



University College Dublin School of Education



*“Insights into Social Class and Literacy Development in the English Classroom”*

Submitted by:

Georgia Lee Flynn

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Research Supervisor

Head of School  
*Assoc. Prof William Kinsella*  
Module Coordinator  
*Dr Deirdre McGillicuddy*

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## **1.0 Chapter One: Introduction.**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This dissertation aims to describe and discuss the impact of social class on literacy development in the English classroom. Statistics state that “one in ten children in Irish schools has serious difficulty with reading or writing, and in some disadvantaged schools this is as high as almost one in three students” (DES, 2011 p.12). From my experience of schooling in Ireland, and from my time spent on placement during the Professional Master’s in Education (PME) programme, social class and socio-economic disadvantage had a noticeable impact on pupils’ literacy skills in the English classroom. Having completed my first year of placement in a co-educational, urban DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) school, it was noticeable how broad the spectrum of ability was in each class I taught, with some students being extremely weak, and requiring numerous additional literacy supports. Although it would be inappropriate to allocate all students to any one particular social class grouping, because schools are awarded DEIS status due to the “high concentration of disadvantage” in the vicinity, it is safe to assume that the majority of students in attendance in my first placement school came from predominantly working-class backgrounds (DES, 2017 p.4).

While working in this school, I also became more and more conscious of students’ attitudes towards reading, writing, listening, and speaking in the English classroom. Many students were unwilling to take part in lessons, submit homework or admit to reading for pleasure. Moreover, many of the students in my classes were struggling in some or all of the areas mentioned above. This meant I had to deploy numerous strategies and resources to try and better engage students and support student learning. I am now currently

teaching in an all-boys non-DEIS school, and I have noticed a stark difference in students'

willingness to engage in English lessons. Many students are eager to voice opinions and discuss books they have read or are reading. In general, the work being produced by my first-year students is of a much higher quality. That is not to say that there are no students who require additional support however, there seemed to be an internalised dislike of English as a subject in my first placement school and much poorer literacy rates overall.

## ***1.2 Rationale for my choice of topic***

I come from a working-class background and faced many hurdles on my journey to higher education, therefore I believe the impact of social class on literacy development is a vital issue; one that must be understood in a more nuanced way by newly qualified teachers (NQTs). Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face discrimination and are at high risk for leaving school early due to their marginalised position within the education system (Reay, 2006). Although it is an issue which has a profound impact on a students' overall experience of education, it is not an area that is addressed thoroughly during initial teacher education. Much of the research that will be discussed in the coming chapters draws clear links between social class and educational outcomes, stating that students from disadvantaged backgrounds seem to have poorer literacy skills and less confidence when reading and writing. Social class also seems to determine students' access to education, educational resources, cultural capital and can even have a long-term impact on students who may face discrimination due to the possible existence of class biases. These students can also have trouble accessing third level education or experience low self-esteem as a result of poor literacy skills (Layte, 2017; Reay, 2006; Vargle&Jones, 2012).

In 2017, the Department of Education and Skills published a detailed DEIS plan with the goals of “improving the path of educational opportunity for those who come to education at a disadvantage and of strengthening the capacity of education and training to break cycles in communities with high concentrations of disadvantage” (DES, 2017 p.4). Interventions in other European countries to address educational inequality have established intensive literacy and numeracy strategies with Ireland following suit, by developing and introducing the national ‘*Literacy and Numeracy programme for Learning, For Life*’ in 2011 (DES, 2011). Countries such as Poland (2001), Portugal (2006), and The United Kingdom (2011) have also developed and implemented national plans to improve and encourage reading to increase the national standards in literacy (EU, 2012 p.35). Policy makers have placed “particular emphasis in the Irish context on the adoption of a whole school approach, which is recognised internationally, to enable schools to respond to new and complex challenges linked to increasing diversity in society” and by extension in our classrooms (DES, 2017 P.9).

