

Abstract

Jessie Bustillos and Sandra Abegglen undertake an inquiry into inequalities in education. They attempt to disentangle some of the many issues in the realms of gender, 'race' and social class in education. The chapter explores some of the growing patterns of inequality that have characterised schooling in the UK. This is broken down into three main sections. In the first section, gender equity issues in schools are outlined and interrogated. The authors look at feminist concerns and ask whether we are now in a post-feminist educational era. Second, issues of 'race' and education are discussed in relation to the work of well-known 'critical race theorists' Gillborn and Youdell. Finally, the work of recently retired, internationally renowned Professor Stephen Ball is drawn upon to illustrate a range of issues around social class and educational opportunity.

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Issues of gender, 'race' and social class in education

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6.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to disentangle some of the many inequality issues in the realms of gender, 'race' and social class in education. The opening discussion sets the scene by using constructivist theory to offer a critique of education and schooling as important sites where social problems and social inequalities are regularly and historically addressed through prescribed inclusion policy. It is against this rationale and premise that the chapter will move on to untie and develop some of the growing patterns of inequality that have characterised schooling in the United Kingdom for many years. Firstly, there will be a section in which gender equity issues in schools are outlined and interrogated ([Skelton et al. 2006](#)); this will be followed by a critique of the notion of post-feminist education ([Ringrose 2007](#)). Secondly, there will be explorations around issues of 'race' and education, articulated through an analysis of [Gillborn and Youdell's \(2000\)](#) research around the 'rationing of educational opportunity'. Thirdly, the work of [Ball \(2008\)](#) will be used to illustrate some issues around social class and educational opportunity. The chapter ends with an overview of how, although schooling has been characterised by particular gender, 'race' and social class inequalities, it still remains one of the key sites for attempts of social inclusion to be realised.

6.2 Schooling as a site to tackle inequalities?

When discussing and thinking about social problems, we might think about things that have gone wrong with our societies or new trends that threaten the way in which people live together in societal arrangements. In this book there are various chapters suggesting how social problems emerge, how they can be defined and how they have been addressed, and whilst there is a historical and long-standing plethora of social policy attempting to respond to social problems, no social institution is so central to the tackling of social problems as schooling has been and continues to be. This chapter is an attempt to explore some of the main issues of inequality that characterise schooling in the UK, yet it is also important to understand the ways in which schooling as a social institution is utilised to highlight and address any current social problems that a society might have identified.

This chapter, similar to the others in this book, presents arguments as to how social problems are constructed as part of a social fabric which is never static, but rather changes frequently. Some of the reasons for the changes in how social problems are identified and articulated can be said to be impacted by socio-political agendas: that is, whatever social problems we talk about often find their beginnings in political ideology and media/news attention at the time. Nevertheless, what is constant is that the system of schooling, and of education in general, are very often utilised to respond to emerging social problems. Schooling, seen from this constructionist perspective, is a socio-historical amalgam which acts as a site – both physically as a space and intellectually as an ideal – where social problems and their consequences are mitigated. Hence, it is in these environments where governments have decided to implement policies to tackle the most common social problems in society. This is discussed by [Smaeyers and Depaepe \(2008\)](#), who talk about the educationalisation of social problems, which transfers social responsibility to the school. An example of this might be the many days, events, assemblies or weeks dedicated to creating an awareness of road safety, healthy eating and sex education, amongst many other things, or the responsibility schools now have of running breakfast clubs and after-school clubs to help struggling families. Many of these initiatives are

included in the day-to-day running of schools to address wider social problems surrounding obesity, teenage pregnancies and poverty, amongst other well-known social problems in the UK.

In the same way schooling bears a lot of the responsibility in addressing inequalities in society, it has also been discussed as being at the centre of the reproduction of social inequalities. Particularly since schools, from a sociological perspective, are used as a means to socialise pupils (formally and decidedly) into the ways of a society: that is, of course, the desired ways in which a society wants to develop and maintain itself. [Giddens and Sutton \(2013\)](#) discuss how Durkheim viewed education as key for transmitting social and cultural values and also for reproducing a skilled labour force. [Giddens and Sutton \(2013\)](#) also discuss how other theorists, such as Bowles and Gintis, point to how education, instead of levelling or resolving inequalities, might be creating further divisions or reproducing patterns of inequality. For example, black students still win fewer undergraduate places than other applicants with similar qualifications, despite long-standing efforts to support their access to and participation in higher education ([Adams 2017](#)). One of the main aims of this chapter is to open up possibilities for thinking about schools as sites that are not only created, run and regulated to tackle social inequalities and social problems but that also have historically inherited inequalities.

Against this understanding of education and schooling as a means to address and foster equality, this chapter will proceed to illustrate and discuss some of the patterns of inequality that nevertheless still exist in modern schools in terms of gender, 'race' and social class. These patterns of inequality will be explained first by dealing with key notions and, secondly, by drawing on classical educational and academic research which focuses on explaining the relational patterns between the particular inequalities and schooling.

6.3 Understanding gender and gender differences

It is important in this section to reflect on a question which underpins many of the debates around gender and schooling. Why do boys and girls tend to behave so differently in society and

education as a whole? Where do these differences come from, and how do they become manifested in aspects of schooling? Across different societies, there are patterns of behaviour and expectations around gender which shape the socialisation of boys/men and girls/women. These expectations vary from place to place and from society to society; the important thing is that these notions and invisible rules work to organise and codify the behaviour of people in social situations, such as schools. These codes and notions surrounding boys and girls are not necessarily equal but might, in fact, be disempowering and restrictive. So what are some of the formations around gender that are found in our society?

