

# **Social Reproduction and Education Policy**

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**ABSTRACT** The last half-century of sociology of education is littered with the debris of functionalist theories about social reproduction, inequality and class. This article discusses 'progressive' and 'conservative' readings of arguments about social reproduction and explores the consequences for the sociology and the politics of education with reference to supposed 'influence' and 'audience'. New Labour's embrace of the school effectiveness/improvement movement and the introduction of the Sure Start programme illustrate that while 'social reproduction' is still a concern for sociologists of education, policy-makers have more 'practical' concerns.

## **Introduction**

The theme of the International Sociology of Education Conference held in London in January 2003, 'Class, Inequality, and Social Reproduction: The Position of Education', has dominated the sociology of education for over half a century. The social sciences have long been concerned with 'social reproduction'. What is conceived as 'the social' varies with different theoretical systems, although what is 'reproduced' usually involves hierarchies of 'classes' and occupational status. Education, both in the broadest sense and more narrowly school-based, is invariably involved because the hierarchies reproduced are said to relate to knowledges, skills, understandings, values orientations, ideology, etc., acquired through learning in school as well as in the family and other formal and informal social institutions. The relative significance of specific social institutions is said to vary over time; in medieval Europe, for example, the Church played a more significant role than it does in the twenty-first century. In different societies today, different social institutions matter more than others, but the school and the family appear central. 'Socialisation' is the generally agreed term

used by sociologists and others to refer to processes in learning social values, knowledges, skills etc. that are involved in social reproduction. I have discussed the theoretical problems associated with the notion of 'socialisation' at length in *Contemporary Theories in the Sociology of Education* (Demaine, 1981, pp. 13-46).

Sociology of education is particularly concerned with processes of socialisation involved in social reproduction, focusing on specific mechanisms in the school, the classroom and the family, and on 'outcomes'. In the longer term, outcomes are said to involve the acquisition of educational qualifications and 'appropriate attitudes and values'. Together, these are seen as leading eventually to occupations which are hierarchical in terms of desirability, social status, pay, etc. Although the range of occupations might change from generation to generation and some may become more or less desirable or provide greater or less income to the incumbent, forms of hierarchy remain. The school and the family are said to play their part in social reproduction as each new generation takes up social roles and occupations left by the previous generation as well as newly emerging occupations.

Although changes in the character of society, the economy and the technical requirements of occupations and other social roles are seen as changing over time, the hierarchical character of social systems remains so that, to quote Willis (1977), for example, 'working-class kids get working-class jobs'. Although social reproduction in this sense is not guaranteed, and a degree of 'social mobility' is said to occur, most middle-class children aspire to and eventually find their way into middle-class occupations. Sociologists of education are concerned to explain why and how this continues to be so, despite and indeed because of the huge investment made by families (see Ball & Vincent, 2001; Ball, 2003) and by the state in the education of children and young people.

In this article I distinguish between what I call 'progressive' and 'conservative' readings of social reproduction theory; the latter is captured in Willis's phrase about working-class 'kids' and their job prospects. Conservative readings regard social inequality and the *status quo* as the inevitable outcome of processes at work in families and schools. Of course, Willis and other such 'radicals' who offer a conservative reading usually take a *progressive* stance on social reproduction, arguing that the *status quo* they describe is evidence enough of the need for social change to be brought about through change in education and other social reform (for further discussion of 'radicalism' in sociology of education, see Demaine, 1977, 1981). Whether they see themselves as radical, reformist, revolutionary or merely social philosophers content only to explain the world, sociologists of education who discuss the issue of social reproduction often take a moral or political stance on educational and social inequality, addressing an assumed 'audience' of social actors; namely politicians, other academics, schoolteachers and teachers-in-the-making (trainees is a word I prefer to avoid), who are seen as

possible agents of social change in a position to strive for 'social justice' (but see Gewirtz, 2001).

