

# Why advantage has always been in the background



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**I**T is always fascinating to me how our views on education are influenced by family background and childhood experiences.

In 1952 I was a member of a happy family. Two parents with two children. I was also surrounded by my 'extended family' which included uncles and aunts and cousins. Some of my uncles and aunts were not blood relatives but that seemed a minor issue.

My extended family was 'interesting'. One uncle would secretly serve Winalot dog food at parties, then whisper to me that everyone would 'woof it down'. When people left the local pub on a Saturday night they would see candles glowing in rows of skulls along the church wall, put there by another uncle who hid in the churchyard making wailing sounds. His other claim to fame was sucking lemons in front of a visiting brass band to put them off during the annual brass band competition.

A couple of years ago my mother's sister died at the age of 96 and was buried in the local churchyard. My wife, who had been regaled with tales of my childhood, had final confirmation that they may be 'possibly true'.

When she praised the beauty of the churchyard, which was adjacent to the Durham moors, another 'aunt' then introduced her sons. Two bald headed 50-year-olds. 'Remember when you two used to put sheets over your heads with little eye slits and hide in the graves', she said to them. 'Then when someone walked by you used to jump up and scare them.' 'When was this?', my wife asked. 'Just last week' came the answer!

My 'family' was funny and very optimistic. They also clearly saw themselves as working class and had very strong views about the inequalities in society.

I would often sit and listen to the men - it was always the men - hotly debating the topic. Very rarely, if ever, did they discuss gender inequality and certainly not racial equality.

The inequalities they were concerned about were seen as a product of class inequality. It always struck me, even as a young boy in the North East, that the issue of equality was



► Some swotting over lunch before an 11 Plus exam in 1954

much more about why working class children generally attained less (in terms of examinations) than middle class children of similar measured intelligence.

All of my family was fully behind the first major area of education policy in the post-war period, which was to address class and equality of opportunity.

They were very proud of the recently established welfare state believing the National Health and Education service was there to address these inequalities. They wholeheartedly supported the new great advances of an entirely free state education, raising the school leaving age to 15 and the tripartite system with upward mobility enhanced by the 11-Plus.

They saw the tripartite system as an attempt to bring about greater equality of opportunity and to tap previously 'wasted' sources of talent, including that of my sister and me.

My 'uncles' were not so optimistic. Whilst my own parents saw education as a means of getting out of poverty, they were less optimistic about the impact of the new state education system. The male members of my family were much more in the mould of those who believed real change would only come about through a fundamental change in the structure of society.

They also believed that getting a 'trade' was important, becoming apprenticed fitters and mechanics was a safer bet than taking exams.

Even so, my parents were confident about the reforms that were being brought in, including the opportunity for me and my sister to sit the 11-Plus exam and gain a better life.

They believed that the 11-Plus exam would select those who had ability and then the system would allocate jobs in accordance with their ability. Simple!

Even when I was in primary school I began to have my doubts. By the age of seven I could see that some pupils had advantages simply because of their backgrounds, no

matter what type of school they went to.

The 'cultural capital', ideas and knowledge the better off children brought to the school, became more and more visible. What my parents, who would later be so proud of me getting into the grammar school, failed to understand was the limited amount of 'cultural capital' I took with me. It hindered me at primary school and was a severe handicap at secondary school.

As one of the first generation grammar school boys, I would have to face the challenge of working alongside children who had inherited the cultural advantages from their parents that I did not have. I would read Shakespeare alongside children who had seen a play. Study French with children who had actually been to France.

My family's clear support for the Labour policies started to be disturbed in the late 1950s when the tripartite system was increasingly attacked by the Labour Party who began promoting the comprehensive system, arguing that the 11-plus examination discriminated against working class children.

I often wonder what they would have thought of the 1980s and 1990s. Ironically, they could empathise with the Conservative emphasis on the link between education and economic success. They would have been shocked by the anti-school culture of white North East lads in the 1990s who saw no link between getting jobs and school performance.

They also would have denigrated a system, which saw young people taking qualifications that did not even lead to a job. What they would never have conceived of was government ministers in the future advocating a 'free market' approach to education.

To them this would have challenged the very principles of a National Education Service focused on reducing inequality resulting from class divisions.

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