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The times, they are a-changing! A Note from Claudia Buchmann, Chair

Dear Section Members:

The times they are a-changing and I am pleased to tell you about several exciting developments within our section! First, as you have already likely noticed, our newsletter has a brand new design and a lot of great content. **Fabian Pfeffer**, a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, is the creative force behind this change and with your help, we will be able to make future issues of the newsletter “required reading” for anyone interested in the Sociology of Education. In addition to being THE source for important news and announcements of our section, we are inaugurating a new series posing five questions to a leading scholar of the field. Take a look at the first of this series in which **Richard Breen** responds to five questions below.

I am also happy to announce our section’s mini-conference “New Directions in the Sociology of Education” will take place on August 7th, the day before the ASA meetings, at the Hilton Hotel in San Francisco. I know that many of you have been waiting for information about this conference. Conference organizers **Mitchell Stevens**, **Amy Binder** and **Elizabeth Armstrong** have done a stellar job of putting together what is sure to be a stimulating day of learning and discussion. I am especially impressed with how they managed to design a conference that will provide professional guidance for young scholars in the discipline and serve as a forum for stimulating discussion about the future our discipline in this period of transition and change. Details as well as the link to the conference website are below.

Another change in the works involves the section website. We are creating a new page on the website that will contain links to section members' homepages. Thanks to those of you who have already sent your homepage info to us. Please be patient as we work to input all of the links, as this will take some time. If you have not sent your information and would like to, please send an email specifying your name, title (e.g., Professor, graduate student, other) and a single link in this format: (e.g., Claudia Buchmann, Associate Professor, <http://www.sociology.osu.edu/people/cub/>) to **Carl Schmitt**, our webmaster (soe.web.master@verizon.net), and carbon copy me (Buchmann.4@osu.edu).

Still on the topic of change, **David Bills** at the University of Iowa has been named the new editor of *Sociology of Education* beginning in 2010. Congratulations David!

While the ASA has not published the full meeting schedule yet, I can tell you that there will be many sessions spotlighting education issues on the program. A full listing of the sessions will be published in our summer newsletter. As you make your travel plans, bear in mind that the Sociology of Education Section day is Saturday August 8th. This means that our business meeting as well as many of section sessions will take place that day (because our section is one of the largest in the ASA, some section sessions will be scheduled on other days). Our reception and dinner will take place on Saturday evening. This year, thanks to **Sara Goldrick-Rab** and **Dan McFarland**, we are fortunate to be dining at R&G Lounge, an award winning Chinese restaurant in the heart of Chinatown. I will send out details regarding the dinner and how to register for it via email in late May.

Finally, please be sure to vote in the upcoming ASA elections. The voting runs from April 23-June 1. As a section member you will be able to vote in the general ASA election as well as vote for the new officers of our section. Your vote ensures that our section continues to thrive in the future.



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Announcement of Mini-Conference

“New Directions in the Sociology of Education”

Friday, August 7, 2009 Hilton Hotel and Towers, San Francisco, CA

10 a.m. -6:30 p.m.

Organizers

Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Department of Sociology, Indiana University

Amy J. Binder, Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego

Mitchell L. Stevens, School of Education, Stanford University

Presenters include

Elizabeth Armstrong, Richard Arum, David Bills, Amy Binder, Prudence Carter, Dennis Condron, Cynthia Feliciano, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Michal Kurlaender, Amanda Lewis, Dan McFarland, Jal Mehta, Stephen Morgan, C.J. Pascoe, Tom Toch, Pamela Barnhouse Walters, and others.

On the occasion of a new U.S. Presidential administration and renewed interest in school reform, the conference will challenge attendees to revisit core questions of their enterprise, specifically: Why do sociologists study schools and educational processes? What can sociology contribute to current debates on education policy and school reform? These are questions worth asking. In recent years sociologists have ceded much of the problem space of education policy to other disciplines, specifically economics. Our neglect has narrowed national discussions about the purposes and processes of education.

This conference challenges prominent young and mid-career scholars to critically reconsider why sociologists study schools and educational processes; how the study of schools is generative for sociology generally; and how sociology can be made more useful for education policy. The conference also mentors young sociologists who are just beginning to find their professional voices. Several workshops advise young scholars in the mechanics of writing articles, book proposals and grant applications. The conference specifically encourages young scholars to think ecumenically about the kinds of problems sociologists should be addressing and the kinds of work settings in which they can profitably develop careers.

Our event will convene in the Hilton Hotel and Tower which is one of the ASA conference hotels in San Francisco. Space is limited, so please register soon at <http://ed.stanford.edu/suse/events/new-directions-social-edu/index.html> (**click here**). The registration fee of \$50 includes lunch. Doctoral students in good standing at their institutions are encouraged to apply for a limited number of fee waivers, sponsored by the Education Section. Apply online at the mini-conference web page.

