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### Social Class in Education: Teacher Recruitment Practices in International Schools in Egypt

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#### Abstract

The present paper analyzes my personal experience in the professional field of education in Egypt, trying to contextualize it within an academic, theoretical framework. The personal experience referred to here is illustrated in two professional interviews I have been through to work as an English language teacher, upon my college graduation, in two different well-established schools in Cairo, Egypt. Through this analysis, I hope to add new to the theoretical understanding of the practical. Thus, the paper's analysis of my first interview reveals how David Labaree's 'social mobility' as a goal of education (1997), and Lisa D. Delpit's 'culture of power' (1988) are precisely and practically at work. The second interview is an elaborative example of Paulo Freire's 'cultural identity'



recruiting new teachers (actors) into their schools/cultures.

I have been rejected in the first interview but got accepted for the position in the other school, yet my qualifications were exactly the same at the time of both interviews. These interviews made me realize that merit does not play as much role in the professional world as I thought it does, or should be. Social privileges and other assets speak louder than personal merit in this professional world.

*Keywords:* social class, education, merit, international schools, cultural hegemony, cultural identity

## Introduction

To start with, I personally was never enrolled in any international or private language school, as usually assumed when one is enrolled as an undergraduate student at the American University in Cairo, Egypt (AUC), one of the most prestigious and highly-ranked universities in the region. True in elementary I was enrolled in a private Arabic school. Yet, for the preparatory and secondary levels, I graduated from two different public Arabic schools, respectively in Al-Dokki, a middle-class neighborhood in Giza, Egypt. Then, thanks to my high score in Thanwayyia 'Amma, the Egyptian national public high-school education system, I was fortunate enough to be among the 20 students nationwide to receive the governmental scholarship to study for my Bachelor degree at AUC.

[1] Social class has always had a strong impact on education: on both the kind and the quality of education one receives. Consequently, it affects the kind of future professional career one could aspire to have. In fact, one can go as far as arguing that social class has always been a determining factor in the kind of educational experience one is to establish. As a result, I intend to have this paper as a reflection on my personal educational as well as professional experience, as being analyzed academically and attempted to be put within a theoretical framework. This experience shall highlight the interconnectivity between the socio-economic class I belong to, the kind of education I received and the kind of professional society I encountered upon my college graduation.

## Social Class and Education

To state it frankly, I belong to an Egyptian middle-class family. For an accurate definition, the middle socio-economic class is according to Merriam Webster Dictionary:

*"a class which occupies a position between the upper class and the lower class, and which is a fluid heterogeneous socioeconomic grouping composed principally of business and professional people, governmental officials, and some farmers and skilled workers sharing common social characteristics and values," (merriam-webster.com).*

Another dictionary definition applicable to my case is that provided by the Cambridge Dictionary: the middle class is "a social group that consists of well-educated people, such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers, who have good jobs and are neither very rich nor very poor," (dictionary.cambridge.org). Additionally, in its study of the effects of the uprisings of the Arab Spring on the middle class, the World Bank provides a definition to the middle class in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa: "Middle-class status is assigned to people with income higher than a



bank clerk who invested his end-of-service financial reward in a small-scale real-estate business, while my mother is a sector manager in the Egyptian Taxation Department. With my parents and other three siblings, we live in a modest middle-class neighborhood in Giza: Al-Haram. More adequately as might be established, my family belongs to the “lower-middle class” which constantly experience a kind of “existential anxiety” (Zayed, 2014). This segment of the middle class in Egypt, argues Zayed, always “aspires to higher standings in search of wealth and power, but constantly fears the possibility of falling into deprivation (falling to lower social classes),” especially with the country’s instable economy (Zayed, 2014).

First of all, some theorists assume that differences between values and beliefs held by the different social classes are the main reasons for the issue of inequality in educational attainment (Hansen, 1997). In fact, I cannot see the relevance of this perspective within my social-cultural context. When compared to the upper social class, it is a common discourse, belief and value strongly held by middle-class families, including mine, that education, acquisition of knowledge, is the only way for uplifting, for social mobility, for achieving higher social status by acquiring higher social positions through pursuing an advanced career path. This was the way I was raised by my parents; this was how they believed in the significance of education. Education was, still is, seen as the only way, to make it through, and to make it out. They always pushed us to better our performance in the school and provided all the needed facilities and resources, including a healthy environment suitable for our studies.

