Marginalized youth in education: social and cultural dimensions of exclusion

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Introduction

The marginalization of young people in education systems is a process that occurs in all advanced societies and, despite changes in the organisation of education and in patterns of participation, inequalities remain deeply entrenched. The groups that are most prone to marginalization vary from country to country – in Canada and Australia aboriginal groups are vulnerable, and in Europe the Roma have long been a concern. Immigrants who lack fluency in the national language frequently encounter difficulties, as do members of certain ethnic groups. There are also media and policy 'fads' that bring specific groups to the fore: in the UK at the moment there is concern about the NEET group (who are basically 16-19 year-olds who are not in education, employment or training), while in Japan there is concern about a group referred to as 'freeters' who are seen as choosing a new work life balance in which employment becomes secondary.

In talking about marginalization and education I could look at a range of vulnerable groups who are undoubtedly at risk of socio-economic exclusion, any of which deserve to be the focus of deeper analysis, but today I want to focus specifically on social class. There are several reasons that I've chosen to focus on class: first because, in all developed societies, when we think about groups who are vulnerable to marginalization social class divisions are significant and tend to cross-cut other divisions like ethnicity; second, class inequalities have proved to be resistant to political manipulation and are significant in societies committed to meritocracy as well as in neo-liberal societies; third, there is a view that the mechanisms through which class inequalities become translated into marginalization have changed and that class has become less significant in late modernity: if this is so, we probably want to know how things have changed. In my view it is important to explore the nature of the relationship between social class and marginalization as it is only through developing a full understanding that we can hope to prevent class inequalities leading to marginalization and exclusion. In turn, a fuller appreciation of the mechanisms that link class with marginalization can help us understand processes of marginalization among other vulnerable groups.

In terms of patterns of inequality, Canada and the UK occupy similar positions in international 'league tables': Using the GINI index which measures patterns of income

inequality, Canada and the UK fall mid-range in a listing of OECD countries: the two countries are much more unequal than the Scandinavian countries, but much more egalitarian than countries like Mexico and Turkey (Field *et al*., 2007). In the UK and Canada, the vast majority of young people now remain in full-time education until the age of 18, although those who drop out earlier are overwhelmingly drawn from less advantaged families and there is a strong association between social class and educational attainment. In the context of educational attainment, there is also a strong association between low social class and a lack of basic skills which are essential to survival in modern labour markets. Highlighting this relationship, a recent OECD report concluded that 'poor basic skills mean less chances of a job, worse health, more criminality and a shorter life' (Field *et al*., 2007: 26).

In this paper I want to focuses on the processes through which marginalization occurs within modern educational contexts. I'll begin by discussing the concept of marginalization and go on to examine changes in the relationship between inequality and educational outcomes before going on to examine the ways in which changing educational structures and their interface with modern transitions impacts on the process of marginalization. With a strong focus on social class, the paper will explore the ways in which cultural orientations impact on educational attainment and examine the extent to which modern educational experiences have affected patterns of engagement. Finally, I'll conclude by highlighting some of the policy implications that can be drawn from research findings.

Marginalization and exclusion

To begin, we need to be clear about what we mean by marginalization and how it differs from social exclusion, which is the other key concept used to describe the situation of disadvantaged groups. Social exclusion is basically a more extreme concept and can perhaps be thought of as one of the possible consequences of prolonged periods of marginalization. If marginalization is about being away from the mainstream, out on the margins of society, exclusion means being more or less cut off from society and as being in a situation of economic and social isolation. Social exclusion is about disenfranchisement and about being prevented, through lack of resources, from being able to participate in the types of activities that are taken for granted by citizens in a given society.

As part of a *process*, marginalization is hard to define because it occurs in a variety of contexts and can be cumulative. In the labour market, for example, those with disabilities may be marginalized: they are not necessarily excluded from participation, but through a variety of processes frequently come to occupy peripheral positions that may not reflect their qualifications or intellectual capacity. Marginalization is frequently linked to a resource deficit, but can also be linked to culture and to subjective orientations. In education, for example, a young person can be marginalized because they lack the resources to participate fully due to a deficit of basic skills or due to family finances and poverty. In a cultural context, some young people may not regard education as a worthwhile endeavour and may reject the goals and values of the school. If we are to prevent social exclusion, then it is necessary to ensure that children and young people are not marginalized within educational contexts, but this has to involve interventions that address both structural and cultural dimensions.

