Young Gifted and Working-Class: Issues Arising from Case Studies of Families with Gifted Children

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Abstract

The article reports findings from a small qualitative investigation into the perceptions of giftedness held by four working-class families in the northeast of England. Each family had a child identified as gifted in England's national program for gifted education. These findings include: intense hostility toward those of their neighbours they despise as welfare-dependent; the dominance of entity theories of giftedness; how the children carried their parents' vicarious ambitions; lack of interest in general social and educational equity; negative experiences of the national program for gifted education; and, low sense of actual parental agency in relation to schooling, though potential empowerment arising from the children's high attainment. The findings are discussed in relation to policy formation and theorizing about giftedness and social reproduction.

***Keywords*:** Theories of Giftedness; gifted education; working-class; case studies; Britain.

Introduction

This article reports evidence from a small scale study of four working class families, each with a child identified as gifted, who experienced the implementation of England's National Program of Gifted Education, mediated through the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) from 2002 - 2007. We are not, of course, proposing to generalize from these four case studies. Our aim for this article is to draw on the rich descriptive accounts of family dynamics so as to raise questions about the existing research on giftedness, and yield ideas which may be used to contribute to theory building and policy formation.

There were two fairly unusual features of this study: the working class sample, and the focus on the families as a whole. Few empirical investigations of giftedness have used working class samples, and few have attempted to understand giftedness as constructed by families, rather than using the individual student as the unit of analysis.

Social class in Britain

Social class remains a most significant framework for understanding everyday life in Britain, despite populist claims by Prime Minister Thatcher in the 1980s that there was no such thing as society, and by Prime Minister Blair in the 2000s that Britain had become entirely middle class. As the social historian, Selina Todd (2014) said:

> Class has united and divided Britain since the industrial revolution. United, because class is widely accepted as a quintessentially British fact of life, a heritage and language we can all share. Divided, because class is no romantic tradition or amusing idiosyncrasy, but is produced by exploitation in a country where a tiny elite has possessed the majority of the wealth....The working class was composed largely of manual workers and their families - miners, dockers and steelworkers, and also domestic servants - and lower grade clerical workers like typists, secretaries, office boys and messengers. They constituted three-quarters of the British people until 1950, and more than half as late as 1991. Then there were the large number of non-

> manual workers - nurses, technicians and higher grade clerical workers - who chose to identify themselves as working class by virtue of their family background and because they believed that working for a living meant they had more in common with other wage earners than with employers or political leaders. Working class, therefore, people formed the majority of British society throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty first. (pp.1-5)

Despite this, Todd pointed out that the working class as a whole was not an undifferentiated monolithic mass, but comprised highly diversified groupings.

> "Class is a relationship defined by unequal power, rather than a way of life or an unchanging culture. There can be no 'ideal' or 'traditional' working class. Instead there are individuals who are brought together by shared circumstances and experiences" (p.33).

There are many other ways of defining the British working class and its sub-divisions, but Todd's was particularly helpful for our analysis because it emphasized lack of power arising from economic position, shared socio-economic contexts, yet substantive differences realized within apparently common circumstances. Todd drew upon qualitative vignettes and case studies, to generate a wide ranging and historical analysis across the period 1910-2010, while ours provided much more limited, though detailed and rich, narratives of four families in 2010. Because, across the English-speaking world, "class" and "working class" have varying interpretations, we thought it sensible to spell out at the beginning of this article, for an international readership, what the terms mean for us.

The families

Our study, (See Mazzoli Smith, 2010, Mazzoli Smith 2013, Mazzoli Smith and Campbell, 2012 for further details on methodology) generated the narratives of four working class families in the North-East of England about giftedness, education, and social class. Each family had a child who had been identified as gifted in the then English national programme for gifted education. The four families had been selected to participate in the study because they were classified as "moderate means" in the geo-demographic ACORN database, in essence a postcode marketing database incorporating lifestyle factors with economic and social ones. (See www.caci.co.uk, for further details.) Moderate means families tend to live in the old industrial heartlands with many employed in traditional blue collar occupations, or in service or retail services, and in locations where there are isolated areas of unemployment and long term illnesses. Housing is typically terraced and includes many former council houses (i.e., public housing). Such families were sometimes called the "respectable" working class in order to emphasize their social attitudes, while elsewhere, the label "skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers" has been used to emphasize their occupations and qualifications.