In examining accounts of social reproduction and their conservative and progressive interpretations, this paper argues that, in Britain, New Labour regards education as a dynamic force for social progress. Although critics talk of a 'betrayal of socialist principles' in the retention of much of the quasi-market approach introduced by the Conservatives, New Labour has attacked conservative interpretations of the social reproduction argument and has been keen to distance itself from what are referred to as 'the forces of conservatism in education' (Blair, 1999). Much of the criticism of New Labour, and of the Conservatives before them, was that neither has addressed the conservatism of social reproduction *effectively* even though both parties claim their own kinds of 'radicalism' in matters of education policy.

### **Conservatism, Social Reproduction Theory and the Problem of Functionalism**

The account of social reproduction offered by sociologists of education presents two kinds of problem. One is the theoretical problem of functionalism, and the other is the related problem of a possibly conservative reading by a supposed 'audience'. Theoretical problems and difficulties arise where the social reproduction thesis appears as an aspect of a distinct social theory, such as in Talcott Parsons' account of the social system, Louis Althusser's account of the ideological state apparatuses in securing capitalist relations of production, or Bowles & Gintis' so called 'correspondence thesis'. All of these involve either an explicit functionalism, as in the case of Parsons, or fall into functionalism in the case of Althusser (see Demaine, 1981; Gane, 1983) and Bowles & Gintis (see Demaine, 1981).

Parsonian functionalism conceives of education as a social process in which the school class, as a social system, inculcates appropriate values and attitudes in future workers. As Parsons (1959) puts it, the 'mechanic as well as the doctor needs to have not only the basic "skills of his trade", but also the ability to behave responsibly toward those people with whom he is brought into contact in his work'. The school class performs its role in securing what he refers to as 'functional prerequisites'. Somewhat similar accounts are provided by the various brands of neo-Marxism that flourished during the 1970s (see Demaine, 1981). Paradoxically, in that era, sociology had often been taught as if there was an academic struggle or choice between functionalism and Marxism, even though the latter has clearly functionalist elements. Marxist functionalism is discussed at length by Mike Gane (1983) with particular reference to Althusser's conception of ideological state apparatuses and the problem is also discussed in my *Contemporary Theories in the Sociology of Education* (Demaine, 1981, pp. 14-29).

In the 1970s, with many western economies and societies experiencing rapid change, the social sciences, including sociology of education, were

energised by new ways of thinking about social reproduction. The work of the French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, electrified many fields of investigation and the sociology of education in particular. Althusser brought together many earlier themes: the question of the school, the family, socialisation and value orientation, in a sophisticated argument that proposed that social reproduction involved the reproduction of ideology through what he referred to as ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). Education was said to be the modern and dominant ISA, with the family-school 'couple' reproducing social classes, occupational hierarchy and 'appropriate' value orientations and 'ideology'. Ideology was conceived as much more than mere 'ways of thinking'; it was 'practice', a living 'imaginary relation to the real' or what Pierre Bourdieu would later refer to as '*habitus*'. Indeed, Althusser was to open the door to much that was to follow on the themes of 'social reproduction'. For example, see the work of Bourdieu and his numerous academic followers (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and more recent work on segregation in France (van Zanten, 2001, 2003).

In an attempt to escape the Parsonian functionalism that had dominated mainstream American sociology, writers on education sought refuge in various neo-Marxisms and in a critique of the 'radicalism' of Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1971). Illich had located the source of 'social problems and the value crises of modern societies' in schools and their need to reproduce alienated patterns of consumption. Neo-Marxists such as Bowles & Gintis argued that these patterns were manifestations of deeper workings of the capitalist economic system, which in turn fed back into the education system. This was a less comfortable functionalism than that usually attributed to Parsons, but functionalism nonetheless. In their *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), Bowles & Gintis found the source of social decay not in the 'autonomous, manipulative behaviour of corporate bureaucracies', as Illich had, but in the 'normal operation of the basic economic institutions of capitalism' (p. 76). One of the most significant institutions of capitalism was said to be the education system. Bowles & Gintis' elaboration of the 'correspondence thesis' proposed that 'different levels of education feed workers into different levels within the occupational structure and, correspondingly, tend toward an internal organisation comparable to levels in the hierarchical division of labor' (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 132). Education is treated as an agency of supply of appropriately trained (in the language of the time) 'manpower', and the 'needs of the economy' feed back to organise the structure of the education system.

