



Book Review

Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes

Reay, D. (2017). Bristol, UK: Policy Press. ISBN 9781447330653 (paper) £13.99; ISBN 9781447330660 (ePub) £12.99. 248 pages

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At a recent scholarly conference, dinner conversation among a group of academics turned to Tara Westover's *Educated* (2018), a title that generated much book buzz and made the *New York Times Book Review's* top 10 Best Books of 2018. The memoir traces the author's journey from her rural survivalist family roots to the halls of Harvard and Cambridge. It is a story that fascinates and compels, with part of its appeal perhaps due to its fairy tale element for smart girls, where elite higher education is the corollary to meeting Prince Charming, and the pinnacle of success and social mobility. It is a sentiment that is alluded to in *Educated*, and overtly countered in the work of Diane Reay.

In *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*, British sociologist Diane Reay (2017) traces her own educational journey from the working class to Cambridge. And as a smart working-class girl turned academic myself, I found Reay's dismantling of the fairy tale much more compelling. Reay integrates a robust scholarly review of research, her own extensive empirical work, and case study narratives from a wide range of learners and stakeholders. By weaving multiple studies over many years alongside her own experiences as a smart working-class girl journeying through school, Reay exposes the insider-outsider status she experienced firsthand and supports her argument empirically. *Miseducation* is a highly readable account that is well-organized, clearly articulate, and methodically-supported.

Reay notes that her motivation for writing the book came from a place of sadness and diminished hope, amplified by recent policy shifts and increased

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competition that further complicate education's ongoing inability to compensate for wide social and economic inequalities. In the first two chapters, Reay explores the relationship between education and the wider economy and society. Tracing the workings of the education system historically and in contemporary English society, with particular attention to class, she posits deference as an educational outcome:

Deference always has been and still is expected of the working-class. In fact what is surprising is that some of the working-class still make enormous efforts to succeed educationally in an educational system that holds little prospect of a positive academic outcome. The working-class continue to have access to relatively low levels of the kind of material, cultural, and psychological resources that aid educational success. Most cannot afford the private tuition and the enriching cultural activities that many upper- and middle-class parents routinely invest in for their children. (p. 15)

Reay highlights how working-class underachievement is frequently blamed not on the structural inequality that reproduces poverty and keeps people from accessing resources, but on the parents themselves – their attitudes and failures. The sense of belonging that middle-class children are afforded in schools is sharply contrasted with the legacy of negative representations and othering that working-class children inherit from multiple generations of family history, where schooling is associated with failure and class derision. Lack of respect for the working class in wider society translates into class condescension in the classroom, with students and schools being judged negatively by their location in working class neighbourhoods or the prevalence of a working-class student population. Reay paints a portrait of schooling under neoliberal assault and with working-classes caught in the web. The increasing casualization of labour, as well as a widening income gap and wealth distribution in the UK and globally, means issues of inequality in schooling and society are persistent, if not worsening.

Reay draws on statistics and social policy to demonstrate how working-class experiences in the labour market are inextricably linked to inequality in schools, and how education is implicated in larger processes:

Education cannot compensate for society because our educational system was never set up to do that, any more than it was established to realise working-class educational potential. Instead it operates as an enormous academic sieve, sorting out the educational winners from the losers in a crude and often brutal process that prioritises and rewards upper- and middle-class qualities and resources. (p. 26)

She examines educational policies that have exacerbated educational and social inequality, focusing on the historical processes that have legitimized and institutionalized working-class educational failure. Arguing that the provision of education for working-class children within the late 19th century English state schooling system was intended as a mechanism for the

dominant classes to maintain their status, while policing and controlling, rather than educating the working classes, Reay returns to deference as an educational goal, and anchors this argument in the reality of a divisive class environment where high achieving students are called Cheetahs and put in the top set and lower-performing students are grouped together in the bottom set and called Monkeys. Reay makes it clear that management strategies such as this type of ability grouping reproduce societal divides, working “to reinforce and entrench the low esteem in which the working classes are held, rather than to modify and alleviate class prejudices and discriminations” (p. 25). As a former teacher at a British curriculum school, I can attest that this chapter should be required reading for those who might argue that grouping their students according to hares and tortoises is innocuous.

Reay provides an overview of working-class education over the 20th century. Tracing the elimination of school fees for secondary schooling in the UK in 1944 and the establishment of a tripartite system of schools from that point on, Reay draws on studies that reveal how ineffectual the system was at increasing educational opportunities. Weaving anecdotal references regarding her own place as the sole or one of only two working-class girls in the top set of her classes at grammar school, she highlights how middle-class children still dominated the top sets at institutions that were supposed to provide opportunity for all children. The line between the personal and the scholarly overlaps as she incorporates a poem from her uncle, whose observations of how working-class boys were treated in school highlight the disjuncture between the educational aspirations of working-class children and their alienation, as they lost a sense of belonging amongst the middle-class mores of grammar schools.

