Social Stratification and Educational Inequalities

Tarek Mostafa
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2 Theories of stratification.
3 Stratification and Education.
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Definition:
Socioeconomic stratification is the categorization of people into strata, based on their occupation, income, wealth and social status. As such, stratification is the relative position of persons within a group, category, geographic region, and social unit.
• The word comes from the Latin ‘Stratum’ meaning layer.
• Stratification exists in every society.
• Stratification is reproduced from one generation to another.
• Stratification does not only involve quantitative differences (income, wealth, etc) but also in qualitative ones (attitudes and beliefs).
• Stratification implies unequal access to valued goods: education, employment, housing, consumption, etc.
• The level of stratification depends on each society’s history and institutions.
• Stratification is determined by 3 factors:
  - Social institutions which define certain goods as valuable.
  - The rules of allocation of these goods (e.g welfare systems).
  - Social mobility and the ability to move between strata. Open stratification systems are the one that allow mobility (opposed to closed stratification systems, like in caste based societies).
Stratification Theory: An Overview
• Karl Marx: The relations of production which are at the base of stratification.
- The employee-employer relations.
- The division of labour.
- Property relations.

These factors determine political and non-political institutions and even the prevalent ideologies in a society. Of course, power relations are different from one society to another and they have changed over time.
Max Weber: Three component theory of stratification. This differs from Marxian theory in a number of ways.

- **Class**: Economic position in society. (Corporate executives: they have economic power without owning their companies).

- **Prestige**: the respect with which a person is regarded by others. Writers, poets and musicians can social power without owning much capital.

- **Power**: the ability of people or groups to achieve their goals despite opposition from others. Legislators (e.g. MPs) have political power without necessarily having capital.
Functionalist perspective (Davis and Moore 1945): Stratification serves an important function in society. In any society, a number of tasks must be accomplished. Some tasks, are relatively simple while others are complicated. Those who perform the difficult tasks are therefore entitled to more power, prestige, and money.

Argument heavily criticized: inequality and stratification are a cause of individual success or failure, rather than a consequence of it.
Social stratification can be characterised by a number of dimensions:

- **Economic**: income, wealth.
- **Social**: occupation, education, gender, ethnic group, race, and nationality.

In this session we are interested in educational stratification.
Stratification and Education
Stratification in the education system:
Access to education and to educational attainments is a function of social class, economic status, gender, disability, personal preferences, education ‘quality’, teachers, pedagogy, peer relations, etc.

What are the mechanisms behind educational stratification?
Residential stratification: people live in neighbourhoods they can afford => Schools reflecting the wealth of the neighbourhood. =>

Children go to schools with similar peers (similar background).

If funding is decentralized => school resources will reflect the wealth of their geographical location.

If teacher hiring is decentralized => better schools will attract wealthier students and better teachers.
• Personal preferences => private, religious, single-sex schools, schools with particular pedagogy, etc. Preferences are also related to social class.

The more the educational system is stratified the more likely it will have larger inequalities.
The level of educational stratification and inequalities vary between countries and between systems:

Example
Finland, Germany, UK, Japan, Italy.
Finland

- Highly egalitarian system (homogenous schools).
- Lutheran traditions => universal literacy and state controlled education.
- Social structure: large class of farmers and small bourgeoisie.
- Late selection: 9 to 10 years of all-through comprehensive education.
- Small private sector, and low population density => limited school choice.
- Highly qualified teachers (Masters level).
- Absence of grade repetition
Germany

• Early selection (around age 11 or 12) 
⇒ exacerbates the impact of social background.

• Federal political system => national reforms are hard to implement => persistence of early selection.

• Important apprenticeship systems oriented towards the labour market.

• Labour market having a high level of coordination allowing for the provision of training at a low cost.
Italy

- Most Mediterranean countries have Napoleonic legacies of educational centralisation.
- Relatively old comprehensive lower secondary system and differentiated upper secondary one.
- Grade repetition for low performing students (absence of streaming).
- Limited school choice.
United Kingdom

- Incomplete comprehensivisation due to Introduction of competition under Thatcher.
- Large disparities within countries, between states and between school districts.
- Availability of school choice between different types of schools.
- Elitist private sector.
- School autonomy and differences in curricula, school management, and in streaming practices (setting).
Japan

- Comprehensive compulsory education up to the end of lower secondary schooling.
- Highly stratified (by ability) upper secondary system. 94% of student continue at upper secondary.
- Most teachers have four year degrees.
- Limited autonomy in developing curricula or choosing textbooks.
- Upper secondary => general academic stream and vocational one
- 10% attend private schools up to lower sec, then 29% of student go to private high schools.
Czech Republic
Educational Stratification: Empirical Evidence
Achievements and socio-economic status
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<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage of variance in student performance explained by student socio-economic background</th>
<th>Slope of the gradient</th>
<th>Mean performance in reading</th>
<th>Mean socio-economic background</th>
<th>Height of the gradient</th>
<th>Range of socio-economic index points for the middle 90% of students (difference between the 95th and 5th percentiles)</th>
<th>Score point difference associated with one unit increase in the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status squared</th>
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Immigrant background
Reading performance by immigrant status, before and after accounting for socio-economic background

- Students WITHOUT an immigrant background perform better
- Students WITH an immigrant background perform better

Countries: Qatar, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, Mexico, China, Kazakhstan, Australia, Hungary, United States, Hong Kong-China, Jordan, Montenegro, Azerbaijan, Canada, Costa Rica, Croatia, Latvia, Norway, New Zealand, Netherlands, Italy, Canada, Portugal, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Spain, Greece, Denmark, Austria, Ireland, Estonia, Panama, Finland, Mexico, Brazil
### School Characteristics

School characteristics are MORE favourable for students with an immigrant background by:

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<th>at least 0.50 index points</th>
<th>between 0.20 and 0.49 index points</th>
<th>up to 0.19 index points</th>
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School characteristics are LESS favourable for students with an immigrant background by:

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<th>Percentage of students with an immigrant background</th>
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<th>Quality of educational resources</th>
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Schools, stratification and performance
## Variation in reading performance between and within schools

Expressed as a percentage of the variance in student performance across OECD countries

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ESCS at the country Level. Difference between 25th and 75th percentiles
School ESCS distribution (25\textsuperscript{th} – 75\textsuperscript{th} percentiles)

ESCS at the school Level. Difference between 25\textsuperscript{th} and 75\textsuperscript{th} percentiles
Variation in reading performance explained by students’ and schools’ socio-economic background.
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Slope of the socio-economic gradient between and within schools
Percentage of students in disadvantaged, mixed and advantaged schools, by students’ socio-economic background.
Conclusions
• Education systems with more comprehensiveness (Nordic) tend to generate more equal outcomes.
• Systems with early selection (Germany) have more inequality and stratification.
• Systems with more choice and marketization have higher levels of inequality.
• Stratification and inequality operate along different lines:
  - Social class.
  - Immigrant background.
  - School characteristics (school resources, peers).
Possible Policy Implications
• Targeting low performers regardless of their social background will yield higher levels of equality in the distribution of outcomes since low performers tend to be the most disadvantaged.
• Targeting disadvantaged students or schools with more and better resources will reduce inequalities.
• Moving towards more comprehensive and inclusive systems will also reduce inequalities: less selection, less grade repetition, less school diversification, homogenisation of resources, etc.
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