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# THE RECONSTRUCTION OF FAILURE: IDEOLOGIES OF EDUCATIONAL FAILURE IN THEIR RELATION TO SOCIAL MOBILITY AND SOCIAL CONTROL\*

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This paper seeks to explain the use of ideologies concerning failure or non-failure in American education in terms of the struggle of sponsoring and professional groups to establish or maintain position on the social scene and, correspondingly, to gain control over those clienteles which are relevant to the particular drives for social or professional mobility. The author argues that the prevalence of theories that students should not fail is linked to the development of efforts for continuous control over such clienteles. However, she suggests that ultimately both the grounds on which such control is legitimated (especially ideologies of social mobility) and the reactions of students themselves may operate as constraints on the nature of the social control which it sought.

Public school reformers of 60 or 70 years ago often argued that children failed to learn because they did not have enough food in their stomachs. Today's counterpart reformers are more likely to see the cause of failure in the teachers: that teachers are biased or ignorant of the way in which children learn; that they treat children as educational failures, and that children, therefore, become educational failures, being too discouraged to try.

Teachers, of course, counter this accusation with angry denials or with equally angry denunciations of the systems which saddle them with overcrowded classes, which deprive them of adequate rooms and equipment, which force them to handle disturbed or delinquent youngsters, and so forth. But the assumptions which underlie these teacher arguments are precisely the same as those underlying the charge of the reformers: that children ought not to fail, and that under the right conditions they can be taught without failing.

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\* My special gratitude to Stephenie Edgerton and Anselm Strauss for their converging inspirations, as well as their comments on the paper itself; and my thanks to Helene Levens, for her thoughtful criticisms of an earlier draft.

The prevalence of this kind of ideology concerning failure is one of the most striking features of American educational reform, and its implications pervade the entire educational scene. Such ideologies concerning failure involve what I want to call non-failure theories, that is, theories which argue that under proper teaching conditions students do not fail or should not be labeled as having failed—in contrast with failure theories—that is, theories which argue that even under the best teaching, students fail and should be made aware of the fact. My purpose in this paper is to try to explain the prevalence of non-failure theories by exploring the *use* of failure and non-failure theories of education in their social contexts, with special emphasis on the ways in which group social mobility and the effort of groups to control their clienteles have shaped these uses. My approach differs from many discussions of education and social mobility in not making a direct attack on the problems of failure from the standpoint of one or another established social definition of failure or success, correct or superior as some of these definitions may be. This is not to deny the value of psychological,

moral, or logical questions which may be raised about educational failure (such as whether failure experiences do in fact discourage students, in what ways choices concerning failure or success relate to ethical behavior, or how rationales of failure relate to the logic of learning or discovery), but rather to try to specify some of the social and historic conditions of their being raised at all.

In substance, I am going to suggest that the prevalence of non-failure theories results from the efforts of both the groups which sponsor educational programs and the teaching groups which work in them to hold and socially control educational clients. A significant aspect of these efforts is that they are often undertaken in the face of the rivalry of other social or occupational groups and/or the resistance of the clients themselves. The framework for this tug-of-war is also set in part by the expectations concerning opportunity in American life, which sponsors, teachers, and clients themselves draw on in various ways, and which are particularly important to sponsors and teachers in gaining and legitimating the social control they seek. Sponsors and teachers may offer education as the fulfillment of opportunity; but they may also structure education as the main vehicle for the fulfillment of opportunity, as part of their effort to structure the social world. This kind of structuring has considerable consequences for both individual teachers and students, especially to the extent that it traps them in implausible roles or roles they do not want. However, it does not always or fully determine the careers of students (or, indeed, of individual teachers). By reinterpreting or ignoring definitions of educational failure or success, they

may gain more room to structure their own educational fates.

Let me preface the exploration of my argument with a few words about my general approach to educational situations. My first premise is that social change involves the mobility aspirations and the subsequent interweaving and collision of social groups as they attempt to establish or maintain position on the social scene.<sup>1</sup> In the realm of education there are typically three major kinds of groups which shape such encounters—educational sponsors, teachers, and students. Such groups, in seeking to carve out the social world to suit their respective interests, either come into conflict or find programs which they can mutually support.