In line with the diversity noted by Todd, there were considerable differences in the families' educational and economic experiences. (All names are pseudonyms).

1. The Booths comprised Patrick, the father, who worked in the engineering plant on a local industrial estate and his wife, Shirley, a beautician. Their children were Fergus, aged 15 and identified as gifted and his sister Holly, aged 10. Fergus's biological father, with whom he had a good relationship, but who did not live nearby, originally came from South America. Shirley's mother participated in the interviews. The Booths' parents and grandparents had worked as labourers on farms and in coal mines.

2. The Desmonds comprised Maggie, the mother, Amanda, her daughter aged 15, identified as gifted, and Amanda's stepfather, Chris. Maggie was a care worker and Chris worked as a warehouseman. Chris's biological daughter and her daughter were also part of the family. Both Maggie and Chris had parents who had moved around for their jobs (public house trade and Merchant Navy) and their

education had been adversely affected by this mobility.

3. The Newlands comprised Pete, the father, Debbie the mother and Nicolas their son, identified as gifted and aged 17. The Newlands were an example of an upwardly-mobile family where education had, within one generation, significantly changed the prospects and fortunes of the family. Both parents were born in the North-East and their families had worked in the local heavy industries. However the father, Pete, was largely self-made, and as a successful software programmer, had a comfortable lifestyle and the Newlands sent Nicholas, to an independent school.

4. The Breakwells comprised, Keith, the father, and Claire, the mother, and two daughters, Emma, aged 16, identified as gifted, and Lily, aged 14. Keith was a secondary school teacher of Design Technology and Claire was a part-time primary school teacher. Keith's father had worked in the local cotton mills while Claire's father had left school at twelve to earn money after his father had lost his job.

Findings

The "Chav" culture: hostility and fear

Our most striking finding was a sociological one and was unanticipated: our families defined themselves, their values, and their explanations for their children's giftedness, first and foremost by describing characteristics they despised in others living near to them - characteristics they perceived as distinguishing their neighbours from them.

Owen Jones, in *Chavs: the Demonization of the Working Class* (2012) argued that the media, especially newspapers, television, and social media had created an image of the the British working class as a "feckless problematic rump", idle and living on welfare, prone to poor parenting and promiscuity - an underclass, called "chavs". It was an image that became embedded in public discourse in Britain, and had profoundly influenced the families we investigated. Jones reported a BritainThinks focus group caricaturing the working class through "deeply unattractive images: flashy excess, cosmetic surgery gone wrong, tacky designer clothes, booze, drugs and overeating". He noted, "the almost complete absence of accurate representations of working class people in the media, on TV and in the political world, in favour of grotesque chav caricatures." (p.14, Preface)

He cited Lynsey Hanley, author of *Estates: an intimate history* to the effect that the class hatred involved in demonizing the working class as "chavs" was, not a one way street, but a collusive often subtle process which demeaned everyone. "In fact a great deal of chav-bashing goes on within working class neighbourhoods, partly because of the age-old divide between those who aim for 'respectability' and those who disdain it." (p.19, Preface)

This was precisely what we found; a demonization of some of their near neighbours by all the adults in our families that was vengeful, vitriolic, and vituperative; living in close contact with "chavs", they characterized them as the degenerate other, exploiting welfare, lacking aspirations, and feckless, the other side of the moral and social boundaries that the working class families we studied had constructed to maintain a narrative of their difference from the equally working class "chavs". It was as though they feared their children would be contaminated by contact with them. If you called someone else a "chav", it meant you were not one.

The Booths, for example, were driven by their belief in a work ethic, and they expressed a stereotyped hostility to families they knew who did not share their values and who were benefiting excessively, as they saw it, from welfare:

Shirley: And all over that side of the town... to Radford Road at the back end of the town centre is classed as Waites Ward, - Beirut we call it -, and they, (i.e., the welfare providers) they give them everything. Free swims, free discos, the lot.

Patrick: And the parents drop them off and sit in the bar.

Shirley: And like this Educational Maintenance Allowance (i.e., a government-funded support scheme)…it's all them kids who get the full amount.

