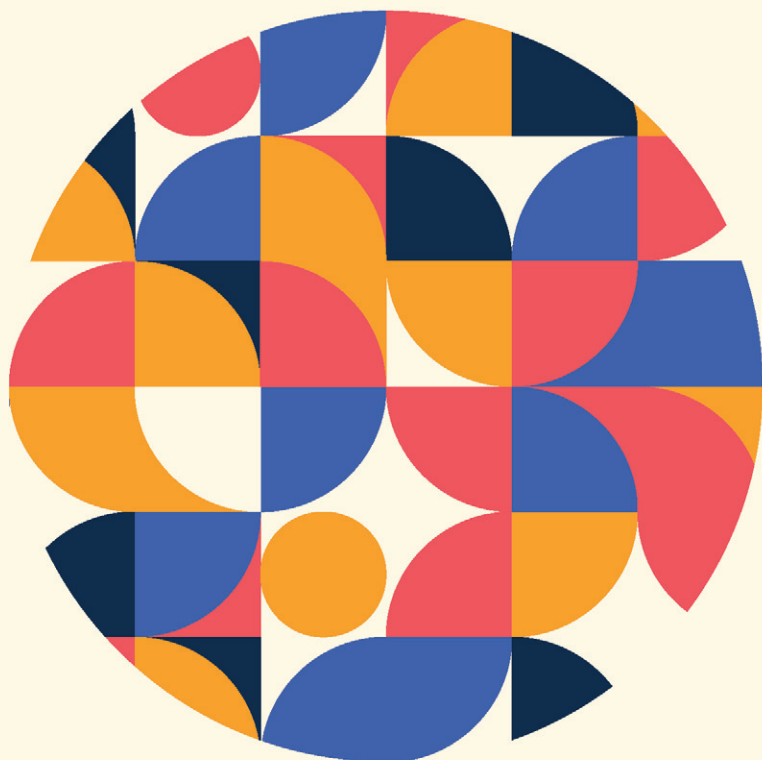


**EMERALD STUDIES IN THE
SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION**



Working-Class Schooling in Post- Industrial Britain

Only Schools and Courses

ALEX McINCH

Working-Class Schooling in Post-Industrial Britain

Emerald Studies in the Sociology of Education

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This series aims to provide a clear understanding of sociological approaches to the study of education, drawing on a range of scales and contexts around the key dilemmas of education, society and social change. Books in the series contribute to knowledge in differing national and historical contexts and explore ‘big ideas’ such as inequality, power, and identity and their application to contemporary educational issues and debates.

Working-Class Schooling in Post-Industrial Britain: Only Schools and Courses

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For Mum and Dad
With love and respect
Rest in Peace*

*For Zachary and Amelie
Spread your wings and fly high in the sky
Love Dad x*

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Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables	<i>ix</i>
List of Abbreviations	<i>xi</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xiii</i>
Chapter 1 Introduction – The Research Problem	<i>1</i>
Chapter 2 Why Social Class Has Always Mattered: A (Re)Conceptualisation	<i>9</i>
Chapter 3 Developments in the UK Educational Policy Context	<i>27</i>
Chapter 4 Sociology of Education in the UK	<i>47</i>
Chapter 5 The Research Site: Grange Hill	<i>63</i>
Chapter 6 The Grange Hill Educational Field	<i>87</i>
Chapter 7 Pupil Habitus and Capital at Grange Hill	<i>107</i>
Chapter 8 Conclusions	<i>129</i>
References	<i>135</i>
Index	<i>153</i>

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List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1.	The Grange Hill Locale.	72
Figure 2.	School Behaviour Ethos.	73
Figure 3.	Well-being Board.	74
Table 1.	ONS-SEC Analytic Classes Nested Version.	10

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List of Abbreviations

BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
EAZ	Education Action Zone
EIC	Excellence in Cities
EMA	Educational Maintenance Allowance
EPA	Education Priority Area
eFSM	Eligibility for Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HND	Higher National Diploma
KS3	Key Stage 3
KS4	Key Stage 4
LAC	Looked After Children
LEA	Local Education Authority
NC	National Curriculum
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
ONS-SEC	Office for National Statistics, Socio-Economic Classifications
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
PAG	Poverty Action Group
PDG	Pupil Deprivation Grant
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator

xii List of Abbreviations

SLT	Senior Leadership Team
TA	Teaching Assistant
TLR	Teaching and Learning Responsibility
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

