

Education and social class

Diane Reay

The common-sense view of modern life is that we are all 'classless' now and that social class no longer counts within education. But is this really true?

Contemporary research demonstrates the power of social class not only in the traditional sense as a dimension of educational stratification, but also as a powerful and vital aspect of both learner and wider social identities. In 2006 a study published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) showed that social mobility in Britain has been steadily declining over the past decade and that, currently, children from middle-class homes are 50% more likely to stay in education after the age of 16 than their working-class counterparts. These findings demonstrate more than a failure of contemporary government policy. They represent

not just the way things are in relation to social class and education, but the way they always have been.

History of social class in education

Andy Green in his survey of the rise of education systems in England, France and the USA singles out England as the most explicit example of the use of schooling to secure dominance over subordinate groups. He argues that the growing middle-class commitment to working-class education in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries 'was different in every conceivable way from their ideals for middle-class

education...it was a way of ensuring that the working classes would acquiesce in middle-class aspirations' (Green 1990). Adam Smith summed up this English middle-class viewpoint regarding working-class education when he wrote over 200 years ago in *The Wealth of Nations*:

An instructed and intelligent people besides are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant one...less apt to be misled into any wanton or unnecessary opposition to the measures of the government (Smith 1785).

For Smith, as well as the vast majority of politicians and intellectuals of the day, the schooling of the working classes was always

Signposts

This article looks at the continuing importance of social class within the English education system. Rather than simply looking at statistical data showing different levels of achievement, Diane Reay explores some of the psychological effects of relative failure on children, particularly those from the working class. Their perceptive comments demonstrate how they feel less valued than other, more successful, children, and how they notice that their accents and use of language are considered less worthy than other forms of speech. You could use the material in this article to help you answer exam questions on differential educational achievement by class, to show how this can have negative psychological effects on students as well as affecting their chances in the employment market. From the point of view of methods, this article demonstrates how in-depth, qualitative research can complement that based on statistical data.

intended to be subordinate and inferior to that of the middle classes: its purpose was to contain and pacify rather than to educate and liberate. Writing about the introduction of state education for all — which happened 100 years after the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* — Jane Miller (1992) asserted that:

The provision of education for working-class children was thought of by and large instrumentally, rather than as likely to contribute to the life possibilities of the children themselves.

When the English state school system was set up in the late nineteenth century, the intention of the dominant classes was still to police and control the working classes rather than to educate them.

Social class in modern education

So historically the working classes have been constructed as the inferior 'other' within education, but what about the present situation? Unfortunately, much of the evidence indicates that the educational system is still focused primarily on middle-class interests. Recent educational policy reform in England, for example, has widened the opportunities of working-class students and boosted their educational attainments. But collective patterns of working-class achievement within education remain sharply different from those of the middle classes, despite the country having had over 100 years of universal state education.

It is not surprising then that education for the working classes has traditionally been about failure. We do not have fluid patterns of social mobility. Despite long-standing characterisations of Britain as a 'meritocratic' society, when it comes to social class mobility, education in the UK is still about social reproduction and reinforcing the status quo. The reasons for this are partly economic. It remains a question of the level of resources — material as well as cultural — that families can bring to their relationship with schooling. But there is also an issue of representation and 'othering' that both feeds into and is fed by social and economic inequalities. The 'working-class scum' of the nineteenth century have become twenty-first century 'chavs'.

Students' perspectives on teaching and learning

What are the consequences of ignoring both this history and the current social and educational context? I am going to draw here on some data from two research projects: a large Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project on students' perspectives on their teaching and learning at secondary school level, and a second smaller study on assessment in primary schools. In the first research project the vast majority of students, particularly those from the working class, talked about a sense of educational worthlessness and feelings that they were not really valued and respected within education (Reay 2005).



Working-class girls — both black and white — worried about being 'no good'

Social inclusion in schooling entails the right to be included — socially, intellectually, culturally and personally. However, nearly all the students in the ESRC study, apart from the middle-class boys, felt they were not really heard in the classroom. While the working-class boys were the most vocal and vociferous group in their opposition to official pedagogic discourses (see Box 1), the working-class girls' sense of alienation was just as raw and tangible (see Box 2). A potent sense of unfairness and unequal treatment can be seen in their attitudes to levels of teacher attention.

Box 1 Working-class boys aged 12–13 talking about schooling

Kenny: Some teachers are a bit snobby, sort of. And some teachers act as if the child is stupid. Because they've got a posh accent. Like they talk without 'innits' and 'mans', like they talk proper English. And they say, 'That isn't the way you talk' — like putting you down. Like I think telling you a different way is sort of good, but I think the way they do it isn't good because they correct you and make you look stupid.

Martin: Those teachers look down on you.

Kenny: Yeah, like they think you're dumb...we don't expect them to treat us like their own children. We're not. But we are still kids. I'd say to them: 'You've got kids. You treat them with love but you don't need to love us. All you need to do is treat us like humans.'

Source: Reay (2005)

Box 2 Working-class girls aged 12–13 talking about schooling

Sharmaine: Sometimes we feel left out.

Sarah: Because you know, teachers are not meant to have favourites.

Sharmaine: You can have, but you can't show it, you know. That's unfair to the other people.

Sarah: Because there's a whole class there and you want to pick that particular person, and you are nice to that one, and the rest you don't care about.

Alex: But everyone has to be the same.

Sharmaine: He needs to treat everyone equal.

Source: Reay (2005)

Box 3 Assessment and domination

Hannah: I'm really scared about the SATs. Ms O'Brien [a teacher at the school] came and talked to us about our spelling and I'm no good at spelling and David [the class teacher] is giving us times tables tests every morning and I'm hopeless at times tables so I'm frightened I'll do the SATs and I'll be a nothing.

