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Commentary: Socio-economic status, young language learning, and the weapon to change the world

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The history of all previous societies has been the history of class struggles – Karl Marx

1. Introduction

Traditional models of Education might see the process as being one of transference of knowledge. The student is the empty vessel and the educator's role is to fill up the student with knowledge - an idea which has held sway with some of history's greatest thinkers such as Locke and Aristotle (it was Aristotle after all who first talked about the blank tablet, later described as the *tabula rasa* by Henry More in the 1600s). Clearly, this kind of education is important in that societies generally need our citizens to have basic knowledge of subjects such as literacy, maths and science. However, this traditional model presents a rather limited view of what education can be, and indeed many have argued that beyond the accumulation of knowledge, education is a powerful force for social change. Nelson Mandela, for example, is attributed as saying that "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world".[1] Clearly he believed that an important function of education was as a force for social change and indeed there are many examples of precisely how education has been a powerful positive influence. A brief view of the *Global Partnership for Education* website highlights a few examples (https://www.globalpartnership.org/education). Education is one of the most effective ways of reducing poverty, it can improve children's nutrition, reduce health risks, help bring about equity between boys and girls/men and women, and is one of the strongest drivers of economic progress and prosperity. It can also help individuals from different societies learn about the environment thus helping future generations to be better custodians of our planet than perhaps we have been. Importantly, education can also be an important precursor to peace and resolution of conflict. Confuscius said that "Education breeds confidence, confidence breeds hope, hope breeds peace".[2]

Another aspect of education and its role in society that is entrenched in some countries' educational policies is the ideal of education as the greater leveller. The idea is that whereas children may come from many different socioeconomic backgrounds, and have a wide range of differences that may advantage or disadvantage certain students, once the child walks through the door of their school they can all be treated equally, and importantly equally benefit from what education has to offer and consequently what the world has to offer the educated citizen. In other words, two individuals with the same

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[1] Quote from Nelson Mandela's speech at the launch of Mindset Network 16.07.2003, Johannesburg, South Africa.

[2] Quote take from *The Open University* http://www.open.edu/openlearn/education/12-famous-confucius-quotes-on-education-and-learning.

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educational qualifications should (in theory) have equal probability of success in the labour market, regardless of their social class or socioeconomic status (SES). The reality, unfortunately, is that this is often not the case. A number of studies carried out within the context of European Union countries, as well as the US, have shown that individuals who come from higher social class brackets tend to have the advantage (in terms of socioeconomic backgrounds) when compared to individuals with the same level of education but from a lower social class (Bernardi & Ballarino, 2016; Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2011). In essence, studies like this confirm the idea of 'the rich get richer … ' or at the very least 'the poor don't catch up to the rich in economic wealth'. These studies demonstrate that education, then, often fails in the remit of levelling out social inequity. This is an important issue highlighted by a number of papers in this volume (e.g., Sayer; Kuchah).

2. The importance of a volume on SES and young language learners

These issues are for me one of the reasons why this volume is so important. Researchers from a range of disciplines have for some time been studying how individuals develop knowledge of more than one language, and yet, a widespread finding throughout educational research, that contextual factors such as SES are powerful influencers in a child's academic achievement, has up until very recently been somewhat neglected within an L2 perspective. Furthermore, as the field of young language learners is itself somewhat in its infancy, this is an issue that demands greater scrutiny from the young learner perspective. As governments around the world are developing educational programmes and curricula to ensure an early start to foreign language (FL) learning in school often driven by the uninformed belief that 'younger is better' (see Murphy, 2014 for a more detailed discussion), it is all the more important for educators, parents, policy makers, and curriculum designers (for a start) to better understand the role that these contextual factors play in shaping FL/L2 outcomes in younger learners. This volume makes a really significant contribution to helping us better understand this complex set of inter-relationships.

There are a number of different reasons why this volume represents an important step forward in uncovering the inter-relationships between SES (and related factors) and young language learner's language and academic outcomes. First, the papers in this volume come from a range of different geopolitical contexts, allowing the reader to begin to understand the ways in which SES influences learner outcomes across different contexts. This is critical because to generalise across contexts is ill-advised and leads to inaccurate assumptions (e.g., such as the younger is better debate, see Murphy, 2014). Papers in this volume represent research carried out in China, Taiwan, Spain, Hungary, Mexico, South Korea and Cameroon. Thus we have interesting differences in terms of culture, language (of the L1) and SES differences. Some of these countries are first world, others developing, some have strongly capitalist histories and social infrastructures, others less so. These differences allow us to gauge how sensitive the role of SES is in shaping L2 outcomes across these different geopolitical contexts. Theoretically it might be possible, for example, that SES would fail to exert much of an influence in countries that were more socialist in their political leaning. Interestingly, this is not what we see in the papers here. Rather, each paper, regardless of geopolitical context, illustrates an important interaction between SES, social class, and educational provision, implementation and outcomes. This finding is not to suggest that the nature of those inter-relationships is identical across contexts. However, given that the literature has not always presented a uniform picture of whether SES impacts on L2 outcomes (as identified for e.g., in Huang et al. this volume), it is important to see how it does so across a range of different geo- and socio-political contexts.

Related to this issue is the notion of different conceptualisations of how to define SES. A number of papers here define SES as some combination of parental level of education and/or household income, sometimes identified by whether the family requires financial assistance from the government, and/or parental occupation and home resources (e.g., Kuchah). Importantly, other contributors take a different approach, discussing the construct of 'social class' over SES highlighting the notion that the variable of interest cannot easily be reduced to one simple index (e.g., parental education) but rather encompasses a range of different features characterising an individual's social standing or 'social positioning' (Sayer). As highlighted in the introduction to this volume, defining, and even just naming the construct in question is difficult. The editors ask whether it is 'social class' or 'SES' in their introduction and, quite rightly for a volume of this type, they chose to include different conceptualisations of a broader concept(s). Authors within the volume have opted for their preferred term which reflects the focus their respective studies. Furthermore, the editors also note that historically research in applied linguistics has tended to only briefly reference SES as an 'unproblematic' variable. One of the strengths of this volume then is that it highlights the complexity of what the construct in question actually is and how it can be defined and operationalized in different research contexts. Of course, this means then that some of the papers are not necessarily measuring like-for-like but as already noted, this is a strength, highlighting the complexity of the construct itself in identifying how it might influence learners' experiences with an L2 both in and outside the classroom context.

The papers here also represent different research methodologies, offering quantitative and qualitative approaches, studies of children's learning in classroom contexts, outside the classroom (e.g., home contexts) and in study abroad. The variability of methodological approach serves to enrich the general contribution of this volume in highlighting the differences and similarities in findings across different studies. Many quantitatively oriented studies adopt a survey-based approach, sometimes including the administration of language assessment tasks to investigate the link between SES and L2 learning. For example, Butler and Le identify proportions of students in different SES brackets, and links the child's SES to student motivation, self-perceived competence, and anxiety. Similarly, Huang et al. take a quantitative approach and examine the relationship between SES, experience with language input and speech production. Nikolov and Csapó adopt a similar type of survey-based design examining the inter-relationships between SES, reading comprehension (in two different L2s, English and German)

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