

## **The elusiveness of equal access to educational opportunity: Scotland, after a decade of inclusive policies**

### **Abstract**

The achievement of equal access to educational opportunity is an international policy imperative that remains as elusive as it is desirable. Despite a plethora of inclusive policies and initiatives in Scotland such as *Getting it Right for Every Child* (2008 & 2012), *Curriculum for Excellence* (2009) and the *Scottish Attainment Challenge* (2015), significant numbers of young people cannot be said to experience equal access to educational opportunity. This paper draws upon complementary sociological and philosophical perspectives to explore why such barriers to equality of educational opportunity persist, before suggesting ways in which serious engagement with such theory might counter deficit assumptions in play and offer possible new ways forward.

The point of departure is Bourdieu's typology of various forms of social capital which highlights how possession of capital is advantageous to upper and middle class families, whereas lack of such capital serves to restrict educational opportunities for young people from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds. Such an analysis argues that reproduction of social conditions, styles of thinking and decision-making, coupled with oppressive societal structures, all serve to disempower young people and impact negatively upon their educational attainment.

This paper explores a variety of ways in which theory might challenge and interrupt assumptions informing discourses associated with inequality and their associated remedies. Through engaging a series of problematics within current framings of inequality, the paper argues that a more sustained engagement with theory offers the possibility of more nuanced understandings of inequality and a provocation to imagine otherwise. Engaging in such imaginative work might, moreover, enable the barriers to equality of educational opportunity to be better addressed.

**Key Words:** agency; transgenerational disadvantages; adaptive preferences; capital; habitus.

## **Introduction**

Equal access to educational opportunity is a pressing global concern that continues to frustrate efforts of policy makers to seek effective remedies (Schleicher & Zoido, 2016). The primary focus of this paper is the situation in Scotland where almost one in four (230, 000) children live in poverty (Child Poverty Action Group, 2018). At age five, children in the most deprived areas of Scotland are between six and thirteen months behind their peers in problem solving and eleven to eighteen months behind their peers in expressive vocabulary. More likely to be delayed in terms of language acquisition, children living in poverty also have a higher incidence of behavioural problems than their more affluent peers (Child Poverty Action Group, 2018). In recent years, policy makers in Scotland have drawn upon discourses of early trauma - such as the literature on Adverse Childhood

Experiences (ACEs)) - as a means of acknowledging multiple impacts on children's development, their ability to learn, and their mental health and wellbeing.

By the time they reach age fifteen, young people from the most deprived homes are approximately two years of schooling behind their peers (Scottish Government, 2014b: 5). Hirsch (2007: 2) highlights the importance of acknowledging 'the multiple aspects of disadvantaged children's lives', otherwise termed a 'coupling' by Sen (1997) or a 'clustering' of disadvantage by Wolff and de-Shalit (2007), all of which constitute further barriers to equality of educational opportunity. For a young person attending school in Scotland, this multiplicity or clustering might include poor housing combined with poor nutrition (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007: 126-7; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003: 26). Being from a family whose income qualifies children for a free school meal halves a young person's chances of getting to Level 5 in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework<sup>1</sup>. Young people with fewer qualifications are more likely to end up not in education, employment or training and those without a job, training course or study programme are reportedly more likely to become involved in crime. Three in ten men (29%) and one in twelve women (8%) who were not in education, employment or training from the ages of 16-18 were involved in crime between the ages of 17-30 - three times the rate among all young people (Scottish Government, 2013). Poor educational attainment is also associated with an increased likelihood of mental health issues, substance

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<sup>1</sup>The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) aims to promote lifelong learning through 12 levels. Level 5 is the equivalent to National 5 which the most able pupils will attain in fourth year of secondary school. The various levels articulate with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

abuse and economic marginalization in adulthood (Farrington, 1997; Howieson & Ianelli, 2008).

