

Britain: Children socially, educationally disadvantaged by age two

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Recent research into the learning development of very young children suggests that many are educationally classified according to social class before they are two years old.

A study by Leon Feinstein, a researcher in child development at University College in London, was conducted on children just before they had reached their second birthday. The infants were given four simple tasks to see how they were developing their skills: the ability to point to different facial features when asked; putting on and taking off a pair of shoes; stacking a pile of coloured bricks; and drawing lines and circles on a piece of paper, as opposed to simple scribbles.

The tests revealed that children of parents from middle class, professional backgrounds were significantly better at completing the tasks than children of working class parents in manual occupations.

A difference in income of £100 a week was equal to a quantifiable 3 percentage point improvement in the ability to do the tasks. Children whose parents were educated to at least A-level standard were 14 percentage points above those without qualifications.

Other findings from the research indicated that children of working class parents tended to be “more passive, less engaged in the world around them and have a more limited vocabulary.” Children from middle class households were found to possess a “wider vocabulary, better understanding of how to ‘converse’ with other people and were more skilled at manipulating objects.”

Education officials said that parents’ willingness to spend time with their children, how much they spoke to them and the amount of reading they did all produced differences in their child’s attainment.

The research found that toddlers in the bottom 25 percent of the test results were significantly less likely to leave school with qualifications. The findings also revealed that children in the top 25 percent of results at the age of three-and-a-half were twice as likely to go on to study A-levels than those in the bottom quarter.

The researchers concluded, “It is worth emphasising that before children have even entered school, very substantial signals about educational progress are contained in the tests of development.”

The Labour government’s Minister of State for school standards, David Miliband, revealed the findings in an article entitled *Focus on the Future* for a magazine produced by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and circulated among teachers. Milliband was forced to admit, “We continue to have one of the greatest class divides in education in the industrialised world, with a socio-economic attainment gap evident in children as young as 22 months.”

The DfES has set up a special unit of officials to look at the issue and see how parents of working class children can be helped to close the divide.

Amongst the hurriedly prepared suggestions were giving out free books for parents to read to their children, parenting classes and ways of “improving the economic standing of lower income parents”.

The well-respected baby and child care expert, Penelope Leach, cautioned the government against sending out too negative a message to working class parents. “These kind of findings can be alarming,” she said. “If you are already being told that your children are at a disadvantage ... well you are not going to make people feel very good.”

Even given a sensitivity to parental feelings, however, facts are stubborn things and these facts should not be ignored. The feigned astonishment being

displayed at these findings by ministers is almost pathetic. This is a government, after all, that in the space of little over five years has taken an already socially segregated and under-funded education system and made it worse.

Indeed, current government education policy has played no small role in exacerbating those tendencies highlighted in the recent study. The series of tests and targets, increased in recent years and designed to catch children at a younger and younger age, now hound kids throughout their primary education (5 to 11 years of age) and on into secondary education. This social divide is reinforced through streaming and setting, and maintained with increasing rigidity throughout school life, with the gap growing rather than diminishing for most children.

This is corroborated by the finding of another recent study which found that in modern Britain only 14 percent of young people from lower income backgrounds go to university.

Feinstein's study reveals just how entrenched class divisions are in Britain. Whilst the educational disadvantages faced by working class children are not new, they have become more protracted as successive governments have dismantled progressive social and welfare measures in order to fund tax breaks for the rich and big business. Only an education policy that has at its heart the fight for social equality can prevent the scandalous waste of potential for millions of young people.



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