Almost any kind of social group may become an educational sponsor—occupational groups, ethnic groups, political groups, social movements, and so forth. Such sponsorship, however, is only sought when for one reason or another potential sponsors come to see educational policies and programs—in contrast to or in addition to other strategies—as serving the establishment or maintenance of their group interests. Particular interests vary with the group and the position it has or seeks on the social scene. Yet, the use of education is almost inevitably connected with gaining or increasing some form of social control—whether it is the control of fathers over the direction of their sons' generation, of leaders of a social movement over prospective members, or of employers over employees whose

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<sup>1</sup> My general approach, which variously draws on the symbolic interactionist tradition and the social structural analysis of such figures as Mannheim and Mills, is described in Fisher (1972).

attitudes or behavior they wish to bring in line with their own interests.

Teaching groups share many of the characteristics of sponsoring groups. What differentiates the former is their effort to achieve social mobility within the occupational structure, by staking out an occupational territory and by promoting, through partly symbolic means, a definition of their work as educational. But the legitimacy they seek does not always come easily. Teaching groups often encounter rival teachers or members of other kinds of occupational groups which may vie for the same sponsorship or clientele. Moreover, even without the challenge of rivals, sponsors or clients may draw away from the given teaching goal. Thus, teaching groups are forced to defend old or seek out new educational roles for themselves.

Finally, while sponsors and teaching groups variously try to establish their notions of education, students move through the world of programs and institutions, seeking to realize those life chances and goals which their backgrounds and developing careers offer. This may be a fairly simple and unself-conscious process or an extremely complex and self-aware one. Sometimes students will try to avoid educational situations, sometimes settle with educations they cannot avoid, sometimes choose one rather than another education, or sometimes be unable to find the education they seek. But how they value formal education, how much they accept or reject that education, depends in great part on both the groups in and through which they have moved and the alternative programs with which sponsors and teachers present them. By their acceptance or rejection as individuals or as student groups,

they too help to shape the structure of educational encounters.

#### THE TEACHER'S INTEREST IN STUDENTS NOT FAILING

Looking over the history of American teaching, one of the most striking characteristics is the insistence of teaching groups that education can do something for even the most wretched, aged, or feeble people, and that certainly it will do good things for those who are luckier to begin with. Is this simply American optimism, or the pressure on service occupations to do glorious (and unreasonable) jobs for the society? Perhaps it is in part, but as suggested above, I think the explanation has more to do with the struggle for mobility within the occupational structure.

Let us begin with the following example of face-to-face interaction as described by a current field-worker (Glass, 1971) in the area of nursing education: a university instructor takes her student to a hospital (with which the university has a practice-teaching arrangement) and schedules her to participate in a series of practice-nursing situations.<sup>2</sup> Although teachers are greatly cross-pressured in making these schedules, they make special efforts to schedule students for experiences in which they can successfully apply the lessons they have learned in university nursing classes. Although the instructors may criticize their students for many aspects of their hospital behavior, they believe that practice-nursing experiences should be of a satisfying, non-failure variety—especially at the beginning of practice work. To justify

<sup>2</sup> I am also indebted here to discussions with Helen Glass. See, also Oleson and Whittaker (1968).

this contention, they cite problems of morale, insisting that the students need to have positive experiences and not be discouraged.

How can this educational encounter be explained in terms of the intersection of evolving interests? Roughly, the historical structure of the situation is as follows: from the time nursing moved from a private-caretaking-occupation into the hospitals, to become the helpmate of medicine, nursing has fought a long, hard struggle for higher status as an occupation.<sup>3</sup> As the result of basing the occupation in the hospitals, these became the *loci* of a primarily apprentice-style teaching—at least until the universities started to offer training. As in many other practitioner fields, the new university teaching staffs represented a reform segment of the occupation, one which stressed the importance of science-based practice over-and-against the mere experience gained in the hospitals. Hence, the competitive (though sometimes cooperating) segments of the occupation of nursing have come to represent different occupational ideals and different educational theories of nursing. This, in turn, has made them rivals for the souls of the new recruits.

