

# Measuring and understanding contemporary English educational inequalities

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## ABSTRACT

This commentary argues that educational inequality is not one thing but an intricate and complicated amalgam of many different factors. The dominant political view regarding education is one that accepts the efficacy of the market, and does not question the consequences of the preoccupation with performativity and outcomes for learning processes and pedagogy. Furthermore, there has been a general endorsement rather than challenge of social mobility as the main mechanism of social justice in education, an acceptance of private schools, and an influential movement within the discipline that promotes the notion of knowledge as power rather than any strong concern with analysing and understanding the workings of power within education. I will focus on all these trends and their consequences for educational inequalities, taking a multi-disciplinary approach that brings together insights from sociology and psychology as well as education. However, first I will examine the issue of measurement in relation to educational inequalities.

**Key words:** education; inequality; power

## Introduction

The orthodoxy within the field of education, and amongst politicians and policymakers, is to express concern about educational inequalities whilst failing both to engage with many of the main drivers of inequality, and to grasp the complex and dynamic interplay of educational structures, processes, and practices. Educational inequality is not one thing but an intricate and complicated amalgam of many different factors. The dominant political view regarding education is one that accepts the efficacy of the market and does not question the consequences of the preoccupation with performativity and outcomes for learning processes and pedagogy (Warmington 2015). Furthermore, there has been a general endorsement rather than challenge of social mobility as the main mechanism of social justice in education, an acceptance of private schools, and an influential movement within the discipline that promotes the notion of knowledge as power rather than any strong concern with analysing and understanding the workings of power within education. I will focus on all these trends and their consequences for educational inequalities, taking a multi-disciplinary approach that brings together insights from sociology and psychology as well as education. However, first I will examine the issue of measurement in relation to educational inequalities.

## The problem of measurement

Current widely used metrics, such as POLAR4 (which classifies local areas across the UK according to young people's participation rate in higher education) and eligibility for free school meals (FSM), are inadequate proxies for what is actually happening in English schools in relation to inequalities. With current widely

used measures, we cannot even provide accurate assessments of the extent of educational inequalities in English education, let alone understand the consequences of those inequalities for children and young people's educational experiences. The FSM measure captures only a minority of families who are living in poverty or struggling on low incomes. The current FSM threshold is very low, requiring an annual income of £7,400 or less. This means that two in five children living below the poverty line do not qualify for FSM.<sup>1</sup> As Kounali et al. (2008) conclude, 'it is a coarse and unreliable indicator by which school performance is judged and leads to biased estimates of the effect of poverty on pupils' academic progress'. The use of FSM data is very misleading (Treloar and Begum 2021) because it is based on the subset of children who receive FSM, which is only 17% of the school population. Inevitably we underestimate the extent of poverty and deprivation if we only focus on 17% of the age cohort. Similarly, POLAR4 is a crude measure, particularly in densely populated areas where you can often find tower blocks next to large, single-occupancy family homes (Austin 2018). But beyond the preoccupation with FSM and POLAR4, most official education statistics draw on a count of all students in state schools, ignoring children in private schools and thereby removing from sight a group of disproportionately white and privileged students.

<sup>1</sup> See MP Claudia Webbe's contribution to the House of Commons debate 'Support for Children Entitled to Free School Meals' Volume 696: debated on Wednesday 26 May 2021, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-05-26/debates/21052612000001/SupportForChildrenEntitledToFreeSchoolMeals>.

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**Table 1:** Mean GCSEs at grades A\*–C by parental social class in two samples.

Parental National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification		1990s/early 2000s		Late 2000s/early 2010s	
		Mean A*–C	SD	Mean A*–C	SD
1.1	Large employers and higher managerial occupations (e.g. chief executives)	7.23	3.63	8.19	2.95
1.2	Higher professional occupations (e.g. doctors and lawyers)	8.08	2.96	8.67	2.40
2	Lower managerial and professional occupations (e.g. secondary school teachers)	6.61	3.59	7.21	3.38
3	Intermediate occupations (e.g. police officers and paramedics)	6.03	3.75	6.57	3.45
4	Small employers and own account workers (e.g. carpenters and taxi drivers)	5.30	3.80	5.80	3.74
5	Lower supervisory and technical occupations (e.g. mechanics and electricians)	4.75	3.86	4.70	3.35
6	Semi-routine occupations (e.g. care workers and receptionists)	4.46	3.88	4.70	3.82
7	Routine occupations (e.g. hairdressers and cleaners)	4.10	3.73	4.27	3.67
	Total	5.86	3.85	6.34	3.71

Note: The 1990s/early 2000s sample uses data from the British Household Panel Survey ( $n = 1624$ ), and the late 2000s/early 2010s sample uses data from Understanding Society with linked National Pupil Database ( $n = 1175$ ). SD is standard deviation of the mean.

Source: Stopforth et al. (2021 p. 311).

In the infrequent instances when detailed and rigorous socioeconomic categories are used, research reveals sizeable and persistent social class differences not just in A level but also General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) outcomes (Stopforth et al. 2021) (see Table 1).

There is a persisting gap between pupils from the most advantaged and least advantaged social classes, with most of those in the less advantaged social classes falling short of the national benchmark of five or more GCSE passes at grades A\*–C. In a recent article on trends in educational inequality between the 1980s and 2010s, Pensiero and Schoon (2019) show that measures of social class, social status, education, and income all have independent effects on educational attainment and can show different patterns of stability or variability over time.

In addition to the common usage of limited and superficial substitutes for social class, inequalities are further masked by the prevailing educational preoccupation with school improvement and effectiveness, in which educational outcomes become the responsibility of teachers. Through the operation of league tables and Ofsted, changes in children's attainment are often attributed by politicians to the performance of school staff rather than being shaped by the economic circumstances of their families.

Yet, the educational research consensus in the 2020s is that schools do make a difference but not much of one. As Cassen and Kingdon (2007) argue, '[w]hile students' social and economic circumstances are the most important factors explaining their educational results, about 14% of the incidence of low achievement is attributable to school quality'. A report for the Institute for Public Policy Research (Clifton and Cook 2012) found that academic studies had generally found that 'about 20% of variability in a pupil's achievement is attributable to school-level factors, with around 80% attributable to pupil-level factors'. So, even the most optimistic assessment places only 20% of underachievement as attributable to school-based factors. Any rigorous account of educational inequalities needs to look at the wider social and economic context as well as the educational system.

## Wider social and economic context

In Fig. 1, based on OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data and reported in the Good Childhood Report 2020 (The Children's Society 2020), the UK had the largest relative increase in child poverty (4 percentage points) between

2015 and 2018 at a time when poverty was decreasing in most the other countries surveyed. But, most importantly, the figure shows a correlation between increasing poverty and drops in life satisfaction, with British children having the greatest fall in well-being. Further analysis, which used the measure of social class included in the PISA data, indicates that in 2018, the UK had the second largest social class gap (after Latvia) in life satisfaction among 24 countries surveyed. British children in the highest socioeconomic quarter had a mean life satisfaction score of 6.55, compared with 5.76 for children in the lowest quarter.

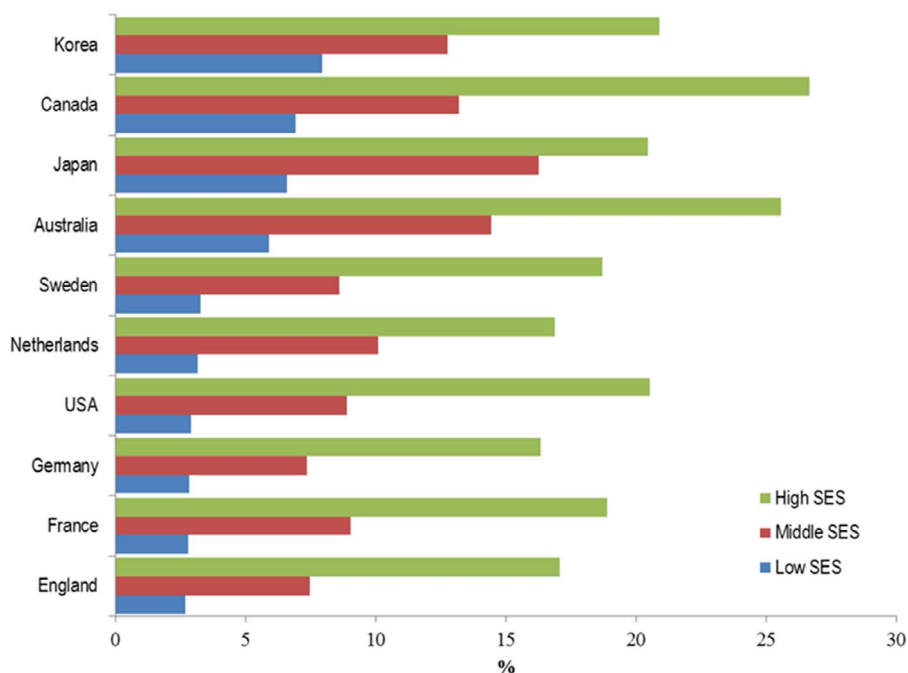
Statistics from the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2021) show that since 2010, median income for the poorest fifth of the population has fallen by 4.8% to £13,800, with most of that fall over the last 4 years. In contrast, the income of the richest fifth increased slightly. As a consequence, household income inequality—for example, the ratio of the income of the person at the bottom of the top 10% to that of the person at the top of the bottom 10% (the P90/P10 ratio)—increased from 3.9 to 4.5 between 2017 and 2020. Such widening social class inequalities, especially in regard to income levels and income security, have exacerbated educational inequalities. Rather than the educational system ameliorating the impact of wider economic inequalities, the impact has been in the opposite direction. Even the Department of Work and Pensions (Nunn et al. 2007) has recognized that there are strong influences on educational attainment that lie outside the scope of formal educational provision.

