

# Education and Poverty



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Edited by

Alfredo Gaete and Viviana Gómez

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# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Key Issues in Education and Poverty ALFREDO GAETE, VIVIANA GÓMEZ.	

## **Schools and Families**

Chapter One.....	13
Gender, Space and the Developmental Cycle: Social Class and Education in Bermondsey, Southeast London GILLIAN EVANS	

Chapter Two .....	29
Mapuche Families and their Chilean Schools: Mapuche's Search for Education and Respect SEBASTIÁN DUEÑAS	

## **Life in Schools**

Chapter Three .....	49
Involvement, Ethnography and Situated Knowledge: The Teacher-Student Relationship in Schools Located in Poor Areas PATRICIA GUERRERO	

Chapter Four.....	69
Does the School-Community Relationship Impact the Emergence of School Malaise? A Multiple-Case Study from a Social-Ecological Perspective M. FRANCISCA ÁLVAREZ, M. JOSÉ FERNÁNDEZ, P. ASCORRA, V. LÓPEZ	

Chapter Five .....	103
Disruptive Pedagogical Relationships to the Construction of the Learner Identity: Obstacles of the Pedagogical Practices on the Continuity of School Learning Trajectories of Underprivileged Learners CRISTINA JULIO-MATURANA	

Chapter Six .....	135
Why do Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds Acknowledge a Superior Authority in History Teachers? Three Interpretative Hypotheses GUILLERMO ZAMORA, MARISA MEZA, PILAR COX	
Chapter Seven.....	153
Technical and Instrumental Rationality of Technical Pedagogical Units in the Araucanía Region’s High Schools JUAN MANSILLA, CLAUDIA HUAQUIÁN, MANUEL MIERES	
<b>Teacher Education</b>	
Chapter Eight.....	175
Inequality and Poverty: Their Powerful Effects on Society, Schooling, Teaching and Teacher Education DAVID C. BERLINER	
Chapter Nine.....	197
A New Focus on Social Class: Teacher Education in a Grossly Inequitable Society STEPHANIE JONES	
Chapter Ten .....	215
Teacher Educators’ Beliefs about Poverty: Implications for Teacher Education Programs VIVIANA GÓMEZ, ALFREDO GAETE	
Chapter Eleven .....	247
Teacher Education for Teachers who Work with Low-Income Students: A Critical Literature Review M. BEATRIZ FERNÁNDEZ	
<b>Social Justice and Inclusion</b>	
Chapter Twelve .....	279
Between Equality and Difference: The Other in Teacher Discourse CECILIA ASSAEL, MARCO VILLALTA, ANDREA BAEZA	

Chapter Thirteen .....	321
Segregation of Indigenous Students in the Chilean Educational System and its Relation to Socioeconomic Segregation	
ERNESTO TREVIÑO, J. PABLO VALENZUELA, CRISTÓBAL VILLALOBOS	
Chapter Fourteen .....	349
Fair Practices: One Way of Meeting the Educational Needs of Students at Universidad Católica de Temuco	
J. PABLO BECA, PATRICIA A. MEJÍAS, PAMELA C. MERINO, JESSICA L. NAVARRO, M. ANGÉLICA SALDIVIA	
Chapter Fifteen .....	367
Art Educator Program of the Chilean Gendarmerie (GENCHI): An Educational Arts Initiative Serving the Prison Population	
PAULINA SARKIS	
Chapter Sixteen .....	389
Theatre Experience with Young People whose Fundamental Rights have Been Violated: The Role of Education beyond School	
IRIA RETUERTO	
Chapter Seventeen .....	403
Social Justice Accountability for Educational Leaders	
GERMÁN FROMM	



# INTRODUCTION

## KEY ISSUES IN EDUCATION AND POVERTY

ALFREDO GAETE AND VIVIANA GÓMEZ

This collection of works stems from discussions held during the *First International Conference on Education and Poverty*, which took place in January 2015 in Villarrica, Chile.<sup>1</sup> Its general purpose is to contribute to the understanding of the complex relations existing between education and poverty in the light of contemporary research and reflections carried out from different disciplines and theoretical approaches. While it does this mainly by delving into problems and challenges of the Chilean educational system, most of them are currently of international concern: What are the effects of recent public policies for reducing educational inequalities? How do privatization and other market-based education measures influence schooling in poverty contexts and teacher training programs? In what ways and to what extent can these programs take responsibility for improving low-income students' learning? How do ethnic and cultural differences relate to socioeconomic differences at school? What is exactly meant when it is said that teaching is a political act and that education has a social justice commitment? How is teacher education currently responding to the challenges underlying these questions – and how should it?<sup>2</sup>

Chile has one of the most unequitable and segregating educational systems among the OECD countries (Ministerio de Educación 2012; OECD 2013a; OECD 2013b). This state of affairs is due to a great extent to the neoliberal policies implemented in the country during the last decades – ever since the Constitution that the dictatorship imposed on the country in 1980, which changed the benefactor role of the state into a subsidiary role. On this new political scenario, the state transferred the educational task to municipalities and private agents by implementing a voucher system. A

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<sup>1</sup> Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Campus Villarrica.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning that, as many of the chapters were written in 2015, they have no references to works produced after that year.

market-based education system was thus inaugurated and later perfected through several modifications which deepened the effects of both the territorial and economic segregation already affecting the most disadvantaged social groups. All this ended up with a highly segregated school system in which the poor study with the poor and the rich study with the rich (see e.g. Rosas and Santa Cruz 2013; Valenzuela, Bellei, and de los Ríos 2011).

