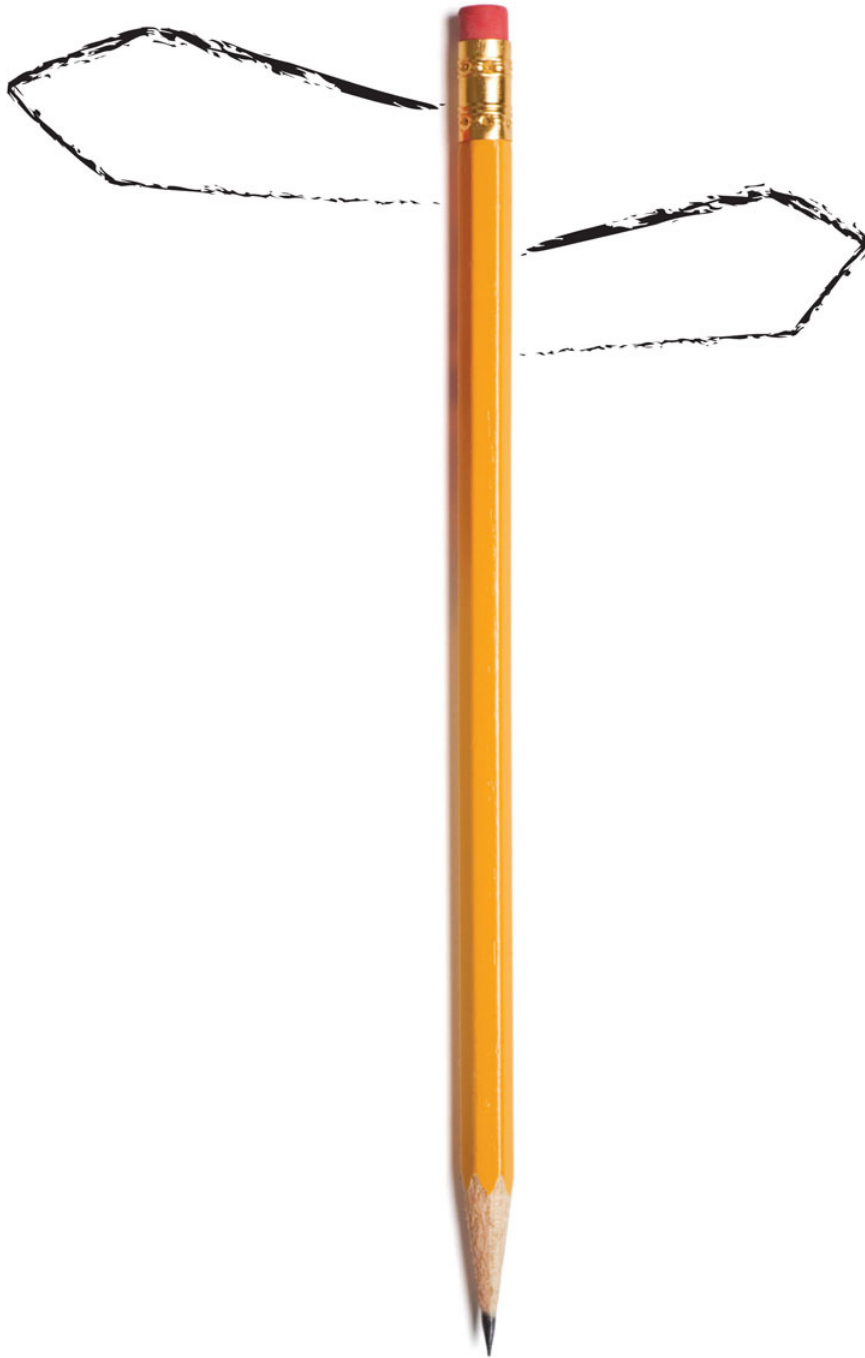


THE SOCIAL CLASS GAP FOR EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT: *a review of the literature*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social class remains the strongest predictor of educational achievement in the UK, where the social class gap for educational achievement is one of the most significant in the developed world. This has been identified as a policy concern by all three main political parties, illustrating as it does both the extent of wider social inequality in the UK, and an impediment to meritocracy and social mobility. But efforts thus far to close the gap have been largely unsuccessful, as this review highlights. What sort of initiatives and approaches, then, might prove more fruitful in addressing working-class educational achievement — especially within a climate of cuts which threaten to exacerbate existing inequalities?

This review of the literature seeks to address such questions. It begins by establishing the scale and persistence of the social class gap for educational achievement, acknowledging how patterns are complicated by other factors such as gender and ethnicity, and exploring the social class gap from the early years through to post-16.

We then turn to approaches to the problem adopted by the previous government (and maintained in particular government-funded and other initiatives). These have included a range of programmes, including those focused on the early years, and those targeting schools in areas of disadvantage. Recently, approaches have focused on: **a)** raising the aspirations of working-class individuals, and **b)** on the diversification of the education market. Both approaches are reviewed and analysed. In relation to the former, we report the concerns in the literature that the focus on ‘aspirations’ individualises the problem of underachievement, locating the ‘problem’ exclusively with working-class families, and ignoring the issues around social capital and structural aspects of the education system that mitigate against both achievement and ‘aspiration’. Hence, there appears to be a need for more nuanced, structural accounts of working-class educational achievement, and further creative interventions that seek to genuinely engage with and value the unique lived experiences of working-class families.

In addition to the positioning of working-class young people and their families as lacking in aspiration, working-class educational underachievement has also been located with ‘failing schools’, which are often situated in deprived areas. In an effort to remedy this situation, the previous Labour government aimed to ‘drive up standards’ through the diversification of the market and increased competition. These various initiatives — including the academies programme, and the coalition government’s further ‘freeing’ of the market via allowing schools independence from local authorities, and the inception of ‘free schools’ — are discussed, and the emerging literature analysed. It is noted that while aspects of these approaches have produced small gains, the literature concurs that the marketisation of education works against the closing of the social class gap, given the stronger purchasing power of the middle-classes, and their ability to successfully ‘play the game’ due to their various social and cultural capitals. This conclusion is demonstrated via a range of research on school choice, school quality in relation to pupil demographics, achievement according to socio-economic background in different education sectors and systems, and so on.

Hence we argue that, although policy makers are increasingly intent upon ‘closing the gap’ in educational achievement, recent strategies that aim to realise this, either by raising aspirations or diversifying the market, are both significantly flawed. There is a need for innovative ideas in order to close the social class gap in education.

“Our analysis demonstrates that in spite of the quantity of initiatives implemented in recent years, there is considerable debate about their effectiveness.”