The reference to Beirut as a synonym for run-down public housing estates was particularly interesting since the national tabloid newspaper, The Sun, had run a headline 'Estate is like a nastier Beirut,' The Sun, 9 April 2008.

Likewise with *the Newlands*, Pete, the father, enthusiastically reported a widespread joke about the female "chavs" as sexually promiscuous at an early age.

Pete: And parents, I think that's where the education, a lot of it, should be. Teach the parents what's available so they can show the kids. As long as the parents are interested, - a lot are not.

Debbie: But a lot, a lot of parents are, are technically, still kids themselves, they're very young, and...

Pete: [Laughs] That's what they say up here. What do you call a twelve-year old chav? It's grandma! [laughs]. Sorry about that [laughs].

We stress this harsh caricature, held by all four families, for three reasons. First, it provided a fundamental moral justification for the families' own attitudes to education, and the identification of their children as gifted buttressed the families' sense of their own rightness and their difference from those not so identified. Second, it served to excise concerns for educational equity from the families' values, since the "chavs" were the undeserving poor. Special treatment designed to cater for the learning needs of gifted students was seen as being fundamentally fair, not unfair. Any larger, societal, structural, consequences of educational policy had little salience for them.

The third point is the most significant for understanding the families' views of giftedness and high educational achievement. There was a direct link between wider family values and educational values, for instance, a strong work ethic, and the importance of discipline and respect for teachers, which arose from a stated adherence to what they called "traditional" values. It is difficult to understand the families' construction of education without drawing upon such a social class perspective, in which their moral superiority to nearby social groups was reflected in a discourse of derision directed at them. It pervaded their educational aspirations and enabled them to construct the most fundamental explanation for their children's high achievement. Yet research on educational attainment, and particularly on gifted education, is largely devoid of this kind of sociological understanding, thereby, missing the investment that people have in the idea of labelling some children as gifted - a point elaborated on by Mazzoli Smith (2014).

The dominance of entity Theories of giftedness

The families spoke about giftedness in quite similar ways. Each family described a gifted child in terms primarily of innate ability, often evidenced through detailed accounts of early precocity in their children, as Freeman (2012) suggests, and complemented by motivation and hard work.

The concept of ability as innate was left largely unquestioned, suggesting that families accepted that being gifted was something one was born with, relatively unaffected by environmental influences.

Keith Breakwell gave the clearest idea of giftedness as pre-determined using a stark metaphor:

Keith: I have to say, that teachers can only do, you, you know, you've got a material to work with, and if it's an inferior material it's very hard to, you know, to make it any better. But if, if you get better ingredients, you can make a better solution, a result.

His daughter, *Emma* emphasized her early achievement, largely independent of environmental factors:

Emma: It was just the fact that I was always, well I was since, always like slightly cleverer. Not to sound big headed but I have always been in the top band. … and that's always been like another bit of incentive to kind of work hard to stay in the top band.

Keith developed his view, arguing that giftedness should be seen as close to genius. In this he was supported by Emma's making a distinction between "gifted" and "talented":

Keith: ...To say somebody's gifted is usually when someone has a really special gift and they, you know, they can play the piano at three years old or that, you know it's a gift. Beethoven was gifted … not just a cleverer person.

Emma: Talented is something you can work on, you can work towards your talent and improve your talent, can't you? A gift's something, it seems to be given to you.

Their conceptions of giftedness were primarily inward-looking, that is, concerned with the internal world of the individual, according to Sternberg's (1990) taxonomy of intelligence by metaphors. Likewise, following Borland's (1997) division, these families tended to hold conjunctive conceptions of giftedness, where there is a single profile, with a number of traits coexisting. Indeed, it is significant how similar these traits were in each of the families; innate ability, motivation, and hard work.

Three of the four families also specifically linked their child's giftedness to ancestors, supporting the view that giftedness was hereditary. Moreover, since the children largely concurred with these understandings, our research points to how important parental conceptions of giftedness are for their children. As Dweck has suggested (1999), this in turn has ramifications for a student's educational development. Our data suggested that although families considered hard work as necessary for a gifted child to succeed at school, they also thought that high achievement came more naturally, or easily, to gifted children, both because of their innate ability, motivation, and interest, and because they got through school work more quickly.