Segregation, together with low quality education, has led to low SES students' persistent academic failure and to an unacceptable achievement gap between the social classes (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación 2016; Rosas and Santa Cruz 2013). Several educational reforms and changes have been intended to mitigate this, but they have not succeeded in improving the students' learning and, even worse, there is evidence suggesting that many teachers lack the theoretical and practical knowledge required to teach the current curriculum effectively (CEPPE 2013) and to work in poverty contexts (Ferrada 2015).

The chapters of this book offer some refreshing thoughts on these issues. Berliner, Jones, Gómez and Gaete, and Fernández invite us to take very seriously the fact that teacher education must be revised and deeply transformed if we expect teachers to be able to deal effectively with their daily demands in poverty contexts. In his insightful analysis of the effects of poverty on society and education, Berliner analyzes some features of recent educational policy in the US and suggests certain skills that prospective teachers should develop during their preparation, stressing the ability to promote their students' success "by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context in which they live and work". We must, he thinks, have politically active educators ready to change "a society that desperately needs changing". A similar thought can be found in the chapter by Jones: "Teaching has never been, nor will ever be, a neutral act, but rather it is and will always be a political act". This applies also to the teacher educator's teaching. A goal of teacher education, Jones contends, is to support agents of change, which requires that teacher educators be themselves agents of change as well. But this is quite hard if they do not become aware of the impact their own prejudices and stereotypes have upon student teachers' professional development, as we note in our chapter (Gómez and Gaete). Teacher educators can easily overlook this, for we are human and, well, we know how tempting it is to see the mote in someone else's eye without noticing the beam in one's own. In this very same vein, Fernández points out the irony of criticizing teachers' deficit attributions to low-income students when one takes the same deficit-based approach toward the teachers. Her chapter provides us with an excellent literature review on how

the problem of teaching low-income students is framed and what teacher education strategies tend to be implemented, which, along with the other chapters just mentioned, makes us think that a common feeling has risen among educators that the time has come for discourses on the development of critical, reflective thinking in teacher education to be seriously put into practice. Beyond mere declarations, many teacher education programs are still focused on teaching contents and technical skills, without giving prospective teachers real opportunities to think about their practice and all the phenomena surrounding it. Actually, not all teacher education programs include poverty as an issue that must be explicitly problematized (Aragon et al. 2014; Hughes 2010; Ladson-Billings 2006). Why is this so? If reflection upon the problems of poverty is not fostered in universities, where will it be?

This question becomes particularly relevant if we consider that there might be a profound lack of critical thinking among teachers working in poverty contexts, as Fromm hypothesizes in his chapter and as it is suggested in the chapters by Jones, Dueñas, Assael, Villalta and Baeza, Evans, and Gómez and Gaete, which show that many teachers uncritically succumb to, and reinforce, the negative images society tends to construct of families experiencing poverty. Indeed, teachers tend to describe their low SES students' parents as if they were irresponsible or relatively ignorant citizens (or both), sometimes with questionable sexual practices or drug abuse behavior (or both), who do not care about their children's education and indeed fail to meet their taken-for-granted role of teacher assistants. In this picture, parents' low level of participation seems always a premediated decision due to their lack of commitment. We wonder to what extent teachers are aware of the reality they contribute to constructing by describing low SES families in this way. We also wonder how these totally unjustified conceptions are installed in schools and in the relations between schools and families, and to what extent students perceive them and are affected by them. At any rate, Álvarez, Fernández, Ascorra and López show in their chapter that parents' level of participation and commitment increases when the school is open to the community. Plus, feelings of belonging and integration produce an impact on people's well-being, both individually and at the social level. This must make teachers think about the kind of relation they want to establish with families and the effects that the way in which they talk about them have on such a relation.

Both Evans and Dueñas bring up in their respective chapters some tensions existing between home and school cultures, and in both cases the school happens to embody middle-class values that appear to clash with the families' values. Evans writes a wonderful ethnographic narrative that

submerges us in the turbulences of an English working class family surviving a troubled urban world, including the school and, more specifically, a school staff ready to blame the family for the failure of students at school. Evans points out some of the problems with this conclusion, one being that “it allows the school to wash its hands” of the failure. She also reminds us that learning is situational and why this is so important to bear in mind when we think of schooling. Dueñas, by means of ethnography too, shows how schools and Mapuche families on the coast of the Araucanía Region have differences in their views on childhood and parenthood, as well as conflicting expectations regarding the way schools and communities should interact with each other. The chapter ends with a discussion on how the school should become more sensitive to the culture and value the knowledge children bring from their homes.