### **1.3 How this study shall be carried out.**

Due to the nature of the PME dissertation process, and the limitations I face in terms of ethical clearance and GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) for the purpose of gathering data, I will be taking a qualitative approach to my research. Looking at academic journals, sociological theorists, policy documents, scholarly articles and my own professional observations and reflections from my time on school placement, this research aims to examine the impact of social class on education in a broader sense, before focussing more specifically on its impact on literacy development in the English classroom, as well as looking at methodologies and strategies designed to help teachers

mitigate or combat its effects on students' performance and educational outcomes in the subject of English.



#### ***1.4 Structure of the dissertation.***

The dissertation shall be divided into four parts, with Chapter One introducing the topic and the rationale for my choice. Chapter Two will provide an extensive literature review on the subject of social class, education, and literacy. Chapter Three will focus on reviewing my own practice through the lens of the literature review presented in Chapter Two and finally, Chapter Four will offer a conclusion and my position within contemporary debates about practitioner research. By gathering and synthesising the work of other educational and sociological researchers I hope to better inform teachers' classroom practice and provide insights and answers to the following questions: How does social class impact education in Irish secondary schools? How does social class impact students' literacy in Irish secondary schools? and finally, what can be done to limit the impact of social class on literacy development, and to help support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the English classroom?

## **2.0 Chapter Two: Literature Review.**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Macmillan and O'Neill (2012, p.32) define literacy as the ability to “read, to listen, and to defend a position on daily issues; to think and differentiate; and to inform our conversations and decisions as citizens.” It is the ability to participate fully in society and to have the necessary skill set to take part in all activities which require language. While ‘literacy’ has traditionally been thought about as skills of reading and writing, today our understanding of literacy encompasses much more than that, including “the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media” (DES, 2011, P.8). With literacy playing such a key role in our daily lives, it is imperative that educators acknowledge its importance. All teachers are teachers of literacy and “if working-class and poor students are going to be better served in schools, teachers must be better prepared to enact pedagogies informed by knowledge about social class and economic disparity”, and the ways these phenomena are enacted in classroom practice (Vagle and Jones p.320). While social class is a heavily disputed concept which will be discussed in detail (Cahill, 2019), the “intransigent relationship between family social class and children’s educational performance has generated a great deal of theoretical and empirical work on the part of sociologists” (Layte, 2017 p. 499) Moreover, a 2006 study conducted by Diane Reay states that inequalities and social stratification in schools “not only persist, but are growing”, with working class students moving from “a position of educational outsiders” to marginalised insiders in recent years (Reay, 2006). No longer can educators ignore the impact of social class on education, nor can they “plan only for the narrowest

definitions of literacy”

(Wendt, 2013 p.41). Instead, they must strive for a more nuanced understanding of social class and literacy development pertaining not only to English, but to all subjects.

## **2.2 The Impact of Social Class on Education.**

Reay (2006, p.288) and Cahill (2019, p.295) recognise social class as a “co-constructed and contested concept that is intrinsically relevant to societal differentiation and discrimination.” Social class remains “a central concern within education” often leading to social stratification and inequality for disadvantaged students (Reay, 2006, p.288). Social class is defined as “the relative economic position of large-scale groups, defined in relation to occupation, ownership of property and wealth or lifestyle choices” and it can be indicated in a number of ways, such as accent, dress, educational outcomes, or mannerisms and behaviour (Giddens and Sutton, 2017 p.92). However, it is important to acknowledge that boundaries between social classes are fluid and difficult to define. In the past, Marxist theory sought to uncover the process of “pauperisation” experienced by the working classes as a result of rigid class structures which existed essentially to exploit the working classes to benefit the wealthy (Marx, 1848). This experience of ‘pauperisation’ remains relevant today, and heavily influences students’ experience of schooling due to its effect on the distribution of privilege within school settings. The 1998 Education Act was designed to prevent disadvantage from impeding education and “prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit” from their time in school (Government of Ireland, 1998 p.32). The Department of Education and Skills also recognise socio-economic disadvantage as a key factor influencing student performance in Ireland (DES, 2011, p.9). Numerous studies confirm the existence of an attainment gap between students of varying class groups, and although predominant ideologies seem to

use “working class resistance to learning activities or class differences in cultural capital”  
to account for these differences, Layte

attempts to explain the influence of family investments and family income which is “the primary mechanism through which social class influences educational development (Layte, 2017 p.490).” These so-called ‘family investments’ in education can come in a variety of forms such as access to and exposure to books, “educationally useful toys and games, to trips to museums and art galleries” as well as parental time investment and parental education. Parental time plays a key role in a child’s early school performance, and it has been documented that working class children who are often left to play “independently in an unstructured fashion” have lower levels of academic achievement in comparison to their upper to middle class peers throughout their educational careers (Layte, 2017 p.490). Social class has a direct impact on socio-economically disadvantaged students’ academic achievement, and more specifically on their literacy development.