Five Questions to ... Richard Breen

We are inaugurating a new series posing five questions to a leading scholar of the field. Special thanks go to Richard Breen who agreed to be the first interviewee in the series. He is professor of sociology at Yale University and Co-Director of the Center for Research on Inequalities and the Life Course (CIQLE). Before joining the Yale faculty in 2007, he was at Nuffield College, Oxford University, where he continues to be a Senior Research Fellow. He has written numerous articles on educational inequality, social mobility, rational choice theory, as well as methodological topics.

In a forthcoming article in the American Journal of Sociology, you and your collaborators show that the association between the social class position of parents and the educational attainment of their children has decreased over time in several industrialized countries. Have educational opportunities become more equal in a broad sense over the last century?

Unquestionably, yes, with the clearest equalization occurring in respect of gender. But I think it's important to remember that we can measure equality of educational opportunity in different ways (for instance, do we care about inequality in the distribution of completed education or are we concerned with inequality in particular educational transitions?), and we should not expect that they will all show the same trends. In the recent papers that Ruud Luijkx, Walter Müller, Reinhard Pollak and I have written, we focus on gender and social origin inequalities in completed educational attainment and find that trends towards equalization are present in all the countries we looked at, though the timing and patterns differ among them. But as well as different measures of inequality there are different measures of educational attainment that could be studied, and it is not surprising that there might be different trends in these. In our work we could not examine, at least in a

comparative framework, the degree to which equalization in educational level might be tempered by horizontal distinctions within them or by differences in performance in standardized examinations or tests. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to believe that inequalities in those areas could offset the effect of the equalizing of the distribution of educational levels according to gender and social origins that has been so marked in many European countries during the first two-thirds of the 20th century.

In several of your contributions, you also assess the question whether modern societies have become more "meritocratic" over time. What are the conditions for an "educational meritocracy" and how might one get there?

If you look at some classic texts, such as Daniel Bell's work, it seems to mean a state of affairs in which occupational attainment is independent of ascriptive features once we control for education. But that seems implausible because it's naïve to think that educational attainment is the only thing rewarded in the labor market and some of these ascriptive features might, from an employer's point of view, be legitimate reasons to reward employees. In the papers to which you refer we argued that the debate about meritocracy was best viewed in a temporal

perspective: so the question is ‘are societies becoming more meritocratic?’ rather than ‘has an educational (or any other kind) of meritocracy been attained?’ because we don’t believe that this is a feasible goal.

You have been instrumental in giving rational choice theory a more central place in the sociology of education. Curiously, the push for a formal model of rational choice comes at a time in which it is under increased critique in its home discipline economics. Should we be paying closer attention to the fundamental revisions to the rational choice model proposed by behavioral and experimental economics?

Of course. But in many respects what is happening to rational choice in economics is bringing it closer to a more sociological version of rational choice, of which one can find an early expression in Popper’s idea of the ‘logic of the situation’. For example, the model of educational decision making that John Goldthorpe and I developed is actually an application of Kahneman and Tversky’s ‘Prospect Theory’ - though I have to admit that I didn’t realize it until later when I was writing a paper that tried to test the model. Prospect theory is important in behavioral economics because it shows that utility functions can be asymmetric with respect to gains and losses. Another important area of behavioral economics is the finding that our actions need not be motivated only by considerations of material payoffs – which should not come as a surprise to sociologists. The rationality principle is quite generally applicable and need not imply all the bells and whistles that have been attached to it in neo-classical economics and this is

something that I think many of its critics in sociology do not appreciate. My own view of rational choice and of game theory, which I have also used in sociological applications, is that they are not the last word on modeling social behavior, but they are the best place to start if we want to develop better models. And I think that this is true even for something like Bayesian updating (which I and other sociologists of education like Steve Morgan have used) despite its having had quite a hard time from some behavioral economists. The first question we should ask of something like this is whether, relative to our purposes, it is an adequate way of modeling how beliefs change. And, even it isn’t, it seems to me to provide a good baseline from which to try to develop something better.

For a 2005 review article, you looked back on the last few decades of research on inequalities in opportunities. Looking forward, which are the pressing questions in this field that you hope will be addressed soon?

In that ARS paper, co-authored with Jan Jonsson, we made some fairly specific suggestions of promising avenues for future research. But these are all variations on the basic question that has long driven research in this area: how do we account for differential outcomes in education, the labor market and elsewhere which are consequential for life chances and for the transmission of inequalities in life chances to later generations? As societies change the answers to these questions may change also, so we are unlikely ever to come to a complete answer. But I believe that there are exciting developments in train to help us better address

these issues. One is the turn towards causal analysis and increasing attempts by sociologists to assess the causal impact of things like particular institutional arrangements (in education, for example) and specific familial arrangements or practices. Of course this has a long tradition in sociology – think of studies of school effects – but developments in statistical methods over the past 20 years now allow us to address these kinds of questions in a much better way than before. Another immensely important development is growth in the availability of panel studies following cohorts from birth, or thereabouts, through to adulthood, which gives us a much clearer fix on what is important and when it occurs. Yet another advance is the integration of biological and social factors in our understanding of differential outcomes in childhood and early adulthood, linked to the appreciation that the relationship between genes and environment is not additive but interactive.

