

# **Popular but Peripheral: The Ambivalent Status of Sociology Education in Schools in England.**

## **Abstract**

This paper reports the largest UK study of sociology school teachers' views of the discipline. Drawing on the sociology of the professions, we reflect on the ambivalent positioning of sociology in schools. Despite buoyant uptake, teachers claim that sociology is perceived as dated and has lower status than other elective courses, often described as a 'soft' and 'easy' subject that anyone can teach. Whilst many students are reported to benefit from the transformative education that sociology affords, the failure to designate the subject as facilitating entry to higher status universities serves to further marginalise the discipline. We argue that sociology in schools is weakly bounded, poorly supported, and lacks strong professional coherence. Whilst this allows sociology to have an open, critical and reflexive character, it comes at the price of not being able to control delivery in schools and make claims for high status.

## **Keywords**

Professional Projects, School Teaching, Status, Sociology

## **Introduction**

In 1989 a British Telecom advert depicted Maureen Lipman, in excited anticipation, telephoning her grandson to learn about his exam results. We observe her deflation as she finds that he has failed all his exams, and then see her rally when he sadly confesses that he had passed pottery and sociology: "people will always need plates....an ology, he gets an ology and he says he's failed, you get an ology and you are a scientist". As the advert closes, a narrator reminds viewers, "whether it's well done or hard luck a phone call says a lot", with success in the sociology exam ambiguously emblematic of both good fortune and disappointment. It is

interesting that sociology was chosen as a subject lacking any clear definition (an ‘ology’), but also the exam that *could* be passed when all the rest were failed, thereby reinforcing an informal curriculum hierarchy with sociology situated in a marginal position.

In the three decades since this screening, alongside such public perceptions of sociology, parallel concerns have emerged within the university sector about the robustness of sociology’s intellectual mission and methodological rigour (e.g. Goldthorpe, 2015; Holmwood, 2010; 2014; XXXX). However, there is an interesting puzzle: the apparent uncertainty of sociology’s status has not undermined its appeal. In the UK, sociology remains a strong subject choice within schools: having only been introduced in 1972, it is now the 8<sup>th</sup> most popular A-level subject<sup>i</sup>, studied by 11.4% of students in 2016 (Carroll and Gill, 2017). University student numbers have equally remained resilient, even with the introduction of student fees<sup>ii</sup>.

How, then, can there be uncertainty about the status of sociology given the evident institutional success of the subject? At a general level, this can be linked to a long term ambivalence about whether sociology is a distinctive discipline at all. Early claims that sociology was the overarching social science which united all specialised disciplines under its umbrella, lost favour in the mid-twentieth century (XXXX), and were superseded by a more modest professional project, formed around a narrower conception of the discipline and focused on critical social inquiry (Abbott, 2001; Calhoun, 2007; Halsey, 2004; Wagner, 2001). However, the professional mission of sociology has struggled to be realised, partly because it cannot claim exclusive expertise over its subject matter, and partly due to persistent theoretical and methodological uncertainties. This situation has impacted on the hierarchical positioning of the discipline. In America, Szelenyi (2018) claims that sociology faces a triple crisis - having lost not only its methodological prowess, but also political appeal and theoretical cohesion. The absence of theoretical consensus is observed as problematic, for instance in Canadian (Scott,

2009) and Indian (Patel, 2011) sociology. Javid (2018), commenting on Pakistan, notes the undermining of sociology in comparison to political science and economics, which have stronger links with donors and the government.

As such, sociology is seemingly in a position of ‘peripheral popularity’. This study focuses on the delivery and status of sociology in schools. This is important as school delivery constitutes the ‘boiler room’ of the discipline. We investigate how sociology is taught, valued and appraised in schools, through the lens of the sociology of professions, which sees expertise, credentialism and social closure as central to the construction of jurisdictional domains and control over work (Abbott, 1988; Friedson, 1988; Parkin, 1974).

