

Equality and diversity in education



The main aim of this case study is to explore the concept of equality and diversity in contemporary society, this research will concentrate on the impact of poverty upon the educational, emotional and social experiences of a child, in this case a young boy attending a mainstream school; he will be referred to throughout the study as “ Tom”. The research will aim to identify some current legislation and policy surrounding equality and human rights, along with some of the inequalities related to class and the impact of these upon the social, personal and educational experiences of a child, his parent and teacher. These issues will be explored through the use of a case study of a fictional scenario which centres upon the experiences of a young boy who lives in a deprived neighbourhood with his single mother. The case study focuses on the young boy suffering from bullying due to his hygiene; the study also includes his mother and teacher.

Scenario and Dialogue

Child A is a young boy attending a mainstream primary school; he lives in a deprived neighbourhood with his single mother. It has been noticed by the boys’ teacher and other pupils that the boy and also his mother have a low standard of hygiene and they both often look unkempt. The lesson plan for today is to work in pairs for a P. E lesson.

Classroom:

Teacher:

“ OK children, I would like everyone to pair up with the person sitting next to them and one of the pair should go and collect a football from the apparatus cupboard.”

Child B:

“ Miss...I don't want to be with Tom, he smells funny!”

Teacher:

“ That's not a very nice thing to say about Tom”

Child B:

“ No miss I'm not playing with him, look at him, he's all smelly and dirty
Miss! Tom...you stink of wee!”

Teacher:

“ Now come on, this is silly, it is not nice to call your friends names, you will hurt Tom's feelings. I'm sure you wouldn't like your friends calling you nasty names would you?”

Child B:

“ Nah Miss, he isn't one of my friends, I'd never want to be friends with someone like him, and he makes me feel sick.”

Tom:

“ Shut up!!! It's not my fault, I can't help it!” – (Tom runs to the toilets crying)

Telephone Call between Teacher and Tom's Mother:

Teacher:

“ Hi, could I possibly speak to Mrs Connor please?”

Mother:

“ Yes speaking”

Teacher:

Oh hello, I was hoping I could discuss with you a matter concerning me about your son Tom. He seems to be struggling to make friends at school and there has been a bit of trouble with name-calling today due to his hygiene.

Mother:

“ I’m sorry to hear that but I’m a single mother with a part-time job, I can’t always afford to buy luxuries, I’m sure you understand this?”

Teacher:

“ Yes of course that is understandable, but it seems to just been simple things, nothing a bar of soap couldn’t sort out Mrs Connor.”

Mother:

“ Like I said, I can’t afford it”

Teacher:

“ I’m just concerned as it seems to be affecting his confidence to join in group activities and even paired work. He did comment today that it’s not his fault, so it is clearly bothering him. Does he have any other clothes he can wear to school, as his current ones seem to smell of urine?”

Mother:

“ No, he only has the ones he wears to school.”

Teacher:

“ I will contact you again in the next few hours, as I know that the council can sometimes give people an allowance for school uniforms. It might help you out a bit.”

Mother:

“ Thank you, I’d appreciate some help.”

This case study highlights class inequalities and how physical differences can impact upon a child whether he/she is at school or out of the school grounds. This study aims to explore the ways in which social class can impact both positively and negatively on a child’s personal, social and educational experience. This will then be followed by a brief analysis of how the process of entering a child’s experience has affected my understanding of the issues explored in this module. I will be including the words and thoughts of “ Tom” and will also be including discussions he may have between his family, teachers or peers, which I will endeavour to link directly to policy and legislation and also background critical reading, related to specific aspects of the case study. Davies (2005) expresses a need to believe that all children are individuals and are to be valued. Davies also comments that we are to take into account each child’s home life and background circumstances not only as detrimental effects but as experiences to be utilised in furthering their educational opportunities. It is important to also point out that professionals also need to expand on their knowledge of the subject in order to accommodate a more diverse way of teaching alongside their pupils.