We tend to think of gender as being explained through biological differences between men and women and that consequent differences in gender and sex behaviours are a result of diverting genetic properties. These ideas correspond to the view of gender as explained through biology and evolutionary psychology, which justify our gendered behaviours on Darwinist ideas of evolution as the survival of the fittest ([Birkhead 2001](#)). However, other educational theorists have put forward ideas which openly challenge evolutionary arguments and psychology's take on gender and argue that this is a simplified and narrow view of how gender is constructed in society.

The social determinist view explains that there are plausible and important social explanations for why women and men are seen as needing to conform to certain types of behaviour in order for them to be categorised as male or female. Following these ideas, 'first-wave' feminist writers have argued how gender differences are far from being natural or innate; they are continued because of unequal treatments and social conventions around gender in society. For instance, Wollstonecraft wrote in the eighteenth century about how the exclusion of women from higher education and other parts of education – for example, particular curriculum subjects such as science and mathematics – resulted in the wider educational exclusion of women. Much later, in the 1970s and 80s, 'second-wave' feminists and activists argued how gender differences and the reinforcement of gendered 'sex-roles' (e.g. women as 'homemakers')

and men as 'breadwinners') were learned through interactions with important social institutions such as schooling and the family ([Skelton et al. 2006](#)).

Importantly, the view that gender differences happen as a consequence of social forces, conventions and constructions underpins the ideas discussed in this section. Of particular interest to the ideas developed here is the view that, as one of the major social institutions, schooling – as compulsory and socially influential – is crucial for the reproduction of gender roles and gender differences in society. In what follows, we will discuss and illustrate some of the most common gender differences and inequalities that have characterised education in the UK. There will also be important commentary on some of the most influential academic works which have attempted to explore and explain these inequalities.

Understanding gender inequalities and schooling

Before World War II, systems of education in the UK were made up by some fee-paying, state-run and other church- and charity-based provisions which would be considered very 'patchy' in comparison to today's compulsory and free (at least to a certain extent) systems of schooling. Although education became compulsory for both boys and girls and solely state funded after World War II, there were still issues surrounding a gendered curriculum and unshifting gender and sex roles which affected both girls and boys. To this effect, [Spencer \(2005\)](#) explores in her book *Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s* how, despite positive and overall inclusionary changes to schooling, which opened up new opportunities in education and employment for girls, there was still a universal belief that women's place was in the home.

Some of these arguments are continued further by the work of [David \(2015: 163\)](#), who, in her analysis of the same historical period, sees education and developments in schooling as the very mechanism through which women were 'returned to the home' after they had gone out in huge numbers to work to help the war effort. This return to the home that [David \(2015\)](#) discusses was carried out through the continuation of a gendered curriculum which still relegated girls to an education that was not as extensive as that of boys and which was based on subjects that

developed girls' quiet character and domesticity, such as needlework. The inequalities in the treatment of women were also evident when attempts were made to produce educational policy as there was an overall lack of concern in addressing the gap between boys' and girls' participation in further education. [David \(2015\)](#) discusses how the Crowther Report in 1959 pointed to the existence of a 'wastage of talent' since both boys and girls were not pursuing courses in further education, with 25 percent of boys in further education and only 6 percent of girls; it therefore recommended raising the school-leaving age to 16. Although the Crowther Report highlighted these pressing issues, it failed to provide solutions for the lack of education still faced by many girls and proceeded to provide recommendations for boys' continued engagement in education. The report also stated that, in the case of the education of girls, 'The prospect of courtship and marriage should rightly influence the education of the adolescent girl. . . . [H]er direct interests in dress, personal experience and in problems of human relations should be given a central place in her education' ([David 2015](#): 170). In this way, the school's main educational concern for girls stayed with their preparation as future homemakers, mothers and wives; these ideas were accepted and continued because of the belief that boys and girls were to live very different lives, in turn reinforcing some of the gendered 'sex-roles' discussed earlier. This is an important example which shows how gender inequality in schooling is tightly connected to the ways in which we understand the role of men and women in society, as 'taken for granted' and part of a 'common-sense', which presents unequal educational opportunities for both men and women. These ideas and trends in behaviour around gender are argued to be socially constructed; produced by sets of social relations which occur in all aspects of social life; and, as we have discussed so far, embedded in systems of schooling.

Meighan and Harber (2007: 375), discussing issues of inequality of opportunity in education for boys and girls, point to 'a lack of a well developed comparative perspective of education . . . a systematic comparison with other countries (e.g. Russia, Sweden) would have presented some disturbing information about women, education and occupations elsewhere' as occupations and further study in applied sciences and other subjects were considerably more

populated by women. Meighan and Harber (2007) continue to explain that it was in the 1970s when there was a recognition that sex differences in education as an 'official' problem needed to be investigated. The government announced in 1973 that it planned to ask Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) to conduct an inquiry to determine the extent to which difference in attitudes and school curricula continued to affect girls' and boys' life chances. This request resulted in the HMI's (1975) document titled *Curricular Differences for Boys and Girls*, which

showed the persistence of the familial emphasis in secondary schooling. And there is no further evidence, in policy rhetoric, or research, to suggest that by the end of the decade girls were no longer taught that their adult lives would consist of two activities, one of which would be the care of the home and children.