This topic has not attracted previous research. Despite the remarkable growth of sociology as an A-level subject, very little is known about its provenance as a school-based subject: about how teachers engage with the discipline, the attraction of sociology to school-age students, or the demographic uptake of the subject. This is more pressing in the context of changing education policies which may stymie its future popularity.

We lack studies about the ways in which sociology teachers and school students are recruited, how sociology teaching is valued and resourced, and, in turn, whether sociological knowledge is associated with clear areas of expertise. This partly reflects the fact that sociology subject associations appear largely disengaged from school-based delivery: admittedly the ASA (2015) has recently identified national standards for school-based study, but this appears to be exceptional. More broadly, research on sociology school teaching, as well as being dated, is confined to the United States, where some relevant issues have been identified. First, whilst sociology is widely taught in American universities and colleges, provision is limited to around a quarter of high schools, and is constrained by teacher shortages, lower levels of student interest, and increased emphasis on standardised testing (DeCesare, 2006). The majority of

American sociology school teachers are not trained in the discipline, feel isolated, and do not have access to training or suitable teaching resources (DeCesare, 2005; Greene, 2007). In turn, teachers suggest that they are unsupported by the professional state associations and the university sector (DeCesare, 2002). Teachers without a sociology qualification were also more likely to be located in schools in poorer neighbourhoods (Ingersoll, 1999). Whilst these studies have revealed a general acknowledgement of the value of studying sociology, not least for its potential to foster a sense of citizenship and provide a forum to discuss difficult questions about difference and diversity, sociology's profile as an elective, rather than required, subject has also limited its reach, in a crowded social science school offering (Stevens and Martell, 2016).

A further insight drawn from the sociology of professions is that professional projects are shaped by their economic and political context. It is widely recognised that neo-liberal market reforms have challenged classic professional projects which insist on the autonomy and monopoly of expert professional groups (XXXX). Such imperatives necessarily impact on sociology teaching in UK schools, given increasing competition between schools and subjects within schools, the use of league tables and audit pressures. In 2010, changes to the grading system of the General Certificate in Secondary Education for 14-16 year olds (GCSEs) were announced, concurrently with the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). The latter is a school performance measure and assesses the number of students studying core subjects, including optional geography and history. These changes have prompted the removal of some GCSEs, such as law and applied business studies, from the curriculum. Within this context, sociology remains a GCSE optional choice and the number of students has marginally increased, but it remains a minority subject<sup>iii</sup>. Moreover, social sciences at GCSE have generally been accorded 'lesser importance' (Hodgson and Spours, 2011: 212), and often have fewer hours allocated to their teaching, in contrast to EBacc subjects (Worth, 2017). However, we know little about the practical impact of these changes for the teaching of sociology.

There are also crucial implications deriving from changed A-level provision. From 2016, the delivery and examination of education in England was changed from examinations across two years, to exams at the end of the course. Early analysis of this move to a linear format suggests that the number of students taking more than three A-levels has decreased<sup>iv</sup>, which might reduce the appeal of sociology. For instance, Munro and Carroll (2016) suggest that because that most sociology A-level students are new to the subject, it was often a fourth choice, intended to be dropped after the first year of study (but then sometimes retained)<sup>v</sup>.

A-level choices are shaped by the status afforded to the discipline. Bleazby (2015) suggests a curriculum hierarchy operates, and sociology is grouped with less prestigious subjects. In turn, she argues the higher status subjects are ‘aligned with middle class culture, university and lucrative professions’ (677), and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be enrolled on low status curricula. A-level choices are also influenced by longer term educational aspirations and university requirements. The Russell Group (Informed Choices, 2016), make offers based on three A-level grades and provides advice about which subject choices *facilitate* entry to university. For students unsure about what they wish to study at A-level, the advice is to choose facilitating subjects, with the warning that some non-facilitating subjects are not regarded as good preparation for university. Three non-facilitating subjects - economics, religious studies and Welsh - are identified as providing ‘suitable preparation’ for university. Sociology, however, appears in neither category, with the inference it is non-facilitating and, perhaps, ‘unsuitable’ preparation.

