2 Education Markets and Social Class Inequality

A Comparison of Trends in England, Scotland and Wales

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INTRODUCTION

Educational quasi-markets and social inequality

In the 1980s and 1990s Great Britain introduced policies to develop quasi-markets in education, similar to policies introduced in other countries at that time (Hirsch 1994; Whitty et al., 1998; Lauder, Hughes et al., 1999). Influenced by the New Right and neo-liberalism, quasi-markets apply market principles to the provision of public services. They differ from ‘real’ markets in that the services provided are free to the user and the providers may not be private profit-maximising organisations (Le Grand and Bartlett 1993). The typical features of educational quasi-markets are parental choice of school, the publication of information to inform this choice, enrolment-linked funding, the granting of management powers to schools, the corresponding reduction in the powers of educational authorities to plan education, and encouragement to schools to diversify. In Britain the Conservative governments of 1979-1997 introduced all these features of quasi-markets in a series of reforms, the most significant of which was the 1988 Education Reform Act for England and Wales. These reforms attempted to remould — in the eyes of critics, to undermine — the predominantly comprehensive school system created by an earlier wave of secondary-school reform that began in 1965. However, this attempt was not uniform across Britain: England moved much further in the direction of quasi-markets than Scotland or (to a lesser extent) Wales.

The creation of quasi-markets is an example of what Brown (1995: 43) describes as ‘a change in the “rules of engagement” to mediate the competition for credentials’. He argues that globalisation and the insecurities associated with it have intensified positional competition in education and encouraged a shift towards market rules of engagement in place of rules based upon the ideology of meritocracy and the introduction of comprehensive education (Brown 2000). ‘This change in the rules of engagement is giving the middle classes the opportunity to capitalise on their superior market power in the competition for credentials within a market-driven system of education.’ (Brown 1995: 46) Education markets thus represent a new mechanism of social closure. This theme is echoed by Ball, who
argues that ‘the particular policies of choice and competition give particular advantages to the middle-class, while not appearing to do so, in the way that selection policies did in a previous policy era’ (Ball 2003: 26).

The main argument of the social-closure theorists is not that market rules of engagement necessarily result in higher levels of class inequality than existed in earlier generations. It is rather that under the new social conditions created by globalisation and other socioeconomic changes, market rules of engagement provide the middle classes with a more reliable way to preserve their positional advantages than the rules of engagement associated with earlier school regimes such as selection or the pre-market comprehensive system. In this chapter we aim to test this claim by comparing the stronger and weaker market regimes in the different ‘home countries’ of Britain: England, Scotland and Wales.

Many of the researchers who have studied parental choice and related market policies in England, Wales and Scotland have broadly supported Ball’s conclusion that these policies ‘give particular advantages to the middle class’ (Adler et al., 1990; Echols et al., 1990; Willms 1996; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Woods et al., 1998; Gibson and Asthana 2000; Walford 2001). Their research suggests that under the typical rules of engagement of educational quasi-markets the mechanisms of social closure are as follows:

1. **The middle classes have more effective market strategies.** Middle-class parents are more likely to exercise choice, and they have the social and cultural capital to do so in a way that maximises positional benefits for their children.

2. **Parents’ choices create or accentuate a hierarchy among schools, which is associated with social class.** Choices tend to favour ‘good’ schools and those in middle-class areas, which become oversubscribed and enjoy the benefits of full rolls, a favourable student composition, low per capita costs, a good reputation and high staff and student morale. Conversely schools serving working-class or socially disadvantaged areas risk losing pupils and may enter a ‘spiral of decline’ with lower resources, higher per capita costs, a less favourable student composition, poor reputation and low morale. There is no self-correcting mechanism as in other markets. Consequently, school differences increase. Competition encourages vertical (hierarchical) rather than horizontal (pluralist) differentiation, and reinforces academic values. This reflects the status of education as a positional good and its influence on life chances and social reproduction.

3. **Schools’ own market responses reinforce this hierarchy.** Oversubscribed schools often select students on criteria which favour the middle classes, such as aptitude, self-presentation, motivation or parental interest. All schools must maintain or enhance their position in the hierarchy in order to attract (good) students and remain viable. To do this they emphasise or adopt the pedagogies, curricula, organisational styles, reward systems and ethos which will attract ‘good’ (middle-class) students. In sectors of education where positional competition is important education markets encourage a uniformity of values, unless strong supply-side measures are introduced to promote diversity.

4. **Within-school class inequalities in attainment increase.** This effect tends to be implicit in the research literature. As a result of (3) the school system as a whole becomes more ‘middle-class friendly’. That is, it recognises and rewards the cultural