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Class matters: social class and adult education

Introduction by Fergal Finnegan and Barbara Merrill (editors)

CLASS REPRODUCTION THROUGH EDUCATION

The issue of social class and social class analysis have been foundational for sociology as well as one of the fundamental themes of educational research for the past sixty years in a wide range of national and institutional contexts. There is now a large body of literature building on a variety of theoretical traditions (Weberian, Marxist, Durkheimian, Bourdieusian etc.) which has illustrated the power of education to reproduce and perpetuate class inequalities.

Research on class in the social sciences went through a remarkable period in the 1970s and early 1980s. One of the most influential contributions to this debates came from neo-Marxists who argued that education, at all levels, functioned as a sorting mechanism within a classed society and is an “integral element in the reproduction of the prevailing class structure of society” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 126). Of course, this was only one strand of a wider body of work, drawing on sociology, politics, sociolinguistics, and anthropology on social reproduction in what was termed the ‘new sociology of education’. This work was most closely associated with Pierre Bourdieu (1971) and Basil Bernstein (1971) and has proved to be enormously influential in educational studies. High profile symposia and books that followed from these events established the groundwork for two generation of educational research on class inequality and in Anglophone educational scholarship these ideas remain very prominent to this day. One of the enduring insights from this research is just how important culture and language is in class reproduction. For these thinkers’ culture is a key arena of class power and conflict and education serves a role both in sorting, and justifying, on seemingly meritocratic grounds the maintenance of class inequality.

Research on class reproduction was supplemented and problematised by work that sought to understand how this was resisted in complex, sometimes contradictory ways. For writers such as Henry Giroux (1983) Annette Lareau (1987) and Paul Willis (1977) questions of group and political agency are fundamental to grasping social class. Alongside this we have seen multiple large-scale empirical studies on international patterns in the strong link between social and educational class inequalities at all levels (e.g. Goldthorpe, 1996; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993, *inter alia*). This latter work had, and in many places continues to have, a significant influence on educational policy.

Despite a very significant turn away from class as a topic over the course of 1980s for political and social reasons that we shall discuss further below, we can point to the accumulation of a substantial body of international research, from varied and even conflicting theoretical perspectives, using multiple methodologies that demonstrated that class continues to matter a great deal in education and shapes educational experiences, trajectories and outcomes in a profound way. This body of work also

indicated how important it was to combine sophisticated theoretical accounts of class structures and processes with empirically grounded research on class experience. It has had some influence on how social inequalities and educational access are approached by government, states, and educational institutions. In recent years there has been an increasing focus on the elite use of education and the differentiation of a 'mass' system (Courtois, 2018; Friedman & Laurison, 2019).

CLASS AND ADULT EDUCATION

However, the research landscape regarding class and class inequality in adult education is quite distinct from in the disciplines of sociology and education. On one hand, the modern field has a unusually close, and politically charged, relationship to social class—arguably this has been a formative relationship—but on the other hand there is relatively little work that deals with social class in a direct way theoretically or empirically in recent years.

For historical reasons adult education, particularly in radical and popular forms of adult education, class was a much more proximate and live issue than in compulsory or higher education. In many countries the formation of adult education was strongly tied to the development of explicitly working-class education (e.g. the Workers Educational Association in the UK or in a different way the folk high school movement, or at least a portion of it, in Scandinavia). These forms of adult education were organically linked to social democratic and socialist working-class social movements in which class solidarity was foregrounded and the question of social transformation, and the best means of achieving this, was an abiding concern. That class exists and that class matters, and that inequality should and can be resisted were taken for granted. That class was inextricably linked to the economy and to questions of culture was seen as self-evident. That the working class wanted, and needed, new forms of institutions, curricula and pedagogy was treated as obvious. This political orientation and the associated, but distinct, cultural tendencies of democratic popular education had a major impact on the theory of adult education epitomised through the work of, for example, to name a few Paulo Freire, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, Ira Shor, and Jane Thompson. If one think of this research and activity as a whole it remains one of the most significant attempts in social science to think about how class inequality and class experience is inextricably tied to education, knowledge and voice. This in turn has fed into a rich body of work that explicitly examines class and its impact on adult learners (for instance the work of Ian Martin, Tom Lovett, Linden West, John Field, Paula Allman, David Livingstone, John Holst, Leona English, Kjell Rubenson, Marjorie Mayo, Jim Crowther, Shahrzad Mojab, Sara Carpenter and Peter Sawchuk). Most of this scholarship is from the critical tradition be that critical pedagogy, Marxism, feminism or cultural historical activity but also includes policy orientated empirical research especially in terms of class differentiated participation rates and trajectories in adult and higher education.

