

The Working Class Conundrum

Her own class background has given **Professor Sonia Blandford** a unique insight into the way working class children fail and what can be done about it.

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In July 2017, sat in my home office reflecting on the end of another full and mainly productive academic year, there was a realisation that, as a working class Professor, I might have something to contribute to the social mobility debate. A view that would be immersed in my experience, contributing to the class consciousness that has been subject to media activity and political debate over the last year. My aim in sharing thoughts on social mobility is to question the injustice of the current prevailing view of social mobility, that the working class have somehow failed and they should become more like the middle class. That is, pass the required exams to go to university, get a degree or two, buy their own house and live a healthy life, contributing to society and the economy. Not too dissimilar to my own story in some ways, but lacking the notion of family and the tribal effect of the working class. What is needed is an alternative way of thinking about social mobility – a way of thinking that crucially listens to, engages and involves the working class in determining what their future should be. An alternative way that values partnership, mutuality and collaboration and which, by doing what is right, creates opportunities for all. What would different look like if we addressed working class questions, if we responded to old questions with new thinking?

Why do working class children not achieve?

The need to understand how and why children can learn is fundamental to pedagogy – how teachers teach. Getting it [teaching] right for the working class remains an ongoing challenge in many schools. An appropriate starting point might be to increase understanding of how working class, disadvantaged and SEND children learn, and refocusing teacher training and professional training on the majority of the population in schools, identifying what is needed to prepare children for work. It is also about changing the mindset of the adults and services around the school to improve the outcomes for all children. I have long known that that, if you change the attitudes of adults, you improve the attitudes and behaviours of the child.

Why do working class families not participate fully in early years provision?

Sure Start Children's Centres were the main vehicles for ensuring good quality family services and provision were located in accessible places and welcoming to all. The aim for every Sure Start Centre was to improve outcomes for children and families.¹ There are some fine nursery settings that take that approach today. If we want working class families to fully participate in early years we need to see more of the same - to share the benefits of early years education by building a respectful relationship with families, and sustain that to help ensure growth and school readiness.

Why is there not the will to stop the growth of disadvantage among the working class?

Part of the problem is that the context of UK poverty has changed. Poverty is no longer just an issue for people out of work or living in social housing. It impacts on people with disabilities, people who've become ill and had to give up work, people in work, young people (including some just out of university), people renting from private landlords. The drive for welfare reform has been seen as an answer to the problems of disadvantage, but it's failed to understand this changing context and, hence, the better ways (better housing, investment in communities - or reinvestment where cuts have decimated good work - and a continued drive to grow employment and provide good jobs that provide an income on or above a living wage) to address this.

Why is school considered not relevant by the working class?

A curriculum that is not socially and culturally relevant, that presents more barriers than opportunities will not engage children in learning. The national curriculum in England has been developed on knowledge and learning experienced by the middle class.



There are solutions to this dilemma that, if implemented, would address the needs of all children. The first is to break down the barriers to learning by providing opportunities for all children to participate in social and cultural activities, sport, the arts, debating, volunteering, wider community based provision, museums, trips and much more. The second requires us to relate the curriculum to the social context of the child and their future. All communities have a rich heritage, which can provide significant resources. In terms of their future, learning about the workplace can begin in primary school, increasing ambitions, breaking down barriers and providing relevance to learning. Increasing access to learning for all children should be the benchmark of a successful school.

Why is working class success only measured by exam results?

The annual media frenzy that follows primary phase national curriculum assessments (SATs) and secondary phase GCSE exam results only serves to remind the majority of the working class families that their children are disadvantaged, with private and grammar schools forming the majority at the top of published league tables. For the minority of working class students who do achieve, this is a demonstration that passing exams is a possibility at primary and secondary. However, recent primary SATs serve to prove the difficulties for those without the related social and cultural capital to respond to questions in the English paper. EPI Closing the Gap research² reminds us that it will take decades to 'close the gap'. A more meaningful assessment at secondary phase would be destination outcomes; measuring students' outcomes by where the examinations take them. If exam results are to be a single judgement of success, all forms of examinations should be considered providing a more rounded picture of what each school has to offer.



Why is there a lack of ambition for the working class?

There is no evidence that the working class cannot achieve - in education, employment, housing and health. There is also no evidence that the working class are any less likely to have a desire for success than others. What there is, though, is a lack of societal ambition outside those spurious targets (like university entry) that only concern 50% of the population at best. To increase ambition for the working class there needs to be a mutual understanding of what is available in terms of alternatives, and engagement with the working class about what they actually want. By talking and listening, ambitions can be shared - a do *with* rather than do to approach.



So, are the working class born to fail?

Research would indicate that, rather than reducing the chances of failure within the working class over the last forty years, we have increased the possibility in housing, education and social care. This should not have happened, nor should it be allowed to continue. Back in 1973, the authors of the Born to Fail report referenced Tawney, saying, "The continuance of social evils is not due to the fact that we do not know what is right, but that we prefer to continue doing what is wrong. Those who have the power to remove them do not have the will, and those who have the will have not, as yet, the power."

And there is no evidence that the attainment gap cannot be closed for all children, regardless of background, challenge or need. To recommend a national ambition set at 50% will allow excuses and caveats; creating a barrier to change. Evidence has shown (Impetus Foundation, 2014³; Rowntree Foundation, 2016⁴; PwC, 2016⁵) that the key to change is to develop an approach that engenders self-belief, building the core in every child at the earliest stages of their development: Aspiration, 'I can'; Access, 'I do'; Attainment, 'I have'; and Achievement, 'I am'.

Ultimately, it is about taking responsibility, owning a shared moral purpose and shared ambition and integrity that can provide the opportunities and resources needed for all children and their families to achieve. This is social justice in action and, possibly, social mobility that really works.

Extracts from 'Born to Fail? A Working Class View'
<http://www.johncattbookshop.com/born-to-fail>

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