

Social class, school and family: Thinking about the relevance of Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods*

Abstract

This essay draws on the work *Unequal Childhoods: Class, race and family life* by Annette Lareau to reflect on the current relevance of the concept of social class and its relationship with school and family. From a broad perspective, the author, on the basis of an ethnographic study in a natural context, develops the concepts of cultivated growth and natural growth, relating them to social class and highlighting the effects of each one on the relationship between family and school. On this basis, it is understood that, despite the changes in social and family life brought about by contemporaneity, the role and weight of social class in the unfolding of family, school and social life is a catalyst of the social differences currently observed in the world.

Keywords: social class, school, family, Annette Lareau, education sciences

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Introduction

Annette Lareau's (2003) book, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, race and family life*, focuses on an ethnographic study with observations in natural contexts and in-depth interviews with 12 families (of white and black ethnicity, and of middle, working and poor class). The book is dedicated to demonstrating how families organize their lives and the differences in this organization of family life by social class, focusing on differences in language use and interactions with the school.

From a broad perspective, thinking about the relationship between social class, family and school in contemporary times does not escape Annette Lareau's timeless work, insofar as the inequality caused by the stratification of society into social classes directly affects the organization of family life, the family's relationship with the school and the type of parenting strategies used by each family.

Why is social class so important for understanding the relationship between family and School? Between middle-class families and working-class and poor families resources vary dramatically (e.g. parents' salary, education and quality of work). These and other factors have a significant impact on the lives of families, but also on children's life chances. For example, a child whose parents hold higher education qualifications is more likely to succeed in school compared to a child whose parents hold a secondary education certificate.

Along these lines, Annette Lareau¹ suggests two concepts regarding the educational strategy that families may present towards children: concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth. The first is based on a strong dialectic between parents and children, in which the former wants to develop the latter's talents and skills through various socio-cultural activities (e.g., piano lessons and football practice). This strategy of raising children emerges in middle-class families. In contrast, the second one centers on the imposition of boundaries between the world of adults and the world of children, in which the former use directives to dialogue with the latter. Children have greater control over their leisure time. This strategy emerges in working-class and poor families.

From a broad perspective, the family can be understood as a group of people who live together and share ties of some kind (blood or otherwise). The organisation of family life differs according to the family's social class. Middle-class families organise their lives around their children's education and the activities they organise for them. It

is a very busy life. Working-class and poor families organise their lives around their socio-economic needs (e.g. food, shelter and money). It is a life marked by social vulnerability.²

On this basis, at the level of family historicity, it is possible to denote changes in contemporary practices and conceptions of family life (from natural growth to cultivated growth), in the social transformation of the status of women (although they are recognised as having a new social status, their role within the home and in the education of their children remains, in many cases, unchanged) and in the transfer of democratic values from the public to the private sphere (e.g., dialogue and the promotion of agency as the basis of parental education).

Discussion

The relationship between family and school is a complex one. Language is a tool used by families in the education of children and by the School to communicate with families and educate children. The way in which middle-class families and working-class and poor families differ in their use of language has direct implications for their relationship with the School. The first families use language as a way of developing the child's vocabulary universe, encouraging him/her to think and argue. In contrast, the second families use language in a directive way and sometimes as a means of threat. Thus, middle-class children develop a complex vocabulary and learn to read earlier than working-class and poor children, the former having an advantage in the school environment over the latter.¹

In this sense, let us think about the double movement of the family: on the one hand, privatisation and, on the other hand, socialisation. The parents stop being parents of their children and start being parents of the students of the school, thus establishing a new relationship with the child (child and student) and a new relationship with the school (school as a structure present in the family). It is also relevant to think about the new relationship between the school and the student (the student belongs to the family) and between the school and the family (the family as educational support of the school).

Thus, this new relationship between family and school is full of tension. In the family, the important thing is often the school results and not the quality of parenting. However, the school success of a student is not synonymous with healthy parenting (nor vice versa).

In this line of thought, for the school, the student's abilities and behaviours come from the family. Good students are associated with good families and a good education and bad students are associated with bad families and a bad education.² The question is not so linear, it is important to ask about the conditions these families have to educate (and to exist). This is where the relationship between social class and education as an individual and family capital with social recognition comes in place.

