INDIVIDUAL ENQUIRY AND SCHOLARSHIP

Bridging The Gap: The Role of Social Class, Race, Gender, and Disability in Shaping Educational Opportunities Through an Intersectional Lens. A Critical Reflection of Shaun's Story

Khasiba Omar - Disability and Inclusion Advisor, University of Law

Introduction

As an individual deeply committed to supporting students and advancing their success, I extensively observe the enduring impact of socioeconomic inequality on students during their transition from Further Education to Higher Education. Therefore, examining how socioeconomic inequality shapes students' academic attainment, social inclusion, and welfare within the school context is crucial. This could provide us with a more comprehensive understanding of the main challenges students face within the university and school settings, and how these challenges persist throughout their university journey. These challenges do not simply dissipate; they continue to shape students' educational engagement and wider university experience.

Different theories and frameworks, such as Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943), Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (1978) and Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy theory, will be proposed to elucidate and facilitate a deeper understanding of why such issues exist. Further, it will critically examine current government policies, legislation, school leadership, management and challenges that may act as barriers to successfully implementing them.

Shaun's Story: An Example of Dual Habitus: Blue-collar Masculinity vs Educational Ambition

Diane Reay's "Shaun's Story" (2002) introduces an ethnographic account of Shaun; a white working-class schoolboy confined between the pressures of working-class masculinity and educational aspiration. For instance, the cultural barriers that Shaun experiences in his school, such as being part of the male peer group and not experiencing inclusive pedagogy, make it difficult for Shaun to succeed.

This is what Reay describes as a "dual habitus," as he attempts to outdo in school, marked by disturbance, hostility, and instability, while presenting a "tough" masculinity respected by his peers (Reay ,2002). Shaun's commitment to both is exceptional but psychologically taxing. His narrative demonstrates the psychosomatic drain of directing conflicting social outlooks within a context of poverty and educational disadvantage. Reay utilises Shaun's story to critique prevalent educational discourses about "failing boys," revealing their neglect of systemic and emotional factors contributing to working-class underachievement.

Why Does This Story Matter?

Socioeconomic inequality is considered one of the most persistent issues in our modern-day

education system because it substantially contributes to the attainment gap between different groups, including those who experience learning differences. Unfortunately, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, like Shaun (Reay, 2010), often experience hurdles that directly impact their learning experience, personal development and equal opportunities, which are related to learning disabilities and various needs.

Indeed, there are many factors linked to educational inequality and attainment gaps. These factors include financial difficulties, disability, gender, ethnicity and whether the student has been cared for (Winchester,2022)

This article addresses and analyses how issues of inclusion, such as gender, class, and learning differences, intersect in pedagogy, principally for students from underprivileged backgrounds who face both educational and socioeconomic difficulties to succeed. Shaun's chronicle is not merely an individual case but a means of demonstrating how emotional challenges and systemic inequalities are rooted in educational systems. It urges that researchers need to potentially re-examine how masculinity, social class, psycho-social well-being, and silhouette impact students' educational journeys.

The Multifaceted Nature of Educational Disparities: A Closer Look

The causes of current inequalities are complex and may be structural, according to Tahir (2022), who further posits that the education gap is frequently an indicator of future income

inequality. This suggestion confirms that education substantially forms future economic opportunities in our society, potentially leading to socioeconomic inequality. Cook (2024) acknowledges the importance of having a diagnosis to assist in obtaining the relevant support, such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. Nonetheless, the question is whether this is helpful due to the variability of neurodevelopmental conditions.

However, diagnosis provides the prospect of accessing specialist support (Lombardi et al.,2021). Conversely, Cook (2024) emphasises that the delay in catering to diverse students' needs in schools is because of inadequate governmental funding for support and diagnostic assessments, which can be a significant concern. It is important to note that being labelled as having a learning difference puts students in a vulnerable position of being stigmatised, which can be correlated with negative emotional, psychological and academic impacts (Daley and Rappolt-Schlichtmann, 2018).

Unpacking Educational Inequities Through Theoretical Frameworks Lens

It is imperative to draw on the theoretical framework of the intersectionality of race, class, gender and disability. Intersectionality, as coined by Crenshaw (1989), indicates how intersecting social identities, such as gender, disability, and social class, interact to create diverse forms of disadvantage (Besic, 2020). It is defined as a method of critically examining and interpreting the layers of complexities of the world, individuals, and phenomenological experience

(Hill Collins and Bilge, 2020). In educational contexts, this means that students do not experience differences in isolation, but rather through the impact of multiple, intersecting forms of marginalisation. Shaun's experiences, for example, exhibit intersectionality in practice as Shaun's social identities intersect to produce overlapping barriers to students' educational attainment (Reay, 2010; Chatzitheochari and Butler-Rees, 2022).

Intersectionality, in this context, means distinguishing how Shaun's family background, socioeconomic status, disability and gender work collectively to act as barriers to accessing his educational opportunities (Reay, 2010). Ferri (2006) argues that race and socio-economic class impact how disability is experienced (Kardashevskaya, 2022). Harwood (2006) suggests that disability diagnosis has a byzantine affiliation with socioeconomic class. For example, the likelihood that a student from a low socio-economic class is to be diagnosed with a behavioural disorder is high (Kardashevskaya, 2022), which potentially puts them at a disadvantage and perhaps is the case for many students like Shaun.

