

A Study on Progressive Education among American Families and Class Solidification

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Abstract: Progressive education in the United States is ideologically egalitarian, but in practice, it has been divided by class. Determine whether the same educational ideology leads to different results in the four class groups of low-income, working-class, middle-class and elite families. Based on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and integrating data from national education statistics, labour market tracking studies and ethnographic case records, this paper builds a four-stage analytical chain: family capital endowments → differentiated progressive educational practices → stratified academic and career pathways → intergenerational transmission and class solidification. Based on the results, elite families have turned progressive education into a high-pressure, enrichment-intensive path to secure admission to top universities and high-status jobs; low-income families have received a reduced version with low academic demands and few extracurricular activities, leading to community college enrollment and lower-paying jobs. Middle-class and working-class families are in the middle; both have limited resources in the system. Therefore, progressive education does not reduce inequality but rather reproduces it by creating a self-perpetuating cycle of capital, schooling, career and next-generation capital. Structural reform of school funding, college admissions and support for early childhood education are all required to break this vicious cycle, but there are serious political and cultural obstacles to their implementation.

Keywords: Progressive Education; Class Solidification; Cultural Capital; Educational Inequality; Intergenerational Transmission.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In the mid-20th century, the American progressive education movement began as a response to rigid, examination-oriented schooling. The reasons appear reasonable: have students take the initiative, make learning more enjoyable, develop all-round abilities, and focus less on tests. Over time, these ideas became well-known. But progressive education does not work for everyone in the same way.

According to the data from the New York Times [1], only 12% of children from low-income families complete a four-year university education after attending progressive schools. Among children of the upper class, the college entrance rate is 95% [1]. The same teaching method has different effects in families of different backgrounds.

The Gap began early. As of 2019, only 8 per cent of low-income families could afford private school tuition (NCES data [2]). Another 19% use public school choice programs, and 18% attend their zoned public schools [2]. Middle-class families have more choices but face trade-offs. Working-class families often take whatever is available. Rich families can choose freely from the good ones: top public schools in wealthy areas, private schools, etc.

The gap persists after graduation. In 2025, NBER and Columbia University collaborated to follow more than 80,000 graduates of public universities [3]. Low-income graduates started at an average salary of \$37,600—12% less than their high-income peers [3]. Only 33% had job offers before graduation, compared to 39% of high-income graduates [3]. Low-income graduates also ended up more often in low-wage firms, earning 18% below the industry average [3]. Where

you start financially determines where you can go to school, what kind of job you will get, and where your own children will begin.

1.2. Core Research Questions

There are three problems here. First, how do children from low-income, working-class, middle-class and high-income families experience progressive education differently? What is it for their studies and future work? Second, how do these differences lead to class division? How do unequal access to cultural capital and good schools pass on advantages from one generation to the next? Third, why is this pattern so difficult to break?

1.3. Research Significance and Research Gap

Many studies have examined class and education in America, or cultural capital [4], or how family background affects career choices. But most focus on one piece of the puzzle. Few people have tried to connect the dots between family capital, school life and careers, and the next generation. Fewer people are spread across all age groups, including the working class and the middle class.

This paper constructs a full chain: family capital → differentiated progressive education → stratified academic paths → career outcomes → intergenerational transmission. It considers four classes of positions, not just two.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Literature Review

2.1.1. Cultural Capital and Educational Inequality

Bourdieu [4] believed that families transmit cultural knowledge, taste, mannerisms and behaviour, as well as social

networks. They are not money, but they serve as a medium of exchange in school. A child who has grown up hearing academic language, visiting museums and expecting to go to college starts school with a hidden advantage.

Research confirms this. Research on participation in AP courses shows that family cultural capital is positively correlated with enrollment in advanced classes. Privileged families know how to get their children into these courses, offer support at home, and help their children achieve success in college applications. Families lacking this cultural literacy are unable to help their children navigate the system.

2.1.2. Class Attributes of American Progressive Education

Progressive education did not create class inequality in American schools, but it also failed to address it.

The problem is also in the funding system. Most American public schools are funded by local property taxes. Rich neighborhoods have rich schools—small classes, experienced teachers, language labs, art programs. Poor neighborhoods have poor schools—overcrowded, understaffed, basic courses only. Kozol [5] presented this in *Savage Inequalities*. Anyon [6] added that schools train different classes for different futures. Working-class schools stress obedience and repetition. Elite schools teach critical thinking and decision-making [6].

Lareau [7] identified two kinds of parenting in the family. Middle-class and upper-class families practice "concerted cultivation", organising activities, prompting questions, etc., for their children. Working-class and poor families practice "natural growth" by offering love and care but allowing children to develop more independently [7]. Schools are organised for concerted cultivation, and middle-class children have an advantage.