### **2.3 The Impact of Social Class on Literacy Development in Irish schools.**

Students can fail to develop adequate literacy skills for many reasons however, it has been noted that “social structures and linguistic forms are intimately intermeshed” (Davison, 2000 p.254). A 2011 Department of Education report states that “children from socially and economically disadvantaged communities are significantly more likely to experience difficulties in literacy and numeracy for reasons associated with poverty, poorer health, and a wide range of other factors” with many of these underlying reasons lying outside of the education system and some being unamenable to “school-based solutions” (DES, 2011 P.9). As mentioned previously, statistics state that “one in ten children in Irish schools has serious difficulty with reading or writing, and in some disadvantaged schools this is as high as almost one in three students” (DES, 2011 p.12). This ‘attainment gap’

becomes evident from a very early age. Social class and family investment in time, education and resources can directly influence a student's performance in school. The 2009 PISA report also

testifies that social class impacts literacy attainment as students whose parents regularly read books to them when they were in the first year of primary school score 14 points higher, on average, than students whose parents did not (OECD, 2009). Researchers point towards “variation in cultural capital, rejection of school values and gradual disengagement from school among working-class children”, but evidence suggests that “working-class children show lower levels of ability in standardized tests almost from the beginning of life” (Layte, 2017 p.490). The Department of education also note that “schools in which there are high concentrations of students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds may be affected by a “multiplier effect”, meaning these students are at high risk for failing to acquire “satisfactory literacy skills” and leaving school early without any qualifications (DES, 2011 P.62). This needs to be addressed and mitigated by improved classroom practices and whole-school interventions in order to create equity and equality of educational outcomes for such students.

MacRuaire (2011, p.535) states that more recent research into the area of social class and literacy attainment “has built on scholarship related to the discontinuity of linguistic codes”, by which the “middle-class bias of the school curriculum” and the “language register of testing” as well as classroom practice acts as a “key factor contributing to educational disadvantage” and inequality in schools. By teaching and testing students with unfamiliar and inaccessible language teachers may be unconsciously alienating and excluding certain groups of students from meaningful participation in classes. Similarly, Vagle and Jones (2012, p.320) describe the “precarious relationship students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds have with literacy” globally, examining how these students “underperform their more privileged peers” and challenge



the idea of economically disadvantaged students of being in need of “remediation or intervention,

opting instead to place the onus on teachers to re-evaluated their pedagogical approaches and educate themselves” about the impacts of social class and economic inequality on literacy. Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds are working to ‘fit’ into the middle class dominated spaces within schools, while struggling to negotiate their own distinct backgrounds and experiences. Building on Pablo Freire’s pedagogies of the oppressed, John Davison (2000, p.254) states that working-class students are failing to be empowered in schools, “through critique and debate; they are not active subjects engaging in ‘dialogue’ to generate knowledge, but are passive objects, who might engage in ‘educated discourse’ by taking notes or writing essays” without any real learning taking place. Pedagogy of poverty requires students passively completing teacher-set tasks, rather than developing their creativity, critical-thinking or problem-solving abilities, and focuses upon raising test scores in ‘basic skills’ in literacy and numeracy (Hempel et al ,2018, p.86). Rather than dedicating time to trying to ‘fix;’ these students, removing resources and attention from the real issue of “classism in literacy pedagogies”, more emphasis needs to be placed on the development of strategies and methodologies to incorporate the unique experience of these students into lessons, to help them achieve their full potential and feel truly included in their literacy development (Vagle & Jones, 2012 p.322). The question for educators then is, how do we better support these students’ literacy development?

