

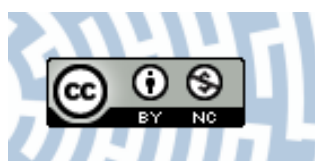


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**Title:** The principle of meritocracy and the function of emancipation in the context of pathology within the sphere of education : selected issues

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## **The Principle of Meritocracy and the Function of Emancipation in the Context of Pathology within the Sphere of Education (Selected Issues)**

The paper aims at investigating selected aspects of pathology in educational institutions (classified by Jan Szczepański into the group of educational and cultural institutions [J. Szczepański, 1965, p.114]; and by Shmuel Eisenstadt, into the group of educational and care institutions [quoted after G.Skańska, M.Ziółkowski, 1998, p. 318]).

Pathology is a notion which cannot be interpreted unequivocally. According to a dictionary definition, it denotes any deviation from the norm. Taking into consideration the criterion of meaning, the term is applied to a set of phenomena harmful to an individual as well as a group, which have a specific origin, social scope and a negative impact [L. Pytko, 1999, p. 175].

In social and humanistic sciences certain typical functions are attributed to educational institutions. They include accomplishing tasks referring to secondary socialization, adaptation, education, imparting knowledge and competence, selection, allocation, holding social control, compensation, reconstruction emancipation [cf. B.Bernstein, 1990, p.33; Z.Kwieciński, 1995, p. 21; T.Parsons, 1969, pp. 172–182; B. Szacka, 2003, pp. 420–421].

School fails to fulfill these functions, as Z. Kwieciński aptly remarks. It reconstructs culture in an incomplete and selective way. Due to dysfunctionality it has created within many local and family environments, which do not aid it in performing its functions, school limits most of its graduates' access to culture. The process of people's adaptation to the established structures and their justification is also incomplete and harmful. The participants of the educational process do not accept the artificial world which is being acted out, pretended at school. They rebel against the division

of social roles and statuses which have been assigned and offered to them. On the other hand, it does not mean at all that at school they acquire the competence to become emancipated, to cross boundaries, to change the world around them, to transform it into a new, better one [Z. Kwieciński, 1995, pp. 21, 22].

The reasons for and symptoms of the crisis in school education are diverse and multifaceted (it would be impossible to investigate all of them in this paper). They lie outside educational institutions, and should be discovered in institutions and people. There are two main causes of the crisis in an organized system of education, which lie outside its institutions. One of them is a crisis of the process of legitimization of the social and political order, as well as the legitimization of power. The second reason lies in the identity crisis the system is faced with, which is characterized by a broad tendency towards readdressing questions as to who and where we are, where we are heading, what we are driven to, what happened in the early days of the current order, what led to its successive crises. Legitimization and identity crisis in the system results in undermining the authority and credibility of sense-makers, their ideological apologists and those who convey sense [education workers are among them] [Z. Kwieciński, 1995, p. 22].

As a result of the examination of the subject literature concerning sociology of education, published over the last decade, a thesis can be advanced that there are two trends as regards interpretation of dysfunctions and pathologies in education. One of them originated in the 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the investigation of sociologists, who were predominantly exponents of the theory of reproduction and the theory of social resistance. The second category of analyses refers to specific forms (or risks) of pathological changes in the sphere of education – at its various levels – studied in the context of the information society and the ostentatious consumer society.

The former of the approaches mentioned above focuses on the issues related to social inequalities and creating barriers that limit the opportunity for social advancement among the individuals who show the features characteristic of a depreciated, unfavourable status. The category of social inequalities is one of the key and at the same time universal characteristics of a social structure, since it exists in each social context. Inequalities originate from the differences in access to the specific kind of goods, both material and non-material. Henryk Domański underlines the supreme importance of differences in the level of income, power, prestige, lifestyle, and participation in culture. A factor defined as *the degree of need satisfaction* has also been pointed to in literature. [H. Domański, 2004, pp. 23–24]