## International comparisons

Figure 2 shows that less than 3% of English children in the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) group are educational high achievers, the lowest for all the countries surveyed. This suggests a disturbing gap between working-class children's academic results and their educational potential. Although PISA has not updated its research on achievement gaps between different social classes, the Social Mobility Commission (2020, pp. 35–36) found there was a 20% gap in SATs results between disadvantaged pupils (defined by the Commission as pupils from low socioeconomic backgrounds) and all other pupils in England. Only 51% of disadvantaged pupils reach the expected standard in reading, writing, and mathematics by the end of primary school, compared with 71% of all other pupils.



**Figure 1:** Changes in life satisfaction and child poverty, 2015 to 2018. Source: The Children’s Society (2020, p. 47).



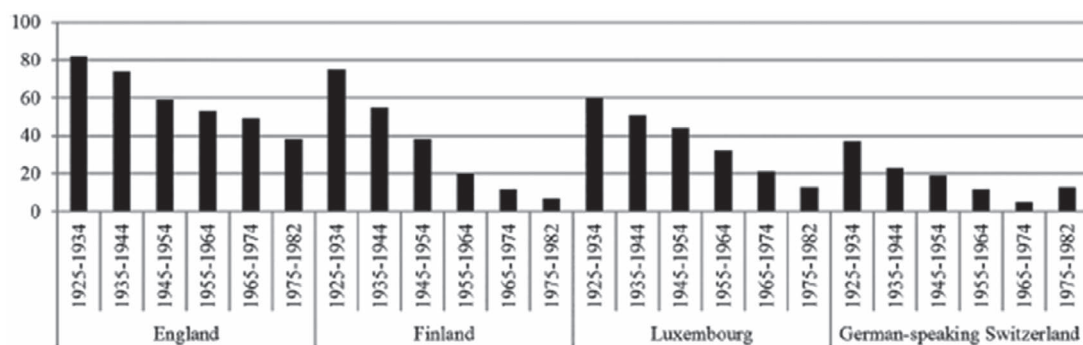
**Figure 2:** The percentage of high-achieving children by family background (PISA, 2009) for selected countries. Source: OECD (2012).

Hadjar and Uusitalo (2016), in their comparison of educational inequalities in four European countries, found that England had comparatively high inequalities over cohort succession (see Fig. 3). Although the link between social origin and educational attainment had fallen drastically in the other three countries, the probability of having no post-compulsory education was still 30 percentage points higher for people with low-educated parents born between 1975 and 1982 in England. There is also strong UK evidence to show that poverty continues to have a detrimental influence beyond education, affecting labour market experiences and earnings, particularly for women. ONS (2022)

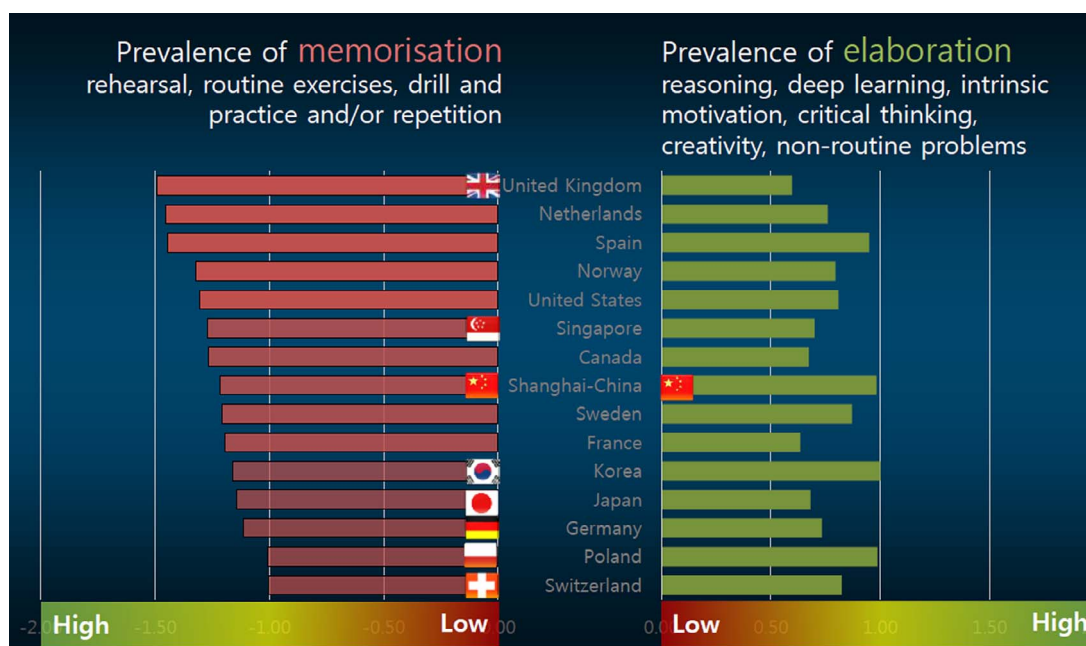
found that only 18.2% of females who received FSM had recorded earnings above the living wage compared with 27.8% of males who received FSM; for non-recipients, the proportions are 39.3 and 47.5%, respectively.

### Knowledge

For Ofsted, educational progress now means ‘knowing more and remembering more’. Committing knowledge to long-term memory is becoming the overarching goal of the English schools system. The new Institute for Teaching will tell teachers that



**Figure 3:** Percentage of low-educated people (only compulsory schooling).  
Source: Hadjar and Uusitalo (2016 p.277).



**Figure 4:** Prevalence of memorization versus prevalence of elaboration.  
Source: Schleicher (2016, slide 14).

'regular purposeful practice of what has previously been taught can help consolidate material and help pupils remember what they have learned'. No one disputes that knowledge is an important component in any curriculum. Because it is easily measurable, the government has made it the dominant aspect of the current curriculum. It has pushed out skills, problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking to the margins of teaching and learning. However, despite this focus on knowledge, we have a curriculum in our state schools that places us at the top of an international league table for routine learning, repetition, and memorization, although the UK languishes near the bottom of the league table for intrinsic motivation, deep learning, and critical thinking skills (see Fig. 4).<sup>2</sup>

The 'knowledge-rich' curriculum has, with little debate, become the new orthodoxy, and the government ignores other voices, asserting that there is no alternative. What is more, focusing on knowledge allows the government to influence what knowledge is taught, limiting a broader, more diverse approach to

history, literature, and the arts. As Boustead (2022, p. 59) points out, this results in working-class and ethnic minority students seeing fewer examples in the taught curriculum from their cultures, fewer role models from their communities, and fewer aspects of their everyday lives reflected in the school curriculum.

The damage of a narrowly focused curriculum is compounded by a 'pedagogy of poverty', a term that was first coined by Haberman (1991) to highlight the impoverished pedagogical offer commonly made to children living in low-SES urban contexts in the USA. It has since been used in a growing amount of research across the globe, and is commonly understood as a pedagogy that requires student compliance in carrying out teacher-set tasks, rather than developing creativity, critical thinking or problem-solving, and one that focuses unduly on raising test scores in 'basic skills' in literacy and numeracy (Lingard 2007; Ladson-Billings 2014). As Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen (2012) point out, in the UK context, pedagogies of poverty characterize working-class schools far more than their middle-class counterparts. A more experiential, participatory approach to learning that moves from a focus on facts and content to a focus on process would benefit all children but particularly those from working-class backgrounds (Kohn 2000; Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen 2012;

<sup>2</sup> See the TES magazine article 'Exclusive: England held back by rote-learning, warns Pisa boss', <https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/exclusive-england-held-back-rote-learning-warns-pisa-boss>.