Another theme that appears in several of the chapters is social justice and inclusion. Assael, Villalta, and Baeza tell us about the other in teachers’ discourse by means of an interesting analysis on how educational policies derived from international agreements are interpreted by the actors that must implement them in the schools. They discuss the origins of these policies and their lack of integration and coherence. When every difference is addressed in a separate way, they warn us, comprehensive knowledge may be lost and differences can become a problematic field of intervention. In tackling these and other issues, they also present us with a theoretical discussion on inclusion, diversity, the construction of the other, normality, abnormality, difference, and identity. Their goal is to go into the conception of the *alter* teachers articulate in everyday school practice from the perspective of inclusion.

Treviño, Valenzuela and Villalobos analyze the segregation of indigenous students across schools in Chile and contrast this ethnic segregation with socioeconomic segregation. As international research shows, segregation leads to the maintenance or the accentuation of inequality. In Chile, ever since 1999, the levels of socioeconomic and academic segregation have increased systematically, and school segregation is higher than residential segregation in a large part of the country. In their chapter, the authors stress the negative effects of school segregation over students’ processes of learning and socialization as well as over the development of social cohesion. The findings of their study suggest that indigenous students’ segregation does not follow the same patterns of socioeconomic segregation, and contribute to a better understanding of the relations and interactions of social, cultural, and academic inequality in the country. The concentration of indigenous populations in rural areas, the low density of population in these areas, poverty, and the differentiation of indigenous and

non-indigenous sectors are some of the elements that might account for ethnic segregation. The researchers remark that these and other findings should be considered in order to design policies fostering interaction among students from different ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. They also urge local authorities to push for plans and actions that help to break the link between poverty and ethnicity.

But the challenges of inclusion go far beyond the school. Beca, Mejias, Merino, Navarro, and Saldivia share with us a strategy they developed for attaining fairness in higher education teaching practices. They all belong to a university located in one of Chile's poorest regions. As a result of successive higher education public policies, the great majority of its students come from the lowest economic groups and, consequently, they have studied in schools that have not fully developed their academic capabilities (see Rosas and Santa Cruz 2013). In order to face this challenge, the university has implemented actions orientated to fairness in teaching practices, on the assumption that fairness involves more than simply allowing students from underprivileged backgrounds to enter the university. From the paradigm of action research, Beca and his colleagues present a case study in the context of this attempt to encourage new teaching strategies. The chapters by Sarkis and Retuerto also take us to inclusion and education outside the school. Both expound acting experiences among two highly excluded groups of society: people in jail and "institutionalized children". Sarkis presents an ethnographic study of a theater workshop in the penitentiary system that attempts to offer educational opportunities to the inmates. She analyzes the way in which acting succeeds in becoming a valued practice that deeply impacts the daily routine of the participating inmates and helps them develop important social abilities that were atrophied during imprisonment. Through descriptions of the prison's environment and culture, in combination with excerpts of interviews, Sarkis reveals the meaning of the theater workshop for the inmates and suggests how this space allows for trial and error and the possibility to collaborate with other people. Retuerto's chapter tells us about a theater experience developed with children protected by the National Children and Juvenile Service (SENAME). She positions her reflection in three territories that, in her view, belong to the periphery: poverty, social education, and territory-applied theater, suggesting that educational drama workers actively assume their role as potential drivers of change and provide significant experiences that foster resilience. She also calls attention to the stigmatizing notion of the "vulnerable" and the historical, naturalized prejudice it helps to maintain in Chile – the linking of poverty, psycho-social damage, and delinquency. We also present some considerations about this very negative notion in our

chapter (Gómez and Gaete), hoping to cast doubts on its suitability in education.

The chapter by Fromm takes us back to school. He discusses how social justice can be understood from a three-dimensional model nurtured by economic, cultural, and political insights, and points to the difficulties of achieving real social change in schools, due to the state demands stemming from the utilitarian accountability paradigm (and, again, the inadequate preparation of teachers). Schools have discrimination mechanisms that keep groups of people in disadvantageous conditions (the poor, ethnic minorities, LGBT students, and children with disabilities). Under the regime of the utilitarian accountability paradigm, with its standardization of teaching and assessment, the guides and programs fail to address social diversity and narrow down the understanding of local possibilities, leaving educational leaders under a lot of pressure. The same paradigm is criticized by Berliner in his chapter. He argues that standardized test scores are strongly affected by sociological rather than instructional variables and, consequently, neither teachers nor school administrators should accept them as valid ways of measuring their professional competence. We believe that the obsession for standardization and accountability has to do with an even deeper or more general framework which Mansilla, Huaiquián, and Mieres discuss in their chapter, namely, the modern turn to instrumental rationality. In this framework, the ends are eaten by the means: educators need to be efficient, no matter for what purpose. The question about the purpose of education is seen as a sort of philosophical caprice. In contrast with the call for political action in schools and teacher education institutions, the focus is on how to get things done as quickly, cheaply, and standardized as possible (something that reminds us of the McDonaldisation of society, of course; see Ritzer 1983). Policy takes over politics: we stop thinking where we are going because we are too busy trying to find the right vehicle. Mansilla, Huaiquián, and Mieres show us how this modern frenzy for instrumental thinking in education is expressed in the schools' excessive attention on the administrative-bureaucratic level and the control of tasks, to the detriment of pedagogical processes and the quality of education.