Given this situation, the university teacher's problem is essentially that of how to tutor her student in the camp of the enemy, and to a good extent at the enemy's pleasure. Moreover, her students are still, as historically, upwardly mobile girls from modest back-

grounds, whose images of nursing are usually drawn from the popular, i.e., hospital-based, ideal of what a nurse should be. Thus, while the university teacher struggles to turn her student into a scientifically-minded practitioner, she also must hold her against the efforts of the hospital staff to use and mold students to fill the immediate work needs of the hospital. For this reason, the nursing educators will schedule students for successful practice experiences which are in line with popular (hospital-based) imagery—even though this involves an image of nursing which these reformers basically reject—at the same time that they try to educate the students to the scientific model. See, the university teachers essentially argue, as they point to the “woman in white” experiences, I *can* teach you how to be a nurse!<sup>4</sup>

This fieldwork example not only points to the ways in which non-failure theories may be used to hold students, but suggests how theories concerning failure may be employed in developing notions of timing, pacing, curriculum, etc. Yet, it also suggests that such theories are very situationally rooted. Would teachers employ non-failure theories in this way, if they had other mechanisms by which to control their students?

When one looks at the kinds of education in which teachers would seem to have the least worry about holding students—namely, compulsory education—it is surprising how often teaching groups still opt for non-failure

<sup>3</sup> See, Strauss (1966) and Bucher and Strauss (1961) on the structure of professionalization in general. The philosophic consequences of this patterning are discussed by Stephenie G. Edgerton in her unpublished paper, “The technological Imagination: A philosopher looks at nursing.”

<sup>4</sup> The occupational dilemmas which result from this strategy—for, of course, just because an occupation chooses to use a non-failure theory does not mean that it will “work” as the occupational group hoped—are pointed out in Glass (1971).

theories. There seem to be a series of interrelated factors operating here. One, of course, is that even with a captive clientele, teachers must face problems of institutional order. For this reason, institutions which deal with involuntary or relatively involuntary clients seem to foster reform ideologies which stress non-failure teaching. Some reformers, for example, have developed an educational ideal for the handicapped which transforms what would be a failure outside the institution to success within: every attempt is a victory, not just for the individual, but for the running of the institution.<sup>5</sup>

But difficult clients are not always thrust on teaching groups; they also reach out for them, because new clients mean the opportunity to build a new occupation. Hence, the tremendous pressure which was exerted at the turn of the century to extend schooling to a wider segment of the population led to the expansion of specialized institutions (vocational, special education, etc.) to cope with this population, and to the boom of special teaching groups to man these institutions. Over-and-above the motives which sponsors may have had (concerning the labor market, urban reforms, or what have you), the emerging teaching groups had a special stake in the success of this new division of educational labor. Nothing could have made this clearer than the development of vocational and educational guidance in this same period, that is of an occupation whose ideology was precisely that of non-failure. Everyone (went the claim) could succeed in the

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, how the occupational therapists worked at carving out their definitions of educational failure and success, in Hall and Buck (1915).

*right* kind of education and further succeed in the *right* kind of career.<sup>6</sup>

While the problems of institutional management and of building up teaching groups on new clienteles may lead to the use of non-failure theories, these patterns also lead to other problems concerning legitimacy. For though non-failure theories may enable teachers to control their students—say, by simply graduating troublemakers rather than making them repeat grades, or by developing some kind of educational task at which a given kind of student does seem able to succeed—such strategies also render teaching groups vulnerable to attack by rivals, sponsors, and the clients themselves. The attack is double pronged: on the one hand, students must not fail (which means that teachers must not fail to teach) but on the other, a teacher who does not fail any students is suspected of not “really” being a teacher at all.

Part of the difficulty here is due to the nature of the claims teaching groups make as they seek to establish themselves on the occupational scene and the fact that, when challenged, teachers tend to redefine and extend their claims rather than limit them. Teaching groups can be contrasted with mainstream medicine in this respect, which in its push to monopolize legitimate practice has developed a lofty but highly qualified claim; namely, that physicians do the best job possible

<sup>6</sup> See the discussion of circumscribed mobility in Fisher (1967), which, however, gives insufficient attention to the professional interests of the educational specialties; and Bloomfield's classic guidebook (1911), which makes the function of his educational specialty quite clear. Notice the continuities with post-World War II discussions of dropouts and with writers such as Ginsberg (1967).

given the current state of science and medical practice. The cure may fail, but not the doctor.<sup>7</sup> Why teaching groups generally have developed other strategies seems to be related not only to the problem of their technology, such as it is, but to their relations to clients and sponsors. Therefore, it is to the expectations these other groups have of teaching we should turn next.