Shaun experienced difficulties fitting into both domains, underscoring the overarching issue of how some schools potentially fail to create inclusive environments for boys like Shaun who desire to thrive academically but experience the burden of conforming to societal norms of masculinity and group dynamics amongst his peers (Reay, 2010). This was articulated by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), or observational learning, in which he explained that learning can happen by observing others, replicating, and modelling others' behaviour (Bates, 2023). In this context, this enlightens how and why Shaun fostered the views and attitudes of his peers toward education, merely to be accepted into the group.

It is significant to acknowledge Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy theory (1970); it suggests that education should be seen as a cultural forum where educators must develop their capacity to examine cultural contexts (Shih, 2018). In addition, Chiang (2010) states that this context enables students to develop critical values and independent thinking, advancing democratic notions within our society (Shih, 2018). Critical pedagogy was applied in Shaun's school, leading to withdrawal as he viewed the curriculum as unrelated to his life (Reay, 2010). This underlines the necessity of fostering an inclusive educational environment to avoid excluding specific groups and create a healthy climate for the students to learn and succeed while not neglecting their emotional, cultural, and academic needs.

Another critical aspect that requires attention is inclusive pedagogy; it is defined as a method of teaching that seeks to increase the students' attainment at all levels while maintaining the inclusion of those at risk for exclusion pedagogy and underrepresented groups (Florian, 2016). For example, reflecting on Shaun's experience, implementing a pedagogy of exclusion, where the school fails to acknowledge the undiagnosed or hidden disabilities that could be affecting his

education, meant that his safeguarding and academic needs were not being met (Reay, 2010). This led to educational disadvantage and demonstrated neglect of the school's ethical responsibilities toward its pupils.

Lombardi et al. 's (2021) study addressed the correlation between support from educators, family, and friends and profound academic engagement. In the context of Shaun's story, the absence of unswerving support from teachers and peers placed an unbalanced emotional burden on family support structures, showing how profound academic engagement can appear despite, rather than because of, supportive learning environments. Further, Shaun experienced systematic challenges that excluded him academically and socially. Therefore, the experience of school environment(s) drastically impacts academic engagement, an essential factor affecting the students' well-being (Lombardi et al.,2021).

Adolescents' safeguarding and emotional needs in schools are also critical factors shaping pupils' educational results. Essentially, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943) suggests that students need to feel psychologically and physically safe to succeed academically. This signifies the importance of ensuring that social and emotional needs are met in school contexts, alongside educational needs (Rojas et al., 2023). In Shaun's narrative, holistic support is completely absent in his school and family, which arguably created an educational deficit for him in the process.

Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (1978) reinforces contemporary pedagogical approaches and supports scaffolding and the use of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Castagno-Dysart et al., 2019; Bates, 2023). In considering ZPD in practice, teachers might have prevented the issues raised in Shaun's case, such as the ongoing classroom disturbance. However, it is noteworthy that substantial teachers' departures suggest critical concerns to successfully scaffolding learning (Reay, 2010). This indicates Vygotsky's hypothesis of the ZPD; the distinction between what a student can do with assistance and autonomously.

The Role of Statutory Guidelines, Legislative Frameworks and Policies: Do They Have a Real Impact?

Historically, the school system in the United Kingdom (UK) has undergone extensive reforms, where policies are discussed and implemented. Yet the key question that still needs to be debated in the literature is whether the usefulness of these policies in supporting students who experience socioeconomic inequality has been evidenced in practice. Nevertheless, policies, statutory guidelines and legislative frameworks, such as the Equality Act 2010 and the SEND Code of Practice (2015) (DfE,2015), intend to advance inclusivity in all learning environments, including lower social class and failing school areas (Stobbs, 2022; DfE, 2015). Policies intended to close the attainment gap and improve social mobility between disadvantaged students and their peers have been introduced recently (DfE, 2017).

Notably, while policy reforms are often framed as instruments for reducing social disparities, the responsibility arguably lies with organisational structures and a political will to implement a meaningful change (Bixby, 2024). Consequently, the challenge, however, is implementing these policies to close the attainment gap and support disabled learners in schools; it is subject to the efficiency of school leadership and management (Reay, 2010). For example, the Education Inspection Framework (DfE, 2023) can pressure schools to perform well during inspections, which may lead to stress and anxiety among staff and students (Penninck, 2017).

Policies and frameworks that overlook the complexities of these intersections, such as gender, class, and disabilities, will fail to assist students like Shaun. For example, as of age 26, over 70 per cent of privileged school students are university graduates; however, compared with their counterparts, only 20 per cent of underprivileged school students are graduates (Tahir, 2022), reminiscent of Shaun's case.

