

Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education

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The overarching statement in of Sack's (2007) work is "America's education system is driven by class distinction to a degree most American's don't acknowledge and perhaps don't even comprehend" (p. 50). Yes. Class divide exists in America and no one wants to talk about it because it is a taboo subject. A taboo subject is incomprehensible because of the power of the rhetoric messaging.

Sacks (2007) took me on an eye-opening journey about the hierocracy of the American educational system. The battle of obtaining a quality education between the rich and the poor. Resources are accessible to the rich; Barriers are friends of the poor. Students from rich parents and poor parents begin their educational journey at the start line. Student outcomes are measured by the same assessments. The winner (rich kid) takes it all. The loser (poor kid) has to fall and get the blame for being lazy and not doing his best in this land of opportunity where every student has the level playing field. This is called equality. No this is called inequality. After all it not liberty and justice for all as every student stands tall and recites the pledge of allegiance by placing his right hand on his heart. A superbly crafted masterpiece. A must read by all educators from P-16 education pipeline. Especially people who view the American education system in rose-covered glasses. "Everyone has a fair chance in the American education system" is what I beloved until I learned otherwise after reading the book... The class issue is the white elephant in preschool, elementary, secondary, community college and university classrooms that no one wants to talk about. Peter Sacks (2007) offers a critical analysis of the role American high schools and colleges of the class structure in a mix of individual students' stories and

demographic analysis by using French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical and conceptual framework of capital (wealth). "Economic capital can be converted into other forms of capital" (p.18). Social and cultural capital is discussed in length and the impact of these on the lives of students in our education system. The great divisor of the rich and the poor is class. The rich have a higher level of social capital because of the connections and the networking of the people that they associate with. The higher the social capital is the higher the cultural capital and the opposite of this is lower social capital and lower cultural capital. Also known as poor students living in poverty who are blamed because of their lack of meritocracy. The notion of if you work hard you are going to be successful is a facade. No matter how hard you work, if you do not have access to resources and opportunities to break through barriers you are not going to be successful. Sacks (2007) walked me through the powerful story of a white student Ashlee Jackson from Garden City, Idaho and Gillian Brunet from Santa Monica, California. Ashlee's fate to be successful in school was an intrinsic motivation. This was cultivated further in high school by her mentor and encouraged Ashlea to attend community college. The barriers Ashlea faced in high school reminded me of the barriers some of the poor parents of the preschool children with special needs experienced in Los Angeles School District. i.e. Ashlea was assigned to wrong classes and she was hesitant to call out the counselor who did this until Ashlea's mentor empowered her. On the other hand the resources that Gillian had opened many doors for him. Gillian's fate of obtaining a college degree was instilled when he was a little boy by his educated and wealthy parents. Gillian's experiences reminded me of my work with the rich and affluent parents of preschool children with special needs in Palm Springs. These parents had no

reservations to hold back. They'd drive the Individualized Education Plan (I.E.P) meeting. When they talked the rest of the attendees of the meeting listened. Why? Parents were attorneys, they knew their rights, and they were ready to go any length to obtain services for their children.

Social class and academic performance in K-12 classrooms across the U.S. is discussed in 'Public Schools, Private Privilege,' Chapter 5 which shifts the focus to a macro-level discussion. Even though the class system is so prevalent Sacks (2007) stated "No students stood up to identify themselves as 'lower class' or 'upper class', but almost the entire group of students stood up to identify themselves as 'middle class' As a possible indication that social desirability bias and the myth of the middle class are alive and well among young people in the U.S. (p.64). The No Child Left Behind law benefits rich students and rich schools because intervention and support is provided as resources for students to do well in the exams so that the schools earned the money allocated rather than losing funds for under performance.

We all know there is inequality in America. Equity is provided through laws such as the 'Affirmative Action.' Sacks (2007) addresses 'Affirmative Action for the Rich' by sharing that higher education is the platform we turn to as a nation as a Great Equalizer. Is it actually the great equalizer? How far is this true? This is the case when the represented population is outraged about the higher education system not being fair. Institutes of Higher Education addresses the affirmative action in a way that their ratings are not dropped in U.S. News and World Report and other popular news prints which the public used to judge the movements of universities. Sacks included thought provoking and mind blowing analyses of social stratification of elite, colleges and universities. Educational levels of parents and the success rates of students getting into these colleges proved to me why most parents that I know want to send their children to private

schools to obtain their education from preschool – 12: Smaller class size, trained teachers for the core curriculum and other extracurricular activities and college preparation from younger years and emphasis is placed in high school. This is in comparison with over whelmed teacher with over 30 students in a class and the counselor to student to ratio could be from 1:500 or 1:500. Now I understand why most parents want to by pass the community college in their neighborhood and send their children away to universities in spite of knowing they will be buried in debt. The gates are wide open at these universities. Entrance is guaranteed based on a merit system. The poor students with no resources obviously do not do well in the SAT exam as compared to the rich student with many cultural and social capitals under his belt. “since 1973 a college education has been the requisite credential for access to the middle class” (p.135). This is lack of access to resources. It is the moral and ethical obligations of ‘flagship institutions‘ to expand educational access for all students. When the media highlights a story - a long article how a poor student from a poverty stricken area is given a scholarship to an elite school, we have to remind ourselves, this is an exception and not the norm.

I would like to conclude by saying that Sacks “got it right”. Bringing the taboo topic of class to the attention of the public by sharing anecdotal notes, relevant data and facts of the end result of the class divide. Sacks also shared about the American Dreams, traces the changes in the opportunity structure in the American education since the end of world war to today. Class is not a Democratic or Republican party issue. It is an American issue that cannot be swept under the rug. Access to education is a right of every student in America and it needs to be offered to all students. ...“instead , consider the simple truth: An untold amount of potential human talent in the United States is wasted as a consequence of an increasingly rigid class structure”(p.298).

References

Sacks, P. (2007). *Tearing down the gates: Confronting the class divide in American education*.
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