

TEACHERS, SOCIAL CLASS & UNDERACHIEVEMENT

M A I R E A D D U N N E
& L O U I S E G A Z E L E Y , 2 0 0 8

C O N T E X T

Social-class inequalities in educational achievement widen as pupils move through the education system.

Working-class pupils with low levels of numeracy and literacy at Key Stage 2 are unlikely to close the gap by Key Stage 3. They are also less likely than middle-class pupils to achieve five GCSE A*-C grades. Three-quarters of middle-class pupils enter higher education compared with only one-third of working-class pupils. Working-class pupils are more likely to be excluded from school, or to self-exclude through truancy.

The home continues to be identified as the key site in which social class

inequalities are reproduced. Middle-class parents are seen to be active in producing favourable educational outcomes for their children, while working-class parents - especially single parents - are represented as failing to provide adequate support for their children at school. Some commentators have gone so far as to suggest that working-class families are 'culturally deprived'.

Interactionist research has tended to focus on what goes in schools rather than the home. Sociologists

such as Ball (1981) have found that teachers underestimate the educational potential of working-class pupils. In lower teaching sets, where working-class pupils are over-represented, pupils are at greater risk of exposure to reduced teacher expectations and a consequent loss of self-esteem that may increase potential for disruption in the classroom. Dunne and Gazeley's study sets out to explore teacher perceptions of working-class pupils in order to test these ideas about teacher attitudes and behaviour.

LINKS TO KEY DEBATES

This study lends support to the interactionist or labelling theory view of working-class underachievement, which suggests that teachers judge pupils not by their ability or intelligence but on the basis of class-related factors such as family background, neighbourhood, attitudes and behaviour. Dunne and Gazeley's study confirms Becker's (1971) view that teachers perceive the 'ideal pupil' to be the one who conforms to middle-class standards of behaviour.

Evidence from the pupil discussions indicated that negative labelling often resulted in tense pupil-teacher interaction in the classroom. Pupils felt that teachers were hostile towards them, for example shouting at them on a regular basis. There is a

danger that such interaction can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy as working-class pupils internalise these negative labels and react to them with disruptive behaviour in the classroom, thus confirming the original teacher stereotype.

Dunne and Gazeley's research also suggests that cultural deprivation may have a role to play in the underachievement of working-class pupils because it underpins teacher stereotyping. There is a real danger that exposure to this theory as part of teacher training may result in its uncritical acceptance by middle-class teachers, who then use it to evaluate both working-class and middle-class pupils.

METHODS

The research team included 12 trainee teachers and collected both quantitative and qualitative data from 22 teachers in nine state secondary schools in England. The research was conducted in four stages:

1. The research team used school records to collect secondary data about a single teaching group of Year 9 pupils in each school. These groups were drawn from a variety of curriculum subjects and included top and bottom sets as well as mixed-ability groups. The data included information about special needs, attendance and prior attainment.
2. A general interview was conducted with the group's class teacher. The

teacher was then asked to select individual pupils to become the subject of a more in-depth interview in which the teacher was asked why they believed these pupils underachieved and how social class might play a role. Teacher respondents were allowed to use their own definitions of underachievement and social class. They were asked specifically to comment on support for learning provided in the home by parents.

3. Pupils identified as underachieving took part in group discussions.
4. Heads of Year were interviewed in order to check the data about underachievement and the social-class designation of pupils discussed in teacher interviews.

KEY FINDINGS

Teachers identified 88 pupils, i.e. 27 per cent of the sample of 327 pupils, as underachievers. The school data indicated that the 88 came from across the range of attainment.

However, 70 per cent of those identified as underachievers came from working-class homes. Teachers often referred to the significance of such pupils' home lives when discussing reasons for their underachievement. Middle-class pupils and parents were commented on positively with regard to respect for teachers, attendance at parents' evenings, support for the school, showing interest in their child and paying for extras such as music lessons. Middle-class underachievement was rarely linked to home circumstances.

Teachers persistently used social-class stereotypes when discussing pupils. Their comments about working-class pupils and parents were generally negative. It was suggested that working-class parents were hostile towards school, that they gave their children too much freedom, and that they showed less concern about their children's behaviour. Negative comments about their home background suggested that teachers thought that working-class parents were more likely to be voluntarily unemployed, to live in social housing, to be divorced or a single parent, and to have a low regard for society and its rules.

Teachers generally predicted negative outcomes for working-class pupils such as poor educational achievement, unemployment, unskilled work, crime and early pregnancy. It was rare to hear a teacher state that such pupils were likely to achieve a good set of GCSEs and to progress into higher education. In contrast, most teachers expected middle-class underachievers to enter higher education.

