

# Inequality and the next generation

Gary Thomas explains how the gradient of difference can impact upon identity in the classroom

**Inequality is bad – for individuals and for societies. And the worse off you are, the worse are the effects of inequality. These are now established facts of social science.**

**Yet recent events and austerity-led policy have resulted in inequality becoming more, not less, exaggerated. Psychologists need to find new ways of understanding the consequences of inequality and to discover ways of engaging with institutions to attenuate its effects.**

## questions

As psychologists, do our ways of thinking distract us – or, worse, discourage us – from looking at wider features of the environments people inhabit?

If there is evidence to show that psychological harm can come from inequality, shouldn't we be doing our best to reduce markers of inequality and difference in schools?

## resources

Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2009). *The spirit level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*. London: Allen Lane. See also [www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/spirit-level-why-equality-better-everyone](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/spirit-level-why-equality-better-everyone) [www.davidsmail.info](http://www.davidsmail.info)

Before he was elected President, Barack Obama noted in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006, p.192): Between 1971 and 2001, while the median wage and salary income of the average worker showed literally no gain, the income of the top hundredth of a percent went up almost 500 percent. The distribution of wealth is even more skewed, and levels of inequality are now higher than at any time since the Gilded Age.

Obama was writing before the post-2007 recession took hold, exaggerating the inequalities even more. The social significance of the scale of these differences has, in recent years, begun to be appreciated. It is clear now that many of the troubles – psychological and physical – that we once took to be dispositional or located in some maladaptive relationship can be located in inequality. For us as psychologists, the danger is, to paraphrase David Smail (1996), that we may become so submerged in our subject and its diagnostic intricacies that we lose sight of the inexorable realities of the external world.

More than a decade ago, in looking at relative poverty and inequality, Keating and Hertzman (1999, p.3) summarised a range of epidemiological research to identify a phenomenon they called the 'gradient effect'. By this they meant the extent to which social differences exist between members of a population. They put it this way: 'Particularly striking is the discovery of a strong association between the health

of a population and the size of the social distance between members of the population... this gradient effect [obtains] not only for physical and mental health but also for a wide range of other developmental outcomes, from behavioural adjustment, to literacy, to mathematics achievement.' Keating and Hertzman discussed the significance of this effect, with the important point being that the greater the gradient amongst members (i.e. the difference existing between members of a population) the greater will be the unease, mistrust and discontent existing among those members.

Around the same time, Willms (1999a, 1999b) reported important findings about the significance of gradient for education. He examined associations between parent education and child literacy in different OECD countries – including Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, Canada, the USA and Poland – and in different US states. He found that where parents themselves were highly educated (measured by number of years in education), literacy levels of their offspring differed least, so children with highly educated parents performed equally well in each country. But for less educated parents, advantage went to the Swedes and Dutch, with Americans and Poles performing worst.

After reviewing more studies about school effects, Willms suggested why this might be so – why the children of less educated parents do better in Sweden than in the US. One of his central conclusions was about gradient: '...when students are segregated... [those] from disadvantaged backgrounds do worse' (Willms, 1999b, p.85). He notes that such segregation may come from many and varied directions: from special programmes for 'gifted' children to phenomena such as charter or magnet schools.

Chiu and Khoo (2005) confirmed the importance of the gradient effect and its significance in education on a range of measures of achievement: students' achievement is worse in countries with larger distribution inequalities, and students in countries with greater

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'privileged student bias' have lower overall achievement. Countries distributing funding more equally (such as Finland and South Korea) perform best on a range of achievement outcomes. Chudgar and Luschei (2009, p.626) also confirm the phenomenon, noting that schools are 'a significant source of variation in student performance, especially in poor and unequal countries'. Serious concern should therefore be felt about recent increases in inequality gradients. In the USA, where funding per student can vary widely (Rothstein, 2000), the gradient effect became very much more pronounced in the last quarter of the 20th century and the first years of 21st (Sennett, 2006).

### The sequelae of steep gradients

The significant ingredient in notions of gradient lies in inequality. It is about the *differences* that exist between high and low, and their magnitude and visibility, it is not about absolute levels of income or capital. It is these differences that impact on a whole range of outcomes, and it is interesting to speculate on the mechanism

of their operation in education. One plausible hypothesis is that damage is done to individuals' sense of worth and identity where they see themselves, through major differences between themselves and their peers, conspicuously excluded from the expectations, the activities, the resources and the worlds of those peers. In such circumstances people are likely to abdicate, to withdraw or to resist, as a range of research about 'deviance' has indicated (see Cohen, 1955; Cohen et al., 1999; Matza, 1964). Where it is clear because of the steepness of the gradient that any kind of equivalence of achievement is impossible, people will create their own identities, even if the process involves resistance, discomfort or 'deviance'.