By comparison with Bowles & Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Louis Althusser's earlier short paper *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (known as the ISA paper) is a sophisticated piece of writing. His approach to the question of ideology and social reproduction came to dominate sociological thinking, not only in education but across a wide range of areas, but nevertheless presents a functionalist argument. Althusser's ISA paper begins with a line from Marx's much-quoted letter to Kugelmann: 'Every child

knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year' (Marx, 1868). Althusser (1971) goes on to argue that the 'point of view of production or that of productive practice is so integrated into our everyday consciousness that it is very difficult to think beyond it and to take the point of view of reproduction'. Althusser argues, as Marx had done, that in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce its own conditions of production. He adds, however, a range of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and a Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) which function to secure the conditions of reproduction. Althusser distinguishes between the reproduction of relations of production and the reproduction of productive forces, and argues that the reproduction of labour power takes place in the ISAs. In a phrase redolent of Parsons' (1959) essay 'The School Class as a Social System', Althusser argues that:

besides these techniques and knowledges, and in learning them, children at school also learn the 'rules' of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is 'destined' for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. (Althusser, 1971, p. 127)

Althusser's argument is that the reproduction of labour power requires not only the reproduction of skills, competencies, etc., but also the reproduction of submissive *attitude* to the rules of the established order. Of course, in many other respects it is rather different from Parsonian functionalism, but it is functionalism nonetheless. For a non-functionalist account of the relations between education and the economy, see Hussain (1976), who effects a break-out from 'economistic and sociologistic conceptions which dominate the literature on education'. The theoretical problem with all functionalisms lies in their teleology (see Hindess, 1977), and in the case of Althusser there are specific problems with the notion of 'structural causality' (see Cutler et al, 1977/1978; Demaine, 1981, pp. 82-85). For the purposes of my present discussion, it is sufficient simply to note that the functionalisms discussed above leave open the possibility of an interpretation of social reproduction as the *necessary end* of the processes of education and family socialisation, with all the inequality of outcome that is entailed; what I have called the 'conservative' reading or interpretation.

### **Radicalism, Social Reproduction, and the Question of 'Influence' and 'Audience'**

The social reproduction thesis was re-introduced to its supposed audience by the radical new sociology of education that emerged in the late 1970s, which incorporated the neo-Marxisms of Freire, Althusser, and Bowles & Gintis among others, and pointed to Alfred Schutz's phenomenology for

philosophical support for its research methodology (see Young, 1971, 1972; Demaine, 1977). Of course, the radical new sociologists of education, like the older ones before them, regarded such analysis of the *status quo* as a damning critique of education in capitalist society, and had not 'intended' a conservative reading of the social reproduction thesis. Their supposed 'audience' of politicians, teachers and teachers-in-the-making would be sufficiently morally offended by what had been laid bare in their analysis that they would spring into political action to secure a fundamental change. Unfortunately, the mechanisms of political action were not adequately problematised and, more often than not, were left to assertions of the need to 'raise awareness' (for criticism of this approach, see Demaine, 1980).

By the end of the 1970s, the sociology of education is said to have lost much of the influence (see Demaine, 1992; Dale, 2001) it had in the late 1950s and 1960s, when the comprehensive reform of secondary schooling had begun in Britain. There is good reason to think that this supposed 'influence' may be somewhat exaggerated, since in the late 1950s and early 1960s the sociology of education was relatively undeveloped in Britain. Convention has it that the political influence of A.H. Halsey's work on the reproduction of educational inequality influenced Labour Party politics, and in particular the ambition of Anthony Crossland to abolish the grammar schools and introduce comprehensive education. A more credible explanation is that, although politicians almost certainly form some of their politics through exposure to academic argument and 'think-tank' debates, they can also think for themselves and, when in power, seek out academic and other arguments for what they want to do.

