

Rist R C. Student social class and teacher expectations: the self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educ. Rev.* 40:411-50, 1970.
[Washington University, St. Louis, MO]

Many studies have shown that academic achievement is highly correlated with social class. Few, however, have attempted to explain exactly how the school helps to reinforce the class structure of the society by generating different levels of academic achievement. This article reports a three-year observation study that addressed this issue. [The *SSCI*[®] indicates that this paper has been cited in over 345 publications.]

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Three weeks prior to the beginning of my first fall semester of graduate study in sociology at Washington University, St. Louis, I came to campus to meet with Jules Henry, a professor in the (then) joint Department of Sociology and Anthropology. I had received a graduate research fellowship to work with him on a new study of the experiences of black children in urban schools. Before we were 20 minutes into the conversation, it was apparent to me that working with him would be demanding. I also quickly learned that with the St. Louis schools beginning the next week I was going to be in the field almost immediately.

After several days of intensive tutoring on data collection strategies, I visited for the first time the school where I was going to spend the next two and one-half years. I began with a group of kindergarten children on their first day and stayed with them month after month. By watching the day-to-day routine of the children, I came to know in intimate detail their

experience of school. What made the study particularly provocative was the careful description of how children from low, working, and middle social classes came to experience school quite differently. The source of these differences I attributed to the beliefs and behaviors of the teachers, who treated children quite dissimilarly based on the social class backgrounds of the children themselves.

The interest in and debate surrounding the paper (and later a book from the same study¹) have come, I believe, from the use of qualitative research methods to longitudinally describe how schools create "winners and losers." There is a common understanding that not all children leave school with the same experiences and instructional opportunities. How these differences evolve (in this study the differences appeared after just eight days of kindergarten) suggests the power that the school possesses as a mechanism of sorting and stratifying American society. Such a portrayal of American schooling runs directly counter to the belief that schools are an engine of opportunity and mobility.

One final note: this paper exposed the dynamics of social class independent of race. Every individual in the school was black, except for me. Consequently, the factor of race could be put somewhat to the side as, even in this racially homogeneous setting, the experiences of poor children began radically to diverge from all others. Their segregation based on social class was every bit as real and as vivid as that in other settings where race was a factor.

Postscript: I never returned to see what happened to the children after I left them during second grade. They would now be 25 years old.

[See reference 2 for a recent review of self-fulfilling prophecies.]

1. Rist R C. *The urban school: a factory for failure*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973. 265 p. (Cited 65 times.)
2. Jussim L. Self-fulfilling prophecies: a theoretical and integrative review. *Psychol. Rev.* 93:429-45, 1986.