In 2020, it would certainly appear that there is more support available in Scotland for young people from less affluent homes, as evidenced by a plethora of inclusive educational policies such as *Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)* (2008 & 2012) and *Curriculum for Excellence* (2009). More recently, the *Scottish Attainment Challenge* (2015) aims to ensure equity in education, particularly focusing on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. To that end, the Attainment Scotland Fund of £750 million pounds is targeted at the most deprived schools in Scotland over the course of this parliament (2016-2021) and part of this is the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) which is allocated directly to schools. The Evaluation of the Attainment Scotland Fund Interim Report (March 2018) suggests ‘increased awareness, understanding and commitment to address the impact of poverty on attainment across local authorities and schools’ (Scottish Government, 2018). And yet, despite the aspiration to create an even playing field, it is clear that family background is still perceived to have a major impact on young people’s educational experiences and attainment<sup>2</sup>.

The acknowledgement that apparently ‘equal’ children within a given setting *and* children from different socio-economic backgrounds have differential outcomes in terms of opportunities, can be analysed at a series of different levels. Family

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<sup>2</sup> The *Scottish Attainment Challenge: Equality Impact Assessment results* (2018) show that children and young people living in areas of multiple deprivation perform less well than the general school population - for example, the percentage of school leavers attaining SCQF levels 4-6 by pupil characteristic SIMD (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) is significantly lower in the most deprived quintile than those in the highest quintile.

background, for example, continues to play a key role in determining a young person's future (Gilligan, 2000; Hirsch, 2007; Raffo et al., 2007; Ball, 2010; Sosu & Ellis, 2014) and this is not simply about financial resources. Beyond family background, attitudes and aspirations also have an impact on equality of educational opportunity as do perceived transgenerational disadvantages (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007) and adaptive preferences (Nussbaum, 2000). In other words, young people's choices about who they want to be and how they want to live their lives (their agency freedom) are imbricated within broader relational networks that offer different valuations and forms of support. Consequently, at a societal level it might be said that there are barriers in Scotland that hold some young people back and which render the struggle for equality of educational opportunity more difficult. At a theoretical level, such barriers might be characterised as involving differing access to the various forms of capital and the power of habitus as delineated by Bourdieu (1986), alongside restrictive social structures and lack of opportunity to re-think future horizons of possibility. These issues will be explored further in this paper.

### **Attitudes and Aspirations**

Attitudes to education start to form at an early age and so, too, do children's awareness of social differences (Horgan, 2007; Sutton et al., 2007). An example of this is the divide between the 'chavs' and the 'posh' (Sutton et al., 2007) as young people from contrasting socio-economic backgrounds label the two extremes (more commonly known as that between the 'neds' and 'swots', respectively, in Scotland). Perhaps this awareness stems from differences in aspects of linguistic capital - identified in Passeron's (1965) empirical research as the main factor

underlying inequalities in the academic attainment of children from different backgrounds. Linguistic capital is the manifestation of a complex set of social, historical and political conditions with language being the bearer of symbolic power through its traces of social structure: words 'do not exist in a disembodied form; they have meaning within a social context that is class bound, conflictual and power driven' (Cookson, 1994: 116). Lack of linguistic capital can have an impact on every area of education and young people seem to understand intuitively that ways of speaking (in terms of accent, dialect and word choice) denote class and social position (Sutton et al., 2007).

Bourdieu's various forms of capital (1986) are highly relevant here in so far as they provide a theoretical lexicon that promotes further analysis. The concept of cultural capital refers to a whole array of symbolic elements such as tastes, speech, credentials and so on that people acquire from belonging to a certain social class. Sharing equivalent forms of capital with others, such as engaging in the same leisure activities or speaking in a similar way, creates a sense of group position and collective identity ('people like us'). However, cultural capital can be 'an instrument of reproduction capable of disguising its own function' (Bourdieu, 1986: 254), a major source of social inequality, because certain forms are valued above others and can, consequently, help or hinder social mobility just as much as income or wealth. Cultural capital takes three forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Accent or dialect is an example of embodied cultural capital, while possession of material goods is cultural capital in its objectified state. Institutionalised cultural capital refers to credentials and qualifications such as degrees or titles that symbolise cultural competence and authority. Lack of the

various forms of capital can impede working class, disadvantaged or marginalised people in the education system - particularly since schools are 'classed institutions' (Savage, 2003; Archer, 2007) in which middle class structures often compound inequalities and young people who are more clearly aligned to teachers' values and approaches are more likely to succeed.

Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1990) is also helpful in understanding equality of educational opportunity. Habitus is historical, 'a kind of transforming machine that leads us to 'reproduce' the social conditions of our own production' (Bourdieu, 1990: 87). It is primarily transmitted through the home, 'a form of cultural inheritance analogous to genetic inheritance' (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009: 47); attitudes to education could be a product of habitus, therefore. Social conditioning can lead to adaptive functioning since it is through habitus that 'a sense of our place in the world' is developed (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009: 47), along with expectations as to the type of path to be followed. The transgenerational nature of disadvantage (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007) can have an impact on young people because 'material and non-material circumstances shape our opportunities and choices' (Robeyns, 2005: 99) and a variety of cultural, social and economic factors reproduce social inequality across generations (Roberts & Evans, 2012: 72). Recognition of the power of habitus highlights the significance of past and present relations that a young person has in framing future intentions and, although it is not fixed, habitus may well predispose people to certain ways of behaving over others that may appear to be available (Sullivan, 2002: 113).

The confidence, motivation and self-worth of some young people can be affected detrimentally by social class differences compounded by the education system. There are many examples of ‘exclusionary practices’ (Bourdieu, 1999) in schools, such as the labelling of groups and types of pupils (implicitly through teacher and pupil attitudes and explicitly through categorisation of groups in school, as we have already seen). Despite awareness that ‘low sets are clearly perceived to be coterminous with educational failure’ (Reay, 2013: 45) setting and streaming are still commonplace. Also persisting in some schools is the so called ‘hierarchy of student worth’ (Reay, 2013: 43) by which values held by teachers about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ pupils are transmitted to young people through attitudes, words and actions. (This hierarchy of worth can pertain not only to individual pupils, but also to whole classes and is sometimes a result of setting and streaming.<sup>3</sup>) Favouring some young people more than others has a significant impact: ‘these are real people’s lives we are talking about, and... how we conceptualise and describe them has material effects’ (Paechter, 2011: 239).

One such effect is that some young people become ‘reluctant recipients of the taught curriculum’ (Hirsch, 2007) because they feel they do not belong, that they are not affiliated to the school. The result could be that young people switch off

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<sup>3</sup> Recent examples of labelling young people in Scottish schools include ‘the PEFs’ or ‘the PEF group’ to identify individuals or groups who ‘qualify’ for additional support due to their assigned level of deprivation on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) is additional Scottish Government funding allocated directly to schools and targeted at closing the poverty related attainment gap. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) identifies multiple deprivation across Scotland and aims to allow targeting of policies and funding.



and eventually self-eliminate or 'drop out'. This is exemplified by Bright (2011) in a paper describing how some young people 'pre-exclude' themselves from education. Bright looks at material from an intergenerational ethnographic study of former coal-mining communities in the north of England often characterised as inward-looking and lacking in ambition. Because it protects and reaffirms, pre-exclusion is not necessarily negative: 'the power of those that exclude is neutralised and the indignity of exclusion eliminated' (Bright, 2011: 10). Arguably, pre-exclusion rejects a set of values imposed by 'outsider' teachers and is in itself a form of aspiration: 'to counteract the conventional framework of individual aspiration promulgated through the schooling system by pre-empting school's many formal and informal exclusionary powers' (Bright, 2011: 30).

