Education, inequality and social mobility

Key findings from three case studies

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of the authors' three case studies of school and undergraduate student aspirations and progression pathways, and examines the implications for current policy and research in relation to social mobility. The studies challenge the government's preference for individualist, education-based solutions to the problems of social justice, including the under-representation of disadvantaged young people in elite universities and workplaces. They argue that the individualist perspective grossly underestimates the role of underlying structures, including social class, and the influence of families, through transmitted economic, social and cultural capital. Large-scale quantitative studies tend to compound this bias by measuring social mobility in terms of male income progression, and by neglecting the contribution of women and family networks to social fluidity. Entrenched patterns of advantage and disadvantage are likely to persist until there is a determined and consistent effort to pursue the logic of the 2010 Equality Act, especially by bringing the socio-economic duty into force and ensuring that every employer complies with its requirements. Education alone is not enough.

Introduction

For over thirty years, policies designed to improve rates of intra-generational social mobility in England have emphasised individual, personal responsibility for acquiring knowledge and skills at school, and for applying them to generate wealth and acquire status. Neo-liberal economic ideas and human capital theory have informed social mobility policy, with Conservative, Coalition and New Labour governments driving state-education provision to 'unlock talent and fulfil potential' (Department for Education (DfE), 2017). Policy-makers share the widespread opinion that hard work and education are important for developing human capital and promoting social mobility (Her Majesty's Government (HMG), 2011; DfE, 2010). The Coalition government (2010-15), for example, argued that fair access to high-quality teaching would close the gap between

advantaged and disadvantaged students, improve workplace skills and contribute to the creation of a less unequal society (Gove, 2011).

Our recent work (Hoskins and Barker, 2014; Barker and Hoskins, 2015) has raised strong doubts about this optimistic scenario. Social mobility may not be 'low and falling' (Blanden et al., 2005; Gorard, 2008) but there are few signs that the combination of school reform and increased educational expenditure has boosted total mobility rates between 1972 and 2005 (Goldthorpe and Mills, 2008). This paper presents a summary of our social mobility research projects carried out over the last decade to shed light on the future career aspirations of school and university students. The data confirms that social reproduction is a more common reality than social mobility for many of the young people we have interviewed. We discuss the implications of these findings for social mobility policy-makers, children, and families.

Education and social mobility

Social class background continues to influence young people's aspirations for the future, despite claims that class is dead (Pakulski and Waters, 1997). Many young people are guided by internalised classed dispositions towards employment similar to that of their parents and/ or grandparents (Hoskins and Barker, 2020). This pattern has implications for social mobility and helps explain why substantial public investment has produced so few signs of a sustained increase in rates of upward movement.

The limited increase in intra-generational social mobility rates since the 1970s reflects the social class bias that pervades education provision in England (Ball, 2003). Many young people from working-class backgrounds encounter a school and university sector inclined to disparage or undervalue their dispositions, interests and hobbies. As Reay (2006, p294) reminds us, 'within the educational system almost all the authority remains vested in the middle classes. Not only do they run the system, the system itself is one which valorises middle rather than working class cultural capital' (Ball, 2003). Major differences in children's social, economic and cultural capital precondition their educational experience and outcomes in a school environment loaded in favour of students from middle-class backgrounds. Unequal opportunities in terms of nutrition, health, welfare and family resources are compounded by parenting strategies based on intensive cultivation, especially in relation to language use and the organisation of daily life (Lareau, 2002; 2003).

As soon as young children enter the education system in England, they experience a social-class filtering effect that shapes and determines their school experience. Their academic attainment is closely linked to that of their families. Comparative analysis of the 1946, 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts shows that parental class, status and education continue to exert a strong influence on academic attainment, even when allowance

is made for cognitive ability (Bukodi et al., 2014). Education appears to operate as a channel for social mobility rather than its cause, and seems to promise greater equality than is available in reality (Goldthorpe and Mills, 2008).

The research

Over the past decade we have carried out three research projects to examine the career aspirations of school and university students. The aim of this work is to provide qualitative understanding of the influences that condition students' future career aspirations. In 2012, through paired interviews with eighty-eight secondary school students located in years 11-13 of two schools, we noted consistent patterns of social reproduction in participants' aspirations and plans for the future (Hoskins and Barker, 2014; 2017). There was also an opportunity to gather genealogical data from forty-four of these participants. Maternal and paternal parent and grandparent data similarly revealed striking employment patterns across three generations that exemplify a strong tendency towards social reproduction. Similarly, in 2016, interviews with eleven undergraduate students pursuing three- or four-year degree courses in chemistry found that eight participants identified a strong STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) background amongst family members (Hoskins and Barker, 2020).

These research projects have led to findings with important implications for our understanding of: (a) the role of families and family networks over time in transmitting capital, dispositions and status expectations; (b) the role of relative wealth and status in mediating access to new opportunities; (c) the role of education in reinforcing and enhancing pre-existing patterns; (d) the scope for individual agency in developing new capital through education; (e) the role of changes in the labour market that expand or contract demand for particular types of labour. In what follows we provide a brief discussion of these five key themes.

(a) Families

Our qualitative investigation of family histories and networks (Hoskins and Barker, 2014; 2019;2020) confirms expectations derived from Bourdieu (1984). Young people acknowledge that their values, outlook and dispositions owe much to their families. We have traced interests, hobbies and vocational preferences through three generations and our data is consistent with results from large scale studies based on national samples, as well as the pathfinding work of Bertaux and Thompson (1997). Students' attitudes reflect family influences and their aspirations are closely linked to their sense of what is possible for 'people like us'. Individuals belong to families that exercise a formative influence on their approach to learning, their attitudes and preferences at school as well as their outcomes. Families play a critical role in accumulating and transmitting

advantages from their social networks and, whilst these are not deterministic, they act as a sustaining influence for most of the young people interviewed (Hoskins and Barker, 2020).