For these families, the shifting tide researchers in gifted education write about, away from an idea of a fixed, general intelligence, towards a developmental notion of multivariate intelligence, (notwithstanding the fact that there is a lack of consensus about this shift within the research community itself), did not play a significant part of their own conceptions of giftedness as innate. Although lack of familiarity with debates in the research community might be expected, the national program, which directly affected them, had explicitly incorporated this modernized concept of intelligence (See Campbell et al., 2009), but had failed to communicate such conceptions of giftedness in reality. From the modern research perspective, and, (more directly relevant), from that of the conceptions of giftedness in the national program, our families' constructions looked culturally anachronistic.

A second way in which our families' views of giftedness appeared culturally behind the times, was the use of the metaphor of "a sponge" to illustrate it.

Amanda: I think it came naturally to me in primary school really.... All the way through, ... it wasn't a matter of you have to do well over the first few years, it's just I just wanted to. I wanted to do well. I had, I could do it, like, well.

Chris: I think some kids are like Amanda, they've got a willingness to absorb...
she's like a sponge, she takes everything in.

Maggie: Desperate, desperate to get to the next stage

Our families, parents, and children, used this metaphor to illustrate their construction of giftedness as the unusually fast acquisition and retention of factual and conceptual knowledge; absorbing knowledge and memorizing it in order to reproduce it in schoolwork, tests, and assessments. Giftedness was tightly restricted to performance in the school curriculum. Apart from one striking anecdote about a musically talented peer, there was no sense of giftedness as creative, or as problem solving.

There was no sense of giftedness as concerned with the active construction (or co-construction) of knowledge rather than its acquisition. Co-construction of knowledge was a central characteristic of 'personalized' learning, promoted at the time of our research by the English government as an important pedagogical innovation. (See Campbell et al., 2007a, where personalized learning is seen as particularly appropriate for gifted students).

The family context: Carrying vicarious ambitions

Our study placed the gifted child in the wider familial context and showed the reciprocal, interactive construction of giftedness through the parent-child relationships. When studies of giftedness focus primarily on the child as the unit of study, this parental perspective is obscured; hence, gifted children are often spoken about in the family context as though there is one response to them, and one to their non-gifted siblings (for instance Cornell, 1983; Colangelo and Brower, 1987). However, our study demonstrated that parents who believe that they too had the ability of their gifted child yet never developed it, felt resentment over their squandered potential, angry at the education system, or loaded their lost ambitions onto the gifted child. This was best reflected in the Desmonds' comparisons between their schooling and that of their gifted daughter, Amanda.

Chris: I mean if you could turn the clock back I, I would have gone, or tried to go, much further. I left school with 3 CSEs and went into the army.... I think I got my education in the army. 'Cos when I, when I was at school I never used to pay attention. I didn't have…I don't know, I suppose I was a rebel, when I was at school, but soon as I got out and got in the army I realized that, you know, learning was the way to get ahead. That's the way I've been ever since.

Maggie: I hated it, hated school.... I mean I couldn't wait to leave. I was clever, very, very clever, but I got bullied terrible....so I just, I couldn't wait to go. I couldn't wait to get out the place. I did my exams but, it was like, that was it, that, to me, that was me finished, I didn't want to do anymore. And I regret that now, I really, really do. To see like, how she's [referring to Amanda] come on and I think, Yeah, that, that could have been me. 'Cos I have the brains that she's got, but I just wasted it and didn't use it.

Both Maggie and Chris as pupils, along with their children by previous partners, had experienced some pretty harsh school environments. Apart from Amanda, family members had low levels of educational achievement. There was considerable focus in the interview on Amanda's detailed plans for her future, as though the family was willing it to happen: "She will do it and she'll be the best vet in the country" - affirming how important her success was to the family.

Much rides on how giftedness is experienced by the parents, and this is therefore a useful point of departure for researchers seeking to understand the development of the gifted child. Studies of optimal home environments for gifted children (for instance Campbell, J R., 2007; Winner, 1996) could in this way provide a more nuanced account of how parents with different educational biographies, and dispositions towards giftedness, facilitate their children's education. This having been said, Campbell's three factors found to be most associated with a positive academic home climate - high expectations, a strong work ethic, and positive family communication, - were all supported by our study, even if, at an individual level, complex patterns underpinned them. This research orientation provides evidence of one way in which individual variation can work to complicate or question the determinism in Bourdieu's (2004) principle of the reproduction of cultural capital, as Nash (1999) suggests. We elaborate on this point later.

