (Sewell 1971:795)

The above-mentioned indicators of socioeconomic status are parental income, father’s and mother’s educational attainment, and father’s occupation. Each of the four socioeconomic background variables was found to have approximately equal effects on educational attainment and, taken together, accounted for 18 percent of the total variance in years of post-high school educational attainment. Although Sewell’s study demonstrated that “socioeconomic status plays an important part in inequality in higher education,” it
also showed that “its role is far from simple and direct. Its effects tend to be mediated by largely psychological factors, which in turn also have independent influences on the processes of educational attainment” (Sewell 1971:800). Included among these social psychological factors are the development of cognitive skills, academic performance, the influence of significant others, and educational and occupational aspirations.

Cohen (1972) makes the similar point that “ability and status combined explain somewhat less than half the actual variation in college attendance. As in the case of curriculum placement, we must turn to other factors—motivation, luck, discrimination, chance, and family encouragement or the lack of it—to find likely explanations” (1972:55).

Cohen’s use of the term “luck” as a variable in educational achievement is similar to Jencks’s use of the term to explain a major source of income inequality and has been criticized by Karabel and Halsey.

The identification of unexplained variance with ‘luck’ seems a peculiar one for a sociologist, but it is a logical result of Jencks’s decision to gather data only about individuals. Yet as Bourdon (1974) has argued in a review of Jencks, relationships that are objectively indeterminate for the individual may be anything but random when viewed from the perspective of social structure. (Karabel and Halsey 1977:24)

It is this very duality in perspective that this paper attempts to illustrate; it is one deeply embedded in studies of education. Those scholars who assume the approach of methodological individualism place emphasis on the perspective of the individual as part of a system of action, and although at times this action may appear random, from the perspective of methodological holism, it may be easily explained as an integral aspect of the class system or as a vital element within the social structure.

An illuminating study of the factors governing academic success among members of an “underprivileged” group—in this case black Americans—was carried out in the 1960s by Bond. He studied the origins of and education received by black Ph.D.’s and found that academic success was not distributed at random throughout the black population, but was highly correlated with the type of early schooling received. The religiously motivated “missionary” scholars of the lower South, according to Bond, “established and sustained in the students far higher levels of self-expectancy than their accustomed milieu demanded of them” (1972:121). That is, those children fortunate enough to live near these scholars did better than those who did not, and the type of schooling received is crucial. This may seem a commonplace observation, but it is one that may perhaps need to be stressed in a climate of pessimism about the efficacy of schooling and in view of analyses of black academic failure such as that by Ogbu. Bond does not, however, attribute success to superior schools alone, but also to the “intangibles of high expectancy, of high aspiration, motivation, and attainment among teachers and in families.” In fact, Bond’s conclusions may be regarded as representing a synthesis of the views of many other writers on education, correcting the one-sidedness that is often a feature of educational writing. Bond’s work is valuable in that, while recognizing the common disadvantages shared by all black Americans, he does not regard them as representing a solid, undifferentiated mass, but is
sensitive to the differences that account for achievement or the lack of it. Moreover, he demonstrates the necessary interdependence of family, community, and school in producing academic achievement and social mobility. Thus, it is neither the family nor the school that effectively produces a successful pattern of education but the two in combination as part of the total fabric of social and educational life.

The fact that there are variables other than socioeconomic status that determine academic achievement should surprise no one, but it appears sometimes that the recognition of these other factors leads to a tendency to dismiss the importance of class in education. Ravitch, for instance, quotes Featherman as noting that the Sewell study found “only 18 percent of all the educational differences in his sample to be associated with class factors per se” (Ravitch 1978:114). Leaving aside the question of whether this is a truly representative statement of Sewell’s findings, there are many who would question the use of the term “only” in the quoted sentence. It would seem that the ideological stance of the interpreter affects the degree to which he ascribes importance to the variables of class. For some, it is intolerable that 18 percent of all educational differences should be associated with social class; for others it is insignificant.

VI. Conclusion

If there is one outstanding conclusion to be reached after this somewhat cursory review of some of the literature pertaining to the relationship between class and educational achievement, it is that socioeconomic status is only one of many aspects of human diversity that contribute toward educational achievement. It is, however, an extremely important aspect, one that should never be overlooked in evaluating the most appropriate educational treatment for any particular individual. Equally clear from the literature is that the exact nature of the relationship between socioeconomic status and educational achievement has not been fully researched, since different researchers have tended to concentrate on one aspect of the relationship to the exclusion of others. There has been a tendency to attribute everything to “cultural deprivation,” or to poor schools, or to attitudes of teachers, or to the children’s low expectations, or simply to the evils of a class system in general. While all these factors undoubtedly play a part, their relative significance is not clear. It is apparent that there is vast room for further research in this area.

