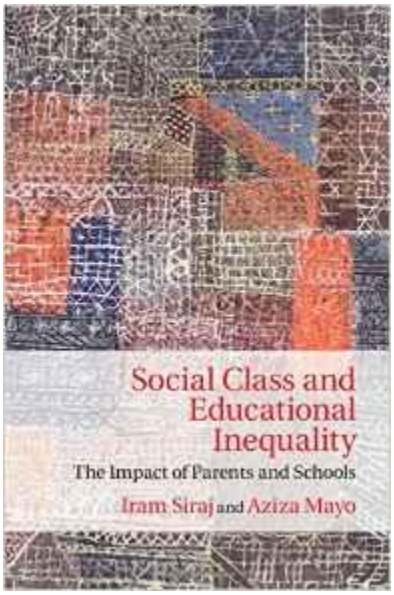
Book Review

The Impact of Parents and Schools

"Social Class and Educational Inequality" by Iram Siraj and Aziza Mayo

By Gbenga Emmanuel Afolayan



Social Class and Educational Inequality offers another perspective on the complex nature of social disadvantage and the interplay between risk and protective factors in homes and schools with an analysis of the impact of parents and schools—using longitudinal data sets from fifty Child and Family Case Studies (CFCS) conducted with 13-16 year olds. The general question the authors pose is, "*when* and *why* do some at-risk children succeed against the odds while others make little progress or fall further behind?" (p.8). Although the general question this book addresses cannot be explicitly answered due to the contextual realities of each country, the richness and complex relationships that shape the educational and developmental outcomes of resilient and vulnerable children, as exemplified in the book, entail that: a) social class and educational inequality are jointly dynamic; b) parents and schools play pivotal roles in the learning trajectories of their children; and c) external factors such as community, extra-curricular activities, pursuit of hobbies/interests, among others, shape children's educational experiences.

The first chapter establishes the background/context for the study, which includes the working definitions of key concepts (like resilience and vulnerability) and outlines of the book's major research questions and structure. The following chapter provides Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of human development as an overall framework that provides multiple channels to understand the differences in children's trajectories and developmental processes, and how close people in their lives and within the macro-system of socio-economic statuses contribute or hinder their experiences and opportunities to engage in proximal learning processes. Chapter 3 describes the mixed methods adopted (a combination of quantitative and qualitative data from the Effective Pre-School, Primary, and Secondary Education Project, 1997-2014), and justifies the design and trajectory analyses of the CFSC, which are aligned with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development.

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Chapter 4 illustrates typical circumstances and experiences in the learning life-courses of two children from disadvantaged socio-economic status backgrounds and two children from middle-class families from the presented case studies. These circumstances and experiences include succeeding against the odds of disadvantage (demonstrated by Steven Peterson); not succeeding against the odds of disadvantage (demonstrated by Tom White); failing to meet the high expectations of privileged circumstances (demonstrated by Marcy Stewart); and doing well as expected (demonstrated by Imogene Woods). The authors also add the parents' voices to these narratives, thereby making the stories convincing. The enormous courage and doggedness that Peterson and his mother demonstrate cannot change the fact that succeeding against all odds (academically) is ridden with joyful and joyless sets of narratives. Taken together, these illustrations shed more light into the human narratives that validate or disrupt the established connection between socio-economic background and educational performance.

Chapter 5 details how children can be the harbinger of their level of academic success. The section is descriptive and factual based on the sampled children's academic successes or difficulties, as well as their parents and teachers, and other previous works in the empirical literature. The findings reveal that children's motivational attitudes, cognitive abilities, and other "developmentally generative force characteristics" (like self-regulation, personal competencies, and locus of control) are perceived as potent factors in explaining children's level of academic success. For example, Peterson is decidedly motivated toward learning and school-related tasks. He enthusiastically looks for new opportunities for learning through his peers, his hobbies, close people in his life, and the media. As the authors put it, Peterson becomes "a driving force behind his own, personal academic success" (p.125). However, his mother was also instrumental to achieving this success.