At every level, education has to be about equity and inclusivity, but while most people may agree that education systems need to be underpinned by social justice, there is little agreement about what a socially just system would look like in practical terms. At its core, social justice relates to the principle that every effort should be made to ensure that individuals and groups all enjoy fair access to rewards. It is about creating a 'more equitable, respectful and just society for everyone' (Zaijda *et al.* 2006: 13). Yet social justice is not necessarily about equality; it can be about providing equal opportunities to access an unequal reward structure. In a society committed to the ideals of social justice, it is recognized that fair treatment and equal opportunities for everyone can only be brought about by imposing restrictions on the behaviour of some individuals or groups. And this is where the problem lies: the provision of opportunities to members of less advantaged groups is uncontroversial; restricting the opportunities of the middle and upper classes has proved to be a political bullet that few governments have been prepared to bite.

John Rawls' (1971) idea of social justice involves more than the equal opportunity to access unequal labour market positions. He argues that any reward system that provides advantages to those who display superior performance is likely to result in a form of distribution that is essentially arbitrary and favours those with pre-existing advantages. In other words, while some may regard talent, ability or effort as attributes that merit reward, to provide differential privilege on the basis of something like ability (which is randomly distributed) or effort (which is conditioned by family circumstances) is likely to result in the reproduction of inequalities and therefore runs counter to the idea of social justice.

In less idealistic terms, in a recent OECD report (Field *et al*., 2007), equity was presented as having two dimensions: first, fairness, which means 'ensuring that personal and social circumstances - for example, gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin – should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential'. The second, inclusion, 'implies ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all – for example everyone should be able to read, write and do simple arithmetic' (2007: 11). In this context, the prevention of marginalization in education involves activities targeted at groups as well as individuals. On the macro level it will involve monitoring inequalities and taking positive action if any group is shown to be performing less well, while on an individual level it would involve triggering interventions targeted at pupils who are failing to thrive educationally and lacking a grounding in basic skills. Interestingly in the UK a new Equality Act has just been passed which requires all local authorities to monitor and act on class differences in access to all public services, including education.

Inequality in education: macro perspectives

If we focus briefly on patterns of inequity in education, the first point I want to make is that irrespective of social class, young people today remain in education longer and leave with superior qualifications to those of earlier generations. In Canada and the UK most young people remain in school until the age of 18 and higher education is increasingly a mass experience. In the UK, for example, more than four in ten young people progress to higher

education and there is a policy commitment to take that to fifty per cent over the next few years. Yet while these changes have impacted on young people from all social classes, and while in some countries the attainment gap between social classes has narrowed, it remains significant in all advanced societies including those that have made great efforts to reduce class-based inequalities, such as the Scandinavian countries.

Despite some variation between countries, in all OECD countries young people's educational attainment and patterns of participation are strongly affected by the class position of their parents and, in Canada, it has been argued that compared to other sources of inequality, such as gender and ethnicity, 'class background seems to be the far more enduring source of educational inequality' (Guppy and Davies, 1998: 123). In Canada there is also clear evidence of an association between poverty, family income and levels of parental education and patterns of educational participation and attainment (Wotherspoon, 2004; O'Reilly and Yau, 2009). In Toronto a recent school census highlighted a strong relationship between family income, parental education and ethnic origin, and performance in reading, writing and maths. The performance gap was particularly wide between those whose parents had a college education and those whose parents had no post-secondary education (O'Reilly and Yau, 2009).

In terms of basic skills, the international PISA surveys also show that patterns of literacy and numeracy are affected by social class. In Canada, for example, young people from lowest SES quartile were two and a half times more likely to fall into the bottom quartile for attainment in maths than their more advantaged peers, while in the UK they were more than three times as likely to show poor levels of attainment in maths (Field *et al*., 2007). Less advantaged young people are also more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to participate in post-secondary education or to attend university. Across the OECD countries, young people with educated parents are 'between two and six times more likely to complete tertiary education themselves (Field *et al*., 2007: 39)

In a review of trends in participation in higher education in the EU countries, it has been argued that 'a constant factor in all member states for which data are available, is that while absolute participation rates have increased for all socio-economic levels, the relative rates have rarely changed' (Green *et al*., 1999: 204). Drawing on data from several countries, Raftery and Hout (1993) proposed a theory of 'maximally maintained advantage'. Essentially their argument is that educational expansion tends to occur in a way that results in little change in class-based differentials until a 'saturation point' is reached. In other words, working class gains will only occur once middle classes participation has reached the point when virtually all young people from middle class families are benefitting

The persistence of class-based inequalities in education is perhaps not surprising given that, despite some changes, particularly in the ways in which modern transitions impact on education, there are a lot of basic inequalities that remain unchanged. Children's early experiences within the family still provide them with an essential preparation for formal processes of education and lay the foundations for patterns of inequality and marginality.