([David 2015](#): 184)

All of these developments led to the creation of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, which stipulated that neither boys nor girls should be refused access to any courses solely on grounds of their sex or the appointment of teachers (except in single-sex schools). The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC; now the Equality and Human Rights Commission) made direct and indirect discrimination against women illegal. Although the differences in the curriculum for both boys and girls are not as glaring as they used to be, because the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act made unequal curricula illegal, there are still prevailing gender inequalities. For example, girls still show more negative attitudes towards maths ([Gunderson et al. 2012](#)) and hence display less interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields than boys, and because of this, girls also perform lower in these subjects ([Shapiro & Williams 2012](#)).

Whilst the 1970s saw considerable change around gender differences and discrimination on the basis of gender, there are persistent patterns which have continued, such as subject uptake by gender. [Francis \(2000\)](#) discussed in her book *Boys, Girls and Achievement: Addressing the Classroom Issues* how these patterns of inequality could be explained by problematising the

dominant norms and behaviours associated to a particular femininity or masculinity. Part of Francis's argument is that within an environment of social change, which has seen the introduction of policies to balance gender inequalities in society, the classroom and its dynamics have been characterised by a continuity of traditional attitudes towards gender. Francis's work examines schooling and the classroom as an environment that reproduces society's values but also, more critically, as reproducing some of the inequalities that characterise that society.

Similarly, Valerie [Walkerdine's \(1988\)](#) work *The Mastery of Reason: Cognitive Development and the Production of Rationality* presents a complicated review of issues in the classroom. For Walkerdine many of the more insidious inequalities that we find in schools and in the intimacy of the classroom are as a result of stifling and unshifting attitudes to teaching and learning which are gendered and place both boys and girls in disadvantageous positions. Walkerdine looks at specific examples of boys' and girls' perceived lacks in certain subjects and also how certain subjects have become marginalised in the school curriculum. In the case of boys, Walkerdine points to how the unsuccessful paths in languages, which see them historically underperforming in subjects such as English and other modern languages, are normally explained by the suitability of boys for languages, a subject which is more associated with femininity. Similarly, girls' apparent disinterest in mathematics was constructed based on the methods used by girls to learn and perform mathematical calculations, which were seen as non-traditional. This inherent method suggested that there was a 'right method' for learning mathematics which girls struggled to comply with; teachers therefore encouraged girls not to take the higher examinations in this subject. This problem was made worse by how boys were seen to dominate classroom talk and interactions, with teachers not addressing the imbalances between boys' and girls' contributions during classes ([Walkerdine 1998](#)).

However, in recent years, there have been several stories in the media landscape which point to how boys are being failed by the educational system, and boys' underachievement has been constructed as problematic and as in direct opposition to the achievements of girls. Some examples of these headlines are 'Boys are being failed by our schools' ([2006](#)) and 'Why lack of

male teachers could be the reason for boys fail in the classroom' ([2012](#)). There have been many critics of this narrative since it places boys and girls in competition with each other in the education plane, and the panic associated with boys' underachievement might suggest that boys outperforming girls is the status quo; thus, the sudden shift is constructed as a threat. This narrative of boys being outperformed by girls is also constructing girls' achievement as detrimental to the boys and also as harmful to the boys. Should we not want everyone in education to perform to the best of their ability, regardless of their gender? Why is female success constructed as harmful and as a threat to male achievement? And why is boys' underachievement placed in direct opposition to girls' achievement?

[Ringrose \(2007\)](#) has addressed how the construction of educational underachievement through gender binaries produces new disadvantages in the world of education. Ringrose's work explores how the 'successful girl' discourse, co-constructed by 'girl power' cultural and social shifts in the 1990s, has led to 'divisive educational debates and policies where boys' disadvantages/successes are pitted against girls' disadvantage/success' ([Ringrose 2007](#): 471). Ringrose raises questions about the silence in educational policy and public debate that surrounded the many years of educational exclusion and undermining experienced by girls in the UK. As with this chapter, Ringrose's work understands schooling as a crucial environment, productive of cultures and practices which in themselves reflect society's views on gender. Yet schooling is also conceived as a space in which gender binaries should be challenged and called into question. Ringrose's work also suggests that the educational focus on 'successful girls' alienates those girls who fall out of this category and, therefore, become deviant in the world of schooling. Rising numbers of girls' school exclusions might be associated with this phenomenon. More importantly, the focus on girls' and boys' achievements helps us overlook more pressing social issues to do with sexuality and gender in schools: for instance, the unequal access to STEM subjects at higher education by girls and the rise in sexual violence and sexual harassment in schools in recent years, which led to an inquiry into these issues by the Women and Equalities Committee in 2016.

As reviewed in this section, schooling is very often the space in which traditional gender inequalities have been addressed. Historically, evidence of how gender is constructed and understood can be found in key educational policies, as presented by the work of [David \(2015\)](#). These same differences can be traced back to classroom and school practices as explained by [Walkerdine \(1988\)](#). Schooling remains a site in which we both reproduce and challenge gender stereotypes and mandates. However, it is important to develop the criticality necessary to recognise where the debates lie and how to engage with them. Thinking about schooling and education as a site for locating, understanding and tackling social problems is a useful critical perspective to engage with issues of gender and inequalities. Nevertheless, it is important to also examine critically how the very responses from policy and institutions to perceived problems can be damaging, undermining or neglectful of other issues.

6.4 'Race'

Besides gender, 'race' is an important factor to consider when speaking about social inequalities. Generally speaking, 'race' is the idea that human beings can be classified into groups based on their physical appearance: their facial features, skin colour or type of hair. As history shows, the categorisation of human beings according to their physical appearance is highly problematic as it led to racist ideas about innate predispositions of different groups, attributing the most desirable features to the white European race and arranging the other races along a continuum of progressively undesirable characteristics. This led not only to racial discriminations and racial inequalities, some of which exist to this day, but also to eugenics, the troublesome desire to improve the genetic quality of a particular population, which further embedded ideas of the superiority of some human beings to others.