#### **2.4 Strategies to Support Disadvantaged Students’ Literacy Development in the English Classroom.**

The Department of Education and Skills have noted that “gathering evidence about how

students learn and using this information to improve the learning opportunities teachers provide for them are essential elements” in ensuring that all students make good progress

in developing literacy and numeracy skills (DES, 2011, p.73). We must make sure to select appropriate learning programmes and methodologies, collaborate with peers and share our successes and good practice to combat this issue (DES, 2009 p.39). Despite this Wendt (2013, p.41) argues that among secondary teachers there is a “disparity between learning academic content and learning literacy”, and a lack of focus on literacy in general. Recommendations to improve literacy in struggling or disadvantaged students from researchers, educators and scholars advocate for a whole-school approach to reform and include some of the following: creating a welcoming environment in the classroom and explicit teaching of phonetics, spelling, and punctuation (DES, 2009 p.13). Introducing graphic organisers and scaffolding, as well as providing opportunities for collaboration with peers, promoting reading for pleasure, and giving students a diverse range of texts to choose from, with the aim of enabling students to experience “small, but consistent success” (DES, 2009 p.13).

Stephen Brookfield (2006) argues that in order for any meaningful learning to take place, a “climate of trust” must be created within the classroom. This becomes even more important when working with disadvantaged or marginalised learners. Students must be comfortable failing and making mistakes to grow. However, once this environment has been established other intervention strategies can be implemented, such as the promotion of reading for pleasure. Promoting reading and reading for pleasure in the classroom has the potential to “disrupt ‘pedagogy of poverty’ in low socio-economic schools” and enable students to reap the “cognitive, well-being and social benefits of reading” (Hempel et al

,2018, p.86). This in turn will include “increased skill in reading (and other subject areas)

and more sustained reader engagement,” which is particularly important for children in disadvantaged (DEIS) schools (Hempel et al ,2018, p.86). Expanding the range of texts

available to students (Vagle & Jones, 2012 p.330), and including rather than negating the students' 'home-language' (MacRuairc, 2011 p.536) also has positive impacts on students' literacy development. Many students who lack the basic competencies in literacy are coming to secondary school with "significant oral language deficits" (DES, 2005 p.25). It is anticipated that the explicit teaching of reading strategies and phonetics and the improvement of lower-order thinking, and skills will lead to higher-order thinking and enjoyment of literature for such students (DES, 2011 p.31). The use of graphic organisers may be used as an effective scaffold to support this process (PDST, 2008 p.4). Finally, the opportunity to work in pairs or groups has been proven to have significant positive effects on students' development of literacy skills. As theorised by Vygotsky (1978) allowing peer collaboration increases students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) and allows for student centred learning to take place, in line with PDST's promotion of the gradual release of responsibility model (PDST, n.d. p.4). All of these methodologies and intervention strategies have been found to be successful to varying degrees across varying contexts, but what is important, is to find what works for your students and their unique situation.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

It is clear from the above analysis and discussion that social class has a direct impact on schooling in Ireland, and more acutely on literacy development. Although it can be seen as a social justice issue, it is one that has never been "adequately tackled within education" (Reay, 2006 p.291). Without the necessary literacy skills, students can be cut off from participating in many aspects of life, with basic tasks such as reading or sending an e-mail jotting down a shopping list or understanding a utility bill. "They are cut off

from participating in and contributing to many aspects of the society and culture in which they live” (DES, 2011 P.9). But, by increasing teachers’ awareness of social class, challenging

class bias, implementing appropriate pedagogies in the classroom, and creating a class sensitive environment, all educators should be better equipped to support all disadvantaged students' literacy development.



### **3.0 Chapter Three: Reflections on my Teaching Practice.**

#### **3.1 Introduction:**

Drawing on my own experiences in the classroom and authentic professional reflections, I will endeavour to draw links between my own practice and the academic literature and research provided in Chapter Two. This chapter will be divided into the four key areas of literature as identified by the Department of Education and Skills: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening (DES, 2011, P.8).

