

## THE ZOMBIE STALKING ENGLISH SCHOOLS: SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

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*ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to reclaim social class as a central concern within education, not in the traditional sense as a dimension of educational stratification, but as a powerful and vital aspect of both learner and wider social identities. Drawing on historical and present evidence, a case is made that social inequalities arising from social class have never been adequately addressed within schooling. Recent qualitative research is used to indicate some of the ways in which class is lived in classrooms. The article also raises concerns about the ability of the education system to positively address social class in the classroom when contemporary initial teacher training rarely engages with it as a relevant concern within schooling.*

*Keywords: social class, learner identities, social justice*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For Ulrich Beck (2004) social class is a ‘zombie category’, embodying nineteenth-century horizons of experience. He argues that because these inappropriate horizons, distilled into *a priori* and analytic categories, still mold our perceptions, they are blinding us to the real experience and ambiguities of the second modernity’ (p. 19). Yet despite Beck’s contention, inequalities of social stratification not only persist but are growing:

The UK suffers from high levels of relative poverty and the poor in Britain are substantially poorer than the worst off in more equal industrialised societies. In 1979 the richest tenth of the population received 21 per cent of total disposable income. This figure rose to reach 29 per cent by 2002–3. (Diamond and Giddens, 2005, p. 102)

By the late 1990s relative poverty was twice the level of the 1960s and three times the level of the late 1970s (Diamond and Giddens,

2005). With Skeggs (2004) and Sayer (2005), I would argue that in a social context of growing inequalities there is a need to reinvigorate class analysis, not bury it. However, within education policy the prevailing focus has been on within-school processes; a focus that has often been at the expense of understanding the influence of the wider economic and social context on schooling. In contrast, this article's main contention is that until we address social class as a central issue within education then social class will remain the troublesome un-dead of the English education system. I am not conjuring up here some gentle shadowy ghost haunting our classrooms but a potential monster that grows in proportion to its neglect.

This paper has two main objectives. One is to briefly outline current theorisations of social class, in particular what Mike Savage (2003, p. 535) terms 'a new kind of class paradigm, recognising the mutual constitution of markets, classes and individuals'. Using my own research on social class processes in the classroom, I shall attempt to illustrate what these new ways of understanding class as complex processes and practices can tell us about class inequalities in contemporary schooling. A second objective is to sketch out the current state of play within English education in relation to social class. Related to this I want to question the ability of the education system to positively address class in the classroom when contemporary initial teacher training rarely engages with social class as a relevant concern within schooling.

## 2. NEW CULTURAL ANALYSES OF SOCIAL CLASS

Within sociology, including sociology of education, there has been a re-working of class analysis (Ball, 2003; Devine *et al.*, 2005; Lawler, 2000; Reay, 1998a; Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; 2004); one that is more subtle and nuanced than its predecessors (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1986; Heath, 1981), but equally powerful. Cultural analysts of class focus on class processes and practices, the everyday workings of social class, developing conceptualisations that move beyond the economic and exchange to understand 'the consequences of cultural struggle and how this is part of new marketisation, new attributions of value, new forms of appropriation, exploitation and governance, and new selves' (Skeggs, 2004, p. 186). They engage in uncovering and exposing the unacknowledged normality of the middle classes (Ball, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2007 forthcoming; Savage *et al.*, 2001) and its corollary, the equally unacknowledged pathologisation and diminishing of the working classes (Lawler, 2005; Reay, 2004; Skeggs, 2004). They are heavily influenced by Bourdieu's work and his conceptual tools of habitus,

capitals and field. These new class cultural theorists explore how class is made and given value through culture, examining how different classes are differentially attributed with value. For example, Skeggs (2004), one of the leading exponents of new cultural analyses of social class, looks at how class is deployed both as a resource and as a form of property, working through categorisations of race, gender, nationality and sexuality. Within such analyses class is seen as everywhere and nowhere, denied yet continually enacted, infusing the minutiae of everyday interactions while the privileged, for the most part, continue to either deny or ignore its relevance to lived experience. However, to date, these new understandings of class as everyday processes and practices have had little impact on educational policy and practice. While there is a growing recognition of the salience of class processes within health (Wilkinson, 2005) and housing (Glennerster *et al.*, 1999), within education training and policy classrooms are routinely presented as classless.

