

Title of Submission—Race, class, and gender: The role of capital.

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Abstract

Research Objectives

The system of education faces critical challenges when determining what constitutes equitable access and equal opportunity for traditionally underrepresented groups in public schools. These fundamental issues are linked to the achievement gap that presently exists along racial/ethnic lines and socioeconomic status (Heubert, 1999; Irvine, 1990; McNeil, 2000; Miller, 1995; Viadero, 2000). Particularly, as it pertains to African-Americans from affluent backgrounds, the academic disparities compared to Whites become more suspect given the impact that increased resources and influential networks are assumed to have in manifesting higher educational outcomes (Miller, 1995; Willie, 2001). Therefore, the research study entitled, *Race, class, gender, and schooling: The role of capital*, seeks to examine the role of status-based culture in shaping academic achievement for African-American students. The following questions will guide this study: How do status cultures or status groups influence the teaching and learning process in a desegregated, magnet school?; To what extent does a desegregated, magnet school increase access to cultural and social capital?

Status-based culture, a concept coined by Max Weber, serves as an entity that subscribes to collective ideals about traditions and conventions. The status-based culture maintains unified expectations about academic performance, cultural knowledge, dispositions, etc. for educational settings irrespective of diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds (Gerth & Mills, 1946; DiMaggio, 1985). The status-based culture is exclusive and operates independently because of its ability to exist without the status group, but the status group cannot exist without the status culture. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defines capital as the “accumulated labor which, when appropriated on a private basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (p. 241). Capital essentially refers to exclusive assets that contain the capacity to reproduce profitable and meaningful outcomes within particular contexts. More specifically, the study seeks to understand the transferal processes of social and cultural capital within a desegregated, magnet school. The use of magnet schools serves to forge racial balance and to manifest higher, educational outcomes. Magnet schools are purposed to carry out the goals for desegregation and in the process, the idea is that students gain capital from this exclusive environment.

The research objectives are thereby three-fold in conception: to observe the dynamics between individuals within a high performing/high achieving desegregated, magnet school; to examine how different forms of capital vary across status groups (i.e. race, class, gender, etc) and their impact upon the transferal process of social and cultural capital; to determine whether or not different forms of capital operate in a stratified hierarchy within a desegregated environment. Various theoretical and epistemological contexts will provide the framework to situate this discussion on school desegregation, magnet schools, and cultural and social capital. Qualitative and quantitative methods will provide the tools to gain insight about the transferal processes related to cultural and social capital in a desegregated, magnet school.

Methodology

This research study is being conducted as a qualitative and quantitative study at a high performing/high-achieving desegregated, magnet school in an urban, Midwestern city. Data is collected using interviews, focus groups, observations, document analyses, and survey. Interviews provide the means to gain more in-depth perspectives about the transferal processes of cultural capital. Forty-five minute interviews are conducted individually with administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Focus groups serve as the median to examine how individuals internalize their role within desegregated contexts. Two different focus groups are conducted with the students.

Observations provide the context to examine how meaning arises via the interactions between individuals. Observations are conducted of the teachers who are being interviewed. Some of the students who are being interviewed are in the same classes of the teachers who are being interviewed. Document analyses of the magnet school application, 2001 Illinois School Report Card, and other related materials have been used. The use of relevant documents provides a useful avenue for pinpointing how the objectives and data of this high performing, magnet are presented to the general public. Survey questionnaire provides the opportunity to examine the general trends related to educational processes. Each of these methods provides the more conducive means to extract data.

Discussion of Expected Outcomes

I anticipate that this study will reveal significant findings about the impact of status-culture upon the educational outcomes of African-Americans. First, status culture in schools on curriculum and pedagogy compliment the ideologies of the dominant group irrespective of [status groups] and the type of school. Such argument leads the researcher to posit that African-Americans and other racial minorities use their influential access in social capital to compensate for what the school does not provide. In terms of the transfer processes of social and capital in desegregated setting, the researcher suggests that African-American students have less knowledge about particular forms of social and cultural capital than their White counterparts. Particularly, this position is asserted toward the forms of capital that are considered 'legitimate' in school settings.

Educational Importance

This study clearly raises some important perspectives when discussing issues related to forging high academic outcomes within desegregated, magnet schools. While this high performing, magnet school does have an excellent record of sending racial minorities to prestigious institutions of higher education, the microlevel agents cannot be negated. Preliminary findings have demonstrated how cultural capital is not merely gained by virtue of access to environments that arguably subscribe to academically rigorous standards. Racial minorities, in particular, must be actively involved in both in-curricular and extracurricular activities. Preliminary findings further reveal that the physical locale of desegregated environments does not alleviate the systemic remnants of inequalities. An environment of this sort, as a high performing magnet school, only diminishes the blatant manifestation of the inequities. Ineffective desegregation becomes just as devastating as *de jure* segregation. Therefore, it still remains fundamentally important to continue monitor schooling contexts that are desegregated surrounded by a larger society of inequities and inequalities.