Rather than identifying and working to remedy the root causes of disenfranchisement, it is often disenfranchised people and communities that are blamed (Gorski, 2010). The pathologisation of the working class (Reay, 2006; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009; Granger, 2013), 'discursively constituted as an unknowing uncritical tasteless mass' (Reay, 2006: 293), involves the projection of putative deficits onto working class young people and their families which both stigmatises and focuses on individual problems rather than upon broader institutional, financial or societal issues (Perry & Francis, 2010: 10). Implicit in such deficit thinking is an assumption that schools are fair places, 'classless classrooms' in which all young people experience similar treatment and opportunities (Reay, 2006). In reality, schools are 'manifestly unfair' in that educational capital is distributed mainly on the grounds of gender, race and class (Smyth et al., 2014 citing Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Without serious recognition that aspects of

contemporary educational management 'literally fix failure in the working classes, while simultaneously fixing them in devalued educational spaces' (Reay, 2006: 298), it would appear that little can be done to address inequality of educational opportunity. Deficit ideology can also exploit public perceptions and divert attention away from the very systems and socio-political circumstances that exacerbate and compound inequalities (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Yosso, 2005; Gorski, 2010).

Given this rather bleak picture, are there any points of interruption that might enable new ways forward? Ainscow (2005: 8) argues that it is necessary to develop the capacity of educationalists to 'challenge deeply entrenched deficit views' which define certain pupils as 'lacking'. 'Genuine inclusion', within these terms, is quite different from simply including a whole range of young people in the same building and is characterised by 'social learning processes... that influence people's actions and, indeed, the thinking that informs these actions' (Ainscow, 2005: 5). Here, inclusion is a process that is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers that hinder the meaningful presence, participation and achievement of all students. Such an orientation places particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement. In this instance, theory is deployed to interrupt existing discourses and to suggest new ways forward, rather than simply being used as a means to characterise an existing ordering. Theory, in other words, can also be drawn upon as a resource with which to re-think how the inclusion of all young people in the education system might be achieved, regardless of social class, ethnicity, perceived ability, attainment or nationality (Ainscow, 2005: 7; Ainscow et al., 2013: 4). This requires what Ainscow

(2013) terms ‘interruptions to thinking’ in order to question long held (and often deeply hegemonic) assumptions about certain groups or types of young people.

Some policymakers identify low aspirations as a factor that is ‘in part the cause of contemporary social and economic ills’ (Roberts & Evans, 2012: 70-71), limiting both social mobility and horizons of possibility for working class and disadvantaged young people. Within the terms of such discourse, a remedy is sought through attempts to ‘raise’ aspirations. However, aspirations, like attitudes, are complex and influenced by a wide range of mutually reinforcing factors that also include place (Raffo et al., 2007). The very suggestion that some young people have ‘low aspirations’ is in itself a potentially disempowering and deficit view (Spohrer, 2011: 57), where ‘low aspirations’ are construed as such simply because they do not comply with middle-class norms and ideals (Roberts & Evans, 2012: 71). Within such a policy landscape, teenage pregnancy and single parenthood are thus construed as ‘low’ aspirations, whereas a university education and its associated deferrals is positioned as a ‘higher’ aspiration. Such judgements (whether explicit or implicit) are unlikely to encourage empirical investigation of ways in which young people actually make choices and imagine their futures (Roberts & Evans, 2012: 84). In England, where the schooling climate has been characterised as informed by neo-liberal imperatives, its associated discourse of aspirations has been critiqued as ‘an art of government’ (Roberts & Evans, 2012: 72) that blames individual behaviour and choices for socio-economic status (Perry & Francis, 2010: 10). Such a discourse does not take social inequality into account; again, the implication is that responsibility lies with ‘those who are in fact the victims of policies which have increased social differentiation’ (Roberts & Evans, 2012: 73).

If, in Scotland, education policies appear, on the face of it, to give a higher prominence to issues of social justice and inclusion, these ideals are also in tension with fixed ideas about aspirations and social inequality. To the extent that these deficit notions remain in play, closing the poverty-related attainment gap seems set to remain ‘an elusive pipe-dream’ (Mowat, 2018: 299).

