

Inequalities in education essay sample



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In education, all the research, past, present, and at nearly every criteria, shows working class underachievement against their middle class counterparts. Even though standards have risen the divide between the classes remains constant. Recent figures in a labour force survey stated that 80% with professional backgrounds entered university at 18. Middle class children are 5 times more likely to enter higher education than working class children. Many researchers and studies have asked the question ' why? ' and tried to address it, we will examine three different methods and evaluate each one in turn to see their strengths and weakness.

Various studies have shown that, even when IQ is the same, there are clear differences in educational achievement between working class students and their middle class counterparts. It could be argued that IQ tests are biased in favour of the middle class as they are constructed by this class, nevertheless it has been suggested that class is directly related to achievement.

The Functionalists' perspective sees a ladder of opportunity open to all, failure to use the ladder is caused by cultural deprivation, this theory suggests that some cultures are inferior to others and so less able to equip their members to deal successfully within the social world, thus working class childrens' home background, values and norms are to blame for their underachievement. Research suggests that middle class parents have more interest in their child's education, JWB Douglas research measured parental interest in how many times working class and middle class parents attended parents evening, hence the middle class parents attended more often which illustrates more interest.

However, working class parents may have less time to attend school because of the demands of their jobs, or the working class may be intimidated by authority figures such as teachers and may feel ill at ease, not uninterested in their children's education. Jackson & Marsden study concluded that middle class homes are characterised by deferred gratification which incorporates long term planning or putting off present pleasures for future rewards in contrast to working class homes which are characterised by immediate gratification where there is a tendency to live from day to day and future planning is limited, pleasures of the moment outweigh everything else.

This is significant because it clearly shows that working class children's background puts them at a disadvantage immediately. Bernstein research suggests the use of language codes between social classes, the restricted code (used by the working class and middle class) in which the meaning of the message is implicit, the meaning may not make any sense and the elaborated code which is more explicit and the meaning does make sense, he suggests that middle class children use the elaborated code whereas working class children don't.

Education uses the elaborated code so therefore working class children are at a disadvantage. Although, it could be argued that the restricted code is superior to the elaborated code so why is the elaborated code used in education? Also, as this study is dated it is debateable whether the same can be said of today's students, more recent study would show if both codes still exist or have become blurred over time. The functionalists argument about cultural deprivation is very strong, and it emulates that the home

background is vital in what the child brings to school, values etc they have learned from home but it is only part of an answer and totally ignores the school.

Similarly, the Interpretive perspective also sees a ladder of opportunity open to all but unlike functionalism it concentrates entirely on the school, not the home background. It looks into education, especially the curriculum, peer group pressure and the role of the teachers. Rather than putting responsibility of underachievement onto the child it suggests that we should examine what is going on within the school. Hargreaves study of Lumley Secondary school (where he observed behaviour) suggests that schools perpetuate middle class values and the higher the stream pupils are more likely to have middle class values.

He also suggests that schools have sub-cultures, the academic, children from middle class backgrounds motivated by wanting to achieve and the delinquent sub-culture where a working class background is more likely, motivated by friends who reject the school. Lacey's comparable study identified two processes in creation of sub-cultures, differentiation - separation by teachers and polarisation which leads to an alternative to school dominated culture. Hence, your peer group is very influential in achievement or underachievement.

Clearly, being influenced by your peer group is important but this study only uses the top and bottom streams, whereas the vast majority of pupils are in the middle. Further research carried out by Hargreaves suggests that labelling is used in schools where a stereotypical judgement is made for or

against the pupil, for example a pupil's home background, thus once labelled predictions are made for the future and relabelling is difficult. The relevance of this is that once labelled, a pupil's behaviour and academic success is determined for the future.

Hargreaves concludes that that fewer rules (dress, hair) and teachers being more aware of labelling would hinder underachievement. However, this does not take account of pupils not living up to their label. Keddie study discounts cultural deprivation as a myth and tried to work out the criteria used by teachers to categorise and evaluate classroom knowledge. Her findings suggest that knowledge from the teacher appropriate to a subject is important whereas knowledge from a pupil is not. She found that teachers withheld knowledge from bottom stream pupils which was given to top stream pupils.

She concluded that top stream pupils conformed and achieved whereas bottom stream pupils used their own experience to object to statements that were remote from their everyday lives and underachieved. Therefore, the allocated stream (top usually being middle class and bottom tending to be working class) decided the stratification of knowledge. The relevance of this is that knowledge is paramount in academic success but the bottom stream are being denied this. This contributes to class inequalities as although pupils may attend the same school this may not mean they receive the same type of education.