#### EDUCATIONAL FAILURE AND THE STUDENT'S CAREER

The marked preference of teaching groups for non-failure strategies seems to be shaped in part by the particular difficulties which teachers encounter in controlling their clients and in part by the constraints which teaching groups suffer by virtue of being sponsored occupations. In order to explore the first of these factors, we need to turn to the ways in which students deal with educational failure or non-failure.

From the standpoint of the student's role in a given educational encounter, the whole panorama of occupational jostling comes down to the question of whether he will "really" be a student by taking the given education seriously. This, in turn, hinges on whether or not he accepts or rejects the definitions of failure or success which the teacher promotes. With the possible exception of small children (whose exclusively affective responses to education there is reason to doubt), students respond to definitions of educational failure or non-failure in terms of their life

<sup>7</sup> See the discussion of credibility in medicine and in-service professions in general in Fisher (1969). Stephenie Edgerton often has pointed out to me the many problems which arise in service occupations from the effort to use a "pure science" ideology to legitimate activities essentially of an applied science nature. (See Edgerton, 1966.)

chances and the sort of lives they currently seek for themselves. In order to understand both the options and interpretations which students bring to such educational encounters, it is important to view their careers in terms of the patterns of both individual and group mobility involved.<sup>8</sup>

Where do students get their definitions of educational failure or success? Since the specific answers to this question are myriad, let us approach it by asking the more schematic question: under what conditions do students question or reject the notions of educational failure with which teachers or sponsors present them, and, therefore, constitute a problem of social control? The answer, I think, lies in great part in the kinds of mobility which students undergo, and the degree to which they encounter problematic or unproblematic definitions of educational failure or success.

The different types of mobility involved suggest four possible (ideal) situations. The first is one in which a student is undergoing some kind of radical mobility—not only upward, but downward or horizontal or any kind of shift into a new social world—and doing so more or less on his own. Being torn away from (or freed from) his previous group affiliations and not yet having acquired new ones, he is likely to look for guidance concerning

<sup>8</sup> See Strauss (1971) for discussions of the wide variety of mobility patterns. Regarding small children and their responses to failure, there are many questions still to be raised; for discussions in this area have been heavily influenced by service occupations (psychology, kindergartening, etc.) which have sought to make children their clients, and whose occupational rhetoric often parallels the general rhetoric of service groups which build on stigmatized clientele.

both the nature of the world into which he is moving and how successfully he is moving toward it, that is, concerning what constitutes the norms of success and failure *vis-à-vis* that world. Hence the isolated student who goes to work in some esoteric mathematical specialty, the isolated immigrant who finds himself an English teacher, the seeker after truth who studies under a guru, each may be at the mercy of the particular educational definitions of his teacher. It is under such general conditions that we find individual and sometimes small isolated groups of students looking constantly and even desperately for signs from their teachers concerning their educational progress. Under such conditions, whether the teacher holds a failure or non-failure theory of education may have important implications: non-failure theories which mute or obscure signs of progress may make students nearly frantic, while both theories have implications for the way in which teachers handle coaching.<sup>9</sup>

However, even though the student is relatively isolated, the teacher may not be. In particular, there may be rivals around of whom the student may become aware. This truly complicates the situation, for the student is then confronted with rival claims about the nature of the world into which he is moving and how to get successfully educated for it. In this situation it may be less important whether his teacher is employing a failure or non-failure theory of education than whether the teacher is able to establish the legitimacy of his own brand of education. The example from nursing education given in the last section suggests that teachers sometimes feel that non-failure

approaches help to establish such legitimacy. But if you will remember, part of the problem in the nursing case, in addition to the presence of educational rivals, was the fact that the student was socially mobile and brought notions of failure and success from her world of origin.

