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Education as a Factor in the Intergenerational Reproduction of Poverty

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Abstract: In sociological theory, there are several concepts in which it is possible to look for the impact of education on transmission of poverty and social inequality. We would like to point to educational system as integral and major part of the reproduction of society. The article shows how education largely affects the life chances and participation of the individual in society, which is closely related to unemployment and poverty. In sociological theories we can meet with several authors that respond to the question why society and social structure are reproduced from one generation to another. The article deals with education as an important factor of intergenerational reproduction of poverty. Based on significant authors dealing with these issues, such as Louis Althusser, Melvin Kohn, Pierre Bourdieu, Basil Bernstein and John Goldthorpe, the article aims at highlighting the idea that the strongest defence against the reproduction of poverty is education.

Key words: education, educational system, reproduction of poverty, social structure

The contemporary information society is first of all characterised by technological and scientific progress. As a result, the transition from routine to creative type of work comes to the foreground, which, in turn, increases the demand for more skilled employees with the special emphasis put on higher education. “The advance of human knowledge has long been considered the engine of the information society. The two most famous prophets of the post-industrial society were a French sociologist Alain Touraine (1969) and an American sociologist Daniel Bell (1973), who already in the 1960s and 1970s predicted in a consistent way the fact that education is going to be the core value of new society” (Kuzmišinová, 2010, p. 93).

Although education has always played a crucial role in societies, it was predominantly the prerogative of certain groups of people. Nowadays, the knowledge society can be discussed very openly, notwithstanding the fact that in academic literature we also encounter its criticism (e.g. Liessman's *Theory of miseducation* or Keller and Tvrdý's *Knowledge society? Temple, elevator, insurance*). However, attaining the knowledge society is one of the main priorities of the European Union.

I would argue that children coming from higher-income families are on their way to the school environment that guarantees successful professional career. They perceive education as one of the main channels leading them to gainful and satisfying employment. According to Ka tr ň á k (2004), parents from higher social classes are not only more attentive when it comes to their children's education at schools, but also assist with their schoolwork at home and to a larger extent stress the need for gaining education than parents from lower social classes.

The connection between the socio-economic status of families and the education of children coming from them is also confirmed in studies conducted by the OECD. However, the programme which is particularly important in the context of researching the intergenerational reproduction is the PISA study, primarily focused on the evaluation of basic skills and school achievements of primary school pupils. Within the PISA study the socio-economic background is gauged using two measures:

1. ISEI, that is International Socio-Economic Index of occupational status classifying groups of working parents according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO).

2. ESCS, that is index of economic, cultural and social status, which includes various dimensions (e.g. parents' level of education, cultural heritage consisting of the number of books in a household as well as other equipment needed in the course of education).

Results from the 2009 study show that poor school performance does not automatically stem from the underprivileged family background, but the latter is one of the decisive factors influencing a child's performance at school (Bodnárová et al., 2006, p. 11).

Education as a factor in the transmission of poverty Sociological concepts

In sociological theory, there are several concepts concerning the impact of education on the transmission of poverty and social inequality. The modernization theory (Blau, Duncan 1967; Featherman, Hauser, 1978; Treiman, 1970) is founded on the premise that the influence of social background on educational achievements decreases due to the advancement of industrialization. "According to this theory, industrialization brings about not only the growing demand for skilled

labour, but also a change in the principles of allocating individuals to staff positions. What results from the growth in amount of educational opportunities and the change in allocation principles is the decrease in the impact of social background on educational achievements” (Matějů, Řeháková, Simonova, 2004, p. 33).

My aim in the present article is to show the educational system as an integral and major part of intergenerational reproduction. I argue that education to a large extent influences life chances as well as the involvement of individuals in social life, which is closely related to unemployment and poverty. In sociological literature, a number of authors ponder the question of why society and social structure are reproduced from one generation to another. There are two currents of scholars, both agreeing with the idea of educational system as a key to the said reproduction, but differing in their opinions as to whether it is the school background that creates educational inequalities or rather the cultural differences that are manifested at school.

Louis Althusser, referring in his body of work directly to Karl Marx, draws attention to the problem of reproduction of social relations in the system of capitalist production. School according to Althusser is an institution that shapes the economic relations of the capitalist society. A similar view, though not derived from Althusser’s thought, is presented by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. Their ideas reflect opinions relating solely to the American society, however, we consider it appropriate to draw attention to them herein. The basic thesis of Bowles and Gintis is that the sources of educational inequality are mainly economic in their character. Even more interesting is the idea that the capitalist society does not limit itself to mere production of income, goods and services, but it is to the equal extent focused on the reproduction of its own structure. In a particular plane, the authors say that a company is reproduced in such a way that the children of working-class parents become workers, sons of manager become managers, so that ultimately the ownership of capital is passed unchanged from one generation to another. Therefore, it is evident that in the investigations of all the three authors (Althusser, Bowles, Gintis) we can see school as a major factor in reproduction processes of the educational and occupational structure of society.