You have compared social mobility and the role education plays in this process across a number of European nations. Does any nation stand out as “the country of opportunity”? And may you speculate how the U.S. fares in comparison?

I would say that one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century – or any century, come to that – has been the extension to whole societies of a standard of living that would have been unbelievable to someone born into anything except the most privileged classes at the start of the century. This has been most completely achieved in the welfare states of Europe and, particularly, the Nordic countries. So if by opportunity we mean the opportunity to

enjoy a comfortable standard of living and the capacity to participate fully in society then countries like Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway stand out from the rest. In terms of intergenerational class mobility Sweden is the most open of the countries I have studied, which is to say that here social origins have the weakest effect on an individual’s own occupational or class position. So the circumstances in which you are born have less impact – positive or negative – on what you become. Education plays an important role in this, as we should expect. On the one hand, it seems that the residual effect of social class background on class destination, when we control for educational attainment, is weaker in Sweden than elsewhere, suggesting that it is closer to an educational meritocracy than any other country. On the other hand, the expansion and gradual equalization of education in Sweden during the 20th century has been the single most important factor in its becoming such an open society.

It is difficult to draw comparisons between the European countries and the US in terms of class mobility because of differences in the way the data on occupations can be coded into classes, but some analyses show the US to have a level of openness roughly on a par with Sweden. Comparability is better when we turn to intergenerational income mobility, where it was long believed that more inequality in income in the US was offset by greater intergenerational income mobility. But that seems not to be the case. When we look at a sample of developed countries (as in a recent paper by Anders Björklund and Markus Jantti) there is no general relationship between earnings inequality and the extent of inter-generational earnings mobility,

except that the US (along with France and Italy) has the dubious distinction of having high inequality and low mobility. It is not obvious how to reconcile the conflicting results concerning US class and income mobility, but if low income mobility in the US is caused by high persistence at

the top and bottom of the distribution this may be not be captured in class mobility analyses which make less fine distinctions, particularly at the extremes.

Questions asked by Fabian T. Pfeffer

Do you want to pose five questions to a leading scholar in the field?

Submit your ideas for the next newsletter!

The “Collective Mind” at Work

A Decade in the Life of U.S. Sociology of Education

by Steven Brint

*The following is a shortened version of a plenary lecture by Steven Brint presented at the inaugural meeting of the Portuguese Sociology of Education Society in Lisbon, January 23, 2009. Steven Brint is Professor of Sociology at the University of California Riverside and works on topics at the intersection of the sociology of higher education, the sociology of professions, and middle-class politics. He has authored many articles and several books, such as for instance *The Diverted Dream* (with Jerome Karabel) for which he received the outstanding book award of the American Education Research Association. He served as the 2007/2008 chair of the sociology of education section and was elected a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science last November.*

You have asked me to speak about the current state of the sociology of education in the United States. The temptation is great in such an assignment to applaud the sub-discipline for following one’s own cherished positions or to lament its failure to do so. I will (for the most part) resist these temptations and talk instead about what a study of the “collective mind” of the field tells us about the current interests (and blind spots) of the field, the controversies that animate it, and the extent to which other possible discourses on education in society would be as scientifically productive.

By using the term “collective mind” I do not have in mind a Hegelian notion of the Spirit realizing itself in history, or indeed any integrated image of the collective mind. Instead, I have a pluralistic and fragmented image, based on counting each specific piece of work in the field. One can count the pieces of work to form an image of the whole. As this reference to counting suggests, my approach will be

quantitative. I have read and coded the last ten years of work in *The Sociology of Education*, the leading U.S. journal in the sub-discipline and will present a portrait of the collective mind of the field based on a content analysis of that body of work.

Although I anticipate that you will find the results of this exercise illuminating, it is important to emphasize that my methodology has clear limitations. Many other journals publish work by U.S. sociologists of education, including the *American Educational Research Journal* and the *American Journal of Education*, to mention just two of the more prominent. Leading journals in sociology, such as the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*, also occasionally publish work by sociologists of education. And, of course, my methodology leaves out book publication altogether. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that the collective mind of the U.S. sociology of education is only one part of a much larger collective mind defined by the intellectual field of education studies. This larger collective mind can be conceived as the aggregate of all journals and book publication related to education and educational systems from all countries in the world and on all topics – from cognition to pedagogy to classroom and school organization.