A specific interpretation of inequalities can be found in the late modern [or postmodern]discourse analysis, in which the category is investigated not only

through the prism of differences in access to social goods, but mainly through the prism of differences concerning identity, ego, affiliation, cultural background. Difference-determining identity is in this case approached from the perspective that takes into consideration the social context, and is studied through the prism of belonging or not belonging to a particular group. In contrast to the modern interpretation, according to which differences are rooted in *objective* variables, a postmodern approach emphasizes the importance of *subjective* variables, which are constructed in a dynamic and discursive way, through social participation. Thus, the category of *inequalities* has been juxtaposed with that of *differences*, the latter being in certain cases socially induced, whereas in others determined by an individual's choice. Hence, when referring to the sphere of education, an individual makes a comparison between *identity* and *education*, examining the correspondence between the two categories [R. Moore, 2007, pp. 8–9]. Taking into account the biography of an individual, neither of the above-mentioned groups of factors (objective or subjective) functions separately. An individual can employ various adaptation strategies, aimed at rejecting the features which have been imposed on a person, and regarded by society as a determinant of the individual's identity. The individual can adopt the strategies designed to accept objective factors [*variables*], determining the person's identity, and refuse to identify with the environment in which these features are depreciated. The individual can pursue identifying with the features which constitute objective variables, and decide on the strategies of resistance, both active and passive, against an institution that depreciates those characteristics. The individual can also maintain the identity determined by the objective features, and refuse to be a member of the institution responsible for depreciation [cf. adaptation strategies developed among students belonging to ethnic minorities: D.G. Solórzano, O. Villalpando, 1998, pp. 212–221].

At the same time, the problem of identity refers to the issues related to society during the transformation period. It can be pointed out, quoting Zbigniew Kwieciński, that from the perspective of the social system dynamics and imbalance, school performs a diaphragmatic function. Due to a historicist attitude it adopted, and many years of activity aimed at detaching children and youth from the current issues of social life, school, as it were, blurs the generation memory. It functions as a diaphragm in the process of experience transmission between generations.

Performing such a function in the period of identity crisis and the crisis of legitimization of the social system, school creates favourable conditions for the crisis to arise, mainly in the sphere of identity development among young people, and in the sphere of sense. It also leads to anomy, vacuum and incoherence between values and norms, and consequently, to escapist attitudes among youth. As a result, school

is regarded as one of the factors which reinforce crisis, since it is characterized by an inability to recognize the meaning and purpose of activity; it loses norms, and considers the social world to be something unknown. School is an instrument of alienation that young people face in their environment [K. Szafraniec, 1986; Z.Kwieciński, 2007, p. 20]

Following the functional order of the industrial society, a postindustrial community is subordinated to the principle of meritocracy, according to which achieving different statuses is determined by technical competence, something that economists refer to as human capital, which is gained during the process of formal education [mostly higher], completed preferably at a prestige institution of higher education. Hence, education is considered crucial in determining the individual's status, and a university becomes a determinant of the social (class) position of the individual [D. Bell, 1999, pp. 409–410].

The original assumption, made in the modern social discourse in accordance with meritocratic principles, was that educational opportunities should stem from intelligence (measured by IQ). In the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this assumption was questioned [an interpretation of the meritocratic principle was also subject to criticism]. The critics of this conception (among whom there were Christopher Jencks and Jerome Karabel) pointed out that meritocracy is grounded on selection, whose main criterion is the level of intelligence, which in return constitutes an inborn characteristic. Thus, opportunities for achievement take the form of a peculiar genetic lottery, in which the so-called fair criteria for acquiring a social status are established. It has been assumed that implementation of meritocratic principles is not possible, since parents who have a high social and economic status prove to be an important social capital for their children; whereas children with a low social rank are deprived of this capital. There is also a third aspect which has been emphasized. It refers to the ability to take a given chance, and to the importance of coincidence in the process of achieving particular occupational statuses. When it comes to the issue of the opportunities of gaining high social positions by members of the groups which have been attributed some discreditable features [e.g. racial minorities], the critics of meritocratic principles maintain that in this case equality of initial opportunities [e.g. concerning developing a particular kind of competence] does not guarantee equal opportunities which determine the ultimate outcome (e.g. possibility to hold prestigious positions in the occupational structure) [quoted after: D. Bell, 1999, pp. 427–428].

