Example of a Proposal 4

**Title:** Does it matter where you go to school? An exploration of Educational Inequality, using a Social Harm Perspective.

**Key words:** Education, Inequality, Social Harm, Socio-demography.

**Introduction:**

The Education system in the UK is comprised of several categories of schools. Perhaps the starkest divide, and that which attracts most discussion, is between the state and private sector. The state sector is neglected as a point of contention. Students applying to university are segregated into those who have been state educated and those who have been privately educated (UCAS, 2019). This approach is problematic, assuming that the state system is egalitarian, whilst neglecting the variety in state school experience and standards. This study will highlight the gaps in standards between non-selective state schools and will explore educational inequalities within a wider framework, considering the socio-demography of schools’ catchment areas, and allowing educational inequality to be viewed as social harm.

Finding your Way: This introduction provides a clear knowledge gap. Using the anchor of a particular perspective is good here as it helps give clear direction for the study. To improve, a little more on the societal implications of this problem might strengthen the argument.

**Literature review:**

The UK is unequal, the gap between the rich and the poor is increasing and the poorest are most vulnerable (The Equality trust, 2018). Educational attainment in the UK is also unequal, with 33% of those pupils entitled to free school meals gaining 5 A\*–C GCSEs compared to 60.5% overall (Teach First, 2017). In order to locate levels of educational inequality within a wider societal framework, a social harm perspective can be adopted. Social harm can be defined as:

*‘[A reflection of] the relations, processes, flows, practices, discourses, actions and inactions that constitute the fabric of our societies which serve to compromise the fulfilment of human needs and in doing so result in identifiable harms’. (Pemberton, 2016: 24)*

Essentially, the social harm perspective aims to understand how societal structures and relationships impact upon life experiences, and how these affects vary across the population. The degree to which an action or social structure will impact one’s life will vary according to indicators such as employment status, relative wealth and familial stability (Pemberton, 2016). Social harm also rests upon the understanding that such harms, due to their well-being a result of social structures and relationships, are preventable, meaning that change is possible (Hillyard and Tombs, 2004).

Educational inequality is a social harm in so far as it ‘[interferes] with the fulfilment of fundamental needs and obstructs the spontaneous unfolding of human potential’ (Tifft and Sullivan, 2001: 191). This idea of the hindering of potential is reiterated in Reay et al.’s (2001) findings that suggest the UK’s working class are prevented from achieving their educational potential due to self-limiting behaviour which results from a lack of belonging in more elite spaces. The OECD (2018) reports that in the UK, girls who rank in the top 10% for attainment, but poorest 10% by income, are three years behind their counterparts
in science and reading by the time they leave school. Education inequality, in its
leaving behind of more deprived students, must therefore be treated as a social harm.

By adopting this perspective, the location of a school whose admissions policy is based on living in the local catchment area becomes increasingly significant in offering insight into the educational prospects of the students. Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) make the case that the wealth of a nation is not of primary importance in determining life experience; rather, it is the relative wealth of people living alongside each other. What matters is the gap between rich and poor. Regions in the UK have different levels of inequality, meaning that regions with more inequality will fare worse that those living in areas of more equality (The Equality Trust, 2018). Dorling (2016) highlights this in his findings, indicating that in London and the South East of England, a higher proportion of students achieve the highest A-Level results. This is reflective of the fact that the South East of England and London have higher proportions of their populations deemed ‘wealthy’.

Finding your Way: This literature review is excellent in part due to the strong grounding in literature. All the points are carefully supported which justifies the study. Through showing how a specific theory (social harm) can be applied to educational inequality, the proposal also shows innovative and original thinking.

**Aims:**

This report will consider educational inequality between selective and non-selective state schools in the UK through a social harm perspective, comparing regional and local differences in GCSE results to the regional and local differences in socio-demography. Ultimately, this report will explore whether the socio-demography of a school’s local and regional area mirror patterns in education attainment.

Finding your Way: To improve here, it might be useful to provide some specific questions too. This shows the direction of the project more clearly.

**Methods and Methodology:**

The project seeks to explore the educational inequality between non-selective state schools in relation to social harm. Therefore, data relating to both educational attainment and socio-demography of a school’s catchment area is of interest.

This project will adopt an unobtrusive methodological approach to data collection, defined by Denzin (1970: 472) as being ‘any method of observation that directly removes the observer from the set of interactions or events being studied.’ More specifically, the data will be archival in its format, drawing on pre-recorded statistics used by governmental and non-governmental organisations (Denzin, 1970). An obstructive approach is beneficial for this research due to its objective nature (Bryman, 2016). The aim here is to explore educational inequality with regards to other forms of inequality, occurring outside of the classroom. It is not the individual experiences of the participants which are of primary interest here, rather the statistical points of comparison, which are only achieved through this objective approach.

In order to understand educational inequality within a social harm context, the socio-demography of a school’s local area must be considered, as well as the school’s educational attainment levels. The report will purposively sample schools from various regions in the UK, of contrasting deprivation levels, the schools will therefore be used according to their relevance to the research (Bryman, 2016). This data is accessible to the general public online via the Office for National Statistics and provides statistics relating to
employment, crime rates, household income and other demographic indicators
(Office for National Statistics, 2019). This project will adopt a content analysis approach
to data, defined by Holsti (1969: 14) as being ‘any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages.’ This objective approach will uphold the principle of ensuring unbiased research (Punch, 2006).

The Department for education has ‘legal powers to collect pupil, child and workforce data’ (Department for Education, 2018). The data relating to school attainment levels will thus be sourced from the Department of Education’s online resource, which is accessible to the general public. Schools will be compared based on their GCSE results for English and Maths, since these are deemed core, compulsory subjects and are the final mandatory exam sittings for children in the UK (Department for Education, 2018). Comparisons of attainment will be formed between the schools, whilst also against the national average.

Finding your Way: The method is clearly justified and doable. Relating back to the aims as well as varied literature helps with the explanation of methods.

**Ethics:**

Data for this project already exists and students’ anonymity is maintained, meaning that both ethical principles of informed consent and privacy are upheld (Rudestam and Newton, 2002). To ensure ethical compliance, this research will undertake a thorough review of the ethics within my university, ensuring that processes and plans for research are appropriate.

Finding your Way: A little more detail on the ethics procedures here and what this involves might be helpful.

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