This issue is compounded by the intersections between school type, subject choice and the chances of being admitted to elite universities (Boliver, 2013; Sutton Trust, 2011). Students from private/independent schools and grammar schools have greater probability of gaining entry to the most selective high tariff universities. Even after controlling for the effects of prior attainment and other individual characteristics, Dilnot (2016; 2018) found that students at

private and grammar schools had a higher likelihood of opting for facilitating subjects in comparison to students at sixth form colleges, further education colleges and non-selective schools. In turn, there is a link between school type and the uptake of sociology: Gill's report (2017) shows minimal uptake of sociology in independent, grammar and selective schools, a pattern not mirrored for other elective social science and humanities subjects.

This paper addresses the need to understand the nature of the professional project in sociology by reporting on an empirical study of sociology teachers in England. Through an examination of teachers' views and experiences, we relate how teachers identify the positioning of British sociology as marginal, and describe how this may serve to limit the prospects of the discipline. We thus make some cautionary predictions about the future, though also point to some areas of possible optimism, in terms of the commitment of many teachers to the way that sociology can empower students to think critically. These arguments are intended to encourage further reflection on the challenges facing sociology in the UK, by placing these debates into a wider theoretical framing of sociology as a professional project and outlining some ways to counter the negative perceptions associated with sociological enquiry.

### **Methods: survey and focus group**

Our study incorporated a semi-structured questionnaire (comprising 52 closed and attitudinal questions, and two opportunities for free commentary) and one focus group. The survey questions were designed to elicit the professional, educational and demographic characteristics of sociology teachers; their perceptions about the status of sociology; the practical delivery of the curriculum and views about content, remit, and challenge of the specification; challenges faced; support available (including from: exam boards; the British Sociological Association (BSA); and universities), and support sought by those teaching the subject.

To achieve the sample, a dataset, containing telephone numbers and website addresses, of 1766 state-funded schools and sixth form colleges in UK offering sociology, was obtained from DATAFILTR<sup>vi</sup> in March 2017. To assure the reliability of the database and enhance the response rate, all schools in England were contacted, where possible, to establish whether this information was accurate and to secure a named teacher responsible for teaching the sociology content. This was a laborious exercise but provided a comprehensive list of schools in England which taught sociology. However, not all schools were contactable (after three attempts), and sometimes school policy prohibited the sharing of teacher email addresses, or the request that follow-up emails be sent to elicit the information were sometimes unanswered. Where names and email addresses of individual sociology teachers were impossible to elicit, the official school email address was used.

In total, 963 English secondary schools/colleges were identified as offering sociology, approximately a third of all schools (DOE, 2014). However, 1054 questionnaires were mailed, as some schools had more than one sociology teacher identified on their website. The incentive of being automatically entered in a prize draw was used to enhance the response rate (Cook, et al., 2000). Programming a separate email screener in Qualtrics, to store the names and email addresses of those responding to the survey, ensured that the prize draw did not compromise the anonymity of the survey responses. After reminder emails were dispatched, 212 respondents completed the questionnaire (20%), which is a good response rate for emailed web surveys (Manfreda et al., 2008).

Though responses were received from all counties in England, and the response rate from most regions was roughly comparable, a distinctly higher response from the South-East of England, where one of the authors has established contacts with local teachers, was achieved. It is also important to acknowledge that the sample responses may be skewed towards teachers who were more enthusiastic about sociology.

The final data collected from the survey allowed both descriptive quantitative analysis and basic qualitative analysis of text responses. All open-ended responses were coded and sorted according to theme to draw on the rich insights provided by this group of teachers. Moreover, the value of these insights is strengthened by the number of responses with national distribution, and the provision for comparison of the quantitative and qualitative segments of the findings. The two hour long focus group used a convenience sample of seven sociology teachers from the South East of England, and descriptive narrative analysis added useful contextual material<sup>vii</sup>.