Simultaneously, it is essential that education is referred to as a crucial factor determining the chances of social mobility (as it has been put forward in the classic approach of P.M. Blau and O.D. Duncan) [H. Domański, 2004, pp.

160–161]. The obvious assumption is that social equality [interpreted as equality of opportunity] is conditioned by equality of educational opportunities [Moore, 2007, p. 7]. Opportunities for equal access are in this case considered to provide able individuals with an opportunity to enter education on increasingly higher levels, according to the principle of *competitive mobility*, formulated by Randall Collins [E.Górnikowska-Zwolak, E.Jarosz, 1993, pp. 48–49]. Otherwise, the idea of equality would prove antagonistic towards the idea of academic perfectionism [cf. R.Moore, 2007, p. 6].

Limiting the opportunities for egalitarian access to education is a marginalizing factor. The phenomenon of marginalization is interpreted here as, quoting after Maria Jarosz, *living on the margin of the social law and privileges*, and as a characteristic related to community stratification, and deriving from a social position, biographic experience, aspirations, and civil decisions, which in this case concerns the sphere of educational policy [M. Jarosz, 2008, p. 8]. The notion refers to the limited participation in the fundamental institutions of the given social order; it defines the state which is opposite to social integration. A marginalized individual holds an underprivileged (disadvantaged) social position in a given structure. In extreme situations, marginalization leads to the *welfare dependence* syndrome, and consequently to gaining the *underclass* status (A. Radziewicz-Winnicki, I. Radziewicz-Winnicki, 2005, pp. 12–13).

The issues concerning equality of opportunity, governed by the meritocratic principles, are examined in educational sociology both within the Polish and global context. Determining educational opportunities of an individual through the prism of objective variables, which are predominantly social background (class position), sex or racial affiliation, proves to be disadvantageous to the above-mentioned modern principle, which remains applicable in the postmodern context [R. Moore, 2007, p. 7].

It is likely that the selection mechanism, which constitutes an inherent part of the education system, and results from structural limitations, leads to the exclusion of certain groups of children and youth. The surveys and reports concerning education disclose unequal access to schooling (education). According to externalist views, the reason for inequalities in the education system lies in the fact that certain types of families are not able to prepare their children for taking full advantage of learning at school. The approach emphasizes the fact that the factors generating inequality in education include genetic diversification among groups, in terms of intelligence quotient or cognitive abilities; material deprivation; cultural deprivation, for example a very low level of education within a family and lack of social and/or language skills which are essential for an effective learning process; social

differences concerning aspirations and motivation for studying; disproportions with regard to cultural capital.

The internalist approach focuses on school, and particularly [quoting after R. Moore, 2006, p.330] on the characteristics of the education system which might be responsible for creating and reproducing class and other kinds of divisions; reinforcing social prejudices through the official education programmes; indirect transfer of patterns, by means of a hidden educational programme; disregarding cultural dissimilarities, particularly those concerning sexuality and ethnic affiliation.

According to the view phrased by internalists, education is the main breeding ground for diversification [R. Moore, 2006, p. 330].

The perpetuated and increased inequalities in education refer both to the function of school related to operating in various environments and providing knowledge and school skills for children from various backgrounds (which is defined as a school habitus), but also to aspirations concerning the future social position [aspirations, life plans] [Z. Kwieciński, 2007, p. 18]

Research proves that there is a link between the student's learning results and his or her environment background; and that the level of acquired education correlates positively with social background, or as P. Bourdieu puts it, with the cultural capital [cf. I. Bialecki, 2003]. It has been confirmed by the analysis of the dropout phenomenon, which indicates that the students who leave school prematurely come from families with low cultural capital [cf. B. Fatyga et alli, 2001].