However, historically, 'race' has not always been used as a distinguished feature of how humans are different from each other. Initially, 'race' was used to refer to speakers of a common language and then, later on, to denote continental or national affiliations. This means that the

term has not always been used to define humans in terms of perceived physiological differences but to describe and distinguish groups of people according to their place of origin and/or their culture. However, the work of early anthropologists and physiologists – plus historical processes of exploration and conquest, which brought Europeans in contact with groups from different continents – actively promoted the idea of human difference based on appearance and, through that, fostered ideas of inherent racial privilege.

The first to actively challenge this concept of 'race' on empirical grounds was the anthropologist Franz Boas, who argued that 'race' was an invalid designation because human form and behaviour stemmed from the environment and not biological or genetic predisposition. His groundbreaking work was taken up by other (social) scientists and thus:

By the 1970s, it had become clear that (1) most human differences were cultural; (2) what was not cultural was principally polymorphic – that is to say, found in diverse groups of people at different frequencies; (3) what was not cultural or polymorphic was principally clinical – that is to say, gradually variable over geography; and (4) what was left – the component of human diversity that was not cultural, polymorphic, or clinical – was very small.

A consensus consequently developed among anthropologists and geneticists that race as the previous generation had known it – as largely discrete, geographically distinct gene pools – did not exist.

(Marks 1995 cited in [Marks 2007](#): 234)

This means that nowadays most scientists – including social scientists – agree that 'race' is a social construction. This led to the term 'race' being replaced by less ambiguous and emotionally charged terminology, which allows individuals to self-identify as belonging to a particular social group. For example, people might identify as black or white, regardless of their skin colour. Because of this, many refer now to ethnicity, the ethnic classification or affiliation, rather than 'race', when asking people to which socio-cultural group they belong.

Racialised worlds: the challenges of schools and schooling

However, although there is strong agreement amongst social scientists that 'race' is a social construct, and new language is being employed to describe group membership, racialised ideas are still pervading social life with 'real' effects on people's lives and life opportunities. For example, black and ethnic minority graduates with a first degree are more than twice as likely to be unemployed than their white peers, and those in employment earn less than their white counterparts ([Trades Union Congress 2016](#)). These closed-down life chances could be referred to as racial discrimination – 'the discrimination, unfair treatment or bias against someone or a group of people on the basis of their race' ([HarperCollins 2017](#)) – which often coincides with racist mindsets whereby individuals of one group come to perceive themselves as superior to those of another group. This, in turn, leads to racism and abusive or aggressive behaviour towards members of another 'race' or, as in this case, closed down life changes for those who belong to a particular group.

In this context, institutionalised practices can support racialised ideas; hence, schooling has an important part to play in tackling racism. Educational institutions have long been asked to promote 'race' equality. Over time, various educational policies have been implemented to ensure that schooling promotes equal opportunities for all, in particular in terms of learning outcomes. More recently, initiatives have been promoted to ensure schools adhere to the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which places a duty on public authorities to have 'due regard' to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and promote good relations between people of different racial groups. Although these (educational) initiatives have good intentions, they often foster the very same issues they are trying to eliminate. This phenomenon is referred to as 'institutionalised racism', a form of racism prevalent in the practice of social and political institutions such as schools.

A study that explicitly looked at the issues of institutionalised racism in schooling was conducted by [Gillborn and Youdell's \(2000\)](#). The study explored how racial inequality is created and sustained in educational settings. Based on their findings, [Gillborn and Youdell \(2000\)](#) put forward the argument that, particularly in a neoliberal context, schools are 'rationing education', meaning they unwittingly deny pupils equal experiences and opportunities. The neoliberal context to which the authors refer involves the many policies and political pressures placed on schools, specifically the rise of competition between schools and the opening up of education as a consumer-led market, which leave schools fighting for a privileged position in publicly available league tables.

Because of the racialised ways that ability is constructed in a neoliberal context, it is black and ethnic minority students who are 'significantly over-represented in the group of pupils deemed to be without hope' ([Gillborn & Youdell 2000](#): 200). They are implicitly discriminated because of their 'race'. The discrimination comprehends a rationing of the best resources, teaching, experiences and overall school's investment in their educational futures based on the belief that the outcomes of their educational careers will be less favorable than those of others. As asserted by [Gillborn and Youdell \(2000](#): 199):

The extraordinary demands of the A-C economy are such that both our case study schools are seeking new ways of identifying suitable cases for treatment – pupils who will show the maximum return (in terms of higher-grade passes) from receipt of additional resources of teacher time and support.

[Gillborn and Youdell \(2000\)](#) point out that this creates a virtuous cycle of disadvantage for this particular group of young people: they receive less support and hence are less likely to achieve, which, in turn, confirms schools' perception that they are less capable; hence, schools provide less support for them. As [Gillborn and Youdell \(2000\)](#) highlight, these institutionalised forms of racism operate through discourses of 'culture' and 'difference' rather than direct action, meaning that institutions such as schools do not actively promote this sort of behaviour but leave the

complex mechanism supporting racial inequality unchallenged. Because of this, [Gillborn and Youdell \(2000\)](#) argue that schooling is prevalent in practices of inequality.