Contrary to popular belief, patterns of job and education aspirations across the United Kingdom are in practice quite varied and can be high even in disadvantaged areas (Ainscow, 2005: 7; Ainscow et al., 2013: 4). In making sense of this, a framing that draws upon social capital theory can offer an analytical tool with which to inquire into the kinds of social capital that are available within particular contexts. This might, for example, identify situations where some young people have ready access to the ‘know-how’ associated with success (Kirk et al., 2011) whereas others do not. Following Bourdieu, ‘cultural capital is inculcated in the higher-class home, and enables higher-class students to gain higher credentials than lower class students’ (Sullivan, 2002: 146). In Bourdieusian terms, different players are arbitrarily dealt cards of different values (in various forms of capital) whilst the possession of prized social capital enables some players to have a head start. According to this reading, the education game is rigged from the outset: ‘privileged groups within society sustain a whole range of social structures - including the education system - to maintain their positions of privilege’ (Raffo, 2007: viii) while ‘players’ without the necessary forms of capital are disadvantaged. Perhaps the ‘rules of the game’ are not shared by all participants because ‘the hidden and most specific function of the education system consists in

hiding its relationship to the class structure' (Bourdieu, 1997: 208). Many educated, middle class families understand how to yield the greatest rewards from the education system, actively exploiting class capital as a strategy in the search for advantage (Ball, 1993: 17). Research suggests that it is middle class children who often benefit the most from initiatives located in schools in less affluent areas and, for example, the very pupils for whom supported study and homework clubs are intended, are the least likely to attend (Perry & Francis, 2010). Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often miss out on opportunities to enhance academic capital and to engage in other out-of-school activities which increase the social advantages that accrue from wider networks of friends and chances to form relationships with positive non-teacher role models (Wikeley et al., 2007). Since academic and linguistic capital increasingly require economic capital (Ball, 2010: 158-160), the current situation both in Scotland and in other international contexts potentially marginalises less affluent families. School strategies and initiatives may have a complementary role to play in 'closing the gap' but greater recognition of the different kinds of capital (and how these might be enhanced for all young people) coupled with insights regarding the imaginative work that needs to be accomplished, calls into question the adequacy of these kinds of response in and of themselves.

The lack of sustained improvements in schools is often rationalised by claiming that certain groups of people have low aspirations; however, such a response is only possible if the extent to which 'the contemporary education system retains powerful remnants of past elite prejudices' is ignored (Reay, 2006: 293-4). The aspiration debate is itself an impoverished discourse that portrays young people

from disadvantaged backgrounds in deficit terms, conflates economic and social equality discourses and individualises structural problems (Spohrer, 2011).

Changing views and increasing understanding of restrictive societal structures is thus a ‘vital precursor to a socially just educational system’ (Reay, 2012: 9). Such an educational system would, in Bourdieu’s terms, recognise that lack of capital reproduces inequality and seals the fate of some young people - even though they themselves might actually have high aspirations.

### **Agency**

In much educational policy, attitudes and aspirations are currently gathered within a discourse of agency. Agency is a key term within the current Scottish policy lexicon and is implied throughout *GIRFEC* (2008 & 2012) and the four *Curriculum for Excellence* (2009) capacities (successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, effective contributors). According to Walker and Unterhalter (2007: 6), developing agency is an important goal for young people because it ‘potentially enables us to imagine and act toward new ways of being’. All such policy which focuses on the individual and choice is informed by the intention that young people’s educational achievements ‘should not be dictated by the wealth of their parents, their gender, their race or their ethnicity’ (Watkins, 2012: 1-2). Within such a discourse, if young people are to choose how they want to live instead of simply following already established patterns, imagining new ways of thinking and being is necessary (Watkins, 2012).

A definition of agency, distilled from a variety of sources, is provided on the Education Scotland *Journey to Excellence* website. Agency is here characterised as:

the degree of self-belief or self-confidence. It is the belief that one has the capacity and ability to learn and achieve. Young people who believe that they can learn and achieve their goals through effort and technique are much more likely to succeed. By contrast, the belief that ability is fixed is a major cause of underachievement in schools (Education Scotland, 2006).

