

The Continuing Class Divide

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

by Peter Sacks

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Peter Sacks has written a compelling account of how educational opportunities in the United States, from kindergarten through higher education, are shaped by class status. What determines who gets to go to college?—the driving question in Sacks' analysis—is one of great import at a time in the history of our capitalist democracy when college graduates earn more on average than high school graduates and enjoy better health and quality of life. Through interviews conducted with college-aspiring youth of disparate socioeconomic backgrounds—as well as with their parents, mentors, counselors, teachers, and principals—and through well-documented statistical data gathered from governmental archives and secondary sources, Sacks debunks the American myths of meritocracy and upward mobility and locates the fueling force for a growingly rigid U.S. class structure in an educational system manipulated by the elite to maintain and further its privileges.

Sacks is not the first to discredit the American myth that our nation's public schools are meritocratic institutions, a myth perhaps most radically assailed by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis in their work, *Schooling in Capitalist America*. But Sacks's book contributes to the literature on the mutually constructing systems of class and education in the U.S. in several important ways. Like Ellen Brantlinger, Anette Lareau, Jay MacLeod, and Penelope Eckert, to name some

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authors whose research has been seminal in examining class differences and educational opportunities, he brings to light the lived experiences of today's youth and their families. In this sense his work, like theirs, captures "real" people's points of view, perspectives that are too often buried under or neglected by statistical data. Unlike the authors just mentioned, whose research is naturalistic and ethnographic, Sacks's approach is derived from investigative journalism and makes up what it loses in depth with what it gains in breadth. Through his lens we travel across the country, from Washington, D.C. to California, and witness a story about disparities in U.S. educational opportunities unfold. Sacks further extends the body of literature that foregrounds youth experiences in examining class differences by bringing us to the doorstep of higher education, delving into the admissions process, and including higher education institutions as active players in the construction of educational opportunities for youth through a trickle-down effect of their influence on the system as a whole.

Sacks identifies three major contributing factors to the growing rift between the haves and have-nots, which he argues is fueled and exacerbated by a *de facto* classist educational system: (1) the political power of elite parents to shape school curricula, (2) a college admissions system heavily biased in favor of the privileged, and (3) a culture of poverty, itself the result of rampant capitalism. All three factors are interconnected and mutually defined. Sacks rests the bulk of his data on two theories. From French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, he borrows the notion of "cultural capital" to explain how economic wealth is converted into cultural assets in the form of access to museums, travels, social networks, and other extracurricular activities that develop artistic, athletic, and other talents. The cumulative effect of such activities, nurtured in elite youth since infancy, results in enhanced social power as these kinds of knowledge are rewarded by schools. Sacks also borrows from Raftery and Hout the theory of "maximally maintained inequality" to explain how "dominant groups ... will strive to differentiate themselves from groups of lesser status as the latter continue to gain in educational participation" (94).

Informed by these theories, Sacks argues convincingly that upper-class parents' ubiquitous presence in school classrooms, on school boards, and in myriad extracurricular activities, in the form of volunteer work and monetary contributions, buy them the political clout to lobby for ever more specialized top-end programs that benefit their children, relegating the children of working class and poor to the regular and remedial classes.

While the social injustice of slotting youth into various academic tracks has been well-documented by educational researchers, most notably by Jeannie Oakes in *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, Sacks complicates the discussion of tracking by identifying it not just as a strategy for racial segregation, but as a tool continually reinvented for maximal maintenance of economic privilege. "Under the guise of 'choice,' 'academic rigor,' and similarly veiled code words, school officials are bowing to a growing sense of entitlement on the part of wealth-

ier parents, who are both highly vocal and politically savvy” (92). In a well-wrought narrative structured around elite parents’ testimonies, Sacks identifies the processes by which public tax funds are appropriated for the private advantages of the already advantaged.

Moving his analysis from high school to higher education, Sacks masterfully deconstructs the discriminatory admissions system across our nation’s colleges which places standardized test scores “and God on the same stone tablet,” and the further socially unjust effects of a financial aid system that rewards the already well-off with hefty scholarships designed to attract the ‘desirable’ students. Sacks also reveals how “feeder schools work closely with admission officials to place students at prestigious institutions” (149). Students whose parents do not have the requisite cultural capital to navigate this close-knit networking system, or who attend schools with no effective access to counselors, are at a disadvantage from the start, and doubly so when facing the SAT test which reflects the cultural capital of the upper class.

The cumulative effect of K-12 tracking—actively supported by upper-class parents eager to distinguish their children for college admission—and the virtually impossible entrance into colleges for most working class and poor is “an artificial restriction of the flow of talent,” according to Sacks (102), contributing ultimately to the erosion of our nation’s democracy and economic prosperity.

To his credit, Sacks discusses efforts on part of some educators to fight the growing class divide through innovative teaching methods that bear results with students of lower socio-economic backgrounds, as well as the efforts of some higher education institutions to broaden admission criteria and even do away with SATs. But these efforts are dwarfed by the effects of rampant capitalism, the elite’s political hold on educational policies and practices, and the unfortunate identification of poorer whites with the elite structure into which they hope to ascend. As things stand, “who gets a bachelor’s degree from college by age 24 is largely determined by birth” (4).

If there is one criticism to make, it is that Sacks’ work lacks discrepant elite voices. Without them, his claims essentialize an elite class at the top of the food chain. While this lack weakens somewhat the credibility of his research, and makes for less rigorous scholarship, Sacks’ work stands out as a substantive and courageous contribution to our understanding of the machinations of social injustice in our nation and a brilliant call to action on behalf of democratic principles. Lack of elite discrepant voices notwithstanding, his claims are well-evidenced, and his arguments, solid and compelling. 