The scenario shows Child B referring to Tom as “ stinking of wee”, here we are witnessing Child B stereotyping Tom as a smelly child who he does not want to be friends with. There has clearly become a normalizing attitude towards Tom, which through constant reinforcement of attitudes, Child B has come to understand that Tom is the ‘ smelly’ child and therefore refuses to associate with him. Butler (1993) explains this to be ‘ performative

discourse’, the repeated assumption of an identity in the course of daily life. Basically, the more the children call Tom the ‘smelly’ child, the more accepted it will be by the other children and he will then be subjected to bullying on a daily basis. The teacher in this case study does not in fact challenge the language used by Child B but simply diverts the name calling by providing an excuse for the problem by replying “Now come on, this is silly” completely avoiding the fact that one child is bullying another in her own classroom. The teacher had the opportunity here to utilise her authority over the pupils, yet failed to do so. Foucault (1974) tells us that schools have a hierarchical identity within society that remains unchallenged and provides a framework for power which gives the teacher authority over the children not just as an adult over a child, but as someone who has more power and authority; this reinforces what a child accepts as being a normal power relationship.

Tom has been isolated at school during activities, as his classmates refuse to work with him as he is seen as the ‘smelly child’. It seems that Tom is not receiving the support of the teacher, as she is failing to take authority over the bullying classmates and having a deprived social background seems to leave Tom unable to express his needs and rights as a child. The Children Plan (2007) states that children and young people need to enjoy their childhood as well as grow up being prepared for adult life (DCSF 2007). The Human Rights Act (1998) states the need for children to have the opportunity to express themselves. Article 10 gives everyone the right to freedom of expression, this includes children and is also linked to the outcomes of the ‘Every child Matters’ agenda (DfES 2005). It is evident that

Tom and his mother are suffering from social deprivation in this scenario and this can adversely affect Tom's educational opportunities and his future prospects. It has been published in the past that was published that a "child's educational achievements are still too strongly linked to their parents' social and economic background" (Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 10) Vincent and Ball (2007) argue that this is social and educational link between classes is because middle class families tend to invest much more time and effort in their children, in order to ensure that they have every possible advantage that can be provided. This theory corresponds with Bourdieu's description of cultural capital, which contributes to the social reproduction of class differences (Bourdieu 1990).

In an attempt to try and resolve some of the class differences, the government has set up Sure Start Centres and extended schools in an effort to provide after school activities aimed initially at areas of socio-economic deprivation. This may provide activities for Tom as well as perhaps some help and advice for Tom's mother. The introduction of the 10 year 'Children's Plan' (DFSC 2007) was another step forward for deprived children. This is aimed at providing children with equality of opportunity and improving communities through education as well as further legislation aimed at helping children and their families out of poverty. James and James (2001) argue that social policy restricts and controls children's lives. The government through its agenda is trying to address the imbalance in opportunities between children from deprived areas and those from more wealthy families. Devine (2000) believes that in order to increase the rights of children, society in general must change its discourses surrounding

children. Cremin and Thomas (2005) contend that children compare and contrast themselves with each other and these judgments can affect feelings of self worth within the school and wider community, they go on to explain that the school as an institution can endorse such judgments to the detriment of its pupils. Esping-Anderson (2004) states that the child care provision needs to be of a high quality and supported by other policies. Local authorities have a duty to deliver services which meet the needs of individual children and promote inclusion within local communities. This government intervention is aimed to “ stimulate and cajole people into doing more to find a job” (Deacon 2002 p. 113) and give the result people can be an active part of the economy.

However, the government does tend to contradict itself, first stating that it would like all mothers to try and find a job, but then as Mayall (2002) points out, the government are encouraging mothers into work and also emphasising that a mother’s responsibility is also to be a primary carers for her children. Working at home is obviously not acknowledged as a real job simply because the mother is not getting paid to do it and therefore not performing their social economical abilities. The efforts of the government to provide legislation to support children and families in areas of socio-economic deprivation may not have the desired effect however, as there appears to be a limit on the affect which education alone can have on social opportunities (Beck 2007).

During the classroom dialogue in the scenario, the linguistics used by Child B when he says: “ Nah Miss, he isn’t one of my friends, I’d never want to be friends with someone like him, and he makes me feel sick” can provide us

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with evidence of language and linguistic traits which link back to the social background of the child. (Peterson 1994 p. 252) makes an interesting theory that “ all children enter school with discourse skills appropriate to the community in which they were raised.” It is also evident that teachers tend to use language which is more easily understood by middle class children as they are more familiar with this language structure from home (Peterson 1994 p264). Peterson (1994 p. 253) also expresses that some differences in linguistics may be due to cultural diversity not just social differences in the community. In a study conducted by Connolly and Neil (2001) middle-class children tended to limit their educational and career prospects because of the influences of their community such as family and peers. This was especially evident amongst the boys who felt a need to defend their locality as part of their masculine identity and found it difficult to move out of the area in which they lived. The girls however had slightly higher aspirations for themselves and were more likely to leave the area they lived in. This could have repercussions for Tom and his class mates were they to limit their outlook to their locality. It is clear that children in Tom’s social locality need to be educated further and encouraged on their career opportunities in the future. Teachers could play a large role in this by exploring what career their pupils would consider going into once they leave school. This could stimulate the children into wanting to do better for themselves in the future, once their school education has come to an end.