DR: I don't understand Hannah. You can't be a nothing.

Hannah: Yes, you can, 'cause you have to get a level like a level 4 or a level 5, and if you're no good at spellings and times tables, you don't get those levels, and so you're a nothing.

DR: I'm sure that's not right.

Hannah: Yes it is 'cause that's what Ms O'Brien was saying.

Source: Reay and Wiliam (1999)

Social class and assessment

In both the boys' and girls' words we can see some of the injuries of class that are enshrined and perpetuated through educational policy. But what is particularly stark is the damage that is generated by the increasing surveillance and regulation of students' learning, enacted through testing and assessment practices. There is a long history of assessment policies in education that are allegedly aimed at raising the achievement of working-class children. However, in practice such assessment procedures often have the

effect of fixing failure in these children. The two dialogues in Boxes 3 and 4 highlight the ways in which assessment can become 'a means of control and a method of domination' (Reay and Wiliam 1999).

The educational value system that produces middle-class children like Stuart as academic stars (see Box 4), or even relatively successful level 3 and 4 students, simultaneously generates a working class that is represented within the new testing regimes as incapable of having a self with value. They are reduced to Hannah's 'nothing'. While

Box 4 The threat of growing up 'naughty'

Sharon: I think I'll get a 2, only Stuart will get a 6.

DR: So if Stuart gets a 6, what will that say about him?

Sharon: He's heading for a good job and a good life, and it shows he's not gonna be living on the streets and stuff like that.

DR: And if you get a level 2, what will that say about you?

Sharon: Um, I might not have a good life in front of me, and I might grow up and do something naughty or something like that.

Source: Reay and Wiliam (1999)

entitlement and access to resources for creating a self with value are central to how the middle classes are formed, the consequence is too often a residual working class that feels worthless. This is further revealed in Sharon's view of class destinies and how they are tied to academic achievement. This shows how class has entered psychological categories as a way of socially regulating the normative and the pathological.



Students' learning is increasingly tested and regulated in schools

Both of the working-class girls quoted in Boxes 3 and 4 have already internalised an understanding of their low achievement as one that is pathological — ingrained and beyond fixing. As their remarks illustrate, at the micro-level of the classroom there are regular glimpses of the normalising and regulatory function of testing on children. However, although children express anxieties across class differences, the research found that it was not the white middle-class boys who were panicking about being exposed as 'no good' through the new assessment procedures. Rather, it was the black children and white working-class girls who were agonising that they would be 'a nothing'. And the risks of finding they have little value are disproportionately high for such working-class girls. These girls, in the context of schooling, inhabit what we might call a 'psychic economy of class' defined by fear, anxiety and unease, where failure looms large and success is elusive.

Conclusion

The range of new government initiatives and policy changes in education that claim to address equality, freedom and choice do not necessarily add up to greater equality and

fairness. Indeed, much of the evidence cited in this article appears to indicate that they do not. Rather, we can see the impossibility of assuming a successful learner identity for many working-class students. The key question that we need to ask is: 'What progress has been made towards social justice and equality in education for the working classes over the last 100 years?' The answer has to be remarkably little.

The most recent statistical data show that the educational gap between the classes has widened over the last 10 years (ONS 2005). We are now much more credentialled (i.e. we have more qualifications) than we were then — but there is still a worrying percentage of British working-class people who leave school with no qualifications at all. The attainment gap between the classes in education is just as great as it was 50 or 100 years ago.

This attainment gap mirrors the growing material gap between the rich and the poor in UK society. In 1985 the best paid people in the UK earned 42 times more than the worst paid; by 2005 they earned 400 times more. Against a policy backdrop of continuous change and endless new initiatives it appears that, in relation to social class, the more things

change the more they stay the same. Social class is the one problem that comes back to haunt the education system again and again. It is the key area of educational inequality on which educational policy continues to have little impact.

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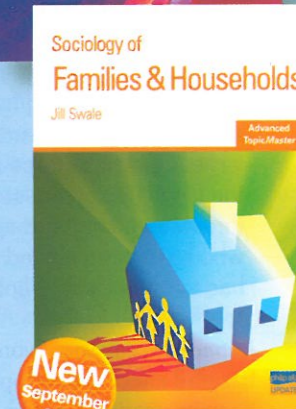
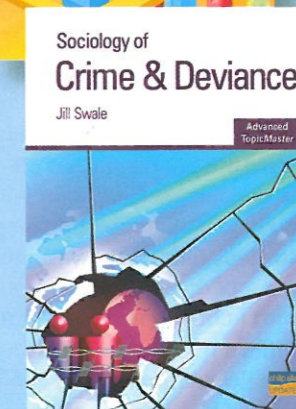
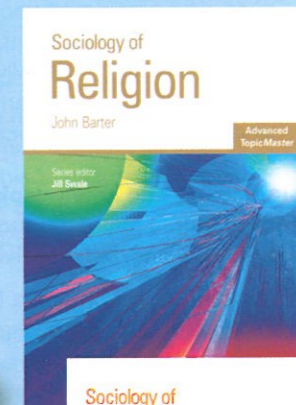
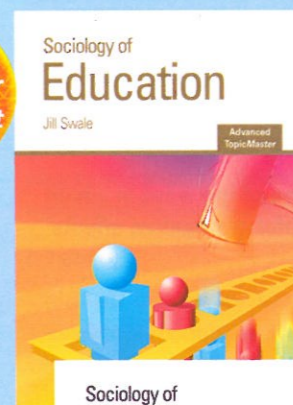
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