### **Teacher Background and Characteristics**

Our teacher sample were mostly female (71%), and 77% identified as White British. There was a large and representative age range, with about one quarter (26%) being over 50. In terms of social class background, teachers appeared to be fairly representative of the English social structure, with no obvious elite bias (XXXX). Of the 140 respondents who identified their social class, most (73%) saw themselves as falling within the lower or middle-middle class. The majority of teachers came from middle-class backgrounds (51% from the professional and managerial classes), with no less than 12% being children of teachers. Fifty-nine percent had attended comprehensive schools, and 18% had attended grammar schools. The proportion of teachers from private school backgrounds (6%) is broadly representative of the number of children who attend such schools.

Sixty-three percent of sociology teachers held bachelor's degrees. Thirty per cent had been to a Russell Group university, with 40% being from new universities. Strikingly, 41% of those from Russell Group universities were from professional and managerial households, compared to 31% of those from new universities. A surprisingly high number (31%) held a Masters' degree (not including postgraduate qualification in teaching), and 3% had a doctorate. Only



29% of teachers had a single honours bachelor's degree in sociology, with a further 28% having a joint degree. A sizeable proportion (43%) of sociology teachers therefore had no university training in the discipline – their degrees, most usually instead, being in psychology (11%) and history (10%). This relatively low level of university education in sociology – for sociology teachers – is worthy of note.

This did not prevent teachers overwhelmingly enjoying teaching sociology. Overall, 96% of teachers agreed – and 68% strongly agreed - “I am passionate about teaching sociology”, with those from working class backgrounds being the most enthusiastic (83%, compared to 50% from a professional background strongly agreeing). In the open-ended responses, as many as 42% reported that they would prefer to teach sociology exclusively.

However, concerns were raised about the resourcing and expertise of sociology teaching,

“There are not enough specialist teachers and it is given to non-specialists which makes it difficult to provide students with the knowledge that they need.”

Teachers in the focus group alluded to the paucity of time available to update themselves through additional research and self-learning; a situation exacerbated by not being able to specialise in sociology. As one teacher reported,

“falling into the trap of not necessarily updating things as much as I should... for sociology teachers we generally don't just teach sociology and I think that is part of the problem, if you can specialise in sociology and just teach sociology you can find all the brilliant articles...”

Most teachers (92%) were enthusiastic about sociology, enough to want further support and training<sup>viii</sup>. Overwhelmingly, whilst 97% of teachers would welcome external educational opportunities for their students, the sociology subject association, the BSA, had a low presence: the vast majority (89%) reported that they were not a part of the BSA Teaching Group, and 83% did not subscribe to the BSA magazine ‘The Sociology Teacher’. In the focus group, participants noted that membership to the BSA teaching group was expensive and prohibitive,

and since the membership subscription was individually based, schools did not, or would not, support payment.

“It’s you that is on it so whether you are willing to pay, ‘cause you have to pay ....there have been some good things, I got some magazine through and they are really excellent but I cannot justify £58.”

Overall then, the sociology teachers in our sample were committed and enthusiastic. It is striking that although a small majority have a graduate training in sociology, over 40% have no disciplinary expertise, but this does not stop them from being passionate about the subject. Notwithstanding this enthusiasm, the absence of an active professional infrastructure, which could promote a stronger sense of identity and around which teachers could mobilise, was notable.

### **The Uptake and Status of Sociology**

Sociology is taught in a variety of school settings though it tends to be predominantly associated with state comprehensive schools. Fifty-six percent of our sample taught at comprehensive schools, compared to 12% in sixth form colleges, and 10% from secondary modern/non-selective schools. By contrast, a much lower proportion of teachers were from faith schools/colleges (8%), grammar schools (5%), and private/independent (2%) schools<sup>ix</sup>.

On the face of it sociology is popular. Teachers reported that the uptake of sociology within schools has remained steady, despite recent policy and curriculum changes. About half of the sample (47%) suggested that sociology had become more popular over the last 5 years, while 40% indicated that sociology had maintained stable numbers. Only a small proportion of the respondents (13%) felt that sociology’s popularity was currently in decline.

