

## Education, Economics and Enterprise: 'What's social class got to do with it?

Of the 50 most cited articles in the journal *Sociology* in December 2010 20 had a social class focus but only one was researching the educational system and it was also the only article of the 50 looking at the educational system. For Barack Obama: speaking in 2010 'education is the economic issue of our time' but education in the UK doesn't appear to be much of a sociological issue! However, the oversight does not just operate one way - while *Sociology* appears to have sidelined Education, Education has also sidelined *Sociology* and in particular this has increasingly meant that social class, a central concern within *Sociology*, has, apart from a few brief periods, been marginal within Education. So the *British Education Research Journal*, a prestigious mainstream Education journal has published 19 articles on social class in education over the last 30 years. (as opposed to 27 on science education over the same period). I want to look at the repercussions of this neglect in relation to social justice in our new age of austerity.

The conundrum those of us on the Left have to struggle with is that social class is no longer seen as a social justice issue, social class inequalities have become naturalized – they are just how things are. This naturalization of socio-economic inequalities is most clearly evidenced in the recent actions of the Liberal-Conservative coalition government. In November 2010 Theresa May scrapped the socio-economic duty from the Equalities Act. This duty demanded public bodies consider the impact of policy on people from poorer backgrounds, in the same way they currently need to consider the impact of policy decisions on women, minorities and disabled people. The fallacy that Bernstein pointed out 50 years ago, that education can

compensate for society has been superseded by the fallacy that aspirations can compensate for social class. So the dominant discourse is that anyone no matter how disadvantaged can succeed if they want success enough. The dominant belief is that an ill-resourced social background doesn't matter if you work hard enough. And if ability and effort are all that count now then social class disadvantage has become an anachronism. The focus becomes one of an aspiration gap rather than an opportunity deficit in which individual and cultural attitudes are seen to cause educational underachievement rather than wider social and systemic failures and inequalities. This eliding and downgrading of social class has ironically occurred at an historical juncture when an increasingly stratified society has produced unprecedented levels of poverty and wealth.

As Lauder et al (2009) point out, the very importance attributed to education by parents, teachers and policy makers also worked against sociology of education as a discipline. It attracted too much public, and in particular Government, attention. In the late 1970s and early 80s when neo-marxist perspectives were dominant, that attention turned to censure. However, the political assault on radical educational thinking, and in particular, work on social class within sociology of education, led to timidity and a propensity to play safe. As a consequence a practical pragmatism invaded education in the late 1990s through into the 2000s with the growth of political pressure for research in education to be policy-relevant and useful, and a focus on the classroom that tends to exclude sociology of education and, indeed, the parent discipline. What emerged out of the 1990s was a widespread perspective that only the instrumental value of educational research was of importance. As a consequence the new commonsense was that most educational research should have a practical use for teachers and

others involved in education. The emphasis was increasingly on uncritical and technicist research preoccupied with what works. Key in this development had been the growing dominance of school effectiveness and improvement which policy makers increasingly turned to because its explanations, based on theories of management, supported their own assumptions (Lauder et al 2009). School effectiveness and school improvement, together with a preoccupation with what was often a futile attempt to impact on policy has resulted in an empiricist, theory-light discipline. Yet all the recent research, including that of Peter Mortimer, a leading light of school improvement and effectiveness in the 1980s and 90s, shows that schools contribute only 20 to 25% to children's achievement levels. It is wider social and economic forces that have the major influence. It is here we desperately need complex, nuanced and strongly theorised research that teases out the tangled and convoluted processes that result in educational success and failure and avoid simplistic crude analyses that either blame parents or teachers for educational underachievement.

Yet, just at an historical juncture when we need to develop complex sociological understandings of the processes underpinning educational success and failure we have dominant educational and political discourses which concentrate on the cheap, crude and easy. Roger Dale described the application of theory to education as 'theoretical painting by numbers' while Stephen Ball writes about educational theory as finger pointing. And what appears to have happened is that theory has become a concessionary afterthought rather than central to the educational research enterprise. One ironic consequence is that at the same time as there has been a disappearance of the working class hero in sociology we have seen the emergence in Education of the heroic headteacher, an iconic usually male figure who can turn failing schools round regardless of the

social context. The claims of school effectiveness studies were read by Government for recentering the school as the focus of causation and explanation of student achievement. The prevalent lack of engagement with sociological – or any other theory in effectiveness research – left it largely trapped in a logic of common sense which allowed it, by and large, to be appropriated into the Right's hegemonic project. Shain and Ozga writing in 2000 argued that the emerging paradigm of research in Education throughout the 1990s resulted in research that was simple, relevant, useful, rendered sociology of education as irrelevant, and was totally disconnected from Sociology.