Within these terms, self-belief or self-confidence become dominant factors that can affect agency, but this is also fundamentally concerned with capacities for making and enacting choice. The discourse of individualism and choice is here linked to that of belief, self-confidence and goals. As such, this would appear to involve borrowings from broader, international neo-liberal policy agenda (for example, Sharma, 2008). Whilst conceptualisations of agency are contested (Ahearn, 2001), a widely cited definition is that provided by Sen (2009: 287) who describes agency as ‘all the goals that a person has reason to adopt’. The process of exercising agency (here conceived as acting on goals) is one of Sen’s two main purposes of education - the other being education as a form of wellbeing and functional achievement (Flores-Crespo, cited in Walker & Unterhalter, 2007: 49). Sen (1992: 41) asserts that education should lead to a life of ‘genuine choices with serious options’. However, the development of agency requires equal educational opportunity: ‘[i]f a person has equal educational opportunity, the person’s practical skills and human agency can be shaped in a fair way’ (Flores-Crespo,

cited in Walker & Unterhalter, 2007: 49). This suggests that there is an ethical element to education, that is praxis oriented: 'morally-committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in the field' (Kemmis & Smith, 2008: 3). Such practice involves, moreover, 'creative thinking, care, compassion and critical consciousness' as well as the 'connectedness of people' (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). Educational activities designed to broaden young people's horizons could enhance levels of agency in young people - but, as discussed earlier, this can be challenging both on account of cost and levels of participation. According to Walker and Unterhalter (2007), the point of departure is individual agency but it is clear that broader structural and relational matters are also implicated here. It is, arguably, precisely these 'broader structural and relational matters' which are largely ignored in educational policies.

Viewed within an agency framing, it would appear that many young people do not actively shape their lives 'in the light of goals that matter'; instead, a different set of priorities largely determined by family background is found to be in play (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007: 5). Rather than being 'active participants' in their own development, some young people appear to be 'passive spectators' (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007: 5) since they remain enmeshed within '[n]on-ideal contexts' (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007: 9). Thus, home background, on this reading, can serve to diminish agency and lessen the chances of young people making informed choices about how they want to live. A conclusion can then be drawn that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular, are less likely than their more advantaged counterparts to have the resources to formulate agency goals - or, to put this another way, the very possibility of constructing agency goals is



compromised by 'pre-existing inequality' (Burchardt, 2009: 11). This is exemplified by Hanley (2017) who writes about her personal experience of crossing the class divide and the limitations of 'choices' - 'those that are offered and those that we make from the ones we have access to'. Although Hanley was clearly an active participant in her own development, she highlights how little society has changed since Hoggart wrote of working class culture in 1957. Some young people still adapt to circumstances in accordance with family background and opt for socio-economically determined goals and specific paths because this is what is expected (the so called 'adaptive preferences'). There are clear links here to an agency framing in so far as 'processes of social and psychological adaptation can erode a person's desire of what, in reality, would give her well-being' (Sugden, 2006: 2).

However, the assumption that all that goes on in the social world is the outcome of people's choices can risk individualising success and failure (Walker, 2003: 178).

Not all young people are free agents who are able to choose their own fate 'through transcendence of structural constraints imposed upon individuals from birth' (Kingsley, 2012: 5), such as class, gender, race, disability and geography.

The education system appears to perpetuate social patterns justifying social inequalities through treating 'cultural heritage... [as] a social gift treated as a natural one' (Bourdieu, 1974: 32). As a result, those from higher classes maintain their class position whilst also legitimating and perpetuating their dominance (Sullivan, 2002). In school, children from disadvantaged backgrounds can feel less in control and experience reduced agency due to pressures to perform tasks in which they are less confident (Hirsch, 2007). There is little recognition, according to Reay (2013: 36), of 'how painfully the educational world is experienced by those

who occupy an inferior devalued position in a privileged universe’ and of the challenges in succeeding ‘in a stratified education system in which opportunities for social mobility are severely limited’ (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009: 478). Programmes which attempt to ‘open the possibility to interrupt a pervasive relationship in education that tends to link learners’ origins and outcomes’ (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007: 6) can make a difference. One Scottish example is the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) which aims to increase progression to Higher Education by supporting regional collaborations between schools, colleges and universities. However, from a sociological perspective, the acknowledgement of structural impediments suggests that an individualised conception of agency has distinct limitations.