This means that, to tackle racial inequality, educational institutions such as schools need to engage more critically with the pervasive and complex forms that racism – and racial inequality – can take. Equally, and probably even more importantly, to avoid institutionalised racism, educational institutions such as schools need to scrutinise the continuous and numerous policy changes more critically to ensure they are not contributing to already-existing elitism. As [Gillborn and Youdell's \(2000: 222\)](#) state:

[T]he wider education system, policy makers, headteachers and teachers are currently remarkably busy remaking and reinforcing inequality . . . (albeit that they are frequently unaware of these particular 'fruits' of their labours). It is time that this level of activity was refocused toward the achievement of social justice.

A prominent yet very sad example of institutionalised racism is the case of Stephen Lawrence. Lawrence, a 18-year-old black British man from Plumstead, Southeast London, was murdered in a racially motivated attack while waiting for a bus on the evening of 22 April 1993. The case became one of the highest-profile racial killings in UK history because it was suggested during the course of the investigation that the handling of the case by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service was affected by misconceptions of 'race'. A public inquiry held in 1998 concluded that the institutions handling the case, in particular the police, were institutionally racist. One of the ways in which it was suggested the police were institutionally racist was by placing Lawrence's family under surveillance during the investigation, instead of proceeding to investigate suspects. This prompted the amendment of legislation and a transformation of the police service: its recruitment, training, practices and accountability. The name of Stephen Lawrence became a potent symbol and catalyst for change, promoting widespread re-examination of questions of (in)justice, cultural identity and continuing racism in British society.

The concept of institutionalised racism, then, not only gives important insights into people's opportunities and experiences in institutions which appear to have developed and implemented equal opportunities policies, but also offers opportunities for resistance and action. This means that the notion of institutionalised racism allows the much-needed scrutiny of racialised practices at a micro level whilst retaining a contextual understanding of wider socio-economic practices and developments. A particular strength of such an approach to racial inequality, as [Preston \(2007: 23\)](#) points out, is 'that whiteness is treated as a *practice*, not as an identity and white privilege is *institutionally* as well as individually determined'.

Although much has been achieved in terms of racial equality through a critical analysis that goes beyond the individual, there are, as the black British scholar Stuart Hall (1993: 361) famously pointed out a few years ago, further challenges to face when thinking about re-balancing racial inequalities in a globalised world:

'The capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century – something which affects us all, including those involved in education and schools/schooling.

This means that the discussion about the role and responsibility of schooling in regards to 'race' need to be continued to make sure educational institutions promote 'true' equality in a multicultural world. Steps Towards Racial Equality, a recent report on racial equality in the UK, the government's race disparity audit (viz. www.gov.uk/government/publications/race-disparity-audit) shows that there are still pressing issues that need to be addressed. For example, the report highlights that black Caribbean pupils still fall behind their peers, although pupils in the black ethnic group made more progress overall than the national average. This means that pupils of ethnic minority backgrounds are still disadvantaged compared to those from other backgrounds, and this not just in education but also in areas of health, employment and the criminal justice system. Because of this, some – for example, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Great Britain's national equality body – call for a comprehensive and coherent race equality strategy to

foster equal opportunities for all (viz. www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/healing-divided-britain-need-comprehensive-race-equality-strategy).

In this context, it is argued that educational institutions such as schools can (and should) do much more than closing the gap in educational achievement but provide a much better and fairer educational experience for all. It seems, therefore, important not to dismiss issues of 'race' or, as pointed out by [Gulson et al. \(2016\)](#), let 'race' slip to the periphery of education policy. 'Race', as many research studies show, still matters. It is therefore timely, as Gilborn (2016b) suggests, to ask 'policy in whose interest?' There is some useful work done by critical race theory (CRT), in particular in relation to white supremacy.

White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today. . . . the most important political system of recent global history – the system of domination by which white people have historically ruled over and, in certain important ways, continue to rule over nonwhite people – is not seen as a political system at all. It is just taken for granted; it is the background against which other systems, which we are to see as political, are highlighted.

([Mills 1997](#): 1–2)

Considering recent political and educational developments, it seems important to continue this work and not dismiss schools as 'neutral' territory or to glorify them as a site where social equality can easily be achieved. There are dangerous racial myths which are sustained and renewed through social arrangements, processes, behaviour and discourse. Schools and the whole education system can challenge these myths by carefully addressing the specific rights and needs of all pupils, by advocating pluralism and the riches of multiculturalism and also by fighting institutional racism as well as racist frameworks of reference to ensure they are not contributing to the very same problem they are trying to solve. As David Gilborn (2016a) points out, the issues of racism, as with many other social problems, are hidden in the small print. It is therefore key for schooling to be critical of its own practices, constantly asking itself: I am

racist? to eliminate race thinking or, as [Ware and Back \(2002\)](#) state, diminish 'white-friendly' systems and structures.

6.5 Social class: asking the right questions?

A further factor to consider when speaking about inequality in education is social class. Social class has created significant divisions in English society, yet it is often very elusive. Wider discussions around class have almost disappeared from political discourse, with politicians being more comfortable discussing problems to do with institutional racism or the gender pay gap than they are discussing issues of class. Within the study of education and academic educational research, there have been several contributions not just to help render class visible but also to help reveal how it impacts educational opportunity and educational achievement.