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Chapter 1

Introduction – The Research Problem

Since the inception of the formalised and supposedly egalitarian British education system, a social class war has implicitly played out that has culminated in the middle classes utilising educational establishments and pathways as the vanguard to prosperous employment and comfortable lifestyles. Diane Reay (2001) asserts that the (English) educational system is still prey to what she terms as ‘Tawney’s curse’, which argues the prevalence of the UK education system being organised along lines of social class. Indeed, whilst social class and its structures have long been contested as theoretical concepts, class-based analyses of the sociology of education is still fertile ground for researchers because class-based studies impart critical influences on life chances in western world democracies (see Tomlinson, 2001).

In the United Kingdom, it is widely accepted that individuals with the highest level of qualifications will earn more income throughout their career lifespan, with annual data released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) periodically confirming this.¹ Correspondingly, statistics have consistently demonstrated that the biggest participants in the pursuit of educational qualifications have been the middle classes; which more often than not culminates in middle-class students outperforming their working-class counterparts at school and university level (see Ianelli & Paterson, 2006). Thus, even though a formal education system should promote equality of opportunity and potential for upward social mobility (i.e. movement between social class groupings based on achieved status characteristics), it has long been thought of that the intellectual and ruling elite still manage to preserve their social positioning (Bourdieu, 1984), further perpetuating what Sally Tomlinson has described as ‘the myth of meritocracy’ (2001, p. 267). Even at the time of writing this book, a cursory glance into the beneficiaries of our ‘high quality’ (higher) education system reveals that our universities are disproportionately over-represented by students from higher socio-economic groupings. Perhaps even more disconcerting is the monopoly that private (also known as public) schooling has over-the-top jobs in the United Kingdom. For example, periodic evidence over the last 20 years or so re-affirms that senior army generals, senior judges, top civil servants, financiers and company managers have been privately educated (see: Davies, 2000; Kirby, 2016).

¹Whether one chooses to accept ONS data capture as reliable is another story.

2 *Working-Class Schooling in Post-Industrial Britain*

To try to combat this monopoly, in the twentieth century the UK education system has undergone expansion at several different junctures in order to foster educational equality and progression in the hope that inequalities further up the chain (i.e. higher education) will also be redressed. There have been some modest successes, with Tomlinson (2001) noting the 1950s as a time where the children of many manual workers migrated into well-paid employment in the bureaucratic public services. This idea that educational expansion reduces inequality is neatly underscored by notions of modernisation, and some 40 years ago, structural functionalists such as Talcot Parsons predicted that the development of industrialised societies was predicated upon the workforce becoming more educated. Consequently, this set the tone for individuals gaining employment based on achieved rather than ascribed characteristics through formal qualifications.

Whilst this ideology and approach to education was lauded by many at the time, there has been an ever-increasing gap in performance between working- and middle-class pupils in the United Kingdom. One of the main reasons for this stems from changing governments and their not-so-different political agendas. For example, new labour ideology in the 1990s was guilty of trying to protect the now established (and sizable) middle classes by adopting conservative principles such as individualism. Nevertheless, at the time of writing this book, there is a long and chequered history of class-based educational attainment and progression featuring as a hot topic for researchers, policy makers and the media alike. Many column inches in the UK media are annually devoted to reporting an increasing gap in university applications between the growing middle classes and the dwindling working classes. This has recently been attributed to the debacle over the (now previous) Coalition Government's decision to raise tuition fees to (a cap of) £9,250 per annum and more recent conservative educational policy scrapping maintenance grants for students from disadvantaged backgrounds back in 2015.² It is thought a fusion of the two have significantly reduced the opportunity for poorer students to attend higher education (see: Pells, 2016).