There has been a wide range of interventions from government and charities that have sought to address the issue of the social class gap for educational achievement. Clearly we cannot do justice to, or even mention, all of them in this brief review. However, we review key programmes which have approached the issue in different ways. Our analysis demonstrates that in spite of the quantity of initiatives implemented in recent years, there is considerable debate about their effectiveness. Many of the initiatives are measured through increases in attainment, and overall there has been little sustained improvement with regard to the educational outcomes of disadvantaged groups. There are a number of explanations for this, including the notion of ‘low aspirations’. However, the literature shows that the increasingly segregated education system, driven via a market in which the wealthy have better purchasing power (via both financial and social capital), mitigates against the narrowing of the social class gap for attainment. Although various positive interventions have been developed, there is skepticism in the literature as to whether the ‘grafting’ of interventions onto a fundamentally unequal education system can significantly address inequality. As such there are arguments for an approach that simultaneously tackles social and educational inequality. Holistic interventions are required, which take into account the dynamics of local areas. And innovative thinking is required as to what a more socially just education system might look like.

Our analysis of the literature and various philanthropic interventions in the field identifies several trends in attempts to address the social class gap for educational attainment, as follows:

- A ‘meritocratic’ approach that targets individual high achieving working-class young people
- A focus on ‘raising aspirations’ of individuals and their families
- A focus on academic routes, and on prestigious universities and career paths
- A focus on attainment, rather than engagement with education

Of course, there are initiatives that do not share these attributes; but these points reflect the overall trend. What our analysis suggests, then, is that there is a relative lack of philanthropic initiatives to narrow the social class gap adopting the following features:

- A focus on educational engagement and ownership by working-class young people, as a precursor to achievement
- Addressing working-class young people as a group, irrespective of ‘ability’; emphasising collectivist, rather than individualistic approaches
- Attention to vocational routes and careers in addition to academic routes
- A focus on, and valuing of, the existing knowledges of working-class young people

We argue that, not only are such approaches currently scarce, but that they are vital to incorporate if the social class gap in achievement is to be addressed (as opposed to simply making slight increases in the number of working-class applicants to elite universities, and so on; important as this latter may be). The success of any local and/or small-scale intervention may be constrained by the regressive effects of structural aspects within the education system. However, we would argue nevertheless that understanding working-class young people’s local circumstances and employment prospects, focusing on engaging working-class young people with their education as a necessary precursor to attainment, and valuing working-class young people’s existing experience and expertise, are of fundamental importance in facilitating success.

“Holistic and collaborative models should be developed which seek to include these young people, value their lived experiences, and enable them to exercise greater agency and control over their transition from school to work.”

INTRODUCTION

The persistent social class¹ gap for educational attainment has been identified as a policy concern by all three main political parties, illustrating as it does both the extent of wider social inequality in the UK and an impediment to meritocracy and social mobility. As part of the RSA’s commitment to social justice and its aim to enable underprivileged social groups to realise their potential, this review seeks to map the current research and policy terrain with regard to working-class pupils’ educational engagement and achievement. It outlines the key issues in relation to the complex problem of the social class gap for educational attainment, and discusses some of the policies that have endeavoured to remedy the situation in recent years. Various attempts have been made to reinvigorate and resource education in areas of poverty, to ‘raise aspirations’ of working-class young people, and to expand and diversify the education market. The review draws on research evidence which indicates that these approaches are limited or flawed, and suggests that further innovative thinking and practice is required in order to increase working-class young people’s engagement in education. It recommends that holistic and collaborative models should be developed which seek to include these young people, value their lived experiences, and enable them to exercise greater agency and control over their transition from school to work.

¹ There is wide academic discussion about terminology and related indicators: the statistics informing the debate are often based on indicators of poverty (e.g. free school meals), but we retain reference to social class given the sociological insistence on the importance of identity and structural context in informing the issues at stake (see e.g. Sayer, 2005).

“The yawning gap between the educational achievement of poor children and their more affluent peers remains a complex and seemingly intractable problem.”

SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Education Secretary Michael Gove recently told a Commons education committee that “rich, thick kids” do better than “poor, clever” children, even before they start school. Although the blunt and emotive language provoked criticism from the National Association of Head Teachers (Guardian, 2010a), there is a broad agreement with Gove’s essential message, that of the clear connection between poverty and educational (under) achievement; and the problematics of this relationship for notions of a meritocratic, ‘fair’ society. Many recent statistical studies have highlighted that social class is the strongest predictor of educational attainment in Britain (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Dyson *et al.*, 2010; National Equality Panel, 2010; Sodha and Margo, 2010; Kerr and West, 2010). It is increasingly recognised as a problem by policy makers, featuring prominently in the manifestos of the three main parties, and is also a popular topic in the media.² However, despite the extensive attention that the topic has received, and a variety of initiatives (including *Excellence in Cities*, *Aimhigher*, and *Extra Mile*) that have been developed over the last 13 years under a Labour government, the yawning gap between the educational achievement of poor children and their more affluent peers remains a complex and seemingly intractable problem.

Statistics have highlighted that British children’s educational attainment is overwhelmingly linked to parental occupation, income, and qualifications (Lupton *et al.*, 2009; National Equality Panel, 2010; Sodha and Margo, 2010). Marked differences become apparent during early childhood with regard to readiness for school (National Equality Panel, 2010). By the age of three, poor children have been assessed to be one year behind richer ones in terms of communication (BBC, 2010a), and in some disadvantaged areas, up to 50% of children begin primary school without the necessary language and communication skills (National Equality Panel, 2010). As compulsory schooling progresses, educational inequalities continue to widen between children from poor families and those from more affluent backgrounds. Using free school meals as the best available indicator of socio-economic background (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; National Equality Panel, 2010), statistics show that at Key Stage 2, 53.5% of pupils eligible for free school meals reach the expected level (i.e. level 4 or above) in English and mathematics, compared with 75.5% of pupils who are not eligible (DCSF, 2009a). Furthermore, these children are more likely to attend the lowest-performing schools in deprived areas (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Kerr and West, 2010). They are also disproportionately likely to have been in care, and/or have special educational needs (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Kerr and West, 2010). Although this is a widespread international phenomenon, and research has shown that social deprivation has a negative impact on educational attainment across all OECD countries (Kerr and West, 2010), the UK has a particularly high degree of social segregation (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; National Equality Panel, 2010) and is one of the nations with the most highly differentiated results among OECD countries (OECD, 2007).

2 For example, the BBC’s recent *School Season* drew attention to the issue through programmes such as *Unequal Opportunities with John Humphrys* (2010).

