WORKING-CLASS BOYS, EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AND THE MISRECOGNITION OF WORKING-CLASS CULTURE

N I C O L A  I N G R A M ,  2 0 0 9

CONTEXT
This study focuses on the educational experiences of working-class boys in Northern Ireland. The education system here differs from the rest of the UK in that children do not attend comprehensive schools.

Instead, at the age of 11, pupils sit a selection test called the 11-plus that determines whether they will go a grammar school or a secondary school. This arrangement is similar to the system that existed in the rest of the Britain before the comprehensive system was introduced in the 1960s.

Pupils in grammar schools usually go on to experience continued educational success by gaining more than five GCSEs and then A-levels, whereas the majority in secondary schools perform poorly at GCSE level and tend to leave school at 16.

Ingram argues that most sociological studies of working-class boys focus on educational failure rather than on educational success. Little attention has been paid to the issue of how working-class children cope with educational success, and how that success affects their class identity. However, the studies that do exist, such as Mac an Ghaill’s (1994), suggest that working-class boys have a problematic relationship with academic success.

Ingram’s research focuses on how working-class boys’ experience of two very different educational institutions affects their class identity.

LINKS TO KEY DEBATES

The cultural capital theory of the neo-Marxist Pierre Bourdieu is an influence on Ingram’s analysis of the data. She suggests that middle-class culture shapes the ethos and aims of the education system and, consequently, definitions of success and failure. On the other hand, the educational system presents working-class culture as problematic. Bourdieu argues that working-class pupils experience a form of ‘symbolic violence’ in that the middle-class ethos that dominates most schools devalues their working-class experiences, values and attitudes. As a result, working-class identity is presented as an obstacle that needs to be overcome.

Ingram suggests that working-class boys can react to this symbolic violence in two ways. First, symbolic violence can alienate boys and communicate to them a sense of inferiority that may mean they seek alternative sources of status based on anti-school subcultures. This strategy of resistance produces low educational attainment. This is characteristic of the reactions of the boys in the secondary school.

Second, boys in the grammar school may internalise the view that their home culture is deficient and so leaving their working-class identity behind is a positive option. Ingram concludes that the final result is the maintenance of class inequalities, as one group rejects its class of origin in favour of upward mobility while the other confirms its low-status working-class position.
**METHODS**

Two Catholic boys’ schools were selected for the study: one secondary school and one grammar school. The research focused on two groups of pupils, those aged 11 to 12 and 15 to 16, because these pupils were respectively beginning and coming to the end of compulsory education.

Most of the children in the study lived in a working-class Catholic community in Belfast. The area ranks within the top ten in Northern Ireland in terms of deprivation, measured by income, educational qualifications, skills and training. In 2006, 60 per cent of children were eligible for free school meals compared with 19 per cent across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Two types of interview were conducted in order to generate qualitative data. First, group discussions were carried out in each school with eight of the younger and eight of the older pupils. The discussions lasted for an hour and the issues raised became the basis of questions used for the second stage of the research.

Second, individual semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that allowed students to digress were carried out with working-class boys in both schools. Informal unstructured interviews also took place with the principal and a teacher from each school.

Ingram had previously taught in both schools and the older group in the secondary school were deliberately chosen because she had been their form teacher.

Ingram noted that the labelling of pupils as academic or non-academic started at the local primary school, which was attended by all the respondents. The primary school divided its Year 6 into two classes, one of which was trained and entered for the 11-plus examination, while the other group was not entered on the grounds of their anticipated failure.

Children, therefore, internalised definitions of themselves as successes or failures at an early stage. The progression into grammar or secondary school, and the experiences of pupils within these schools, reinforced those labels.

Ingram found that working-class boys in the secondary school reacted to their failure by stressing their working-class identity. The boys conformed to peer-group pressure to fit in, and this generally meant resisting attempts at control by the school. The school was seen as an ‘easy ride’ by pupils because disciplinary procedures were weak. However, such behaviour had the effect of confirming the boys’ failure, as they left school with few or no qualifications.

On the other hand, the grammar school was shaped by a long tradition of academic success, a strong disciplinary ethos, and high teacher expectations.

