

Poverty, class and education: conflicting explanations

Terry Wrigley, for ECER Conference 2012, Cadiz

I am near the end of writing a book with John Smyth which tries to untangle and critique some of the complex arguments relating poverty and class to school success. The original abstract for this presentation was too broad and ambitious. I would like to focus on some problematic issues in the various explanations developed and circulated historically and problems of the research underpinning them.

There are some recurrent themes:

- i) many of the explanations involve deficit accounts which in effect blame the victim;
- ii) they tend to be non-dialectical, non-interactionist, seeking simply to single out a particular factor;
- iii) in addition, there is often a failure to look at the larger power relations.

An important starting point for us was the very important book by Carlo Raffo and colleagues in Manchester, *Education and Poverty in Affluent Countries*. The early chapters are an attempt to map existing research, in which the authors seek to locate particular theories. We saw some particular problems in that mapping, but particularly concluded that the most important issue was not whether to locate at macro, meso or micro level but the need to focus on the *interactions* between education and society.

Some of this has been well theorised already. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is centrally focused on interactions; he isn't arguing that poorer people have no culture, but that their culture is unrecognized by schools. Similarly, his notion of social capital is very much about recognition, respect, exchange, a far more dynamic and dialectical account than we find in Putnam.

Another very important sociologist for me is Ervine Goffman, whose work originated in Symbolic Interactionism, but perhaps his most interesting book is *Asylums*, which looks at what he calls 'total institutions': prisons, mental hospitals, barracks, convents, boarding schools, and the processes by which new inmates are inducted into roles and norms. This seems to me particularly interesting if we consider not boarding schools but ordinary day schools, particularly when they are culturally remote from the communities they serve, because their students are expected to transition smoothly every day between the school's institutional expectations and the lifeworld of their families and neighbourhood. An entire research project is waiting to be built around that.

I also want to refer back to my own reworking of the term 'school culture', in a book published in 2003 'Schools of Hope: a new agenda for school improvement' (currently out of print in English but available on my website, and also in a Spanish edition by Morata). Looking at some of the dynamics of school culture, I suggested for example:

- examining the cultural messages of classrooms which are dominated by the teacher's voice, closed questions and rituals of transmission of superior wisdom
- developing a better understanding of cultural difference, in order to prevent high levels of exclusion
- understanding how assumptions about ability and intelligence are worked out in classroom interactions
- discovering how assumptions about single parents, ethnic minorities and 'dysfunctional' working class families operate symbolically in classroom interactions. (chapter 2)

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Innate intelligence

Let us look at some of the major theories, historically, for why working-class pupils underachieve at school. First of all, the problem only begins to exist near the start of the 20th Century. In the 19th Century, schooling was established in many countries with the intention and expectation that nobody should be educated 'above their station in life'.

We do not profess to give these children an education that will raise them above their station and business in life... We are bound to make up our minds as to how much instruction that class requires, and is capable of receiving. (Robert Lowe)

The rhetoric which surrounded such expectations became unviable with the rise of the Labour Movement in Britain early in the 20th Century (Cowburn), and a theory of innate intelligence became hegemonic. This enabled governments to pretend, indeed believe, that they were giving an equal opportunity to all children to achieve according to their *ability*, their *potential*. Although the theory of innate intelligence has collapsed academically, it still has residual power as a tacit theory for teachers and the discourse of 'educating everybody to achieve their potential' is politically widespread. When I think of these claims that schooling gives everybody an equal chance, I am reminded of Anatole France's witty comment:

The law, in its majestic equality, forbids both the rich and the poor to sleep under bridges, beg in the street or steal bread. (Anatole France, 1894)

Although something like 'intelligence tests' began with Binet in Paris, the beliefs surrounded them developed in England and the USA. The earliest research by England's first Educational Psychologist, Cyril Burt, involved applying tests to the sons of academics at Oxford and to manual workers' children in the town. As was to be expected, the professors' sons scored higher. Burt's conclusion was that this must be genetic, totally discounting the possibility that these ten-year-olds had very different experiences of life. For many years it was insisted axiomatically that such tests measured innate ability and could somehow get behind what had been acquired at school. Ironically my generation, at primary school, spent an hour every day practising the tests in order to raise our scores in what was supposed to be innate intelligence!