But as I stressed earlier, linked to, and compounding the trend to marginalise sociology of education within education has been the neglect of the relationship between the educational system and social class inequalities, that used to be a central concern within sociology of education.

While the relationship between the educational system and social class inequalities has traditionally been one of the most fundamental issues in the sociology of education, changes within sociology itself have seen many sociologists of education move away from categorical analyses towards discourse, and more recently identity theory. This has meant social class is no longer a central concern within education or even sociology of education, where there is far more work on gender than social class. Even the recent popularity of intersectionality has seen more work on intersections of gender and ethnicity than either of these with social class. These theoretical moves were compounded by the claims of school effectiveness studies which were read by Government as justification for keeping social class off the educational agenda.

However, while social class has been neglected by educationalists and policy makers alike in the real world its impact has continued apace. A research report published earlier this year by Bristol University academics found that working class children in Britain were less likely to be socially mobile than in any other developed nation. In 2011 we have a highly polarized, segregated educational system, and the processes of segregation and polarization both within schools and between them are increasing not diminishing. So just to give you a snapshot from my own research. The current project I am involved in is taking place in Luton state schools where a major concern of the working class children interviewed is their school environment which they unanimously talk about as ‘rubbish’ and ‘crap’:

If I had to think of one word to describe our school I’d say trampy because like we were supposed to get improvements but then it got stopped and the school was bad anyway but it’s got even more trampy and its all overcrowded (Habib 2011)

In contrast, one of the public school boys I interviewed in 2009 spoke of ‘brilliant facilities, state of the art technology and one-to-one support for learning. He concluded:

We know we are the great and the good, that’s obvious, what’s less clear is which of us are going to be the leaders among the front runners.

In an ESRC funded research project on middle class parents sending their children to state comprehensives we found inner city schools where the

headteachers told us they had no white middle class students and a significant number of schools that had 95% plus ethnic minority intake. But as I stated earlier polarization does not just exist between schools but within them. A growing emphasis on internal processes of setting and streaming result in fairly homogeneous class groupings. So white middle class students talk of initial fears of ‘chavs’ and ‘rough kids’ but as Olivia points out, for the most part, by year 9:

We are all in the top sets and they are nearly all in the bottom sets  
(Olivia)

Alan Milburn, the Coalition Government’s Social Mobility Czar believes that parent power is the answer to our static social mobility. I’d argue that parent power has become part of the problem rather than providing any solutions. The rhetoric of classlessness works to gloss over any power differentials among parents and treats them as if they have equal access to resources and choices. But differences in power and status among parents is growing apace as the gap between rich and poor in UK society increases. One result is the working classes are left with the choices the middle and upper classes don’t want, and further more blamed for not being able to overcome poverty, hardship and generations of educational failure in a climate when the state is providing less and less support.

So to conclude I believe that in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain the status quo is rotten to its core. And I want to underline this with a powerful quote from my colleague at Cambridge, Priya Gopal:

Without redressing an economic system that enriches a minority by disadvantaging many, promoting social mobility through "aspiration" foments division, not cohesion. When some communities are accused of failing to integrate or receiving preferential treatment, the economic order of our times – with its obscene income differential between the top earners and the rest – is let off the hook. Britain is sleepwalking not into a failed multiculturalism, but to a profound and damaging economic segregation. (Priya Gopal, The Guardian 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2011)

And within Education policy and discourse - aspirations, social mobility and meritocracy are being reconstructed as the new panacea - in an instrumental appropriation similar to that of school effectiveness and improvement in the 1980s and 1990s.

The new commonsense is that educational achievement is all about ability and effort rather than wealth and social status in a fabrication which sanitises social mobility as the answer despite the fact it barely exists in the UK context, and sees either working class families, hard pressed teachers or increasingly now – elite universities, as the problems standing in the way of a more meritocratic society.

Sociological understandings of educational processes have always been more nuanced and allow us to see that in a deeply unequal society such as the UK neither raising aspirations nor focusing on social mobility are answers to the vast inequalities that permeate our educational system any more than school improvement was 20 years ago. So I want to end with both an assertion and a plea. The assertion is that particularly in the hugely socially-divided, Cameron-Clegg led Britain of 2011, it is more important than ever to recognise social class as an aspect of identity that infuses all of our educational experiences and social lives. The plea is for academics to see researching social class injustices in education as central to Sociology of Education, and for policy makers to view alleviating social class inequalities as key to raising educational achievement.