

Sacks, P. (2007). *Tearing down the gates: Confronting the class divide*. London: University of California Press, Ltd.

Reviewed by Alex Pastina  
University of Georgia

Peter Sacks provides an interesting viewpoint of the American school system in his book *Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education*. According to Sacks, many of America's public schools are failing today because of the widening gap between the upper and lower classes, which is leading wealthy students to graduate and continue on to college, and poorer students to continue in their cycle of poverty by forgoing a diploma and dropping out of school. In the words of Sacks, "We prefer to ignore the reality that our schools and colleges in fact reproduce, reinforce, and legitimize inequality" (pg. 2). He explains that our schools set up barriers for students that come from lower socioeconomic statuses, and that they can do little to overcome these roadblocks that are holding them back from graduating or being accepted to competitive universities around the country. All of Sacks' interviews and information are slightly slanted to his particular political stance, so the reader must carefully evaluate and then verify the information presented to make a less biased case about the divide in America's education system.

Sacks breaks his book into five large parts- Part 1 is called Rich Families, Poor Families, Part 2 is Struggle for the Soul of Public Schools, Part 3 is Affirmative Action for the Rich, Part 4 is Experiments in Gatecrashing and the Backlash of the Elites, and Part 5 is American Dreams. Although he speaks to different educators in each of these sections, there are some overlying themes that are evident throughout the book, the first

of which is the idea of cultural capital, i.e., certain non-financial assets that parents provide their children with that promote easier learning in the classroom. But capital can be provided for children in other forms as well: “the cultural, social, and economic ‘capital’ that upper and middle-class families routinely provide their children” (p. 12). Sacks argues that wealthier students are given more types of capital by their parents when they are growing up, including having more toys or books, being read to as a child more often, or being taken to museums throughout childhood. All of these forms of capital can benefit a student in the school system, because it gives them somewhat of a competitive edge when it comes to being able to absorb new information. Because of these ideas of different forms of capital, Sacks argues that wealthier students have an incredible advantage when they enter school and are compared to less wealthy students. He backs up his claims by studying the 1966 Coleman Report called *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, from which he concludes, “The report’s fundamental finding was that families’ social and economic status, the stuff that children bring to school, trumped just about all else in accounting for students’ educational achievements and prospects... that schools bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent on his background and general social context” (p. 14). According to Sacks, “American schools, as they were designed and funded... are decidedly inefficient at alleviating the vast differences in human capital accumulation between rich families and poor ones” (pg. 96). If this is true, he argues that schools should be doing more to lessen this gap between students in the classroom, but does not give specific instructions for how that can be done.

Another hotly debated topic that Sacks addresses throughout the book is that of tracking, or placing students on a specific educational “track” based on their achievement levels, which is typically determined by the school administrators. Sacks is vehemently against tracking and makes multiple cases for completely banning it in schools. Classes in middle and high school are often categorized as university prep, and students that administrators believe have the most potential for college will be tracked into those classes. On the other hand, students that look like they might not have the grades or the attitude for college may be put into the vocational track, assuming that they either will not graduate or have no plans of going to secondary school. Sacks quotes sociologist Christopher Jencks in his book *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*. Jencks says, “schools serve primarily as selection and certification agencies, whose job is to measure and label people, and only secondarily as socialization agencies, whose job is to change people. This implies that schools serve primarily to legitimize inequality, not to create it” (p. 96).

The idea that Sacks presents to the reader is that tracking itself works to help wealthier students achieve or keep less wealthy students down by convincing them that they aren’t worthy of taking more difficult classes or going to college. Sacks explains that policy makers have been ignoring this issue for some time now, and therefore the gap is just increasing. Even if the reader has no knowledge of the inner world of educators, it is clear to see why tracking might not be the answer for all schools in America. But it is not completely worthless, as Sacks suggests. In high school, it would be ludicrous to think that all students should take the same courses all four years. The truth is that some students are more advanced than others, whether that be a result of their work ethic,

cultural capital, or some other factor. If the class is too easy, the most intelligent students will be bored. If the class is too difficult, the students that struggle the most will be left behind and feeling even more confused. Sacks doesn't do a great job of explaining the potential benefits of some tracking in schools, so the reader must read his explanations carefully and create their own opinion about the topic.

The ideas of capital and tracking are the two biggest topics that Sacks addresses in *Tearing Down the Gates*. He believes that American schools are struggling so much because we are not addressing the problems with tracking and the capital gaps between students of different socioeconomic status. Sacks cites many educators, sociologists, and research to back up his findings, but readers (educators especially) may be disappointed to finish the book even more dismayed about the current state of our schools. Sacks offers no clear cut or potential solutions to the problems he addresses, and therefore the book is somewhat lacking in closure and credibility.