Many the silences in the collective mind of U.S. sociology of education can be understood as efforts to claim niche space within the complex ecology of the broader intellectual field. As I will show, the niche space claimed by the U.S. sociology of education focuses on studies of educational achievement and educational attainment as conditioned by social inequality, family and student behaviors, and school organization. Although it is indirectly influenced by contemporary policy issues, *Sociology of Education* typically does not engage policy directly, because other journals do. It is relatively silent on comparison of educational systems, because other journals and books examine educational systems from a comparative perspective. Given this intellectual division of labor, we can perhaps feel comforted that important issues neglected by the sociology of education are not entirely neglected by the larger collective mind.

Accordingly, the most that I will claim for my approach is that it is a partial picture of the collective mind in the U.S. sociology of education, albeit a partial picture that is closely connected to the core of the sub-discipline. The journal *Sociology of Education* is the one of the highest ranked education journals in the U.S. and the only highly ranked journal that publishes the work of sociologists of education more or less exclusively. Its acceptance rate ranges between 10 and 15 percent and thus one can make a persuasive case that the journal represents work that is at the forefront of current sociological thinking about education in the U.S. During the period I examined, the years 1999-2008, the journal published work by many of the leading senior sociologists of education in the United States. As the core journal in the field, the collective mind represented in the journal defines the center of gravity in the sub-discipline.

Method

Between 1999 and 2008, 168 articles appeared in *Sociology of Education*, between three and five articles in each of four issues during the year. (In 2000, the journal published a special extra issue, which included essays about current thinking about key issues in the sub-discipline). I coded each of the

articles that met my criteria for inclusion in four ways. First, I classified the article by methodology: either quantitative or qualitative. In a few cases, both types of methodology were equally prominent. I noted these articles separately. Second, I classified the level of education addressed in the article: primary/secondary or tertiary. In some cases, articles concerned both primary/secondary and tertiary education. In these cases, I did not classify the article. Third, I classified the article into one eight major topical categories. These major topical categories included: (1) inequality, (2) “non-structural” sources of achievement, (3) culture/ideology, (4) school organization/school effects, (5) state/politics, (6) labor market/labor market transitions, (7) comparative/historical analysis, and (8) methods. Finally, I classified articles into a more fine-grained topical scheme of 22 categories in all. I will concentrate my discussion of content on the distribution of articles into the eight major topical categories listed above. Therefore, let me elaborate the conventions that I used in coding articles into these categories.

I classified the articles based on the primary emphasis in the article. Where possible, I tried to classify under one category only. I classified only a handful of articles under more than one category, because I could not determine its primary emphasis. I made a distinction in coding between the major structural bases of inequality in American society (i.e. social class, race/ethnicity, immigration status, and gender) and social structures and behaviors that vary within these broad strata (such as family structure or student work effort). I reserved the category “non-structural sources of achievement” for articles that took up these latter sources of variation in educational outcomes. Thus, articles about the effects of work effort, drinking behavior, or obesity on student achievement were coded into this category, but articles about the effects of wealth or immigration status on educational attainment were coded into the “inequality and schools” category.

In this coding scheme, “culture/ideology” includes articles both on cultural influences on the organization of schooling and the influences of the organization of schooling on culture. An example of the former would be an article on the interpersonal strategies used by high-achieving students to mask their school achievements in settings that belittle intellectuality. An example of the latter would be an article on the effects of educational attainment on attitudes about public affairs.

I will not make strong claims for the accuracy of my coding. In some cases, other equally expert coders would likely have made different coding choices. However, many of the articles were not difficult to code, and I believe the measurement error due to coding mistakes is relatively minor.

The Contours of the “Collective Mind”

One inescapable conclusion is that the collective mind of U.S. sociology of education, as represented in its leading journal, is highly quantitative. Of those articles classifiable into one of two methodologies, 131 articles relied on quantitative methodologies, and only 27 articles relied on qualitative methodologies. The ratio is almost 6:1 in favor of quantitative methods. Given the number of high-quality data sets currently available to educational researchers in the U.S. (and abroad), the great incentive is to train students in quantitative methods and then to exploit that knowledge of statistical techniques to investigate topics using these high-quality data sets. Most researchers relied on well-established statistical methods, such as multiple regression, hierarchical linear modeling, and structural

equation modeling. Only four articles (two percent of the sample) focused specifically on advancing methods for the study of schooling systems.

The content analysis revealed that the collective mind of U.S. *Sociology of Education* is also highly oriented to primary and secondary education, rather than post-secondary education. Of the articles that could be classified by level of education addressed, 93 focused on primary/secondary education and 25 focused on post-secondary education, a ratio of almost 4:1 in favor of primary/secondary education. This orientation might seem skewed, given that at least three in five U.S. citizens now enrolls in a post-secondary institution at some point in their lives, and, further, that post-secondary achievements are highly connected to labor market outcomes. However, sociologists of education in the U.S. have followed the broader American public (and U.S. policy makers) in defining K-12 education as fundamental, both for equalizing opportunities and for building skills in critical spheres of cognitive and social development.