Some children begin school able to read simple words, identify colours, count and do simple arithmetic. Others have to acquire these skills within the school environment and may be seen as less bright from the outset. Some children may be used to sitting quietly, and paying attention to an adult who is providing instructions, while others might not. Throughout their time in education, those from more advantaged families often have access to educational resources in the home environment and support from family members who have some knowledge of the curriculum and who can help with homework. In addition, middle class families frequently stress the importance of education, highlight potential benefits and are able to use their knowledge to secure advantages in an educational marketplace. By contrast, working class families may have narrow occupational horizons, less direct knowledge of educational benefits and may be unable to support their child beyond the end of compulsory education.

The school may also help reinforce family disadvantage. Teachers may have lower expectations regarding the ability of working class children and may fail to offer adequate levels of encouragement. In turn working class pupils are more likely to be placed in lower ability streams where they may mix with pupils who share their class background, reinforcing pre-existing perspectives and limiting their opportunities to familiarise themselves with the assumptive worlds of their middle class peers. There is also an extent to which schools themselves are stratified: most obviously into public and private sectors, but also in terms of the neighbourhoods that they serve. Some schools have a poor social mix, contain large numbers of disruptive students, have high drop-out rates and lack a tradition of progression to higher education. In this context, research shows that social background has a greater impact on educational outcomes in cases where levels of social stratification between schools are significant (Field *et al*., 2007). Similarly patterns of inequality are reinforced where pupils are placed into ability streams at an early stage (Field *et al*., 2007).

The separation of young people into vocational and academic tracks has a similar effect, but the issues here are slightly more complex. Some young people show no aptitude or interest in the academic curriculum and there are clearly benefits in providing high quality vocational alternatives. If we look at countries that have a strong separation between vocational educational routes and academic pathways, such as Germany, there is clear evidence that the vocational alternative reduces unemployment among young people and smoothes transitions to employment: in other words, a strong vocational track helps reduce marginalization. However, there is also evidence that these same processes limit the opportunities for upward social mobility. Where vocational tracks are established, it's important to ensure that the lines of movement between different pathways remain open and that vocational qualifications are regarded as equivalent to academic qualifications for the purposes of admission to college or university.

While there are strong continuities over time and many similarities between countries in the ways in which social class impacts on educational experiences, it's important to reflect on the ways in which changes in patterns of educational participation impact on outcomes. Undoubtedly, education has become more important to young people. The labour market has changed and opportunities for poorly qualified young people are severely limited. In the new knowledge economy, it's not just the lack of basic skills, but even the lack of relatively

advanced skills that can lead to marginalization within labour market contexts. In these circumstances, young people are participating in education for much longer and the vast majority have a strong awareness of the link between educational attainment and subsequent life chances.

Increased participation comes at a price and can lead to the emergence of fresh inequalities and we increasingly need to focus on educational pathways followed at the post-compulsory stage. Not all families can afford to support their offspring through long periods of post-compulsory education or training and even if state support is available, there are still important lines of stratification. Evidence from the UK shows that young people from less affluent families are frequently debt adverse and reluctant to take out student loans to finance their studies. Young people from poorer families frequently select courses on the basis of cost: not simply in terms of fees, but overall costs which may include the need to move away from home, travel costs, the length of course and the perceived linkages between their course and future employment. This can result in young people from less affluent families selecting courses in less prestigious institutions, choosing shorter courses and considering courses with strong vocational orientations. In addition, less affluent students frequently work long hours to survive in education which can interfere with their studies and prevent cross-class social interaction.

Changes also require an ability to manage the complexity of educational structures, make informed choices and manage educational careers. For those with inside knowledge who have direct experience of the ways in which education is delivered and the implications of various choices, the process can be relatively straightforward, but for those from families with little experience of post-compulsory education it can be difficult to navigate effectively and marginalization can occur through poor choices. Education has been subject to a process of marketization in which knowledgeable consumers with spending power are advantaged while others can be marginalized.