However, this popularity was not always matched by strong resourcing. Fewer than 5 students were rare in an A-level sociology classroom (only reported by 2%), and over a fifth (22%) of teachers taught in a classroom with more than 20 students<sup>x</sup>. Large class sizes were seen to be linked to cost-cutting. These relatively large class sizes and strong uptake was however delivered from generally small departments: 27% of the teachers reported that they were either teaching by themselves, 37% with one another person<sup>xi</sup>. Furthermore, only 29 respondents concentrated on the sole teaching of sociology, the vast majority teaching it with another subject. This helps to explain why many of the teachers felt isolated, for instance, 74% noting that they did not get regular opportunities to meet with sociology teachers from other schools/colleges and are not more widely enrolled into a sociology community.

Further testifying to the popular but peripheral positioning of sociology within schools, teachers were divided in their views regarding sociology's worth: a low proportion felt that sociology was considered a valued academic subject. More than half of the respondents (57%) were either neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that 'sociology is well regarded as a discipline'. In addition, a sizeable proportion of teachers felt that sociology was not promoted amongst high achieving students<sup>xii</sup>. This is reflected in their responses to the statement, 'At my school/college the best students are encouraged to take sociology at university', where little less than half (45%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, and about one quarter (27%) were neutral.

A large number of respondents (70) elaborated this concern in the open comments. Whilst 32 teachers claimed that sociology was a popular subject, they added the connective 'but' to qualify that this was often because it was regarded as an easier option. The quotes below illustrate this tension,

“It is one of the most popular A-level subjects – but it is still regarded as ‘not really an academic subject’ and it is hard to attract the top students. This is a perception among students, staff and parents.”

“Sociology is a popular subject, but quite often it becomes a timetable-filler for weaker students who do not know what they wish to study.”

This was seen to make teaching more challenging, as students may have lower skills on entry to the subject and, sometimes, less interest in studying,

“More able students are encouraged to take the more established subjects (maths, science, history), while the less able are often encouraged to take sociology, even if they are not interested in it.”

About half of the responses (33) to the open-ended question, detailed that sociology was considered a soft subject or an easy option,

“I feel that sociology is presented as an ‘easier’ subject. I often hear students saying ‘I am not clever enough to take the sciences’. ....Other teachers often advise students to take sociology if they regard them as ‘less academic.’”

A significant number of respondents (27) also suggested that sociology was actively encouraged as an option for lower ability students, with able students being diverted from making it their choice,

“Often weaker students are pushed into picking it - by management. Attitude that it is easy, any student can do well in it.”

“high flyers are directed towards Russell Group facilitating subjects. Moreover, we now accept students with GCSE grade 4 in English language...this probably puts off students who think that sociology is easy and standards are low.”

“.....it is, unofficially, seen as the sink subject in my school, with little regard for the essay writing demands of the course.”

Similar sentiments were expressed in the focus group, where the lower entry requirements for sociology, and adverse perceptions towards sociology from senior leadership teams, other teachers, and students, were described.

“senior management in interviews with Year 11 push students of weaker academic ability towards sociology..... I think there is still that sort of feeling among the students, it’s a grammar school so there is just this perception, that sociology is an easy subject and you do it if you can’t do history or math or something like that.”

“....my Head of Sixth Form used to refer to it as a soft subject and he'd always, when a kid joined sixth form late they would always be put in sociology, I've had, particularly boys who've come into the football academy, always get put in sociology, ‘cause they can join in at any point in sixth form.”

However, despite the frequent rendition that sociology A-level was ‘softer’ or ‘easier’, there was also a perception that it had distinctive, critical benefit. The vast majority of teachers (93%) agreed that ‘sociology stretches and challenges my students’, as further illustrated by the following quotations,

“Those students who opt for sociology find it challenging, only able students can cope with the study/reading and application needed.”

“There is a total misunderstanding of the demands of the subject. Students are not fully aware of how challenging the subject can be.”