Indeed, group mobility, whether that of mobile students tearing off from a main group (yet often retaining some identity with it and with each other) or that of an entire group raising its status, forms the background for much educational encounter. Thus, we find the situation in which a mobile group bringing its own notions of success or failure in education confronts a teaching group with a different theory. Again, it seems less important which theory the teaching group holds than that it does not fit with that of its clients. For instance, there seems no way that public school teachers could have convinced many turn-of-the-century immigrants to accept public school notions of either failure or success, short of the kind of cultural revolution which the teachers were in no position to effect. Moreover, teachers in such a position may not have the chance to test out fully the extent to which their norms actually are being rejected. For students do not always respond to an unacceptable theory of educational failure or success by outright rejection. On the contrary, to the extent that they share educational norms with each other, they may well help each other get through the given educational world with some success in terms of their *own* goals—preserving ethnic identity, getting skills they covet, etc.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> A striking example of the problem of problematic signs concerning educational failure is found in Castenada (1968).

<sup>10</sup> See the discussion of students in Fisher (1972), as well as the work by Becker (1968) and others (e.g., Geer, 1968) on the ways in which students both adjust



Finally, there is the situation in which mobile student groups encounter teachers whose ideals of educational failure or success are sufficiently compatible, or indeed, even the same as their own—sometimes because they are co-members of the group. Social movements, ethnic enclaves, or class enclaves often present this situation; and here again it seems more important that the group and teachers hold compatible notions of failure or success than whether they hold to failure or non-failure theories. This would be as true for an extremely “progressive” school which had no formal standards of attainment, but a firm understanding about the kinds of lives toward which the students were moving, as for an old fashioned parochial school, with strict grading and behavior standards, but a consensus that most children were being prepared as honest Catholic citizens—failures at high educational attainment or high spiritual penetration being expected for the majority.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, then, both failure or non-failure theories may promote various types of mobility for both individuals or groups, but the possibilities for mobility will depend to a great extent on the particular relation between student and teaching groups. (And, ultimately it depends to an even greater extent on the social structural context within which both groups are operat-

ing, as the next sections of our discussion imply.)

There are important paradoxes regarding mobility here. In one sense, a student who is allowed to fail has more of a chance to carve out his own life, even though the alternatives for mobility available to him may be meager, dangerous, or corrupting by middle-class standards. Conversely, the effort to hold students through non-failure theories (and the institutional arrangements which enforce them) results in a peculiar kind of captivity. This is illustrated less in the war of ghetto children against their teachers, whose demands often seem to be more for institutional order than educational seriousness, than in the rebellion of college students against their teachers and parents, whose converging theories of non-failure amount to an incontrovertible demand for educational seriousness. In this light, student protest of the past decade may be seen as a demand for the option to fail, that is, in the students' terms, to opt for another kind of schooling—and another kind of world.<sup>12</sup>

However, as our schematic treatment suggests, there are also situations in which students may find non-failure theories useful or even liberating, and these situations are most likely to come about when there is agreement (whether through tradition, reasoned conviction, or faith) with the teachers'

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to and subvert the original purposes of educational institutions. The use of prisons by the prisoners to educate themselves in crime is another classic example, to be contrasted with the whole history of prison reform.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Ware's chapter on education in her classic study of Greenwich Village (1935) suggests how different groups occupying overlapping social space, may see notions of educational failure and success in radically different ways.

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<sup>12</sup> It seems to me that in these terms, the much discussed prominence of “good” students as protesters makes considerable sense, without doing violence to the student's own conception or the social realities of the situation: notions of educational failure and success *do* imply buying into some image of the world. The same theme can, of course, also appear in the world of “delinquent” protest: see, for example, Keiser (1969).

notions of educational failure or success. Then students and teachers *may* be able to circumvent old and poor notions of educational adequacy and educational limitations—just as some educational reformers have dreamed. But the probability and possibility of this happening would eventually depend not only on the direction of student careers *vis-à-vis* their teachers but on the world in which both are operating.<sup>13</sup>

#### WHETHER SPONSORS WANT STUDENTS TO FAIL

Since teaching groups are by and large sponsored occupations (a pattern established quite early on the American scene), the ways in which sponsoring groups view failure or success are obviously of great importance to the ways in which teaching groups handle the problem of educational failure. Since sponsoring groups by definition supply the money and other resources to sustain programs, they can have a strong hand in shaping them—although they are not always able to exercise or interested in direct or full control. However, as noted at the beginning of our discussion, sponsoring groups, which vary greatly in their character and developing interests, choose educational means simply as one possible mechanism for securing those interests. Hence, the question regarding the role of sponsoring groups must be: When do they favor failure or non-failure theories of education, in relation to their ambitions for social mobility and

the problems of social control these may entail?