In the USA, intelligence tests were used to control immigration, and the arguments were heavily racialised. The American pioneers were actually very political about class and intelligence:

The people who are doing the drudgery are, as a rule, in their proper places. (Goddard 1919:246)

Now the fact is, that workmen may have a ten year intelligence while you have a twenty. To demand for him such a home as you enjoy is as absurd as it would be to insist that every laborer should receive a graduate fellowship. How can there be such a thing as social equality with this wide range of mental capacity? (cited by Gould 1996:191)

Burt's scientific procedure had often been cavalier, including asking headteachers for estimates which would override the test results (Gould 1996:305), but that scarcely mattered since his conclusions were ideologically convenient. As Rose, Lewontin and Kamin point out:

Burt never provided even the most elementary description of how, when, or where his 'data' had been collected. The normal canons of scientific reporting were ignored entirely by Burt, and by the editors of the journals that published his papers. He never even identified the 'IQ test' he supposedly administered... Within many of his papers, even the sizes of his supposed samples of relatives were no reported. The correlations were given without any supporting details'. (1984:102)

Burt's fixation with hereditarian explanations led him to establish the ultimate proof, namely that identical twins separated from their natural mother would retain her IQ rather than that of the adopted parents. He published three separate studies which were eventually discovered to be fraudulent – they had never happened! Around the time of Burt's death, Professor Leon Kamin pointed out the implausibility of this repeated correlation, presented to three decimal points .771, which remained absolutely stable while the number of pairs of twins increased from 21 to 53 (Kamin 1972 and 1974, in Rose et al. 1984:103). Burt's friend and biographer Leslie Hearnshaw, attempting to clear his name, could find no evidence of any records; the twins themselves and their parents had disappeared without trace, and Burt's two researchers appeared never to have existed (Rose et al 1984:104). Somebody should have smelled a rat many years earlier when reading the studies, but Burt's conception of intelligence was so hegemonic that no one asked the right question.

As Rose and colleagues point out (1984:106 seq), the few later studies of separated identical twins by other researchers are also seriously flawed. Many 'separated' twins were only temporarily separated, they were cared for by relatives or close friends, went to the same school, and remained in close contact. The contrary investigation, of adopted children who were not twins, showed a substantial rise in IQ from that of the natural parents to that of the (higher IQ) adoptive parents; IQ correlated as strongly between the adoptive mother and the adopted child as between the adoptive mother and her natural child (Rose et al 1984:110-4)

Biological understanding has also moved on, so that it becomes much more difficult to sustain a determinist position. It is no longer possible to think of specific genes producing intelligence in any direct way; simple mechanisms such as Mendel's explanation of the transmission of yellow or green colour in peas is now known to be atypical, as most genetic processes are vastly more complicated than a pair of chromosomes underpinning an observable characteristic. Steven Rose summarises it as follows:

The ultra-Darwinists' metaphysical concept of genes as hard, impenetrable and isolated units cannot be correct. Any individual gene can be expressed only against the background of the whole of the rest of the genome. Genes produce gene products which in turn influence other genes, switching them on and off, modulating their activity and function. (Rose, 1998: 215)

And that is before we even consider the environmental influences.