If we asked the simple question What is social class? we might come to traditional sociological theory to provide some answers since social class has held a prominent place in the discipline of sociology for a very long time. This long history of social class in sociology might bring you to read the works of Max Weber or Karl Marx. Sociology professors and academics might argue the existence of social class based on economic inequality arguments, lack of equality of opportunity arguments or through questioning the fairness of systems that do not acknowledge the accumulation of privilege by the few in a society. Depending on who you read, you will agree and disagree with some or all of these arguments. Whether we think of social class as straightforwardly divided into 'working class', middle class' and 'upper class' or we think it is as complex as seven different categories, as suggested by a BBC survey in 2013, the fact is that class is difficult to define. Even in recent years, many articles that can be argued to discuss dimensions of class 'often use the terms "inequality", "stratification", "family background"' or specific indicators (such as education, wealth, income, or occupation) – sometimes interchangeably. As a result, considerable 'murkiness swirls around the empirical study of social class' ([Lareau & Conley 2008](#): 3–4). Perhaps asking what social class is might not

be the best question to pose, but rather how does social class work? And, if social class is better analysed through how it works, then what are its workings in education and systems of schooling? These are some of the questions that are posed in this section.

Staying with social class: culture, class and schooling

In spite of its complexity, we should not avoid the term 'social class', particularly since it offers an analytical angle which encompasses much of everyday social life, one without which we would struggle to provide an understanding of how inequalities continue to prevail and worsen in societies. But let's begin by thinking about how schooling might actually be reproducing social class inequalities. Many educational theorists have set themselves the task of explaining how social class could be said to work in education and schooling. If you were to investigate issues of class in education by conducting a simple library literature search, you would find that many articles refer to the theorist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu was a French theorist working primarily by observing French society, particularly the culture of the middle classes. A lot of his work around class can be said to be very Francocentric; works such as *Distinction* (1984) and *The State Nobility* (1996) are difficult to apply or translate to English culture and contexts. However, this has not stopped many researchers and writers who have used Bourdieu's theory and key concepts to provide an analysis of class in education. For instance, [Gunn \(2005\)](#) uses some of Bourdieu's ideas to understand the rise of the middle classes in Britain in the twentieth century. Unlike other theorists, [Gunn \(2005\)](#) does not fully accept that the rise of the middle classes in Britain came about as a consequence of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century and the creation of middle-class occupations. Instead, Gunn uses the concepts of 'culture' and 'cultural capital' as important elements that contributed to the rise of the middle classes. What is meant by culture in this case is not to do with what people wear and eat or the languages they speak, but rather what people do, what people regard as valuable and worthwhile in their lives, from what gives them pride to what they see as leisure. Cultural capital is regarded as a set of practices and embodiments of knowledge and legitimacy which give people a sense of belonging

and permanence in particular contexts, places, institutions and everyday socialities. In Bourdieu's work, the middle classes (bourgeoisie) went through a process of establishing themselves through a distinctive culture; this culture had 'class'. This is particularly important since, at the time, the lower and working classes were constructed as having no 'class' or 'culture'. The working classes have been historically discussed as being 'uncultured' or 'uncultivated' and therefore as lacking in 'class'. This is, of course, not true, but this social construction of the working classes aided the emergence and establishment of middle-class culture:

The bourgeoisie finds in cultivated nature and culture that has become nature the only possible principle for the legitimation of their privilege. Being unable to invoke the right of birth (which their class, through the ages, has refused the aristocracy) or nature which, according to 'democratic' ideology represents universality. . . . [T]hey can resort to cultivated nature and culture become nature, to what is sometimes called 'class', through a kind of tell-tale slip, to 'education', in the sense of a product of education which seems to owe nothing to education, to distinction, grace which is merit and merit which is grace, an unacquired merit which justifies unmerited acquisitions, that is to say, inheritance'.

([Bourdieu 1993](#): 235)

Bourdieu is suggesting the culture of the middle classes becomes a kind of education which in itself owes nothing to education, but which becomes distinctive learnings, attitudes and practices. This is somehow in direct opposition to how the working classes were thought of and constructed as 'classless' and 'needing an education' to elevate them and give them a sense of culture. What [Gunn \(2005\)](#) is proposing is that following some of the initial thoughts by Bourdieu, and with the advent of organised systems of schooling in the UK, the middle classes in Britain have, indeed, continued to pass on their cultural genes, not just in the family but through schooling. Similarly, [Gunn \(2005: 58\)](#) discusses how systems of schooling have absorbed the cultural ways of the middle classes historically into their everyday practices:

Family and education intersected in the workings of cultural capital, not only because the middle-class family represented a primary site of training but also because it allowed for early immersion in precisely those codes and competences that would later be valued in formal schooling.

This is where we find many of the arguments around social class and education: at this intersection between schooling and class privilege. Many scholars agree that school has been made and changed to reflect the privileges and images of a particular class: the middle classes. Within academic educational research, there are further claims that this has continued to contribute to the exclusion of large groups of people historically, primarily the working class, even when they seem to be included in systems of schooling that are mandatory. It is at this intersection, this critical perspective, that the following works are discussed, to provide an understanding of how class has been put to work in research and academic work around education and has permeated the world of education and schooling.

6.7 Exploring class through educational theory and research

When discussing the interrelationship between class and schooling, there is a tendency to overlook the importance of another context, the home. With changes to education in the 1940s and the introduction of the Butler Act of 1944, the tripartite system of education began, and children were allocated to secondary modern, technological schools or to the more prestigious grammar schools. The children who sat the 11+ examination and obtained high scores were sent to grammar schools, and the ones who did not were allocated to one of the other schools. With the 11+ examination, some working-class children were admitted to grammar schools, which were normally far from traditional working-class communities and very different to elementary schools, with strict uniform and behaviour codes, a more extensive curriculum and regular examinations. Many of the working-class children who went to grammar schools experienced a

disconnect between home life and school life. Within the discipline of sociology, there are some important contributions to the understanding of these experiences and systems of education, not just as a social institution but as an aspect of everyday life which can be very impactful on issues of class. The work by Jackson and Marsden, *Education and the Working Class*, first published in 1962, offers some early insight into class distinctions and how the home interacted with systems of schooling. Their work is regarded as pioneering a new type of sociology of education, one which, through careful narrative, built an image of class in the home and in the school with distinctiveness and clarity, an approach which clearly rivalled the more quantitative tradition of the time. [Ball \(2011: 959\)](#) comments on the importance of [Jackson's and Marsden's \(2012\)](#) work:

Education and the Working Class is about class mobility, class inequality and waste, and about what Dennis describes as a 'blockage' – selective education. In stark contrast to the sometimes pathologising focus on working-class failure in much of the contemporary sociology of education, *Education and the Working Class* works with a sample of 90 'successfully' working-class children. That is, children who passed the 11+ and went to grammar school and many of whom went on to higher education.

Jackson and Marsden portray the lives of working-class children who can be said to have been successful in education and narrate the differences the home and school thresholds brought to them every day. In their work, they offer an alternative storying of working-class children in the educational system; their stories showed the many strategies the children utilised to survive and thrive in grammar schools but also, in turn, how this exerted an influence in their everyday lives. [Jackson and Marsden \(2012: 117\)](#) offer a textural description of the lives of the working-class children who attended grammar schools and how the class codes of schools produced home pressures for the children:

Few working class homes had easy provision for home study. Some children went into the front room, others retired to a bedroom, but many did their homework in

the living-room/kitchen at the very centre of family activity. This immediately produced difficulties. Should the wireless be on or off? Could the younger children play noisily? Could the father stretch his legs and tell the day's tales? To ask for silence here was to offend the life of the family, was to go against it in its natural moments of coming together, of relaxation. So many learned the early habit of working with the wireless on and the family talking, of building a cone of silence around themselves. To a certain extent this worked well. . . . [T]he family was not always untroubled at this, for the private concentration could produce an abstraction, a forgetfulness, an off-handedness that also gave offence.

Moreover, *Education and the Working Class* (2012) takes us through an empowering narrative highlighting the resourcefulness of working-class children and families, but not without understanding the huge challenges and disparities that characterised these educational pathways. It is clear from their investigations that the world of schooling occurred within a cultural code which was different from that of the working-class home. This is an important reflection to consider and seek to understand when dealing with issues of class in education: namely, that the educational system itself has historically reflected the values of the middle class, disadvantaging those who represent a different social and cultural code.

Another major issue in relation to social class in schooling is that of language. Basil Bernstein focused on differences in language and how they affect aspects of schooling. His work conceptualised school as an institution that functions through language culture (Bernstein 1971). Bernstein explored language differences as representative of distinctions of class, specifically between working-class and middle-class children. He constructed his theory around 'elaborated' and 'restricted' codes which were made consonant with working-class and middle-class children. In Bernstein's work, middle-class language codes were seen as more elaborated, descriptive and expansive whilst working-class language codes were seen as restricted in comparison to the language culture of schools. Bernstein's work explained how language is not just internal but also reflected in institutions, organising and, to a certain extent, determining outcomes in education. Schooling is therefore not seen as a neutral environment in which all language codes

can be accepted and readily recognised and incorporated. Instead, Bernstein suggested that differences in language codes lead to different possibilities and, what is more, different levels of achievement in educational settings. His work has raised some critique in more recent years because of the way in which its centrality on individuals has overlooked the inherent inequalities the cultures of school seem to perpetuate. [Bartlett et al. \(2001\)](#): 184) summarise some of the critique and controversy provoked by their work:

The danger in the position expressed by Bernstein in relation to class, language and education was the attribution of essential qualities to the differences between working-class language and middle-class language, and the potential correlation of working-class culture with less expressive linguistic forms. The use of distinction between working-class speech as 'restricted code' and middle-class speech as 'elaborated code' became infamous as it seemed to imply a hierarchy of expressive power.

When we think about school, we tend to think of places for learning or places for advancement; the works discussed so far have presented arguments which problematise these understandings of schooling. Bowles and Gintis (1976), two American writers, provide another strand of thought to the problematisation of schooling. For them, schools' primary purpose was to hone in on the 'hidden curriculum'. With this phrase, they were attempting to describe the many ways in which school was less about instruction or learning in mathematics, the sciences or literacy and more about learning your place in society. The hidden curriculum encompassed the insidious forms of control, punishment and management that characterise schools and which are directed at organising and governing pupils' behaviours and aspirations, commanding pupils to learn to respect the institution, to conform to rules and to obey authority. Their study *Schooling in Capitalist America* was an attempt to document the systematic failure of systems of education to shift wider societal inequalities, in spite of tons of educational policy change and reforms. They saw the main aspiration taught to students at school to be the acceptance of a wage-dependent

life, a life which was only attainable if students learned to refrain from resistance and contestation whilst conforming to the ruling status quo.

Stephen Ball's work has been highly important in developing a systematic analysis of education and the effects of schooling on individuals. In his works, he has developed what he calls a 'policy sociology', which seeks to develop a thorough understanding of changes and reformations to educational systems in the UK through the analysis of the effects of educational policy ([Ball 2008](#)). Ball's work has also centred on developing an understanding and theorising of how the privilege of the successful in education helps us understand the challenges and exclusions inherently faced by the disadvantaged. His work has also offered an analysis of how family strategy, developed through being successful in the system themselves and through more extensive resources, influences educational achievement, attainment and pathways ([Ball 2006](#)).