Darling-Hammond et al. 2020). Similarly, an inclusive curriculum that recognizes the cultures, histories, and achievements of all groups in society, as well as recognizing the discriminations and inequalities that some groups face, would be of particular advantage to working-class and ethnic minority students who frequently feel excluded from the traditional canon.

## The importance of historical context

A rigorous account of educational inequalities also needs to include an understanding of the history of the English (UK) educational system. Andy Green (1990) in his survey of the rise of education systems in England, France, and the USA, singles out England as the most blatant example of the use of schooling by a dominant class to secure control over subordinate groups. He maintains that the growing middle-class commitment to working-class education in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries 'was different in every conceivable way from their ideals in middle-class education. Rather it was a way of ensuring that the subordinate class would acquiesce in the middle classes' own class aspirations' (Green 1990, p. 248). From the conception of state-supported working-class education, the system was designed to provide an inferior education, producing different educational opportunities appropriate to one's station in life. It has always been about self-protection on the part of the upper and middle classes. They wanted to prevent any challenge to their own privileged positions, 'to inure the working classes to habits of obedience' (Johnson 1976). English education was still a class-polarized system when Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden concluded, in their influential text *Education and the Working Classes* published in the 1960s, that the British educational system was about selecting and rejecting to rear an elite (Jackson and Marsden 1966). Recent sociological research by Sam Friedman and his colleagues (Friedman and Laurison 2017, 2019; Friedman and Reeves 2017, 2020; Reeves et al. 2017) shows that there is an enduring social and economic reproduction at the top of society, with the upper echelons of all the major professions, but particularly the high-status professions, still dominated by individuals from elite educational backgrounds. To understand this impermeability of what Friedman and Laurison call 'the class ceiling', we need to understand the history of the English educational system. From its inception, English education has been a system that educates the different social classes for different social and economic purposes. As T. S. Eliot wrote in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, 'the function of schooling is to preserve the class and select the elite' (Eliot 1948). Inequality is at the very core of our educational system, sedimented into its values and ethos.

As a consequence, the working-class experience of education has traditionally been one of educational failure not success. Central to working-class relationships to state schooling is that it is not their educational system. The system does not belong to them in the ways it does to the middle classes, and they have little sense of belonging within it. Therefore, aspects of education can seem pointless and irrelevant, and there is extensive research documenting, in particular, white working-class boys' sense of futility in relation to official school-based learning (Willis 1977; Stahl 2015). In place of middle-class enthusiasm for school-based learning, there is more often a pragmatism and strong remnants of historically rooted attitudes to education that recognize at an important level that the educational system is not theirs, does not work in their interests, and considers them and their cultural knowledge as inferior.

To provide just one example, although there are many working-class memoirs documenting unease and discomfort in schooling, I have drawn on the experience of the comedian, Micky Flanagan.<sup>3</sup> In his BBC Radio 4 programme on social class, Flanagan discussed his experiences of being an East End working-class comprehensive school pupil in the 1970s with his old school friends. He joked that they had all left school with nothing, adding that he got to make an ashtray in the second year and then a bottle opener in the third year. Micky and his mates reminisced about Barry Hutton, who was the most ambitious kid in the class because he wanted to be a van driver. Flanagan told how the whole class had erupted in laughter at Barry the dreamer because no one in their school ever got to drive a van. What they did get to do was carry the stuff from the market to the van but never to actually drive the van. He concluded that, for him and his friends, school and educational qualifications just seemed totally pointless. But the point is that such histories are still being repeated in the present as the experiences of Andy, Paul, Jason, and George, in the later section on 'Experiences of inequality', demonstrate.

## The impact of the private school system

The history of private education has always been a history of elitism and, for the most part, a history of boys' education. Pierre Bourdieu (1993, p. 96) wrote of the *grandes écoles* in France as 'enclosures separated from the world, quasi-monastic spaces where they live a life apart, a retreat, withdrawn from the world and entirely taken up with preparing for the most "senior positions"'. But the description applies equally well to the elite private schools in England, which functioned and still function as the 'schools of power' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 96). The provision of private schooling for the English elite is not a 'victimless crime'. The faltering commitment to a fairer, more inclusive schooling is fundamentally undermined by structures, such as private schools, that perpetuate advantage and segregated schooling. Private schools are also the chief means through which the upper classes operate a form of monopoly privilege and—as the research of Friedman and his colleagues demonstrates—enable them to ring-fence high-status positions across all areas of the labour market.

If you focus simply on the statistics rather than the impact on values and culture of having a private/state educational divide, private schools have small student–teacher ratios (8.5 students per teacher compared with 14.4 students per teacher in state schools) and smaller classes (17.6 students per class in private independent schools compared with 25 students per class in state schools) (OECD 2019a, p. 111). According to Verkaik (2018), more than 23% of school spending goes on the 7% of pupils who are privately educated. But, even more concerning, the gap between real funding per head in state and private schools is widening.<sup>4</sup>

## Market mechanisms in English state education and their consequences

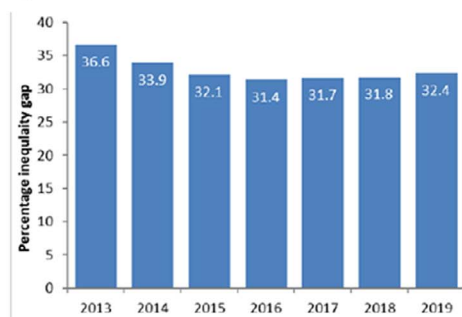
A major transformation of the UK education system that has affected social inequalities in educational attainment has been

<sup>3</sup> See also the interview by Decca Aitkenhead, 'Steve McQueen: my hidden shame', in *The Guardian* (4 January 2014), for an example of how race compounds class in 1980s English schooling to cause a sense of working-class estrangement (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/04/steve-mcqueen-my-painful-childhood-shame>).

<sup>4</sup> See the article by Tony Yates, 'The big idea: why we shouldn't be levelling up', in *The Guardian* (13 June 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/13/the-big-idea-why-we-shouldnt-be-levelling-up>.

### Increase in inequality gap between all pupils and lowest attaining 20%

**Figure C: Percentage inequality gap between all children and the lowest attaining 20% England, 2013 to 2019**



The mean average total point score for the lowest attaining 20% has decreased from 23.2 in 2018 to 23.0. However, it is up from 21.6 in 2013.

The percentage inequality gap has risen to 32.4% in 2019 compared to 31.8% last year, however it is still lower than in 2013.

**Figure 5: Percentage inequality gap between all pupils and lowest attaining 20%, England, 2013–19.**  
Source: Department for Education (2019).

the introduction of market mechanisms, including parental choice, linking school funding with student enrolment numbers and the attempt to diversify school supply through the academies and free school programmes (Department for Education 2016). The rationale was that increased competition among schools could potentially enhance attainment. Market-led policies also increased the focus on school improvement and effectiveness as more information about school performance became available to parents and the public, in the form of publicly available test score information, known as 'league tables' (Machin and Vignoles 2006). Less emphasis was placed on a further effect of market mechanisms. Increased competition among schools raises inequality because more affluent families are better able to take advantage of the diverse opportunities created by a more market-oriented system than their less well-off peers (Blanden et al. 2005; Galindo-Rueda and Vignoles 2005; Gibbons et al. 2008). Thirty years ago, Phil Brown (1990) wrote a prescient paper arguing that the introduction of markets and choice into English state education would lead to 'the education a child receives conforming to the wealth and wishes of parents rather than the abilities and efforts of pupils'. School performance in English schools in 2022 is not so much an indicator of effort and ability as the consequences of the wishes and wealth of parents. This has always been the case in the private sector but is increasingly the situation in the state sector.

## The accountability culture

The focus on educational attainment within schools is an important one, but there needs to be recognition of how outcomes are affected by the strong contemporary performativity culture. Recent research (e.g. Ehren and Baxter 2020) charts how the intense emphasis on school accountability places a disproportionate pressure on head teachers to 'account for' their pupils' academic attainment, and to find quick fixes when attainment levels are below national benchmarks (Godfrey 2014). All too often, the consequences are 'teaching to the test' (Mansell, James, and the Assessment Reform Group 2009), frequently with an undue focus on borderline students (Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Bew 2011). An educational system, where accountability is often reduced to a narrow, data-driven approach, gives rise to temptations to 'game the system'. Ofsted (2012) found that schools were providing booster classes for pupils in year 6, 9, and 11, focusing particularly on those pupils narrowly at risk of missing key threshold targets

(for similar evidence, see Gillborn and Youdell 2000). In view of such practices, in their article on education inequalities in this collection, Farquharson et al. (2024) state that 'there has been a long-run increase in the time that young people spend in education and an accompanying rise in levels of educational attainment', but this tells only part of the story. In 1990, a third of English and Welsh students achieved school leaving qualifications (five good GCSEs); by 2010, this had risen to nearly 80%. But it is impossible to estimate how much of this increase can be attributed to 'gaming the system'. What is uncontroversial is that such practices limit learning opportunities for those at the top and bottom of the attainment spectrum. They may be enhancing statistics on educational achievement, but they restrict the curriculum offer, especially for less advantaged students. They also risk compounding educational inequalities by neglecting pupils, particularly those at the bottom of the attainment range.