Pupil discussions indicated that their underachievement was linked to what they interpreted as negative teacher behaviour towards them. They identified shouting, work that failed to engage them and poor teacher explanation as the main reasons for their lack of motivation. Few middle-class underachievers complained about these things. This pupil view was also supported by the trainee teachers who reported that a majority of teachers demonstrated little sympathy for pupils' individual circumstances and a greater acceptance of working-class underachievement.

All in all, judgements about social class underpinned teachers' perceptions and labels, and led to their constructing the underachievement of working-class and middle-class pupils quite differently. Underachievement was rarely linked to school-based issues such as the curriculum or teaching styles and strategies.

EVALUATION

The study has a number of strengths. First, the researchers constantly triangulated data obtained from a variety of methods in order to cross-check validity. For example, secondary data was used to confirm teachers' identification of underachievers. Teachers' interpretations of the social-class background of pupils were confirmed by interviews with Year Heads.

Interpretive sociologists would approve of the qualitative data generated by the interviews with both the teachers and pupils, which gave first-hand insight into the everyday interactions between teachers and pupils. Two clues suggest that the data obtained from both teachers and pupils was high in validity.

First, the researchers note that teachers were very reluctant in the early part of the interviews to discuss or even to acknowledge the role of social class. This may have been due to a social desirability effect in that teachers will generally want to give a positive impression in order to avoid accusations of unprofessionalism. However, the researchers reported that, as the interviews progressed, teachers felt sufficient rapport with the interviewers - many of whom were trainee teachers in the same school - to open up on the subject of social class.

Second, pupils may feel that their contributions to group discussions might be used against them so may hold back. However, their responses, which were critical of teachers, suggest that the researchers had reduced this possibility by promising anonymity and confidentiality.

Finally, another potential problem of interview data is that there is sometimes a gap between what people say and what they actually do. This potential problem is overcome by the presence of the trainee teachers in the research team who were able to observe first hand both teacher and pupil behaviour in the classroom.

FIND OUT MORE

Dunne, M. and Gazeley L. (2008) 'Teachers, social class and underachievement', *British Journal of the Sociology of Education* 29:5 pp.451-463

Ball, S. (1981) *Beachside Comprehensive*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Becker, H. (1971) 'Social Class Variations in the Teacher-Pupil Relationship' in B. Cosin (ed.) *School and Society*. London: Routledge

Vocabulary list

Here is a list of some words and phrases used in the summary. Below are the definitions of those words and phrases. Match the word or phrase to the correct definition.

Word/phrase	Meaning
1. Cultural deprivation	
2. Interactionist research	
3. Quantitative data	
4. Qualitative data	
5. Secondary data	
6. Self-fulfilling prophecy	
7. Labelling theory	
8. Triangulated	
9. Validity	
10. Interpretive sociologists	
11. Social desirability effect	
12. Rapport	

Definitions

- Process whereby people internalise the labels applied to them and so actually conform to those labels
- Information presented in a written rather than statistical form
- Bias caused when research participants speak or behave in ways they feel they ought to
- The idea that certain cultures are inferior to others
- and so incapable of bringing up children effectively
- Information already in existence
- Cross-checked
- Information presented as statistics
- Sociological approach focusing on the effects of being categorised by others
- Research based on the view that detailed analysis of interaction is necessary to understand the meanings people give to their own and other's behaviour
- Quality of data that is truthful and accurate
- A good working relationship based on trust
- Those who believe the subject should try to understand people's subjective meanings and motives using qualitative approaches

True or false?

Decide whether the statements below are true or false. Then check your answers by looking at the study. Add the correct information and/or more detail in the right-hand column.

Statement	✓	✗	Comment
1. Social-class inequalities reduce as pupils move through the education system	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Interactionist research often focuses on what goes on within the school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. The aim of the study is to explore teachers' perceptions of working-class pupils	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. The research team included 15 trainee teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. The research focused on Year 9 pupils	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. Teachers were provided with definitions of social class and underachievement by the interviewers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. 27 per cent of the sample was identified as underachieving	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8. 52 per cent of those identified as underachieving came from working-class homes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
9. Teachers' comments about working-class families were generally negative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. Teachers expected middle-class underachievers to go on to higher education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
11. Pupils blamed their underachievement on themselves	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
12. The research suggests that cultural deprivation has no role to play in the underachievement of working-class pupils	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Answers to True or False quizzes at end of book

Questions

The study

1. What has interactionist research identified as a key factor in the underachievement of working-class pupils?
2. What was the relationship between social class and the pupils identified as underachieving?
3. How did the teachers explain this relationship?
4. How did the pupils explain their underachievement?
5. How does the study 'lend support to the interactionist or labelling theory view of working-class underachievement'?

