

EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND INEQUALITY

'Educational policy' refers to the plans and strategies for education introduced by government, for example through Acts of Parliament, together with instructions and recommendations to schools and local authorities. Examples of educational policy include the 2010 Academies Act, which made it possible for all state schools to become academies.

Most educational policy is a response to the following issues:

Equal opportunities How far do government policies help to achieve equal opportunities for all pupils? How far do they actually make the inequalities greater?

Selection and choice What types of school should we have? Should schools be able to select their pupils? Should parents be able to choose which school their children attend?

Control of education Who should control schools and what they teach? How much influence should central government, local councils, schools themselves, businesses, teachers, parents and pupils have?

Marketisation and privatisation Should state schools operate like businesses within an 'education market'? Should they be given to private companies to run?

Many educational policies have contributed to maintaining and justifying inequality between classes, genders and ethnic groups. However, certain policies have had some success in reducing inequality. This Topic examines the relationship between inequality and educational policy.

Educational policy in Britain before 1988

Before the industrial revolution in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, there were no state schools. Education was available only to a minority of the population. It was provided by fee-paying schools for the well off, or by the churches and charities for a few of the poor. Before 1833, the state spent no public money on education.

Industrialisation increased the need for an educated workforce, and from the late 19th century the state began to become more involved in education. Reflecting the growing importance of education, the state made schooling compulsory from the ages of 5 to 13 in 1880.

In this period, the type of education children received depended on their class background. Schooling did little to change pupils' ascribed status (the position they were born into). Middle-class pupils were given an academic curriculum to prepare them for careers in the professions or office work.

By contrast, working-class pupils were given a schooling to equip them with the basic numeracy and literacy skills needed for routine factory work and to instil in them an obedient attitude to their superiors.

Selection: the tripartite system

From 1944, education began to be influenced by the idea of meritocracy – that individuals should achieve their status in life through their own efforts and abilities, rather than it being ascribed at birth by their class background.

The 1944 Education Act brought in the tripartite system, so called because children were to be selected and allocated to one of three different types of secondary school, supposedly according to their aptitudes and abilities. These were to be identified by the eleven plus (11+) exam.

- Grammar schools offered an academic curriculum and access to non-manual jobs and higher education. They were for pupils with academic ability who passed the 11+. These pupils were mainly middle-class.
- Secondary modern schools offered a non-academic, 'practical' curriculum and access to manual work for pupils who failed the 11+. These pupils were mainly working-class.

(The third type, technical schools, existed in a few areas only, so in practice it was more a bipartite than a tripartite system.)

Thus, rather than promoting meritocracy, the tripartite system and 11+ reproduced class inequality by channelling the two social classes into two different types of school that offered unequal opportunities. The system also reproduced gender inequality by requiring girls to gain higher marks than boys in the 11+ to obtain a grammar school place.

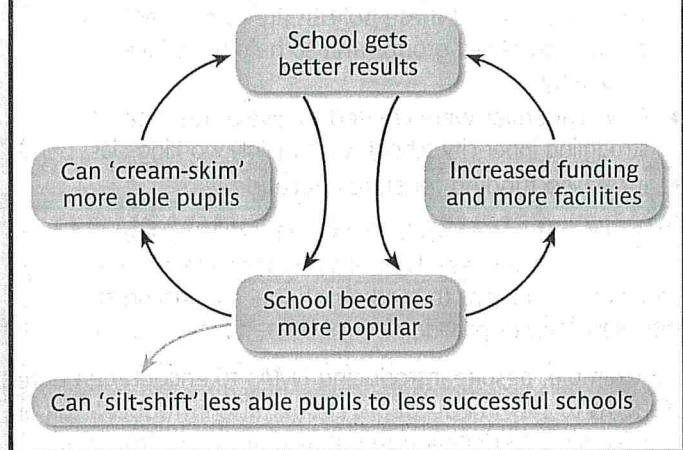
The tripartite system also legitimated (justified) inequality through the ideology that ability is inborn. It was thus argued that ability could be measured early on in life, through the 11+. However, in reality children's environment greatly affects their chances of success.

The comprehensive school system

The comprehensive system was introduced in many areas from 1965 onwards. It aimed to overcome the class divide of the tripartite system and make education more meritocratic. The 11+ was to be abolished along with grammars and secondary moderns, to be replaced by comprehensive schools that all pupils within the area would attend.

However, it was left to the local education authority to decide whether to 'go comprehensive' and not all did so. As a result, the grammar-secondary modern divide still exists in many areas.

Figure 2.7: Marketisation – how success breeds success



are more in demand, because parents are attracted to those with good league table rankings. As Will Bartlett (1993) notes, this encourages:

- **cream-skimming** 'Good' schools can be more selective, choose their own customers and recruit high achieving, mainly middle-class pupils. As a result, these pupils gain an advantage. (See Figure 2.7.)
- **silt-shifting** 'Good' schools can avoid taking less able pupils who are likely to get poor results and damage the school's league table position.

For schools with poor league table positions, the opposite applies: they cannot afford to be selective and have to take less able, mainly working-class pupils, so their results are poorer and they remain unattractive to middle-class parents. The overall effect of league tables is thus to produce unequal schools that reproduce social class inequalities.

Activity Webquest

Marketisation and selection

...go to www.sociology.uk.net



the funding formula

Schools are allocated funds by a formula based on how many pupils they attract. As a result, popular schools get more funds and so can afford better-qualified teachers and better facilities. Again, their popularity allows them to be more selective and attracts more able or ambitious, generally middle-class applicants.

On the other hand, unpopular schools lose income and find it difficult to match the teacher skills and facilities of their more successful rivals. Thus, popular schools with good results and middle-class pupils thrive; unpopular schools fail to attract pupils and their funding is further reduced.

A study of international patterns of educational inequality by the Institute for Public Policy Research (2012) found that competition-oriented education systems such as Britain's produce more segregation between children of different social backgrounds.

Gewirtz: parental choice

Not only do marketisation policies benefit the middle class by creating inequalities between schools. By increasing parental choice, marketisation also advantages middle-class parents, whose economic and cultural capital (see page 23) puts them in a better position to choose 'good' schools for their children.

This is shown in Sharon Gewirtz's (1995) study of 14 London secondary schools. Gewirtz found that differences in parents' economic and cultural capital lead to class differences in how far they can exercise choice of secondary school. She identifies three main types of parents, whom she calls privileged-skilled choosers, disconnected-local choosers and semi-skilled choosers.

Privileged-skilled choosers These were mainly professional middle-class parents who used their economic and cultural capital to gain educational capital for their children. Being prosperous, confident and well educated, they were able to take full advantage of the choices open to them.

These parents possessed cultural capital. They knew how school admissions systems work, for example the importance of putting a particular school as first choice. They had the time to visit schools and the skills to research the options available.

Their economic capital also meant they could afford to move their children around the education system to get the best deal out of it, for example by paying extra travel costs so that their children could attend 'better' schools out of their area.

Disconnected-local choosers These were working-class parents whose choices were restricted by their lack of economic and cultural capital.

They found it difficult to understand school admissions procedures. They were less confident in their dealings with schools, less aware of the choices open to them, and less able to manipulate the system to their own advantage. Many of them attached more importance to safety and the quality of school facilities than to league tables or long-term ambitions.

Distance and cost of travel were major restrictions on their choice of school. Their funds were limited and a place at the nearest school was often their only realistic option for their children.

Analysis and Evaluation

Suggest reasons why working-class parents might be less able to manipulate the education system to their advantage.