Social Status and American Education

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TALK to most any American on the subject of class structure and social stratification and he will deny that it exists. The principles and concepts upon which the United States was founded give ample evidence to him of this fact. Both the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence loudly proclaim the equality of man under law, and Americans will stoutly defend these principles against all criticism. "There is a Universal American trait which rejects the idea that classes, proletarian or plutocratic exist among us; a sweeping confidence that the individual is better off than in the past, that notwithstanding, a faith in material gains and a greater devotion to intangible values as a heritage to be passed on to posterity."

Despite these verbal enunciations of equality of opportunity and classlessness, a general acceptance of the concept of class differentiation has evolved in our society. Those who reject this fact do so mainly because it seems to be contrary to the democratic ideals which are taught to our children and expounded glowingly to the world. While this may be true, class stratification in all societies is inevitable and becomes undemocratic only if the keys to mobility are such that each individual is prohibited from seeking and striving to achieve that status which he is desirous and capable of achieving. As difficult as this may be, it is still possible to move up or down the social ladder in America if the individual is able to display the characteristics and symbols representative of that class.

Anthropologists and sociologists seem to be agreed on the idea that wherever man lives with other men in sufficient numbers, a social status system will arise based on a specific criteria for each culture. In the United States the community is the principal focus of associative life — "the maximal group of persons who normally reside in face-to-face association." Each community possesses a

3 Ibid.
distinct culture of its own and is the primary center of social control. Deviation
is penalized and conformity rewarded depending upon the accepted rules of
conduct established by the community. The threat of ostracism to a great
measure assures cultural conformity. As each group within the community
assists each other in satisfying basic drives, there develops a group solidarity and
cohesiveness characterized by law, order, and cooperative effort.

Today in our society this feeling runs from local pride, college spirit, and
esprit de corps in a business organization, to religious intolerance, racial prejudice,
class struggle, and international conflict. It is as inevitable as social life itself.1

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The American Class Structure

Social stratification emerges strongly in communities which experience
little mobility. Classes arise to segment the community and complicate the social
structure. As the system becomes more and more complex, participation and
intercourse becomes greater within these groups than among them.2 Although
many means have been devised whereby classes have been differentiated, the
following would appear to be generally accepted by most authorities as the
six major divisions of class structure.

At the “top” of the structure is found the upper-upper and lower-upper
class, the so-called upper crust or “400”. In this category would be included the
landed gentry, the old families, and the “money crowd”. This class is considered
the “power behind the throne”. They are consulted when critical situations
arise within the community and, by their influence, they keep the community
running on an even keel. They are distinguished by wealth and lineage.

Next on the social ladder would be the upper-middle class. They are the
professional men, the officials of industry, and the better businessmen, who are
active as community leaders, members of the school board, the political office-
holders, church leaders, and officers of commercial organizations. Normally
they are the most highly educated, own the big houses, and earn a larger income
than the average person.

The next group – lower-middle – is usually referred to as the average man.
He is the rank and file of the political, economic, and social institutions of the
community. This class contains the white collar workers, the small businessman,
the skilled tradesmen, the skilled workmen, and the lesser professional men.

By far the largest group within the community is normally the upper-lower
class. These people are primarily concerned with making a living. They are
the lower income group working in lesser income jobs at the lesser skill level and
as common laborers. They live in the poorer areas around the industrial complex

1 Ibid., pp. 82–84.
2 Ibid., p. 88.