There is a lot of competition among schools, which pursue prestige. They apply the policy of segregation – new forms are being created, which are not adopted to suit the needs of selected students. Schools compete for students who come from well-off families. The practice of segregation conducted in post-primary schools involves school enrollment procedures and dividing students into forms [M. Rek, W. Woźniak, 2005, p. 143].

The composition of the student body is determined by the social, economic and demographic structure of the school. An important fact is that there is a division into better and worse schools, which is accompanied by some negative consequences [it contributes to the creation of poverty and crime areas] [J. Błachut, A. Gaberle, K. Krajewski, 2001, p. 350].

Education is grounded on social diversification. It is an effective instrument for perpetuating it, and reinforcing the established structures and functions characteristic of the global society and the local community [Z. Kwieciński, 2007, p. 12]. Contrary to its initial declarations, school performs a function which is referred to as cultural and social reproduction. If we take into consideration the level and

kind of cognitive competence, and the social and moral orientation which young people attain having completed the general education, it can be stated that they bear greater resemblance to their parents rather than to their peers socialized in different family conditions [Z.Kwieciński, 2007, p. 16].

There are certain flaws in the education system. The most representative of them can be traced in the area of vocational education. Training students are provided turns to be outdated and unsuited to the requirements and demands of the labour market. Vocational education does not provide most of its students with good prospects of attaining a high social position, let alone social advancement. It does not encourage alternative education participation, but it contributes to hesitant and passive attitudes among students. In other words, it provides a breeding ground for the phenomenon of counter-socialization [J. Błachut, A. Gaberle, K. Krajewski, 2001, p. 349].

Talcott Parsons, a representative of functional structuralism, distinguishes the principal functions of education, such as socialization, selection and allocation. The process of selection involves singling out able individuals and encouraging them to continue education. The individuals who demonstrate a lower level of ability are made to enter the labour market directly after completing the relatively early stages of education [cf. T. Parsons, 1969, pp. 171–202]. However, this view, originating from the 1960s, has been questioned by the representatives of critical sociology and a radical approach in sociological thinking. In the period between the end of the 1950s and the 1980s, Basil Bernstein developed his theory of language codes and their consequences for the social functioning of the individual. In his theory he emphasizes that the activity conducted by educational institutions does not conduce to social status equalization. It is since the beginning of their educational career, as Bernstein claims, that the representatives of low social classes [he points to the working class ] have had a limited opportunity for achievement, due to the fact that they use a limited language code, which is depreciated in an official school discourse [B. Bernstein, 1990]. Pierre Bourdieu makes a similar assumption in his theory of reproduction, formulated in the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He maintains that school does not foster crossing the boundaries of social stratification, since it provides achievement opportunities for the individuals who, in the course of socialization process, have internalized the habitus characteristic of the middle class (considered to be dominant) [P. Bourdieu, J.-C. Passeron, 2006]. Taking this theory into account, it should be indicated that habitus [regarded as a *genealogical capital*] is a broad notion which combines application of particular language codes with behavioural patterns, lifestyles, tastes, preferences and specific interpretations of reality [P. Bourdieu, J.-C. Passeron, 2006, p.109]. In the view of this interpreta-



tion, the group representative who has developed the habitus which is divergent from the one established within the dominant class, is put at risk of attaining a depreciated social status, which equals limited opportunities for social advancement. In this situation, the refusal to undertake the compensation activity in the school context, or decreasing it to a minimum level which is not suited to satisfy the existing needs, is considered pathological. At the same time, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron maintain that the task of education is not compensating for gaps but reproducing the dominant class habitus.