Gender and ethnicity: complex patterns of inequality

Although social class is the strongest predictor of educational achievement, it intersects in complex ways with other factors, notably gender and ethnicity. For example, certain groups of middle-class minority ethnic students continue to underachieve in relation to their white middle-class counterparts (see e.g. Strand, 2010), and although middle-class boys still outperform working-class girls at literacy, girls outperform boys at literacy within each social group (Francis and Skelton, 2005). The debate around 'boys' underachievement' was precipitated during the early 1990s, with the inception of the publication of school league tables, which included a breakdown of results according to gender (Francis, 2006). Since then, boys have consistently outnumbered girls as 'low achievers' by three to two (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007) and this trend is reinforced by recent statistics that show 54.4% of girls achieving 5 or more A*-C grade GCSEs compared with 47.1% of boys (DCSF, 2009b). Popular discourses have tended to explain this underachievement by positioning boys as struggling to cope in a 'feminised' school environment (see Epstein *et al.*, 1998; Francis and Skelton, 2005, for critique). For example, the BBC's *Gareth Malone's Extraordinary School for Boys* (2010b) is a recent example of a host of work seeking to provide 'boy friendly' ways of learning that include learning outdoors, extensive physical activity, taking risks, competing with others, 'boy friendly' content, and learning with fathers. However, feminist researchers have been extremely sceptical with regard to the framing of the problem and its attendant solutions, asserting that these explanations are based on flawed essentialist models of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Epstein *et al.*, 1998; Martino, 1999; Francis and Skelton, 2005; Francis, 2006). They have shown the lack of effectiveness of 'boy-friendly' approaches, and the potential damage caused by playing on stereotypes of 'what boys like' (Jackson, 2002; Lingard *et al.*, 2002; Martino & Meyenn, 2002; DCSF 2009c). Furthermore, they have argued that by focusing resources exclusively on 'boys' needs', a more sophisticated understanding of the complex patterns of inequality relating to gender, ethnicity and social class is overlooked.

Certainly, when assessing educational achievement in relation to social class and ethnicity as well as gender, a more complex picture begins to emerge. By age 16, half of all boys receiving free school meals have results in the bottom quarter of the overall distribution (National Equality Panel, 2010). Girls taking free school meals continue to underperform in relation to girls and boys not on free school meals, reminding us of the importance of not simply viewing this as a 'boys' issue (Francis and Skelton, 2005). Researchers have also drawn attention to the low average achievement and deteriorating position through secondary school of low-income boys from Black Caribbean, Black African and Pakistani backgrounds (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Strand & Demie, 2007; National Equality Panel, 2010).³ However, it is the underachievement of white working-class boys that is becoming a rising cause for concern (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Demie and Lewis, 2010). Recent statistics show that 19% of white British boys eligible for free school meals achieved 5 or more A*-C grade GCSEs including English and mathematics; 31.7 percentage points lower than the figure for all pupils (DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), 2009b). Researchers have also noted that eligibility for free school meals is associated particularly strongly with low levels of attainment for white British pupils, more so than for other ethnic groups (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Archer and Francis, 2007; Demie and Lewis, 2010; Kerr and West, 2010).

3 For some of these groups girls also continue to underperform in comparison to their white middle-class counterparts, if not to the same extent as boys (e.g. Gilborn and Mirza, 2000; Archer and Francis, 2007).

“Inequalities are not only evident throughout the years of compulsory schooling, but persist in relation to rates of participation in further and higher education.”

Some reports have linked the underachievement of white working-class pupils to the loss of ‘white culture’ and identity in comparison with other ethnic minority groups (Demie and Lewis, 2010). However, researchers such as Nayak (2001) have argued that ethnicity is a dynamic and shifting category and that ‘whiteness’ encompasses a wide and diverse range of ethnicities and cultures. Racism has been identified as impacting the trajectories of minority ethnic groups, including ‘invisible ethnic minorities’ falling into the ‘white working-class’ category (such as migrants, and the exceptionally under-achieving Gypsy/Roma group).⁴ This position is also challenged in a collection of papers published by the Runnymede Trust (Sveinsson, 2009), which suggest that the white working-class are in fact losing out to the middle-classes rather than other ethnic minority groups. The authors of this collection claim that by framing white working-class disadvantage as an ethnic disadvantage as opposed to a class disadvantage, attention is diverted away from an analysis of wider social and economic inequalities. Cassen and Kingdon (2007) have also observed that within each ethnic group, the lower the social class, the lower the proportion of pupils gaining five A*-C grades at GCSE. This demonstrates the continued need to foreground social class in an analysis of educational attainment, whilst maintaining a broad awareness of the complex way social class intersects with gender and ethnicity to reproduce inequalities in educational attainment.

Post 16: unequal trajectories into higher education

Inequalities are not only evident throughout the years of compulsory schooling, but persist in relation to rates of participation in further and higher education. Despite initiatives such as *Aimhigher* (discussed in more detail below), which aim to increase working-class young people’s desire to engage in further and higher education, pupils with GCSE results above the national median who have been eligible for free school meals are less likely to go on to higher education than more affluent students with the same results (National Equality Panel, 2010). The number of young people categorised as ‘NEET’ (not in education, employment or training) has also been an issue that confounds policy makers (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Sodha and Margo, 2010). One in seven 16-18 year olds were ‘NEET’ in November 2009 (Sodha and Margo, 2010), and these individuals were disproportionately likely to have truanted or been excluded from school, have few educational qualifications, misuse drugs and alcohol, be a teenage parent, and have mental health issues (Sodha and Margo, 2010). They were also more likely to become involved in crime (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007), leading the Department for Education to observe that “these outcomes have a cost for both the individual and the economy, and we cannot afford this waste of potential” (DfE website, 2010a). However, the Education and Skills Act 2008 increased the age of participation in compulsory schooling and will require young people to remain in education or training until 17 from 2013 and 18 from 2015, thus eradicating the ‘NEET problem’ in this age group (DfE, 2010a) — though not necessarily the problems of educational engagement for those concerned. This, coupled with the recently announced cuts to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) — which gave students from low-income families a weekly benefit of up to £30 for their attendance at sixth form or FE college — could result in such students being officially signed up, but failing to attend college (Laird, 2010); raising the potential for consequent social problems and educational under-attainment.

With regard to working-class rates of participation in higher education, 49% from the poorest fifth of families say they are likely to apply to university, compared with 77% of the richest fifth (Sodha and Margo, 2010), and only 4% of those eligible for free meals at 15 continue to study at university, compared with 33% of their peers (Guardian, 2010b).

