

Student Achievement

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The sociological literature asserts that societies throughout the ages have been characterised by social inequality. Societies have also been found to reflect inequality in terms of social groupings or stratification. It has been further discovered that stratification can generate different subcultures in a society, social mobility among classes, and different life chances for individuals in society.

It is because of these findings that a recent report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a social policy research and development charity in the UK, captured my interest. The report indicated that the norm is for a quarter of poor children in England to gain five GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) or equivalent, and noted that school quality tends to account for only a fraction of student achievement. Apart from insisting that poor student achievement is a characteristic family disadvantage, which tends to be passed on from one generation to the next, the report revealed that such factors as how children feel about themselves and their learning are also important when assessing student achievement.

It should be noted that this report was conducted against the background of eight previous studies for the charity's education and poverty programme. Indeed, its main objective was to determine whether there is a correlation between poverty and low educational performance.

In an attempt to stimulate debate, allow me to reveal some more of the report's findings: 1) low-income parents who work long hours tend to find it hard to give children good life chances; 2) educational value added by schools does not differ significantly from school to school; 3) children from different backgrounds seem to have different attitudes to their learning and schools; 4) children from advantaged homes do not only have more help with their homework but have more physical space to do it; and 5) many low-income parents lack the resources that allow them to help out, provide conducive environments, or access relevant services. A critical finding to my mind—and one of great relevance to us in Trinidad and Tobago—is that children who have been able to develop reading and writing outside school tend to be more confident and have higher self-esteem than those who are not so fortunate.

As I see it, such reports should always be of interest to us because of the continuing influence of our colonial history on our education system. The parallels to our own situation are illustrated in an April 23, 2003 report in the *Guardian*, a respected British newspaper, which stated that the then Liberal Democrats party spokesman, Phil Willis, addressing members of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers at their annual conference, had claimed that how well a British child does at school is defined by his or her social class.

My reading of the literature on student achievement so far seems to support the view that social class tends to impact on student achievement. The evidence indicates that middle-

class children: 1) generally perform better than other children at school; 2) come to school with a wider knowledge of the world; 3) are more familiar with elaborated, formal language; and 4) are more inclined to independence and self-directed thinking.

On the other hand, low-income students have been found to face the following classroom obstacles: 1) a curriculum and instruction that do not necessarily meet their needs, interest, and experiences; 2) lack of previous success; 3) too much low-level learning; 4) teacher-student background differences; and 5) negative peer pressure.

Much research is still needed to support or reject these explanations for student achievement. The evidence so far seems to suggest that: 1) most of the children who do the best work are the easiest to control and stimulate, make the best prefects, stay at school longest, take part in extra-curricular activities, finish school with the best qualifications and references and get into the best jobs, and tend to come from the middle class; 2) poor living conditions and standards, coupled with social class, are strongly linked to educational failure; and 3) not all working-class children fail educationally; just as some middle- and upper-class children fail, many working-class children achieve academic success; 4) the existence and rapid growth of private tutors has meant that parents with sufficient income can buy additional education provision for their children; and 5) students from the higher classes in society seem to access the better schools. Two British researchers, Fulcher and Scott (1999) coined the term *parentocracy* to describe a system in which resources + preferences = choice.

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