A very large proportion of articles concerned variation in student achievement, as measured by access to educational opportunities, scores on tests of reading or mathematics achievement, or educational attainment in degrees or years. These are very attractive dependent variables, since schooling is explicitly intended to encourage cognitive achievement and the attainment of valuable educational credentials. It is consequently of great interest for sociologists to try to understand with which populations and due to which methods of organization schools are and are not succeeding. Moreover, variation is easy to measure for variables like these and a variety of factors may be relevant to explaining this variation, ensuring an almost limitless supply of relationships to investigate.

Table 1
Proportion of Sociology of Education Articles by Topical Category, 1999-2008 (N=168 articles)

| Topic | Number | Proportion |
|--|--------|------------|
| Inequality and Schools | 42 | 25% |
| School Effects/ School Organization | 33 | 20% |
| Non-Structural Sources of Achievement | 28 | 17% |
| Culture/Ideology | 27 | 16% |
| Comparative/Historical | 17 | 10% |
| Labor Market Mechanisms/ Labor Market Outcomes | 11 | 7% |
| State/Politics/Mobilization | 9 | 5% |
| Methods | 4 | 2% |

Only two of these eight topical areas – inequality and school effects/school organization – were the subjects of at least one-fifth of articles (see table 1). To a large degree, this reflects the core subjects of sociological analysis: inequality and social organization. We can gain more purchase on these two leading topics by looking at the more refined topical categories. Of the articles on inequality, 26 focused primarily on race and ethnicity, while 11 focused on gender, 7 focused on social class, and 5 focused on immigrants. These figures indicate that U.S. sociology of education is very much grounded in

U.S. social relations. Race has been the pivotal division in American society and the issue of black-white achievement gaps has been one of particular interest to American sociologists, following the influential work by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Philips on this topic in the late 1990s. Moreover, U.S. school policy has also been strongly oriented to reducing inequities by race, as evidenced by the legitimating language surrounding the U.S. “No Child Left Behind” Act of 2001, which sought to overcome “the soft bigotry of low expectations” for minority children. Surely, in most of Europe, immigration status is a more significant structural category and one would expect to see variation along these lines.

Other structural bases of inequality received less attention: Social class was thoroughly analyzed in previous generations, and the major advance in recent years has been the incorporation of wealth measures into achievement and attainment models, as in the work of Dalton Conley. Gender has a far more limited differentiating influence in the U.S. Indeed, as in the rest of the developed world, girls now greatly outdo boys in grades, verbal test scores, and college enrollment.

Articles studying the influence of school organization on achievement were nearly as common. In these articles, dimensions of variation in school organization – including socio-demographic composition of schools, school size, sector (private or public), tracking structure, and site-specific instructional styles – were analyzed for their associations with variations in student performance. Thus, the articles researched such topics as the connection between instructional activities and student engagement, school financing and achievement in urban school districts, school size and students’ psycho-emotional adjustment, and the connection between tracking, student effort, and student achievement.

Indeed, the interaction between school organization and social inequalities is an important thread running through the last decade of work in *The Sociology of Education*. Thus, for example, one article discussed how in socio-economically similar schools, greater concentrations of minority students leads to the raising, rather than the lowering, of expectations for higher level degrees. Another showed that, in comparative perspective, inequality between groups can widen in the initial phase of expanding educational opportunity, because the most advantaged groups are the first to exploit any new opportunities that policy changes offer.

The next largest group of articles belonged to the category that I have termed “non-structural” sources of achievement. Here I categorized articles about social structures, attitudes, and behaviors linked to school performance, but only distally related to the most important structural bases of social inequality in American society. In this category we see articles focusing on family structures such as cohabitation and divorce; behaviors such as timing of sexual initiation, obesity and drinking; and academic resources, such as effort and academic skills developed in prior schooling. We can contrast sociologist’s focus on structural versus non-structural bases of inequality, running over the last decade at a ratio of approximately 4:3 in favor of structural bases of inequality. Thus, one of the fault lines in studies of education divide those who place priority on categorical social inequalities and those who place priority on attitudes, behaviors, and practices that explain inter-stratum variation in achievement.

This is a bigger issue in U.S. sociology generally, one that is relevant to the sociology of health behavior and the sociology of occupational advancement, as much as the sociology of education.

Why do we see this controversy? Many U.S. sociologists (particularly those who are closer to the center of the political spectrum) are impatient with the blunter forms of social determinism represented by those who root behavior in social structural advantages and disadvantages, and an equal or larger number of U.S. sociologists (particularly those who are closer to the left of the political spectrum) are impatient with those who focus on behavioral choices and effort to the relative exclusion of broader influences on educational outcomes due to structural inequalities.

