Social Inequalities in Education

Enlarging the Scope of Public Policy Through Reflection on Context

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INTRODUCTION

Theories of inequality in education offer more or less scope to public policy. They expose a field to intervention which may be relatively confined or more extensive, depending on what structures, processes and activities are identified as salient and also accessible to policy.

Of course, it is not theories which drive policy, though they can be influential and also useful to politicians — useful in ways not necessarily faithful to the limitations of research itself, as Goldstein and Myers remark in the case of school effectiveness research (1997). However, even at the risk of political distortion or ‘hijack’, it remains important for theorists to present a field of endeavour to policymakers and administrators, based on research findings and theoretical reflection.

Theories of social reproduction would seem, on the face of it, to offer very little scope to policy, or at any rate to educational policy. They belong to a broader class of reflection reaching back to the Coleman Report (1966) which attributes relatively little influence over achievement or status attainment differences to educational resources and practices per se (Coleman et al. 1966; Jencks 1972). The imperative of changing the social environment still echoes in the words of Basil Bernstein, “Education cannot compensate for society” (1977).

Conceiving education as a system of social reproduction, and schools as agencies of “conservation” rather than “emancipation” makes the point even more strongly (Bourdieu 1966). The most well-educated families know how to manage structures (school, stream, and subject options), while governments often seem unable to operate structures effectively and inclusively. Families with social power use education as a system for staking claims on status, life-style, income and occupations. Families without social power rely on governments to assert these claims on their behalf or to compensate them for unenforceable claims. Governments frequently fail their poorer citizens because social claims on educational success are determined by cultural systems of curriculum, teaching, and examinations whose demands favour the children of educated families and the schools attended by these children. Governments are the trustees of this culture which is made authoritative through the hierarchical organisation of school
programs and university courses, and through statutory bodies, like examination boards, charged with codifying the curriculum and administering tests and examinations.

How could governments operate these bureaucratic structures in favour of poor families when the very nature of the objectives which drive the codification of knowledge and its academic transmission is to differentiate and to select according to a cultural model of learning and the learner derived from a socially advantaged milieu? Moreover, since children from advantaged homes are compelled to compete against each other, the outcome of a more generalised competition involving disadvantaged children as well will inevitably be interpreted as due to merit. This is so even though the circumstances under which competition is organised may be very unequal and the very criteria of success favour one group of competitors. As the trustee of merit, government is compromised from the beginning. Any action it takes to reduce cultural bias in scholastic demands or social bias in the conditions of learning will be interpreted as anti-competitive and as destructive of merit and of the incentives to merit.

Stated in these bald terms, the theory of social reproduction in education would appear to offer little scope for policy beyond compensatory measures for the disadvantaged. Indeed it seems that the very tools that governments have developed at least in part to redress disadvantage have enlarged the scope for strategic action by advantaged families. The creation of new curriculum streams or subject options, the wider use of school-based or coursework assessment, devolution of management to schools, de-zoning of catchments, greater accountability and transparency through public reporting, all these measures have promised better quality and equity, but have delivered more flexibility and mobility to better-off families and produced more isolation and segregation of poorer families.

PERSISTENT INEQUALITY AND HISTORICAL PROGRESS

However, theories of reproduction also recognise change. The ‘reconversion strategies’, highlighted by Bourdieu (1984: 125ff), reveal a situation of growing stress felt by even the socially most advantaged families. Their children, from the time secondary education began to be popularised, were forced into academic competition, if not at lower levels where expansion was initially greatest, then at post-compulsory levels which had become exposed to popular demand. Even the concepts of cultural, economic and social capital are products of a theory, not of inertia, but of reproduction in the context of change. French middle-class families whose capital lay in a small business (a shop or a workshop) were made vulnerable in the post-war decades by the emergence of large retail outlets, business mergers, and cheap imported manufactured goods. Their lack of cultural capital and failure to invest more in education as a conversion strategy condemned them to historical decline as a class fraction in contrast to families whose ascent was based on business services and new technology and involved greater participation in education.

Structural change in education has allowed major changes to occur in levels of participation. This has occurred over successive waves of reform – lower secondary