A slightly different theory is proposed by an American sociologist Melvin Kohn, according to whom responsible for reproduction of social structure are the cherished family values and types of professions practiced by parents. In the light of Kohn’s concept, it seems obvious that the social status is linked with behaviour. In his work *Class and Conformity*, he states that people who work in conditions allowing them for self-determination, are more likely to emphasize while upbringing their children the values connected with the role of policy makers; at the same time, people who work in conditions excluding or restricting independent decision-making are more likely to pass to their children values associated with conformity (Kohn, 1977, p. 151). Drawing on Kohn’s theory, it may be concluded that the values fostered by parents shape not only the children’s behaviour, but also their access to education. Sources of these values, according to the author, are in parents’ professional experience and the type of job they carry out. In general, we can say that the employment status of working-class families stems from the values con-

nected with obedience and compliance with the rules, while the employment status of higher social class originates in the values associated with making autonomous decisions and taking responsibility for them.

Nevertheless, the most significant sociological theory of reproduction of (cultural and social) capital was put forward in the 1970s by a French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. His theory of cultural capital suggests the correspondence between the cultural activities of the parents and the children's performance at school. Cultural capital is defined as the ability resulting from the cultural quality of the background of a child's upbringing. These are skills that an individual acquires in family. It should be noted that under the umbrella term "capital" Bourdieu subsumes everything that a human being is able to accumulate and subsequently benefit from (so not only strictly economic capital). Bourdieu points out that children coming from higher strata of society obviously have different cultural capital than children from lower social strata. Already during their process of socialization they learn distinct language of expression, cultural understanding, as a result of which they come to school already equipped with the knowledge of how to behave properly. School appreciates their pursuit of knowledge, but mainly because they have better starting position to become successful. Children coming from the upper social strata, according to the discussed theory, are simply better informed about the culture and the life in society. The Bourdieu's theory can be also applied to our conditions, because it is evident that children from poorer families have significantly less chances of being exposed to theatre, cinema and literature, let alone traveling around Slovakia and abroad. Those cultural factors surely impact on their success at school.

Another interesting concept is introduced by sociologist Basil Bernstein, who claims that the class structure in modern societies is reproduced on the basis of various linguistic socialization of different social classes. His idea is founded on the concepts of *restricted and elaborated codes*. Children from middle-class are mostly brought up in an environment where it is used the elaborated code that gives them a competitive edge, not only in terms of their position at school, but also on the way to achieving the same (or at least similar) social status. Children from lower social strata, on the other hand, during their socialization are in contact with the restricted code and are therefore considerably disadvantaged. Bernstein in his work *Class, Codes and Control* (1971) claims that relative knowledge of children from working-class families takes the form of cultural backwardness as a result of linguistic socialization. The code accompanying a child symbolizes his social identity and binds him to his kindred and its local social relations (Bernstein, 1971, p. 136).

A completely different viewpoint on the issue of education and transmission of poverty comes from a British sociologist John Goldthorpe. His theory of rational procedure emphasizes the persistence of inequalities in educational achievements. The British researcher claims that to understand the persistent inequalities, one needs to focus on the concept of rationality, which assumes that social actors have their objectives and alternative means to achieve them. In order to properly choose from these resources, one must take into account the ratio of costs, risks and

benefits. Thus, it is not sufficient to discuss the social and cultural norms specific to a particular class, to which a given social actor belongs. Goldthorpe, drawing on a theory of educational inequalities reproduction, developed a theoretical and analytic approach based on the fact that in order to grasp the question of changing a social class effectively, it is necessary to focus attention on secondary rather than primary effects (Goldthorpe, 1996, p. 491). It should be added that both the authors consider an individual's ability or performance at school to be primary effects and factors involved in the phase in which the educational system divides secondary effects (Matějů, Řeháková, Simonova, 2004, p. 36). It follows that the benefit of obtaining higher level of education is in a view of the lower social classes relative: the relative costs are higher and also higher is the risk of failure. According to the mentioned authors, the above principle applies regardless of how successful individuals in the field of primary effects are.

The idea of education being the strongest shield against poverty is known to most people. In the academic literature, there is an unprecedented consensus that low levels of education directly translate into the risk of poverty. Filadelfiová argues that “education influences not only the patterns of reproductive behaviour, but it is also related to successful participation in the job market and benefits from working on it” (Filadelfiová, 2007, pp. 24—25). In Slovakia, like in other countries, we can observe inverse correlation between the risk of poverty and the level of education.

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