Other research suggests that dominant groups within our society have the power to decide what is knowledge and thus determine the curriculum. MFD

Young study on knowledge & power suggests that high status knowledge (knowledge that has been deemed important by a dominant group) is given to able children. The curriculum at the moment is individually assessed on ideas, written word, but doesn't bear any relationship to every day needs. Young argues that the curriculum should be amended to give equal status to other forms of knowledge such as practical, speaking word, group work that match every day needs.

So, by changing the curriculum it would equal status to qualifications gained by the bottom and top streams. Although, any changes to the curriculum would be resisted by the dominant group. Rutter's study of 12 similar ILEA schools within a 6 mile radius suggests that schools (even in a disadvantaged area) which incorporated regular homework, good courses and teaching, displaying pupils work etc encouraged pupils to better achieve in their academic work & behaviour. Therefore, schools with good teaching, values, punctuality etc enhance a pupils achievement and behaviour.

This is significant as it shows that schools can and do make a difference. The interpretive argument shows that schools and schooling are very important in the achievement/underachievement of pupils and clearly play their part and have an enormous effect on children, however this is only part of the answer and does not address the home background. The Marxists perspective in contrast does not believe that a ladder of opportunity exists at all.

Marxists suggest education in capitalist societies such as ours match people to their jobs, education helps keep inequality and the class system strong.

Recent government findings stated that one quarter of children in this country live in poverty and the gap has widened between the rich and the poor over the last 7 years. Althusser argues that to keep capitalism alive the system must be believed by further generations. Education is vital in this process as it produces the future workforce, it is here where children learn skills such as maths and english, good behaviour and ideas are instilled such as structuring of knowledge and how to obey.

He argues that the role of education is to encourage belief that everyone is competing on level terms which they are clearly not & to control peoples expectations. Hence, the working class student accepts as natural the educational inequalities and does not challenge them. The importance of this is that over time, through schooling ideas that are instilled in children are believed and not questioned, the children do not know the question to ask.

Bowles and Gintis argue that the education system is very similar to the workplace, it exists to produce the future labour force for capitalism with the qualities needed to keep capitalism strong, it ensures that people are educated just enough to become workers & it maintains control and order. The education system produces docile people through the hierarchy of teachers & their authority over pupils which gives lack of control to pupils as it does in the workplace for workers. Pupils in lower streams are given little responsibility, middle stream are given more responsibility and the high stream work independently and have some control.

In essence, education is an apprenticeship for the world of work in a capitalist society, however even if the child is very able they will never be as

advantaged as public school pupils, that is a further accepted inequality.

Cultural reproduction theory suggests that schools help to perpetuate inequalities from one generation to the next which gives opportunity to some but not to others. Willis study suggests a huge gap between 'the lads' tough working class kids & middle class values of school.

'The lads' ethos is macho, wanting men's jobs, ie. manual jobs, & they mocked 'the lobes' (academic kids) & in their case school made no difference whatsoever in their lives. Their resistance to authority prepared them for the factory floor, where they could be open about booze, women etc. Previous research suggested that children from working class backgrounds thought themselves not clever enough to go into high status posts and accepted their lot, Willis argues that being street wise (although irrelevant academically) takes intellectual skills and other factors must be involved.

The contrast between the top and the bottom streams is huge but is also in a minority, the vast majority of children are in between the lads and the lobes. An argument for this is to compare the study to Hargreaves labelling theory, if a pupil is labelled low ability then that is what they become and act in that way but Willis argues that few if any children leave school believing their labels.

Bourdieu, like Althusser states schools are middle class institutions, controlled by middle class where middle class pupils do well and working class underachieve with equal measured intelligence, he describes this as cultural capital theory which suggests as schools are middle class children

from this background come to school more prepared, same values etc whereas working class children suffer through cultural deficit, without being prepared. The middle class determine topics which they think are worthy. Boudon argues that material factors play a key role in determining how long children stayed on at school.

Put simply, middle class children advantages (cultural capital) outweigh working class children disadvantages (cultural deficit). This provides a balance to Bernstein (language codes) study which suggested working class children were not prepared through language for school as well as middle class children. Also, it can be compared to Youngs study (curriculum) where Bourdieu states as Young does that middle class determine topics they think worthy of knowledge. The marxist argument states that inequality explains all points made in functionalism and interpretive research.

However, working class children do go to University but it could be argued that there are some pupils outside of the mould who will achieve against all the odds. The balance of the argument suggests that home background and school are very important in underachievement in the working class and clearly valid points have been made by both functionalists and interpretive but it is all on a foundation of inequality, these problems can be addressed but not thoroughly until the core of the problem is solved, inequality.

As long as Eaton, Westminster etc. exist inequality does, it could be argued that we have choice to send our children to these institutions but in reality wealth and status dictate and take away our choice. A ladder does exist but only goes so far up, the real ladder of limitless opportunity is given to the

students at Eaton etc. who go on to into the best jobs etc. and perpetuate capitalism control and dominance for future generations.