4 See e.g. Sivanandan (2001); Derrington and Kendall, (2004); Crozier et al (2010).

“Any analysis of inequalities in higher education should not only take into account the shifting identities of individuals with regard to their gender, ethnicity and social class, but should also challenge institutions and structures that create and sustain these inequalities.”

Working-class teenagers are also less likely to go to prestigious universities and are less likely to be awarded high degree classifications (National Equality Panel, 2010). For example, although Oxford and Cambridge universities have access schemes in place for students from low income backgrounds, very few apply for places, resulting in an intake of only 11.5% of working-class students at Oxford and 12.6% at Cambridge (Guardian, 2010c). As Gove himself pointed out in his speech to the Conservative Party conference, more young people from independent school Westminster alone attend the ‘best’ universities than the entire cohort of young people on free school meals (Gove, 2010). Such low rates of attendance have led some education researchers to observe that participation in higher education is not an equal or possible choice for everyone, partly because higher education is seen as a ‘natural’ progression and a ‘non-choice’ by the middle-classes, but is alien and unfamiliar to many working-class young people (Reay *et al.*, 2005). Crozier and Reay (2008) have also suggested that despite interventions that have attempted to broaden access to university, working-class young people are persistently regarded as problematic learners, and potential drop-outs. However, those working-class young people who are determined to succeed have been shown to demonstrate great resilience and commitment, despite the structural inequalities they face (Crozier and Reay, 2008; Crozier *et al.* 2009).

Consequently, some researchers have suggested that low rates of participation in further and higher education are connected to a complex combination of personal, social, economic, and cultural factors which lead many working-class young people to believe that university is ‘not for the likes of us’ (Archer *et al.*, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Archer *et al.*, 2007a). These factors also intersect with gendered and racialised identities that constrain working-class participation in a variety of ways. For example Archer *et al.* (2001) have noted that achievement of ‘manhood’ for many working-class men has traditionally been linked to secure and skilled work with its immediate financial rewards, as opposed to participating in academic work, which is positioned as ‘soft’ and ‘feminine’ (Epstein, *et al.*, 1998). Researchers have also asserted that any analysis of inequalities in higher education should not only take into account the shifting identities of individuals with regard to their gender, ethnicity and social class, but should also challenge institutions and structures that create and sustain these inequalities (Archer, *et al.*, 2003).

“It tends to be middle-class children within poorer schools that benefit most from school-based initiatives.”

STRATEGIES TO NARROW THE SOCIAL CLASS GAP FOR EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

So what then has been done in recent years to address this complex and entrenched issue? The previous government focused attention on child poverty, supporting families, and strengthening early years provision. These might be expected to narrow attainment gaps further down the line; it is too early as yet to tell outcomes. However, outcomes are complicated by two key factors: **1)** recent government cuts, which are suggested by the IFS⁵ to disproportionately affect the worst off, and which might therefore mitigate against any previous gains. **2)** The market in education which, as we shall discuss below, has been implicated in benefitting middle-class families and disadvantaging those from poorer backgrounds. It is notable that in spite of a package of redistributive policies and targeted programmes (especially targeted at the early years), the achievement gap has not narrowed more significantly; and arguably this suggests that there is a problem in the education system itself (see e.g. contributions by Stewart (2009), Lupton *et al.* (2009), and Kerr and West (2010) for discussion).

A range of other initiatives have sought to enhance provision in schools with poorer intakes, including targeted initiatives such as Excellence in Cities and the City Challenges (and recently programmes aimed at individual children such as ‘Every Child a Reader’). These efforts may have contributed to a closing of the gap at school level (Lupton *et al.*, 2009; Lupton, 2010). However, it tends to be middle-class children within poorer schools that benefit most from school-based initiatives (Reay and Lucey, 2003; Lupton *et al.*, 2009). This trend has also been observed in academies (initiated by New Labour to improve educational attainment in areas of disadvantage), where the National Audit Office (2010) observe that on average, the gap between more disadvantaged pupils and others has grown wider in academies than in comparable maintained schools. It is perhaps then not surprising that in recent years there has been an increased focus on individuals falling behind.

Recent policies focused on narrowing the social class gap for educational attainment have tended to focus on raising the aspirations of working-class individuals and on the diversification of the education market. The following sections address these strategies in more detail.

‘Raising aspirations’

The need to raise the aspirations of working-class young people was a central tenet of New Labour’s education policy, leading former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, to state that:

The poverty of aspiration is as damaging as the poverty of opportunity and it is time to replace a culture of low expectations for too many with a culture of high standards for all. (2007)

Such ‘low expectations’ have been frequently cited as one of the most significant barriers to working-class educational achievement by both researchers and policy makers (DCSF, 2009; Demie and Lewis, 2010; Sodha and Margo, 2010). For example, in the DCSF document entitled *The Extra Mile: How Schools Succeed in Raising Aspirations in Deprived Communities* (2009), the problem of low aspirations is explained as follows:

Children living in deprived communities face a cultural barrier which is in many ways a bigger barrier than material poverty. It is the cultural barrier of low aspirations and scepticism about education, the feeling that education is by and for other people, and likely to let one down. (2009: 2)

5 See Browne and Levell (2010)

The document continues by asserting that this ‘cultural barrier’ is reinforced by the perceived attitudes of some working-class parents:

Often pupils come to school with a lid on their own aspirations. In some families the culture is fatalistic — parents pass on the idea that their status is relatively fixed. Effective schools help their pupils to break free of these limitations; so that they can have higher and realistic aspirations for the future. (2009: 25)

Some recent studies have supported this position, additionally suggesting that some working-class parents are unable to provide their children with a stimulating and positive home environment, characterised by trips out in the local area, communicative family meals, and the consistent enforcement of rules and boundaries, such as regular bedtimes (Demie and Lewis, 2010; Sodha and Margo, 2010). Consequently, recent initiatives within schools, such as *Extra Mile*, have attempted to address this ‘cultural barrier’ by engaging with communities in order to tackle some of the perceived ‘low aspirations’ that are connected with some aspects of working-class culture.⁶

The problem of working-class underachievement is situated within these accounts as a primarily *cultural* problem. However, the assumptions underlying the discourse of ‘raising aspirations’ has been questioned by some researchers, who suggest that the projection of ‘deficits’ onto working-class young people and their families has the potential to stigmatise these individuals, and conveniently focuses on individual problems rather than institutional, financial or societal explanations (Rose, 1999; Gerwitz, 2001; Francis and Hey, 2009; Reay, 2009). Bauman (2005) has developed this position by asserting that within a neo-liberal society, individuals are positioned within economic frameworks of active, entrepreneurial citizenship. Through the discourses of the ‘work ethic’ and meritocracy, individuals are encouraged to believe that hard work combined with talent will naturally lead to social and economic rewards. Those who do not advance in this manner are portrayed as ‘failed consumers’, responsible for their own failure to thrive (Bauman, 2005). Thus, he suggests that by recontextualising poverty as a primarily cultural problem — a poverty of aspiration — economic ‘success’ is constructed as a matter of individual choice. His argument has been applied to educational achievement (e.g. Francis, 2006). Researchers writing from this perspective have observed therefore that the discourse of ‘raising aspirations’ positions working-class families as fundamentally irresponsible, ‘unmotivated, unambitious and underachieving’ (Reay, 2009: 24). Moreover, they have argued that such ‘deficit discourses’ (Francis and Hey, 2009) shift attention away from the social structures and institutions that perpetuate economic inequality and contribute to low educational achievement and locate them within the individuals themselves (Rose, 1999; Bauman, 2005; Sveinsson, 2009).