Other aspects of the life in schools and the relationships between teachers and students can be found in several chapters. Zamora, Meza, and Cox share the results of a very interesting study on teacher authority with low SES students who pointed out that their History teacher was the most significant figure of authority at school. They argue that authority is not an intrinsic characteristic of teachers but a consequence of a certain social relationship with the students, and suggest three ways to explain students' choice for History teachers: the institutional value of History in the Chilean

educational system, the fact that History teachers teach contents that are both relevant and understandable for the students, and the fact that these teachers explain to them “the rules of the game”, putting themselves in a highly visible form of authority. Julio writes on the pedagogical practices that interrupt school learning trajectories of children from underprivileged families in their early years, through narratives of the pedagogical relationships made by the children themselves. She argues that school dropout may be caused by certain situations that are triggered in the school system and, to an extent, can be regarded as a process of exclusion due to the failure of the school – a silent process linked to economical, sociocultural, material, educational, political, and symbolic barriers as well as to the shaping of children’s identity. In particular, she refers to a form of working at school that restricts the role of the learners to a highly passive performance, in an environment almost fully controlled by the adult. In a situation reminiscent of Freire’s (1996) banking education, the teacher has all the knowledge and all the power and the learner is passively limited to listening, watching, obeying, and copying. Finally, Guerrero presents a study carried out in a formerly very prestigious school that had stopped receiving the elite children of the community and begun to serve children whose families were experiencing poverty. Among other things, she found that teachers had problems in recognizing positive features in their current students. She also notes that it is both important and urgent for teachers to have more time to work and be with their colleagues, especially to meet and share experiences, improve their practices, and overcome their difficulties. Actually, a lack of time and other bad working conditions are two of the reasons the rate of teacher attrition is so high in Chile and other countries (Gaete et al. 2017). So fixing this might not only provide a way for teachers to overcome the defensive strategy of devaluing the students and their families to sustain their self-worth, as Guerrero suggests, but also a way to stop teachers from leaving the profession.

Last, but not least, it is worth remarking that for all the undeniable connections existing between poverty and education, attempts to fight segregation, inequality, and other problems of poverty simply by means of educational policy are doomed to fail. Poverty is a matter of social injustice and, consequently, education is just one of many social factors that can either combat or perpetuate it. Bad education is itself a consequence (although also *part* of the cause) of a morally unacceptable social structure, and in that regard we should avoid falling into the bad habit of conceiving it as the ultimate solution for all the problems of poverty. As Evans warns us in her chapter, this (mis)conception of education can easily lead us to neglect the question about why certain social groups are relatively poor in

the first place – a question whose answer cannot, in fact, be reduced to a merely educational explanation. We need to activate questions about employment, about the history of the working class, about what is going on culturally in working class communities, about what has happened to them historically, and about this whole social structure in which some people are clearly more privileged than others. Here we also follow Jones' inspiring reflections in her chapter: "Poverty is an effect of the systemic problems in our society: unregulated corporations, unregulated financial institutions, wages too low to sustain family life, local and state governments sacrificing tax revenue to corporations and the most wealthy citizens, a focus on competition, and a deplorable societal attitude toward a collective good [...]" These and other expressions of our ill-conceived social organization should be defied by any person who realizes these and the many other problems it yields, but especially by educators. For even though education should not be pictured as a magic cure for all the problems of poverty, it remains the case that one of its main goals is to build the kind of society we would like to live in. As educators, we cannot lose sight of how each of us contributes to reproducing the evils of our social structure, much less think that changing things is not in our hands. We hope this book can contribute to waking up our criticism and our political commitment to stop the injustice that, after all, we ourselves have created and, consequently, we ourselves can and must stop.