From there, Reay moves to the establishment of comprehensives in the 1960s, noting that although this was meant to address inequities, social class selection in comprehensive schools remained in the “systems of setting and streaming” (p. 41) and the residential catchment areas that determined patterns of comprehensive school intake and demographics, again mirroring larger social inequality. The incorporation of parental choice policies in the 1990s is implicated in the persistence of inequality. Pointing to a widening attainment gap between low-income and middle-class students since 2015, Reay next moves to the private school sector and demonstrates how power and privilege in that arena continues to ensure that elitism and exclusivity are guarded by the wealthy. Similarly, Reay notes that the introduction and growth of an academy system perpetuates the differences cleaved by class because it is grounded in principles of competition not social justice, and privatization not educational improvement.

Parental choice policies that have supported the proliferation of charter schools in the United States and academies in the United Kingdom have been part of educational discourse in recent decades. Reay disrupts the political hype around the achievement of academies by drawing on research that reveals a system that is not living up to the political rhetoric. Reay notes from

her research into the educational experiences of young people that working-class knowledge – both relevant and rewarding for them – is absent or devalued in their school curriculum, a finding that resonates with my own experience (Ingersoll, 2012). The “damaged learner identities” (p. 63) that schooling creates and imposes is comingled with the stigmatization of vocational education. Reay notes that “failure within education to respect and value working-class knowledge has resulted in the invidious divide between vocational and academic knowledge” (p. 65) and “any sort of equality between vocational and academic education would require a transformation in both what vocational education constitutes and who engages in it” (p. 65). Choice policies do little toward such transformation; rather they reinforce class divides by providing middle-class parents with venues for removing their children from working-class classrooms.

Reay’s work spans more than 25 years of research on class in the classroom, and she shares a grim portrait of students whose well-being is jeopardized by a competitive culture of test attainment. Sharing stories from focus groups in both primary and secondary schools, Reay reveals how children have taken up the neoliberal discourses of individual competition and choice as a determinant of success in a market-driven educational context. Tying these stories to recent statistics on the social-emotional health of students, Reay makes the case that working-class learners are the ultimate losers in a schooling culture that emphasizes competition over the civic values of care and collaboration.

In this work, the fairy tale of competitive social mobility is exposed. Reay tackles the topic of social mobility as it relates to isolation for working-class learners, whose educational attainment means distancing from their communities of comfort, and proximity to those who have been warned against associating with them.

So many of us from working-class backgrounds invest heavily in the fantasy that our relentless efforts will bring us love, care, intimacy, success, security and well-being, even when they are highly unlikely to do so because, in doing so, we are forming optimistic attachments to the very power structures that have oppressed us, and our families before us. (p. 102)

Entrance into the higher status universities is rare for working-class youth, and sustaining performance within an essentially alien culture while accruing a significant debt load makes it a difficult prospect. Few get through, and the impact is individual mobility, not wider social mobility; access has not widened overall. Using empirical research, personal anecdote, and examples from public discourse, Reay crafts a compelling argument for understanding social mobility through educational attainment alone as a fallacy. She notes, “the troubling paradox of widening access and the democratization of higher education is that, despite the democratic intentions, widening access has brought an intensification of class and racial inequalities between different levels of higher education” (p. 121). At the collective level, greater numbers

of working-class students at universities has, Reay concludes, resulted in asset stripping. At the individual level, there is loss of connection and increased isolation described as disjuncture by bell hooks (2009), who notes that academics who come from working-class backgrounds frequently encounter a chasm between the scholarly lives they craft and those of their home communities.

Although this work focuses on England, and largely on the experiences of White working-class students, Reay also acknowledges how working-class identities are mediated by other factors such as gender and race. This text sits alongside other powerful accounts of working-class experiences in schools and higher education in other locales (Dews & Law, 1995) and recent research that challenges the notion that private school enrolment improves outcomes for low-income students (Pianta & Ansari, 2018). The sense of struggle is clear throughout this book, and the compelling leaning toward social justice that is characteristic of Reay's previous work lifts each page.

At the end of this book, I wondered if it would also resonate with other working-class teachers. This was confirmed when I slipped the title into a Twitter conversation with Mr. Pink, a working-class teacher on Twitter, who characterized the book as "brilliant." Indeed, the insights Reay shares are robust, informed, articulate, and greatly needed in the realm of research in the sociology of education.

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