

Passionate partiality

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Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes (second edition)

Diane Reay, Bristol, Policy Press 2025

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In the middle, and perhaps at the heart, of the first edition of *Miseducation*, published in 2017, is the story of its author's first day at school. As a little girl of 'barely five years' in a small town on the edge of the Derbyshire coalfields, Diane Reay is 'gently pushed through the school gate' and left to the care of a state education system overseen by Anthony Eden's Conservative government. This first encounter proves inauspicious: initially for the child, but ultimately for the system. Within the hour, five-year-old Diane is standing in a corner of her classroom, punished for telling the truth about herself. A lifetime later, through academic papers, articles and books, she is still telling the truth about the system.

The second edition of *Miseducation* updates, revises and augments the first to such an extent as to appear in many respects a new book. The first edition acknowledged a debt to Jackson and Marsden's *Education and the Working Class* and engaged it in dialogue. In this edition, Reay forges her own path. Much material from the earlier edition has been set aside, including the story of Diane's first day at school. In its place, information drawn from or synthesising the most up-to-date research (allied with less recent work) is deployed alongside fresh interview content and passages or sections of new writing, to set out once more and starkly the plight of working-class children and young people in England's schools. Additionally, a new chapter considers aspects of four education systems beyond the UK – in Finland, Flanders, Japan and the USA – and weighs up what our system might take from these, and what it would do well to avoid. Another chapter critically explores the impact of the continuing academisation and free school policy. Throughout, the misery which too many current educational approaches inflict on children and young people is brought to the fore. 'We desperately need to transform the cruelties of the current system', Reay writes. For it is a system 'based on the fears, limitations and anxieties of the adults running it' (p217).

Use of the word 'cruelties' makes plain that the 'passionate partiality' Diane Reay owned to in the first edition has not abated. If anything, Reay's class consciousness burns the fiercer, along with her commitment to a more just society in which those she terms 'the working classes' are recognised and valued as social equals and educated for

success. Hitherto, they have not been.

Miseducation contains eight chapters, bookended by a personal and reflective introduction and a conclusion which looks at the policy continuities and material changes for the worse in education over the near-decade since the earlier edition was published. Reay argues that the history of state education in England 'is one of controlling and coercing the working classes' (p214). By pacifying them and making them conformable, state education has sought to render them apt for economic exploitation under capitalism. She sketches the role played by the ideology of 'intelligence' or IQism in justifying this overarching intention, and presents through the words of pupils, students, graduates and teachers the lived impact of the class biases which so inflect the system. Following the distinguished French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, she argues the need to see social class both relationally and as a thing in itself. 'No class is an island,' she writes, 'and the actions and practices of one class have reverberations for other classes' (p3). Not to adopt a relational perspective cedes too much ground to an already-pervasive cast of mind which would blame the individual rather than the rigged system, the oppressive totality, for that person's relative educational 'failure'. But class is also its own entity: 'a social space structured by levels and compositions of economic, cultural and social capital' (p14). Class is 'cultural, individualized and embodied', with 'psychic and moral aspects' and 'emotional effects' (p14).

Reay is alive to the intersectional nature of oppression, as to the specifically class-based oppression inevitable under capitalism which is the lot of all members of the working class whatever their gender, sexuality or ethnic background. She has no truck with political perspectives which would privilege those members of the working class who are white, or claim that private philanthropy or the local unorganised generosity of individuals can do the work of the state. The middle class have abnegated their share of responsibility for everyone's social welfare, she argues. Individualistic self-centred competitive capitalism, which she identifies with neoliberalism, has generated and then justified 'austerity' measures. These have pulverised the welfare state. One consequence has been the normalisation of food banks in schools in working-class areas, 'part of a wider process in which businesses and charities are being integrated into school life ... [and] another way of managing poverty rather than tackling it' (p24).

Hand-in-hand with these developments, an obdurate and sustained policy has subordinated all trappings of a liberal education to the project of readying students for exams and then the labour market. The aim is 'to produce competitive self-interested individuals focused on material gain' (pp23-4). The academisation and free school programme has exacerbated the educational damage done, and entailed a dramatic loss of local democratic engagement. A cadre of 'rich, private, often right-wing individuals' (p229) now exercises power over the education of hundreds of thousands of young people without any meaningful local democratic involvement by students themselves,

their parents and carers, their teachers or elected members of their community.

This quasi-privatisation of the state system has been followed by the imposition of oppressive approaches to the management of student behaviour, crystalised in programmes such as 'SLANT' and 'TLAC'.¹ These programmes renew mechanisms by which an earlier age also tried to render the working class compliant and obedient in school (in line with bourgeois anxieties) and which had, to an extent, been countered by 'child-centred' approaches at the high point of England's post-war social democracy, the 1960s and early 1970s. Against the self-interested misrepresentations put about by people such as Nick Gibb and Robert Peal, Reay writes: 'Since the mid-1970s, it has been the voices of those who put the needs of the child at the heart of the educational process who have struggled to make themselves heard. Instead, the radical right, and neoliberal values, have dominated the educational agenda ... For too long, child-centred education has been systematically demonized in England' (p133; p212).