The interview data from the working-class boys who attended the grammar school suggested some conflict between their working-class identities and the school. For example, mild swearing that was acceptable in front of adults in the outside community, was labelled as vulgar and inappropriate by the grammar school. The message to pupils was that their own community was deviant.

Many of the working-class grammar school boys reacted to these potential tensions by taking less part in local activities — they often made friends outside their community and left the neighbourhood to pursue social activities more often than the secondary school boys. Their route to academic success therefore involved the gradual abandonment of their working-class identity.

Ingram then used this information to construct questions for the individual interviews. The boys could therefore see that Ingram valued their input. As she notes, if sociologists listen more carefully to working-class experience, more accurate representations of working-class lives can be developed.

Also, Ingram remarks that she knew the boys as well as their friends and family, and this helped them to feel at ease during the interviews. All of these factors are likely to have produced highly valid data that allowed Ingram to see the world of grammar schools and secondary schools through the eyes of her subjects.

However, there is a danger that her familiarity with the boys and their families, and the fact that she lived in the neighbourhood, may have distorted her objectivity. Her obvious sympathy with the working-class boys could have resulted in her seeing in the data what she wanted or expected to see. Furthermore, her sample is extremely small and centred on Irish Catholic education, which differs in fundamental respects from mainstream education in the UK. There is, therefore, some doubt about the extent to which her findings can be generalised to working-class boys in the rest of Britain.
Vocabulary list

Here is a list of some words and phrases used in the summary. Below are the definitions of those words and phrases. Match the word or phrase to the correct definition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word/phrase</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 11-plus</td>
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<td>2. Grammar school</td>
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<td>3. Secondary school</td>
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<td>4. Comprehensive system</td>
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<td>5. Internalised</td>
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<td>6. Cultural capital</td>
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<td>7. Neo-Marxist</td>
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<td>8. Symbolic violence</td>
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<td>9. Anti-school subculture</td>
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<td>10. Upward mobility</td>
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<td>11. Valid</td>
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<td>12. Objectivity</td>
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Definitions

- Updated adaptation of a Marxist view
- Having no personal biases
- In this context, the type of school attended by those pupils who do not ‘pass’ the 11+
- System of post-11 education not based on selection. All pupils go to the same type of school
- Truthful, accurate
- Group of pupils who reject and resist school
- Test taken at the age of 11 to determine what kind of school a child will attend
- Type of school attended by those pupils who ‘pass’ the 11+
- Made part of your own identity
- Movement up the social scale
- Non-financial assets that help achieve success in life such as values, attitudes, norms, experiences, linguistic skills and forms of knowledge
- In this context, the devaluing of working-class culture
True or false?

Decide whether the statements below are true or false. Then check your answers by looking at the study. Add the correct information and/or more detail in the right-hand column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>✓</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Northern Ireland uses the comprehensive system</td>
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<td>2. Pupils in grammar schools usually succeed in education</td>
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<td>3. There are lots of sociological studies about working-class pupils who experience educational success</td>
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<td>4. Ingram only studies boys from two schools</td>
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<td>5. The area studied was typical of Northern Ireland</td>
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<td>6. Only pupils from Year 7 and Year 10 were interviewed</td>
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<td>7. Issues raised in the individual interviews were used as discussion topics in the group interviews</td>
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<td>8. Ingram had taught in both schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. The boys in the grammar school stressed their class identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. The boys in the secondary school stressed their class identity</td>
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<td>11. The boys in the grammar schools reduced the amount of leisure time they spent in the local community</td>
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<td>12. The boys in the secondary school developed an anti-school subculture</td>
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*Answers to True or False quizzes at end of book*
Questions

The study
1. How does the system of education described here differ from that in the rest of the UK?
2. How can it be argued that Ingram's study fills a 'knowledge gap'?
3. How did the labelling of pupils as academic or non-academic begin in primary school?
4. How did the working-class boys in the secondary school react to their failure?
5. In what way was there a conflict between the grammar school and the working class identities of the boys who attended the school?
6. How did the boys resolve this conflict?

The methods
7. Suggest why the study focuses on pupils in two year groups.
8. How did Ingram combine her two main methods of data collection?
9. How did Ingram attempt to ensure the validity of data?
10. Why is there doubt as to the generalisability of Ingram's findings?