2.2. Theoretical Foundation and Key Concepts

2.2.1. Progressive Education

The above refers to the American progressive education movement in the mid-20th century. It developed in the post-war boom, the Civil Rights Movement and a reaction to rigid testing. First, humanistic: respect children's innate curiosity, take into account individual differences, and promote all-around development.

2.2.2. Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's concept [4] includes three types: embodied (knowledge and behaviour), objectified (books, art, instruments), and institutionalised (degrees, qualifications). Cultural capital in education refers to parents' participation in their children's schooling, academic support, extracurricular activities, and the hope of higher education.

2.2.3. Class Solidification

Class solidification means blocked inter-class mobility. When parents' class predictions for children's classes exceed effort or talent, it is class solidification. This paper will also explore the function of progressive education in this process.

2.3. Four-Stage Analytical Framework

The four stages of the analysis are: (1) family capital endowments, (2) differentiated educational practices, (3) stratified academic and career pathways, and (4) intergenerational transmission and class solidification. The logic is Capital → Education → Career → Next generation's Capital.

3. Methodology

3.1. Literature Review Method

Research in sociology, education and economics has been conducted to collect peer-reviewed papers, books, institutional reports (such as NCES [2] and NBER [3]), and news data (New York Times [1]).

3.2. Case Study Method

The paper uses Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods* [7] for portraits of family life across classes, and Kozol [5] and Anyon [6] to show how schools differ by neighbourhood.

3.3. Data Sources

All empirical data are from public sources: NCES (2019 school choice report) [2], NBER and Columbia University (2025 graduate tracking study) [3], and New York Times (class and education statistics) [1].

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Educational Practices Across Four Classes

Progressive education differs in each grade.

Upper-class families (household income over \$115,000) select high-quality schools from the public or private sector. They promote progressive values and also offer high-quality academics, test preparation, music classes, travel, summer camps and private college counseling. Their version is "progressive +".

Middle-class families (income \$60,000–\$115,000) generally live in good areas but are somewhat restricted. They try to reproduce the elite model on a small scale: one instrument instead of three, local camps instead of overseas courses, and parental help instead of private tutoring.

Working-class families (income \$35,000–60,000) have fewer options. They send children to zoned public schools that may be under-resourced [5]. Progressive education here often refers to lower academic requirements and less homework. Parents want to help but do not have time or confidence.

Low-income families (under \$35,000) have the most restrictions. School buildings are old, teachers are inexperienced, and advanced courses such as AP and IB are often unavailable [5]. Progressive education here is essentially basic skills plus free time. Families cannot afford after-school classes.

4.2. Academic Paths and College Admissions

These different educational practices produce predictable gaps.

52% of low-income children have not received higher education. Only 12% finish a four-year degree [1]. Most who go to college start at community colleges. Test scores are low, and the legacy admission path is unavailable.

For working-class children, four-year degree completion is higher than for low-income families but still well below the national average. Many start at community colleges or less selective state universities.

College is the standard for middle-class children. Four-year degree completion rates are relatively high for the working-class family. Some attend selective schools, though rarely the very top tier without additional advantages.

95% of the elite children go to college, 55% obtain a bachelor's degree, and 11% pursue graduate studies [1]. They

are the top 50 universities. They enjoy the benefits of old-school admissions, well-known recommendation letters, expensive counselors, and extracurricular competitions that low-income families cannot afford.

4.3. Career Outcomes

The NBER/Columbia study of 80,000 public university graduates found that education levels were correlated with wages [3].

Starting Salary for Low-Income Graduates: \$37,600. For high-income graduates: 12% higher [3]. Only 33% of the low-income graduates had job offers before graduation, and 39% of the high-income graduates [3]. Low-income graduates were employed at companies that paid 18% less than the average [3].

Less than 10% of low-income graduates work in finance, law, management or medicine [3]. Among high-income graduates, this proportion is over 40% [3]. Working-class and middle-class graduates fall in between—some in professional jobs, more in teaching, nursing, small business, and lower-level management.

This is occupational class reproduction. Elite children become high-status professionals. Middle-class children remain middle-class. Working-class children often stay working-class or barely climb. Low-income children mostly stay low-income.

4.4. The Self-Reinforcing Mechanism

A closed-loop is established. Family economic status determines starting cultural and social capital. That capital determines the type of progressive education a child will receive. Education Determines College. College Determines Employment. Jobs and incomes are the next generation's initial funds. The Gap increases with age.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Divergent Functions of Progressive Education Across Social Classes

Progressive Education is not neutral. Class changes it completely.