The history of education policy is littered with examples of this. Cyril Burt's work on IQ was sought out as academic support for selection in the late 1940s and 1950s; Halsey's work was drawn upon by Crossland and his political allies as support for their plans for comprehensivisation; and in the 1980s Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher turned to the work of Arthur Seldon, Stuart Sexton and other new Right thinkers for support for their plan to introduce a market into education. In all of these illustrations, the politicians made their choices, but the realisation of policy has always been 'incomplete' from the academic and think-tank point of view. The comprehensive 'ideal' was not fully achieved, in part because internal selection became the norm in secondary schools, and, although profound, the effect of new Right thinking has not been complete (see Sexton, 1999).

Although sociologists of education have been at the forefront of *criticism* of new Right thinking on education, in policy terms they have for the most part been 'outsiders', commenting on rather than influencing developments in education. More often than not, their analysis of social reproduction has had no audience able to act upon what Whitty (2001), citing Goodson & Grace, refers to as its 'big picture'. An exception to this argument about 'influence' in the context of the bigger picture of social reproduction can be found in the feminist research in sociology of education (see Dale, 2001 for

further discussion). The influence of Althusser is evident in Miriam David's *The State, the Family and Education* (1980), and other feminist sociologists such as MacDonald (1980) drew on Bowles & Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America* to elaborate a feminist critique of the social reproduction thesis. Important changes to the education of girls in school and women in higher education were influenced by such work, precisely because the social reproduction thesis was *challenged* at a time when economic and political circumstances were favourable. A receptive audience of politicians, teachers and teachers-in-the-making, together with the radical restructuring of the labour market, resulted in a dramatic modernisation of attitudes to girls' and women's education. The education of girls has improved to such an extent that in primary and secondary school they outperform boys across the curriculum, and women have become a majority student group in higher education in Britain. As a result of educational, political, social and economic change, a proportion of women are now no longer confined to what was once referred to as 'women's work' although most working-class girls and women still continued to get working-class jobs as a consequence of the educational qualifications they secure at secondary school (see Gillborn & Mirza, 1998).

### **Social Reproduction and School Improvement in a Quasi-market Environment**

The radical reform of educational opportunities for schoolgirls and for women is a very important part of the 'bigger picture' that emerged during the latter part of the twentieth century. But another important legacy is the 'quasi-market' in education, brought about by the new Right's influence in the 1980s and 1990s. Significant aspects of the quasi-market have been retained by New Labour since coming to power in 1997 (see Tomlinson, 2001a, 2001b) and Labour has also embraced the school effectiveness/improvement movement which first gained a foothold during the Conservative administration of education.

In 1989, a study entitled *The School Effect*, by David J. Smith of the much-respected Policy Studies Institute and the highly accomplished and well-respected sociologist of education Sally Tomlinson, established that 'there are large differences between schools in the academic results they achieve with children from similar backgrounds and having the same level of attainment at an earlier time.' (Smith & Tomlinson, 1989, p. 280). The authors went on to say that they had 'not been able to achieve our original objective of explaining why some schools are more successful than others'. However, the shortest chapter in the book, Chapter Eight on 'Teachers and Schools', which takes up hardly more than one page in a book of 325 pages, makes reference to 'very large differences between schools in their styles of organisation, in the extent and nature of discussion among teachers about curriculum and policy matters, in the rate of change they have experienced,

and in the way they have dealt with change' (p. 129). Smith & Tomlinson go on to say that they:

believe that the key to progress in understanding secondary schools is the study of the structure and *dynamics* of school organisations, and of management methods at the level of the school, the subject departments and the units of pastoral care. (p. 130)

Management methods, a focus on subject departments and on teachers themselves are precisely the concern of the 'school effectiveness/improvement movement' (for an overview, see Reynolds, 1999). However, the school effectiveness/improvement movement was taken up by the Conservatives and used in rather different ways than the academic authors of earlier work might have imagined. As Sally Tomlinson was later to observe:

the realities of social class and education were obscured by governments which seized on school effectiveness research which superficially supported the political message that 'poverty is no excuse' for schools in deprived areas obtaining low examination results, and enabled a blame and shame culture to flourish. (Tomlinson, 2001b)

A political culture of 'blame and shame' was made all the more possible as a result of the centralised powers that government secured under the cloak of new Right policy of 'liberalisation' of education (see Demaine, 1999). Centralisation had not been the intention of the new Right architects of a 'liberalised' system of education but, nevertheless, as a result of their initiative (see Demaine, 1988, 1989, 1990) today a quasi-market and a central 'statist' interventionist ideology on policy for education vie with each other.