### 3. AN ABSENT PRESENCE: SOCIAL CLASS IN EDUCATION

On 26 July 2005 Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Education, gave a speech at the Institute for Public Policy Research entitled 'Education and Social Progress'. Her talk, whilst rarely mentioning social class, and never the working classes, was replete with connotations of class. She argued for a society where 'ability flows to the top irrespective of an individual's background' and expressed concern about 'the attainment gap between pupils from affluent and deprived backgrounds'. She provided a glimmer of recognition that Government policy may not be helping those from working class backgrounds:

Our gifted and talented schemes must not just be for the middle classes – they are for everyone and we may need to do more to ensure children from all backgrounds are being involved.

As *The Times* newspaper reported more starkly on the same day:

The education gap between rich and poor children has grown. Billions of pounds of investment in primary schools has failed to close the achievement gap between children from rich and poor families. ... While the gap between the best and worst primary schools has narrowed, the gap between children from deprived backgrounds and those from more affluent families has actually widened in the past six years. (Bennett, 2005)

A month later a study published by the Office for National Statistics gave further cause for concern (ONS, 2005). It showed that social

mobility in Britain had been steadily declining over the past decade and that currently children from middle-class homes are 50 per cent more likely to stay in education after 16 than their working-class counterparts.

More recently, research by the Sutton Trust has found that elitism is even more entrenched in English society than it was twenty years ago, leading Peter Wilby, former editor of the *New Statesman* to argue that 'the conditions that allowed post-war social mobility have disappeared in contemporary society' (Wilby, 2006, p. 30). I want to argue that these findings are more than an indictment of current government policy, they represent the way things have always been. Despite the advent of state schooling for all in 1870, social class, as Tawney astutely pointed out in 1912, is the hereditary curse of education. Social class injustices have never been adequately tackled within education. Even the ILEA (Inner London Education Authority), the bastion of Equal Opportunities in Education throughout the 1970 and 1980s, never managed to produce guidelines on social class to accompany its impressive documents on race and gender (ILEA, 1985; 1986).

One area of education where there is a pronounced movement to alleviate social class injustices is widening access and participation. Yet in this area, lack of informed knowledge of the problem plus a failure to tackle the injustices where they arise, much further down in the schooling system, has meant that the vast majority of gains have gone to the middle not the working classes (Callender, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005). As Blanden *et al.* (2005, p. 231) conclude from their longitudinal study of HE expansion, widening participation has disproportionately benefited children from middle-class families. Similarly, most commentators on the 2006 White Paper on Education which proposes reforms that will give all schools more control over their admissions have pointed out that such measures will increase rather than diminish social segregation, leaving working class students stranded in predominantly working class schools (Taylor, 2006; Webber and Butler, 2006).

The prevailing fallacy for much of the past two decades has been that schools can make all the difference necessary. The school effectiveness and improvement movement was hegemonic long enough to have a number of lasting effects (Schostak, 2000). The focus was to be on teachers and within school and particularly within classroom processes. If we can only make teachers good enough, equip them with sufficient skills and competencies then the wider social context of schooling is seen as unimportant. The contemporary 'wisdom' has been that teaching and learning is improved by concentrating almost

entirely on concerns about teachers' subject knowledge and pupil performance, both of which are seen to be de-situated (Macdonald, 2000). This has been a paradoxical process of, on the one hand, surveillance and prescription in which teachers have been reduced to technicians and divested of much of their earlier scope for autonomy and initiative in relation to pedagogy and curriculum, and on the other investing them with impossible powers of transforming educational failure into success without any of the knowledge and understanding that is necessary before they can even begin to make a small headway into an enormous problem.

In contrast, Pat Mahony and Ian Hextall's (2000) insightful analysis shows that the complex relationships and practices inside schools and classrooms require knowledges, approaches and a reflexivity that goes far beyond the skills and competencies approach to teacher training. Teachers do not simply deliver the National Curriculum and enact a positive discipline policy, they also confront contextual circumstances such as dilemmas over levels and distribution of resources, acts of violence and aggression, complex patterns of interpersonal and group relationships, power struggles for control and dominance, disputes over achievement, and issues about what constitutes 'really useful knowledge' for different groups of students. All these multi-faceted dilemmas facing teachers are imbued with gender, ethnicity and social class.