Progressive education for low-income children is less demanding and has lower standards. It sounds good, but it's a pit. When schools expect less, children achieve less. Without competition, no one will develop the will to fight. The low-income version is not an option but a limitation.

Gifted children's parents select the aspects they are interested in—creativity, confidence, student voice—and combine them with high-intensity academics, test preparation and resume building. They can obtain the psychological benefits of progressive education and the competitive advantages of traditional discipline simultaneously.

The middle class is in a predicament; they wish to live as the rich but are unable to do so. The working class lacks the means and knowledge to use the system, so many have opted out—the worst choice in a competitive environment.

5.2. Structural and Institutional Barriers to Reform

Three reasons the class differentiation persists.

First, school funding is provided by local property taxes [5]. Rich Towns do not wish to share their tax base. They consider high spending an investment in their own children, not an injustice. It will make the local people and property owners

feel differently about it. School-level reforms will not solve the problem unless the allocation of resources is changed fundamentally.

Second, cultural capital is invisible and intergenerational [4,7]. By kindergarten, the family has formed a vocabulary, habits, confidence and expectations. Schools are not set up to close this gap; they usually widen it.

Third, the elite actively protect their advantages. Legacy Admissions exist because alumni want them. Recommendation letters reflect social networks. Expensive enrichment activities price out the poor by design. No one believes they are being unfair; they are helping their own children. However, the result is a moat for the upper class.

5.3. Theoretical and Empirical Contributions of This Study

Researchers have previously conducted individual studies on the effects of cultural capital [4], school funding [5], parenting style [7] and labour market outcomes [3]. This paper links them in a single causal chain. Four class positions have been used in the analysis instead of the usual two. Most Americans are not rich or poor; they are in the middle or working class. Their experience of progressive education has been shaped by the same forces, but less so.

5.4. Policy Implications and Structural Recommendations

Several ways are clear. First, replace local property tax funding with state or federal funds and allocate more resources to poor districts. Second, abolish legacy admissions and introduce need-blind admissions. Third, invest in early childhood education to help low-income families build cultural capital before the gap widens.

None of them are easy. Affluent Districts will oppose funding reforms. Elite alumni networks will oppose legacy bans. Early childhood education programmes have a long-term payoff but are not high on the political agenda at present.

However, the alternative is to accept that progressive education will continue to reproduce the class structure rather than changing it.

6. Summary

6.1. Summary of Results

First, progressive education differs significantly among classes. Elite families receive a rich, rigorous, expensive version. Middle-class families are relatively comfortable but still worried. Working-class families receive a reduced version in under-resourced schools [5]. Low-income families receive a reduced-function model with lower standards and no additions. These are different educations, not merely different lives.

Second, the different educations lead to various academic and career results. Gaps in college enrollment, college quality, starting salary and industry placement are large and predictable [1,3]. The rich remain rich. Low-income children largely remain low-income.

Third, the system is self-sustaining. Family Capital Shapes Education. Education Shapes Careers. Career Shapes the Next Generation's Wealth. The loop has closed. This is class consciousness.

6.2. Policy Recommendations

Three proposals emerge. First, reform school funding by

moving away from local property taxes [5] and adopting state-level formulas that allocate more resources to districts serving low-income students. Second, reform college admissions by eliminating legacy preferences, implementing a need-blind policy, and introducing a percentage plan that guarantees admission for top students from all high schools. Third, fund early intervention by expanding Head Start and other programs, and offer academic counselling and enrichment in low-income communities [4,7].

6.3. Obstacles to Implementation

These recommendations have serious defects. Affluent Communities Resist Funding Reform. University alumni networks oppose legacy bans. Early intervention requires an initial public investment and is not politically feasible. Cultural capital is not easily generated by policy. Government programs cannot easily replicate the dinner table conversations and social networks that middle-class children absorb naturally [7].

6.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This paper uses the available data and case studies without conducting new surveys or interviews. In the future, collect first-hand experiences from students and their families in all four classes. Compare the research results of other countries to rule out US institutional factors. Quasi-experimental studies of the actual policy changes can offer causal evidence of efficacy.

6.5. Concluding Remarks

Progressive education began with good intentions—to free

children from drill-and-kill instruction, to make schooling joyful, to develop the whole person. But in a stratified society, good intentions are not sufficient. The same educational idea is turned into a class mechanism for reproduction. Low-income children have less pressure but also fewer opportunities. The rich are free and privileged. If progressive education is to achieve its goals, then the system of school finances, college admissions, and support for early childhood education needs to be adjusted. Otherwise, it will continue to be called an egalitarian society but will be an elite society.

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