As early as October 2019, when I was just a few lessons into my teaching practice, the impact of social class on literacy development was noticeable. Starting my first placement in an urban DEIS school, there was a high concentration of students from working class, or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of the students in my classes seemed to be struggling with literacy. Having had no previous experience, I was beginning my teaching career teaching from assumptions I had about what students 'should' already know. However, as stated by Brookfield, if we teach based on assumptions, we have regarding what we think students already understand or what we think students find helpful, it is, after all, important to make sure those assumptions are correct (Brookfield, 2006 p.41). Learning from my own biases towards methods of teaching and accepting my lack of experience, I endeavoured to use reflections as a method of self- questioning to better plan for my students.

#### **3.2 The Impact of Social Class on Oral Literacy:**

Many students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who lack the basic

competencies in literacy are coming to secondary school with “significant oral language

deficits” (DES, 2005 p.25). This was noticeable in my first placement school. Many of the students in my classes, from first, third and fourth year when asked questions orally would often remark: *“I know what it means, but I can’t explain it.”* Students also seemed reluctant to express their opinions in class and struggled to engage in constructive whole-class discussions on texts. It seemed that a lot of students were self-conscious when speaking during English lessons, giving short and disorganised answers when questioned. While participation was less of an issue in my second placement school, students continued to fail to express themselves clearly and coherently during discussions. Reflecting on this issue in my first placement school I noted that:

*“I had to constantly ask the students multiple questions before anyone would speak and usually, they would only speak if called on by name and after a long time had passed”*

(Placement One, 9 October 2019).

To combat these issues, I endeavoured to adopt the educational ideas of Brookfield (2006) and MacRuairc (2011). Firstly, I attempted to create a ‘climate of trust’ and a classroom environment in which all students would feel comfortable sharing ideas, by getting to know students, using positive reinforcement, and by being persistent in giving students multiple opportunities to share their thoughts. I also tried to incorporate, rather than negate students ‘home language’ into lessons (MacRuairc, 2011 p.536). Instead of correcting students spoken English constantly, I encouraged participation and provided students with word mats and opportunities to ‘level up’ their word choices during discussions. Students were encouraged to find synonyms or suggest alternatives to words they were overly reliant on, such as ‘good’ or ‘nice’. When explaining concepts, themes, or vocabulary it was also helpful to situate the words in contexts students would

understand using language that they understood. To improve whole-class discussions, students were given specific discussion

questions as well as the opportunity to work in pairs and groups in which each student was assigned a role. This enabled students to stay focussed and expand their answers and share their ideas with their peers before bringing them to the attention of the entire group. Students were also provided with graphic organisers such as ‘Placemats’ and ‘Brain Droplets’ to organise their thoughts before putting them into words (PDST, n.d. p.24/60). These strategies had a positive impact on my classes and because students were able to articulate themselves more clearly when speaking, this in turn should have positive impacts on their literacy skills over time.

### **3.3 *The Impact of Social Class on Reading.***

Another one of the key strands of literacy that was noticeably affected by social class was students’ reading ability and attitude towards reading. The PISA results demonstrate the existence of an attainment gap between social classes (OECD, 2010). Layte also speaks to the difference in performance among socio-economically disadvantaged students, which my own observations confirmed (Layte, 2017 p.490). However, despite the preconceived notions of socio-economically disadvantaged students having a ‘resistance’ to reading activities, I found that this was not always the case. Although I did struggle to get students to volunteer to read during class, I noted that “*all students [were] very supportive of one another when reading the novel aloud*” (Placement One, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2020). As stated by Gregory & Chapman (2012), it is important that there is “an emotional ‘hook’ for learners” and that teachers provide “unique and engaging activities to capture and sustain attention,” so I felt that their lack of interest in reading was partially to do with the texts on offer within the confines of the school book rental scheme.