The Child Poverty Action Group found in a survey that while parents believed that uniforms and school trips were important for children to be involved in school life, they would not seek help to pay for them in case their children

were bullied as a result (CPAG 2003). This is also applicable in Tom's case, as the teacher tried to offer some support to Mrs. Connor during their telephone conversation:

“ I will contact you again in the next few hours, as I know that the council can sometimes give people an allowance for school uniforms. It might help you out a bit.”

In the scenario Mrs. Connor mentions that she cannot afford luxuries or spare clothes for Tom as she is a single mother with a part-time job. Lack of finance at home can also lead to a stressful atmosphere within the household, which can result in low performance at school. In a report about the impact of poverty upon children's school experiences it was found that although in theory school uniforms were a good idea because of their equalising effect children from disadvantaged areas were acutely aware that uniforms cost money (Horgan 2007). At the present time in England, funding from the council for school uniforms is not available and therefore Mrs. Connor will not be able to claim any benefit to get new clothes for her deprived son; meaning he will continue to be the ' smelly' child who does not conform to the ' norm' unless she takes it upon herself to start putting money aside to pay for such things.

Reflection

Upon reflection of this research and scenario with regard to Tom and his mother, there are many implications to be discussed. There is no reason for children who are born into Tom's area of social deprivation to have to go to school each day with a reinforced reputation as the ' smelly' child or ' the

boy who stinks of wee'. In this day and age there should be access to government funding for parents such as Mrs. Connor who need help with simple things such as clothing. When a single mother has a child, a house, bills and food to pay for, it is understandable that she would not be able to cater for every need on a part-time wage. In light of the research conducted throughout this case study, it is important to highlight that Connolly and Neill (2001) believe that there is a need to provide alternative aspirations and life chances for children in areas of social and economic deprivation in order to mitigate the negative effects of their cultural norms and habits, which can be accomplished by challenging constructed ideology and establishing practices that can break down these barriers to learning. Primary practitioners need to be aware that they can influence school choices and assist families in using the current educational market to their advantage rather than just allowing choices to be forced upon them by the government.

The case study also raised the issue of school uniforms and how families with a low income can struggle to make ends meet. It would be wise for schools to take into consideration these families when deciding upon the cost of uniforms, school dinners, trips and activities and so on. Children of a lower social class should not be stigmatised and miss out on such activities simply because they cannot afford to pay for them, as this means that they may not develop to the standard of a higher class child who is less deprived. With the help of childhood practitioners, the integration of sure start and extended school programs may begin to solve some of the deprivation issues to a point where they can be aided by other services. Teachers need to focus on taking control of their classroom so that pupils are aware of the hierarchical

power above them. In the case study, the teacher did not solve the problem by taking Child B aside and discussing his problem with Tom; instead it was left a public incident where Tom would have felt very embarrassed and ashamed of himself, when in fact there was nothing he could do about his economic deprivation at home. The teacher could have allowed the rest of the class to participate in their paired work and could have then taken Child B and Tom aside to discuss the issue. Whether he knew the impact his words would have upon Tom or not, Child B should have definitely been made more aware that he could not say such hurtful things to Tom and perhaps both sets of parents should have been informed. This situation was due to a lack of personal hygiene, lack of finance and perhaps lack of awareness on the part of Mrs. Connor. All of the issues raised are definitely not easy to confront in a modern society and need to be approached in a sympathetic and supportive way, which the teacher did seem to achieve during her conversation with Tom's mother. Schools and childhood practitioners hold a responsibility to ensure that children receive an equal education with equal opportunities; they have a huge role to play in recognising the inequalities surrounding class issues and challenging discrimination within the classroom. Children should be given a broader knowledge of social deprivation, so that higher classes may hold fewer prejudices towards those who are not as fortunate as themselves. They should be made aware of their own prejudices and ways in which these link into social class.