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# **SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES**



CHAPTER ONE

GENDER, SPACE AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL  
CYCLE:  
SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATION  
IN BERMONDSEY, SOUTHEAST LONDON

GILLIAN EVANS

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first I present an ethnographic case study. This allows me to explain the relationship between childhood, social class and gender in a predominantly white working class neighbourhood of London. The case study is taken from my fieldwork research in Bermondsey, which is an area characterised by the historical legacy of the famous riverside docklands of central southeast London (Evans 2006a). In the second part of the chapter, I build on the case study to ask what the current and on-going controversies about educational attainment and the white working class can tell us about the transforming cultural politics of Britain at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My concern at the outset is to make it clear that a focus on the white working class is not the same as a backlash against multiculturalism (Edwards et al. 2012). Rather, it is, an invaluable lens through which to analyse the transforming relationship between social class, race and multiculturalism in Britain (Evans 2012b). At a time when the working class in Britain is becoming increasingly fragmented along racial and ethnic lines (Evans 2017), we must not lose sight of what is it that black, white and Asian working class people share in common in Britain. It is this shared, multiracial history and the awareness of struggles that are shared in often increasingly difficult circumstances that makes it necessary to place an analytical focus on the political and economic as well as social and cultural features of a shared class position. Without this, it becomes difficult to think of what it might be that unites, for example, young black and white men growing up in similar urban neighbourhoods, under shared conditions of relative disadvantage.

## The Case Study

Tom was a lively, freckle-faced ten-year-old boy. He lived with his mum, step-dad and young sister, Mary, in a small two-bedroom housing association flat on an old estate in Bermondsey, the post-industrial docklands of southeast London. Pete, Tom's step-dad, was a dustman. He was a strong, but peace-loving man who wanted nothing more than to provide for his family, and to lead a quiet life. Tom's mother, Ann, was a housewife; she kept, as they say in Bermondsey, a tidy home, but struggled to manage the household in the way Pete expected her to. Like an increasing number of Bermondsey women of her generation, Ann "liked a drink" and had developed a drugs habit, using cocaine with friends from the pub where all kinds of drugs were freely available. Living on a dustman's wage meant that spare cash was hard for the family to come by, and Ann, desperate to get "nice things" for the kids and to "keep up with the Joneses", started secretly selling cocaine to make "a bit of extra on the side". Before long the family was in big trouble: Ann had got into debt to her supplier and then had to confess to Pete that she had let him and the kids down.

Disapproving of the trouble his mum was causing at home, and often in trouble himself at school, Tom was due to leave primary school in a year's time, barely able to read and write. Why was this? It seems incredible that at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a significant number of children in Britain—one in five at primary school level—are still leaving school with little or no basic skills (Ofsted 2012).

Tom was a bright and lively boy. He had no statement of special educational need, and he clearly had ambitions: occasionally he talked of being a policeman, which his mother teased him about, because policemen are not popular in Bermondsey, and after hearing a programme on the radio about what it is like to go to university, Tom had asked his mum if he could do that one day. She had told him that he could do anything he wanted if he put his mind to it, but in private, Ann was not sure whether what she had told Tom was true. She knew that all the odds were stacked against him, that she was in trouble herself, and that he was already always in trouble at school.

The problem in Tom's classroom, at the local school, was that he was one among a small group—there was no more than five or six of them—of badly behaved and disruptive, sometimes violent, boys who caused a lot of trouble, and constantly distracted the teacher's attention from what she was getting paid for—to deliver a curriculum, and teach the day's lessons. Sometimes, up to 80% of the teacher's energy was spent on trying to manage these boys' behaviour so that they might settle down, and appreciate

the value of learning something at school. The teacher's focus on the disruptive boys meant that the majority of other children in the class, those who were well behaved and who wanted to learn, did not stand much chance, because their learning was always being interrupted. Meanwhile, the teachers despaired, because without the support of senior staff the problems caused by the behaviour of disruptive boys was getting worse and worse, to the point that ten and eleven-year-old boys were beginning to think that they were the ones who ruled the school.

All the boys in the small group of five or six badly behaved boys had mothers or main-carers whose ability to care for them was, like in Ann's case, disrupted by the struggles they faced in just surviving and trying to raise a family in a predominantly working class neighbourhood. While Ann battled alone with her drugs problem, another mum found it virtually impossible to make ends meet, and had to work all the hours of the day on a low wage without family support, leaving her no time to spend with the children who ended up being cared for by their older sister who was just seventeen, and who resented the burden. All these disruptive boys had, then, disrupted parents or carers, which led to what the teacher called "an unhealthy level of independence". In other words they were not sure whom they could depend on, and were turning to themselves, and each other. Only in private could the boys admit to their teacher, whom they respected because she never gave up on them, how angry they were about being let down by people they ought to be able to trust.