Education researchers have also drawn attention to the way in which school is a classed institution (Savage, 2003; Archer, 2007) that ‘valorizes middle-class rather than working-class cultural capital’ (Reay, 2001: 334). For example, Archer *et al.* (2007a) have claimed that powerful groups such as the middle-classes are more likely to experience a smooth transition between their own ‘life-worlds’ and the social institutions around them, whereas working-class pupils are more likely to experience disjuncture and alienation. Similarly, Reay (2001, 2002) has argued that working-class pupils are constructed by the education system in terms of what they ‘lack’, which often leaves them feeling worthless and educationally inadequate. Consequently, she has suggested that in order for working-class pupils to feel as though they are succeeding within this stratified system they need to ‘lose themselves’ and perform a more overtly ‘middle-class’ identity.

6 Examples include family learning classes, craft and music activities, and cultural experiences within the local area. The *Extra Mile* initiative is discussed in more detail below.

“As working-class children understand and internalise messages that they are ‘slow’ and underachieving, a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby expectations are lowered results — ‘lower aspirations’ being a logical response to the messages provided.”

Besides such issues of identity and (lack of) recognition, there are also clear structural issues that impede working-class achievement, and which need to be acknowledged. For example, working-class pupils are more likely to attend poorly performing schools (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Lupton, 2004; 2010); and low-income families have been shown to have a narrower choice of primary school than their middle-class counterparts, even where they live near the same number of schools (Burgess *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, it has been shown that underperforming pupils groups (wherein working-class pupils are over-represented) may not receive the best teaching unless they are perceived to be able to contribute to their school’s league table position (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007).⁷ It has also been argued that the preoccupation with educational standards through setting, streaming and league tables has increased social segregation within the education system both nationally and internationally (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; OECD, 2007). Consequently, Reay (2009) has observed that although governments have aimed to raise educational achievement for all children, one of the consequences of increased distinction through setting and streaming has been the reinforcement of social inequality and ‘the fixing of failure in the working-classes’ (Reay, 2009: 26). In a culture where academic ‘success’ is valued and promoted, and fears of failure are common (Reay and William, 1999; Jackson, 2010), working-class young people who are statistically more likely to ‘fail’ can become quickly de-motivated and may subsequently come to see themselves as having no value or use in society (Archer *et al.*, 2007b). As working-class children understand and internalise messages that they are ‘slow’ and underachieving, a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby expectations are lowered results — ‘lower aspirations’ being a logical response to the messages provided.

Hence, there appears to be a need for more nuanced, structural accounts of working-class educational achievement, and further creative interventions that seek to genuinely engage with and value the lived experiences of working-class families.

The diversification of the market

In addition to the positioning of working-class young people and their families as lacking in aspiration, working-class educational underachievement has also been located with ‘failing schools’, which are often situated in deprived areas (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Kerr and West, 2010). In an effort to remedy this situation, the previous Labour government aimed to ‘drive up standards’ through the diversification of the market and increased competition. Poorly performing schools were converted into new academies, which provided them with greater independence, resources, and the opportunity to ‘re-brand’. Notable examples include Mossbourne Community Academy and Phoenix High in London, both of which have dramatically risen in the league tables since their transformation (BBC, 2010a).⁸ More recently, the coalition government has rapidly developed the academies agenda, by inviting all schools rated Outstanding by Ofsted to apply for academy status. By focusing on high-performing schools instead of struggling schools the government has turned the approach of the previous administration on its head, albeit with the stated ambition for *all* schools to become academies.⁹

Academies are publicly funded, but are independent of local authority control. The original academies are managed by a range of organisations including charities, faith groups and businesses, and have the freedom to set their own pay and conditions, change the length of terms and school days, and adapt the curriculum, particularly in relation to the education of 14-19 year olds (DfE website, 2010c).

7 For example, pupils assessed as having the potential to achieve a C grade as opposed to a D grade at GCSE level may receive more support than those who are perceived as being unlikely to achieve any A*-C grades (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007).

8 The RSA Academy in Tipton comprises a further example here: located in an area of disadvantage, in the two years since it opened the percentage of pupils gaining 5 A*-C at GCSE has risen from 58% to 95%, and from 29% 5 A*-Cs including maths and English, to 45%.

9 And it seems that the coalition government may be returning attention to underperforming schools, with a recent announcement that they will offer money to philanthropic organisations willing to take these schools over to secure school improvement (DfE, 2010b)

According to the National Audit Office's (2010) report on the original academies opened under the previous Labour government's programme, the proportion of pupils achieving 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE is improving at a faster rate in academies than schools run by local authorities. However, as we noted above, they have also found that the gap in attainment between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers has actually grown wider in academies than in other schools, despite the original aim of academies to raise the achievements of all pupils. Although the National Audit Office suggests that 'less disadvantaged pupils benefit from improved standards at the academy more immediately, and that other pupils may take longer to benefit' (2010: 6), further evaluation, particularly with regard to this finding, will be required as the academies programme develops, especially given that the focus is now on Outstanding schools. Analysis of Ofsted figures by Ruth Lupton (2010) shows that, although there is a relatively high proportion of Outstanding schools in areas of high social deprivation (perhaps reflecting previous government interventions and resourcing), generally the pattern is for poor schools to be concentrated in areas of disadvantage, with Outstanding and Good schools disproportionately represented in wealthier areas.