The absence of the acknowledgement of the sequelae of steep social gradient can be seen with the persistence of segregation and inequality in education. Minow (2010, p.153), for example, in reviewing a range of research, observes that 'schools too often are already settings for renewed racial segregation through academic tracking, special education assignments, and

students' own divisions in lunch tables and cliques'. And, after a major review of inequality Marmot (2010, p.19) concludes: 'Inequalities in educational outcomes are as persistent as those for health and are subject to a similar social gradient. Despite many decades of policies aimed at equalising educational opportunities, the attainment gap remains.'

As Willms has noted, it is important to recognise the significance of gradient effects in our educational and social planning. He draws attention to attempts that have been made in some areas for school restructuring to move away from segregative measures to initiatives for curricular restructuring, parental participation and site-based governance. He also suggests that the beneficial influences operating in low-gradient places may be in the way parents are encouraged to relate to the school in governance and as volunteers. Likewise, Marmot (2010) points to the significance of education in the early years with closer links between schools, families and the local community with more and better extended services. More could be done in training teaching and non-teaching staff to work across home-school boundaries.



Students' achievement is worse in countries with larger distribution inequalities – and countries distributing funding more equally perform best on a range of achievement outcomes

### Reason for hope

The consequences of steep gradients are now incontestable: scrutiny of international comparisons provided by OECD (2010) for the period from 2000 to 2009 shows remarkably consistent findings relating to the gradient effect, with the countries with the shallowest gradients performing, broadly speaking, at the top of international tables of educational outcomes. In societies with greater inequality there is lower achievement at school and there are more casualties of the school system. As Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) put it, following their seminal review of the societal consequences of inequality, 'more equal societies almost always do better'.

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One should not be pessimistic about this effect in policy terms, though, for there is evidence from the work of people such as Sen (1999) that support at the local level in guiding the ways that institutions work can have spectacular success in reducing inequality and its consequences.

I have stressed that when one thinks of the gradient effect, one is considering the effect of comparison that arises out of the conspicuousness of differences in capital. But comparisons rest not merely in monetary capital; they rest in the constructs we devise precisely to enable comparison. In schools this happens through comparisons of what is taken to be ability. Comparisons on the basis of ability have forever been at the root of segregation and it is these comparisons that transmute to the alienation that is sapping of status, identity and self-belief.

It is these – identity, belonging and self-belief – that appear to me to have currency far beyond the ambit of ability. One might suggest that the alienation and exclusion experienced by students are constructed largely out of comparison – out of the comparison of each student herself or himself with others, and the institutional endorsement of such comparison by teachers and other professionals. The point to be made is that it is not so much absolute standards of ability that are important for assessing learning ‘disability,’ as perceptions concerning relative status.

It is relative status rather than ability – or its obverse in disability of multifarious kinds – that is important in generating failure. But relative status has competed

poorly as an explanatory concept against ability and disability. Ability has always shown great resilience as a framing concept despite the force of empirical evidence and rational argument to contradict it (see, for example, Dickens & Flynn, 2001; Ericsson & Delaney, 1999; Gould, 1981; Howe, 1990; McClelland, 1973; McClelland et al., 1958; Wahlstein, 1997).

Although we have known this work for some time, assessment and comparison still provide, using an ever-increasing array of tests, a process for enabling and legitimising the hierarchisation and judgement of students. Perceptions of ‘difficulty’ or ‘disability’ are thus constructed around and within discourses



of comparison – around normality and abnormality, success and failure, the functional and the dysfunctional (see also Thomas, 2013)

If the separation of one child from another is, then, down to comparison – rather than ability pure-and-simple – how do hierarchies and status actually affect identity in such a way that learning and even health are substantially affected? Marmot (2004) puts the mechanism down to the complex set of relations that exist among inequality, hierarchy, cooperation and control over one’s own life. He suggests: ‘There is a large body of literature

[referring to Sapolsky, 1999] supporting the importance of these five characteristics – control, predictability, degree of support, threat to status, and presence of outlets – that modulate the impact of a psychologically threatening stimulus’ (2004, p.114).

The latter, the psychologically threatening stimulus, is conspicuously found in the judgemental environment, with its contrasts and comparisons, created in much of today’s education. The message of work on relative judgement implies that this environment needs continual challenge – respect, identity and control need to be given back to those inhabiting the institutions that are created for them.

### Attenuate – don’t amplify

The magnified inequalities created by the worst global downturn since the 1930s encourage a re-examination of the models, ideas and theories through which we construct notions about difficulty, disadvantage, disability and deviance. Even before the recession epidemiologists were telling us of the major consequences flowing from the magnitude of income difference, and I have discussed in this article how the dynamics of that relationship work for young people in schools as well as for everyone else. But the epidemiologists’ revelations promote a realisation that the enervating mechanisms which operate to create ill health, anomie or depression operate not just through differences in income, but through other differences also – differences that institutions such as schools can, unless we are very careful, amplify rather than attenuate.



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