It is not surprising, then, when school staff wondered about who was to blame for the failure of particular boys to learn well at school, that they often blamed what they called "problem families" where, it was said, that children were not being cared for properly. There are several problems, however, with this conclusion. Firstly, it was easy for the teachers to assume that the disruptive boys were also badly behaved at home. In fact, in my experience, Tom was "under manners" at home, because he respected his parents' discipline. At home, away from his friends at school, Tom was a complete mummy's boy. Often sitting on his mother's lap to steal a kiss, and joke with her, Tom would tease her as far as he dared before running away when she threatened to clout him. Spending time with Tom at home made me realise that despite the troubles the family was having, Tom was relatively safe there as a ten-year-old boy away from the peer group at school. The often violent, disruptive behaviour that teachers despaired of at school was, then, something to do with the social situation that boys were able to create at school. This really helped me to understand that learning, and therefore, behaviour, is deeply social and always situational (Evans 2006a; Lave and Wenger 1991). Young children and, indeed, all of us, as adults, are learning

all the time what the difference is between who we imagine ourselves to be, and who we are expected to become in all the various situations of life that we find ourselves in. This is why any anthropological study of childhood and education must be grounded in a rigorous theory of human learning (Toren 1990; 1999). An anthropological theory of learning makes possible a critical analysis of taken-for-granted assumptions about human behavior, and helps us to understand that what it means to be a child and young person at any time, in any place – whether at home, at school, or on the street – is always socially structured, culturally valued and personally embodied to highly specific kinds of ways (Montgomery 2008).

The second problem with assuming that so-called problem families are the cause of particular boys' failure to learn, and to behave well, is that it allows the school to wash its hands of the boys, and their parents. This is probably the most tragic failing—the institutional one. At least in a good school a boy who has the odds stacked against him at home can find a new horizon, an alternative perspective, and an orientation towards the world in which only the very best is expected of him. In a failing school he is limited to working out what survival means on all fronts—at school, among his peers, and at home. Blaming parents without supporting them is a failure to support the child. After all there is no such thing, anywhere, as a family without problems. The only real difference between families in Britain is the emotional, financial and educational resources they have available to them to work their problems out. In this sense, as Reay's work clarifies (2004), we might think usefully of emotional capital as a useful addition to Bourdieu's understanding of social class as the index of a range of investments in various social, educational and cultural capitals.

The third problem with Tom's school scapegoating problem families is that it avoids the fact that because of its own chronic institutional problems it was *also* failing the boys. These boys were, then, being failed twice: once at home where one or both parents were struggling for various reasons to meet their children's needs, and then, once again, in a school that did not have in place any system for containing the boys' disruptive behaviour, never mind addressing the reasons for it. From this point of view the boys were not being properly cared for at school either. No wonder they were not learning well. Also, in failing to get the disruptive boys under control, the school was, as well, failing to meet the needs of other children from working class families—those children who were relatively well behaved and ready to learn, but who got very little attention from a distracted and often distressed teacher. These children were quite often entertained by the clowning of the disruptive boys' antics, but sometimes they were also silently enraged, withstanding, day after day, the onslaught of a small group

of boys whose relentless disruption of the class and intimidating behaviour in school undermined everyone's chances of success.

Even if this were the end of the analysis it would at least be something—to acknowledge that so-called “problem families” are not the simple cause of children's failure to do well at school in working class neighbourhoods. Putting the focus also onto failing schools makes it possible for us to understand something more about how the odds come to be stacked against different kinds of working class children. And, in support of schools, we need to ask whether, even if they had all the answers in place, they would get the funding they need to deliver on solutions. For now, what we still need to understand is the part of the analysis in which it becomes clear that boys are failing worse than girls, and that white working class boys are doing worst of all compared to any other group of young people in the country (Strand 2008).

### **White Working Class Boys**

First, the difference between boys and girls. Tom's sister, Mary, was a brilliant reader, at least three years ahead of Tom even though she was at least three years younger than him. Why was this? Surely if Tom came from a problem family then Mary, who came from the same family, should have been failing at school too. The difference between Tom and Mary was that Tom was allowed to play out in a neighbourhood where tough boys ruled. On the street Tom had to leave behind his “mummy's boy” attitude, and become a different kind of ten-year-old boy, a boy who could handle himself, and prove his worth among friends who were learning how to cope with violent bullying from older boys who moved in a crew, and controlled the various territories of the estates with ruthless determination. Faced with this kind of environment for play, young boys quickly learn how to withstand violent intimidation and, in time, how to enjoy being intimidating themselves.

The problem though is that the tougher and more violent a boy gets when learning how to survive and become a man on the streets, the harder it is for him to accept the humiliation of being a good boy at school. It is almost as if a boy in a certain kind of tough working class neighbourhood has to fail at school in order to prove that he is worth anything at all on the street. This was certainly Tom's problem. The only place where he was kind of safe to be a vulnerable ten-year-old boy was at home and, even then, he knew that his mum was letting the family down. He was stuck, then, between a rock and a hard place with nowhere to turn. Not surprisingly, I found that boys, like Tom, were often easily enraged.