With an intention to further socially just outcomes for all pupils, Scotland’s *Curriculum for Excellence* (2009) sets out to promote ‘achievement of important levels and skills acquisition, which play a vital role in agency and well-being freedom’ (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007: 32). However, ironically, this ‘coherent and inclusive curriculum’ (Scottish Government, 2008) may actually restrict opportunities for either autonomy or agency (Priestley & Humes, 2010: 357). This is in part because the four capacities of *Curriculum of Excellence* (2009) focus strongly on *individual* traits, values and dispositions (Biesta, 2008: 50). The apparent ‘shift towards socialisation’ (Biesta, 2008), the focus on what individual young people should be or become, might render the qualification function of education (what young people should know and be able to do) less important (Biesta, 2008). Furthermore, the ‘production’ of a particular kind of person (who is successful, confident, responsible and effective) appears to be a type of

‘moulding’ of all individuals into one pattern (Biesta, 2008) with, arguably, little scope for the expression of diversity and individuality. From this perspective, *Curriculum for Excellence* risks turning education into ‘an instrument of adaptation’ rather than promoting the democratic agency of children and young people (Priestley & Biesta, 2013: 45). In addition, the ‘responsible citizen’ capacity of *Curriculum for Excellence* (2009) would appear to concentrate on apolitical forms of citizenship such as a detached and abstract understanding of different beliefs and cultures and developing informed, ethical views of complex issues<sup>4</sup>. These aims neglect the development of ‘the political dimensions of citizenship and the promotion of forms of political literacy that position democratic citizenship beyond individual responsibility’ (Biesta, 2008: 50), and as such do little to address broader sociological issues.

In trying to create conditions that promote the development of agency, an acknowledgement of the interdependency and inseparability of agency and societal structures is therefore important. The United Kingdom has one of the biggest class divides in education within the industrialised world and there are clear connections between poverty, social class and poor educational attainment among British children. Class continues to be the strongest predictor of low educational attainment (Perry & Francis, 2010; Ball, 2008) and the gap between the achievement of disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers ‘remains a complex and seemingly intractable problem’ (Perry & Francis, 2010: 4). Class

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<sup>4</sup>See I’Anson and Jasper (2017) for a critique of current approaches to cultural difference.

differences and inequalities are firmly entrenched, ‘everywhere and nowhere, denied yet continually enacted’ (Reay, 2006: 289). However, the term social class is rarely found in education policy: ‘it has been replaced first by social exclusion and now by social disadvantage’ (Ball, 2008: 197). Perhaps this is because class intersects gender and ‘race’ inequalities (as well as others) often resulting in a clustering of disadvantages as aforementioned (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007; Ball, 2008: 196). When the term social class is found in Scottish educational policies, it is linked to teachers’ low expectations, underachievement and lack of aspirations (Priestley & Humes, 2010: 20). Individual agency depends on social and economic arrangements but ‘[u]nequal social and political circumstances lead to unequal chances to choose’ (Walker, 2003: 172). In sociological terms, ‘unequal chances to choose’ can be due to lack of cultural or social capital, as described earlier, and the education system is judged to be one of the most efficient ways of reproducing inequality – whilst *also*, paradoxically, a potential means for acquiring the necessary social, cultural and linguistic capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Empirically, it is challenging to discern whether or not agency has been respected and encouraged in schools (Ibrahim & Tiwari, 2014), and if young people are making decisions about what they themselves value or if the decisions are based on parental, community and peer pressure. It could be said that some young people opt for goals that are ‘less ambitious’ (Burchardt, 2009: 8) purely because that is what is expected by peers and family members. However, such a statement presumes that it is possible to differentiate ‘the young person’ from her broader relational setting in this way. Judging what is ‘ambitious’ and what is not, and working out if subjective aspirations are ‘low’, is thus inherently complex, value laden, and could well be theoretically misconceived.