## Early years

US research shows that investments in education are most effective when they start early (Heckman 2011). Money spent then has the biggest impact on a child's life prospects. Yet, we spend 0.1% of GDP on early childhood education (as opposed to childcare) compared with an OECD average of 0.6% (OECD 2019b). We have a fragmented system of small-scale private providers, which results in a postcode lottery in terms of availability and quality. One consequence is the UK is one of only a few countries that make extensive use of teachers' aides rather than qualified early years practitioners. At the preprimary level, the ratio of children to teaching staff is 23:1, well above the OECD average (OECD 2019b, p. 4), and unqualified members of staff are more likely to be working with the least advantaged children. The high level of private provision is also driving segregation, which is higher at the early-years stage than it is in primary schools. As Campbell et al. (2019) found, the likelihood of being in a setting with no FSM peers is much higher if a child attends a setting in the private or voluntary sectors than if they attend a maintained nursery school or class. The Department for Education's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) profile results found that the inequality gap between the lowest attaining fifth of children and their peers had grown for the third year in a row in 2019, and at a faster rate than the previous 2 years (Department for Education 2019) (see Fig. 5).

The focus on care rather than education, segregated early-years provision, a lack of qualified staff, combined with a 'choice'

system that enables more affluent parents to monopolize high-quality provision, contribute to a system where the poorest children are already 11 months behind their peers when they start school. The [Education Policy Institute \(2016\)](#) found that, on average, 40% of the overall development gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds, using eligibility for FSM as the measure, and their peers emerged by the age of five. We need high-quality nursery provision by highly trained nursery practitioners for all children instead of the low-standard warehousing of children by low-paid, low-skilled workers so that their parents can work. Early-years provision needs to be seen as much more than enabling people to access work. It constitutes the building blocks of opportunity for children.

## Toward a better understanding of the intersections of class and ethnicity

London is often referred to as an educational success story, the place where poor children can succeed despite austerity and adversity. Forty-eight percent of London's FSM-eligible young people go on to higher education by the age of 19, twice as many as young people in the rest of the country, with the exception of the West Midlands and the North West ([Coughlan 2019](#)). This is often cited as an issue of ethnicity, in which ethnic minority groups are educationally successful despite coming from low-income families. This familiar narrative of the better achievement of ethnic minorities and the success of London is too often used as a justification for the emphasis on social mobility at the expense of policies targeted at improving resources in poor families. If some groups and areas can succeed, despite high levels of poverty and deprivation, then so can other groups who 'just need to pull their socks up' and try harder. However, this oversimplified and callous rhetoric neglects more wide-ranging, historically grounded explanations. Different ethnic groups within the working classes have very different relationships to the English educational system. The white working classes often bring a collective memory of educational subordination and marginalization to schooling going back over many generations. The key theme in my interviews with white working-class parents ([Reay 1998](#)) was their overriding sense of being an educational failure—they talked about being 'stupid', 'hopeless at learning', and 'just rubbish'. As a consequence, most felt they could make little worthwhile contribution to their own children's learning.

In contrast, some ethnic minority groups in England bring family histories of educational achievement in their countries of origin, although migration has often brought economic impoverishment and downward mobility. They may lack economic capital but they have large reserves of social and cultural capital. Others, despite a lack of educational credentials, bring a strong conviction that a fresh start in a new educational system will provide crucial opportunities for educational advancement that were denied to their parents.

I illustrate these very different trajectories by drawing on my own research in 2015 with young students from ethnic minority backgrounds in London sixth forms and colleges. Groups from different ethnicities had different social mobility trajectories. For many of the African students from Somalia, Eritrea, Nigeria, and Uganda, class narratives were about downward mobility through migration to the UK. Parents, and even grandparents, were university-educated in their country of origin, although parents were often working in non-graduate jobs in the UK, as taxi drivers, care workers, and service sector staff. For these students, the central motif in their narratives was the restoration of the

lost status and economic capital that had accompanied their families' migration to the UK. The narratives of the Bangladeshi and Pakistani students were different, although they too spoke of highly aspirational parents, in particular mothers. Their parents often felt a keen sense of deprivation in relation to education, and young people talked about how one or both parents had been forced to leave school early for the sake of family finances. Here, the central motif in the narratives was one of reparation, making good past losses and sacrifices. The young people's longing for something different was nearly always a family project with the longing invested in parents, and particularly the mother, as much as the child. And sometimes, this longing was not for something entirely different but was part of a family project of restoration, of reinstating the family to what is seen to be its rightful social position.

Yet, other ethnic groups, such as Black Caribbean people in England, have—like their white working-class peers—learnt to live with educational failure compounded in their case by racism. The recent report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities<sup>5</sup> draws on data from [Strand \(2021\)](#) to question whether racism plays a part in educational underachievement, citing the better performance of some ethnic groups in relation to the white majority as a reason to be sceptical about the role of racism. Yet, there is a very long history of studies within sociology of education demonstrating the impact of racism over and above that of social class ([Coard 1971](#); [Rampton 1981](#); [Mirza 1992](#); [Gillborn and Mirza 2000](#); [Rollock et al. 2014](#); [Demie and McLean 2017](#); [Bhopal, 2020](#)). In addition, some of Strand's data seem to indicate a role for racism particularly in relation to the low relative attainment of middle-class Black Caribbean and Black African boys, concluding that 'it may be that in school settings, negative expectations about Black boys lead to greater surveillance and pre-emptive disciplining by teachers, which may be particularly disproportionately felt by Black middle-class boys'.

It is also important to consider the impact of geography on differential educational opportunities. Unlike their contemporaries in much of the rest of the country, young people in London can see myriad economic opportunities all around them. Both historical and geographical factors influence educational outcomes between different ethnicities within the working class and drive London's much better educational performance with regard to the rest of the country. London has an extensive widening participation infrastructure, including multiple partnerships between schools and the private and charity sectors, which far exceeds networks and support found in other parts of the country. This sophisticated infrastructure, combined with London's high economic capital, enables systems of support intent on driving aspirations to elite universities and careers, which are mostly lacking in the rest of the country. So, to take the example of Cambridge University's outreach work across the UK, London, with a population of just under 9 million people to Wales' 3 million, is divided into thirty-three access areas targeted by seventeen Cambridge colleges, whereas Wales is only targeted by two colleges. The North East, which has the highest proportion of students least likely to participate in higher education, is also shared between just two colleges ([Lally and Hancock 2018](#)). As the most recent research from [Nye and Thomson \(2021\)](#) concludes, it is geographic differences in the composition of pupil populations rather than school effectiveness that largely account for regional differences in attainment, so here again, economic context is key. In trying

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities>.

to understand educational inequalities, it is vital to recognize the extent to which the local economic context influences the type of higher education and labour market opportunities available to working-class students in different localities in the UK.