This discourse is what David Labaree (1997) recognizes as one of the goals of education and terms as “social mobility” (50). Education in this sense is a “private good” and a very competitive system which provides students with “credentials that allow them to get ahead in the structure of the society,” (1997: 50). Thus, education is a “self-interested” pursuit that enhances the attainment and fulfillment of the “individual status,” for pursuing higher social positions (1997: 51 – 52).

Another important element in my parents’ understanding of the value of education can be seen evident in them constantly pushing us to study hard and get the highest score possible in Thanawyyia ‘Ammal<sup>[2]</sup> to be able to join one of the highly-ranked and most prestigious colleges for higher education. With this, we, the children, shall be able to acquire and maintain a kind of prestigious social position. For this matter, Marianne N. Hansen, in her examination of the extent of the impacts of the social and economic differentials on the choice of educational career, explains this parental tendency as that people of “status groups in which higher education is common will transfer their culture to their children,” (Hansen, 1997: 308). Noteworthy is the meaning of the “status group,” which in her context is another expression for social class but with a narrower focus on the educational backgrounds of different families belonging to the same social class (Hansen, 1997). This is explained by their motivation to avoid “social degradation,” (1997: 308).

Almost all of the criteria and elements of this theory apply to the case of my family. Yet, the fact that my father does not have a graduation certificate from a university shakes this theory a bit. The highest level of education he received was to join one of the public higher institutes of commerce for which he did not sit for the final year’s exams. Consequently, when applying the theory literally, my father cannot be included in this “status group,” as Hansen assumed that the young generation



be justifiably made thanks to his strong beliefs and values about the social significance of education for his own children. These personal beliefs, packed with a continuous push and psychological motivation for his children, can compensate the lack of his educational background. At the end, the theory still holds to a great extent.

### **International Schools and their Homogenous Cultures**

Furthermore, Delpit (1988) was right in arguing that schools, or educational systems, tend to create a kind of "cultural hegemony" by eliminating and rejecting the students' chances to be exposed to, and experience, the inevitable diversity of the socio-cultural backgrounds special to every actor involved in the learning process: especially teachers and students (Delpit, 1988: 308).

This was exactly what I experienced in my interview for a teaching position in a well-established international school in Cairo, Egypt. Unlike all the interviews I have been through in schools, the school principal did not ask me to prepare a demo lesson when coming for the interview. To my astonishment, it was a very short interview; it did not take the Canadian principal much time to say to me: "I've got to be honest with you. I don't see you as a teacher. In fact, I am very disappointed."

Of course, there is no need to spend as much of this paper on the emotional impact of such a sentence, coming from a credible educator, on someone all what she has long been aspiring for is to become a teacher, an educator. After getting over this emotional breakdown, it was crucial to understand what really happened in this interview and I needed to understand why I was rejected. In other words, I needed to know the dynamics and display of power that was at work in this situation, evident as well as hidden. Indeed, the reason for the initial rejection I got was not, like what was said, the lack of the specific professional experience needed to for this position nor the lack of my higher educational qualifications. Rather, it was my lack of something much more profound and intrinsic. The real, unspoken reason for my rejection was what Paulo Freire (2005) calls my "cultural identity" that is the sum of what I inherit, such as the norms attributed to the social class I belong to, and what I acquire throughout the years of upbringing, education and professional work (Freire, 2005: 123, 124,125).

This package did not satisfy the interests of the Canadian principal. It was symbolically evident in the way I dress, the way I speak, and the way I act that I do not belong to the same social class as does the majority of the actors in this specific international school. I simply did not meet up the expectations. One may speculate that the real reason was not because of a failure in my higher education; in fact, what is more than earning a degree from AUC? It is the highest aspiration, most difficult, highly competitive and expensive educational environment to earn a degree from in Egypt. But the real reason was because of a lack in my secondary education. Not only that, my social-cultural experience, being different, also was not what the students of this international school are supposed to be exposed to. And that is exactly a kind of "cultural hegemony" in practice that Delpit critiques (Delpit, 1988).