#### 4. NEW PARADIGMS, OLD PROBLEMS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIAL CLASS IN EDUCATION

Was it possible that the children of the working class, however fortunate, however plucky, could hold their own later with those who in the formative years drank deep and long of every fountain of life? No. It's impossible. Below every strike, concealed behind legislation of every order, there is this fact – the higher nutrition of the favoured few as compared with the balked childhood of the majority. Nothing evens up this gross injustice. (Margaret McMillan, 1912)

Andy Green (1990) 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 by a dominant class to secure hegemony 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 in middle-class education ... it was

rather a way of ensuring that the subordinate class would acquiesce in their own class aspirations' (Green, 1990, p. 248). Adam Smith epitomised this English bourgeois viewpoint regarding working class education 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, p. 305)

For Smith, as well as for the vast majority of politicians and intellectuals of the day, the schooling of the working classes was always to be subordinate and inferior to that of the bourgeoisie; a palliative designed to contain and pacify rather than to educate and liberate. As William Lovett, a working class campaigner and Chartist, argued in the early nineteenth century:

Possessors of wealth ... still consider education as their own prerogative, or a boon to be sparingly conferred upon the multitude instead of a universal instrument for advancing the dignity of man and for gladdening his existence. (Extract from 1837 speech in Lovett, 1920)

Writing about the introduction of state education for all, a hundred years after the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, Jane Miller asserts 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' (Miller, 1992, p. 2). When the English state schooling 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 (Arnot, 1983; Green, 1990; Plummer, 2000). Robert Lowe, writing in 1867, was representing the views of the vast majority of the middle and upper classes when he argued:

If the lower classes must now be educated ... they must be educated that they may appreciate and defer to a higher civilisation when they meet it. (Lowe, 1867, pp. 8–10)

## 5. WAKING THE DEAD: SOCIAL CLASS IN NEW TIMES

It is clear that historically the working classes have been constructed as the inferior 'other' within education but what about the present? Surely such attitudes have been transformed in the twenty-first century? Unfortunately all the evidence seems to indicate that the contemporary education system retains powerful remnants of past

elite prejudices. We still have an education system in which working-class education is made to serve middle-class interests.

Recent educational policy reform in England has widened the opportunities of working class students and boosted their educational attainments but it has also created and sustained what Ken Roberts (2001, p. 215) calls 'one of the greatest illusions of modern times, of society becoming fairer while consistently failing to deliver a more open society'. In England we have the equivalent of the French situation that Bourdieu describes, in which 'those who govern are prisoners of a reassuring entourage of young, white, middle-class technocrats who often know almost nothing about the everyday lives of their fellow citizens and have no occasion to be reminded of their ignorance' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 627). This elitism has consequences for education as well as every other field of social policy. Within the educational system almost all the authority remains vested in the middle classes. Not only do they run the system, the system itself is one which valorises middle rather than working class cultural capital (Ball, 2003). Educational policies from widening access in HE to Excellence in Cities, introduced to provide a fairer deal for the less privileged, have been systematically co-opted by the privileged. As I have argued in earlier work (Reay, 1998b) middle-class practices in the field of education add up to a collective class action. Consequently, regardless of what individual working-class males and females are able to negotiate and achieve for themselves within education, the collective patterns of working-class trajectories remain sharply different from those of the middle classes, despite over a hundred years of universal state schooling. 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, in relation to social class mobility, education in the UK is characterised by stasis, its intractable continuities rather than its fluidity. As a recent London School of Economics report (Galindo-Rueda *et al.*, 2004) on intergenerational mobility in Europe and North America concludes, Britain currently has the developed world's lowest social mobility (see also Aldridge, 2004; Blanden *et al.*, 2005). It also has low educational equity compared to other developed countries (ONS, 2004). The ONS 2004 focus on social inequalities found that in the UK the socio-economic background of students had a high impact on student performance compared with the other 31 countries in the study.