Methods in context question

Item A

Investigating the educational experiences of working-class boys

Ingram researched how working-class boys' experience of education affects their class identity. Two Catholic boys' schools in Northern Ireland were selected for the study: one secondary school and one grammar school. The research focused on two groups of pupils aged 11 to 12 and 15 to 16, because these pupils were respectively beginning and coming to the end of compulsory education.

Most of the children in the study lived in a working-class Catholic community in Belfast. The area ranks within the top ten in Northern Ireland in terms of deprivation. Two types of interview were conducted in order to generate qualitative data. First, group discussions were carried out in each school with eight of the younger and eight of the older pupils. The discussions lasted for an hour and the issues raised became the basis of questions used for the second stage of the research.

Second, individual semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that allowed students to digress were carried out with working-class boys in both schools. Informal unstructured interviews also took place with the principal and a teacher from each school. Ingram had previously taught in both schools and the older group in the secondary school were deliberately chosen because she had been their form teacher.

Using material from Item A and elsewhere, assess the strengths and limitations of using different types of interviews to investigate the educational experiences of working-class boys. (20 marks)
## Mark scheme for methods in context question

b. Using material from Item A and elsewhere, assess the strengths and limitations of using different types of interviews to investigate the educational experiences of working-class boys. (20 marks)

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<th>Band</th>
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| 1-7  | Answers in this band will show only very limited interpretation, application, analysis or evaluation and will show only limited knowledge and understanding.  
**Lower in the band**, this may be one or two very insubstantial points about methods in general or some material ineffectually recycled from Item A, with little understanding of relevant issues.  
**Higher in the band**, answers will show limited, undeveloped sociological knowledge, for example in the form of a few insubstantial sociological points about the selected method, or offer an answer relating solely to the issue of the educational experiences of working-class boys. Analysis and evaluation will be very limited or non-existent. |
| 8-15 | Answers in this band will show some reasonable interpretation, application, analysis and/or evaluation and will show reasonable knowledge and understanding.  
**Lower in the band**, some potentially relevant material will be presented, offering a broadly accurate account of the strengths and/or limitations of the selected method. Candidates may begin to apply these to the study of education. Some less focused material may also appear, for example lengthy, descriptive accounts of issues with this method.  
**Higher in the band**, knowledge and understanding of material will be broader and/or deeper. The answer will deal specifically with a range of strengths and limitations of the selected method and will apply some of these to the study of education. To access 14 or 15 marks, the answer will apply one or more strengths and/or limitations to investigating the educational experiences of working-class boys. There will be some limited explicit analysis and/or evaluation, for example through some brief reference to methodological issues. |
| 16-20| In this band, interpretation, application, analysis and evaluation will be explicit and relevant, and answers will show sound, conceptually detailed knowledge and understanding of sociological material, drawn from Item A and elsewhere, concerning the usefulness of the selected method in investigating the educational experiences of working-class boys. This will be accurately and sensitively interpreted and applied to the demands of the question.  
Answers will present the strengths and limitations of the selected method and discuss them in some detail. These will be interpreted and applied to the research issues identified in Item A and elsewhere in an explicit manner. Research concerns relating to investigating the educational experiences of working-class boys will appear. These could include the following and/or other relevant concerns: political sensitivity of issues, research characteristics of potential research subjects (e.g. teachers’ power and status; pupils’ vulnerability and communication skills), and schools as a research environment.  
Analysis and evaluation may be developed through the concepts of reliability, representativeness or validity, or through linkage to methodology. Explicit analysis and evaluation may also be shown through direct comparison with other methods.  
**Lower in the band**, answers may consider a more limited range of material or may occasionally lack focus or structure and evaluation may be less developed.  
**Higher in the band**, interpretation and application will be more fully focused, and evaluation more thorough. Answers may show a clear rationale in the organisation of material leading to a distinct conclusion.  
**NB**: Candidates (in any band) who make relevant reference to their own research experiences will be rewarded. |

### Different types of interview:

Strengths and limitations may include issues such as: awareness of different types of interview, level of structure, interviewer bias, social desirability, sampling, gaining informed consent, responsibilities to participants, time, cost, access, sensitivity, categorisation of responses, insight, comparability