

Editorial: Class and education: old issues, new perspectives

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‘What is the most pressing issue in education right now and how can we get educationalists to talk about it?’ This seemingly innocuous question gave birth to the 3rd Annual Education Conference, 'In a Class of Our Own', February 2011. The event was organised by Kevin Morris who, at the time, was a member of the Department of Education, Middlesex University, and we would like to thank him and the department for making this conference happen. Indeed, the conference brought together a large group of educators who vigorously debated social class and its relationship with education.

Although some of the speakers did not contribute to this publication, most of the papers stem from that conference. These are the papers by Joyce Canaan, Spyros Themelis and John Yandell. Hence, a dialogue about education and social class did open and has lasted for more than two years. Since then the impact of social class on educational attainments has increased and class inequalities are not only a cause of educational underachievement but also social segregation.

Social class might be the factor with the most explanatory power in understanding and explaining educational outcomes, attainments and so on, but it is more than that. It is a lived category, which encompasses the

totality of capitalist relations of production. In turn, these relations (of production) have since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008 entered an aggressive stage, which in most Western countries goes by the name austerity and involves extended spending cuts, bailing out the banks, attacking and dismantling the welfare state and so on. We understand this set of processes as part of 'neoliberalisation', which entails the entrenchment, strengthening and expansion of neoliberalism.

The outcomes are already discernible and they take the form of high unemployment, wage suppression, decrease in living standards and working conditions, pauperisation of large sections of the population and so on. To this extent, social movements have been organised in Europe and elsewhere aiming to resist austerity and its associated policies, to seek alternative ways of organising society on more egalitarian grounds and re-humanise what neoliberal capitalism is dehumanising. To be clear, both the neoliberal advancement as well as its opposition are facets of the same process, which is no other than that of class struggle.

All the papers in this special issue seek to re-examine fundamental questions of class as they impact on educational sociology and pedagogy. Some of them raise concerns about the basis of classification, including contrasting the Marxist tradition with the Weberian or postmodern frames which have dominated educational sociology in many countries. These papers seek to locate differences in the degree of dis/advantage within economic structures formed by relations of production. They question, in various ways, the persistent claims that education can overcome inequality, and re-examine the complex processes which are often referred to, as shorthand, by the concept of *reproduction*. They connect

historic arguments with our present situation – one in which neoliberalism persists despite the crisis to which it has given rise.

John Yandell focuses on England as the prototype of neoliberal school reform, drawing particular attention to spurious claims that this is addressing class inequalities and reproduction. Whatever the rhetoric, it is abundantly clear that this has not been the effect. He comments on the discourse of ‘raising aspirations’ as the psychologisation of an economic and political problem. His paper raises important questions about the aims of education, the emphasis on individual ambition and mobility, and the pedagogic importance of connecting with young people’s lives.

Joyce Canaan examines her sociology students’ confusion with the concept of class and their struggle with class-related identities. She points to the ways in which ‘middle class’ has come to be seen as ‘normal’ and working class a label of abnormality and deficiency. Working to unravel students’ contradictory statements and reactions, this revealing paper points to the tensions which continue to arise when students from stigmatised backgrounds strive towards a university education and professional career. In the current context of austerity politics, she suggests that lecturers need to support students’ identity work by articulating the relationship between their autobiographies and the wider socio-historical process.

Spyros Themelis patiently assembles the data surrounding the ongoing inequalities of education. He critically explores the extent to which the education system has lived up to claims of helping to alter the social structure, or at least enhancing social mobility. He brings social class analysis into the explanation of educational inequalities and argues for a

renewal of the field of sociology of education through the examination of pertinent inequalities as part of the wider social relations of production. He argues that the connection between education and the wider political economy can help us understand better educational differentials and disparities. The analysis extends from early childhood to higher education and reasserts the need to shed light on the practices of the élites as a means of unravelling practices of domination and exploitation in and out of education.

Panagiotis Sotiris focuses on the relation between higher education and class. He scrutinises the earlier attempts by Louis Althusser and then Nicos Poulantzas to analyse the social role of universities, both in terms of economic (re)distribution and the (re)production of ideologies. This paper discusses the role of education, along with other forms of education including work-based learning, in developing classed identities, drawing on Gramsci's idea that higher education functions as a hegemonic apparatus. In other words, its role is by no means limited to the transmission of marketable skills. Sotiris's careful explanation succeeds in deepening our understanding of the relationship between educational processes and institutions as well as capitalist production and power.

The final paper in this collection, by *Terry Wrigley*, is a rethinking of the dominant ways in which class is presented and conceptualised in educational sociology. It insists on the relevance of a classic Marxist understanding of class in terms of economic production and exploitation, but weaves into this an exploration of the cultural aspects of class development into an agency for historic change. The paper includes important references to E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and other members of the British 'New Left' of the 1950s and 1960s. Subsequent

sections include a critical re-evaluation of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, in terms of a flawed class analysis; the vagueness of sociological references to a ‘middle class’; and the relation between economics and culture in the ideological invention of an ‘underclass’. The concluding section succinctly raises a number of current concerns to demonstrate the crucial importance of a sound class analysis.

Wrigley also contributes to this volume an unusual book review – unusual because the relevance of the book to education is not immediately obvious or explicit. In his review essay of Paul Blackledge’s recent *Marxism and Ethics*, he explores and demonstrates the importance of situating pedagogical understandings within the perspective of the broader educational processes of class development. The discussion is valuable for practitioners within formal educational institutions as well as those whose educational activity takes place in informal settings including social movements.