To assess the most effective educational approach for any given individual, it would, ideally, be desirable to develop a framework within which all the factors relevant to educational performance could be included. To be a useful tool, all the status and functional categories included would have to be very precise and sharply defined. As the earlier part of this paper has demonstrated, the concept of class had different meanings for different theorists. Much of the educational research reviewed in this article fails to explore in a critical and self-conscious manner the epistemological and theoretical implications of using one mode of class analysis in preference to another. An empirical notion of class predominates in most of the literature, and this notion crosscuts theoretical orientations. What is interesting is that
when writers espousing various theoretical positions come to deal with empirical data, their theories tend to fall by the wayside, and much of what is written by proponents of supposedly different viewpoints tends to have a certain similarity. Thus, Bowles and Gintis, and Bernstein, all claiming to be within the Marxist tradition, handle empirical data in a way very similar to the proponents of “the culture of poverty”; primacy is ascribed to culture affecting the potential of academic achievement and social advancement of working-class populations. And Leacock and Ogbu with their divergent theoretical views see scholastic problems in not dissimilar ways, that is, the expectations of teachers or students. It appears that few of the writers are able to pursue a single theoretical position when handling empirical data. The data lead to a rich variety of creative interpretations, some of which do not always appear consistent with the theoretical tradition claimed by the scholar.

Class is most often reduced to a concrete entity within the confines of an assumed static society. This view of the concreteness of class is based upon the presumed necessity of deriving significant correlations between class and educational achievement. There is often a methodological confusion. Educational achievement is frequently used, along with income and occupation, as one of the essential features for determining class; that which is to be correlated is thus already assumed as a property of class itself. But this type of mechanical ordering removes the historical dimensions of class analysis and makes of it a moment in time and not a moving force in human history.

Moreover, it is by no means clear that the usual measures used to determine socioeconomic status (father’s occupation, parents’ education, father’s income) do in fact adequately characterize status. Karabel and Halsey quote a study by Muller of a German town in which unmeasured “family residual” effects account for an additional 24 percent of the variance in the case of occupational statuses of brothers. Karabel and Halsey then remark “what this finding strongly suggests is that there are elements in family background that, though they are important in the determination of adult status, are not captured by the usual techniques” (1977:24). They also point out that Bowles also suspects that “the usual methods of measuring the effects of socioeconomic status have the systematic consequences of underestimating them,” and he suggests that “the transmission of personality attributes, determined in part by parental position in the hierarchy of work relations, is an important component of family background” (Karabel and Halsey 1977:24).

The fact that the measures of socioeconomic status have yet to be fully and clearly defined may or may not account for difficulties in comparing class status between different ethnic groups. For example, Ogbu makes the statement that “class status cannot explain why blacks as a group do not perform as well as whites, especially where the two groups have comparable class attributes” (1978:106). But Rist (1973) quotes findings by Cohen, Pettigrew, and Riley to the effect that “when controls for the influence of social class were imposed, the impact of racial differences became nearly non-existent” (Rist 1973:16). This statement and Ogbu’s are so contradictory that it is obvious that they are not using the same type of conceptual schemes. If one accepts the view that classes are emergent, and not fixed, then the comparison
between, say, black lower class and white lower class becomes specious. What then may become significant is different historical experiences.

H. M. Bond and E. P. Thompson both emphasize the point that society and social classes are constantly in the making. They view class as part of a historical process, as an emergent property, as an essential ingredient of sociological and historical analysis. Education is only one of the many elements that structure society, and for Bond it has affected intraclass and interclass relationships. Bond’s position exemplifies a school of thought that would place education within the context of class formation and economic arrangements, but one that would not treat it as an autonomous or determining institution. Put simply, the relation of class and education must be viewed within the wider context of society itself; neither class nor education are, however, the totality of human history and experience. In fact, if one accepts Thompson’s position that it is the struggle between classes that is significant, that a “class” is not a fixed entity in and of itself, it cannot easily be reduced to a mechanical correlation. Moreover, correlations often fail to throw light on their causes, and thus are of limited usefulness in situations where change is desired. It is thus incumbent upon the educational practitioner to scrutinize carefully notions of class and its relation to educational achievement.

Endnotes

1. This article is a chapter in a future volume edited by Edmund Gordon on various dimensions of human diversity. The volume and this article are oriented toward the educational practitioner and are intended as a review of concepts and research findings related to the multiple facets of human diversity. I wish to thank Professor Gordon for his permission to publish this article. I am also grateful to him, Charles Harrington, and William Shack for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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