Our data also suggested that the scenario of a gifted child having vicariously to carry his/her parents' ambitions might be more common to able children from working class homes than is currently appreciated. Three of our families described being born into a context of substantive educational deficit and the range of difficulties it implied. Whilst studies are more likely to stress that parents have to manage expectations in a general way (for instance, Morawska and Sanders, 2009), our data showed how strongly this was mediated by the particular socio-economic contexts of families.

There was a tendency in several of the families to suggest that a gifted child needed more opportunities and better provision than other children, and that parents had to ensure that the gifted student's needs were being met. This concurs with Desforges's (2003) finding that the more highly a student attained, the more involved in their education a parent became. This reciprocal relationship was directly supported by our case studies. In this sense the high achievement of the children had to some extent influenced the agentic orientation of the parents towards their schooling. However, taking the family socio-economic context and the educational biographies of the parents into account are essential if the education systems are to enable parents to do this. Clearly, parents who are confident about supporting their children's education are more likely to rise to the challenge of parenting a gifted child. The parents in this study explicitly stated the opposite; that they did not feel adequately equipped to support their children and that the education system did not provide them with support for doing so. The parents in this study wished to see additional material available to them to enable them better to support their children's high abilities, interests, and university applications. This is one way in which a policy intentionally designed to identify and develop able students from working class homes, might fail to realize its intentions because of defects experienced at the level of the individual school.

Giftedness, labelling and inequity

Freeman's (2001) argument that gifted children need greater challenge than other children was endorsed by our families. This fits in with arguments by Borland (1997) and White (2007) that when giftedness was seen as largely innate, attendant inequalities would not be seen as the result of the practice of identifying a gifted cohort. The families, while expressing some unease about whether there was fair treatment for all students in the school system generally, had little agreement with the commonly expressed criticism that catering for students identified as gifted was "elitist".

Emma: Does it make the other children feel less special? You don't know.

Keith: I don't know about that. That, that depends on how those children have been brought up.... If they're, if they have a negative response to being told that something is, you know they're not as good, if they're not able to work through that because of their upbringing … can't cope with it, then it hits them hard. See some will, will take that and say, right then, fair enough, I'm not bright, and not aspire. Others will say I'm gonna prove you wrong.

There was some perceived uncertainty (or possibly some hypocrisy) amongst the teaching staff about labelling students, according to Emma's account of how she was treated at school when a gifted and talented group was identified for special treatment:

Emma: In Year 9 they said girls could go on this trip to do Engineering or something and our tutor went absolutely crazy saying that she didn't want anyone labelling us gifted and talented, it was unfair to everyone else. And then the next day she was like, 'Congratulations for getting on this course, it's a really good step in your education'. So it was like [I thought]…'What are you doing? That's a bit weird'.

The Booths displayed no concern about the social equity aspects of giftedness in relation to their son, with an absence of concern about elitism. Although there was a wider rhetoric of equality and fairness, Shirley's concern was expressed somewhat ambiguously, but was focused on unfairness to

gifted children, whose interests were adversely affected as she saw it by resources being squandered on the low-achieving students.

Shirley: I was told the brighter the child, the more money they got….They got more money for bright children and they need to put it for all of them (the bright ones). Because at the end of the day, it's gonna be a two-class system in this country in the end. It's gonna to be the "benefits" and the "non-benefits". You get the ones (on welfare, "i.e., the benefits") what'll go on to take what they want and do what they want with their lives and never have to worry about getting up or anything like that, but there's ones who have to work hard.

Arguments about elitism flowing from gifted education were not seriously addressed, possibly because our families were, in principle at least, if not in practice, the beneficiaries of it, but also because in their narratives special treatment designed to cater for the learning needs of gifted students was seen as being fundamentally fair, not unfair, to such students. Any larger, societal, structural, consequences of educational policy on giftedness, of interest to left-wing academics, had little salience for these working-class families.

