

The Impact of Social Class on Deepening Educational Inequalities:

Introduction:

'There is a strong direct association between social class background and success in education: put simply, the higher a child's social class, the greater are their attainments on average.

Gillborn and Mirza (2000:18)

Perhaps one of the most justified questions of the 21st century is, how can a child born today have their successes hindered or advantaged by their individual family background? Should we not have achieved education equality? Should all children not have equal access to all the opportunities available to them?

Comment: Good opening paragraph

Gaine and George (1999:122) argue that social class has long been a critical element in school achievement. Bartlett and Burton (2012:255) support this idea and further add to it by suggesting social class, gender and ethnicity are key factors and the interaction between all three produce a powerful set of inequalities for many children. It is clear that social class is a dominant factor in educational attainment that has the power to either support or hinder children's successes in life. It falls to the ordinary class teacher to battle these inequalities in partnership with the learner, to produce extraordinary young people who can have a lifetime full of success.

For the purpose of this short study, it will look at the role and implications of social class within the education system and compare literature to what has been witnessed in two contrasting schools in Lincolnshire. In conclusion, this study will look at how social class will have an impact upon future teaching practices for new and established teachers.

For the intent of this study, a social class definition has always been hard to define, as highlighted by Gillborn and Mirza (2000:18) explaining:

'Social class background is both difficult and costly to categorise. There is, for example, no single scale that enjoys universal support.'

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At some point, 'classifying' a child will take into account the parental employment status. For the purpose of this study, it will use those pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) or eligible to receive the pupil premium; although it is important to recognise that both go hand in hand. It would perhaps be important though to recognise that the use of FSM potentially underestimates the number of pupils in poverty as not all pupils are registered (Smith 2012; Noden and West, 2009; Archer, 2003).

Comment: Good methodological critique – yes the FSM measure is flawed.

Summary of Literature:

Social class equalities in education have been embedded into the system since formal education began in the 19th century, this is supported by Leathwood and Hutchings (2003:138) who suggest the divisions have not just been about class but also between institutions, curricula and qualifications. It is important to recognise that within the educational research of social class issues and inequalities, much of this has been predominantly addressed in relation to compulsory schooling context. From this idea, Archer (2003:5) notes the common theme as being 'working-class children tend to experience persistently lower rates of attainment' and it could also be suggested that from that, they are less likely to follow routes into post compulsory education (Archer 2003:5; Reay 2006:297)

Looking at the differences between working-class children and middle-class children, Bartlett and Burton inform us that:

'Surveys which included class as a significant category have indicated that, by just about every criterion of achievement, middle-class pupils in maintained schools do better than working-class children.'

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(Bartlett and Burton 2012:256).

From this we can perhaps deduce that from birth, your expectations and future circumstances have already been determined based on the family social class you are born into. Could this also indicate that attempting to break the shackles that have been placed on you since birth is going to be hard? From this, do middle-class children have better or perhaps easier access to the more privileged education establishments?

To further build on this, much of the literature suggests that 'children of less-educated parents tend to perform more poorly in school and complete fewer years of education compared to children of better educated parents' (Long et al. 2011:83-84). At this point, we must not forget the opening paragraph from which the statement by Bartlett and Burton (2012:255) of 'Social class, gender and ethnicity group have been and remain key factors of inequality in education' will underpin much of the theory and revelations through this study. How much better have things become in recent years though and have consecutive government interventions aided or hindered social educational inequalities?

Comment: Which makes this a self-perpetuating cycle – though the big increase in HEI attendance over the last 30 years should start to have an impact on this.

Reay (2012:10) shows how the majority of British people see education:

'Research shows that the vast majority of British people still see education as a right that should be made available to all rather than a commodity to be competed for in an educational market place.'

(Reay 2012:10)

What is significantly important here however is the idea that the education system has moved from a closed system to a market place with the coalition's policies of moving all schools to academies; either willingly or forcefully. From this, earlier work of Reay (2006:295) also states how 'the lack of positive images of the working-class contribute to them being educationally disqualified,' a view which could perhaps be seen as working-class students gaining entry to the selective or grammar schools in this country – an idea that is explored further in this short study. However, the 1944 Education Act, was designed in part to open up educational opportunities for all children (Leathwood and Hutchings 2003:138), how far this actually worked or is currently working is perhaps a contentious issue when examined against the principles of social inequalities in education.

We can see first-hand how social inequalities are widening in this country; more so than ever with the coalitions planned austerity measures. Reay (2013:3) would suggest that 'educational inequalities are inextricably bound up with social inequalities and cannot be addressed in isolation from them.' Does this then perhaps show that to tackle educational inequalities the government needs to tackle further the inequalities in society itself? What is perhaps most revealing is the idea that currently '23% of British school educational spending goes on the 7% of pupils who are privately educated' (OECD 2009 in Reay 2012:4).