Both chapters 6 and 7 offer more analysis than description about aspects of the family micro-system, parenting, and home learning toward higher aspirations. In these two sections, the authors describe and analyse how parents, despite their social disadvantages, found ways to teach their children about their values and beliefs, modelling and setting patterns of language development at an early age (p.155) in order to prepare their children for the kind of communication they would need to be successful in their educational activities. Further, the authors analyse how parents engage their children through the means of effective and adaptive home-learning environments (HLEs), emotional support, and other activities facilitated by them toward school-oriented goals.

Chapter 8 explores how school-related factors and the pre-school environment contribute to academic success in the pre-school years. Here, the authors argue that teachers, peers, and friends play major roles in inspiring behavioral gains and success in pre-school education and the home-learning environment. The findings confirm the magnitude of combining good quality experiences in the pre-school and home to help children "succeed against the odds of disadvantage." However, connections between pre-school education and the English pre-school curriculum are not discussed as well as one might hope (see p.187). In particular, English pre-school curriculum discourse requires more attention than it receives in the book. It represents the country's strategy for pre-school education and provides for every English child—without exception—basic literacy, numeracy, scientific thinking, and additional areas of development. This is an important issue and the reader should not have

to look elsewhere to understand its proper relevance to the material in this chapter.

Drawing from the case studies, Chapter 9 describes the important roles that schools and parents can play in bridging cultural, social, and emotional capital. It provides case study evidence demonstrating how educational achievement was supported by the "active cultivation" of educational and cultural pursuits (p.229) via children's involvement in extra-curricular activities, through hobbies/interests, religious activities, or involvement with support networks comprised of family friends or extended family members. This suggests that social networks and relationship dynamics cannot be overlooked in the field of educational research. Those linking sociological and economic accounts of education find that social-cultural dynamics, which can lubricate the wheels of academic achievement or bring them to a halt, are deeply embedded within educational research (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2003, 2002, 2000). Social and cultural capital certainly helps shape children's educational trajectories by facilitating or disrupting the link between social background and academic success. It would have been more interesting, however, if the authors incorporated social capital theory as part of the book's theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), as it relates well with many of the case studies it identifies. In the final chapter, the authors argue for the need of "active cultivation" stemming from the child-rearing practices seen in the low-SES families with children succeeding against all odds. It also promotes and advocates for agency in the form of determination from the children themselves, and emphasizes the profound impact of parents and schools on their learning. All in all, the authors conclude that these factors can help children become active agents in their learning life-courses.

Social Class and Educational Inequality is well worth reading. It arrives at a time when we need to bring parenting practices and schools back into the post-modern debate about children's educational achievement. The authors have done substantial research and the book is rich with mixed data sets and empirical literatures that critically explain the major issues it examines. Although the book focuses on the impact of parents and schools, the role of government in delivering education in a way that cushions the effects of educational inequality should not be oversimplified in an age of globalization. In the last four decades, for example, many Western European countries have made educational reforms aimed at reducing existing educational inequality (Bakker and Amsing, 2012; Wiborg, 2009). These reforms tend to be entrenched in new educational policies, providing states with information on the social distribution of participation in education. This testifies to a more integrative role of the state in the educational pathways of its citizens.

While schools have a role to play in children's learning life-courses, governments, through policies or reforms, still attempt to play a vital role in lessening the educational inequality reproduced and exacerbated by many schools. *Social Class and Educational Inequality*'s conclusion helps meet its goals, but the authors perhaps inadvertently marginalize the government's role in supporting children's educational trajectories. Nevertheless, the book offers a lucid guide to the broad investigations on which the research is based and makes an innovative and significant contribution to the literature on risk, resilience, parenting practices, and educational achievement from early childhood through adolescence. Consequently, the book is satisfactory as a whole and is recommended for use in the classroom.

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