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Top of the Class: Education, Capital and Choice

Inspiring the uninspired

This chapter focuses on the media’s presentation of education as the key driver of social mobility, responsible citizenship and equality of opportunity. Paying special attention to political debates around educational achievement in the context of meritocracy and personal responsibility, it explores the ways in which educational choice is presented, taken up or passed by and how this then reflects critically on the perceived class status of children and their families. More generally, it considers how the values which embed current discourses on education and social mobility are reinforced, tested and sometimes challenged in lifestyle journalism, reality television and social observation documentary. In doing so it points to the pressures, conflicts and contradictions of class identity and class mobility (both up and downwards) and the ways in which these intersect with the experience of education and the individual investments which it currently demands.

In her discussion of celebrity, cultural production and public life Elizabeth Barry (2008:251) summarises the current situation: ‘no longer do experts or social elites control what constitutes knowledge; this is now largely established and communicated by the popular media themselves.’ She goes on to remind us that the celebrity endorser promotes not only consumption but aspiration, even to the extent of guiding our values, our levels of self-esteem and our politics. One of the lessons which celebrities teach us is that individuals make things happen and that personal success is usually the product of individual aspiration, passion, drive, talent or accomplishment and the ability to overcome obstacles of all kinds including the economic, cultural or educational.
Nowhere is the logic of this lesson more apparent than in the reality series *Jamie’s Dream School* (C4 2011), in which chef, television celebrity and social entrepreneur Jamie Oliver sets up a temporary school populated by unqualified young school leavers and by ‘teachers’ whose impressive credentials are forged via a talent for their subject and a high level of public recognition. These teachers were flagged as ‘18 of the most brilliant people in Britain’ (Anthony 2011); it is they who populate the ‘dream’ of the ‘Dream School’ by virtue of their unique contribution to cultural life. They included media dons such as David Starkey and Mary Beard, DJ Jazzy B, Tony Blair’s former communications manager Alastair Cameron, the photographer Rankin, sailor Ellen MacArthur, actor Simon Callow, poet Andrew Motion, scientist and TV presenter Sir Robert Winston and artist and TV presenter Rolf Harris. These figures were well-known in their fields and to fairly wide audiences but almost entirely unrecognised by their new pupils, whose celebrity points of reference were quite different. Indeed, perhaps the only figure in the series universally recognised was Oliver himself, who presided over the ‘school’ for its six-week run (together with ‘award-winning headmaster’ John D’Abbro). In interview Oliver declared:

The thing I like about the show is that it’s about a massive political issue. Almost half of students are leaving school without enough GCSEs to take them on to A-levels or higher education. I guess the big question is: are there just bright kids and thick kids, or are there other ways to motivate people who have had a rough time at school? In other words, can *Dream School* inspire the uninspired?

(Tucker 2011)

Oliver’s credentials as a celebrity social interventionist had been established through his TV series *Jamie’s Kitchen* (2002), in which he mentored 15 young people and trained them alongside professional chefs. It was consolidated in *Jamie’s School Dinners* (2005), which was credited with influencing policy on school meals (but see Naik 2008), *Jamie’s Ministry of Food* (2008) and *Jamie’s Food Revolution* (2010). It was *Jamie’s Kitchen* that repositioned him in the popular imagination from celebrity cook to both a businessman and a ‘moral entrepreneur’ and further legitimated an already developing public discourse that entrepreneurialism was a better solution to social problems than state intervention (Hollows and Jones 2010:308). In addition, his endearing rejection of easy cynicism in the face of seemingly intractable social