Damaging consequences ensue for the education of the most disadvantaged among the working class when commodified programmes designed to inculcate ways of behaving via behaviourist means are implemented. Such programmes tend to be accompanied by approaches to teaching which routinely deny student voice and agency, and prevent teachers from exercising fully their professional judgement. Reay points out that edu-businesses make a fortune from all this, while the harms to pupils and students include extended periods in isolation, multiple internal exclusions, being named, shamed and reductively labelled, and the more subtle and enduring practical and psychic hurt which follows when students disengage from this kind of schooling and absent themselves persistently.

A high-stakes public testing regime, coupled with a relentless overemphasis on formal attainment, drives the system. Reay writes: 'English education, with its preoccupation with metrics, has largely stopped paying attention to teaching relationships, collaboration, caring' (p36). She laments 'education policy preoccupied with measurement and accountability' (p38). Significant shortcomings in the way PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) statistics for England have at times been derived (which Reay notes on page 49) have not prevented politicians from using them to boost the neoliberal education agenda to which they are bound.

That agenda, and its various practical and policy mechanisms, is justified in the name of social mobility, a response to poverty against which Reay has been writing for a long time. In *Miseducation* she criticises it in class terms. 'Social mobility' means the depletion of the working class and destruction of the idea of class solidarity, the sense of the class-for-itself. What is presented as an empowering individual project of aspiration or self-emancipation can damage those who succeed in the system on the system's terms. Upwardly mobile working-class individuals can suffer misrecognition, disdain or hostility as they make their way among their new peers of the middle class,

and, wounded, come to feel caught between two worlds while at home in neither. Reay draws from her own life to show this, and on the heartfelt words of, among others, the broadcaster Melvyn Bragg and the artist Steve McQueen.

As pupils and students make clear to Reay in interviews, the discourse of fixed innate 'ability' continues to stigmatise many young people, particularly those from working-class backgrounds. It condemns them to lower sets or 'less able' groups, and thus to demoralisation and an enduring sense of inadequacy. It licenses the narrower curriculum and less responsive teaching they undergo, and the drastically limited options that tend to result. Reay links all this to the huge decline in well-being (let alone joy in learning), which research reveals today's school pupils and students have suffered across recent years.

She has no doubt that the current system overlooks or wastes the talent of working-class students, or what she calls their 'potential', though this word presents its own problems. I may fulfil my potential, but I cannot exceed it. The word genuflects to the notion that learning is limited for each individual, and by implication that some have more potential than others when it comes to learning. As with Reay's use of the term 'working classes' rather than 'the working class', I would want to take friendly issue. Likewise, in reflecting on the inadequacy of the movement towards comprehensive schooling, Reay asserts that 'the greatest problem ... lay in the patterns of residential segregation which determined comprehensive school intake' (p32). But the implication that 'balancing' the intake is what matters most for comprehensivisation seems to me to tie the very knot which must be undone, for it implies a connection between social class and (projected) attainment or educational success. Not so much a 'balanced' intake as thoroughgoing anti-determinist pedagogy and attendant approaches to curriculum and assessment are what's needed.

Should there be a third edition of *Miseducation*, the argument might be further explored. Much less importantly, the pair of sentences repeated word-for-word in different parts of this edition could be redrafted, and the designation for GCSE grades updated to reflect the shift from letters to numbers.

Reay wryly notes that it is the fee-paying independent sector which now preserves a space for collaboration, creativity, student talk and agency, and what might be termed 'child-centredness'. These educationally essential elements are being extirpated from the state sector by politicians who have not hesitated to lay down in detail what shall be taught and, increasingly, how it shall be: 'The most affluent 7 per cent in society are ... nurtured, supported in developing autonomy and critical thinking, treated with respect as learners and encouraged to make mistakes and learn from them ... A good education, in the sense of one that allows children and young people to flourish, is increasingly becoming the preserve of the rich' (p122).

The injustice is self-evident. It will persist, thinks Reay, until there is what she calls 'a

sea-change in hearts and minds' (p228). Her book speaks eloquently in the cause of that revolution. At the same time, it bears witness to the struggle of working-class people to speak in the public arena at all, and testifies to the costs they incur for doing so. Reay writes that her schooling taught her she did not have the right to speak, least of all in ways that might be heard. She offers this time fewer glimpses than graced the original edition of *Miseducation* of her own experience of schooling (and of university). But each remembered example of a teacher's unfairness and a system's injustice bears witness to how deeply these may affect us, and all the more deeply the more often such injustice is encountered. Always Reay reminds us that the children and young people of the working class(es) have it harder. They are more likely to be stood in the corner, made literally or figuratively to wear a dunce's cap, mistaken (though not by each other) for drudges, servants or wait-staff, and constrained to feel out of place even though they have a perfect right to belong. All this and more happened to Diane Reay. Such wrongs are emblematic, in little, of the larger suffering of a class.

Speech is exposure, and to speak is to make oneself vulnerable. Not to speak is to find, sooner or later, that one is spoken for. Hearteningly, *Miseducation* is a book of many voices: teachers, pupils, students, and a rising generation of educational scholars whose unpublished PhD theses Reay occasionally quotes from. These voices, and principally Reay's own, call out the enterprise of mis-education. They urge our current system to be remade, so that education can come into its own as a going-beyond, a transgression of supposed limits. A door opened in the wall.

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Notes

1. SLANT: **S**it up, **L**ean forward, **A**sk and answer questions, **N**od, and **T**rack the speaker; TLAC: Teach Like A Champion.