Smarts and Social Classes:

How Wealth Influences Academic Performance in School

Many people, especially the poor, intuitively know that the present society does not ensure an equal chance at success to its constituents. However, the degree to which opportunities, especially in the field of education, are distributed partially and unequally would be a surprise to most. From a young age people are told that they live in a society that operates under the fundamental principle of meritocracy, where the strong and hardworking succeed and the weak and lazy fail. Meritocracy is a concept particularly attributed to school and education. The people of advanced industrial societies with high enrollment rates are told that the opportunity to pursue education is open to all, and that the most well equipped and diligent are programmed to succeed. In reality, however, equality of opportunity to pursue education, in particular higher education at reputable institutions, is distributed in favor of a certain demographic: the economic middle and upper classes. There have been numerous studies conducted hitherto which have pointed out a positive correlation between capital and educational attainment.

Among the preexisting literature making this argument is the correspondence theory posited by the Marxian sociologists Bowles and Gintis. Bowles and Gintis contend that schools instill varying attitudes, values and behavioral tendencies in students according to their social backgrounds by dividing students into different groups, or “tracks”, and rewarding different attitudes and behavior in each. The attitudes and behavioral tendencies instilled in students in these tracks *correspond* to the social roles students are expected to occupy based on their social background. Students with middle- and upper-class backgrounds tend to perform well academically and are placed in high level tracks where they are taught critical thinking and problem solving in preparation for rewarding roles within the workforce. Conversely, students from working class backgrounds, who are inclined to low performance and failure in academia, find themselves in academically low performing tracks where they are rewarded for docility and obedience and acquire the consciousness of blue-collar workers and unskilled laborers (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

There has been much research aimed at explaining the correspondence theory and why students from wealthy backgrounds seem to perform much higher academically than the economically disadvantaged. This paper aims to summarize the existing literature explaining the underlying relationship between wealth and academic performance and provide a new explanation for the correspondence theory that answers the question of how socioeconomic background influences academic performance.