In this context, New Labour sees an opportunity to pursue what the Labour MP David Chaytor describes as a passionate 'commitment to equality of educational opportunity and the need to develop the potential of each individual child'. He goes on to assert that New Labour has 'delivered new investment to our schools on an unprecedented scale' (Chaytor, 2002). A rather more complex account is offered by Howard Glennerster (2001), who shows that during New Labour's first term of office, overall spending on education fell to levels of GDP 'lower than in the depths of the Thatcher cutbacks'. Nevertheless, expenditure on pre-school projects such as the Sure Start programme and primary school expenditure rose during New Labour's first term and secondary education benefited in particular from the 2000 Comprehensive Spending Review, while the whole of the state education service benefited from the 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2000, 2002).

While acknowledging Labour's reform of primary and pre-school education, its critics, including some Labour MPs, argue that its policy for equality of educational opportunity has been marred by the maintenance of selection, and indeed the introduction of *new forms* of selection in the secondary sector:

The danger is that the Government's magnificent intentions, and its outstanding success in reforming pre-school and primary education, will fail to deliver the great leap forward in our secondary schools because we have failed to cast off the social prejudices and the educational mythology of a bygone era. Rather than build policy on the basis of evidence, the Government has chosen to conduct the debate on the transformation of secondary education through sound-bite and simplistic rhetoric. We have been guilty of misguided political cowardice in failing to confront the arrogance of the (surprisingly small) pro-selection lobby. We have been guilty of indefensible intellectual cowardice by acquiescing in the assumptions of the (rapidly ageing) conservative establishment. (Chaytor, 2002, p. 6)

Sociologists of education see New Labour's education policy in much the same way (see for example, Edwards et al, 1999; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001; Edwards & Tomlinson, 2002; Ball, 2003). However, very few British sociologists of education have a political audience able to act on their policy-sociology, and although they might have an audience of teachers and teachers-in-the-making, these are too severely constrained in what they can do to make a difference to *most* children's educational outcomes. While largely failing to gain the ear of significant politicians, there seems little danger that sociologists of education will lose sight of the 'bigger picture' although, as Grace has long warned, some 'education reformers have been guilty of producing naive school-centred solutions with no sense of the structural, the political and the historical as constraints' (cited in Whitty, 2001). Mortimore & Whitty (1997) identify a 'number of prominent sociologists of education in Britain' who have focused on school-centred solutions; namely, those involved in the 'school effectiveness and school improvement'. In fact, those involved in the school effectiveness/improvement movement are among the very few politically influential sociologists of education in Britain today. While the extent of their influence should not be overstated, it is clear that their influence with New Labour politicians has come about at the cost of suspending or putting aside perspectives on social reproduction.

The British sociologist of education who is probably most directly involved in central government policy formation is David Reynolds, a founding member of the editorial board of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, whose work has been highly significant in establishing the national literacy and numeracy schemes. Numerous critics point to false assumptions, errors and contradictions in the work of the school effectiveness/improvement movement. However, theoretical coherence, or lack of it, is neither guarantee of nor bar to political influence. The new Right influence on education policy during the 1980s and early 1990s is a clear enough illustration. The 'movement' for school effectiveness/improvement is regarded by politicians as a movement unencumbered by a conservative reading of the social reproduction thesis; that's what makes them worth working with. Reynolds himself accepts that, for the most part, schools do reproduce class difference

and division, and that the school is responsible for only up to about 15% of the variation in performance of its pupils (Reynolds, 1995). But the prospect of such improvement is an opportunity that, politically, New Labour cannot afford to pass up. It must be added that even those sociologists of education who distance themselves most stridently from the school effectiveness/improvement movement do, nevertheless, want to see schools improve (see Thrupp, 1999). Indeed, for many of them the improvement of educational opportunity for all, and in particular the pursuit of equality of educational opportunity for the disadvantaged, has been the focus of their life's work. The danger is that rather than *whole* school improvement, New Labour policy will mean improvement for some but not all (see Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001), with many already advantaged schools gaining further advantage in a system driven by quasi-market forces which contribute to social reproduction (Tomlinson, 2001a, 2001b; Ball, 2003; Power et al, 2003).