The reasons are of course partly economic: it is still a question of the level of material and cultural resources that families can bring to their engagement with schooling. But there is also an issue of

representation and othering that both feeds into and is fed by social and economic inequalities, and it is here that cultural analyses are needed to complement and augment traditional economic understandings. Within education and the wider social field, the working classes both historically and currently are discursively constituted as an unknowing uncritical tasteless mass from which the middle classes draw their distinction. This pathologisation of the working classes has a long history. Stallybrass and White (1986) comment on the middle-class ambivalence surrounding the slums of the nineteenth century, and especially the fear and loathing combined with a prurient fascination with which social reformers approached inner city areas across the UK. The poor urban working class have always been associated with images of disease, filth and waste (Carey, 1992). Humphries' (1981) study of working-class childhood from 1889 to 1939 describes middle-class demonisation of working-class youth in which the metaphors employed drew upon images of the 'gutter' and of 'excrement'.

The lack of positive images of the working class contribute to them being educationally disqualified and inadequately supported academically. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, despite all the babble about risk and insecurity, the identity of the middle classes is assured and meritocracy remains a powerful myth that helps hold the social hierarchy in place. Phil Cohen (2000) argues that the concept of the working class 'for itself' or 'in itself' has been replaced by the phenomenon of the working class 'from itself' and this process has been achieved primarily through education. It is the working classes who have been most affected by the contemporary culture of mass credentialism. Despite the advent of schooling for the masses over 100 years ago, until recently education for a majority of the working classes remained something to be got through rather than got into. Now, ironically, the working classes have moved from a position of educational outsiders to a marginalised position of outsiders within. Bourdieu and Champagne (1999) write about the education system turning into a permanent home for potential outcasts and similarly the current move towards capitalist privatised education in England is consuming the working classes rather than the other way round. Such processes, far from being meritocratic and geared towards rewarding working-class talents, skills and abilities are a continuation of the historical processes of containment and pacification described earlier.

One consequence is that Bourdieu and Champagne's 'outcasts on the inside' are characterised by an enduring ambivalence about education. It is unsurprising then that we have indiscipline in our urban schools (Davies, 2000) This ambivalence surrounding

credentialism for the working classes arises from a crucial contradiction; on the one hand desire for the material benefits increased credentialism brings; on the other hand the alienation, cultural losses and subordination that continued domination within the educational field involves. No longer limited to the advantaged few, education is increasingly positioned as the new panacea for the masses. Yet at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Britain the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer, and the educational gap between the middle and working classes is growing (Aldridge, 2004; Blanden and Machin, 2003).

#### 6. SOCIAL CLASS AND PUPILS' 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 on some data from two research projects, a large ESRC project on pupils' perspectives on their teaching and learning carried out from 2000 to 2002 in conjunction with Madeleine Arnot (Arnot and Reay, 2006a; 2006b; Reay and Arnot, 2004) and a second smaller study on assessment in primary schools (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). The design of the ESRC research project was based on some key principles. We tried to ensure through our choice of methods that collective as well as individual voices were heard, especially voices which may not always have been elicited, listened to or preferred. Our chosen methods of investigation therefore, involved discussions with socially significant groupings of students, individual observations and interviews across two year groups in four schools; two secondary and two primary. As we were particularly interested in social class we gathered information about students' class backgrounds by asking parents to complete a brief questionnaire which included both parents' levels of education and their occupations. In this paper I focus on the two secondary schools and only use quotations from children for whom we had complete information. The working-class students quoted in this section all had parents educated to below degree level. They were working in manual or routine non-manual occupations (Rose and Pevalin, 2001). Examples of fathers' occupations included waiter and lorry driver, while one of the mothers was a receptionist and another worked as a clerical assistant.

We also decided that the key questions to ask students were whether they felt that they had the confidence to act; whether they felt they belonged, as individuals and as groups, within the school community; and whether they felt they had the power to influence the procedures and practices which shaped their learning. Our

theoretical and methodological principles were successfully combined by using the three themes of *enhancement*, *inclusion* and *participation*, derived from Bernstein's pedagogic democratic rights, to design focus group discussions, observations of mathematics and English lessons, and debriefing interviews with students. The three themes were converted into two or three research questions.

*Theme 1 (enhancement) – pedagogic identities*

- what constitutes the good learner?
- how do students recognise themselves as learners?
- what are the criteria for success as a learner?