This issue arose with both my first-year class and my transition year students during my first placement. At the beginning of the school year, I was asked to cover the novel with my transition year class, which is an area that posed significant challenges to students. For transition year students I approached the novel in the wrong way by failing to give the students a voice and a chance to choose what they read. I had assumed that students in fourth year would be comfortable and confident in their reading ability and failed to consider how students, especially EAL (English as an additional language) students, who were in the class, would feel in that situation. As we progressed through the novel, I could sense the students were not enjoying the text and could see them disengaging more and more as the story went on, despite my best efforts. While researching how to improve this situation I learned that teachers who are sensitive to their students' emotions can very usefully use this information to orchestrate the learning process (Dumont, H et al, 2012), and that given the time and space to make their own reading choices, children develop "reading networks" (Hempel-Jorgensen et al ,2018, p.87).

Using this information, I made the decision to discard our first novel and put on what I called a 'taster class' in which the students could sample a selection of the texts available from book rental by reading the blurbs or watching a trailer to decide what they would like to read. Although I initially had reservations about abandoning a text midway, I felt strongly that forcing students to read a text that they were not enjoying and that was not relevant to their experience would only allow their negative emotions towards reading to grow. As stated by (Hempel et al ,2018, p.86) student engagement with reading activities is more likely to be intellectually and affectively engaging when learning opportunities have relevance for them." By giving the students autonomy and the right to direct their own learning I was able to better establish a rapport with the class. As stated by Guthrie (et al., 2007), providing students with

opportunities for collaboration such as sharing their opinions, likes and dislikes, teachers can better foster an enjoyment of reading in the classroom which leads to improved literacy.

### **3.4 The Impact of Social Class on Aural Literacy:**

In both my placement schools, behaviour management has been an issue in the English classroom. Students had been reprimanded for speaking over one another, speaking out of turn, and failing to listen to one another, making “*it almost impossible to teach with their constant disruptions*” (Placement One, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2019). The year group most affected by a lack of focus was first year. In order to improve their listening skills, I tried to incorporate specific listening activities. One useful activity which worked well was the use of YouTube videos. After a particularly disastrous class I reflected that “*I [had] been noticing that this class struggles to focus because they are only just learning to look closely at texts*” (Placement One, 13<sup>th</sup> December 2019).

While looking at advertising, I used a YouTube video of a popular Christmas advertisement as part of a viewing activity during one of my visual literacy classes. This worked well as it was pitched at the right level for the group. Students created their own viewing questions and challenged each other to watch the video closely, paying attention to small details to win points. This activity was useful as it promoted a little bit of healthy competition and got the students self-motivated. Similarly, in my second placement school, I noticed that students were losing focus and “*discussions were starting to become disorderly, and I felt students were forgetting to listen to one another*” (Placement Two, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2020). Therefore, I devised worksheets and questions, which required written responses which the students read aloud and created a much better listening

environment more conducive to learning. By incorporating Davison (2000) and Hempel-Jorgensen's (et al, 2018) ideas of



allowing students to develop their creativity, critical-thinking and problem-solving abilities through a task-based learning approach that is student-led rather than having students passively complete teacher-set tasks, students were better able to improve their literacy skills and grow as independent learners.

### **3.5 The Impact of Social Class on Writing:**

One of the most obvious indicators for teachers that a student is struggling with literacy is their written production. In both my placement schools, I have collected written work in my English classes to assess students' levels and identify who in my classes may be struggling. While working in my first school, I noted in my reflections that questioning:

*“the students on their prior knowledge conveyed that very few students understood grammar which had been quickly brushed over during the first week of term. As was evident from the written homework I collected last week many students in this class struggle with literacy skills”* (Placement One, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019).

My assumptions of what students 'should' know were making my lessons difficult for students and as stated by Cuban what is covered, is not necessarily what is understood and what is taught is not always what is learned (Cuban, 2013). To combat this, I planned to try and introduce more scaffolding for written assignments in my English lessons. The introduction of writing templates, models, and examples, as well as the use of graphic organisers and rubrics for success had a positive impact on student performance. By simplifying tasks and giving less work each class *“it was completed to a higher standard, both by my first-year English class, and by my Transition year students”* (Placement One, 13<sup>th</sup> January 2020). Similarly, by implementing the same methods of scaffolding I noticed a *“slow improvement in my other first year English classes writing skills [...] with*

*far less mistakes and much neater work being handed up*” (Placement Two, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2020).