Now, I would like to suggest that sponsoring groups tend to support *failure* theories of education when, in the solution to their own mobility problems, the fate of failed clients does not itself present a further problem; but that, on the other hand, sponsoring groups use *non-failure* theories when they seek to continue to direct the fate of potential or actual educational clients. Whichever strategy they choose, it is with the intent of fostering or constraining mobility in terms of their image of the social structure. In addition, sponsoring groups may change their position on failure or use the different theories simultaneously, depending on the particular groups they are trying to direct and the particular rivals they are facing.

The complete about-face of the New England upper class at the end of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries illustrates this nicely. Although there were exceptions, Brahmin leadership generally had been a mainstay of the 19th century idea that everyone could and would prosper in the American environment if only he received the right kind of public education. Toward the end of the century, however, vast immigration threatened to swamp the educational and welfare institutions the Brahmins had promoted to support their kind of social order. Simultaneously, the immigrant efforts toward group improvement in the form of political, religious, and social organizations were beginning to threaten the established leadership with rival mechanisms of control. At this point the philanthropists completely reversed their position, argued that some people could and did fail to learn the lessons needed to succeed in America, and that,

<sup>13</sup> The extent to which teacher-student relationships can be sealed off from outside norms and pressures has, of course, plagued utopian and anarchist discussions of education—which, in common with education within social movements and other kinds of social enclaves, are not without their own problems concerning manipulation.

therefore, immigration should be restricted to those who could succeed.<sup>14</sup>

In the contemporaneous case of progressive business leaders, almost the reverse pattern occurred. Well before the turn of the century, industrial efficiency experts had started promoting the education of workers to a generally skeptical business world. But with the rise of more complex business organization, and with the threat of unionization which accompanied the increased labor force, progressive business took up the cause of education. Whereas in the past businessmen had often accepted theories of educational failure together with a predisposition to minimize the importance of much of such failure (indeed, educational failure of some kinds might even be seen as a sign of business ability!), they now promoted what were essentially non-failure theories of education. No one would fail Americanization or worker-education courses in the sense that everyone would move through education to his proper place in the industrial world.<sup>15</sup>

One of the points implicit in these examples is that the attitude of sponsoring groups toward failure or non-failure theories is very much a product of the specific relation between them and their rivals. Their response is geared to a great extent to how to win out in the struggle. This, however, results in all kinds of combinations of theories and ambiguities regarding

failure. Histories like that of mainstream medicine or the adult education movement suggest that the question of *whose* failure is basic here. Hence, mainstream medicine waged a tremendous struggle at the turn of the century to knock down (if not out) the non-regular practitioners and lower-status practitioners who were running what the established men considered to be shoddy medical schools. In their terms, these were essentially non-failure schools that promised mobile, often small-town boys that all of them could become doctors. In opposition, the philanthropists, regular doctors, and scientific men developed an education at which the more highly selected students might fail, but the doctors who were produced would not. Adult education reformers used a similar strategy when they sought to establish their own kind of correspondence education. Having excoriated the commercial schools for passing anyone who paid the fee, the adult educators did not hesitate to promote their own non-failure theories—of how “any” adult could win an education. The difference, again, was who was giving the education and who was going to get it.<sup>16</sup>

Though clearly opportunistic, then, sponsoring groups are far from capricious in their use of failure or non-failure theories; for whether and how they seek to hold educational clients and which clients they seek to hold find expression in ideas of educational failure or success. This is even clearer in the case of social movements, where ability to hold a voluntary clientele is intimately related to the success or failure which the movement affords them. These ideas of success and failure are notoriously ambiguous, both

<sup>14</sup> See Solomon (1956). There were, however, some notable figures, such as Charles Eliot, who would not shift principles with the shifting population—which also raises questions.