A teacher is an agent of the transfer of the dominant class habitus, due to the fact that he/she occupies a social role [which, according to Noam Chomsky, concerns the role of an intellectual], defined as the one which involves representing the interests of the dominant group. An inherent part of this role is a special kind of authority, which does not undergo questioning in the teacher-student relation [P. Bourdieu, J.-C. Passeron, 2006; N. Chomsky, 2004, p. 17]. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron claim that educational activity is conducted until the moment when the individual, who it was directed at, gains a *long-lasting education*. This stage is regarded as the internalization of the habitus, which will be made to work permanently, even after completing the pedagogical work [P. Bourdieu, J.-C. Passeron, 2006, p. 108]. Thus, in the course of the conducted activity, a teacher, regarded as a representative of a group of intellectuals, implements the principles of the indoctrinating system, concerning imparting knowledge in the scope and form consistent with the interests of a dominant class [N. Chomsky, 2004, p. 17]

Habitus determines cultural arbitrariness, whereas education, as emphasized by Noam Chomsky, subordinated to the modern canons, is carried out in such a way that it fosters indoctrination, imposes an arbitrary form of obedience, does not promote creative thinking, constitutes an element of the control and constraint system. Hence education does not encourage development of the kind of competence favoured by a postindustrial society [N. Chomsky, 2004, p. 16].

Schools in non-totalitarian countries do not remain unaffected by the phenomenon of counter-socialization. The examples which prove this fact include propagating the ideology of growing wealthy, promoting xenophobic views, fostering inequality, and others [J. Błachut, A. Gaberle, K. Krajewski, 2001, p. 350].

In order to accomplish its tasks, school employs staff, the members of which conduct pedagogical activity. K.J. Tillmann notices that teachers, performing the function of officials, are obliged to remain especially loyal to the State [K.J. Tillmann, 1996, p.114]. The personnel factors, which contribute to school crisis and pathology, include negative selection for entering the teaching profession, low qualifications of teachers, the personality features teachers have which are disad-

vantageous for the education and teaching process. Z.Kwieciński distinguishes two kinds of world outlook, and two kinds of morality among teachers: private and professional [Z. Kwieciński, 1995, p.22].

School is geared towards imparting and reproducing knowledge, developing particular skills. The educational process is aimed at preparing students to participate in the post-industrial society [the process involves imposing the patterns represented by particular teachers]. Serious flaws can be discovered in the school syllabuses, which are overloaded and put too much emphasis on details. Demands exceed students' capacities. Mastering the teaching content involves assessing the knowledge which students have acquired.

In order to assess students, a teacher tries to detect a gap in their knowledge. Whereas students carefully hide the lack of knowledge to avoid getting a fail grade [K. Kmiecik-Baran, 1999, p.36].

Z.Kwieciński maintains that the process of education is accompanied by symbolic violence [Z. Kwieciński, 1992]. The notion denotes the phenomenon which legitimizes, reinforces and perpetuates real violence through certain symbolic means, thus broadening it to include a specific form which can be referred to as symbolic enslavement in the sphere of values [P. Bourdieu, J.-C. Passeron, 2006, p. 23]. Bourdieu demonstrates interest in two aspects of symbolic violence. One of them is instilling specific values in successive generations, which means developing their habitus. The other aspect is the school advancement mechanism and opportunities [ibid. p. 23].

Since this paper is subject to text length limitation, the above analyses are presented in a condensed way. It has been emphasized in the article that the attempts aimed at implementing into educational reality the modern principle of meritocracy (the phenomenon which is subject to extensive criticism, centred on the ostensible *fairness* of the activities based on the meritocratic principle) and the function related to emancipation, are accompanied by difficulties and ambivalence. It is possible to identify certain areas of dysfunction (and in extreme cases – pathology) related to the criteria for disciplining students and assessing their achievements as well as habitus. There is a risk of extreme reproduction of arbitrarily established and favoured patterns, represented by the dominant culture. It is accompanied by the phenomenon of marginalization of ethnic and cultural identity of a student, which proves to constitute an important issue in the context of conducting the process of education within the global multicultural society.

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