Important to note that both Freire's and Delpit's arguments were originally developed concerning the relation between race, or ethnicity, and education. However, one can find, and establish, some connections and implications of these scholars' theories on the relation between social class and



show, which would eventually result in an enriching educational experience. On the same spectrum, Freire (2005) calls for, and highly stresses on, the importance of establishing a democratic, critical education that allows a freer display and presentation of the diverse cultural identities within the educational institution.

Delpit's concept of "culture of power" is equally at work regarding this interview. According to Delpit (1988), this "culture of power" consists of the rules and codes of conduct expected from the individuals participating in this culture of power (1988: 302). Among the aspects of this culture of power: "Explicit presentation of the expected codes of conduct makes learning immeasurably easier," (1988: 303). That is, newly-joined participants in the school culture need to be told the rules of power play explicitly; otherwise, they would not be able to implicitly understand the rules themselves (Delpit, 1988). In this context, I was the supposedly new participant in the culture of power of the school, for which I was offered an unpaid, open-ended training program so that "I get more familiar with the things," said the principal. Only when the principal himself sees that I become qualified and acquainted enough with his school's culture, would he be able to see me as a teacher in his school.

Unlike the disappointment of this interview, on the sides of the interviewer as well as the interviewee, another interview in a private language school, that has an international branch as well, was a huge success.

Yet, the principal, who frankly expressed her astonishment of my performance in both the demo lesson and the actual interview, complained about other female interviewees coming from AUC who refused to put on headscarf[3] while teaching, as long as being in the school. The female principal explained that this was a very important condition. Consequently, I got accepted for this teaching position not only because of my 'outstanding' performance or my educational qualifications, but also, and most importantly, because I wear the headscarf. I was the 'ideal candidate,' simply put, for this headmistress and for the kind of exclusive culture only to which she was trying to expose her students, believing that this is the 'right way' in raising up the young generations: to be exposed and used only to modesty and chastity.

This interview, like the earlier one, can be considered an excellent elaborative example of the "cultural identity" and the "cultural hegemony" of schools that both Freire and Delpit, respectively, talked about. Both schools consciously want to create a kind of culture to which the students are exposed; this culture is meant to be very neatly organized, homogenous, and free of distractions, distortions or differences that would make the students start asking radical, critical questions which would eventually compromise the "culture of power" enjoyed by each school's actors. Not only that, school administrators also tend to reject any possible integration of any 'unlike elements' in their school environments.

## Conclusion

It would not be less prudent to argue that some international schools have diverted from their initial, original, essential missions, as Bunnell et al. (2016) recognize them to be spreading universal



class teacher. As a result, one should not be absent-minded to believe that merit and gained qualifications have really huge potential in uplifting one's status, given the circumstances described in this paper. In fact, it would not be implausible to be disappointed at how little effect and power does merit have in improving people's life circumstances and prove what Labaree believed as one of the core aims of education to be able to move oneself in the societal ladder. If they choose to submit to this prevalent mindset, people with circumstances similar to mine shall always be judged against and labeled to be 'less-qualified' to join those at the top of the ladder in my society.

At the end, this paper was an attempt to find, establish, some connections and applications of theories, originally developed on the relation between race and education, on the fluid relation between social class and education. A counter argument can be established against such an attempt for being limited and subjective, especially for being based on personal situations. A response to this argument can be that they are not rare individual encounters; and when a pattern is detected, they can be held valid. Yet, they still give some speculations and directions of thought on the extent of the impact of social class on education and career opportunities.

Not only that, the paper also sheds light on people's perceptions of the differences between social classes and the importance of keeping these difference and boundaries highlighted for protecting the status-quo of the upper class. Integration seems to be a matter at-stake without exaggeration.

Lastly, I do not intend to claim any generalizability of my arguments. Yet, I cannot deny that these personal encounters tell a lot about the hidden tensions existing between socio-economic classes in Egypt.

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<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2014/05/egypt-middle-class-rise-fall.html>

[1] Alaa Adel El Sayed, M.A. student, Graduate School of Education, the American University in Cairo, Egypt

[2] Thanawyyia 'Amma is the Egyptian National public high-school school system/certificate.

[3] Headscarves are meant to cover conservative Muslim women's hair from showing in public and is considered a symbol of modesty, chastity and virtue. Wearing it automatically implies wearing wide, comforting clothes which cover the whole of the woman's body.

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