## The distraction of genetics

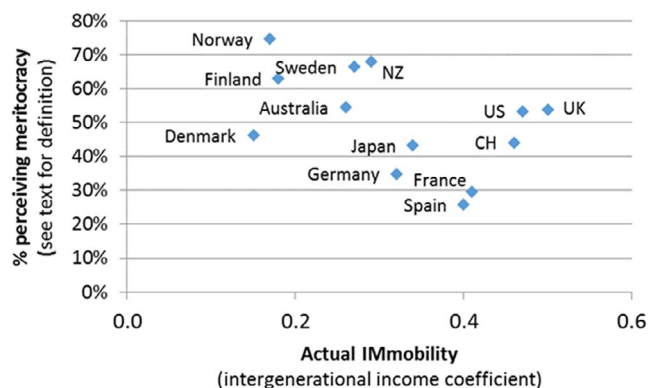
Recent research (Betthausen et al. 2020, p. 349) found that cognitive ability mediates 35% of the total parental class effect on educational attainment but only 20% of the total parental class effect on respondents' social class, net of their educational attainment. They conclude that cognitive ability plays a relatively modest role in accounting for the substantial gap in life chances between individuals from different social class backgrounds (Betthausen et al., p. 361). It is a moot point whether any estimated heritability percentage is high—what is more problematic is the binary approach too often taken to genetics versus environment. Most research involving genetics and educational attainment is rooted in a perspective that accepts, tacitly or explicitly, that any genetic influence is separable from that of environments. It assumes that nature and nurture can be disentangled (Plomin 2018). Yet, as McMillan Cottom (2019, p. 27) has observed, intelligence is a construct of correspondence between one's ability, one's environment, and one's moment in history (see also Herd et al. 2019). There is growing evidence to show that economic hardship and deprivation have a negative impact on cognitive function (Al Hazzouri et al. 2017). If so, then both economic hardship and the cognitive impairment it causes can be ameliorated through progressive policies that tackle poverty. Research (Bueno 2019) provides clear evidence that environmental factors shape cognitive functions by affecting the brain. It is known that they affect neural plasticity and contribute to shaping neural networks. For example, we know of the existence of substantial underlying neural plasticity associated with development that supports behavioural changes during adolescence (Sachser et al. 2018), as well as during childhood (Miskolczi, Halász and Mikics, 2018). The most recent genetic and epigenetic data available point to the continuing importance of environment in which families, teachers, and wider society play a vital role. As Bueno (2019) concludes 'although brain formation and functioning are based on a genetic substrate that influences it to a moderate or high degree, the brain is also malleable and is affected by education and daily experiences, and therefore so too are cognitive functions'. Also problematic is the way in which race is always an 'absent presence' in debates about genetics and educational attainment (Gillborn 2016). Undue emphasis on genetics elides understandings of class and race inequalities of achievement as the responsibility of wider society and promotes understandings that view them as the inevitable and fair outcome of a functioning meritocracy.

## The problem with social mobility

'It's about how we nurture outstanding talent – allowing the stars to shine.'

(Damian Hinds, Education Secretary, 31 July 2018)

In the UK, a focus on meritocracy is being used to justify policies and practices that will increase rather than decrease inequalities. Mijs (2021) concludes that citizens, particularly in the UK, but also in the USA and Australia, are convinced that poverty and wealth are the outcomes of a fair meritocratic process. They are inured to growing levels of inequality because they increasingly



**Figure 6:** Actual social immobility compared with perceptions of meritocracy.

Source: Gaffney and Baumberg (2014).

live in class and racially segregated communities (Massey and Tannen 2016; Tammaru et al., 2016). A recent report on attitudes to inequalities since the COVID-19 crisis (Duffy et al. 2021) found 'a strong belief in meritocracy in Britain, where large segments of the country believe that individual characteristics and effort determine life chances'. Yet, as Fig. 6 demonstrates, the UK has low levels of social mobility compared with many other developed nations. Our educational system entrenches privilege and wealth rather than challenging or diluting them. As Elliot Major and Machin (2018) conclude, there is no evidence that 'early-years centres, schools, or colleges consistently reduce attainment gaps, and life prospects, between the rich and poor'.

Under the versions of meritocracy we find in Australia, the UK, and the USA, the heaviest burdens and hard work of meritocracy are all to be borne by the upwardly mobile working classes, whereas middle- and upper-class trajectories are characterized by stasis and continuity, with very little mobility involved. They, unlike their working-class peers, are not judged negatively for becoming like their parents. A focus on the experiences of working-class children and young people reveals how the focus on meritocracy and aspiration is not progressive but reactionary, as Collini (2010, p. 29) has argued 'a symptom of the abandonment of what have been, for the best part of a century, the goals of progressive politics'. The structural conditions of a deep social, political, and economic crisis have been misdefined as a problem of individual behaviours. The costs and cruelties of this ideological displacement are disturbingly evident in the accounts of working-class children and young people of their educational experiences of always having to do better, to be better, and in the system's judgment that, in most cases, their efforts and striving are not good enough. I turn to these experiences in the next section.

## Experiences of inequality

Research reveals that most working-class students experience a sense of powerlessness and educational worthlessness as well as feeling that they are not really valued and respected within education (Reay 2017). It shows that attainment and behaviour in classrooms are profoundly influenced by how others both view us and judge our performance. For example, psychological research has demonstrated that working-class students' backgrounds are often stigmatized and viewed as incompatible with higher SES educational contexts (Johnson et al. 2011; Stephens et al. 2014), and that such processes of stigmatization can impair students' self-value,

well-being, motivation, and eventual achievement (Harackiewicz et al. 2014; Dittmann and Stephens 2017; Jury et al. 2017). Current research in the area shows that feeling valued and valuable in educational contexts enhances academic attainment (Hernandez et al. 2021). Similarly, qualitative sociological research stretching over a period of 20 years (Reay and Wiliam 1999; Hargreaves 2019) shows that working-class children often felt they were perceived as 'less', 'no good', or even in one case, 'a nothing' in school—with consequences for both persistence and achievement. For example, for many working-class children, test results are conflated with far-reaching consequences in which good SATs results are linked to positive life prospects and poor results mean future failures and hardships. For such children, test results were not simply about how well they were able to perform but went to the very heart of who they were, and what they could become.

Diane: You mean, you think that if you do badly in SATs then you won't be able to do well or get good jobs?

Jackie: If we don't like, get good things, in our SATS, when we grow up we are not gonna get good jobs and...

Terry: Be plumbers and road sweepers...

Diane: Instead of what?

Terry: Footballers, singers, vets, archaeologists. We ain't gonna be nothing like that if we don't get high levels.

(Source: Reay and Wiliam 1999)

More recently, Hargreaves (2019) has written about Wayne, a working-class boy who told her:

'I was kept out of assemblies to practise handwriting skills. That was when I first began to feel "less" than other people. It made me feel "less of a person" ... and being labelled as [low ability] and being clearly given extra help because I couldn't understand is insulting and knocks your confidence—and makes it very easy to give up.'

As English schools have become more and more preoccupied with assessment, measurement, and testing to separate out meritocracy's winners from the losers, a culture of hyper-competition has intensified within schools. Now, children as young as two and three are being tested and ranked on the basis of their perceived ability (Bradbury and Holmes 2017; Holmes et al. 2017). The consequences are particularly vivid in the accounts of primary-aged children talking about the ability sets to which they have been allocated and what that means for both their standing in the pupil peer group and their sense of themselves as learners. This is a 6-year-old in a London primary school:

'They [the lions] think they are better than us. They think they are good at every single thing and the second group, Tigers, there are some people that think they are good and more important than us. And one of the boys in giraffes, he was horrible to me and he said 'get lost slow tortoise', but my group are monkeys, and we are only second to bottom.' (Source: Reay 2017)

As well as creating hierarchies of worth among children, dividing them into winners and losers on the basis of perceived ability, meritocratic practices such as setting and streaming also lead to the children in the lower sets internalizing a sense that they have little or no educational value (McGillicuddy and Devine 2018) The

quotes that follow are from bottom-set students in an English comprehensive school:

Satvinder: Right now, because I'm in the bottom set for everything, I don't like it, because I'm only doing the foundation paper, and yeah, I could have, like, gone to a better, higher place, and then I could have done everything I was hoping to.

Diane: And now?

Satvinder: There is no hope.

Atik: I think I failed proper badly in the tests and that's why I'm in a proper bad set now ... there's like no really smart people and they behave quite bad as well and they influence me ... So I've just become rubbish.

Shulah: The behaviour, it gets worse in the bottom set when like teachers don't pay attention to you. And they pay attention to like the higher ability students and like you get bored because there's nothing for you to do if you don't understand the work.

(Source: Reay 2017)

The demoralization of bottom-set children, which comes through being looked down on and devalued, was evident in the responses of four bottom-set working-class boys when I asked them what they enjoyed learning:

Diane: If you had a choice what would you choose to learn?

Jason: Nothing.

George: Nothing.

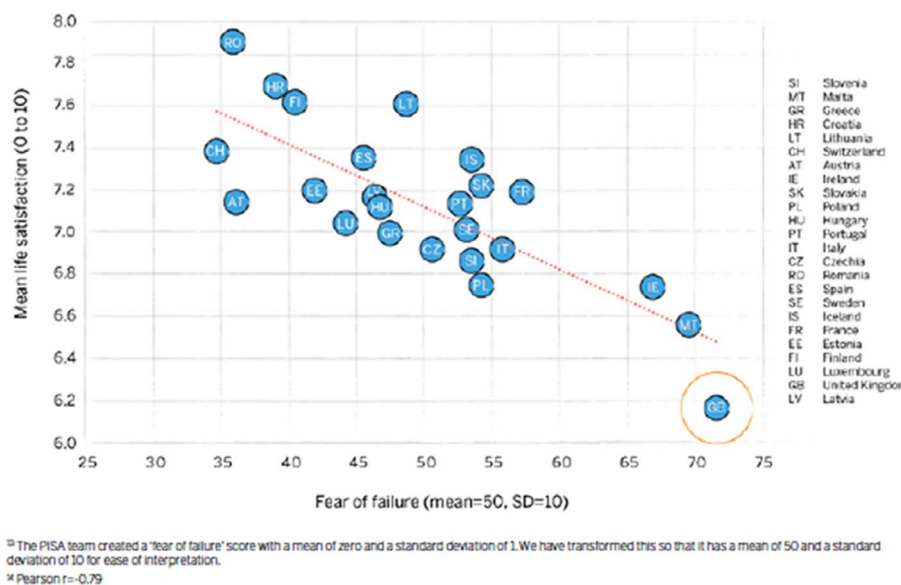
Andy: No idea.