(b) Wealth and status

The empirical evidence derived from interviews with school and university students is also consistent with national datasets that show a close correlation between relative wealth and poverty and subsequent outcomes. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and Advanced level (A level) examination results,[1] as well as university admissions, are not predetermined for individuals but in aggregate reflect postcodes (MOSAIC; POLAR QUINTILE). The recent Social Mobility Commission (SMC) reports (2016; 2019) present consistent and relatively unchanging evidence that those who start behind (from birth), continue behind and often drop further back through the school years. These effects are visible throughout an individual's education and vary little between supposedly highly effective and apparently less than effective schools and colleges. Less good examination results constrain options and prompt students to adapt pragmatically to their grades. But high performers from lower-class backgrounds routinely fail to match the progression achieved by those from more privileged circumstances, even when they secure entry to prestigious careers. As Friedman and Laurison note (2020, p38): 'At every level of education, those from professional and managerial backgrounds are still more likely to be found in top jobs than those from working class backgrounds'. These findings point to entrenched patterns of class-based social reproduction.

(c) Education

The findings/evidence summarised in (a) and (b) above are inconsistent with the confidence that high-quality education available to all is a sufficient policy answer to widespread inequality. Even when excellent school and university education is readily available, outcomes continue to vary widely by social class as measured by post code and free school meals eligibility (Cook, 2012; SMC 2019). Successful education is so dependent on capital, habitus and dispositions (in other words, on students' backgrounds, nurture and primary socialisation) that it may seem as if social reproduction is inevitable; as if the possession of social, economic and cultural capital predetermines outcomes. Our conclusion, however, is that although background variables condition and sometimes shape responses to education, their influence is not inevitable or predetermined. They act instead as active ingredients in a complex equation (Hoskins and Barker, 2020).

(d) Agency

In tracking students, we heard numerous stories of young people with positive dispositions and strong parental support making independent decisions and generating

new capital of their own through teachers, the education system and the stimulus of school and university activities that reach beyond the classroom. Students appear to retain agentic freedom even as they progress through inherited advantage to find related but different opportunities for success. Education seems to operate as an accelerator or catalyst, with school and university introducing young people to areas of knowledge and expertise that become their own and represent a new dimension in the family's history, with significant and cumulative implications for future generations (Hoskins and Barker, 2020).

(e) Labour market

If the role of education is more conservative (in terms of social mobility) than is usually acknowledged, by providing opportunities to consolidate, renew and extend family capital in ways that may have long- rather than short-term benefits, then the labour market must be regarded as the source of dynamic change. Cyclical fluctuations in demand, technological and entrepreneurial innovation, and far-reaching policy adjustments create unexpected opportunities or limit previously promising fields of endeavour. Family circumstances may provide safety, security and the resilience to adjust to an altered landscape; or may leave individuals exposed and vulnerable (Hoskins and Barker, 2020).

Promoting equal opportunities

These major factors shaping socio-economic continuity and change all work to promote unequal opportunities and outcomes. They compound one another to produce a world of winners and losers, where success is transmitted and earned by families that have accumulated small but sufficient advantages over time (Gladwell, 2008). Education (in general) enables family resources to be re-capitalised in each generation as circumstances permit. It does not provide an escalator for more than a fraction of those from less advantaged homes and cannot produce great equity or fairness in the distribution of rewards. This realistic picture of how the dice are loaded in social competition reveals the challenge of devising an improved approach to social justice. We have also to acknowledge the weaknesses of the Equality Act 2010 as well as the failure of successive governments to implement the intended 'socio-economic duty' on public bodies. Social class is the unspoken, unaddressed issue for everyone concerned with equal opportunities (Hoskins and Barker, 2020).

Discussion

Policy-makers construct all young people as agentic, rational choosers able to make informed choices about a potential future career (DfE, 2017). In practice, many young

people are not strategically mapping their future employment, spurred on by the latest policy initiative to bound free from their families (Hoskins, 2017; Hoskins and Barker, 2017). Rather, our genealogical approach to researching social mobility has confirmed the important and decisive influence of family occupations over three generations on participants' future aspirations (Hoskins and Barker, 2019; 2020). Whilst we have noted exceptions and evidence of personal agency, choices about education and employment are overwhelmingly steeped in family cultural capital and dispositions. Our work has shown that, from an early age, schools filter students into academic and vocational tracks and work to extend and transmit relative advantage, rather than to help disadvantaged groups compete on equal terms with others from more prosperous backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Ball, 2003; Cook, 2012; Francis and Wong, 2013).

We concur with Reay (2006) that: 'Against a policy backdrop of continuous change and endless new initiatives it appears that in relation to social class the more things change the more they stay the same'(p304). Those from middle-class backgrounds are well placed to access the new educational resources available through, for example, the gifted and talented scheme, and are more able to move to the expensive catchment areas of high-performing state schools (Ball, 2003). So, whilst the rising social-mobility policy tide can float all boats, the problem remains that whilst this continues to happen at roughly the same speed inequality levels will persist and grow, and gaps will widen. Until policies can stimulate change capable of propelling those from working-class families forward at a faster relative rate than their middle-class peers, entrenched patterns of advantage and disadvantage look unlikely to change. There is an urgent need to recognise 'sociology's inconvenient truth' (Brown, 2013) and acknowledge that policy has accelerated competition and social congestion without improving access or fairness.

Note

1. GCSE examinations are typically taken by fifteen to sixteen-year-olds in year eleven and A level examinations are typically taken by seventeen to eighteen-year-olds in year thirteen in England.

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