Conclusion

Shaun's story provides valuable insights for policymakers and educators on the importance of fostering emotionally supportive, inclusive, richly endowed learning environments that address gender stereotypes. Reay's narrative resonates with Biesta's (2009) educational philosophy by explaining the practical impacts of educational theory. Both works underline the call for an inclusive and purpose-oriented approach to education that recognises the diverse lived experiences of all learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This relationship highlights the significance of promoting an educational environment that supports personal development, social inclusion, pedagogy, and equitable opportunities for success.

Moreover, it emphasises the importance of eliminating the systemic inequalities that prevent successful educational outcomes for disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, effective leadership and management are essential for the successful implementation of the government's policies.

Future Directions

In conclusion, I believe insufficient funding and resource allocation appear to be key factors in continuing inequalities between schools. Lower-class areas may not access the essential support needed, even though policies, frameworks and legislation exist on paper, suggesting little has significantly changed since Goldacre's (2013) study and recommendations for more thorough evidence-based research. Therefore, it is pivotal for the government to review their current policies and practices and invite educators to investigate and provide contemporaneous evidence for more targeted change.

References

- Bates, B. (2023). Learning Theories Simplified : ... and How to Apply Them to teaching. 3rd ed. London: Sage.
- Besic, E. (2020). Intersectionality: A pathway towards inclusive education? *PROSPECTS*, [online] 49(49), pp.111–122.

- Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), pp.33–46.

- Bixby, L.E. (2024). Intersectional Inequalities: How Socioeconomic Well-being Varies at the Intersection of Disability, Gender, Race-Ethnicity, and Age. *Research in social stratification and mobility*, p.12.

- Castagno-Dysart, D., Matera, B. and Traver, J. (2019). *The importance of instructional scaffolding*. Teacher Magazine, 23 April. Available at: https://www.teachermagazine.com/au_en/articles/the-importance-of-instructional-scaffolding [Accessed 31 October 2024].

- Chatzitheochari, S. and Butler-Rees, A. (2022). Disability, Social Class and Stigma: An Intersectional Analysis of Disabled Young People's School Experiences. *Sociology*, [online] 57(5).

- Cook, A. (2024). Conceptualisations of neurodiversity and barriers to inclusive pedagogy in schools: A perspective article. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, [online] 24(3), pp.628–628.

- Daley, S. G., and Rappolt-Schlichtmann, G. (2018). Stigma Consciousness Among Adolescents With Learning Disabilities: Considering Individual Experiences of Being Stereotyped. Learning Disability Quarterly, 41(4), 200-212.

- Department for Education (2015). *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of practice: 0 to 25 Years Statutory Guidance for Organisations Which Work with and Support Children and Young People Who Have Special Educational Needs or Disabilities*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dcb85ed915d2ac884d995/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf [Accessed 29 October 2024]

- Department for Education (2017). *Improving social mobility through education*. GOV.UK. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a82c6cb40f0b62305b94499/Social_Mobility_Action_Plan_-_for_printing.pdf

- Florian, L (2016), *Inclusive pedagogy: Moray House School of Education Election Briefing 7: Education from early years to 18: Research and Practice Contributing to Policy*. Moray House School of Education. http://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/electionbriefing7-inclusive-pedagogy-15-0516.pdf?utm_source=Briefing&utm_medium=Inclusive&utm_content=election&utm_campaign=MorayHouseB [Accessed 15 October 2024].

- Goldacre, B. (2013). *BUILDING EVIDENCE INTO EDUCATION*. [online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7a219140f0b66eab999f4f/Building_evidence_into_education.pdf [Accessed 15 October 2024].

- Hill, Collins, Patricia, and Sirma Bilge. (2016). Intersectionality, Polity Press. ProQuest Ebook Central, p.16. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bcu/detail.action?docID=4698012

- Kardashevskaya, M. (2022). Intersectionality Within Conflict and Peace. Elsevier eBooks, pp.297–302.

- Lombardi, E. Traficante, D. Bettoni, R. Offredi, I. Vernice, M. and Sarti, D. (2021). Comparison on

Well-Being, Engagement and Perceived School Climate in Secondary School Students with Learning Difficulties and Specific Learning Disorders: An Exploratory Study. *Behavioral Sciences*, 11(7), pp. 1-3.

- Penninckx, M. (2017). Effects and side effects of school inspections: A general framework. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 52, pp.5–6.

- Reay, D. (2002). Shaun's Story: Troubling discourses of white working-class masculinities. *Gender and Education*, 14(3), pp.221–234.

- Rojas, M., Méndez, A. and Watkins-Fassler, K. (2023). The hierarchy of needs empirical examination of Maslow's theory and lessons for development. *World Development*, [online] 165(1), p.10.

- Shih, Y.-H. (2018). Some Critical Thinking on Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Its Educational Implications. *International Education Studies*, 11(9), p 68.

- Stobbs, P. (2022). Difference and disability in schools: Participation or isolation? *British Journal of Child Health*, 3(5), pp.250–251.

- Tahir, I. (2022). *The UK education system preserves inequality – new report*. [online] Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/articles/uk-education-system-preserves-inequality-new-report [Accessed 21 October 2024].

- Winchester, N. (2022) *Educational attainment gap: Regional disparities*. Available at: https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/educational-attainment-gap-regional-disparities/#heading-1 [Accessed 21 October 2024].