

## Social Class and Attitudes Toward Education

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EDUCATION IS OBVIOUSLY both a facilitator of and an obstacle to potential social mobility. Of central importance in this regard are individual attitudes toward education and the socioeconomic resources within the family. A significant body of research conducted in the United States, for example, confirms the close relationship between social class and educational aspirations or values, with lower-class parents limiting their offspring's expectations and adhering to largely instrumental views of schooling in contrast to the more expressive orientations of their middle and upper-class counterparts (cf. Chinoy, 1955; Hollingshead, 1949; Hyman, 1953; Kahl, 1960; Mizruchi, 1964; Schneider & Lysgaard, 1953; Stephenson, 1956). Such belief differences are important because they may seriously limit the type of behavior that would significantly increase actual socioeconomic achievement (cf. Hyman, 1953).

The attitudes of different classes toward education in a community survey carried out in a small Midwestern town in Indiana were explored in the present study. A positive relationship between social class and an emphasis on the noninstrumental (i.e., expressive) functions of education was hypothesized. An interview schedule was administered to 330 residents, drawn from housing blocks (picked randomly) of a small Midwestern community. Occupational details concerning head of household or husband were obtained and grouped as follows: (a) professionals, managers, and officials; (b) sales, clerical, and white-collar occupations; (c) skilled craftsmen; and (d) service workers, semiskilled, and unskilled laborers. Questions regarding the type of education parents wanted for their children, major goals, and emphases were asked of each respondent and the results were tabulated by class background, using a chi-square test of significance. These questions were designed to com-

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pare an emphasis on a general, idealistic, thought-provoking, and ability-developing type of education (the expressive view) with a more vocational, skill-oriented, and job-related approach (the instrumental perspective).

The data largely supported the predicted relationship between class and educational attitudes: When comparing ideals with knowledge, for example, ideals were emphasized more by professional or semiprofessional and clerical or sales parents (selected by 84.2%, 50.0%), and less by the skilled and unskilled (chosen by 42.7%, 42.8%;  $\chi^2 = 13.14$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similarly, when presented with a number of different educational emphases, critical thinking rather than technical abilities was advocated more by professional, clerical, and skilled parents (11.8%, 7.1%, 8.2%) and not at all by the unskilled (0.0%;  $\chi^2 = 6.57$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Using one's special abilities in contrast to getting a better job or broadening one's outlook was also emphasized more by professional families (50.0%), but equally by clerical and unskilled parents (34.1%, 34.4%), and least by the skilled (21.7%;  $\chi^2 = 10.31$ ,  $p < .02$ ). When asked to compare a good education with having a steady job, there were no significant differences among the four groups as a whole (a good education was selected by 47.8% of the professional or semiprofessional families, 48.4% of the clerical or sales parents, 42.1% of the skilled, and 47.4% of the unskilled parents, respectively;  $\chi^2 = 0.64$ ,  $p < .90$ ), highlighting the importance of both values in the sample. Finally, the view that a general education is more important than vocational training was highest among clerical or sales families (75%), with professional and skilled parents next in similar proportions (54.8%, 57.3%), and the unskilled the least (40.6%;  $\chi^2 = 13.14$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Such uneven trends may indicate the importance of both education and job-related skills as American values regardless of class background.

In general these results appear to reflect a fairly high positive relationship between social class and parental emphasis on ideals, critical thinking, and the development of special abilities rather than knowledge or obtaining a better job. Overall, professional and middle-class families indicated somewhat more interest in the expressive rather than instrumental functions of education. Nevertheless, "good" and "general" educations were almost equally as important as vocational training and a steady job for most families in this sample. Although the types of "steady jobs" available clearly vary by class background, both education and career-needs were priorities that cut across class boundaries.

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