Young People, Education and Inequalities: an introduction

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Introduction

This special section of *Sociological Research Online* emanates from the ‘Youth 2010: Identities, Transitions, Cultures’ conference, organised by the British Sociological Association’s Youth Study Group and held at the University of Surrey in 2010. The conference brought together youth researchers from many parts of the world to explore a diverse range of issues facing young men and women in contemporary society. An important theme, which has long constituted a focus of youth research and was addressed by many of the conference presentations, was the extent to which social inequalities continue to pattern the lives of young people. This special section comprises eight articles, each of which are based on papers at the conference, which provide robust new empirical evidence about the relationship between young people, inequalities and *education*, specifically. Taken together, these papers enhance our understanding of the ways in which social inequalities are played out in schools, colleges and other educational institutions and the extent to which such inequalities may be changing over time. Although they focus on different aspects of inequality and make different arguments, a number of common themes emerge across the papers. These are discussed briefly below, following an introduction to the papers themselves.

Overview of the papers

The first paper, by Sarah Smart, focuses our attention on the way in which young people understand inequality and how they believe that schools and colleges should respond to inequalities between pupils. On the basis of group interviews, conducted at eight contrasting schools in the south-east of England, Smart argues that young people's understandings are not always consistent, and often tend to draw on both neo-liberal and egalitarian discourses. She goes on to suggest that one of the reasons why pupils continue to use both discourses, despite the apparent contradictions, is the dearth of opportunities within school and elsewhere for them to engage in ideological discussions about social justice.

The next four papers draw on ethnographic research conducted in schools and colleges to explore the extent to which inequalities are played out in young people's day-to-day interactions. Sumi Hollingworth and Ayo Mansaray's paper focuses on the 'social mix' and processes of 'social mixing' in an urban comprehensive school. They argue that although the school celebrates its diverse social mix, the associations and friendships between those of different ethnic and class backgrounds is constrained in important ways. They conclude by contending that while such socially-mixed schools do offer important spaces for social learning, they are also sites of differentiation and, as such, can help to perpetuate social inequalities. Alice Pettigrew's article also draws on data from an urban comprehensive school, but focuses more specifically on inequalities with respect to ethnicity. On the basis of her observations of and interviews with white British pupils, in particular, she highlights tensions within local multicultural and anti-racist discourses as well as within national frameworks for citizenship education.

Social class is the focus of Gayna Davey's paper – based on her ethnography of young people preparing for university entry at two sixth-forms (one state sixth form college and one sixth-form of a private school). Her aim is to reveal the heterogeneity of middle class practices with respect to education. This is achieved through describing the very different social and cultural resources to which different fractions of the middle class have access that, she argues, have significant bearing on the choices that are made about university entry. The fourth ethnographic study, by Mark McCormack, presents a contrasting argument, suggesting that at least one form of inequality – that based on differences in sexual orientation – is declining. He presents evidence from four of the young people involved in his research at a religious sixth-form college in the south of England to demonstrate the positive impact of what he believes to be declining homophobia on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender pupils.

A different geographical perspective is taken by Johanna Waters and Maggi Leung in the sixth paper in the special section. Their focus is transnational education and, in particular, the provision of degree courses by British higher education institutions in Hong Kong – through face-to-face teaching rather than distance learning provision. They suggest that while such programmes can provide an important service, in partially offsetting a shortfall in places at domestic universities (in Hong Kong), they can also exacerbate local inequalities, as such degrees are often taken by those from less-advantaged backgrounds and are valued less than both domestic degrees and those obtained abroad.

In contrast to the previous papers, which focus largely on young people's experiences within schools, colleges and universities, the seventh paper, by Sue Maguire, Thomas Spielhofer and Sarah Golden, explores the impact of expansion of post-compulsory education on young

workers. They argue that the UK government has little understanding of those who do not continue in full-time education beyond the age of 16 and assumes that all those in 'jobs without training' occupy precarious labour market positions. On the basis of three empirical studies of this group of workers, Maguire and colleagues contend that government assumptions are not well-founded; indeed, many of these young people have well-thought out plans for the future, which often include periods of further education and/or training.