By the time they have been to secondary school, which is a tougher place than primary school by far, and if they manage to make it through secondary school without being permanently excluded for disruptive behaviour, boys, like Tom, will find themselves in a difficult situation when they leave school without any qualifications, and nothing but a massive reputation on the street to trade by. With no prospects at the bottom of the employment ladder and by now often completely alienated from the process of formal education, a young working class man, with a background like Tom's, will tend to keep one foot either side of the straight and narrow, weighing up the risks: should he take the risk of becoming a nobody, accepting the humiliation of being bossed around doing a boring, repetitive, badly paid job, and imagining that he can work his way up to better things, or should he follow his friends, uncles, cousins and maybe even his father, taking the risk of moving into a life of crime, which at this point might seem like by far the easier way out. You can be sure that by this stage, young men, like Tom, will not be thinking much about going to university any longer, and becoming a policeman will be out of the question.

Mary, however, was different to Tom. She was not "common as muck" like her brother, as Ann described Tom; she was what her mother called, a "nice girl". She was not allowed to play out, except in the garden square at the back of the flats where her mum could see her. She did not have to prove that she could cultivate a tough reputation on the street, and when she got to school, and found out what learning at school was all about, it did not matter to her that her parents were not educated people. She took to school like a duck to water, and despite high levels of disruption in her classroom, Mary concentrated, thrived, and soon became the teacher's pet. This suggests that in neighbourhoods where boys are expected to become street-wise, and in families where there are problems at home that might lead a boy more and more often to seek the company of his friends on the street, schools are likely to see a real difference in the attainment of girls and boys.

When some girls, like Mary, begin, all of a sudden, to fail at school when previously they have been doing well, it is most likely to be because their mothers, disrupted by the struggles of working class life, need their girls to become carers in the home, looking after the family and putting that first, before their school work. These kinds of girls need particular kinds of support too, and so do their mothers or main-carers (Evans 2012b).

And so, to the last part of the case study. Why are white working class boys the most likely to fail at school in Britain (Evans 2006a; Strand 2008)? For a long time the worry was about black or African-Caribbean boys (Gillborn and Mizra 2000; Sewell 1996; Sewell 2009), and it still is, but the failure of white boys throws a spanner in the works, because it suggests that

the failure of black boys is not necessarily all about institutional racism, and that just at the moment in time when the government are trying to convince us that social class is no longer an issue in Britain (Edwards et al. 2012), we had better find a way to get a meaningful discussion of social class back on the table (Evans 2006a; 2010; 2017).

The important question to ask is not only whether or not African-Caribbean boys are failing to do very well, but also if it is because they are black and face racism at school, or because they are the ones who are most likely to be failed, or the ones who are failing to attain their potential are from working class families and neighbourhoods, and therefore face similar kinds of challenges to those of white working class boys, like Tom, that we are exploring here. If it is true that black working class boys, who are failing to do well at school, face similar problems to white working class boys, then it means that we need to focus a lot more on what makes being a working class boy in the educational system so difficult. Those difficulties are, as I have already outlined above, considerable and I will summarise them again here. They are to do with:

- (a) the necessity, in relation to tough neighbourhoods, and mean streets, to develop a tough fighting stance, what I call an oppositional stance, that makes certain kinds of boys want to resist what it means to be good at school, and more likely, therefore, to disrupt the learning of other working class children who want to do well;
- (b) having to go to schools that do not have systems in place to make sure that adult authority is secure in school, so that children are safe there to learn well and fulfil their potential, and the pecking order of the boys' fraternity on the streets cannot so easily be reproduced in the spaces, and situations, of the school;
- (c) coming from families where the ability of one or both parents to care for their children is disrupted, which leads boys in particular to look more and more to their friends on the street, and
- (d) coming from neighbourhoods where a once abundant supply of working class employment is in decline, and the transition from a post-industrial to a service economy (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004) is hard to achieve where masculinity has been forged in relation to the qualities of toughness and resilience required for manual labour (Willis 1977).

It is important to emphasise, then, that the chances of working class children's success in life are massively increased by good schools; strong, supported, but not necessarily conventional family structures; good

economic prospects for working class families, and safe streets where children can play without fear of violence. Spelling these issues out, and emphasising them, obvious as they may seem, helps us to think about why it might be, nowadays, that families, in working class communities in Britain, whether they are black, white or racially mixed, feel less likely than ever to be able to feel confident that their children will do well, and fulfil their potential. We are forced then to have to begin to understand and to engage with at least the last thirty years of history, in which working class communities in Britain have borne the brunt of profound economic, social and political changes (Edwards et al 2012).

In Bermondsey, for example, the once tightly-knit community is on its last legs, the docks have closed, the food-processing factories have gone, political participation has diminished to less than 50% and young men without qualifications do not want menial labour in service industries. Some families are in their second or third generation of unemployment, and, for some families, a benefit culture is undermining the work ethic that once characterised what it meant to be working class. Spurred on by media stereotypes of wealth without education, young men in Bermondsey are dreaming of getting rich quick, and of buying prestige at any price (Evans 2006b). Without the skills to realise their ambitions, and without an education to give them alternative options and the chance of social mobility, there is a greater likelihood that on top of the rage caused by earlier disappointment there will be shattered dreams, with all the consequent emotional and psychological implications.

