Class, Education and Mindset

DAVID ALLAN

Edge Hill University
david.allan@edgehill.ac.uk

In this think piece, I discuss the implications of class in relation to mindset and educational opportunities. I wish to illustrate how attitudes – particularly those influenced by social positionality – can be a significant contributor to education, employment, and social status. This interest stems from my previous research in educational disaffection and student marginalisation.

Notwithstanding previous political rhetoric that class difference was beginning to wane (e.g. John Major's claim in 1990 that Britain was transitioning towards a 'genuinely classless society,' Tony Blair's 1999 proclamation that 'the class war is over' and David Cameron's concept of a 'big society'), it is clear that in British society today the class war is far from over. Indeed, an ever-increasing gulf between the rich and the poor perpetuates the problem of social inequality (Elliot Major and Machin, 2018; Savage, 2015). Whilst this is a long-held problem in Britain, fresh impetus is clearly needed to challenge it, and Diane Reay's (2006, p. 289) suggestion over a decade ago that 'in a social context of growing inequalities there is a need to reinvigorate class analysis, not bury it' is perhaps even more relevant today. The current social stratification in the UK, albeit arguably more complex than its historical counterpart, has, on the one hand, facilitated seemingly smoother transitions for social mobility through measures such as widening participation; yet, it is also fraught with new challenges, such as the ever-widening gap between the wealthy and the poor.

1. Class and education

Social disadvantage in schooling plays a major role in restricting individual agency, and education often becomes focused on the *reproduction* of capital (Bourdieu, 1992), rather than acting as a mechanism for facilitating a space for its *production* (Apple, 1982). The role of education in society is significant as school (and other educational institutions) can act as a microcosm. However, it can also contribute to how that society functions.

Schools, it is claimed, reproduce the legitimated cultural capital of those in the dominant groups (Bourdieu, 1992); for example, the middle classes. In this way, such capital is readily accepted whilst for others, school is a challenging environment that resonates little with their social surroundings. Thus, the cultural capital 'inherited from the family milieu' can dictate the level of success a child will see in school (Reay et al. 2005, p.19) and the impact of this can be seen in post-compulsory education decisions, whereupon opportunities are, again, often constrained by the parameters of social status.

It has long been argued that education, at least in our Western society, prepares working-class children for a working-class lifestyle, often involving heavy manual labour (e.g. Willis, 1978). According to Apple (1982, p. 42), schools are 'agents in the creation and recreation of a dominant culture' and this situation is perpetuated throughout the education system. For example, despite many attempts at widening participation, far too many individuals feel that university study is not for them. A class-based mindset can therefore route an individual along a particular avenue in life and can be as detrimental to the class gulf as opportunities that favour the middle classes. Whilst cultural capital is at the heart of facilitating middle-class progression, we can also evidence differences in attitudes that are counter-productive for many people. Of course, many working-class people do attend university – and more in today's world than in previous decades – but in too many situations these are the learning mavericks who break the mould. Indeed, many must amend their outlook in order to progress and even change their behaviours in order to gain acceptance. This 'playing the game' we often view as upward social mobility but of course those who choose not to play this game can be seriously disadvantaged. That is, not only do they not have the right start in life, but they are adamant that their pathway cannot veer that way. Thus, the role of school as a site of reproduction is problematic in that it is perpetuating class divisions and failing to widen thinking in many who succumb to the class-based mindset.

Where school is a site of reproduction, an individual's place in society is reaffirmed. Career pathways that are regarded as more advantageous than the average job – the medical or law professions, for example – are heavily dominated by the middle classes as schooling for these areas often involves the acquisition, and quite often the recognition, of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1992). However, for schools this is problematized by the notion of a lack of production and the failing role of the school in facilitating this. Moreover, as a result of poor agency and hidden inequalities, many young people inadvertently perpetuate the problem by failing to use their education as a means of production. Of course, this is not their fault and it is extremely difficult to counter such lack of opportunities when what is often needed is the cultural capital in the first place in order to accurately identify a problem.

Many working-class young people do not 'buy into' education because it does not facilitate a route to a place in society that they can relate to and one's mindset can contribute to this process: many careers are perceived to be beyond the realm of actuality. Indeed, it is also often the case that some societal leverage can be acquired more effectively through actions that may counter schooling, such as wanting to leave school as early as possible in order to get a job. Whilst these measures may appear anti-intellectual, they can be both reassuring and reaffirming if they appear to result in the securement of greater economic capital and/or an increase in social capital. Indeed, in the case of individuals who become NEET[1], whilst there is a lack of economic capital, there is often a trade-off as social capital takes priority. Furthermore, for some in this situation the lack of economic capital can be a coercive force towards crime in order to restore the balance. Agency, then, is reclaimed in one form or another and often the rejection of school is, in itself, an act towards achieving this.