*Theme 2 (inclusion) – inclusive learning*

- what are the (spatial/social) conditions for getting teaching attention?
- is there social equality (treatment and participation) in the classroom?

*Theme 3 (participation) – participation in learning*

- who controls learning?
- how much can students control teaching (pacing, sequencing, evaluation criteria)?

These research questions, in turn, were translated into more extensive interview and observation schedules. The vast majority of, in particular, the working class students talked about a sense of educational worthlessness and feelings that they were not really valued and respected within education. The quotation below is just the most poignant of many examples:

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.

In both Kenny and Martin's words we can see how educational processes are simultaneously classed processes in which relations of teaching

and learning too often position working class pupils as inadequate learners with inadequate cultural backgrounds, looked down on for their 'stupidity' and, according to Kenny, positioned as less than human. Pupils across the lowest sets in one of our two secondary schools had similar experiences. As Skeggs (2004, p. 187) argues in relation to the working classes, these students are literally fixed in space both in order to be identifiable and governable but also so that their more privileged peers can monopolise mobility. We found, as did Gillborn and Youdell (2000), that the pupils in the bottom sets were exclusively working class, while top sets were predominantly middle class, contributing to processes of contemporary educational governance that literally fix failure in the working classes, while simultaneously fixing them in devalued educational spaces. Unsurprisingly, this hierarchical organisation of pupils had the effect of making some pupils 'feel stupid'. The working-class boys in the lowest English sets wondered whether there was any point in trying hard at their learning:

Neil: It's too easy, it's like they think you're stupid or something.  
 Sean: Yeah, like 'How do you write "the"?'?

Although our other secondary school did not group by ability, we found that social class loomed there almost as large in the mixed ability context. While the working-class boys are the most vocal and vociferous group in their opposition to official pedagogic discourses, the working-class girls' sense of alienation is just as raw and tangible. A potent sense of unfairness and unequal treatment infuses their attitudes to both seating and levels of teacher attention. Below four ethnic minority working-class girls complain about what they perceive to be the teacher's preferential treatment of the three middle-class girls in their class.

Jenna: Yeah, our English teacher. He likes the three clever girls a lot because they are always answering questions. He never gives other people a chance to say ...  
 Sarah: If we put our hands up and we want to answer the question, the cleverest person, he will ask them, and we all know it's the right answer. And then he starts shouting at us saying that we are not answering.  
 Alex: Yeah, and like, with them lot as well, if they ask to sit next to their friends they get to sit next to their friends.  
 Sharmaine: And we're split up and made to sit with boys.  
 Sarah: Yeah, but it's just them three particular girls, they get to always sit where they want to sit.

And:

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.

Evident in the girls' account is a strong sense of being marginalised from positive learning experiences. Social inclusion in schooling entails 'the right to be included, socially, intellectually, culturally and personally' (Bernstein, 1996). Nearly all the pupils, apart from the middle-class boys, felt they were not really heard in the classroom context.

We can see in what both the working-class boys and girls say some of the hidden injuries of class (Sennett and Cobb, 1972) that are enshrined and perpetuated through educational policy. Particularly stark is the damage generated by the increasing surveillance and regulation of pupils' learning, enacted through testing and assessment practices (Beckmann and Cooper, 2005). There has been a long history of regulative and interventionist education assessment policy which claims to be aimed at raising the achievement of working-class children (David, 1993; Tomlinson, 2001; Vincent and Warren, 1999). They also have powerful emotional consequences, of anxiety and discomfort, for all children. However, the paradox of our contemporary English assessment regime is that, while the stated aim is to raise the achievement of all children, one consequence of the growing preoccupation with testing and assessment is, as noted above, the fixing of failure in the working classes.

In 1998 I spent the Spring term in two Year 6 classrooms. I collected both observational and interview data, interviewing all the children both individually and in focus groups (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). All 62 interviews were taped and transcribed in full. Below I include quotes from two white working-class girls and a black working-class boy. Tunde lived with his parents who had moved from North Africa when he was a baby. Both left school at 15, his father was a cab driver and his mother stayed at home to look after their five children. He told me:

I'm really worried I am going to do bad in the SATs because if you get too scared or something, or paranoid, or something it kind of stops you from doing it, because you just think you are going to get everything wrong and it's easy to get paranoid about the SATs.