### **From Social Reproduction to the Sure Start Programme**

The phrase 'education cannot compensate for society' coined by Basil Bernstein (1970) captures much of what is at stake in the debate over social reproduction. Bernstein, James S. Coleman (1966) and numerous others have long argued that 'education' is not *reducible* to what goes on in schools. It's not that schools don't matter; quite the contrary, they matter within the context of the wider range of social relations. The good intentions that informed the creation of education action zones bear witness to that (see Power, 2003). Political policy intervention in the social processes involved in learning necessarily involves addressing pre-school education and the contribution to learning made by parents, guardians, childminders, carers, nursery teachers and others. Echoing the much earlier work of the child psychologists John and Elizabeth Newson in their *Seven Years Old in the Home Environment* (1976), Roy Nash (2003) argues persuasively that 'cognitive operations effected by the cognitive *habitus* are fundamentally involved in the reproduction of inequality/difference'.

The older debates over children's learning were cluttered with discourses on 'cultural deprivation', 'relativism' and spurious accounts of 'intelligence', but there is little doubt that differences in the early learning and care of children contribute to their capacity to learn in the future. A parent who cannot read is not likely to be able to teach his or her children to read. Leaving aside notions of 'cultural deprivation' and 'intelligence', and avoiding essentialism, it is safe to say that there are many experiences which contribute to learning, understanding and the acquisition of knowledges. The problem for educators and for politicians concerned with education lies in the fact that it is difficult, sometimes to the point of impossibility, to intervene in the very earliest stages of a child's learning. The nearest that western liberal democracies have been able to get has been through programmes such as the

Head Start Project that began in Washington, DC in the 1960s (see Coleman, 1966, 1969).

In Britain today, the Sure Start programme aims to:

improve the health and well-being of families and children before and from birth, so children are ready to flourish when they go to school. It does this by setting up local Sure Start programmes to improve services for families with children under four spreading good practice learned from local programmes to everyone involved in providing services for young children. (DfEE, 1999)

Sure Start works with parents-to-be, parents and children 'to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children – particularly those who are disadvantaged – so that they can flourish at home and when they get to school, and thereby *break the cycle of disadvantage* for the current generation of young children' (DfEE, 1999, emphasis added). The older discourse on 'deprivation' has been replaced by one on 'disadvantage' and the notion of a cycle that can be broken. However, it has to be borne in mind that when the disadvantaged are allowed to 'flourish' they do so in a context in which other children also flourish. The middle classes choose their childminders and pre-schools very carefully.

Sure Start is said to be a cornerstone of the government's drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion, and by October 2002 there were 342 such programmes. By 2004 New Labour intends to have established at least 500 local Sure Start programmes, concentrated in neighbourhoods where about 400,000 children live in disadvantaged circumstances, including a third of all children up to the age of four living in poverty (DfES, 2003). The Government invested £452 million in Sure Start during the period from 1999 to 2002, with the Comprehensive Spending Review in July 2000 (HM Treasury, 2000) announcing an extra £580 million for Sure Start over the period April 2001 to March 2004. According to the Sure Start website, Sure Start is concerned with:

improving social and emotional development by supporting early bonding between parents and their children, helping families to function and by enabling the early identification and support of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. ([www.surestart.gov.uk/home](http://www.surestart.gov.uk/home))

The scale of the challenges addressed by the Sure Start programme is registered in the targets set for the programmes. Again according to the website, these include:

reducing the proportion of children aged 0-3 on the child protection register by 20 per cent by 2004; implementing 'culturally sensitive' ways of caring for and supporting mothers with post-natal depression; contacting all parents and infants within two months of birth and supporting parents in caring for their children to promote healthy development before and after birth. By 2005-06 a six per cent reduction in the proportion of mothers who continue to smoke during pregnancy; guidance on breast feeding, hygiene and safety and a ten per cent

reduction in children aged 0-3 admitted to hospital as an emergency with gastro-enteritis, a respiratory infection or a severe injury.