The coalition government has also revealed plans to expand the market by encouraging community involvement through the implementation of 'free schools'. Modelled on the Swedish education system, the vision is one of parents, teachers, and voluntary organisations setting up their own schools in response to parental demand. According to Michael Gove (BBC, 2010c), free schools will address the needs of the poorest children by raising the standard of education in the most disadvantaged areas. However, Mona Sahlin, the leader of the Swedish Democratic Party, has observed that insufficient funding of the project in Sweden has led to many free schools opening with poor facilities and high numbers of unqualified teachers (Guardian, 2010d). Other critics such as Wiborg (2010) have argued that the positive results of free schools in Sweden have been limited and short-term. She has claimed that free schools have increased social segregation and inequality, as they tend to reject children who are perceived to be more 'difficult'. This tendency for Free Schools to increase social inequality, advantaging wealthier children and those from certain minority ethnic groups without demonstrating an overall improvement in results, has been illustrated in a review of the literature on Free Schools (Allen, 2010).

An increasing array of charities, faith groups, businesses, voluntary and community organisations deliver services that were previously limited to the public sector (Ball, 2010; Ball and Junemann, 2010; ALT, 2010). 'New philanthropies' (Ball and Junemann, 2010) are increasingly evident in this environment. These 'new' philanthropic investments are characterised by a 'hands on' approach that emphasises the relationship between 'giving' and the expectation of certain 'outcomes'. New companies are also emerging that aim to provide solutions to complex social problems, both through the sponsorship of interventions and the sale of policy solutions to the state (Ball, 2010; ALT, 2010). Consequently, Ball (2010) has highlighted that a range of 'new voices' in education policy and provision are being created in the move from centralised 'government' to more hybrid, unstable forms of 'governance'. Whether a supporter or a critic of these changes, it is clear that the boundary between the public and private sectors is becoming progressively blurred, and that the landscape of the education system is increasingly complex, convoluted, diverse and fragmented (Ball and Junemann, 2010). Many of these changes, such as the sponsorship of schools by charities and businesses, have been specifically instigated under a banner of improving the educational experiences and achievement of working-class pupils (for example, the previous government's academies programme). Hence private and third sector resourcing and expertise is mobilised to promote social equality. However, the increasing input from the private sector, coupled with the gradual exacerbation of a market in education via increased diversity of offer and the foregrounding of league tables and achievement indicators, has led to strong concerns at an increasingly segregated market in education, in which the wealthy have stronger purchasing power.

“Cultural capital provided via educational experience and well-resourced networks provides middle-class families with knowledge of ‘the rules of the game’, understanding of the way the system works and the hierarchies therein, and confidence in liaising with the school.”

If the education system operates as a market, clearly some schools will succeed, whilst others will fail. The ‘consumer’ within this market is the parent, and much of the rhetoric surrounding ‘free schools’ in particular has centred on the notion of ‘parental choice’. However, the system inevitably favours middle-class parents who possess economic and cultural capital. Examples include the financial resources enabling the possibility of moving house to access the catchment of a high-performing school, or buying additional tutoring to support entrance exams (practices documented by Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). Likewise, cultural capital provided via educational experience and well-resourced networks provides middle-class families with knowledge of ‘the rules of the game’, understanding of the way the system works and the hierarchies therein, and confidence in liaising with the school, etc. (Reay, 1998; Crozier, 2000; Crozier and Reay, 2005). By contrast, some working-class parents have little choice but to send their children to schools with bad reputations and poor results. Research by Burgess and colleagues (2009) has demonstrated that, while working-class parents are also concerned with school quality in identifying a location for their children, they more often have to opt nevertheless for the local school (see also Wilson, 2010). The work of Lupton (2006; 2010) and Cassen and Kingdon (2007) shows that working-class young people are over-represented in poorer quality schools.¹⁰ Burgess and colleagues’ analysis of primary school entrance (2010) also demonstrates that working-class families are less likely than their middle-class counterparts to be offered their school of choice.

The OECD PISA analysis (2007), and other academic analysis of the PISA figures (Angel Alegre and Ferrer, 2010) has identified that ‘more market-oriented school regimes tend to increase schools’ social segregation, whilst those characterised as more comprehensive and publicly regulated tend to reduce it’ (Angel Alegre and Ferrer, 2010: 433). Hence, the Sutton Trust (2010a) has argued that in order to mitigate these consequences of marketisation there needs to be a fair access and admissions policy for disadvantaged pupils, and that in areas of deprivation, schools should be encouraged to take poorer pupils through the incentive of a £3,000 ‘pupil premium’ (see below). In addition, they have suggested that there should be a measure in league tables showing the extent to which the school is narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged and other pupils.

The coalition government have adopted a Pupil Premium as policy, specifically as part of a social justice agenda. As the Times Educational Supplement (2010) reports, although the sum to fund the Pupils Premium is less than the £7 billion first mooted, in relation to the cuts to other government departments in the recent 2010 Spending Review the commitment to the £2.5 billion fund is significant. And, this fund constitutes a redistributive policy, given that the money is not additional, and hence while the policy will increase the budgets of some schools, those with lower numbers of pupils on free school meals will lose out (a point of concern articulated by some affected) (TES, 2010, BBC, 2010d). However, it has been warned that cuts to one-to-one learning, the Every Child Matters Programme, the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), and a range of other programmes targeting the needy, risk undermining any benefits to working-class pupils (Hargreaves, 2010; Laird, 2010).

Although policy makers are increasingly intent upon ‘closing the gap’ in educational achievement, recent strategies that aim to realise this, either by raising aspirations or diversifying the market, are both significantly flawed. There is a need for innovative ideas in order to close the social class gap in education, but despite a plethora of initiatives, evidence as to their effectiveness is uncertain. The following section discusses some of the current initiatives and their underpinning assumptions in more detail.

¹⁰ Kingdon and Cassen (2010) also show that disproportionate attendance at poorer-quality schools is a factor in the explanation for differential ethnic minority performance.

ASSESSING CURRENT INTERVENTIONS

There has been a wide range of interventions from government and charities that have sought to address the issue of the social class gap for educational achievement. Clearly we cannot do justice to, or even mention, all of them in this brief review. However, in this section we document key programmes which have approached the issue in different ways.

A great deal of emphasis has been placed on the importance of strong leadership (Demie and Lewis, 2010) and high quality teaching within schools in deprived areas (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Kerr and West, 2010). For example, the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) in partnership with organisations including Future Leaders and ARK (Absolute Return for Kids) has developed a programme in urban schools for ‘middle leaders’, such as heads of year, or heads of department. The scheme works to strengthen school leadership in disadvantaged areas by mentoring and coaching these teachers as they introduce improvement initiatives in their schools (NCSL website, 2010). There is also emphasis on sharing and extension of excellent leadership practice to help struggling schools, with schools collaborating as ‘families’ to facilitate school improvement (Hargreaves, 2010).