Once it is acknowledged that there are ‘different conceptions of the good life’ (Walker, 2003: 178), respecting young people’s choices and supporting their agency might then be framed as exercises in practical reason with regards to available political and economic opportunities. Support within these terms, might entail encouragement to imagine future horizons through entering into ‘meaningful relationships with people [who are both] like and *unlike* themselves’ (Walker, 2003: 179, italics inserted). This gestures towards the importance of testing out imaginative opportunity and experiencing bridging capital - a type of social capital that describes connecting people across a perceived societal divide (such as race, religion or class). Bridging capital crosses social boundaries fostering associations that ‘bridge’ communities and groups, increasing tolerance and acceptance of ‘difference’ (Claridge, 2018). Since a root meaning of education (*‘educere’*) is to lead out (Masschelein, 2010), offering opportunities for bridging and entertaining other opportunities could be key in reconnecting schools with educational purpose. In other words, schools, as educative institutions, have a role to play in supporting young people in considering new imaginative possibilities, to enable them to move ‘beyond themselves’ so as to imagine ‘where they think they are going, where they want to go’ and, crucially, ‘how they can get there from where they are at present’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 984).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) add another theoretical layer to the notion of agency reconceptualising it as ‘a temporally embedded process of social engagement’ (p.962) informed by the past, present and future. Within these terms, agency is

three dimensional: iterational (past); practical-evaluative (present); projective (future). An acknowledgement of past and present relations and identifications is important but shifting the focus towards future imaginative projection would allow agentic processes to shape future possibilities. Here, the achievement of ‘projective capacity’, the ability to imagine alternative possibilities, is of particular significance. This imaginative work involves re-thinking future horizons of possibility to include a broader range of options (which may or may not be put into practice). In terms of entertaining new imaginative possibilities, schools have a role in opening up these new horizons - particularly since adolescence is an important transitional period during which young people can ‘loosen themselves from past patterns of interaction and reframe their relationships to existing constraints’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 2008: 1010). If education is ‘to lead out’ (Masschelein, 2010) then all young people need opportunities to engage in such imaginative exploration, linked to the development of critical capacities to ‘read’ past and present horizons.

Acknowledging sociological barriers coupled with ‘clear and well-thought through mechanisms for intervention and a nuanced understanding of what aspiration intervention can, and cannot, achieve’ (Raffo et al., 2007: 70) could aid educationalists in Scotland - and, indeed, elsewhere. So too could understanding the practical implications of translating an analysis of the different kinds of capital (such as bridging) and a commitment to new imaginative work (such as that described by Emirbayer & Mische, 2008) in the light of this. In other words, theory is potentially resourceful in thinking through how young people can ‘mediate the structuring contexts within which action unfolds’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and

has broader implications for thinking through how equality of opportunity might be more effectively realised within educational contexts.

## **Conclusion**

Education ‘is likely to be the most widely used and most acceptable policy tool for equalizing life chances’ (Ermisch, 2012: n.p.) as it is perceived to be the chief means through which young people might transcend transgenerational disadvantages, adaptive preferences and habitus. And yet, after a decade of apparently inclusive policies in Scotland, there continue to be significant barriers to equality of educational opportunity. This suggests it is necessary that future policy interventions encompass the multi-dimensional nature of unequal access to education, the complexities of disadvantage, aspiration and normativity. According to Reay (2012: 9), equality of educational opportunity cannot rely solely on better delivery of the curriculum but must address a multitude of factors: a shift in attitude to working classes; a move away from ‘elites’ view of the working classes as an unruly undisciplined mass’ or people who need to take more responsibility for their own lives. Changing views and increasing understanding of restrictive societal structures is a ‘vital precursor to a socially just educational system’ (Reay, 2012: 9).

Beyond such an acknowledgement, this paper has also argued that if schools are to better promote equality, a more thorough engagement with theory is necessary as a resource for thinking and practising differently. Here, an analysis in terms of the different kinds of capital (such as bridging) and more complex (embodied) understandings of agency can be drawn upon in order to identify limitations within

current policy discourses that have been identified. In other words, an acknowledgement of barriers faced, the identification of relational strategies in the light of this, coupled with an encouragement of new imaginative work may each be necessary if equality of outcome is to be seriously entertained as an educational possibility for all young people.

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