Comment: And the suggestion that if this funding was moved to the state sector it could considerably change the nature of education patterns.

Successive Governments have tried numerous strategies and policy agendas to influence the inequality between the working-class and the middle-class. These influences have ranged from improving the quality of their home environments and parental interactions (Long et al, 2011:173), the relevance of the National Curriculum in the 21st century (MacDonald 2008), controversial aspects of league tables in promoting a culture of accountability (Ellis and Tod 2009:14), Widening Participation agenda of the previous Labour government to defray class inequalities (Bladen and Machin, 2004), the coalition's decision to fast-track high-performing schools to academy status raising fears a two-tier education system (Bartlett and Burton 2012:171) and Every Child Matters Agenda which was about shifting the principles and assumptions upon which education is founded by altering the focus of intervention from protection to prevention (Simon 2008:19). But most of all the lack lies in our political leaders 'those policy makers, who fail to care or recognise the connections between educational and wider social contexts' (Reay 2004:41)

Panofsky (2002:15) argued over a decade ago that 'the differential experiences of schooling reflect larger conflicts in society and this is supported further by Reay (2006:294) arguing that 'all the evidence seems to indicate that the contemporary education system retains powerful remnants of past elite prejudices.' Those metaphorical shackles certainly do not seem to be willing to be removed anytime soon, especially with the introduction of the coalition's Academy programme, working in favour of the best schools that are perceived to be in areas of higher socio-economic status.

Comment: An excellent summary of the literature in the given space

Comparisons and Contrasts to TP1 and TP2:

What is evident from the review of a small portion of the literature is that social class has a massive influence upon educational inequalities. Many researchers and academics have detailed the vast amount of problems that are caused by social class in relation to education. The review looks holistically at the research from social-class research. The purpose of this next section however will draw from the literature and review the idea of educational systems such as selective education and draw conclusions whether this breaks down barriers of class or reinforces them.

Teaching Practice 1 and 2: Backgrounds

Teaching Practice 1 (TP1) was undertaken in a rural Lincolnshire grammar school where selection by ability is still dominant. The majority of the students at TP1 are transported in from roughly a 20 mile radius. Ofsted (2011) characterises the school as having 'A well-below-average proportion of students that have special educational needs and/or disabilities and the proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is low.' This could arguable show one, of many, reasons why the school has high records of overall attainment. It was well known that within the schools that the students came from predominantly more affluent families with careers such as Doctors, Lawyers, Academics and Armed Force Specialists. Experiences of the school showed that student's behaviour and attitude to work are strong and they are there to achieve.

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Comment: Be careful of unevidenced statements such as these in academic work

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In contrast to TP1, Teaching Practice 2 (TP2) was undertaken in a rural secondary comprehensive school in a relatively deprived corner of Lincolnshire. Ofsted (2010) highlight 'the percentage of students entitled to a free school meal is broadly average' but 'over one third of students are identified as having special educational needs' which is classed as higher than average. The area of TP2 has been adversely affected by the latest economic conditions with many losing their jobs. A minority of students at the school will go onto Higher Education although the majority will work in the agricultural and tourist surroundings.

Comment: Again you should need to situate this with "if recent post-school trends continue then ..."

What does this mean?

Having separate schools for different social classes goes back to the origins of British education (Gaine and George 1999:144; Bartlett and Burton 2012:289). Social class has long been a critical element in school achievement, although a century ago this was barely seen as a problem (Gaine and George 1999:122). Not surprisingly the schools topping the league tables were private schools, remaining grammar schools and other selective schools (Ellis and Tod 2009:15), and more than a decade into the 21st century, selective and private schools still remain dominantly at the top of league tables.

Bartlett and Burton (2012:255) testify how 'pupils at different types of school achieve different levels of success in public examinations.' In the case of TP1 and TP 2 this certainly is the case. Attainment at the selective grammar was 96% A*-C (incl English and Maths) whereas at the no-selective school, overall attainment was 34% A*-C. It is perhaps

important to note that grammar schools in this area do attract the more able students so secondary comprehensives and academies are left disadvantaged because of this system.

Working-class students are more likely to attend state schools rather than private and, even with the state sector, they are more likely to be in schools in poorer neighbourhoods with fewer resources (Leathwood and Hutchings 2003:145). A decade on from this and it is perhaps not as true anymore, schools have received additional funding through the Pupil Premium and all its predecessor names that has given schools additional funding to help raise attainment. On TP 2, the pupil premium is spent wisely on a range of initiatives and resources that help support students and you can visibly see how the money is spent. In contrast, grammar schools perhaps are disadvantaged by their high ability entrance as most students are dominantly from middle-class backgrounds and very few students come to the school who are entitled to receive the pupil premium – therefore the school gets less money and a more traditional approach to teaching is always undertaken. In TP 2 however, there are resources to help students learn in a plethora of ways.

