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Critical Issues in Education

Reflection #2

        Social class is often considered as just one of the many categories that separate members of a population. Just as a DMV might ask a person to fill out a quick questionnaire or an SAT examination sitting might include a demographic portion before the start of the test, people are frequently asked to define their relative positionalities as compared to others. Are you Black? Are you White? Are you Poor? Are you Disabled? Do you have siblings? Are you a citizen? Yet, what Annette Lareau, author of *Unequal Childhoods*, claims is that, out of all of these identifiers, only *one* truly makes the largest difference in impacting child development. Lareau suggests that social class creates the most evident stratifications among children and, therefore, those of the working and poor social classes must, before anything, work to understand the real effects of class and socioeconomic status.

It’s true. Most people are aware that their social class standings are different from those of others. In many cases, poorer mothers understand that, due to their social class, they must work long hours but, still, not make enough money to send their kids to college. Middle class fathers are aware that they drive nicer cars and wear more expensive clothes than their poor counterparts. And depending on which culture one resides, the level of richness and poorness can be perceived in different ways. Perhaps wealthier people on the Mainline might shop at one high-end bakery, while others find it more affordable to shop at a different bakery that is still, nevertheless, high-end. These differences that rise out of having and lacking money are often quite obvious. Therefore, children notice the differences as well.

However, there is a key difference between the parent experience and the child experience of social class. On one hand, parents tend to stay within their social class population, working in their class-specific workplaces, taking their class-specific modes of transportation, and returning back to their class-specific home and neighborhood. On the other hand, some children might attend a non-class-specific school to learn each and every day. Although they do spend some time at home and the class-specific neighborhood, they witness much more than just their own class culture.

With this realization, we can better understand the theoretical perspective of Annette Lareau on dealing with social class differences in the classroom. She explains, since children leave their class-specific socials stratosphere daily, and enter into a world of diversity and chaos, which we call school, parents must place themselves in the shoes of their kin. They must think further into the possible effects of their social class *outside* of their respective class activities. This might require a birds-eye view approach, where one steps back and considers their lives in a third person narrative.

For example, I can view my own educational experience as one that was highly impacted by my middle class status. My mother is a pharmacist and my father is a free clinic pediatrician. They own a beautiful house with their fair share of mortgages, and pay for my grandmother’s senior home apartment. I was never required to work but, of course, I understood that less wealthy children often did not eat out at restaurants as much as we did. My parents constantly reminded me that my only job was school and that I needed to participate in and focus on as many activities as possible. I could go shopping whenever I wanted, and there was not one moment when I feared that I would not be able to afford a college education.

Now, let’s take it a step further, as Lareau urges us to do. As a middle class student, with a well-educated, involved mother, I was able to reap the benefits of subtle student favoritism. My mom would come in on parent-teacher conferences and chat-up a storm with my teachers, radiating confidence and poise. My mom wouldn’t be afraid to ask about my their lives and form friendships with them because their cultures and daily struggles were often quite similar to hers.

Yet, perhaps if I were poor, and my mother worked for minimum wage somewhere, my relationships with my teachers would have been more detached and distanced. As Lareau suggests, the disconnect between poor families and middle class teachers “undermines [parents’] feeling of trust or comfort at school, a feeling that… is pivotal in the formation of effective and productive family-school relationships” (Lareau 186). My favorite teachers attended my childhood birthday parties upon my mother's’ enthusiastic invitation and, as a result, I felt very comfortable asking them questions and expressing my opinions to them in class.

The significance of Lareau’s theoretical piece lies in the basic recognition of the overwhelming importance of social class. Not only is it imperative that we, as scholars, recognize that social class truly distances educators and the middle class from working and poor classes. It is equally, if not more important that the parents of children realize these processes as well. The importance of understanding the impact of social class in education, therefore, lies in the actual *act* of understanding. Parents must learn how to think about social class structures *critically* in the context of a school. Being *aware* of these social processes is the most important step to relieving educational struggles within their children's’ daily activities. From there, we might be able to explore alternative class-specific approaches to improving education.