

School Class

A report from the BBC explains why schools do so badly in educating working class children. The report demonstrates ways in which schools are biased to such an extent that, in 50% of cases, pupils are allocated to sets or streams not according to their abilities but according to social background as perceived by teachers. Professor Judy Sebba said, "Where you have two children with the same prior attainment – the middle class pupil is more likely to be in the higher set." She added that this affected around 50% of pupils. She identified the middle class culture of school along with pressure from parents as the main explanations for the mechanisms.

By doing this schools are preventing working class children from doing as well as they otherwise might. Previous studies have found that putting a child in a lower ability class than their actual ability reduces outcomes at GCSE by one grade.

In addition to this another report, this time by the End Child Poverty campaign group, has shown that teens from disadvantaged backgrounds, who start school nine months behind their peers end up further disadvantaged by the age of 14 when, on average, they are 2 years behind.

This is a major blow to the government's educational policy which is aimed at improving the life chances of young people from less advantaged families.

These reports show how disadvantage at the outset is reinforced and then widened as the child moves through school and even into higher education.

In other words far from reducing social disadvantage, discrimination in school exacerbates it.

Another report from the Joseph Rowntree foundation has shown that only 25% of children from poor backgrounds achieve the hoped for "5 good GCSEs" while over all the average is 57%. The report concluded that. "Family disadvantage is passed on from one generation to the next in a cycle of underachievement."

It added that most of the variations in achievement had nothing to do with different schools; rather most of the variation is linked to the background of the child. The difference between a good school and a bad school was only 14%. The report also found that children who had confidence in the process of learning were more likely to invest effort into it, something that home educators will recognise in their own work.

Added to all this it appears that the government's attempts to improve young children's attainment at the outset of school by introducing educational targets for under fives childcare have failed. This year, the number of children in primary schools who achieved the target in writing tests actually fell, with no change in maths, science or reading. The National Union of Teachers general secretary Steve Sinnott said, "Critics will seek to find fault."

Durham University, who monitors this aspect of government policy have reported that there has been no measurable improvement since 1997 when the first study was completed.

The effects of deprivation are also noticeable on black children, of whom only 44% gained the requisite 5 good GCSE passes.

The truth of the matter is that the improvements in GCSEs are, according to Mike Creswell, director general of the AQA, down to Independent and selective schools. Despite the millions being poured into state education to improve the education of children from less well off families, nothing changes.

One can only conclude from this that the government's education policy to reduce the class divide has failed at every stage. It's tempting to conclude that any improvement in educational performance is not a vindication of government policy, but the result of increases in family incomes over the last 10 years and greater private spending on education.

In contrast to this failure, Paula Rothermel's research and recent research by the Fraser Institute (see report in this issue) show that home educated children of parents in working class families can outperform children from middle class families in school. It seems that taking control of education is by far the best way to meet children's needs.

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"A levels the class divide"