The national program for gifted education: Experiencing policy failure

All the families were unimpressed with the then national program for gifted education; they could be placed on a continuum from lack of interest and lack of knowledge to anger and to cynicism. What was also common to the families was the fact that the labelling of a gifted child, without relevant educational provision, carried with it little added value, since all the families already knew their child was a high achiever. The only benefit of the label was that it acted as a mild incentive; students expressed a desire not to fall off a register once labelled. In all four cases, the national program was found to fall short in the provision of concrete educational pathways after the label had been applied.

The Newlands family heard about Nicolas being identified as gifted, when he was identified and put on the school's register, but thereafter they found no provision that they judged appropriate for him. Pete, the father, was forthright in his condemnation of the policy in practice:

Pete: … I think that's what the government's achieved. Absolutely nothing. And wasted such an opportunity there, the collection of young brains, they could have done something with.

Debbie the mother, was a little more tentative, thinking that they might not have informed themselves as fully about national provisions as they could have. Nicholas, the son, had nevertheless rejected provision as not relevant to his interests:

Debbie: We got a letter saying that Nick had been put onto the [gifted and talented] register. But as far as the, the scheme itself worked we didn't get anything else, or very, very little. And nothing happened...and we were, well, could be our ignorance, we didn't know if we had to do anything, to look for anything or was it coming from their end, and they were going to tell us. We just didn't know.

Nick: It was, well, at school, most of my classmates, because I was in the top sets, were in this NAGTY. So we're all high-flyers, we're all, most of us were in this NAGTY, so it wasn't a big thing…there were, activities and outings, but the Science ones, they were very foreign and weird ones that they put on. There was things like Geology and Zoology and Botany and, things that you had to have a specialist interest in. There was nothing that I remember, and I may be wrong, that was generalized...I can't remember there ever being Physics ones or, you know Chemistry ones, it was always something very specialized. So that was the reason I didn't volunteer or go on them.

Pete: From a parent's point of view, I think it's potentially a good idea that's [been] a waste of time…And why not ask the parents? We've got this register, your child's been put on it, have a parents' meeting, 'What do you think the child would benefit from?' or ask the pupils, 'What would

you like to get out of it?' Not, here is a list of things that, with respect, some academic or whatever's put forward [laughs] and said you know, these are a list of things we're going to give you…The, academics have gained Brownie points out of this system. The schools have gained it, 'We've put forward X amount of pupils, look how we are, how good we are,' which is going to get them up the ladder or get more parents to pay fees and send them to that school because X% of them get put onto this register. So what? The people who should benefit from it, the pupils, they don't, so what a waste of time.

Nick: When I won, I got a Gold in the UK Mathematical Challenge, that was more of an uplifting kind of thing, 'cos out of the school, maybe two people would get one of those, or be able to perform to that standard. So I think that was a bit better because it was such a select thing. But NAGTY, when you're on that list, it was like the bar had been lowered, so everyone rushed on.

This suggests that the gifted label carried with it considerable weight, but not necessarily in the way envisioned by policy-makers. Rather than it being a strongly motivating factor in itself, labelling a child as gifted appeared to act in a static confirmatory way, but carried with it a weight of expectation that it would be dynamic, opening up opportunities and pathways. This was largely unmet. In this, the families concurred with the survey of parents of gifted students (Mazzoli et al., 2006) who were also critical of the relevance of provision.

It is pertinent that the families laid the blame at the door of teachers and schools, not the government, even though the national program was initiated, managed, and funded by the central government. Just as Radnor, Koshy, and Taylor (2007), claim that it is teachers who are having to carry and manage the inconsistencies at the heart of policy, so with these families, teachers were largely held responsible for inadequate provisions. For some teachers these problems might be exacerbated by the irony that they too had considerable reservations about the national program, according to a survey by Hewston and Campbell (2005).

Parental involvement in schooling: Agency and passivity

A particularly critical analysis of parental participation was that by Vincent et al. in an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project entitled *Little Polities: Schooling, Governance and Parental Participation (*2001).

Influenced by Bourdieu, Vincent mapped for each respondent the following:

- Their social positioning (occupational experiences etc.);
- Their habitus (lifestyles);
- Their references to resources of social, cultural and material capital and their activation of these;
- The issues over which they were concerned; and
- Parental agency and how the institution (school) responded to them.