It is also important to look at the background of the students from those attending selective establishments to those who are allocated a school via the catchment area system. What has been more notable in relation to TP1 is the amount of parents that already have Higher Education qualifications and it would be ignorant to rule this out as a factor. Parents with degrees will naturally also expect their children to gain degrees and thus, the home environment will be considerably tougher to that of a home with parents who have no higher education qualifications; albeit, there will many exceptions to this rule as parents naturally want their children to achieve. This idea is emphasised by Long et al (2011:83-84) who suggests that children of less educated parents tend to perform more poorly in school and complete fewer years of education compared to children of better educated parents.

From experiences of TP 1, there were many teachers who would make comments that certain students should not be there and they passed the 11 Plus exam either by additional tuition or by good luck. In the work of Coe et al (2008:21) he looks holistically at 'the mis/allocation of selection' (Appendix I). From the graph it shows 4 quartiles justifying those who passed the 11 Plus exam. What is interesting from this graph is the quartile represented as 'passed who should not have' and this graph shows that 11% of those in selective education should technically not be there. This in a sense would support the

statements the teachers make about certain students being in the wrong place. What was perhaps more interesting was that these students also stuck out in lessons with lower expected grades and struggling to keep up with the workload expected of a Grammar School student.

The experiences of TP1 and TP2 have really shown a stark contrast in two educational systems that are meant to be of benefit to the working class. Whether that is true or not leads much to be debated. There are however many injustices within the educational system, even so when considering how fair entrance exams are. One question that could be asked though is, if middle-class children failed to get into a selective education establishment, would the parents then allow their child to attend state schools or would there be an increase in those attending private education?

Comment: You have situated your literature well in the placement school experience and raised some good questions. You might enjoy Melissa Benn's book on "School Wars" which also asks the question if public schools were banned would this impact on the state sector in a positive way? cf the research by Floud and Raey.

Impact upon Future Practice:

To conclude, we must seek out opportunities to explore the relevance of class within our individual schools, classes, groups and almost certainly, one to one sessions. It is clear that students work in different ways and their backgrounds and family life contribute, significantly, to how they are adaptable in school. As professional teachers, we need to be secure in not only our pedagogic knowledge but also our pastoral knowledge to enable us to foster good working relationships with students and make them enjoy, achieve and feel safe in the learning environments we manage. Issues such as parents being out of work can have more of an effect on young people as it is clear young people are aware of their surroundings and perhaps worry more when they know their parents are struggling. Some children have to take more responsibilities on at home such as looking after younger siblings and factors such as this need to be accounted for in the daily school life. They all have an effect upon how well a student can concentrate and ultimately learn and secure new knowledge.

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Social class should never be a hindrance to educational success but, it is something that perhaps needs to be given more attention when considering the school setting and external influences that might prevent students from being able to achieve. Social class has a direct and influential effect on overall educational outcomes. The type of education provider also shows relevance to educational success, but airing on the side of caution, placing students in the wrong type of setting could perhaps be detrimental to their failure?

Some would perhaps call themselves advocates of selective education whilst others would certainly denounce it as a way for the middle class to assert more authority over the less illustrious working-class population. Students can achieve given the right educational setting, but more importantly, students need to be able to want to achieve and feel capable of achieving. Can this be possible in class divided society – where educational outcomes are almost determined from the moment you are born? Is though perhaps the home environment that is the issue? Vygotsky believed that children build up or construct their own meaning and understanding of their environment (Long et al. 2011:39) and from this, the reader would ascertain that whatever the background the child is born into, that children would grow up that distinctiveness built into them.

Whilst this country and world is shackled in a class divided system, attitudes are unlikely to change if there are perceived pathways for certain groups within society. Whilst there is a class divided system, this will only serve to reinforce people attitudes and stigmas will continue to develop. There is a constant fight and struggle to make it, which can be emotionally draining and tiring, but people can make it and change their outcomes. This is something in the work of Reay et al (2010:120) who suggests for the working-class students who make it into the elite Universities, the battle to fit in is tireless not only with the academic challenge but also the 'identify work' that has to take place to fit in.

Social class matters in a world where it should not – educational inequalities are created as an outcome. As teachers, we must strive to counteract these negative influences to give every child a fighting chance in life.

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Appendix I:

Figure 1: *Misallocations of selection: an illustrative example*