On reflection, I also noted that as a teacher I need to “remain current with what students are capable of achieving by monitoring their progress closely” and set expectations that are positive yet realistic (Duhmont et al, 2012). As Palinscar and Brown, 1984, suggest, students should gradually be given increasing responsibility over their work, with the teacher scaffolding them by supplying prompts and corrective feedback, with the aim of simplifying the learner’s role, but not the task.

## **4.0 Chapter Four: Conclusions.**

### **4.1 Introduction.**

Looking at the evidence presented, it is clear that social class has a profound impact on students' literacy development in Ireland. For the purpose of this research, the issue of literacy development in the English classroom relating to social class was explored in a broad sense however, it must be acknowledged that the issue of social class is multifaceted and further complicated by its intersectional relationship with gender, race, additional educational needs (AEN) and sexuality. From my research I have learned that it is impossible to 'solve' the issue of social class or its impact on educational outcomes due to the multiple exchanges and experiences which exist outside of the classroom and lie beyond the control of educational policy makers. That is not to say that there is no way to help disadvantaged students and attempt to break the cycle of poverty by implementing changes to traditional pedagogies in the English classroom. Socio-economic disadvantage is, in fact, not a problem to be solved, but rather a single branch of diversity which should be acknowledged in the teaching of literacy and included in all mainstream English classrooms. To create a truly inclusive learning environment and engage with inclusive practice, teachers must not only promote diversity in the classroom, equal access to education and equity of educational outcome, but also be able to accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional linguistic or other conditions.

### **4.2 What have I learned from my Literature Review?**

From my research into the topic of social class and literacy development, I have learned

many things. Firstly, my understanding of literacy and all it encompasses has been improved. What I previously believed was limited to reading and writing, has now

broadened to include speaking, and listening as key skills which must be taught in the English classroom. I have also learned that despite the move towards more inclusive practice in recent years, with many EU countries having made significant changes in their policies for special education, social stratification persists and is growing in Irish schools (Rose et al, 2010). There is an ‘attainment gap’ amongst students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and evidence suggests that this ‘gap’ in educational performance becomes evident from the very beginning of the child’s life. It is important to avoid the establishment of bias towards working class children as evidence suggests that there is no ‘working class resistance’ to learning activities, but rather a need for educators to re-evaluate their pedagogical practices to be more inclusive and better suited to support these students’ needs. Finally, I learned a number of suggestions and methodologies which have been shown to have positive impacts on working class students’ literacy development and educational outcomes, which I tried to incorporate into my own planning and which I reflected on in Chapter Three.

#### ***4.3 How does this implicate my practice?***

My research has had a significant impact on my teaching practice, as I am now more aware of the range of students and the unique experiences and perspectives that they each bring to my classes. I am also more attuned to the existence of a ‘middle class’ bias in mainstream classrooms, and better informed on how to enable socio-economically disadvantaged students to access the curriculum. My experience dealing with class diversity when teaching English reflects much of the research previously conducted on the topic. To truly value diversity, create a class sensitive environment, and support all learners in my teaching practice it is important that I create an inclusive learning

environment. To scaffold and support students learning I adopted the methodologies and pedagogical practices suggested

by researchers such as PDST, and various scholars and theorists, to varying degrees of success. I introduced reading techniques and attempted to promote reading for pleasure and purpose in my classes. I also incorporated speaking and listening activities, as well as graphic organisers and writing templates to support students independent learning, and literacy development.

#### ***4.4 How has the dissertation shaped my thinking?***

Coming into this research I naively thought of it as trying to fix a ‘problem’ or mitigate the impact of a ‘problem’, but it is not about fixing these students, denying their experience, or altering who they are and where they come from. Instead, teachers need to promote positivity, and try and alter preconceived notions of working-class students. Rather than working to try and help these students fit in to a mainstream classroom, I want to work to make the mainstream classroom fit them. Endowing students with the necessary supports and skills to become fully realised individuals who can participate in all activities which involve reading, writing, speaking, and listening, I hope to enable my students to become independent and critical thinkers regardless of their social class or economic background.



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