Education: The Gatekeeper

Education in modern society is the largest determinate of opportunity and social class. Education for some provides access to social stability or even upward social mobility, but consequently, for the poor education often perpetuates and reproduces poverty. Education acts as a gatekeeper controlling access to opportunities and therefore social mobility. There is a direct relationship that exists between social class and the quality, quantity, and type of education one is likely to receive. In addition, one's social class is often reinforced by the treatment they receive in the educational system.

As previously stated, education acts as a gatekeeper in modern society. The term gatekeeper within the construct of education refers to the controlling of access to opportunities and upward social mobility. One of the functions of education is to act as this gatekeeper, either guiding people into a different social class from which they originated or holding them at the same social class they were born into. Education determines whether one is allowed to progress and is provided social mobility or if one is to remain socially immobile and stagnate. Furthermore, the gatekeeping process occurs as the social class one originates from is the most influential determinate of the educational opportunities one has access to in terms of the quality, quantity and type of education one will receive, as well as the treatment one will receive in the educational system.

Firstly, there is a direct relationship that exists between the quality of education one receives and the social class from which they originated. The higher the social class the better the quality of education one is likely to receive and the lower the social class the worse the quality of education one is likely to receive. One principal reason for this inequality in education is the local funding of education in the United States. A large portion of funding for public education comes from local property taxes. In affluent communities, property values are high and money is therefore made more readily available through taxes for use in the local public education system. However, in
impoverished communities, property values are low and often even with very high tax rates there is still inadequate funding for use in the local public education system. Due to the fact that there is more funding for education in affluent communities the quality of education is better, providing students with more educational resources than is available in schools that are in impoverished communities. Sadly, even with measures to equalize education through policies such as the School of Choice Act many impoverished families can not afford to transport or relocate their children to more affluent communities where they can receive a higher quality of education.

In addition, the relationship between the quality of education and social class is founded before actually entering the public educational system. Children from more affluent families are often provided opportunities to attend preschool, have travel experiences, and have educational toys. Children from impoverished families typically do not have access to such pre-educational opportunities and often due to poverty are additionally disadvantaged by things such as malnutrition and poor early child development. Children from low-income families therefore may need additional resources and funding to help prepare them for school in comparison to their peers coming from more affluent families. In this way, children from more affluent families and communities receive higher quality education in comparison to children who are born into a low income environment. The disparity that exists between the quality of education the middle- and upper-income populations receive in contrast to the education the low-income populations receive thus continues the cycle of poverty.

Secondly, there is a direct relationship that exists between the quantity of education one receives and the social class from which they originated. The higher the social class the more education one is likely to receive and the lower the social class the less education one is likely to receive. There are various reasons that children from more affluent families receive more years of education than children from low-income families. One reason that children from low-income
families achieve less education is because they are dissatisfied with their educational experience due to the previously discussed disparity of educational quality based on social class. These children often drop out for this reason or drop out to find employment to assist with their families finances. Overall children from low-income families receive less years of education, are more likely to drop out, are less likely to be encouraged to stay in school by parents and peers, and are less likely to receive supportive attitudes from teachers.

In addition, in regards to higher education children of low-income families who do not drop out of high school and seek higher education are disadvantaged because they can not afford enrollment and are not appropriately prepared for rigorous college academics. Children from affluent families typically attend universities while children from poor families typically attend community colleges at best. As a result of children from low-income families receiving less education they are more likely to have low paying blue collar jobs or be unemployed, hence confining them to the same low-income social class as their parents. The inequality between the quantity of education the children of affluent families receive versus the quantity of education the children of low-income families receive further enables the reproduction of poverty.

Thirdly, there is a direct relationship that exists between the type of education one receives and the social class from which they originated. The higher the social class the more likely one is to receive an academic education and the lower the social class the more likely one is to receive a vocational training education. This idea of different types of education was established by the system of tracking in which high school curricula were geared toward a different occupational or educational end. The concept of tracking was developed to provide a means of managing the large influx of students that schools obtained when education became mandatory and the belief that education could provide the opportunity for social mobility grew. The purpose of these tracks was to separate children of low-income families who were expected to remain at the same social class,
doing the same work as their parents, from the children of more affluent families who were expected to go on to seek higher education.

Today the vocational and academic tracks still exist and placement in the individual tracks are frequently based on a combination of socioeconomic status, earlier academic performance, and scores on standardized tests. Children from low-income families are expected to not seek higher education and to obtain the same type of employment, making the same wages as their parents, so they are typically placed in the vocational track. Contrarily, children from affluent families are expected to seek higher education or obtain a job that requires academic and occupational skills so they are usually placed in the academic track. Children from low-income families typically have disadvantaged academic performance throughout school in comparison to the children of more affluent families and therefore are often placed in the vocational track for this reason as well. In addition, standardized testing helps provide justification for the tracking system as children from low-income families tend to do worse on the tests than children from more affluent families. Each component of the tracking system contains biases that cement the denial of opportunities and limit social mobility for the lower class. The differences in the type of education the poor receive in comparison to the more affluent further instigate poverty.

Lastly, there is a relationship that exists between the treatment one receives in the public education system and the social class from which they originated. The higher the social class the better the treatment and the lower the social class the worse the treatment. Children from different social classes are treated differently by teachers and administrators, creating as a result, a self-fulfilling prophecy. The self-fulfilling prophecy in the construct of education occurs when children accept the attitudes of their teachers and administrators as true so they therefore become true.

Unfairly, teachers’ and administrators’ biases and attitudes toward their students are often developed before the children even enter the classroom. They typically know the child’s families
social class as well as have preconceptions about the child based on the opinions of other teachers who have had the child or their brothers or sisters. Commonly, teachers have better attitudes toward children from more affluent families and expect them to excel more in comparison to children from low-income families. Teachers carry out these beliefs in the designing of their seating charts, the amount of attention they give students, and the amount of special rewards and affection they give students. Studies have shown that teachers will seat the better dressed children who are likely to come from affluent families closer to their desk and give them more educational attention, as well as special privileges and affection. Children from low-income families take on their teacher’s belief that they are incapable of excelling in their studies so as a result they do not excel. The unfair treatment of children from different social classes by teachers and administrators deters children from low-income families to hold positive beliefs about their abilities thus, perpetuating poverty.

In conclusion, various issues in the educational system are perpetuating and reproducing poverty in the United States. Education acts as a gatekeeper as there is a direct relationship that exists between social class and the quality, quantity, and type of education one is likely to receive. One’s social class is also reinforced by the treatment they receive in the educational system. Education controls access to opportunities and social mobility and functions as a gatekeeper, allowing some to receive its full advantages while it unjustly withholds benefits from others. In this way education is the largest determinate of opportunity and social class. It is therefore fair to say that the chief reason for poverty is education.