(Vincent, 2001: p. 349)

This framework led Vincent to conclude that there were still "entrenched traditions of professional exclusivity and lay silence" (Vincent, 2001; 360); that parental voice was relatively impotent to influence the power exercised through professional decision-making.

Some of our narratives supported, and others challenged, Vincent's view, though almost all of them refer to attitudes rather than direct action. The Booths had a deferential, even passive, attitude to influencing school decisions: They wanted the return of corporal punishment, but did not seek it; if their children had problems in school with mathematics, they intended to buy a private tutor rather than press the school to change; two wildly contradictory teacher judgments about their son were accepted without demur; and they did not intervene when they thought the provision for gifted students was inadequate. The Breakwells' narrative offered a kind of vindication of Vincent's assessment, since they were teachers themselves, and were mostly dismissive of the views of students

and parents, and said nothing about encouraging parental voice in general. On the other hand, the Newlands' narrative reflected an attitude of active engagement in their son's private school, with heavy commitment to sports and other extra-curricular clubs. Their judgment that the local comprehensives would not cater well for him, did not lead to their working for change in those schools, but to exercising their own choice of private education. They did not take at face value their treatment by some university staff and were strongly critical of dumbing down. In one case they had challenged the view of their son's teacher directly. Attitudinally, they presented themselves as ready to challenge professionals' judgments, but they exercised lay voice by exercising lay choice to opt out of state schooling - not what Vincent was espousing. The Desmonds were more like victims in their relationships with schools, for despite going into school to try to prevent their son's repeatedly being bullied, they obtained no redress. A history of their own poor schooling and low achievement added to the failure to exercise voice. In Amanda's case, inappropriate provision for gifted students went unchallenged by the Desmonds. However, it was not quite so clear cut as Vincent's model would imply, since the Desmonds, through Amanda's outstanding achievement, had been left with a sense at least potentially, that they could play an active role in her education.

Discussion

Some implications for policy and theory

Our families fell into the category of "under-represented" groups, that is without a tradition of children going to universities. A substantive element in the national program was to search out, identify, and support the educational progress of gifted children from such families. (Children from families of moderate means constituted some 16% of the school population and 9% of those accepted onto the national program, according to Campbell et al., 2007b). Although we do not claim representativeness for our four families, their experience and understandings of the national program, its conception of giftedness and the relatively poor support they encountered, offer some indications of how future policy formation, whether in England or elsewhere, might be better attuned to the needs and social contexts of such families. We are not suggesting either that policy should be developed only by reference to the interests of social groups or by reference to a particular group. We are merely arguing for policy-makers to develop a more socially inclusive approach to policy formation. There are five aspects worth consideration.

Curriculum and cultural capital

Policy on gifted education assumes high levels of cultural capital to know about, understand, and access its benefits; yet cultural capital is unevenly distributed socially. To avoid the charge of social bias in the provision of gifted education, particular attention should be given to the nature of curriculum enrichment provided. To take one example, if a policy aims to enrich students' learning by the provision of broad, intrinsically valuable programs which are, or are likely to be seen as, unrelated to the students' mainstream courses of study, such provision will be attractive to those with an intrinsic approach to their learning, but less so to those who view their schooling in a more instrumental mode. The latter, more likely to be found in the working class, would want provision that strengthened the depth of their knowledge in their school subjects, given their heightened sense of the competition for university places.

To caricature: the middle class student at an elite independent school, studying physics, mathematics, chemistry, and biology, and predicted to get a place at Oxford to read medicine, might find a program on Astronomy very interesting and attractive; her working class counterpart, following the same subjects in her comprehensive school, but less confident of her university place, and less aware of the opportunities available to her, would probably want a program related directly to her school studies or projected career in Medicine, such as further mathematics or cognitive science. Astronomy would fit poorly with her instrumental approach to learning. We illustrated this issue for Nicholas, above, and he was the student at a private school, with probably the broadest extra-curricular provision of the four. Nicholas's father proposed that identification should be followed by serious and sustained consultation with parents and students as to what kinds of provision would meet their needs; to personalize provision rather than provide a centralized pre-formed top-down menu

from which students had to choose. Although this proposal is not without its logistical and practical difficulties, a trend toward locally owned provision and e-learning make it a model worth pursuing.