With regard to initial teacher training, one of the most significant programmes has been the *Teach first* initiative. The Teach first charity was established in 2002 with the intention of training ‘exceptional’ graduates to work as teachers in disadvantaged schools. It operates on a business model, trains between 500 and 600 graduates each year and is among the top 10 graduate employers (Teach first website, 2010). Following a recent grant of £4 million from the government, it plans to double in size over the next few years, aiming to place its teachers in a third of all secondary schools (Teach first website, 2010). The Teach first training programme commences with a six week course, upon which the graduates enter the classroom and teach in placement schools for two years. The scheme also focuses on leadership training, with a view to encouraging participants to develop the skills to lead organisations in a variety of contexts. 55% of those trained continue to teach after their two years of training, and some others remain employed in educational settings (Teach first website, 2010). The Teach first programme has not been without controversy: for example, Hutchings *et al.* (2006) draw attention to some of the limitations of the scheme, including the potentially divisive concept of the ‘Teach first identity’. They observe that Teach first recruits are actively encouraged to see themselves as ‘a cut above the rest’ and as having the ability to single-handedly make a difference to their ‘failing’ placement schools. Although in many cases the results have been encouraging, Hutchings *et al.* (2006) have suggested that the promotion of such an identity has the potential to belittle ‘normal teachers’ already working in these schools and create divisions within the profession. Ofsted (2008) has stated however that the programme is providing effective teacher training, observing that many of the trainees made a ‘strong positive contribution’ to their placement schools (Ofsted, 2008: 17).

Other interventions focus on working-class young people themselves, and aim to increase educational engagement and attainment by developing strategies to raise aspirations. For example, the *Extra Mile* project, launched in July 2008, has aimed to develop ways to raise aspirations amongst primary and secondary school pupils living in disadvantaged communities. A wide range of activities has been initiated as part of the project, including attempts to ‘broaden pupils’ horizons by offering experiences and opportunities they would not otherwise get’ (DfE website, 2010d).

This has included music and craft activities, and visits to places of local interest. At primary level, schools participating in the project have also increased their emphasis on communication skills and the articulation and management of emotions. The Department for Education has stated that the initial findings have been positive (DfE website, 2010d), but that a full evaluation of the project will be available in March 2011.

The *Aimhigher* scheme, launched in 2004, also aims to raise aspirations by encouraging working-class young people to participate in further and higher education. Activities include visits to university campuses, attendance at residential summer schools, master-classes and mentoring. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has stated that the project's progress has been 'patchy' (Passy *et al.*, 2009), which is perhaps not surprising given the highly marketised environment and the cultural and financial resources mobilised by many middle-class families to secure their offspring's elite university trajectory.

Various charities and corporate organisations have also developed schemes to raise the aspirations of working-class young people. For example, the *Social Mobility Foundation* is a charity that offers mentoring, summer internships, and careers sessions to academically able Year 12 students from working-class backgrounds (Social Mobility Foundation website, 2010). Similarly, *Pure Potential* is an independent organisation that aims to promote social mobility by encouraging working-class young people to apply to the most prestigious universities. It runs various sessions on university applications and future careers for selected high achieving working-class young people (Pure Potential website, 2010). More specifically, *A C Diversity*, which receives corporate support from J P Morgan, implements programmes for the educational development of working-class young people with African and Caribbean heritage. Once again, academically able young people are selected for a mentoring and enrichment programme that includes a summer school at Oxford University (*A C Diversity* website, 2010). However, given the statistics quoted earlier, and the various factors constraining working-class young people's entrance to Higher Education (and especially to elite universities), realising these aims represents a huge challenge.

Further initiatives include centrally driven 'area-based initiatives', which aim to raise educational attainment in areas of disadvantage. For example, the *Excellence in Cities* scheme has worked with 58 local authorities in order to enhance the aspirations of working-class children and their parents. Initiatives have included the appointment of Learning Mentors, the introduction of Learning Support Units for disruptive pupils within schools, and the extension of activities for 'gifted and talented' pupils (DCSF website, 2010e). Likewise, the *City Challenge* (targeting Greater Manchester, London and the Black Country) includes schemes such as *Futureversity* in London which works with local businesses to run workshops for young people as part of a 'summer uni'. The courses, which include photography, design, business studies, catering, performing arts, and sport, aim to develop skills through enjoyable, 'unconventional learning', and provide new opportunities and experiences for young people from diverse backgrounds (Futureversity, 2010). Although there are plans for the Futureversity scheme to be extended to other areas, some researchers have stated that although 'the 'official' view is that programmes such as the London Challenge have accelerated attainment significantly and begun to 'close the gap' between high and low achieving groups of learners, the gains seem relatively small, the costs substantial, and the methods of measuring 'increases' in attainment increasingly look like proxies for success, rather than indicators of substantive change' (Kerr and West, 2010, p.13).

“The solution to the problem of educational inequality will not be found as long as interventions continue to be ‘grafted’ onto a fundamentally unequal education system.”

In addition to these centrally funded initiatives, various charitable and corporate mentoring schemes are also in existence. These include work by the *Private Equity Foundation*, which draws on the resources of private equity firms in order to support charities that focus on young people who are not in education, employment or training (Private Equity Foundation website, 2010), and the *Sutton Trust*, which funds a range of projects, including mentoring schemes and private tuition for disadvantaged students (Sutton Trust website, 2010).

Our review of the literature reveals that although a wide range of initiatives, such as those described above, has been implemented in recent years, there is considerable debate about their effectiveness (Kerr and West, 2010; Dyson, *et al.*, 2010). Many of the initiatives are measured through increases in attainment, and overall there has been little sustained improvement with regard to the educational outcomes of disadvantaged groups (Kerr and West, 2010). Furthermore, notions of educational engagement have been frequently conflated with the rhetoric of raising aspirations. As previously discussed, taking a deficit approach to working-class young people and their families may lead to further alienation and marginalisation, and can divert attention away from the structural factors that lead to educational underachievement. Although various positive interventions have been developed, Dyson *et al.* (2010) posit that the solution to the problem of educational inequality will not be found as long as interventions continue to be ‘grafted’ onto a fundamentally unequal education system. As such, they argue for an approach that simultaneously tackles social and educational inequality, and assert that holistic interventions are required, which take into account the dynamics of local areas: their resources, structures and systems. Instead of employing deficit discourses and compensatory models that focus on what communities ‘lack’, Dyson *et al.* (2010) emphasise the importance of building on the successful and positive resources that reside in individual communities.