Sociology is therefore in an ambivalent position. It is regarded as a ‘soft subject’, yet is also seen to be challenging and critical. This relationship can have unintended consequences: because it is ‘weaker’ students who are encouraged to study sociology, when they do relatively well this is seen to be an indication that it must be an easy subject, rather than because such students had been inspired and supported to achieve higher than expected grades. This is a no-win situation for sociology. When it turns out that the lower ability students do not perform well (perhaps also because of its challenging nature) this is also seen to reflect badly on the subject, and its teachers,

“I have not achieved national benchmarks in the A-level for 3 years and this is due to the fact that we have to recruit from a very low level of applicants that do not achieve very high GCSE grades. Some of these students have no or little aspiration which makes the job difficult. I am then told that I have failed my target and this is a justifiable reason for me not getting an automatic 1% annual pay rise. This is true.”

Given this precarious positioning, current reforms could have deleterious effects. Teachers expressed the concern that the move to linear A-levels would see the active promotion of facilitating subjects in certain schools, and hence the marginalisation of sociology. As the following respondents noted,

“Move to push able students into facilitating subjects has led to less able being directed towards sociology, as often we are successful with them.”

“Sociology is highly regarded by the school in the sense that we get good results from our students and the students enjoy the lessons. However, being a ‘high attaining’ school, we tend to attract those students who have a lower average GCSE score and it’s rare that we have a student estimated to get a Grade A. This has probably been exacerbated by going from four subjects down to three.”

Generalising, many teachers did not have a clear sense of the professional mission of sociology, or its future prospects more broadly. Sociology was characterised as inclusive but also having weak boundaries, so limiting the status claims of the discipline itself. Despite current recruitment remaining strong, there was an anxiety that future trends might be negative,

“Over the next few years I believe that sociology will become a minor subject and might not run.”

“Next year there will be no sociology in my school as there are too few students who wish to study the subject....it is not appreciated by the senior leadership team or the students coming through.”

“Many schools are now making A-level students pick only 3 A-levels, rather than the traditional 4. This is having a negative impact on the number of students that pick sociology. Many pick it as their 4<sup>th</sup> subject and end up enjoying it and keeping it into year 13. Now that this 4<sup>th</sup> option is being removed, fewer students are selecting sociology.”

Despite the cadre of largely committed teachers from a variety of social and educational backgrounds, sociology is often accorded low status and defined as a ‘soft subject’ for low achieving students. Given this mix, we now turn to consider how teachers talked about the sociology curriculum itself.

## **The Sociology Curriculum**

The majority, 67%, of sociology teachers were happy with the current specifications. Teachers reported that students were engaged and interested but, at the same time, some worried that the material seemed out of date, and that the teachers had to take individual responsibility to make contemporary connections. Some teachers expressed their discontent at the outdated nature of the sociology curriculum, its lack of applicability to contemporary society, and the lost opportunities to engage with more discursive content,

“There is too much to learn which means you have to limit the amount of discussion and engaging activities to embed content. There are too many names and theorists for them to learn rather than understanding what the impact of sociology is on society.”

Discussion also mentioned the dated canon. Participants argued that very often students would premise the discussion of each new study with the question ‘is this another ‘dead’ sociologist?’

Furthermore, some teachers argued that they could get away with making little or no amendments to their lessons. The following exchange from the focus group is illustrative,

“It’s really not changed, I could pretty much open the PowerPoints that I taught back in like 2010 you know, I don’t think it’s changed.”

“I could go back to 2004.”

The recent changes to some specifications were also seen as a lost opportunity to bring in more contemporary research,

“Yeah, I am surprised how few new studies there are really, particularly in education...it seems to me that most universities must have academics working in that field.”

“I have been teaching since 1993 and some aspects of the syllabi have hardly changed...surely some of the debates have moved on since I started teaching? ...Why are we still referring to folk devils and mods and rockers when students cannot identify with this? Surely there is more contemporary research. I also teach psychology and it seems more up to date.”

“I think it (curriculum) is out of date.....I do not like teaching some of the stuff on ethnicity and education – I think it is out of date and stereotypical.”

Considering the recent furore about recently published textbooks that continue to reproduce racist stereotypes about familial relations in Caribbean families (Badshah, 2018), these comments indicate the lack of professional rigour in the production of school resources.