U.S. *Sociology of Education* remains rooted in the “hard,” measurable realities of inequality, school organization, family structure, and individual behavioral choices. At the same time, like so much of the broader field of sociology, U.S. sociology of education has also experienced its own “cultural turn” during the last decade, and we have begun to see many more “soft” articles that examine how cultural meanings influence school outcomes. In one, Regina Deil-Amen and James Rosenbaum showed that efforts to reduce stigma from remedial education have unintended consequences on students’ understandings of schooling by failing to provide realistic feedback on skill levels. In another, my students Mary F. Contreras and Michael T. Matthews and I described the socialization climate of primary schools, linking emphases on self-esteem and praise to U.S. consumer culture. These articles have the appeal of taking seriously the mental picture that the schooling institutions project and the mental pictures that students bring with them to schooling.

As we move down to the bottom half of Table 1, we become more aware of what is missing from U.S. sociology of education than what is present. More than 90% of articles were about schools in the United States, rather than about schooling in other countries, a level of nationalist focus that is perhaps surprising for a country whose leaders touted globalization so frequently during this period. Indeed, the insularity of U.S. *Sociology of Education* is more profound than even this figure suggests. A majority of the comparative articles were published because they shed light on issues in U.S. sociology of education, such as whether educational expansion reduces social inequality and why some systems are better able to incorporate minorities than others.

Other less represented topics are equally surprising. Since schooling is, above all, preparation for adult work and civic life, it may be surprising that fewer than 10 percent of the articles focused on labor market mechanisms or labor market transitions. And, of course, as we can see from this data, interest in the state or political groups as actors in the construction of schooling (or as a beneficiary of schooling) is still weaker. The collective mind represented in *Sociology of Education* has distinctive interests and biases, and these interests evidently do not include most of the rest of the world, the U.S. capitalist market economy, or state-based policy coalitions struggling over the forms and functions of schooling. We can gain a more detailed sense of what is de-emphasized in the collective mind through examination of the more refined topic categories, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Infrequent Subjects in Sociology of Education, 1999-2008 (N=168 articles)

| Topic | Number | Proportion |
|-----------------------------|--------|------------|
| Teaching Practices | 5 | 3% |
| Dropouts | 5 | 3% |
| Extra-curricular Activities | 5 | 3% |
| Curriculum | 4 | 2% |
| Education of Elites | 3 | 2% |
| Family Structure | 3 | 2% |
| Religious Schools | 3 | 2% |
| State Examination Systems | 3 | 2% |
| School Changing | 2 | 1% |
| Group Processes in Class | 1 | >1% |

Theoretical vs. Empirical Engagements

One conclusion I have drawn from reading a decade’s worth of articles in *Sociology of Education* is that U.S. sociologists of education have relatively little regard for theory. The vast majority of articles can be described as empirical examinations of relationships between variables measured in national surveys. Many of the titles of the articles convey the authors’ intent to examine empirical relationships, taking into account a standard battery of controls, to identify or to explore further heretofore unappreciated relationships. Thus, we have articles with titles like the following: “Gender, Obesity, and Education,” “Tracking, Student Efforts, and Academic Achievement,” or “High School Exit Exams and Dropouts.” These articles might be pejoratively characterized, in C. Wright Mills’ term, as “abstracted empiricism” – in other words, the investigation of sociological phenomenon without significant concern for theory testing or the accumulation of propositional knowledge about schooling and society.

At the same time, we might wish to reconsider the usefulness of the term “abstracted empiricism,” because one common pattern found in these articles is the effort to engage, critique, or explain a previously posited empirical relationship, particularly one with important public policy implications. Thus, a number of writers dig into the causes of the educational gap between blacks and whites in the United States. Perhaps this form of investigation is not properly characterized as “abstracted empiricism”; instead, it is rooted in a real social problem with important policy implications. Here one sees the evident interest in the field in the amelioration of the negative consequences of social inequalities, a common outlook among sociologists of education (indeed, sociologists generally) who ground their work in social reform aspirations rather than purely scientific motivations to develop theory to better understand the working of social relations and social institutions.

Not all of the articles were entirely atheoretical. Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory is tested and refined by several authors, some drawing on Annette Lareau’s application of Bourdieu to family socialization practices. John W. Meyer’s “world polity” theory is investigated by two authors. Michael Hout and Adrian Raftery’s theory of maximally maintained inequality is subjected to

investigation by two researchers. In one article, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis reconsider their theory of schooling in capitalist America in light of recent scholarship, finding evidence to support some but not all of its propositions of their well-known 1976 book. In another, Randall Collins' theory of credentialism is compared to human capital theory using the critical test case of employer sponsored vocational training.