But the debate over the specific nature and significance of class in adult education as a field and how this relates to wider processes of reproduction and resistance remains undeveloped, in fact surprisingly so. This is especially true when we look at the past twenty years and the most recent generation of adult education scholars. There is also comparatively little debate on how class is conceptualised in adult education research and very few examples of work that grapples with how wider research on class, inequalities and precarity (for example Sayer, 2015; Standing, 2009; Stevenson, 2023) can be usefully drawn upon in the context of adult education. In organising and in participating in a wide range of



international conferences on adult education, we have been continually surprised by how little explicit attention is given to class. When we have undertaken systematic literature reviews on adult education and social justice research (Finnegan, 2023) we have discovered a similar pattern. It is striking that there is very little organised *collective* work on class, class inequality and forms of class agency- there are no special interest groups or networks focussed on class. The work of Tom Nesbit (2005) and others in putting together a special issue on the topic remains probably the most substantive attempt to reflex of the various ways class is approached and understood in adult education.

A CHANGING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

This shift in adult education research is in part due to the ‘travails of class analysis’ in wider social science where for many years it was viewed as an outdated concern (Pahl, 1989) or at the very least less politically significant than other forms of inequality. Changes in culture and consumption, in careers and types of work, the global division of labour, the weakening of the labour movement and new forms of elite politics in the form of neoliberalism are all part of this story. Also, it should be said that historically research on class simply did not pay enough attention to the ways class connects and is separate to other forms of social exploitation and domination (such as race, gender, disability and sexuality). What is noteworthy is that these travails and gaps have been worked through by many progressive activists and social movements in productive and interesting ways. In research on compulsory and higher education, sociology, anthropology and social geography you can also point to how these issues have been examined through scholarship and debate. A key insight of the current generation of activists and social scientists is that social class cannot be looked at in isolation as class intersects with gender, ethnicity etc. As Anthias reminds us “classes are always gendered and racialised and gender is always classed and racialised and so on” (2005, p. 33). We see less evidence of generative debate and theoretical synthesis in adult learning and education (ALE) scholarship.

This special edition of the Sisyphus journal entitled *Class matters: social class and adult education* is an attempt to spark a more substantive conversation about class and adult education. It consists of four articles written by adult education scholars from around the world: Brazil, Canada, South Africa, and the UK.

The four articles speak out of very different educational and social contexts and draw on different theoretical and methodological traditions but significantly all of them grapple with the idea that class is about power relations which necessarily intersects with other forms of inequality such as race and gender. In fact, this is a major theme of three of them. The data drawn on by the authors is historical and qualitative with a strong focus on reflexivity. Given the importance of large-scale data survey (PIAAC etc.) in ALE and the fact that that classed participation patterns is a key focus in policy and conferences such as CONFITEA it is noteworthy articles explore class using quantitative data. This of course reflects wider trends in adult education research and the predominance of qualitative methods (Nylander & Fejes, 2019).

In the first article Sheri Hamilton and Linda Cooper discuss ‘Why Class Matters: Race and Class in Adult Education in South Africa’. The article combines history with critical theoretical analysis and the way this is done means the piece is both impressively wide-ranging and stimulating. It offers an excellent historical overview of radical and popular education during both the apartheid and the post-apartheid eras. In it they trace how:

At various points in history and in different ways, adult educators saw themselves as change agents in challenging and transforming the racist, oppressive and exploitative social system that had entrenched itself in South Africa by the 20th century. In adopting this oppositional role, adult education as a field was historically orientated towards the black working-class and to oppressed black communities more generally.