Our own analysis of the literature and various interventions in the field has identified several trends in philanthropic attempts to address the social class gap for educational attainment. Of course, by no means all interventions share these characteristics, but they feature prominently across the field, as follows:

- A ‘meritocratic’ approach that targets individual high achieving working-class young people
- A focus on ‘raising aspirations’ of individuals and their families
- A focus on academic routes, and on prestigious universities and career paths
- A focus on attainment, rather than engagement with education

As we have observed, there are initiatives that do not share these attributes, and we highlight a couple here to illustrate these approaches. In their critique of existing interventions, Dyson *et al.* (2010) assert that there should be a move away from the market-based model of education that concentrates on the performance of individual schools, and towards collective activity that engages with the complex dynamics of local contexts. Such an approach may be seen to be illustrated by the RSA’s Area Based Curriculum, which aims to engage a wide range of local organizations and community groups in the development of a diverse and relevant curriculum that reflects the different cultures and communities within a locality. It is underpinned by the notion that new ways of learning can be developed through the collaboration of schools and local communities, and seeks to recognise the various lived experiences of young people within the framework of the curriculum. Although the Area Based Curriculum approach promotes the idea that *all* communities can contribute to the curriculum, it has the potential to be particularly beneficial in disadvantaged or diverse communities, where young people are more likely to feel alienated by the generic curriculum (RSA, 2010).

“Our review suggests the need for greater attention to the educational engagement of working-class young people (as an essential precursor to attainment); and for work with an inclusive approach that addresses vocational as well as academic routes, and wide groups of young people.”

A further example of more collectivist work with a focus on whole groups rather than specific ‘high ability’ groups is that of the University of the Arts, which takes young people from low-income families — irrespective of ability — on its widening participation projects. Young people work together, often with the input of famous artists and designers, to create projects such as advertising campaigns, fashion shows, art productions, and so on. The impressive success and quality of work produced by young people on these projects makes the model particularly notable.

What our analysis suggests, then, is that there is a relative lack of philanthropic initiatives to close the social class gap adopting the following features:

- A focus on educational engagement and ownership by working-class young people, as a precursor to achievement
- Addressing working-class young people as a group, irrespective of ‘ability’; emphasising collectivist, rather than individualistic approaches
- Attention to vocational routes and careers in addition to academic routes
- A focus on, and valuing of, the existing knowledges of working-class young people

We argue that, not only are such approaches currently scarce, but that they are vital to incorporate if the social class gap in achievement is to be addressed (as opposed to simply making slight increases in the number of working-class applicants to elite universities, and so on; important as this latter may be). Of course, as we have reported, the success of any local and/or small-scale intervention may be constrained by the regressive effects of structural aspects within the education system. However, we would argue nevertheless that understanding working-class young people’s local circumstances and employment prospects, focusing on engaging working-class young people with their education as a necessary precursor to attainment, and valuing working-class young peoples’ existing experience and expertise, are of fundamental importance in facilitating success.

To summarise:

A diverse range of existing intervention programmes seek to narrow the attainment gap. Many of these interventions focus on the notion of ‘raising aspirations’, focusing on individuals rather than structural issues. Further, many philanthropic initiatives adopt relatively individualist, ‘meritocratic’ approaches, and are concerned with academic routes — for example focusing on select high achieving young people from less advantaged backgrounds, and encouraging their progression to higher education or elite occupations via mentoring, immersion experiences and/or advocacy. Far fewer interventions focus on vocational (as well or instead of academic) routes, or on whole groups of young people (i.e. irrespective of ability). Our review suggests the need for greater attention to the educational engagement of working-class young people (as an essential precursor to attainment); and for work with an inclusive approach that addresses vocational as well as academic routes, and wide groups of young people. It appears important that young people’s identities and existing skills and knowledge are recognised and valued, in contrast to the assumptions of ‘deficit’ promulgated by some schemes. Moreover, many mentoring schemes are by their nature ‘top down’, with mentors offering advice and support to mentees. Few programmes accentuate the mutual learning and benefits resulting from social-mixing, mutual understanding and shared purpose. Yet such an approach was identified by academic experts at a recent RSA salon (2010) as vital for engaging, and valuing as well as helping, working-class young people.

“There is a need for interventions that depart from the assumptions underpinning the rhetoric of ‘raising aspirations’ and that seek instead to actively include working-class young people, by supporting their agency to exercise more control over their education, and by valuing their lived experiences and identities.”

CONCLUSION

This review sought to outline some of the key issues in relation to social class and educational attainment. Although social class intersects with gender and ethnicity in complex ways to reproduce educational inequality, it remains the strongest predictor of educational achievement in Britain. Striking inequalities are witnessed during early years education, and throughout compulsory schooling, where the literature has shown how the quasi-market in schooling, and processes of segregation and distinction therein, exacerbates inequality. Such inequalities are also reflected in the rates of participation by working-class young people in further and higher education. Following the recent recommendations of the Browne Review, which include the removal of the cap on tuition fees (Browne, 2010), concerns have been raised at the likelihood that young people from less affluent backgrounds may be further deterred from pursuing a path into higher education in the future (NUT, 2010; Sutton Trust, 2010b). Thus, as Archer *et al.* (2003) have recommended, analysis of inequalities in the various education sectors should not only take into account the complex and diverse identities of young people, but should also challenge the institutions and structures that sustain educational inequality. These conclusions raise profound questions, such as whether educational equality is compatible with advanced capitalism, what sorts of (fundamental) shifts would be needed to achieve more equitable outcomes, and how much can be achieved via education policy rather than (or in conjunction with) fiscal and welfare policy? At present, such discussion appears somewhat limited, and initiation of further, radical thinking on these issues is urgently required.

Although a wide variety of initiatives has been developed to address the socio-economic gap for educational achievement, evidence regarding their effectiveness is contradictory. Hence, there is a need for interventions that depart from the assumptions underpinning the rhetoric of ‘raising aspirations’ and that seek instead to actively include working-class young people, by supporting their agency to exercise more control over their education, and by valuing their lived experiences and identities. There is also a need for a focus on educational engagement as a precursor to achievement, and a broadening of initiatives in two regards, to instigate: **a)** more work that values young people from working-class backgrounds as a group, rather than selective targeting of high achieving individuals; and **b)** a valuing of educational routes beyond the exclusively academic. It would also be beneficial to move away from education policies that focus on the performance of individual schools through setting, streaming and league tables, and market-based models of education that have the potential to socially segregate pupils and favour parents who possess economic capital. Finally, this review has outlined the need for interventions that encourage individuals within local communities to work collaboratively in order to create new learning opportunities and forms of knowledge, but which also adopt a structural as opposed to a purely individualistic approach with regard to tackling the causes of inequality. As Dyson *et al.* (2010) have acknowledged, the creation of an equitable education system will take a considerable amount of time to achieve. However, the adoption of holistic and innovative approaches will increase the likelihood of creating a more equitable education system for all.

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