Paul: Definitely nothing!

There is an increasing evidence base of qualitative research that indicates working-class children's low levels of well-being in relation to their schooling, exacerbated by high levels of anxiety and fear of failure (Hall et al. 2004; Reay 2017; McGillicuddy and Devine 2020; Hargreaves et al. 2021; Buchanan et al. 2022). However, when we contextualize this research within more quantitative approaches, we get an overview of the scale of unhappiness and fear of failure in UK schools that combines the micro with the macro.

Here again, in Fig. 7, we can see that the UK is an outlier both in terms of the substantial fear of failure manifested in schools and the very low levels of life satisfaction among pupils (OECD 2019c; The Children's Society 2020). But, as the qualitative research cited above demonstrates, it is the low achievers, those primarily in the bottom sets, and from working-class backgrounds, who are suffering the most.

Evidence-based research shows mixed-ability grouping benefits all social groups (Education Endowment Foundation 2020a), reducing hierarchy. UK research is reinforced by evidence from both Finland and Sweden. In both countries, reforms that pushed back the age of academic streaming from ten until sixteen were associated with increases in income mobility levels (Holmlund 2008; Pekkarinen et al. 2009). In contrast, the more hierarchical and competitive the teaching and learning environment is, the more this privileges the already advantaged. Furthermore, there is a long-standing evidence base that shows, for example, that setting and streaming does not work and that collaborative



**Figure 7:** Life satisfaction and fear of failure.  
 Source: The Children's Society (2020, p. 44).

learning that promotes talk and interaction between learners, and positive teacher feedback, does (Education Endowment Foundation 2020b). But what this database does not highlight is that collaborative, participatory learning works because it enhances both attainment and pupils' sense of well-being (Slavin 1989; Slavin et al. 2003; Laal and Ghodsi 2012; Kyndt et al. 2013; Veldman et al. 2020).

But as well as looking at educational inequalities within classrooms and how they are maintained, we also need a focus on inequalities between schools with differing ethnic and socioeconomic intakes. Exacerbating the sense of having no worth in education are trends toward segregated state schooling, despite our so-called comprehensive system. Research from Teach First (2017) showed that 43% of pupils at England's outstanding secondary schools were from the wealthiest 20% of families. This research was supported by findings from the Sutton Trust that the top performing 500 comprehensive schools in England, based on GCSE attainment, continue to be highly socially selective, taking just 9.4% of pupils eligible for FSM, just over half the rate of the average comprehensive (i.e. 17.2%; Cullinane et al. 2017). The policy emphasis on parental choice has not been victimless, any less than the protection of private schooling has been. Increasingly, we have a system in which there is a divide between advantaged and disadvantaged schools. One invidious consequence of the choice of many upper- and middle-class parents to send their children to schools where there is a critical mass of children like their own is that the numerous, predominantly ethnically diverse, working-class schools created as a result are routinely labelled as 'rubbish', 'sink', or 'schools for thickos'. The working classes are left with the choices the upper and middle classes do not want to make. They also have to deal with the repercussions of being 'chosen against' for their self-worth and sense of educational value. In the following two quotes, we can see the negative impact for working-class learner identities of being designated a 'rubbish' learner only fit to go to 'rubbish' schools:

'And I've been hearing that if you don't get into any of the good schools they send you to one of the rubbish schools. In school,

I've been hearing everyone saying "I hope I don't go to Chiltern" and stuff like that. So I then thought it's because all the kids there are bad and no good at learning.' (George, white English, working class)

'Deerpark is still going to be rubbish when it's changed... because there are still the same students and the students are crap.' (Teyfik, Turkish, working class)

(Source: Reay 2017)

But George ends up at Chiltern while Teyfik goes to Deerpark, and both have to manage the balance between going to schools seen to be 'rubbish with crap students' and trying to be successful learners.

However, the processes of segregation that the ideology of meritocracy endorses and legitimizes are having a wider effect beyond their negative impact on individual children. They are changing and limiting the ways in which the different social classes relate to each other, increasing social distance, mistrust, and ignorance of those who are different to oneself, and in relation to the working classes, sanctioning prejudice and denigration toward them from more privileged social groups. We can see harmful consequences in what white middle-class children say about predominantly working-class schools and the children who attend them

'Well, I wouldn't say this in front of other people, but there's no one here who's going to it, I think Chiltern is good for the not so intelligent people, but for the intelligent people, it's not good enough.' (Alex, white middle class)

'No one with any brains goes to Melton, it's a school for tramps.' (Sophia, white middle class)

Such prejudice and discrimination is particularly strong in relation to levels of education. Kuppens et al. (2017) found that highly educated groups were biased against those with low education, blaming them for their low levels of education and drawing on meritocratic ideology to reinforce tacit assumptions about their own superior intellect and culture.

Instead of compensating for the poverty of the children attending, the norm is now for schools in disadvantaged areas to be impoverished in terms of infrastructure, resources, and curriculum. In relation to the curriculum, UK research points to a difference in pedagogy experienced by different social classes, with the working classes more likely to experience 'a pedagogy of poverty' that pays little attention to critical thinking skills and adopts a 'drill and kill' approach (Hempel-Jorgensen 2019). Schools with predominantly working-class intakes, such as the one in which Cushing (2021) carried out research, are characterized by 'absolute teacher control and extreme systems of student punishment (such as extended periods in isolation and/or detention)' (Cushing 2021, p. 26). Together with Kulz (2017), this research reveals highly regulated attempts, particularly in academy schools, to make working-class students think, act, and talk in accordance with white, middle-class behaviours.

## The academies project and educational inequalities

Recent policy positions academization as a positive lever for enhancing levelling up (Department for Education 2022). Yet, a key component of academization is the frequent use of hard discipline and the introduction of rigid codes of conduct and student uniform regulations (Kulz et al. 2022, p. 151). Like the US Charter schools they are modelled on, they often use overly controlling authoritarian teaching styles and have an expanding control apparatus of behaviour hubs and isolation booths, all geared to manage poverty and deprivation rather than to tackle it. The continual suppression of student opinion—in particular that of ethnic minority or working-class students—has become a centrepiece of the focus many academy schools have on authoritarian discipline (Kulz et al. 2022, p. 155). This suppression is detrimental in its consequences for working-class children and their future prospects. But the consequences are not only educational and economic, they are also democratic. Any suppression of voice and independent thinking has implications for functioning democracy.

Clarke et al. (2021) argue that authoritarian behavioural policies in English education have become the new normality. The 'Teaching Like a Champion' industry (Lemov 2010, 2015, 2021) is the most recent manifestation of the popularity of such approaches. The programme, which adopts the language and values of the business sector, is now endemic in English as well as US schools. Teach like a Champion has an underlying pedagogy based on obedience, conformity, and uniformity. The programme promotes norms of unquestioning compliance as a way of enabling working-class students to achieve sufficiently well to gain entry to higher education.

According to Golann (2015), such 'no-excuses' behaviour programmes develop 'worker-learners'—children who monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority—rather than lifelong learners who can take initiative, assert themselves, and interact with ease with their teachers. Such approaches are more about training than education, control rather than critical thinking (Stevenson 2015). In 2018, writing for the Local Schools Network, Roger Titcombe stated that exclusion and extreme punishment are becoming the norm in the English educational system.<sup>6</sup> And there is no shortage of examples of such

an excessive focus on discipline. Titcombe cites one Academy where 41% of its pupils received at least one suspension in the year 2017/18. The practice in one English Academy, where children were made to chant 'silence is my natural state',<sup>7</sup> echoed the findings of Golann (2015, p. 12) in a US Charter school where one 13-year-old girl complained: '[w]e're silent all the time. Silent even in clubs, silent in class, silent. Come out of the building, silent.' But there are many examples of aspirational mantras designed to drum into working-class children the need for exemplary behaviour and yet more effort, with one academy I visited instructing pupils to chant 'I aspire, you aspire, we all aspire' at the beginning of every school day. Yet, in my research (Reay 2017) conducted in academy schools between 2010 and 2016, working-class students argued that the strict discipline approach deterred their learning rather than enhanced it. Tania, talking about attending a Performing Arts Academy half a mile from her home, said 'I actually hated it, it was like a military camp, you had to walk in silence, chant these mantras, wear suits. The last straw was when one of my best friends was asked to leave for talking in the corridor.' Tania expressed incredulity about the way teaching and learning were organized in the school. She told me:

'I did try and talk to my head of year. I said "how can kids express themselves when there are all these rules?", and he said "but this is what they do in Detroit, this is what they do in Harlem, and they get results." And I was like this is unbelievable, what sort of results can you get when none of the kids are allowed to express themselves?'

