Book Notes

NEGOTIATING OPPORTUNITIES: HOW THE MIDDLE CLASS SECURES ADVANTAGES IN SCHOOL

by Jessica McCrory Calarco
New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 255 pp. $24.95 (paperback).

Educational inequalities are one of the most pressing but intractable problems of our time. Decades after landmark rulings like *Brown v. Board of Education*, our schools are somehow still separate and still unequal. But perhaps even more upsetting is the fact that even within schools that are racially and socioeconomically mixed, inequalities persist (e.g., Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014). Against this backdrop, scholars have sought to uncover *why* inequalities endure even in schools staffed by caring teachers, supported by engaged parents, and attended by young children invested in learning. Sociologist Jessica McCrory Calarco's *Negotiating Opportunities: How the Middle Class Secures Advantages in School* is an important contribution to this growing scholarly discourse.

In some ways, Calarco, digging into the effects of class-based parenting strategies in the classroom, picks up where Annette Lareau's (2003) *Unequal Childhoods* left off. But in *Negotiating Opportunities*, Calarco doesn't just show how class-based differences in parenting manifest in the classroom. She also extends the Bourdieusian tradition of research on education and inequality in a significant way: rather than understanding institutional norms as fixed and the relationship between class advantage and institutions as a static one-to-one match, she brings her data to bear on advancing a more dynamic understanding of how and why schools privilege the skills and behavior of middle-class children. First, she shows how middle-class children push teachers (and therefore schools) to render them services in excess of what might be considered fair. And, related, she renders visible how children are active agents of differential outcomes, not merely passive recipients of an unequal system bequeathed to them. Drawing on four years of ethnographic observations and on interviews with students, teachers, and parents, Calarco illuminates contours of this problem that were previously difficult to see, and she provides teachers, school leaders, parents, and researchers with the building blocks needed to construct fairer educational experiences for children of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

The overarching narrative of the book is that middle-class children are taught by their parents to use *strategies of influence* in the classroom, whereas working-class children are taught to use *strategies of deference*. Furthermore,

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Calarco finds that strategies of influence aren't universally preferred by teachers; instead, the behavior that is desired varies moment to moment, activity to activity. That said, while strategies of deference may result in working-class children avoiding reprimand in some cases, those strategies also result in missed opportunities to garner additional assistance and attention in the classroom.

Early in the book, Calarco offers a poignant anecdote about two students at a science field day, where the middle-class students have their parents in attendance and the working-class kids do not. When a middle-class student's plastic rocket malfunctions, his parents direct him to seek help from the teacher; but when the same thing happens to a working-class girl, she has to struggle to fix her rocket by herself. The story demonstrates how working-class children often try to accomplish tasks and surmount obstacles all on their own, while middle-class kids are cheered on and/or encouraged to seek help from adults. Right off the bat, the story drives home why parenting styles matter. I was surprised to learn that middle-class parents, rather than jumping to intervene, tended to encourage their children to ask teachers for help with assignments and to ask for exceptions when assignments were completed improperly. What the opening anecdote, and the rest of that chapter, also makes apparent, though, is that working-class parents also actively encouraged certain characteristics—work ethic, personal responsibility, and respect for adults—but did not coach their children to make demands of teachers' time and attention. While Calarco makes clear the impact of these different strategies of engagement, she does not denigrate the different coaching styles parents use, instead noting that working-class parents were actively trying to cultivate character traits *and* still were concerned with their children's success in school.

Much of the book explores one of the three main resources middle-class children's strategies of influence enable them to secure from teachers: assistance, accommodations, and attention. The chapters detailing how students extract these resources are full of powerful examples. Calarco highlights moments in which middle-class students ask for help—or even extra time—on tests and get it, thus allowing them to earn higher grades on assessments, which has implications for many other aspects of a student's educational trajectory. When it comes to attention seeking, Calarco notes that both middle-class and working-class children seek attention, but for different things. She found that middle-class children often more openly sought praise for being unique, whereas working-class children seemed to try to make themselves helpful. These seemingly small moments of help seeking, she shows, add up to something really quite significant: a systematic advantage for middle-class children.

That advantage is possible in part because of how teachers respond—a part of the equation Calarco also dedicates significant attention to. In outlining the subtle shifts in teachers' expectations, she shows a fuzzier relationship between teacher expectations and student behaviors than might traditionally be imagined. According to Calarco, it's not the case that teachers uniformly prefer middle-class children's strategies of influence. There are many

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moments in which she sees teachers exasperated and seemingly at wits' end due to middle-class children's frequent bids for attention. Rather than outright rejecting those calls for attention, however, teachers tried to subtly (and often without much success) signal that students should hold their requests. Ultimately, the lack of outright refusal seems to only encourage middle-class strategies of influence. But crucially important here is a central argument of this book: middle-class children secure advantages precisely because they are able to pressure teachers to offer assistance above and beyond what is required or what teachers are inclined to provide. Why might they do this? Early in the book, middle-class parents were shown to encourage their children to advocate for themselves with teachers, but Calarco also found that worries about negative responses from parents loomed in teachers' minds. This raises questions about how school leaders could do more to insulate teachers from such concerns, perhaps by doing more to buffer teachers from overzealous parents.