Academics have long argued that the issue of disadvantage begins far sooner in the educational process. Indeed, it is continually reported that pupils in receipt of Free School Meals (eFSM) (which is the accepted proxy for measuring economic disadvantage and one which I will unpack later) do not perform as well as those not in receipt of eFSM – and are significantly less likely to apply to university. Demie (2014) has pointed out that in the United Kingdom, whilst poverty is the root cause of underachievement, the problem is more prevalent for white British pupils than for most Black and Minority Ethnic Groupings (BAME). Demie has also explained that there is the wider issue of how the government and the media have tended to deal with and report this respectively. A government crusade at reporting middle-class educational achievement has tended to overshadow what is a perennial problem. The problem is then further exacerbated by vitriolic social

²And this remains the case for both the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 academic sessions (See: gov.uk, 2020).

commentary and media rhetoric that seeks to vilify working-class people. One of the most notable class assassinations was from British historian Theodore Dalrymple (2001). His analysis of working-class people has unearthed an over-reliance on welfarism which is underscored by self-destructive behaviours. Describing parents as ‘deadbeats’ and children ‘feral’, Dalrymple argues that both the welfare state and the education system are equally to blame. This is further compounded by different factions of the media who have continued to negatively portray working-class people. Two brief examples from British television are the comedy sketch show ‘Little Britain’, where the character Vicky Pollard is depicted as an unemployed, uneducated girl who lives on a council estate – clearly embodying every working-class stereotype. The other is the way that current affairs and consumer television programmes depict working-class people as poor and unable to participate in British society through programmes such as ‘Can’t Pay, We’ll take it Away’ and ‘Neighbours from Hell’.

As this book will document, this is not necessarily the case. There are complex and multifarious reasons that sit underneath the headline of working-class underachievement (that will be explored further in the coming chapters). For example, the important market reforms in the 1980s/1990s saw the introduction of the quasi-market in education which ultimately left a significant numbers of school-leavers migrating into employment with a shortage of skills or resources needed to flourish in what Brown and Lauder (1996) term as the global economy. Additionally, there was structural reform related to many traditional working-class employment pathways, with over 1.6 million jobs lost in British manufacturing and associated industries. Resultantly, this meant that typically, working-class children with unemployed parents lived in inner-city areas and attended underperforming schools.

One of the ways successive UK governments has tried to close the attainment gap is through the introduction of various compensatory education policies. For example, one of the long-standing policies is eFSM, and this was incepted to (1) comply with national nutritional requirements and (2) reduce educational inequality. What is clear, however, is that the perennial attainment gap would demonstrate that compensatory educational policies are clearly not working, and whichever government dataset is consulted, the data tell the same story. A case in point is the Department for Education’s (2018) self-termed ‘ad hoc’ data that reveal that the more a pupil is deprived, the worse they perform. This is compounded further by the attainment gap growing between the least and most deprived schools – namely the more eFSM pupils a school has on roll, the worse it performs. There are many ways in which national-level data can be critiqued and invalidated, but one of the major doubts expressed has been the idea of false universalism. Indeed, Demie (2014) has argued that treating white British ethnic groups homogenously is misleading, which often leads to erroneous policy formation. The idea that all (white) working-class pupils are the same is illogical and one which requires a far layered consideration (see Anttonen & Sipilä, 2012).

Rationale for This Book

The rationale for this book has both a personal and professional commitment to investigating the perennial problem of working-class underachievement. The following sociological analysis displays a strong allegiance to one of the central tenets of Charles Wright Mills' (1959) landmark text: *The Sociological Imagination*. Mills discusses how research problems often stem from reflecting upon/connecting personal troubles to public issues. Moreover, my personal biography is one that is germane to this book due to my social and academic trajectory. I have spoken briefly about social class thus far, but I am perhaps one of the anomalies that has entered into academia, and I am a proud working-class male academic. I did not do especially well in secondary school and did not attend university in the conventional sense (between the ages of 18–21 in the United Kingdom). I performed modestly in my GCSEs but did enough to commence A-level study. My further education journey was sadly curtailed after just two months because of personal financial hardship. I instead undertook a modern apprenticeship and qualified before working for a small but stable family business for six years.