There is little recognition of either the substantial costs to students' well-being of such low-tolerance regimes or the much higher incidence of such programmes in predominantly working-class schools. As one teacher asserted, 'it's usually the schools in the most deprived areas that have the most draconian rules'. Golann (2018), researching in the US context, drew attention to the harm inflicted on low-income, minority students, including a concentration on teacher-directed instruction and low-level skills, a narrow curriculum, marginalization, and the exclusion of low-performing students. Furthermore, her research reveals 'little evidence to support the connection between no-excuses disciplinary methods and students' academic performance on standardized tests—and some evidence that these methods may undermine non-academic outcomes, such as students' social and behavioural skills' (Golann and Torres 2020, p. 617). Just as concerning, Uncommon Schools, a chain of Charter schools in the USA, decided to drop Lemov's SLANT behaviour technique (requiring students to Sit up, Lean forward, Ask and Answer questions, Nod their head, and Track the speaker), because of concern it was disadvantaging those who were already disadvantaged, and in particular Black and Latino students (Morrison 2020).

## Infrastructure and resources

Managing poverty rather than tackling it is not just an issue inside classrooms. In relation to resources and infrastructure, despite the efforts of staff, schools in disadvantaged areas are increasingly reflecting the poverty of their locality rather than being able to redress it, compounding social and educational inequalities. In terms of school buildings, a 2016 survey found deteriorating

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2018/09/exclusions-and-extreme-punishments-are-becoming-the-norm-in-the-english-education-system>.

<sup>7</sup> See Mansell (2022).

infrastructure including leaking roofs and inadequate ventilation with only 5% of 59,967 schools in the UK ‘performing as intended’ (Thomas and Pasquale 2016). However, evidence suggests that it is primarily schools in the poorest areas that are in the worst condition.<sup>8</sup>

Although schools in affluent areas benefit from the relative affluence of the families attending those schools through highly successful fund-raising and parental donations, schools in the poorest areas are frequently unable to raise funds for local school trips (Barton 2019). The Fair Education Alliance found that, whereas in 2017–18, the average school in London raised £43,00 from donations, in Yorkshire, it was just £13,300 (Barton 2019). But disparities are even greater between schools in affluent catchment areas and those in areas of deprivation and poverty. A further study (Ferguson and McIntyre 2019) discovered that England’s 30 most successful parent–teacher associations (PTAs), all in affluent areas, raised £3.6 million for their schools, whereas schools with the highest proportion of pupils from low-income families usually did not have a PTA, and the minority that did raised very little money from parents.

According to the OECD (2019a), although the norm across most (41) countries surveyed was for smaller classes in disadvantaged schools than in advantaged schools, the UK was one of the few countries where both larger classes and higher student–teacher ratios were observed in disadvantaged schools than in advantaged schools (OECD 2019a, p. 108). This is, in part, because schools in the poorest areas have often had to use the Pupil Premium funding to compensate for cuts in the value of other funding (The Sutton Trust 2019). Working-class schools, in particular, suffer from dilapidated buildings, lack of resources, rapid staff turnover, inexperienced teachers, and an overreliance on standardized tests and basic skills. Instead of policies to compensate for educational inequalities, it is the more advantaged schools that have a higher percentage of highly qualified teachers, whereas the proportion of teachers with fewer than 5 years of teaching experience was greater in disadvantaged schools than in advantaged schools (OECD 2019a). Teachers in the most disadvantaged schools are twice as likely to report that their department had insufficient numbers of suitably qualified teachers, particularly in the core subjects of mathematics and science, compared with schools with more affluent intakes (Allen and McInerney 2019; Bousted 2022). Furthermore, regardless of experience and qualifications, research shows that teachers spend less time on actual teaching and learning in those schools with a large share of disadvantaged students (OECD 2019a).

Such class-based educational inequalities are further exacerbated by paid out-of-school activities and educational work in the home, including private tuition. In their research in the USA, Kaushal et al. (2011) showed that families in the top income quintile were spending almost seven times as much per child each year compared with the poorest 20%: they paid \$9,000 per child for ‘enrichment’ activities such as out-of-school tutoring, athletic activities, test preparation, summer camps, second language learning and cultural activities compared with the \$1,300 per child that families in the bottom quintile (20%) spent. My own research in the 1990s on parent involvement in children’s primary schooling (Reay 1998) showed that middle-class parents were routinely paying more than £100 per week on tutoring, more than the weekly income of some of the working-class lone

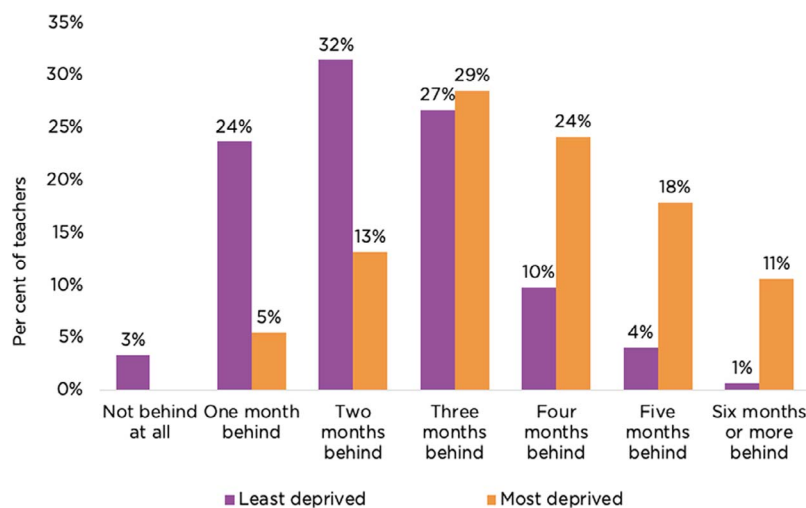
parents. Since then, more recent UK-based research (Kirby 2016) found that privately educated students are about twice as likely to receive private tuition as state-educated pupils, children from richer families are twice as likely to have received private tuition than their poorer peers, and only 17% of children on FSMs had ever received private tuition.

Behind the government’s talk of levelling-up funding for 2020–22 is a redirection of funding toward those schools that had previously been funded at a lower rate because of their more privileged intakes including fewer FSM, English as an additional language (EAL), and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) pupils (Andrews 2020). The Education Policy Institute (Andrews 2020) found that, although FSM-eligible children received an allocation of £240 more than non-eligible children, over the next year they will see an increase of 0.6% compared with an increase of 1.1% for pupils not eligible for FSM. Over the last 3 years, FSM-eligible pupils have received increases of just two-thirds the rate of non-eligible pupils (Andrews 2020). The think tank concluded that efforts to level up school funding in England will benefit better off students more than their poorer peers. The link between funding and disadvantage is being weakened by a system of levelling up that directs additional funding to more affluent schools with historically lower levels of funding. So-called ‘levelling-up’ funding is, in effect, levelling down resources directed at the working classes and the schools they attend (Andrews 2020). The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee has stated that the Department for Education’s decision in 2021 to change how it calculates pupil premium funding has meant that schools lost out on £90 million worth of funding to support disadvantaged children (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2021).

## Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational inequalities

Then there were the school lockdowns, which have further exacerbated educational inequalities (Reay 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a world of home schooling with online lessons and Zoom conferencing. This shift to remote learning during the lockdown periods of March to June 2020 and from January 2021 made the implications of children’s and young people’s unequal access to IT equipment and connectivity uncomfortably stark. When education went online, it was the poorest—those who were disproportionately from ethnic minority backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission 2020)—who were the most adversely affected. For many on low incomes, Internet connection is slow, unreliable, and only available on phone screens. This was the case in the UK as it was across the rest of the world. In 2017, only 47% of low-income British households had home broadband, and low-income, ethnic minority households had lower access than their white counterparts (Ofcom 2018). Analysis of 2018 PISA data (Schleicher 2018) found that although more than 70% of advantaged UK secondary school students had access to online learning platforms, only 40% of their disadvantaged peers had the same access. Even in normal times, this adds up to a glaring inequality divide, but in the time of COVID-19, when most children were being home schooled, there was growing concern that such a ‘digital divide’ severely harms poor pupils’ education and widens the social class attainment gap (Montacute and Cullinane, 2021). More recently, Sibieta (2021) has concluded that the negative effects of the pandemic on educational progress are more than 50% larger for disadvantaged children.