<sup>15</sup> See Hartman (1948), the discussion of corporation schools in Fisher (1967), and such well-known examples of pioneering in worker welfare-and-education programs as the General Electric Company.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Flexner (1910) and Noffsinger (1926).

because of the tensions which arise between individual and group success (or failure) and because groups tend to segment precisely on the issue of how such success or failure shall be defined.

On one extreme there are movements which solve their problems in this respect by narrowing the range of their clientele (or followers) and opting for failure theories to block out those who might impede the movement's success: as everyone cannot expect to be a doctor, not everyone will make a good party member. On the other extreme, there are movements which choose or are stuck with the commitment to virtually universal recruitment; and they are almost forced to opt for some kind of non-failure theory, though the factions of the group may continue to argue the meaning of failure or success.

Hence, in the face of continual and heartbreaking failures, the movement for the uplift or liberation of black Americans has continued to opt for non-failure theories of education, to parallel the ultimate goals of success for all black Americans. Yet the movement has also segmented over the definition of long-run and short-run successes and failures, so that Washington's image of building a New South through agriculture and more skilled trades (indeed to keep the Southern Negroes from failing in the small foothold they had) became a prescription for failure in the eyes of W. E. B. DuBois (1924). For him, non-failure theories of industrial education were a fraud because the idea was economically unsound and not even working the way it claimed (i.e., in reality it was just turning out more teachers). Whereas a superior analysis of what was going on in the American social structure would show the right strategy for success and the correct kind of non-

failure theories—in which both the leaders and their followers would succeed—to be employed.

The study of social movements does, or should, raise a whole series of questions about the use of failure or non-failure theories by teaching or sponsoring groups in general. When and how are the relations between movement success or failure and educational success or failure considered or reconciled? Can one compare the education of individual group members to that of the group "as a whole," and if so, what conflicts arise concerning the norms of failure or success? If the (temporary) failure of a movement is often interpreted as educational, i.e., as an educational success, is educational failure ever seen as constructive toward a movement's success (e.g., Levens, 1971)?

#### THE RECONSTRUCTION OF EDUCATIONAL FAILURE

In rough terms, the prevalence of non-failure theories parallels and reflects the development of what some social critics (e.g., Weinstein, 1968) have come to call the corporate liberal state. That is, to the extent that groups have reached out for relatively continuous control over aspects of the lives of others on the social scene, and to the extent that such groups have used education as an instrument of doing so, education is likely to be cast in non-failure terms.

But our discussion also suggests that simple, one-to-one interpretations of this pattern tend to be misleading or untrue. Sponsors have used and still use both failure and non-failure theories in their attempts to structure the social world. The problem is to discover under what specific conditions they use one rather than the other theory—a

problem to which I have made only a tentative approach. However, one assumption of this approach is that their preference for one or another of these theories, as for any theory, is rational with respect to the means they see available and the ends they see desirable in their construction of social reality.<sup>17</sup> Thus, though big business may have found non-failure theories convenient during the period at which it was still trying to outfox the unions, the business push for such education tended to subside when peace was made with organized labor. In very much the same way, progressives in the contemporary business world rushed in to sponsor essentially non-failure programs for blacks (especially the chronically unemployed), only to give second thought to the problem of failure once the threat of riots and the business boom had subsided (Hunter, 1971).

But the initiating or sustaining of programs, based on either failure or non-failure theories of education, is not the work of sponsors alone. Teaching groups or groups seeking to be called teachers or educators are perhaps the major promoters of educational solutions to social problems. Over-and-above the interest of sponsors, they have a special stake in finding and holding an educational clientele. However, as I believe our discussion suggests, teaching groups also have a built-in problem. For the effort of teaching groups to legitimate themselves to sponsors (as being up-to-date, scientific, effective) and to clients (as doing for them what they are claiming to do) may be confounded by a series of circumstances—especially the circum-

<sup>17</sup> Compare the discussions of Ross (1905), and Berger and Luckman (1966).

stances that teachers often have much different aims in mind than their students. Non-failure theories seem to offer a way out of this bind which does not involve either losing clients or seeking a new kind of education. Basically such a strategy does not represent an attempt to "lower standards" (as, for example, critics of new university programs in Black Studies often suggest), but an attempt by those caught in the middle to adjust differing notions of success and legitimacy.<sup>18</sup>

Since sponsors, too, are often caught in the middle between clients and rivals or between various rivals in shaping the social structure, sponsors may also use non-failure theories as legitimating mechanisms. Yet, as with teaching groups, their ability to do this depends in part on the extent to which such theories are rooted in accepted interpretations (i.e., accepted by at least some significant segments of the society) of social mobility.