In telling this story they pay attention to the varying ways class and race have been understood from communist party educational initiatives in the 1920s through to the Black Consciousness Movement led by Steve Biko, through to People's education, and onto recent student activism linked to fees and decolonising education. This history is fascinating in itself but the article does more than recover history. Class matters, they argue, not simply because it is a major axis of social power but because the precise way class is understood within social analysis has a profound effect on how people envisage adult education and social change. It matters a great deal what is foregrounded in 'intersectional' analyses and how this links to questions of nation, race and processes of social transformation.

Given the neoliberal turn of politics in the post-Apartheid era in South Africa an article that frames this story within a long arc of initiatives and debates is of great value. It is also generatively provocative. The authors discern a dislodging of class as the primary category of analysis over this period and argue that this is problematic noting that when they reviewed the extant research literature that:

a serious conceptual engagement with the notion of class - how class intersects with race, gender and other forms of oppression and how education often serves to reproduce these social inequalities - has not always been evident, nor its implications for theory and practice fully explored. This is despite the existence of longstanding debates in the sociological literature around how to theorise the shifting articulation between race and class in the South African context.

This, they say, left radical adult education open co-option and indeed, despite intentions to the contrary, possibly complicit with the reproduction of structural inequality. The richness of South Africa as a case study as well as depth of experience and of critical acuity the authors bring to this article makes it a major contribution to thinking about class and class analysis in adult education in a more explicit and critical way.

The second article 'Difficult Dreams: Unpacking the Mythologies of Human Capital' – is written by Sara Carpenter and a diverse group of her graduate students (Danielle Gardiner Milln, Joshuha Connauton, Laura Woodman, Meshia G-K Brown, Wilson Javier Mora Rivera, Fatemeh Mirikarbasaki and Arina Ehsan) at the University of Alberta, Canada. The focus of the article is on human capital as an ideology and its relationship to social class. What is interesting is that human capital and class are explored from the experiences of the graduate students as adult learners in terms of how they are 'accumulating and realising human capital' through their university education. The article is a discussion of a collective study in which the graduate adult learners explore critically the 'ideal of human capital' and how it affects and shapes their 'lived material reality.' Human capital is discussed as a means of social mobility as people invest in themselves through education which, by drawing on the work of Brown et al. (2020), is viewed as a 'false promise'. For adult learners learning is viewed as an investment and a means to achieve mobility in the labour market. With this in mind their study asks two key



questions: ‘how do our encounters with the narrative of ‘human capital’ make visible class relations within adult education?’ and ‘how do these encounters expand our thinking about class as historically constituted through colonial processes and embodied in social relations of race, gender, ability, and nation?’

The next section of the article encompasses a discussion on a wide range of human capital theories. Following on from theoretical perspectives the adult student authors bring their stories and biographies into the discussion of human capital and social class by using narrative methodologies. The stories are diverse as the adult students come from different countries and different cultural and ethnic backgrounds so that issues of gender and race intersect with class. In this section we hear the voices and life experiences of the graduate students both similarities and differences. Issues of migration, colonialism, class, financial cost, health and mental issues and the illusion of freedom are highlighted. What is central though is that class dominates their educational journeys. From their stories they conclude that ‘we are not all equally positioned to succeed’. This leads to a conceptual discussion on class by adult educators such as Nesbit and Allman and other theorists. They conclude their experiences of human capital in education by hoping that their stories and experiences of human capital will enable adult educators to adapt a more nuanced understanding of class and class relations.

The third piece is the special issues is Linden West’s article from the UK – ‘Class Matters, Then and Now: Adult Education, Class and the Psychosocial; Auto/Biographical Narrative Perspectives’ – importantly explores the historical past of social class and adult education. Class was once central to adult education in industrial societies as education played an important role in class consciousness and struggle at a time when class was related to economic and productive relationships. He argues that although lives are more individualised now in neoliberal societies class continues to matter even though it is not viewed as such. In discussing the history of class and adult education West discusses the contribution of key past adult educators such as Raymond Williams and Richard Tawney and their influences and legacy on the present in our understanding of social class and adult education. The first part of the article also outlines theoretical and conceptual approaches to class.