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Language deficit

With the collapse of IQ theory, a new explanation quickly became hegemonic. As Harold Rosen pointed out:

[Basil Bernstein's] early papers, which he himself now says 'were conceptually weak and... horrifyingly coarse' (Bernstein 1971:11) ... were readily seized upon... because they seemed to offer theoretical respectability to the widespread notion among teachers and others that an intrinsic feature of working-class language, rooted in their way of life, disqualified working-class children educationally and, by the same token, justified the notion of the superior educational potential of the middle class...(Rosen 1972:3)

Significantly, Bernstein later referred to his codes as the 'genes of social class' (Bernstein, 1986:472)

There were actually several versions of language deficit theory, grounded in wider social prejudices and assumptions that working-class pupils' speech was ungrammatical, lazy, debased and so on but Bernstein's was the most sophisticated. In the USA the focus was particularly on the language of Black Americans. Bereiter and Engelmann argued that these children's language was minimal:

For purposes of getting along socially and of self-expression, language is a convenience but not a necessity for the young child. It is quite possible to make one's wants known, to enter actively into play and other social relationships, and to give vent to one's feelings without language... People who work with disadvantaged preschool children report a considerable number of children who are four years of age hardly speak at all. (Bereiter and Engelmann (1966))

Another version argued that these children grew up illogical because of grammatical features such as the absence of 'is' or 'are', e.g. 'They mine', or a 'double negative' e.g. 'You ain't goin' to no heaven'. They clearly didn't realise that double negatives, or to name it more accurately 'negative concord', is standard in Spanish. 'yo no dicé niente', or that Russian and Arabic frequently dispense with the verb 'to be'.

Bernstein's argument was more sophisticated. He made a distinction between speech about an immediate situation and speech about more remote events, which is an interesting distinction with some grammatical implications: when you talk about something you and your listener can see, you can easily substitute pronouns for nouns (i.e. exophoric pronouns). But Bernstein declared the former to be a 'restricted' code, and argued that manual workers used this almost exclusively and their children were almost unable to speak about remote situations. Let us look at the empirical research:

The children were given a series of four pictures which told a story and they were invited to tell the story. Here are the stories:

- 1) Three boys are playing football and one boy kicks the ball and it goes through the window the ball breaks the window and the boys are looking at it and a man comes out and shouts at them

because they've broken the window so they run away and then that lady looks out of her window and she tells the boys off.

- 2) They're playing football and he kicks it and it goes through there it breaks the window and they're looking at it and he comes out and shouts at them because they've broken it so they run away and then she looks out and she tells them off.

With the first story the reader does not have to have the four pictures which were used as the basis for the story, whereas in the case of the second story the reader would require the initial pictures in order to make sense of the story. (Bernstein, 1971: 178)

In fact, the children did have the pictures in front of them as they spoke. The repetitive use of nouns in example (1) is actually quite inappropriate – these children are speaking in a way they believe to be expected by academic researchers.

Furthermore, Bernstein's chief research Hawkins himself explained that this version was 'slightly exaggerated'. (His statistics suggest more than 'slightly' exaggerated: the difference is far greater than his summative calculation : 4.12 exophoric pronouns for working-class children compared with 2.84 for middle class).

We see in Bernstein's work too (as I fear in Bourdieu's) a tendency to polarise: Bernstein's 'working class' children are in fact 'unskilled and semi-skilled manual' whereas his examples elsewhere of 'middle class' speech are of a professional metropolitan elite. As Rosen termed it 'Hampstead man, not Orpington man'.

Rosen argued that Bernstein's characterisation of working-class language and life leaves out of account the rich verbal culture of areas of industrial and political militancy, for example East London, Liverpool, the coal mining areas.

I have been tracing through some of the subsequent research, and find it often marked by similarly polarised accounts. Typically, a contrast is made between extreme groups, and then the average is presented for each group. Often when we look more closely we find the contrast less startling, suggesting that a minority of parents living in poverty show limited forms of language use with their children, or provide them with limited experience.