Conceptions of giftedness

The families had a view of giftedness which was "old fashioned" in the sense that it was thought to be genetically determined, little influenced by environmental factors, and concentrated on performance in traditional school subjects with high cognitive demands. There was little interest in creativity, the arts, music, and drama, and we saw this as mostly explicable by the families' instrumental view of education. The policy issue here is fairly clear; the government agencies and the schools need to communicate more effectively the broad modernized concept of giftedness and to adopt it more explicitly in the criteria they use for identification. Not to do so would be likely to exacerbate the existing trend for bi-furcation in gifted education; developmental multi-dimensional models of giftedness including creativity and the arts as well as high cognitive performance, reserved mainly for the professional classes, and a more limited and deterministic model for children of the working class. This might not be a deliberate effect but it could emerge by default.

Further research could usefully be carried out into whether this bifurcation impacts on the entrenched nature of the attainment gap between the children of higher and lower social class families. Indeed a broader understanding of how families conceptualize giftedness and high ability, along with a high profile campaign to communicate a modernized conception of giftedness might play a part in tackling the attainment gap.

Parental agency

Apart from the Newlands, the other three families had all confronted their children's schools over the treatment of their children, but found it impossible at times to be heard, or implement change, most notably in the case of the Desmonds, who described feelings of impotence in the face of institutional structures. This appeared to be because their views or feelings were not backed up by sufficient cultural capital, confidence, or financial resources. This seems particularly ironic and unfortunate, given the raised agentic orientation, referred to above, that arose from having children identified as gifted. Pete Newland (Nicholas's father) explicitly asked whether a booklet could be given to parents of children identified as gifted at school, providing information and guidance about how best to support their children. Raised sense of agency is likely to lead to frustration and anger if it is not followed by responsive attitudes in the schools, and especially if it is seen as socially biased, with middle-class parents being seen as more effective in influencing practice both in the schools, and, given their higher levels of cultural capital and knowledge of the education system, in the home also.

The national program: Mainstreaming as a problem

The families had little admiration for, or satisfaction with, the national program. Once their children had been identified as gifted, they experienced almost no further educational provision that was relevant. Indeed opinion was so forceful in several of the families, that the question is raised whether the weight of expectation for high quality, relevant, educational provision generated by the gifted label was damagingly counter-productive, when such provision was not delivered. The data suggest that the weight of expectation for provision generated by labelling a child as gifted, despite its being seen as merely confirmatory, exceeded anything anticipated by policy-makers or educationalists; unmet, it proved more damaging, in terms of negative feelings, than not labelling at all.

The English model, which emphasized provision where possible being provided through the students' school may have placed too much emphasis on such mainstreaming, especially in a system where most teachers had no training in teaching gifted children and had low confidence in their capacity to do so, where there was no dedicated funding stream, and schools were under pressure to raise the performance of lower attaining students. If a policy of mainstreaming is to be effectively adopted it needs to be properly funded at the level of the individual school and provision locally determined.

Theories of cultural reproduction

It is clear from the foregoing that we judge the policy frame on giftedness on the idea that it has reflected the advantages that the middle and professional classes could secure for their children through their possession of cultural, social, and importantly, financial capital. A government wishing to introduce improvement in social equity in education policy would need to adjust its policies so as to accommodate the social context of working-class families. Bourdieu's theories, which stress the tendency of school systems to reproduce social inequalities, have tended to buttress a sense of helplessness about changes in such inequalities, because of the difficulties that transformative educational policies have encountered. We do not pretend that change in social inequalities is easy, or can be brought about by school systems alone. However, it is not an intractable problem, despite Bourdieu's rather deterministic stance. On the contrary, we found amongst our families some substantive pursuit of cultural capital, though less effective social and financial capital. All four of our families offered evidence that, despite the general theory of cultural reproduction, they were, at least through their gifted children, potentially capable of breaking the reproductive moulds in which their family history had cast them. For at least three of them, new identities were being sculpted through schooling. It raises the intriguing hypothesis that theories of reproduction, though broadly valid, may not apply to some working-class families with children identified as gifted.

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