To a large extent, the dialogue between parents and children is a means to practice the vocabulary to be learned at school and to familiarize the child with the patterns of verbal interaction with teachers and other educational actors.

In this sense, it is possible to note that the School values a certain types of resources that are successfully appropriated by middle-class families, with greater economic power and social capital, and that these families reproduce these values and skills to their children through cultivated growth. To some extent, the social capital valued by the School is maintained in families already with economic and social advantages in the wide societal scheme. Thus, the social reproduction of families happens partly in the School.

Nevertheless, there is an indirect control of the family over the school. The child has to want to adhere to school and to the logic of school success. Parent-child relationships are refined and intergenerational relationships are transformed according to the nature of the new school capital that is incorporated by the whole family, in particular by the pupil/children. There is still direct family control over the school, and social class shapes the way in which this direct control is exercised. Between the middle class and the working class and the poor there is unequal power in the choice of the school, to carry out pedagogical work inside and outside the school (e.g. tutoring and semi-formal activities) and at the level of competence to stress the presence and visibility of the family at school. For the middle class, following their children is an opportunity to find problems in the school institution that prevent their success at school. For the working class and the poor, however, this flowing-up does not happen in the same way. These families follow their children at school in a reduced way and expect the school to provide them with answers and advice on what to do.¹

From this perspective, it is these differences that aid the reproduction of social class, since they are framed within parenting strategies that also differ in terms of social class - natural growth for the working class and poor, and cultivated growth for the middle class.

From a broad perspective, the relationship between the family and the school exists today as an overlapping of educational territories, since the school influences the organisation of family life and, simultaneously, the family influences life at school because it is a consumer of the school and makes its presence felt inside the school (e.g. parents' meetings) and outside the school (e.g. semi-formal activities that develop the abilities and talents valued by the school).

Based on this logic, working-class and poor families rely on the school institution as a source of knowledge, success and, possibly, social mobility. Middle-class families, on the other hand, rely on school as a means of knowledge, success and maintenance of the social status quo.

In short, the relationship between the school and the family is established, to some extent, as a way of highlighting the social inequalities that this institution produces. However, how can families have a say in order to have a significant impact on the lives of their sons and daughters when the biopsychosocial (in people) and socio-cultural

(in the place) conditions are not met for that? The same students are signposted to different types of assistance, and there is a focus on their disadvantaged status. But if families need assistance, what should be done? What are the consequences of this assistentialist but necessary approach? How to act in the School without highlighting inequalities? This is a decisive question in our time that forces us to a paradox: the School tries to respond to social problems through education, however, this institution itself creates and/or highlights the problems it tries to respond to.

Conclusion

Throughout Annette Lareau's work, we are compelled to look at people through the habitus – a set of internally assimilated dispositions operating in a large number of social spheres.¹ Cultivated growth and natural growth are integral aspects of habitus and are articulated with capital, that is, with cultural competencies, social connections, educational practices and other cultural resources that translate into cultural and social value as people move through the various contexts of life.

In contemporary life, it is important to interpret the moments when cultural and social reproduction takes place. For example, by focusing the gaze on the contexts in which the capital is situated, on the competencies with which people activate their capital and on the School's response to that activation of resources, we understand the deep social inequality existing in today's world which, in turn, brings out differences in the relationship between the family and the School, where the acquisition and activation of the capital take an important role in this relationship, shaping it. As such, working-class and poor families do not have the same agency as middle-class families and this is largely due to differences in the capital and habitus of each social class. Thus, the social position of the parents shapes the children's educational experiences both within the family and in the school context.¹

In this sense, middle-class children learn the rules of the game from birth and the school accommodates their needs. In contrast, working-class and poor children do not learn how to manage their social and cultural resources in order to obtain social and educational advantages in the school context. In many situations, they are confronted with social and educational scenarios that cause frustration and contribute to their disempowerment.³

In the contemporary world, family life is becoming increasingly rational, predictable and controlled. The family institution is invaded by the meritocracy of society, bringing out cultivated growth as the educational strategy for children (highly valued by the school and society).³

In short, it is important to understand that socioeconomic resources play a crucial role in the stratification of social classes, since the monthly salary, and the level of education, among other factors, mark the differences in each social class. Nevertheless, the biography of each family combined with its economic and social resources is crucial to highlight the difference between cultivated growth and natural growth, particularly with regard to its effects throughout life.

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Conflicts of interest

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