Bradley and colleagues report on *The Home Environments of Children in the United States* (2001: 1850seq) includes observation data on different categories of mothers. We learn that the mother spontaneously spoke to the child twice or more, excluding scolding, in 92% of cases for nonpoor European Americans, and at the opposite extreme 86% of of cases for poor African Americans. The most extreme difference is for answering the child's questions or requests verbally: 92% nonpoor European Americans compared with 77% poor African Americans. This suggests that *some* parents, from various causes, provide an upbringing which involves less verbal interaction, but does not in any way indicate a parenting underclass.

Other recent Scottish research (Bromley 2009) shows not surprisingly that degree-educated mothers are more likely to read books or look at stories with their children every day. It is amazing that the difference is so small: 51% for mothers with no qualifications at all, compared with 78% for university graduates. On many other indicators, such as playing games, singing, painting, physical exercise, visits to places such as cinemas, farms or swimming pools, the differences are almost negligible.

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Low aspirations

Government policy seems dominated by a feeling that working-class areas are dominated by low aspirations and that this is the cause of underachievement and future poverty.

However, a number of recent UK research projects sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation conclude that the problem is not in fact a lack of aspirations by either young people or their parents nor a need to make them more 'aspirational' but rather insufficient knowledge and means to make them achievable (Goodman and Gregg 2010; St Clair et al 2011; Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012)

An exaggerated and decontextualised rhetoric about aspirations, as cause or cure, tends to essentialise and reify, rather than looking at the dialectic relations between young people and their circumstances. It individualises and psychologises a complex social interaction.

Aspirations, like other attitudes, operate within a field of opportunities; they grow or shrink partly in response to the perceived possibilities of a successful outcome. As Carter-Wall and Whitefield (2012:4) express it, summarizing research by Goodman and Gregg (2010):

What might look like 'low aspirations' may often be high aspirations that have been eroded by negative experience.

A recent television documentary about a large public housing estate in the town where I grew up interviewed young people who didn't know of anybody under the age of 30 who had a job.

The key issue is not a lack of aspirations but the *truncation of opportunity* which prevents aspirations from being realised.

The stories of loss, waste and limiting of opportunities were threaded through people's lives and had been triggered at different life stages, by events or circumstances over which they had varying degrees of control. (Creegan 2008:4)

Jessica Bok builds on Appadurai's (2004:76) metaphor of aspiration as the ability to read 'a map of a journey into the future'.

students' capacity to aspire is influenced by past experiences with reading and successfully following their map of aspirations, in combination with their confidence to explore unmapped possibilities.

A map or a script provide the actor with direction that can help them produce the desired outcome. From this perspective, the capacity of low SES students to navigate their aspirations may be like performing a play with no rehearsal – experiments and experiences – to prepare them and a minimal script that requires much improvisation. (ibid:175-6)

Bok is by no means deterministic, looking for various ways in which some (extended) families or teachers can assist the navigation. However, she clearly presents the different sense of aspirations which are frequently to be found in poorer families: parents' vague wishes for their children to 'succeed in life', be happy, find work, a 'good job', even just to stay out of trouble.

Student 3: Well... to me, a good life is like, um... having a great job. Having like, if you want a family, having a family. Not going to gaol, not doing drugs, not drinking a lot, and stuff like that. Um... Like not being rich but not being poor, or like average and stuff... And not like... umm... doing stupid stuff, and all of that, going to gaol and all of that stuff. (ibid: 167)

Riddell (2010) demonstrates very clearly how elite private schools make progression to high-status universities appear natural, almost inevitable. Their pupils don't actually need to aspire, in the sense of making a deliberate decision, because the school and its corporate habitus provides a kind of distributed aspiration framework. One teacher describes the process as a 'drip feed that just builds and builds' (p33), including a schedule of talks by former pupils who attend particular universities or are successful professionals, career and university conferences, the role of sixth form tutors, academic staff who maintain strong links with their former universities and often serve as role models in terms of subject choice, and a relentless focus in school events on achievement in various field. (p31) The family culture and school culture work in harmony, constantly reinforcing each other in making failure to reach university seem unthinkable.