On the whole, *Negotiating Opportunities* brings needed nuance to the conversation about how the effects of class-based parenting styles manifest in educational inequalities, showing how children deploy their class-based cultural toolkits in ways that have a real impact in the classroom. I was left with some questions, but that seems to me the mark of a good text, one that answers many questions but also opens the door for new ones. I had questions about Calarco's application of resistance theory, which is often used to describe working-class students' opposition to middle-class codes of behavior in schools; it's certainly interesting to think of middle-class students as noncompliant, but the power differentials involved in their acts of noncompliance make middle-class pushback feel like a rather different act than the acts of resistance in classic texts like Willis's (1977) *Learning to Labor* or MacLeod's (1987) *Ain't No Makin' It.*

I also was left with questions about the role of race and gender in this phenomenon. In the final chapter, Calarco takes a step back from the class-forward lens through which most of the book is constructed to look at the plausibility of other explanations—like gender or race—for the differences observed. On the gender front, she finds little evidence that parents are giving sons and daughters different messaging, although she does note that that's based on self-reports and later comments that while the *number* of requests didn't vary by gender, the *type* did when it came to problem solving (girls were more likely to ask for clarification, whereas boys tended to ask for new information).

Calarco also looks at her data to see whether patterns can be found by race, given prior research on racialized inequalities in the classroom, but she finds little evidence for race being the driving factor of these differential engagement strategies. It's important to note, however, that that may be a limitation of her sample, which is overwhelmingly white and Asian. While the import of class is clear, given the sample, I think it is less clear that class is more salient than race in shaping students' behavior. It might be worth thinking about how, in the case of white children, the kind of entitlement displayed by middle-class students is not just fostered by class privilege but also bolstered by racial privilege. But I also question how useful the "class or race?" framing is. In some ways, I think the attempt to untangle the relative importance of race and class is unnecessary; instead, it's essential that we understand race as classed and class as raced. That said, I also hope there is a place for scholarship that primarily focuses on one or the other and does it rigorously and thoughtfully, as Calarco does. Class is complicated, and Calarco's work highlights the difficulty of studying and operationalizing class. I appreciate her attending to how socioeconomic mobility affects parenting style, especially as doing so helped answer my question about whether she observed middle-class children who didn't fit the pattern. On that point, her discussion of mobility raises questions for future research about how we should draw the lines between middle class and working class.

I hope this book changes conversations in scholarly and public arenas, that it shifts the discourse about what needs to be done to better support low-income students' achievement. Calarco's research compellingly shows that middle-class strategies of influence are not inherently better than working-class strategies of deference. Institutions like schools simply reward one more than the other. As someone who grew up surrounded by middle-class kids, I recognized the portrayal of middle-class students' seemingly incessant demands for assistance, accommodations, and attention, as well as the benefits those demands yielded. But as someone who was raised with an idiosyncratic mélange of working-class and middle-class parenting styles, I couldn't help but have a soft spot for the more deferential, and at times more respectful and considerate, strategies of the working-class kids. It is my earnest hope that Calarco's work helps education as a field continue to move away from deficit-oriented understandings of low-income students' cultural toolkits and toward thinking of how schools as organizations can be less beholden to the pressures of middle-class parents. On this point, Calarco could be more explicit about what schools, as opposed to individual teachers or parents, should do. Nonetheless, *Negotiating Opportunities* lays the groundwork for generative conversations among school leaders about the school's relationship to privileged families and how to advance a more equitable education environment.

Calarco's writing in *Negotiating Opportunities* is crisp, concise, and compelling, making it interesting and accessible to a wide audience. Cultural sociologists will appreciate how Calarco's analysis moves us toward more dynamic understandings of how culture and institutions interact. Education researchers will find this text an important addition to the ongoing conversation about inequality and what schools can do to level the playing field. Teachers will find the vignettes of student-teacher interactions powerful and will hopefully reflect on their own practice as a result. School leaders should find much food for thought in the implications for policy, and parents, regardless of class background, will likely find this prompts deep reflection on their own chil-

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drearing styles and how their choices about how to parent affect other children around them.

Negotiating Opportunities takes seriously the micro-interactions that make up the rhythm of daily life in an elementary school classroom. By zooming in on these small moments of teacher-student interaction, Calarco is able to do what good social science does best: render the invisible visible and impossible to ignore. The big theoretical takeaway—that middle-class (and primarily white) students reproduce inequality as they navigate institutions like schools more successfully not just because of alignment between their habitus and the institution but because they actively exert pressure on the institution—is something so elegantly simple that it seems it should have been obvious. Now, thanks to *Negotiating Opportunities*, it is.

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"Why We Drop Out": Understanding and Disrupting Student Pathways to Leaving School

by Deborah L. Feldman, Antony T. Smith, and Barbara L. Waxman
New York. Teachers College Press, 2017. 160 pp. $33.95 (paperback).

When *A Nation at Risk* was released in 1983, it named a disturbing conclusion: the United States was lagging behind the rest of the world in terms of education. The report yielded several recommendations, one of which was to strengthen state and local high school graduation standards. At a minimum, all students seeking a diploma would be required to take the following curriculum during high school: four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies, and a half-year of computer science (National Commission on Excellence, 1983). A number of reports have since been drafted that explore the advantages and disadvantages of strengthening K–12 graduation requirements. While more comprehensive state high school graduation requirements would be advantageous to the college bound, it would leave students without strong academic capacities stranded (Roderick, 1993).