The final paper, by Alexandra Allan, focuses on inequalities of social class within educational institutions – but in relation to the research process, specifically. Based on her research with young women in an English private school, she explores the power dynamics between herself, as the researcher, and her research participants. As well as questioning whether visual research methods (located within a broader ethnographic study) are always as empowering as some proponents suggest, she argues that specific methods may work to constitute difference in the research process, and to position young people as powerful or powerless.

Themes and issues

Tensions between policy and practice

Taken as a whole, the papers in this special section, address some important themes within the sociology of education. Firstly, they throw into sharp relief some of the limitations of contemporary education policy. Indeed, a number of the articles emphasise the tension between official rhetoric, on the one hand, and practice in schools, universities and other educational institutions, on the other hand. Waters and Leung highlight the dissonance

between official pronouncements about international education – which stress the high status of international qualifications and their significant returns in terms of an individual’s ‘employability’ (see, for example, Brooks et al., 2012b; Waters, 2006) – and the day-to-day experiences of Hong Kong students who were studying for British degrees in their home country. They maintain that these students were often denied many of the privileges of their peers who were studying for local degrees, and found that their qualifications were not valued as highly as those awarded by local institutions. The authors draw on this evidence to argue for a more nuanced understanding of international education that pays particular attention to the ways in which it can function to reproduce patterns of local disadvantage.

The articles by Hollingworth and Mansaray and Pettigrew also explore differences between official rhetoric and practice. Both focus on ethnically and socially mixed comprehensive schools in which there was a strong official commitment to inclusivity and multiculturalism and an institutional discourse of being ‘genuinely mixed’. However, drawing on detailed ethnographic research, both papers contrast this official rhetoric with the day-to-day practices of students that often had the effect of reproducing racial boundaries. In both schools, friendship groups were frequently structured along ethnic lines and, in Hollingworth and Mansaray’s study, the geography of the school was also racialised – with different spaces being used by different ethnic groups. Hollingworth and Mansaray conclude by arguing that it is important not to conflate the provision of a ‘social mix’ with an increased likelihood of mixing. Pettigrew argues, further, that the dominant discourses of racism – in which it is framed by politicians as a pathology of the white working class, and by teachers as something that does not occur within tolerant, multicultural schools - make it harder for expressions of racism within a school context to be interrogated or constructively explored.

A similar tension between official understandings and the realities of young people's lives is identified in the article by Maguire and colleagues, which focuses on the experiences of young people in 'jobs without training' (JWT). As they note, policymakers have tended to both homogenise and problematize all young men and women in this category, assuming that they occupy a precarious labour market position and are at risk of becoming 'NEET' ('Not in Education, Employment or Training'). However, on the basis of their research, Maguire et al. argue that such assumptions overlook the significant variety in young people's experiences – and their different relationships to both education and work. Indeed, they contend that the JWT group includes young people in three considerably different labour market positions. Although one of these is broadly in line with the stereotypical image of those who are classified as 'JWT' (i.e. with low levels of academic attainment and turbulent trajectories before and since leaving school), the other two are not. The young men and women in what Maguire et al. identify as the 'taking a year out' group had typically failed to secure a place on a post-16 course, but intended to return to full-time education in the near future, while the 'making a career' group valued the skills they were developing in the workplace and hoped to progress in their current occupation in the future.