<sup>8</sup> See the Hansard official report of the Parliamentary debate ‘School Building Conditions, Volume 701: debated on Tuesday 21 September 2021’, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-09-21/debates/A211D025-E5C0-4919-86FD-DDB63A2C0D28/SchoolBuildingConditions>.



**Figure 8:** Learning loss in the least and most deprived schools.

Source: National Foundation for educational research survey of 1,782 classroom teachers: 1,408 teachers gave at least one response (Sharp et al. 2020, p. 21).

Furthermore, government action to redress digital inequalities during the pandemic turned out to be distressingly inadequate, with fewer than half of the children eligible for pupil premium in schools being allocated laptops under the government scheme. Most eligible pupils still had not received laptops 2 months into the school lockdown (Whittaker 2020a, 2020b). By June 2020, most schools had not received a single laptop for disadvantaged Year 10 pupils (Ferguson and Savage 2020). By the time of the second lockdown in December 2020, still fewer than a third of the 1.7 million laptops required had been delivered.<sup>9</sup> Instead, children lacking devices and/or access to WiFi, along with key workers' children, were now required to attend school—putting themselves and their families at much higher risks of COVID-19 than their more privileged peers.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to the government's rhetoric of 'levelling up', COVID-19 has not been an equalizer. Rather, its impact has been to increase and solidify already existing educational inequalities. Research from the National Foundation for Educational Research (Sharp et al. 2020) has revealed stark disparities in learning loss over the period of the first school lockdown between the least and most deprived schools.

More than half of teachers in the most deprived schools reported that their pupils were 4 months or more behind academically, compared with only 15% of teachers in the least deprived schools (see Fig. 8).

Then there has been the government's rescue package for 'left-behind' children for the 2020/21 school year. Rather than invest in state education by funding extra teachers and teaching assistants in working-class schools to provide more learning support for those most in need, most of the money was directed to the totally unregulated £2 billion, private tutor industry (BBC Radio 4 In Business June 24th 2020). The government decided to use more than half of the money allocated to commission private

tutor agencies to deliver individual and small-group tuition.<sup>11</sup> The remaining money going directly to schools was woefully inadequate, representing £80 per student with no specification that it be targeted at the most disadvantaged. It equated to just more than 1% extra in spending per pupil in 2020 and still left spending per pupil more than 3% below its level in 2010 in real terms (Santry 2020). At the beginning of 2021, a survey of more than 1,000 head teachers found that more than 90% said they either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'the National Tuition Programme is working effectively to support students in schools' (Savage and Ferguson 2021). The initiative may have been a failure in terms of reducing educational inequalities but it was definitely a successful venture in terms of further privatizing our state educational system.

By the beginning of 2021, just 5% of state school teachers reported that all their students have adequate access to devices for remote learning. Parents on lower incomes were twice as likely as richer parents to say they were finding home schooling harder than in the first lockdown, while 84% of teachers expressed the view that the lockdown and associated disruption would increase the attainment gap in their school (Montacute and Cullinane 2021).

School closures, such as those necessitated by the pandemic, often have longer term consequences, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized in society, magnifying already-existing disparities within the education system. In addition to the missed opportunities for learning, many working-class children have been subjected to intense economic and social stress (Giannini 2020). The research consensus (Moss et al. 2020; Montacute and Cullinane 2021) is that the pandemic lockdown has had a more negative impact on working-class children than their middle- and upper-class peers. Moss et al. (2020) argue, from their research on 1,653 state primary school teachers, that in the schools with pupils from poorer homes, teachers had to operate in 'crisis mode' to respond to the growing welfare needs of their most disadvantaged families. Sixty-eight percent of all head teachers and 78% of teachers working in the most deprived areas said their

<sup>9</sup> See The Good Law Project article, 'Government is putting its own reputation ahead of the health of poor families' (9 January 2021), [https://goodlawproject.org/news/reputation-ahead-of-health/?utm\\_source=Twitter&utm\\_campaign=edu%20news%20tw%200901&utm\\_medium=social](https://goodlawproject.org/news/reputation-ahead-of-health/?utm_source=Twitter&utm_campaign=edu%20news%20tw%200901&utm_medium=social).

<sup>10</sup> See the Department for Education webpage, 'Children of critical workers and vulnerable children who can access schools or educational settings', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>.

<sup>11</sup> See the article by Richard Adams, 'Boris Johnson's education catch-up plans do not reflect reality', in *The Guardian* (19 June 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jun/19/boris-johnsons-education-catch-up-plans-do-not-reflect-reality>.

highest priority was ‘checking how families are coping in terms of mental health, welfare, food’ (Moss et al. 2020). This inevitably left less time to focus on implementing and supporting those children’s home-based learning.

There were large disparities in home learning over the course of the pandemic. Easterbrook et al. (2022) concluded that pupils eligible for FSM, boys, pupils from families that were financially struggling, and pupils whose parents had not graduated from university were less engaged and spent less time home learning over the course of the pandemic. They also found that pupils eligible for FSM were more likely to have noisy and cramped home environments and lacked sufficient technology and Internet access. Eligibility for FSM was also associated with parents’ lack of confidence in supervising their child’s work, whereas parents with a degree felt better able to supervise their child’s home learning and more likely to report that someone in the home was confident, motivated, and knowledgeable enough to supervise home learning (Easterbrook et al. 2022, p. 9).

A study conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Sharp et al. 2020) suggested that the learning gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students had widened by at least 46%, even before the last lockdown. The Education Endowment Foundation (2020a) came up with a lower but still disturbing figure of 36%. A later study by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Rose et al. 2021), which examined attainment at primary level, found that there was a large attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils, amounting to 7 months for both reading and mathematics amongst Year 2 pupils. However, as they measured ‘disadvantaged’ in terms of FSM and non-FSM children, their results were likely to be underestimates of the ‘disadvantaged’ group. The report concluded that the disadvantage gap is wider than earlier estimates, and was likely to be further exacerbated by the school closures in early 2021. More recent research (Eyles et al. 2022, p. 5) concluded that estimated learning losses during the pandemic in the UK seem to be high compared with other countries, with ‘intergenerational income persistence set to rise by somewhere between 4.8% and 11.9% due to the steep socioeconomic gradient in lost learning hours during the pandemic’.

The mental health of the UK’s children was already deteriorating before the pandemic (Sellers et al. 2019). Between March and May 2020 (during lockdown), a survey of 2,673 parents reported deteriorating mental health and increased behavioural problems among children aged 4–11 years. But it was the working-class children who consistently had the worst mental health (Waite et al. 2021). Working-class children were more likely to have reduced mental health, more anxiety about their schooling, and to have experienced a greater learning loss as a consequence of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns.

## Conclusion

The main focus when we consider inequalities in education—whether we focus on social class, ethnicity, gender, or any combination of them—is educational attainment. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to more attention being paid to well-being and mental health in relation to education. I have looked at the small body of research on children’s emotional responses to their school experiences in the earlier section on experiences of inequality, but more recent post-pandemic research (Action for Childhood 2022) suggests we should be paying much more attention to the inequalities in well-being generated through schooling.

### The biggest barriers children saw to having a brighter future were:

- 44% – more pressure from school
- 34% – fewer opportunities to get a good job

### The top two worries among children were:

- 49% – pressure from school
- 46% – their mental health

### What stops children from fulfilling their potential?

Children were asked what they think makes it harder for them to fulfil their potential and achieve everything in life that they are capable of. The top two responses among children were:

- 49% – the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic
- 46% – too much pressure from school

Children across social classes increasingly see schools as not providing a supportive and caring environment, with girls more likely than boys to feel unsupported.

Source: Action for Childhood (2022).

The survey raises concerns about the well-being of children generally, but among children growing up in poverty, most were worried about pressure from school and saw it as a barrier rather than an enabler of a brighter future. The fact that schooling is seen by so many children as an obstacle to realizing their potential should be raising the alarm among those committed to the welfare of future generations. There is not only a socioeconomic attainment gap but also socioeconomic and gender well-being gaps that have received insufficient attention, despite contributing to educational inequalities. To conclude, the evidence presented in this commentary shows that the English educational system continues to work well in terms of ‘selecting and rejecting to rear an elite’ (Jackson and Marsden 1966), but at the cost of providing a good education for all, and particularly for those who are economically disadvantaged.

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