Schools have a role to play in reducing inequality, of course, but it is also important to show that we should not place all the weight on them; schools merely form 'part of a larger framework of social relations that are structurally exploitative' (Apple, 1982, p. 10). What schools do well, however, is replicate that exploitative structure.

---

[1] Not in Education, Employment or Training

2. Class-based mindset

In addition to education, there is a societal role involved in the reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu, 1992; Reay, 2017), where positionality is usually established early on in life and has limited flexibility in its parameters with regards to social mobility. It is here that we can see the influence of mindset on employment opportunities, educational success, and movement in social status. In many of my previous studies with marginalised young people there is often an identifiable mindset that perpetuates this position. Schooling – and sometimes more specifically the academic route – is rejected because it fails to resonate with social experiences. As such, becoming a doctor or a solicitor is something that other people do – *the posh kids*, *the rich kids*, *the clever kids*. Aspirations, then, are closely tied to mindset and social milieu. In a study published in 2014, one student explained that for her, learning needed to be related to *her* world:

> I like doing things where I can see what I've done at the end of it – like colouring hair. You know when you get it right…and it makes you feel good. For me, that's learning because I can use it again (Emma – cited in Allan, 2014).

Similarly, in another study, a student comments on her employment opportunities because her experiences of working in an alternative learning setting resonate with her social world:

> Being here has made me think about my future … In school, you're just expected to do what they say; they don't think about what *we* want (Jade – cited in Allan, 2015).

The final example I will give here again typifies the responses wherein young people have been marginalised by an education system that fails to value their experiences:

> At school…I know it's our education and all that, but you just learn about different subjects. It doesn't really mean anything. But here…this is good …this is what I need to learn to get a job (Emily – cited in Allan and Duckworth, 2018).

In the examples above, and in many more in each study, the young people's attitudes to learning are influenced by their class-based experiences. Of course, this does not apply to

everyone in this situation but there is a notable trend in that, like the boys as far back as Willis's (1978) study, education is class driven and even counter-scholarly activities can be prioritised if there is stronger social relevance (Humphrey et al., 2004).

Whilst schooling is rejected, and perceived as representative of a social existence that is implausible (and often viewed as beyond the students' capabilities), it is also the institution where change can happen; indeed, student empowerment can lead to more openness to using education as a means to grow intellectually and to create opportunities for social mobility. Schools are not only institutions of *reproduction*, in that they can reaffirm status and reinforce social inequalities through the replication of the social division of labour, but also apparatuses for the *production* of knowledge. Otherwise, as Apple (1982, p. 27) notes, individuals leaving school 'would, in fact, remain within the economic trajectories established by their parents.'

The challenge for education is to educate beyond the curriculum as many students will perpetuate their own status within both society and their school. This is sometimes a delicate task as individuals may feel that their agency is at stake but where marginalisation occurs as a result of social and educational exclusion, self-marginalisation will only exacerbate the problem.

This is not, of course, to lay the blame on young people as agency is clearly wrapped up in structural parameters. However, as individuals' experiences are interwoven in their initial societal positioning, it is arguably important to create life chances through education, metacognition and critical self-reflection in order to facilitate more informed choices for the future (Allan, 2015; Apple, 1982; Reay, 2017).

References

Allan, D. (2014) Dealing with disaffection: The influence of work-based learning on 14–16-year-old students' attitudes to school. *Empirical Research in Vocational Education and Training* 6 (10), pp. 1–18. doi.org/10.1186/s40461-014-0010-4

Allan, D. (2015) Mediated disaffection and reconfigured subjectivities: The impact of a vocational learning environment on the re-engagement of 14–16-year-olds. *International Journal on School Disaffection* 11 (2), 45–65. doi.org/10.18546/IJSD.11.2.03

Allan D. and Duckworth, V. (2018) Voices of disaffection: Disengaged and disruptive youths or agents of change and self-empowerment? *British Journal of Special Education.* 45 (1), 43–65. doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12201

Apple, M. W. (1982) *Education and Power*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. & Waquant, L. (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Elliot Major, L. and Machin, S. (2018) *Social Mobility and its Enemies*. London: Pelican.

Humphrey, N., Charlton, J. P. and Newton, I. (2004) The developmental roots of disaffection?' Educational Psychology, 24 (5), 579–594.

Reay, D. (2006) The Zombie Stalking English Schools: Social Class and Educational Inequality British *Journal of Educational Studie*s vol 54, no 3, 288–307.

Reay**,** D., David, M. E. and Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education. London*: Trentham Books.

Reay, D. (2017) *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Savage, M. (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century*. London: Pelican.

Willis, P. (1978) *Leaning to Labour.* London: Routledge.