The value of sociology as a transformative education was also seen to be increasingly lost in the A-level specification,

“Teaching has shifted away from critical thinking to fact hoarding. But sociology should be a space for critical thinking. I do not think enough is done to publicise these qualities. There has been an attempt to soften the A-level in line with neoliberal and New Right thinking about society, to reduce the focus on power and the operation of power.”

Given the opportunities afforded by a sociology education to ask critical questions about society, there was a concern that such insights were not being accessed by a broad range of students,

“We need to recruit more males to the A-level, as they need more knowledge about contemporary issues.”

“I am always amazed about how little people know about society and politics. I find it alarming and believe that sociology would be beneficial for all students.”

At the same time, some teachers noted how it was possible to change the perception of the subject, suggesting the importance and need for wider advocacy and support, and celebration of positive A-level results,

“Since there have been resources put into the subject, it has begun to flourish. Results were excellent last year and this has encouraged a big cohort in Year 12. The current year 13 are good ambassadors for the subject and several are applying for sociology-related subjects at university. This is a real change.”



## **Conclusion**

The voice of sociology teachers captured in this study raises important questions about the current status and prospects for the discipline. The teaching of sociology in schools does not accrue strong institutional support, is often under resourced compared to other subjects, and is frequently delivered by non-experts. At the same time, sociology remains a popular subject, delivered by many passionate teachers who recognise the academic rigour and challenge of the discipline, and see the transformative and intellectual potentials that a sociology education can afford. The popularity of the subject goes alongside it often being delivered in non-selective schools, to students with lower ability at the point of enrolment. This patterning both reflects and reinforces a persistent view that sociology is less prestigious and less demanding than other subjects. In the longer term, with more students taking three rather than four A-levels, and the introduction of T-level qualifications, it is possible that uptake of the subject may decline, a prediction made by a number of our respondents.

Whilst we rightly celebrate the critical, reflexive and questioning disposition afforded by the sociological imagination, this is also associated with sociology's weak professional presence. This is double edged: there are positive features to the fact that middle class, male and higher ability students who dominate educational hierarchies are less likely to engage with the subject. In this way, sociology can be viewed as a more open and accessible discipline. But, this does not itself challenge, and indeed can reinforce, hierarchies of power and inequality: those privileged groups, whose thinking would benefit from such exposure, are less likely to come into contact with sociological insights. In turn, these patterns of uptake contribute, in nuanced ways, to the marginalisation of the discipline. Subjects where uptake is skewed towards girls, and taught by female teachers, tend to attract lower status, as do those that appeal to, or are recommended to, children from 'lower' social classes. The prestige of the subject and the social positioning of those that chose to study the discipline seem mutually reinforcing. There is a

further, perhaps unsurprising, correlation: while sociology investigates, examines and debates hierarchy and inequality, and often challenges the status quo, it is correspondingly accorded low status and less prestige.

This peripheral status positioning is currently reproduced by differentiation within the university sector. Sociology is not regarded as a facilitating subject by the twenty-four Russell group universities, even though it is delivered as an undergraduate degree in twenty-one universities in the group. We can also see a tendency for sociology school teachers to be drawn from the new university sector so reinforcing status distinctions within sociology itself, and Russell Group universities mainly produce graduates who do not move into teaching the subject in schools.

The teachers raised concerns about the lack of dynamism in the curriculum. Of course, it is important to appreciate the sociological canon, and also to acknowledge the continued relevance of classic sociological theory and the findings of, what might appear dated, key research studies. At the same time, what appears missing is a sense of sociology as a forward-looking discipline, at the cutting-edge of contemporary empirical study, using advanced, reflexive theorising. We suggest that stronger links between academic and school cultures could help update the curriculum and enthuse the next generation of students.