More recently, there has been an increase in educational research using the notion of habitus to make sense of class distinctions in education. Habitus is a very tricky notion to define and discuss, and although there are many pieces of research utilising this notion, its meaning is still debated. On habitus, [Turner \(2013: 752\)](#) offers a useful definition:

Those within a given class share certain modes of classification, appreciation, judgment, perception, and behaviour. Bourdieu conceptualizes this mediating process between class and individual perceptions, choices, and behaviours as habitus. In a sense, habitus is the 'collective unconscious' of those in similar positions because it provides cognitive and emotional guidelines that enable individuals to represent the world in common ways and to classify, choose, evaluate and act in a particular manner. . . . [T]he habitus creates syndromes of taste, speech dress manner and other responses.

The work by Diane [Reay and Carol Vincent \(2014\)](#) is one of the pieces of educational research offering an insight into various class analyses within the sociology of education, paying close attention to how the institution – more specifically, schooling – helps build and shape perspectives around class. By using Bourdieu, Reay and Vincent assert the concept of habitus as

to do with how schooling embodies the dominant group's cultures as a starting position of privilege within schools. In saying this, there is also a need for recognising 'institutional habitus' ([Atkinson 2013](#): 119). Institutional habitus is theorised as the many mediations that have value within an institution and which, in turn, are used to decide which views, codes, practices, behaviours, representations and perceptions are upheld and desirable in it. With reference to class, institutional habitus overlooks and misrecognises, mostly inadvertently, anything outside its own culture. Schooling has therefore been constructed as possessing an institutional habitus that has reflected and continues to reflect the individual and family habitus of some classes over others, making it prone to reproducing social inequality. Throughout this section, there have been various examples of how the habitus of schooling is at work within education, with a distinct culture, expectations and behaviour codes which divide and perpetuate some of the social disparities we find in our societies.

6.6 Summary

The present chapter has looked at gender, 'race' and social class as 'markers' of inequality in schooling. As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, schooling is conceived here not only as a designated and highly regulated space through which social problems are rendered visible and addressed through various social and educational policies, but also as a 'space' where social inequalities are reproduced and even enhanced.

In this chapter we dealt with introductory issues highlighting the disparities in gender, 'race' and class, which continue to be factors of people's lived experiences and opportunities. As outlined, there are still gendered understandings of what boys and girls can and should achieve, similar to still existing understandings of 'race' and social class that determine what young people can achieve in life, not because of their abilities, but by the opportunities they are presented with and are able to access.

In this context, schooling has been constructed as necessary for the continuation of society's values and stability, but it was also suggested that schooling by accumulating society's ideals lacks the means to challenge the effects of its own workings. The increasing involvement of the government in systems of schooling, impacting and determining their funding, performance indicators, assessments and curricula, can be said to reduce schools' autonomy and capacity to respond to in-school inequalities even further.

Whether we regard schooling as an important solution to address social problems and inequalities or as part of the problem, an analysis of school inequalities needs to reflect the complexity of these environments. This chapter has attempted to articulate some of these complexities, with a particular focus on gender, 'race' and social class. Yet it is necessary to understand that a more comprehensive view would explore how inequalities intersect and interact in educational settings, rather than viewing them as occurring separately.

This is particularly true as gender, race and social class, although separated for analytical purposes in this chapter, are not separate processes; they act simultaneously and affect people in many ways. This means that lived experiences are often far more complex than this chapter suggests; hence, the experience of inequalities is far more difficult to discern and rather needs to be understood as inextricably intertwined.

However complex issues of inequality are, educational institutions continue to be an important site where inequalities are perpetuated:

Education is not, as older social science pictured it, a mirror of social or cultural inequalities. That is all too still an image. Education systems are busy institutions. They are vibrantly involved in the production of social hierarchies. They select and exclude their own clients; they expand credentialed labour markets; they produce and disseminate particular kinds of knowledge to particular users.

([Connell 1993](#): 27)

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Key Points

Education and schooling

These are important sites where social problems and social inequalities are regularly and historically addressed through prescribed inclusion policy because they are seen as sites where social equality can be achieved.

Educational research

This has shown that education and schooling reproduce many patterns of inequality and disadvantage. Whilst schooling remains one of the key ways in which a society seeks to address social issues and social problems, other solutions need to be considered to diminish social exclusions.

Gender issues in education continue to disadvantage boys' and girls' life chances as well as their everyday performance in the classroom. Issues of gender influence the world of education in various ways which lead to unequal experiences and opportunities for both boys and girls. Feminist thinking and scholarship have developed a deeper understanding of these issues and talk about gender as socially constructed and not explainable in biological terms. Gender inequalities, although always changing, are still discussed as profound and prevalent in society, and the world of education and schooling is no exception to this.

'Race' still affects what boys and girls can achieve as institutional racism continues to discriminate against particular groups of pupils, in particular those from black and ethnic minorities. Schools need to do more to promote equal opportunities and provide a fairer educational experience for all. Critical race theory, in particular in relation to white supremacy, offers useful tools to analyse social arrangements, processes, behaviours and discourses.

Social class is a concept in social sciences which allows us to analyse society. Although a term that has been explored in significant detail in educational research and sociological study, it

still remains neglected in the making of educational and social policy. The overlooking of issues of class in education is discussed as problematic as education is not understood to be a 'class-less' activity. It continues, similar to other social issues, to reproduce social inequalities.

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Coursework questions

Research one of the key thinkers introduced in the chapter and discuss how their work has widened the understanding around gender, 'race', or social class issues in education.

Find a recent educational study exploring gender, 'race' or social class inequalities in schools and report on its key findings, critically examining possibilities and limitations.

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