The article does not dwell only on the past but brings us to the present and the changing perspectives on social class. In particular, West looks at how social class intersects with other forms of oppression through the work of feminist adult educators as well as the author’s own work and life experiences. He asserts that current research by feminist adult educators, for example, challenges the recent neglect of class as a lived and subjective experience in adult education and society. This move and development is associated with the ‘turn’ to biographical and narrative research, illuminating working class experiences, and the intersection with gender and race of mostly women adult students, through their stories. To illustrate the intersection of class and gender West outlines the research of three women adult educators: Barbara Merrill, Paula Stone and Liz Chapman Houlst. He then moves on to bring himself into the story of class and adult education as well as his research in the field. In particular, he discusses his research and published as a book – *Distress in the City* – which focuses on class and race from a psychosocial perspective.

In concluding West argues that ‘class really does matter’ and that feminist, auto/biographical and psychosocial perspectives can provide insights into the lived classed experiences of adult students by highlighting that class continues to exist alongside gender and race inequalities. Adult education needs to continue to challenge class inequalities in the future by learning from work in the past, and present.

The final article by Janaina Marques Silva, Joaquim Luís Medeiros Alcoforado, Simone Valdete dos Santos, Stéphanie Gasse and Margarete Maria Chiapinotto Noro is an empirical study which explores the factors that support the successful completion of Youth and Adult Education Course (EJA-EPT) in Brazil. The EJA programmes are specifically designed to

address educational disadvantage. This attempt to overcome class and linked inequalities through targeted forms of education of course brings up fundamental questions about the power and limits of education. They note that there is a very high dropout rate from the EJA programmes. However, the authors do not focus on non-completion or pursue the argument, which are already well rehearsed internationally, that traces the likelihood of student non-completion to class inequalities and the overall reproductive logic of education. Rather they focus on student success- the 'difference that makes a difference' if you wish. Based on ten interviews with graduates from the EJA-EPT programmes they explore this "through the eyes of subjects who had successfully completed their education". They look largely at what occurred *within* the context of the programme and how pedagogy, curriculum, peer and educator relationships and the relationship of the programme to professional development to student success.

While the researchers assume that are asymmetries and class hierarchies are necessarily present they are interested in how the positioning is negotiated and renegotiated in these programmes in a way that supports completion. They treat this as both a sociological and a psychological matter and the article discusses how this relates to intrinsic factors related to "self-positioning (schooling, learning, knowledge, and socio-cognitive interactions)" and also extrinsically related to the development of a professional perspective. What is especially interesting about these findings is that these are factors that are linked to pedagogy. Of note is that the educator as a figure is less important than the design of the programme and the availability of collaborative exercise and how this work relates to the external world of work. The "relevance that students attached to the extra-class pedagogical spaces and times developed through institutional programs related to *extension projects*. Thus, it was in the condition of fellow students in a situation of interactive learning with peers that they were able to experience something new by changing roles, something always seen as a teacher's exclusive task".

Thus, the article nicely illustrates some of the dialectical tensions in grappling with inequality and what it might take to mitigate or address inequality. It is especially noteworthy that they use Basil Bernstein as a key theoretical ally for this study. Bernstein, as mentioned already, was a key figure in developing the sociological study of the processes of social reproduction. Drawing on sociolinguistics and Durkheim his work has been crucial in uncovering how class inequality defines, and is in fact, constitutive of, educational experience. A core proposition is that educational institutions create modes of communication and transmission and discursive framing that build on deep socially determined relations to language and culture in a way that advantages members of the dominant class. This highly structuralist reading of class is supplemented by Etienne Bourgeois social psychology alongside ongoing research in Portugal and Brazil and in so doing they identify a capacity for agency and change.

We feel it is fitting that a special issue on adult education and social class which discusses history and social change on a grand scale in different context ends with a discussion strongly influenced by structuralist sociology how decentred, engaged pedagogy can help offset, in however small a way, the logic of social reproduction.

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