We also found evidence of a lack of a professional community, due to the fact that many teachers are not trained as sociologists, can be isolated, and frequently have to fight for recognition from their school colleagues and managers. This is exacerbated when school managers adopt the view that anyone can teach the subject. This is noteworthy considering the uptake of the subject, and the situation is reinforced by the limited number of specialist sociology teacher-trainer opportunities. In turn, the opportunities for sociology graduates to enter secondary education are necessarily curtailed. Moreover, beleaguered and time-strapped

teachers have little resource to update their knowledge. The wider sociological community has an opportunity to challenge such assumptions, and support school-based sociology educators to enhance their disciplinary expertise. Whilst sociological knowledge has a permeable quality, the absence of pre-requisites for teaching the subject at A-level standard can only serve to reinforce its peripheral status. Again, stronger links with universities and the BSA can only serve to foster stronger disciplinary identity, knowledge-exchange, and professional infrastructure.

While teachers report that teaching sociology is challenging and interesting, the perception that it is a 'soft' and 'easy' subject is resilient and persistent. If students with low-ability excel in their sociology studies, teachers found this success explained not by the fact that the pupils were well-taught and enthused, but by the fact the subject was deemed 'easier'. It is imperative that such pre-conceptions are countered to enhance the status and positioning of the subject. Moreover, such engagement is also necessary to secure the future of the discipline. As such, both university departments and the BSA should contribute to: enthusing the next generation of students; work with exam boards to ensure the curriculum is engaging, relevant, and demanding; work with schools and universities to enhance expert training in the discipline; advocate for sociology with an array of stakeholders ranging from the Department of Education, school leaders, teacher educators, to admissions tutors in universities.

In conclusion, whilst sociology's reflexive and critical disposition is a distinctive strength, it also weakens its claims of paradigmatic, codified and objective knowledge: those emblematic of professional and higher status subjects. If strong symbolic boundary construction and social closure are regarded as prerequisites for making status claims and drawing lines of demarcation and jurisdictional authority in professions, then sociology, as a discipline, currently finds itself in a vulnerable position - characterised by permeable boundaries, low ability enrolment, lack of prescription over requisite training for teachers, and minimal professional coherence.

<sup>i</sup> Ofsted (2015) reported that 39,107 students were registered for AS level sociology. Sociology was less popular than psychology (73,390) and history (54,687), but attracted more students than geography (36,653), government and politics (12,967) and law (14,982).

<sup>ii</sup> HESA data reveals that the number of UK domiciled students enrolled for sociology declined marginally from 8625 (in 2001) to 8260 (2005) before rising again to 8700 (in 2009), and then continuing to increase to 10,980 (2015/16) and then dramatically to 15,245 (2016/17).

<sup>iii</sup> 3.6% of students in 2016, from 3.4% in 2014, and 2.7% in 2010 (Gill 2012; Gill 2015; Gill 2017)

<sup>iv</sup> In 2012, 19.5% of students took more than three subjects, dropping to 9.3% (in 2015), and again to 6.2% in 2016 (Carroll and Gill, 2017)

<sup>v</sup> The introduction of T-Levels in 2020, level 3 qualifications that cover occupational pathways such as 'childcare and education' and 'health and science', may attract students that might otherwise have opted for sociology.

<sup>vi</sup> Datafiltr is a university database of over 10,000 UK schools

<sup>vii</sup> The sample was drawn from the network of 24 sociology teachers associated with Canterbury Christ Church University.

<sup>viii</sup> There was interest in revision conferences, visits to schools by academics and specific topic-based conferences. Most respondents had attended workshops or conferences (85.85%) and webinars provided by their exam board (63.55%).

<sup>ix</sup> The characteristics of our sample are almost identical to data reported by Carroll and Gill (2017)

<sup>x</sup> About a third taught in a classroom with 16-20 students (33%), and a little less than a third taught in a classroom with 11-15 students (29%). Another 14% reported average class size of 5-10 students

<sup>xi</sup> 25% of teachers suggested that there were three members of staff for sociology and only 11% reported having more than 4 or members of staff.

<sup>xii</sup> Carroll and Gill (2017), established that uptake of subjects at A level is shaped by prior attainment. Alongside Psychology, Sociology has, by far, the largest proportion of students with low prior attainment.

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