However, although all the children complained about Standard Assessment Tests, it was primarily the working-class girls who expressed ‘paranoid’ fears about the SATs. They were most likely to talk in terms of damage to the self as a consequence of contemporary testing regimes. The two quotations below are included because they are the most powerful and poignant but other working class girls regularly mentioned being ‘rubbish’ and ‘no good’. Norma lived in a lone mother family. Her mother was a waitress. Sharon lived with both parents who had both left school at 16. Her father was a lorry driver and her mother a school dinner lady. In contrast, Stuart, the middle-class boy Sharon refers to, has parents who were both educated to university level. His father was a senior civil servant and his mother a social worker. Visible in both quotations are the panopticism of every day (Foucault, 1977, p. 223) which make description through examination ‘a means of control and a method of domination’ (p. 191):

Norma: I’m really worried about the SATs.

D: Why?

Norma: Well it seems like I’ll get no points or I won’t be able to do it, too hard or something.

D: What would it mean to get no points?

Norma: Well instead of being a level three I’ll be a nothing and do badly – very badly.

D: What makes you think that? Have you been practising?

Norma: No, like I analyse. ... You know I worry about loads of things.

D: Like what?

Norma: I don’t know. I just worry about things and my mum said she should take me to a special aromatherapy lady or something like that because I’m always panicking and I’ve been worrying about the SATs,

And:

Sharon: I think I’ll get a two, only Stuart will get a six.

D: So if Stuart gets a six, 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.

D: And if you get a level two, 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.

Here we can see the enactment of Skegg’s (2004) class values. The system of value that produces the middle classes as valuable, academic stars like Stuart or even relatively successful levels 3 and 4 pupils, 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 Norma's 'nothing'. While entitlement and access to resources for making a self with value (Skeggs, 2004) are central to how the middle classes are formed the corollary is too often a residualised, valueless working class. This is further revealed in Sharon's poignant summation of class destinies and how they are tied to academic achievement, illuminating how class has entered psychological categories as a way of socially regulating normativity and pathology (see also Plummer, 2000). Both white working class girls have already internalised an understanding of their low achievement as pathological. As their quotes 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 expressed anxieties across class differences, it was not the white middle-class boys panicking about being exposed as no good through the new assessment procedures. Rather, it was the black and white working-class girls agonising that they would be 'a nothing'. And the risks of finding they have very little value are disproportionately high for such working-class girls. These girls, in the context of schooling, inhabit a psychic economy of class defined by fear, anxiety and unease where failure looms large and success is elusive; a place where they are seen and see themselves as literally 'nothing'. In the context of this inner city classroom we have the literal manifestation of Skeggs' 'working classes without a self'.

It would nevertheless be wrong to see pupils as passive victims, rather they are expected to make difficult – and in particular for working class students – impossible choices: 'costly' choices between prioritising official pedagogic practices on the one hand and local pedagogic practices on the other; between popularity among the peer group and a successful learner identity. In particular, for working-class boys across ethnic difference, the underlying impulses driving their social exclusion lie as much in the peer group culture as in the structures of schooling. The paradoxical dilemma they face is that inclusion in the male peer group prohibits investment in a successful learner identity. New teachers need to learn about these classed, racialised and gendered processes – to gain some insight into the costs and gains of assuming a successful learner identity for students and the ways in which these costs and gains differ according to class, ethnicity and gender.

When I later interviewed the teacher Sharmaine and Sarah were complaining about, a recent Oxford graduate, he said – and I quote – 'I don't think social class is an issue anymore. It used to be but not any longer. Everyone is very much the same nowadays'. He was not

being very reflexive because, on the basis of the pupils' views and my own observations in the classroom, he had been treating students very differently on the basis of perceived ability. For example, over the course of four weeks' observation the middle class students were given almost twice the amount of positive feedback provided to working class students. Furthermore, the teacher had not been talking to his students about whether they felt 'everyone is very much the same nowadays' because over 90 per cent of the students in his class raised issues around inequalities within the peer group when interviewed. But also I would argue that there are important consequences for him in ignoring class differences – not only his working class pupils' failure but also his own as a teacher.