The centrality of social relationships

Secondly, the papers underline the centrality of social relationships to educational processes and practices (George, 2007; Hey, 1997). Davey's article, which focuses on the university choices of young people, provides a detailed account of how the middle class students in her sample went about accumulating and deploying 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) about the higher education sector. She argues that their narratives suggest strongly that it is social capital that provides the key to accessing elite universities. She contends that, even

amongst the middle classes, there exist very different relationships to the higher education market, with those from more privileged fractions having access to a specific form of social capital (largely as a result of family and friends having attended elite universities themselves) that facilitates a smooth transition to prestigious institutions, which is rarely available to those from less well-established middle class families. Familial social capital is also discussed in Waters and Leung's article. Indeed, the authors suggest that the take-up of low status British degrees in Hong Kong is more common amongst those from families with less social and cultural capital to draw upon and little familial experience of higher education, who have been unable to gain entry to more prestigious local universities.

Pettigrew and Hollingworth and Mansaray focus more explicitly on social relationships between friends and peers rather than family members, but they also suggest that such ties are of crucial importance in understanding the ways in which inequalities are played out within educational institutions. On the basis of her ethnography, Pettigrew argues that friendship groups help to illuminate the basis of racial differentiation in the (multicultural and ethnically mixed) school she studied. She maintains that as a result of widely-held assumptions that pupils could get into serious trouble for making racist remarks, and the seemingly grey boundaries between an acceptable joke and an offensive comment, many young people chose to remain within 'safe' mono-ethnic friendship groupings so as to ensure that they did not inadvertently offend others. Hollingworth and Mansaray extend this argument, contending that educational processes both structure and are structured by friendships and peer associations. By this, they mean that school processes, such as ability grouping and transitions at the age of 16, have an impact on friendships (with many Black and working class students being 'filtered out' in the transition to sixth-form studies, for example). However, they also note that friendships, themselves, can affect educational processes and, in

particular, the degree of cultural learning that occurs. Indeed, in their research, they document the ways in which, despite the ‘mixed’ demographics of the school, relatively little social mixing took place, as there was substantial segregation by race, with different ethnic groups occupying different ‘territories’ within the school.

Enduring inequalities?

Thirdly, the papers in this special section explore the extent to which we can identify any change in the educational experiences of young people in the first decade or so of the 21st century. McCormack’s paper makes a strong claim that the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people within schools have undergone significant change as a result of what McCormack claims to be declining homophobia. He argues that, in the past, heterosexual male students used homophobic language to demonstrate their own heterosexuality and thus avoid the stigma of homosexuality. However, McCormack’s ethnography provides evidence of how, in some schools at least, the attitudes of straight young people have changed considerably, with many now espousing pro-gay attitudes. His article documents some specific ways in which this has impacted on the experiences of LGBT students, drawing on a number of individual accounts - including that of ‘Max’, an openly gay student who was popular throughout the school and was elected student union president. Maguire et al. also maintain that there has been change in the wider context of education and training but, unlike McCormack, argue that this has often been to the detriment of young people. Indeed, they contend that the decline in the youth labour market and the increase in participation in full-time post-compulsory education has changed the focus of both policymakers and researchers – and has resulted in an increasingly poor understanding of those young people who choose not to continue in education post-16.

Overall, however, the papers suggest a strong degree of continuity in the experiences of young people, particularly with respect to the patterning of inequalities. As discussed above, the papers by Pettigrew and Hollingworth and Mansaray provide clear evidence of the impact of ethnicity on the educational experiences of young people – even in schools which are ethnically mixed and explicitly committed to promoting inclusion and multiculturalism. Indeed, Pettigrew suggests that such explicit commitments can sometimes make it harder for teachers and young people themselves to explore both contemporary racialised identities and historically-contingent, enduring structural inequalities. The structuring effects of social class are also discussed in a number of the papers (including those by Davey, Hollingworth and Mansaray and Waters and Leung). This is a central focus of Allan's paper, which draws on her research with privileged young people at a private school in England to explore the relationships between class, power and research practice. She argues that, although social class has an important influence within educational research, it is not exerted in a straightforward manner. Indeed, she claims that while the actions of the young women who were involved in her study can, at one level, be read as powerful and agentic (for example, questioning the purpose of the research and re-directing the research focus to their own ends), an alternative reading is possible. This would suggest that how they presented themselves was not necessarily as self-determined as it sometimes appeared but, instead, conformed to neo-liberal discourses of the 'enterprising self'.