Aspiring against the odds is a much more complex and contradictory process, and has not been helped by the legacy of Oscar Lewis and his highly problematic concept of a 'culture of poverty'. In fact, he conceded that only a small proportion of families living in poverty had what he had described as a 'culture of poverty:

My rough guess would be that only about 20 per cent of the population below the poverty line in the United States have characteristics which would justify classifying their way of life as that of a culture of poverty" (Lewis 1968: li).

Anthony Leeds, in a book edited by Eleanor Leacock, pointed out that most of the 'cultural' characteristics such as unemployment or a lack of savings are directly economic problems. Those issues concerned more directly with feelings and attitudes to life - *Strong Feeling of Marginality, Not Belonging, Alienation, That Institutions Do Not Serve Their Interests, Helplessness, Resignation, Fatalism, Dependency, Personal Unworthiness, Inferiority* – amount to a single outlook, feeling marginalised which arises from being marginalised.

These feelings are always discovered in the context of the society's failure to meet the vital needs of the poor, because *institutionally* a poor man is *indeed* marginalized, *unserved* by institutions, *made* an alien, *made* helpless, *made* to enter into dependency relations, *told* that he is inferior and personally unworthy (because he is lower-class, he is black, he is illiterate, or he is "in the culture of poverty" needing psychiatric help). (Leeds, in Leacock 1971: 255)

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Blaming the schools

The problems associated with School Effectiveness have been written about extensively, including by myself. I would like to focus on just a few. Firstly, as Lawrence Angus showed many years ago, it separates out the social context – the pupils' lifeworld – as 'background', rather than looking at the interaction between that and school. It simply tries to 'control' for it. Secondly, it chooses to regard schools as institutions as the key entity. This tacitly reflects a neoliberal policy frame whereby each school is a managed unit within a local market, in competition with all the other schools.

It lends itself to crude adoption by politicians, who love to argue that if some schools can succeed in difficult circumstances, why can't they all. A recent example is the way England's Schools Minister pointed to a small number of schools where disadvantaged pupils were as successful as other pupils are nationally – failing to point out the particular characteristics of these apparently exceptional schools, and principally the way in which they choose only pupils with high potential.

Finally, in the way School Effectiveness research seeks to identify which characteristics lead to success, it fails to make key distinctions relating to the interaction with context. For example, how headteachers relate to disadvantaged communities is now captured by phrases such as 'strong leadership'. 'A focus on teaching and learning' can mean anything you want it to mean.

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The dialectic of low achievement

To return to my starting point, I believe the central issue is about interaction:

crucially, between low-achieving schools and despairing neighbourhoods, operating within the wider framework of traditional norms of schooling and current meritocratic expectations.

We need to recognise – and this is where symbolic interactionism comes in – that similar forms of school organisation are viewed differently by pupils with different life experiences. For example, strict discipline may alienate poorer students, while richer more successful ones just regard it as the price you have to pay for future success. Similarly, an internal division of the school into high achieving and low achieving classes will be read differently at Eton and at an inner city school.

Two feelings emerge from ethnographies of life in poverty: *shame and futility*. Schools which are run on traditional lines, involving little opportunity for students to exercise *voice or agency*, do not help much. Nor do the standard modes of classroom learning, based on alienated labour – do what I say, for an hour, then hand it in and I will give you a grade – aimless activity rewarded by exchange value rather than use value.

My own, and John Smyth's studies of successful schools in challenging areas, like many other case studies, point to the importance of:

an ethos of respect and relationship, including strong support for each pupil by at least one adult

a curriculum which respects and builds on community knowledge and sets up a bridge to acquire publicly recognized high status knowledge

a curriculum which is intellectually challenging as well as providing access to basic skills, and focused on issues that the students are concerned about

pedagogies which are dialogic and experiential, and provide spaces for student initiative such as place-based education, project method and storyline.

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