I often used to ponder over the extent to which my circumstances had influenced my trajectory. I was a more than capable pupil, but had my 'working-classness' driven any chance of educational success out of the game plan? The 'what ifs' got the better of me, and I took chance and applied to a post-1992 university in 2006 as a mature student. Because I did not meet the usual entry criteria, I enrolled onto a Higher National Diploma. I performed exceptionally well in my first year and was subsequently placed straight onto the second year of the Bachelor's degree. Again, I performed well before going onto postgraduate study, where I overachieved once more before I completed a PhD. My original questioning of my personal position has been enhanced through my own pathway and learning through higher education, with sociology being at the forefront of the majority of what I do. Nevertheless, whilst my status as a working-class academic is rare, it is certainly not in isolation. Other academics have shared my sentiments and research interests in regard to working-class orientations to (higher) education.³

At a broad level, sceptics of the UK education system see it as superficial. Reay (2011) has discussed at length the various failed government attempts at promoting schooling for democracy through avenues such as compensatory educational policies. She argues that separating academic and vocational pathways promotes inequitable social and educational contexts for the working classes. Reay outlines the long-standing stigmatisation of vocational education, noting that it is still 'stereotyped and devalued as education that is more suited to children of the working-classes' (p. 1). Whilst educational policy rhetoric has attempted to ameliorate vocational education, the middle classes have grappled with its acceptance as a semi-appropriate pathway for their children – again to the disadvantage of the working classes. Nevertheless, regardless of who the

³See Diane Reay's (2011) study for a really pertinent commentary.

beneficiaries of educational reform and its pathways may be, studies that look at social mobility demonstrate that a pattern of inequity has remained the same for over century. This is in spite of powerful developments such as the advent of the welfare state, universal free education and redistributive approaches to taxation (see Marshall, 1997).

In summary, whilst there has been recent work that has investigated working-class orientations to education in secondary schools (Ingram, 2011) and Higher Education contexts (Reay, 2001, 2008), aside from Michael Ward's (2015) work on young men, masculinity and education, no studies have utilised an ethnographic research approach to investigate social class. Therefore, the main aim of this book is to provide the reader with a detailed analysis of how working-class pupils orient towards (higher) education. The data presented in this book are an end product of extensive fieldwork undertaken in a Welsh (UK) secondary school. After reading this book, one will also be able to understand how compensatory education policies (e.g. eFSM) are enacted at school level and, indeed, how this impacts working-class pupils' educational choices.

Organisation of This Book

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 will discern the notion of social class in contemporary Britain. After unpacking and critiquing 'official' definitions of social class, a discussion around empirical and applied developments will clearly outline that social class is much more complex than the reductionist economic proxies for adults (e.g. ONS-SEC) and more importantly for school-age pupils (e.g. eFSM). The chapter then engages in the most recent social class debate in the United Kingdom, using Mike Savage and colleagues' recent work as the point of critique. Consequently, the chapter justifies a shift towards using sociological interpretations of social class to understand the working classes and education. In concert with Savage et al.'s (2013) recommendations, the chapter will introduce one of the most influential social thinkers of the twentieth century as the lens in which to interpret the data in this book – Pierre Bourdieu and specifically, his ideas around the logic of practice.

In Chapter 3, I will firstly chart the historical development of the education system in England and Wales. In doing so, the chapter will critically evaluate how key developments (e.g. The Plowden Report) have shaped and influenced how mainstream education is delivered and received in the modern day. The overarching conclusion to be drawn from the chapter is the perpetual failure of the UK government's attempt at reducing inequality through various educational reform, intervention and policy formation and enactment. As Tomlinson (2001) has remarked elsewhere, educational reform in the United Kingdom has principally only served to accentuate the continued reproduction of a class structure that has largely remained unchanged in relation to economic, political and cultural developments in a post-industrialised nation. Resultantly, the chapter will introduce and critique the notion of compensatory education and, indeed, how the various policies that fall under this rubric have failed to reconcile educational

6 *Working-Class Schooling in Post-Industrial Britain*

inequality. It is argued that these shortcomings are further endemic within higher education – in spite of both government and Higher Education Institution (HEI) attempts to increase participation for working-class students through widening-participation policy, where targets again, are not being met.