I identified only one ongoing debate in the journal related to a conceptual idea or theory. In the 10-year period, no fewer than five articles challenged the "oppositional culture" idea of John Ogbu – that highly-subordinated minority students develop counter-school culture attitudes and behaviors. *Sociology of Education* authors attacked this idea in a variety of ways: showing that minority-concentrated schools include more students with high aspirations, showing that prior skills, rather than social disadvantage, explain the development of attitudes consistent with oppositional culture, or exploring the ways that African American students manage dual identities – ambition to succeed combined with awareness of degrees of anti-intellectualism in their home environments.

It is unclear whether the near-absence of theory and theoretical debate in *Sociology of Education* reflects the weakness of existing theoretical perspectives or simply the much greater interest of sociologists of education in exploring the truth or falsity of posited empirical relationships regarding social problems related to schooling using sophisticated analytical techniques on high-quality data sets. Whatever one makes of this, it is clear that statistical knowledge and data collection technology has advanced much faster than theory in the sociology of education and that the leading graduate programs are teaching data manipulation skills and encouraging students to make their careers by exploring under-investigated empirical relationships rather than working on testing or developing theory. In terms of the standard scientific model of theory-grounded knowledge, this is a problem; in terms of understanding the empirical world of schooling as it currently exists in one national context it may not be.

Conclusion: Notable Truncations

I will conclude by considering U.S. sociology of education in relation to alternative "collective minds" that could, in theory, define the field. One clear possibility is for a more international, comparative sociology of education. Unlike the founders of the discipline, U.S. sociologists have gravitated toward a narrow, nation-specific understanding of schooling. Such a change would require greatly reduced nationalism, broader historical and comparative training, and less parochial views about social relations and social institutions. Although one might hope for such an evolution in the field, it does not seem to be in the offing any time soon.

Another alternative conception would be to locate schooling in the context of non-school based educational influences and institutions. At the moment, we have a sociology of schooling, rather than a sociology of education. A broader sociology of education would certainly be less school focused, and instead compare schools with competing culture producing and knowledge creating institutions (such as religion and popular media) as influences on individual (and group) behavior and thought. As I noted in another work: "In adult life, the knowledge taught in school does not necessarily count for more than

other forms of knowledge, such as common sense, popular culture, merchandising, folklore, and religious belief...Moreover, some of these other 'knowledge systems,' such as popular culture and religious traditions, have become more, not less important in shaping cognition." The advantage of focusing on schooling, of course, is that schools are brick and mortar places that can be readily accessed and studied.

The sub-discipline's one-sided focus on the society-to-school link creates a different sort of truncation. In the sociology of education, as currently constituted in the U.S., we see very few studies of the other side of the relationship: the school-to-society link – whether this be the effects of formal education on the structure of labor markets (through credentialism and professionalization), on culture (through the creation of tastes, values, consciousness, and status cultures), or on individual behavior following the completion of schooling (through, for example, changes in parenting, religious or political participation). Variations in students' social backgrounds figure as inputs to schools, but levels and types of schooling only rarely figure as inputs to society or culture. A few scholars, such as Paul Kingston, have pursued the school-to-society link in recent years, but their work is marginal to the main topics in the sub-discipline.

In sum, today's sociology of education in the United States is the study of the effects of social structure and school organization on educational achievement. These are undoubtedly very important subjects. But conceptions of alternative collective minds may suggest the limits of the current constitution of the field. In the U.S., ours has been a nationalist sociology of schooling, not a sociology of all forms of education in global society. It has, in addition, been a sociology of schooling's dependence on social inequalities, not of the dependence of society on the production of the carriers of school socialization and knowledge. A more rounded perspective would, I believe, lead to a stronger appreciation of education's contribution to the construction of society and culture – one that might keep more of us optimistic about the great social enterprise we study, even as, true to our roots in social reform, we remain dismayed about its failures to provide equal opportunities for all.

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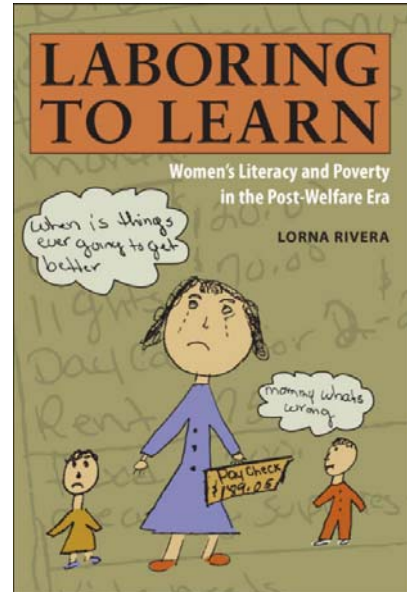
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New Books from Section Members

Laboring to Learn: Women's Literacy & Poverty in the Post-Welfare Era.