All of this will have an enormous impact on the young women these men get involved with. Part of the reason for me conducting this research was to work out what it means for young women to get involved with young men who have tremendous charisma, because of a reputation made massive outside of formal education, but who then fail to translate that reputation in economic terms, whose dreams of being big-men are then shattered, and have to begin their lives again. To understand the gendered dynamic of childhood and youth development is to understand the emergence of the developmental cycle (Goody 1971) that leads to particular kinds of sexual relationships in adolescence and, later, the formation of new households. In Bermondsey, for example, boys who are developing a tough reputation on the street are often saved from their masculine peer group and the danger of 'street-life' by their relationships with 'nice girls' whose relatively greater confinement to the domestic space protects the young man who is a boyfriend from harm. In this sense, it is not difficult to understand why mothers of sons form close relationships of solidarity and allegiance with their daughters-in-law who quite often are literally collaborating to save the

young man's life from a real risk of harm on the street, or imprisonment when a life of crime seems, at a certain point in the developmental cycle, to be the most attractive option. Later, if a young man can find protection for long enough, he may then discover as the developmental cycle unfolds that he is prepared to sacrifice the reputation of his street-life for the rewards of a more mundane, but safer choice as he discovers the opportunities of conventional employment and the potential security of a stable family life.

From the perspective of an anthropological focus on the similar social dynamics that organize the emergent relationship between gender and social class in predominantly working class neighbourhoods, it becomes clear that a focus on the racial and ethnic differences between young people and their families obscures the significance of social class in the analysis of educational attainment. This suggests that only when we have taken account of, and found a way to communicate effectively about, the similar kinds of issues that are facing black and white working class boys, can we begin to look at the significance of the differences between them. Are black working class boys doing slightly better at school because the racial, ethnic and cultural diversity measures designed to make black boys feel more included in British schools are now paying off? Are we even sure that we understand the difference between those classifications—race, ethnicity, culture? Most often these differences of classification are conflated, which leads to a great deal of confusion (Evans 2010). Or is it simply the case that white working class boys have always been doing the worst of all boys, and now the statistics are being analysed in a way that allows us to understand what a difference social class makes (Strand 2008)? Does the marginally better performance of African-Caribbean boys mean that new measures are now necessary to make white working class boys feel more included and culturally supported at school? Or, do we need to find a way to make it possible for black and white working class boys to understand how much they have in common (Evans 2010)?

Part of the problem is that black and Asian young people in Britain are typically classified, for example in statistics and reports about education, in terms of their race, cultural background and ethnicity (understood in terms of the place of origin of immigration of their parents and grandparents from countries of the Commonwealth in Africa, Asia or the Caribbean). White young people, in contrast, are usually described in terms of their social class position. This means, by default, that young white people in Britain appear to have no ethnicity or culture at all except in so far as they are understood to be negatively defined, that is to say that, in a multicultural system of classification, white young people can only be defined as being *not* non-white immigrants from the Commonwealth and they become, therefore,

automatically similar in their ethnic Britishness: they are distinguished only by their social class backgrounds. In contrast, for black and Asian young people, their race, culture and ethnicity are always emphasised, which makes their Britishness seem somehow problematic, and they are rarely described in terms of their social class position. The effect of this is that we are not comparing black, white and Asian young people on the same terms, and we lose sight of how important social class is for all young people in Britain (Evans 2010; Strand 2008).

If we started to do this as some work in education now does (Strand 2008; 2016)—to account for social class, race, ethnicity and cultural background—for all young people, we might discover to our surprise that, outside of our current obsession with cultural differences, white and African-Caribbean working class boys have far more in common than anyone ever thought to imagine. Perhaps part of what they share in common is the challenge, as I said above, of growing up in similar neighbourhoods, and also of having to overcome at school an institutional class prejudice.

So, whilst socio-economic factors remain the most important determinants of young people's life-chances, these are usually not the terms in which the differences between kinds of British people are thought of on the ground. With confusions of classification like this prevailing it is easy to imagine that the idea of what it means to be a person in Britain is becoming increasingly racially divided. Into this divide the growing confidence of far right political parties is sowing seeds of discontent (Evans 2012a; 2017), which is why it matters to set this educational case study in the political context of the contemporary cultural landscape of Britain.

### **White Working Class Alienation and the Rise of the Far Right in Britain**

This has been an important two decades in British politics. Not just because the Labour Party has lost its influence, but because the challenge facing the Labour leadership before it lost power had become how to hold the centre ground in the face of Conservative advances without simultaneously alienating the working class vote. The Labour Party was born of working class politics, which made it all the more remarkable in Britain that during the decades since 1997 when Labour came to power (succeeding John Major's Conservative reign), the working classes and particularly white working classes became the unmentionables; the dirty laundry of British politics (Jones 2011).

Let us go back to 1998 when I was just about to begin my research as a social anthropologist in Bermondsey. A headline splashed across the *Daily*