Ultimately, then, this discussion of failure and non-failure theories points toward basic questions about the legitimacy of social control and what constitutes effective challenges to such legitimacy. Though such questions are clearly beyond the scope of this paper, it might be of value to speculate further on the basis of the discussion thus far.

With respect to the problem of the grounds of legitimacy, sponsors and teachers employ two general ideologies of social mobility in the course of justifying their claim to serve client-needs in some legitimate fashion.<sup>19</sup> The first

<sup>18</sup> See the discussions of the black university teachers in Robinson, Foster, and Oglivie (1969).

<sup>19</sup> See, for examples of discussions of these themes, Wohl (1966) and Smith (1957). My discussion here should be compared with Trow (1966).

of these ideologies involves an interpretation of social mobility which is linked to the rise of modern industry and is centered around the rags to riches story and its corollary that Americans go from shirt-sleeves-to-shirt-sleeves in three generations. The social ideal involved, that of the self-made man, stresses both luck (e.g., being born of poor-but-honest parents) and the ability and willingness to take risks—those that attend moving out of one's station and building a career. Various kinds of education have always been seen as possible or important aids to this process. But the point about education is essentially that about the social world itself: no single effort, no single choice *guarantees* success. Education, like life, is informed by a failure theory.

In contrast, the other interpretation of mobility, that in which non-failure theories of education tend to be rooted, centers around the ideal of the honest workman (artisan or yeoman), who represents the realization of the promise that every American can have a decent, secure life. Given a modicum of ability and effort, such life is made possible both because of natural abundance—the land, the expanding economy, etc.—and because of an ideological commitment to its being shared. In these terms, non-failure education has been seen as a variant of/or substitution for such shared abundance, whether in the hopes of immigrants who had been unable to obtain educations in Europe or in the more utopian arguments of public school reformers such as Mann (1846), who saw education as the new birthright, now that the land was gone.

What is being talked about here is a *guaranteed* education, not just the *opportunity* for education—opportu-

nity, regardless of to whom or to how many it is extended, being in this context basically a *laissez-faire* concept. But the question which then has been logically and periodically raised by social critics is: if education is a variant of, or a substitution for, the share of each in the nation's abundance, are we really getting what we are promised, or was the real birthright sold off in some prior business deal?<sup>20</sup>

Students, it seems to me, are more likely to raise this question than teachers or sponsors, not through any individual moral superiority but because their particular stake is in getting ahead rather than in social control. Getting ahead on either basic interpretation of mobility involves coping with the definitions of failure or success which sponsors and teachers promote. If both sponsors and teachers tend to promote non-failure theories of education, students may become particularly adept at certain counter-strategies themselves—especially inasmuch as their interests conflict with those of sponsors or teachers to the extent that they are no longer content simply to “work the system.”

Of the many such strategies which have been traditionally employed by both individual students and groups of students, two appear to have particular bearing on the criticism of non-failure theories of education. One involves asserting the right to fail. This may be the right to fail out (like a rebellious student who makes himself so difficult for so many people within an educational system that no one can afford to guarantee him anything anymore), or the right to fail at given projects (like a group of girls at a certain upper-class

<sup>20</sup> See Mills (1951). The transmutation of 40-acres-and-a-mule into the right to an education is another version of this substitution, which has inspired similar criticism.

college I know who are insisting that their art teachers really criticize their work, so that they can learn to be real artists, rather than accomplished ladies). The second strategy is to avoid such patterned education altogether, when possible. There is certainly some, though perhaps not much, room for this within the complex institutions which foster education. For instance, some enterprising officers still shoot to the top in the armed services, avoiding the basically non-failure system of education which is used as a control mechanism in this vast organization. How much possibility of avoidance there is outside such institutions and what pay-offs it would net—say, in the context of social movements, or in the worlds of more independent and/or marginal careers—is another question. Perhaps this would depend not only on aspects of the social structure about which we still have rather vague understanding, but, as the saying still goes, on the person.

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