What we also found in our ESRC project on teaching and learning was a repeated theme of alienation, disaffection and dis-engagement in the working class, and in particular the working class, male students' accounts that resonated powerfully with Paul Willis' (1977) research 30 years earlier. This was evident throughout our observations throughout the Easter term of both English and mathematics lessons where a small but regular number of working class boys managed to avoid doing any of the set work, and is amplified in the words of the three boys quoted below:

Qu: If you had a choice what would you choose to learn?

Jason: Nothing

George: Nothing

Andy: No idea

Paul: Definitely nothing!

There is a moral panic over underachieving boys and masses of excellent research which shows that it is white working class boys primarily who are underachieving. Yet most of today's teacher trainees have not heard of Paul Willis' 'Learning to Labour' (1977). The PGCE course at a Northern University in 1978 listed both Willis' book and Basil Bernstein's *Class, Codes and Culture* (1975) as set texts; very different books but both providing analytic insights and tools for understanding the workings of social class within schooling. The contrast with the PGCE course of a University located in London 30 years later is stark. None of the set texts are sociology of education texts and none engage with social class as an educational issue. Unsurprising then that a focus group of London initial teacher trainees felt that the most useful book that they had read over the year was one called *Getting the Buggers to Behave* (Cowley, 2001). Even more disquieting were some of their ill-informed and prejudicial views about working-class parents:

There are parents who are just impossible to work with – totally ignorant, They've got no interest in their children's education. They are more interested in watching TV and slobbering out rather than doing their homework with them.

I'm afraid some parents are just pig ignorant.

In the school where I did my last teaching practice the biggest thing holding the children back were their parents. They just didn't care.

Here we have three examples of the difference that dare not speak its name. Who are these ignorant parents who do not care? Well they are not white and middle class. But with no access to sociological and historical understanding of social class and in particular the positioning of the working classes within education, initial teacher trainees are left ill informed and, I would argue, ill equipped to broach, let alone tackle, the greatest problem the education system faces: that of working class educational underachievement, alienation and disaffection.

As Basil Bernstein argued:

If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher. (Bernstein 1970)

This is not to say that there are not many initial teacher trainees who are aware and sensitive to social class differences and understand the impact class has on learner identities. There remain many incredibly impressive new teachers whose commitment to social justice includes social class alongside disability, race and gender. But we cannot rely on serendipity, the fortuitous chance that teachers will educate themselves about the importance of social class in schooling, that they will have knowledge and understanding of the different class cultures of the children in their classes. Inevitably not all of them will, as the teacher in our ESRC project demonstrates, and this is where initial teacher training has a crucial role. Initial teacher training has lost its way in relation to social class and until it begins to discover the central role class plays in education social class will remain 'the hereditary curse of English education' (Tawney, 1931).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Writing about American society over the last 25 years, Michael Burawoy argues that:

Even as the rhetoric of equality and freedom intensifies so sociologists have documented ever-deepening inequality and domination. Over

the last twenty-five years earlier gains in economic security and civil rights have been reversed by market expansion (with their attendant inequalities) and coercive states, violating rights at home and abroad. All too often, market and state have collaborated against humanity in what has commonly come to be known as neoliberalism. (Burawoy, 2005, p. 7)

We on the other side of the Atlantic may try to convince ourselves that the situation is different in the UK, and particularly within education. But a plethora of new initiatives and policy changes that claim to address equity, freedom and choice do not necessarily add up to greater equality and fairness, and much of the evidence that I have cited in this paper appears to indicate that they do not. I would argue that a 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 hundred 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 ten years (ONS, 2005). We are all much more credentialled now than we were then, although there is still a very worrying critical mass of the white working class who leave schooling with no qualifications at all. In 2005 ten per cent of students entitled to free school meals, and therefore from the poorest families, were still leaving school with no qualifications at all (Blair, 2005). The attainment gap between the classes in education is just as great as it was 20, 50 years ago and mirrors the growing material gap between the rich and the poor in UK society. 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 remains the one educational problem that comes back to haunt English education again and again and again; the area of educational inequality on which education policy has had virtually no impact.

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