13.2D: The Social Reproduction of Inequality

Conflict theorists argue that the democratic mission of education has failed because it has reproduced social and economic inequalities.

Learning Objectives

• Explain, using conflict theory, how inequality is socially reproduced

Key Points

• In democratic societies, education is meant to be a path to opportunity, and public education is meant to ensure society continues to strive for equality.
• Persistent evidence indicates that education’s democratic mission has failed; rather than overcoming inequality, the educational system appears to reinforce it.
• Inequality is continually socially reproduced because the whole education system serves the interests of the dominant classes.
• According to conflict theorists, the myth of individual success through education obscures an important social fact: the individual failures of many students are in fact explained by large-scale social forces.
• Conflict theorists maintain that schools are a means to convey to students what constitutes knowledge and appropriate behavior as determined by the state—those in power.
• According to conflict theorists, children from lower-class backgrounds face a much tougher time in school; they must learn the standard curriculum as well as the hidden curriculum of middle class values.
Key Terms

- **Lower-Class Backgrounds**: Upbringings that are lower on the socioeconomic hierarchy.
- **Social Reproduction of Inequality**: The idea that inequality is continually socially reproduced because the whole education system is overlain with ideology provided by the dominant group.

In democratic societies, education is meant to be a path to opportunity, and public education is meant to ensure society continues to strive for equality. Students who work hard in school should be able to land good jobs and advance themselves, climbing the latter to social and economic success. Yet persistent evidence indicates that education’s democratic mission has failed; rather than overcoming inequality, the educational system appears to reinforce it. According to conflict theorists, this is a predictable result of capitalism and other forces of domination and inequality.

Social Reproduction of Inequality

Conflict theorists believe that educational institutions operate as mechanisms for the social reproduction of inequality. Inequality is continually socially reproduced because the whole education system is overlain with a dominant group’s ideology. The premise that education fosters equal opportunity is regarded as a myth, perpetuated to serve the interests of the dominant classes. According to this myth, those who fail to achieve success have only themselves to blame. According to conflict theorists, this myth obscures an important social fact—the individual failures of many students can be explained by large-scale social forces.

Conflict theorists argue that schools, like society in general, are based on exploitation, oppression, domination, and subordination. From teaching style to the formal curriculum, schools are a means to convey what constitutes knowledge and appropriate behavior as determined by the state—those in power. Thus, students must learn not only basic skills such as reading, writing, and math, but also skills useful in a capitalist economy and behaviors appropriate to the work environment, especially docility and obedience to a manager or boss—the teacher.

Class and Education

Some students may realize the perverse but unacknowledged goals of education, as they begin to see that much of what they learn seems, from their perspective, pointless. Anti-school values displayed by these children are often derived from their consciousness of their real interests. For example, working class students may begin to understand that they are in a double-bind: either they must strive to succeed, and in doing so abandon their own culture in order to absorb the school’s middle class values, or they will fail. Children from lower-class backgrounds face a much tougher time in school, where they must learn the standard curriculum as well as the hidden curriculum of middle class values. For those who aim to succeed and advance, they must confront the material inequalities created by unequal funding arrangements.

On the other hand, for middle and especially upper-class children, maintaining their superior position in society requires little effort. These students have the benefit of learning middle class values at home, meaning they come to school already having internalized the hidden curriculum. They also have access to higher quality instruction. In this way, the continuation of privilege and wealth for the elite is made possible.