by Lorna Rivera

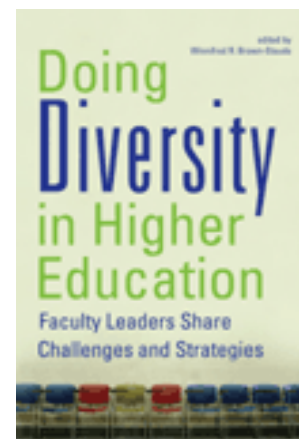
The American adult education system has become an alternative for school dropouts, with some state welfare policies requiring teen mothers and women without high school diplomas to participate in adult education programs to receive aid. Currently, low-income women of color are more likely to be enrolled in the lowest levels of adult basic education. Very little has been published about women's experiences in these mandatory programs and whether the programs reproduce the conditions that forced women to drop out in the first place. Lorna Rivera bridges the gap with this important study, the product of ten years' active ethnographic research with formerly homeless women who participated in adult literacy education classes before and after welfare reform. She draws on rich interviews with organizers and participants in the Adult Learners Program at Project Hope, a women's shelter and community development organization in Boston's Dudley neighborhood, one of the poorest in the city. Analyzing the web of ideological contradictions regarding "work first" welfare reform policies, Rivera argues that poverty is produced and reproduced when women with low literacy skills are pushed into welfare-to-work programs and denied education. She examines how various discourses about individual choice and self-sufficiency shape the purposes of literacy, how low-income women express a sense of personal responsibility for being poor, and how neoliberal ideologies and practices compromise the goals of critical literacy programs. Throughout this study, the voices and experiences of formerly homeless women challenge cultural stereotypes about poor women, showing in personal and structural terms how social and economic forces shape and restrict opportunities for low-income women of color.



Doing Diversity in Higher Education

edited by Winnifred Brown-Glaude

Using case studies from universities throughout the nation, *Doing Diversity in Higher Education* examines the role faculty play in improving diversity on their campuses. The power of professors to enhance diversity has long been underestimated, their initiatives often hidden from view. Winnifred Brown-Glaude and her contributors uncover major themes and offer faculty and administrators a blueprint for conquering issues facing campuses across the country. Topics include how to dismantle hostile microclimates, sustain and enhance accomplishments, deal with incomplete institutionalization, and collaborate with administrators. The contributors' essays portray working on behalf of diversity as a genuine intellectual project rather than a faculty "service." The rich variety of colleges and universities included provides a wide array of models that faculty can draw upon to inspire institutional change.

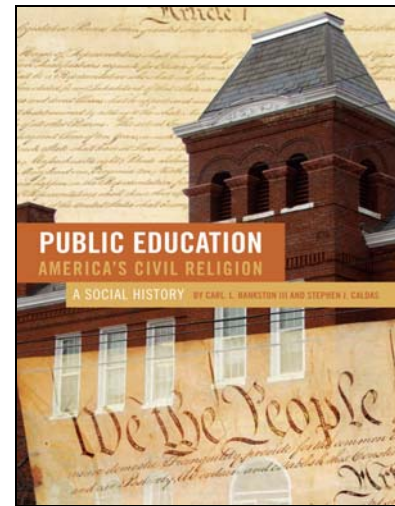


Public Education - America's Civil Religion: A Social History

by Carl L. Bankston, III and Stephen J. Caldas

In this provocative volume, the authors argue that public education is a central part of American civil religion and, thus, gives us an unquestioning faith in the capacity of education to solve all of our social, economic, and political problems. The book traces the development of America's faith in public education from before the Civil War up to the present, exploring recent educational developments such as the No Child Left Behind legislation. The authors discuss how this faith in education often makes it difficult for Americans to think realistically about the capacities and limitations of public schooling. Bringing together history, politics, religion, sociology, and educational theory, this in-depth examination:

- Raises fundamental questions about what education can accomplish for the citizens of the United States.
- Points out that many supposedly opposing viewpoints on public education actually arise from the same root assumptions.
- Exposes the gaps between our pursuit of equity in schools and what we really accomplish with students.
- Looks at ways in which education can be organized to serve a diverse population.



In the next issue ...



We are trying to develop the newsletter further and welcome suggestions and contributions. The summer issue will include the following sections (among others):

... “It should have been a Classic”

We inaugurate a new series for which section members are welcome to submit a review of a major sociology of education book or body of work that in their opinion provided crucial new insights, presented key theoretical advancements, or showed the potential to re-orient the field – but still failed to make it onto most syllabi and standard reading lists. The series will be kicked off by Michael Olneck (University of Wisconsin-Madison) with a review of Margaret Archer’s work on educational expansion.

... “Five Questions to ...”

Section members are welcome to submit suggestions for interviews or, better yet, interview questions to be posed to a leading scholar of the field.

... Announcements from you

We would like to expand the announcement section to include life events and career transitions, awards and honors. Please let us know about your news!

**Submit contributions for the next newsletter to
FPfeffer@ssc.wisc.edu**