The methods

6. Explain the sampling procedure in the study.
7. Suggest reasons why trainee teachers were part of the research team.
8. Give examples to illustrate how the validity of data was cross-checked.
9. How was the problem of social desirability effect in the teacher interviews overcome?

Methods in context question

Item A

Investigating teachers' perceptions of working-class pupils

Interactionist research has tended to focus on what goes in schools rather than the home. Sociologists such as Ball (1981) have found that teachers underestimate the educational potential of working-class pupils. Dunne and Gazeley's study sets out to explore teacher perceptions of working-class pupils in order to test these ideas about teacher attitudes and behaviour.

The research team included 12 trainee teachers and collected both quantitative and qualitative data from 22 teachers in nine state secondary schools in England. A general interview was conducted with the group's class teacher. The teacher was then asked to select individual pupils to become the subject of a more in-depth interview in which the teacher was asked why they believed these pupils underachieved and how social class might play a role. Teacher respondents were allowed to use their own definitions of underachievement and social class. They were asked specifically to comment on support for learning provided in the home by parents. Heads of Year were also interviewed in order to check the data about underachievement and the social-class designation of pupils discussed in teacher interviews. Finally, pupils identified as underachieving took part in group discussions.

Using material from Item A and elsewhere, assess the strengths and limitations of using interviews to investigate teachers' perceptions of working-class pupils. (20 marks)

Mark scheme for methods in context question

b. Using material from Item A and elsewhere, assess the strengths and limitations of using interviews to investigate teachers' perceptions of working-class pupils. (20 marks)

- 0** No relevant points.
- 1-7** Answers in this band will show only very limited interpretation, application, analysis or evaluation and will show only limited knowledge and understanding.
- Lower in the band**, this may be one or two very insubstantial points about methods in general or some material ineffectually recycled from Item A, with little understanding of relevant issues.
- Higher in the band**, answers will show limited, undeveloped sociological knowledge, for example in the form of a few insubstantial sociological points about the selected method, or offer an answer relating solely to the issue of teachers' perceptions of working-class pupils. Analysis and evaluation will be very limited or non-existent.
- 8-15** Answers in this band will show some reasonable interpretation, application, analysis and/or evaluation and will show reasonable knowledge and understanding.
- Lower in the band**, some potentially relevant material will be presented, offering a broadly accurate account of the strengths and/or limitations of the selected method. Candidates may begin to apply these to the study of education. Some less focused material may also appear, for example lengthy, descriptive accounts of issues with this method.
- Higher in the band**, knowledge and understanding of material will be broader and/or deeper. The answer will deal specifically with a range of strengths and limitations of the selected method and will apply some of these to the study of education. To access 14 or 15 marks, the answer will apply one or more strengths and/or limitations to investigating teachers' perceptions of working-class pupils. There will be some limited explicit analysis and/or evaluation, for example through some brief reference to methodological issues.
- 16-20** In this band, interpretation, application, analysis and evaluation will be explicit and relevant, and answers will show sound, conceptually detailed knowledge and understanding of sociological material, drawn from Item A and elsewhere, concerning the usefulness of the selected method in investigating teachers' perceptions of working-class pupils. This will be accurately and sensitively interpreted and applied to the demands of the question.
- Answers will present the strengths and limitations of the selected method and discuss them in some detail. These will be interpreted and applied to the research issues identified in Item A and elsewhere in an explicit manner. Research concerns relating to investigating teachers' perceptions of working-class pupils will appear. These could include the following and/or other relevant concerns: political sensitivity of issues, research characteristics of potential research subjects (e.g. teachers' power and status; pupils' vulnerability and communication skills), and schools as a research environment.
- Analysis and evaluation may be developed through the concepts of reliability, representativeness or validity, or through linkage to methodology. Explicit analysis and evaluation may also be shown through direct comparison with other methods.
- Lower in the band**, answers may consider a more limited range of material or may occasionally lack focus or structure and evaluation may be less developed.
- Higher in the band**, interpretation and application will be more fully focused, and evaluation more thorough. Answers may show a clear rationale in the organisation of material leading to a distinct conclusion.
- NB:** Candidates (in any band) who make relevant reference to their own research experiences will be rewarded.

Interviews:

Strengths and limitations may include issues such as: awareness of different types of interview, interviewer bias, social desirability, gaining informed consent, responsibilities to participants, time, cost, access, sensitivity, categorisation of responses, insight, comparability