Sure Start is charged with improving children's ability to learn through the provision of 'high-quality environments' and childcare that promotes early learning, provides stimulating and enjoyable play, improves language skills and ensures early identification and support of children with special needs so that by 2004 there is a 5% reduction in the number of children with speech and language problems requiring specialist intervention by the age of four. All children in Sure Start areas are to have access to good-quality play and learning opportunities, helping progress towards early learning goals when they get to school. Evaluations of individual Sure Start programmes are ongoing (see, for example, Belderson & Thoburn, 2002).

### **Conclusions**

Aspects of the reform of education, especially the further development of the national literacy and numeracy schemes, the programme to establish education action zones and other state interventions in children's early learning, build upon opportunities for basic learning addressed by the Sure Start programme. 'School improvement' and the striving for more 'effective schools' through target-setting, the promotion of 'good practice', and the focus on school leadership and effective middle-management are all part of New Labour policy on 'standards'. In setting out its programme of educational reform New Labour has not ignored the social reproduction thesis. Rather, its rhetoric speaks explicitly of 'breaking the cycle' of reproduction of deprivation through early education. While the Sure Start programme is to be applauded for its radicalism it remains to be seen how effective it will be in the longer term. Laudable as Sure Start is, few, if any, sociologists of education would imagine that Labour's reform programme is likely to make a difference to established patterns of social reproduction (see Mortimore & Whitty, 1997), especially when other parts of its programme have the effect of further advantaging the already advantaged.

In this article I have not disputed the empirical character of social reproduction and the role that education plays in it. However, I have argued that functionalist theories of social reproduction are problematical and I demonstrate that this has been well understood by sociologists for over thirty years. In empirical terms, social class is the strongest determinant of the opportunity to learn what is required to gain educational qualifications, because that opportunity is structured by arrangements that lie outside the school as well as inside. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that some *individuals* do indeed break out. This is by no means a new phenomenon: Roy Jenkins, Harold Wilson, John Major and Neil 'the first Kinnock in a thousand generations to go to university' provide well-known illustrations from across the political spectrum. Some of the readers of this article, and its author, will want to add their names to that list, as no doubt would many

other sociologists and countless workers in a wide range of differing fields. In most, but not all cases, education will have played a significant role, but for every such individual there are hundreds of thousands on the 'cycle of reproduction', although I cannot imagine many of them seeing their circumstances in functionalistic terms.

Despite the evident sophistication of Althusser's analysis of social reproduction, and the more recent though often closet functionalism of those who regard the school effectiveness/improvement movement and the Sure Start programme as part of a growing ideological state apparatus, this mode of analysis has little to recommend it. If there are any 'true Althusserians' left I suspect they would indeed regard the school effectiveness/improvement movement and the Sure Start programme as part of the ideological state apparatus. But so what? For Althusser *everything* involved in the family-school couple formed part of the ideological state apparatus. New Labour thinking on education, the family and other social matters is carried out on a completely different terrain; social thought and social policy has moved on.

Today, the reform of pre-school opportunities in Britain through the Sure Start programme, the further development of the national literacy and numeracy schemes, new internal arrangements aimed at whole-school improvement and, where it exists, the serious effort to make schools more effective in the provision of educational opportunity for all, constitute important change. It is unlikely that all these policies could be *completely* ineffective and the possibility of the benefit of improved educational opportunities for a generation of children cannot be dismissed, even if unlikely to make a significant impact on the broader pattern of social inequality, on 'social reproduction' or on the 'bigger picture'. This last point must stand as the main conclusion of this article. Although in its functionalist forms social reproduction *theory* is problematical, as an empirical, descriptive account of the 'bigger picture' the notion of 'social reproduction' remains unchallenged at the cost of being unhelpful to its supposed audience of practitioners: reformist politicians, teachers and teachers-in-the-making. The articulation of social reproduction theory is relatively easy, if outdated and politically unhelpful; the implementation of education policy is a far more difficult matter.

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