While providing evidence of enduring inequalities in these areas, the special section also provides new knowledge about some specific groups of young people. Davey's paper, for example, offers a more nuanced discussion of the middle classes than is sometimes found within the sociology of education. It seeks to explore differences within the middle classes in

a fine-grained manner, and to carve a space between the extremes of middle class privilege and working class disadvantage. By developing a typology of three different types of middle class chooser ('natural, effortless and destined', strategic and ambitious' and 'aspiring and vocationally-specific'), Davey deconstructs some of the vaguer notions of privilege which sometimes underpin analyses of 'educational choice'. Her focus on the less advantaged fraction of the middle class is reflected, to some extent, in Waters and Leung's paper, which focuses on students who were neither wealthy nor poor. Their article also draws our attention to the impact of new forms of education (in this case the provision of transnational education by foreign providers through face-to-face teaching) and, in particular, the ways in which *international* education can have the effect of reproducing *local* inequalities.

Smart's paper raises some interesting questions about the ways in which young people, themselves, understand inequality change over time. Drawing on group interviews she conducted with pupils in eight secondary schools, Smart argues that the young people involved in her research tended to explain the inequality they saw around them in school and other locations by drawing on neo-liberal, meritocratic ideas. Economic inequality was thus understood as the fair outcome of differential levels of skill or effort. This can be seen as closely in line with dominant political ideologies and thus potentially subject to change over time. However, Smart also contends that this neo-liberal view co-existed with a more egalitarian perspective, in which the majority of the young people espoused the view that rich and poor were 'the same kind of people' and should thus be treated the same and accorded the same respect. The tension between these positions, she suggests, leads young people to favour interventions which minimise the visibility of economic inequalities (such as separating the schooling of those from different backgrounds and not discussing economic inequality within school), rather than challenge their existence directly.

Methodological considerations

Finally, the papers – either explicitly or implicitly – address some important methodological points with respect to studying young people’s experiences of education. It is noteworthy that five out of the eight papers in this special section are based on ethnographic studies (those by Hollingworth and Mansaray, Pettigrew, Davey, McCormack and Allan). These illustrate the value of this particular method for exploring sensitive subjects and generating data which can help to question the ‘official versions’ of educational policies and practices espoused by politicians, teachers and, in some cases, pupils themselves. The methods employed by the various papers in this special section also facilitate exploration of the *spaces* of education (Brooks et al., 2012a; Gulson and Symes, 2007). The papers focus, variously, on the significance of: an urban (as opposed to a rural) setting (Pettigrew; Hollingworth and Mansaray); national geography (McCormack); space use within a school (Hollingworth and Mansaray); and the growth of new, transnational spaces of education (Waters and Leung). Finally, methodological issues are discussed explicitly by Allan, in her account of using visual methods with young women attending a private school. She argues that the young women’s privileged and classed identity was brought into sharp relief as a result of the research process, the relationships between participants and the researcher, and the specific methods used. Indeed, she claims that the focus on visual methods, in particular, had the effect of producing certain truths and limiting others – as the young women chose to represent themselves as reflexive and creative artists.

Conclusion

Clearly the eight papers in this special section do not cover all the dimensions of inequality that remain important in young people's lives and that continue to pattern their experiences of education (gender is a notable omission, for example). They also focus largely, although not exclusively, on the *English* education system, and thus do not explore how inequalities may be played out differently in other nations and in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, we hope that, together, the papers make an important contribution to on-going debates within the UK and elsewhere about the extent to which education, in its current form, can be considered as an engine of social mobility and social justice. We welcome dialogue about any of the themes addressed in this special section – through suggestions for future Rapid Response sections within *Sociological Research Online*, full journal articles and/or direct communication with the authors.

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