Chapter 4 becomes a fusion of the preceding chapters, explaining how omnipresent social class is within the UK education system. Specifically looking at the working classes as a homogenous grouping, the discussion will outline the different class factions and the varying priorities in relation to risk, challenge and fitting in educational contexts (see Reay, 2008). The critical commentary in this chapter will also unpack working-class underachievement at different junctures, disseminating evidence that reports contributory factors such as poor structural practices, pupil-led rejection of the education system in favour of the labour market, as well as little/no parental/carer support at home. In analysing trend data, the chapter will also examine the working-class identity dilemma in the higher educational field. Whilst there have been isolated success stories of working-class students succeeding at redbrick institutions, the strong pull for working-class students tends to be post-1992 institutions, and reasons for this are outlined in-depth.

Grange Hill (the school research site) is introduced in Chapter 5. The chapter will also discuss how the fieldwork was planned and executed – and first-hand accounts of what it is like for ethnographic researchers studying in modern-day working-class secondary schools also embellish the chapter. Augmenting the procedural account of data collection will be some confessional tales that explore some of the pertinent methodological dilemmas that I faced. To this end, the sub-themes of the chapter are underscored by my experiences of carrying out the fieldwork which include how field relations were established, maintained and enhanced, as well as the ethical implications of researching in a UK working-class secondary school.

Pierre Bourdieu's influence comes to the fore in Chapter 6 when the narrative will present the incompatibility of the working-class pupil habitus to the educational field. The narrative argues that the educational field is in fact discriminatory for working-class pupils for several reasons. The first of which is the presence of symbolic violence at the micro level – which happens through overt actions such as disadvantaging timetabling activity, as well as how the schools formulate and enforce their own policies (such as behaviour through semiotic threats of negative sanctions). The educational field also disadvantages working-class pupils at the meso level through poor policy formation and implementation, where culpability is attributed to the poorly performing schools. Neo-liberal key performance indicators in schools mean that poorly performing schools are shown to mismanage budgets, as well as having high/transient turnovers of staff, which naturally impacts upon the working-class learning experience in a multitude of ways.

Building on Chapter 6, Chapter 7 focusses on both habitus and capital. Working-class pupils are at a distinct disadvantage even before they arrive at the school gate (because of economic and material deprivation), or what Bourdieu terms as *Conatus* (i.e. an individual's life chances). The commentary progresses to

discuss how working-class pupils become acutely aware of labour market conditions and thus recognise the need to start earning money at the earliest opportunity, more often than not to help support household running costs. Even if pupils do have aspirations to progress through the education system, they have increased anxiety around the rising costs of attending United Kingdom HEIs – even in spite of largely tokenistic attempts to widen participation by universities. Indeed, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) have articulated that innumerable stimuli in one's upbringing shape the beliefs, dispositions and practices in ways that influence their academic trajectories. Ultimately, working-class pupils tend to rule themselves out of the educational field as it is deemed 'not for the likes of us' (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Reay, 2007; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). Bourdieu's idea of social capital in relation to working-class schooling is also covered in this chapter. As working-class pupils often feel that education is not for the likes of them, they sideline investment in the various derivatives of cultural capital in favour of the development of social capital. This means that pupils draw upon their own durable networks of resources, which normally equates to the pursuit of (often low-paid) employment, whereas their middle-class counterparts are able to maintain the compatibility of their own levels of social capital to the educational field. Some brief examples range from sourcing private tuition to augment classroom teaching, as well as being able to participate in unpaid internships in order to gain the vital experience needed to enter into the graduate labour market – two luxuries that working-class pupils are generally not afforded. It is further argued that these examples (and others) exacerbate the attainment gap.

Chapter 8 draws the book to a close, summarising the salient points of the commentary. I am also cognisant of one of my own commitments to the enterprise of undertaking research, which is that it has to matter, it has to have application and utility, the so what? Therefore, I will offer some recommendations for the multifarious stakeholders that could take something from this study. I will also suggest some directions for future research.

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