Cultural marginalization

Marginalization is clearly a highly structured process in which groups of young people who lack various resources can struggle to compete on equal terms with their more advantaged peers. But class cultures can also impact on educational orientations and are regarded as playing an important role in the reproduction of inequalities and in processes of marginalization. Here many researchers have highlighted the ways in which lower working class cultures can be at odds with the middle class culture of the school. The classic work here is the study carried out by Paul Willis in the 1970s. Willis (1977) argued that boys from lower working class families frequently resisted the authority of the school and rejected school-based values which were based on deferred gratification, placed a premium on academic success and valued mental labour over manual labour. According to Willis, the ‘lads’ that he studied had no desire to enter middle class jobs: they wanted to be able to prove their masculinity through manual labour and full engagement in working class culture and lifestyles without any unnecessary delay. In other words, through immersion in working class culture they were active participants in the reproduction of inequalities.

Two of the themes that underpin Willis' work are worth highlighting. First there is the idea of a clash between the culture of the school and lower working class cultures and, linked to this, the idea that this culture clash is manifest in a process of resistance which becomes one of the key mechanisms which restricts social mobility.

In recent years, the idea that class-based resistance is central to the reproduction of inequalities has fallen out of favour, mainly because education has become much more central to the lives of all young people, who participate for longer periods of time and appreciate the restricted range of job opportunities available to those without qualifications. In many western countries, today's youth grew up in a period in which the occupational structure changed significantly and many of their parents experienced upward social mobility as a consequence. As a result, expectations changed and there was a degree of convergence in class cultures. With a serious decline in unskilled manual jobs in factories and building sites and with education becoming more crucial to labour market outcomes, resistance is no longer such a central part of working class orientations to the school, although it still exists, and instrumentalism becomes more common. As Côté and Allahar (2007) suggest, even in higer education, many students can be described as 'reluctant intellectuals'.

However, if instrumentalism is the glue that holds young people in the school system, then they have to have a degree of confidence that their efforts will pay off. Young people living in poor communities who lack role models who can demonstrate the link between educational attainment and lifestyles are not going to have any confidence in this 'academic bargain' and may continue to reject the idea of academic conformity. And there is a tension here: in lower working class peer groups it is often not seen as 'cool to be clever' and therefore the rewards for breaking with peer values have to be obvious.

The idea that class cultures are reference points which shape young people's assumptive worlds is a theme developed most coherently in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu (1977) these class-based assumptions (what he referred to as a habitus) represent a form of cultural capital which is used in education and the labour market to secure advantages. Those who lack cultural capital run the risk of marginalization while those who possess cultural capital have a valuable asset that that can be used to secure favourable outcomes and which will offer a degree of protection in educational and labour market careers. In fact Bourdieu thought that as educational policies were introduced to reduce the impact of structural resources on patterns of participation, cultural capital would become increasingly central to the reproduction of advantage. This is supported by a lot of school-based research here that highlights the ways in which cultural capital is regarded by teachers as a proxy for intelligence while those who lack this capital are seen as stupid or disinterested.

If we hold onto the idea that class cultures serve as a reference point through which educational opportunities are evaluated, then we come to appreciate that active and prolonged engagement in education requires some sort of accommodation of an identity as a learner. Young people have to be comfortable to describe themselves as students and have to work

out what that means to themselves in terms of involvement in their communities, in the here and now, and in the context of future lives and careers. Here Diane Reay (2005) talks about class-based ‘authenticity’. For Reay, the effective participation of working class students is not about casting aside a working class identity, but is driven by a desire to accommodate their new experiences within a framework that respects their working class roots. As Reay puts it, ‘for the working class student authenticity most often meant being able to hold onto a self rooted in a working class past’ (2005: 7).

Recent work on youth transitions has highlighted the importance of these subjective accommodations through the concept of biography. Essentially biographical approaches have been used as a way of understanding how individuals make sense of their lives within the dynamic processes of transition and change. As individuals we reflect on past experiences as a way of framing future plans and try to make sense of our lives through putting together a coherent story. In a sense, part of the biographical project of youth relates to the construction of a sense of selfhood in which there is a reasonable degree of congruence between objective and subjective experiences. In the past young people were, to an extent, able to use the experiences of significant others (especially family members or peers from the same class positions or with similar educational attainments) to help them construct road maps. In the modern world, it is argued that rapid processes of social change and the fragmentation of experiences make it extremely difficult to plan for the future or manage lives (subjectively or objectively) in a meaningful sense. Indeed, I’ve suggested that there is often a mismatch between objective experiences and subjective interpretations that can lead young people to blame themselves when things do not turn out as they had expected.

In this context, meaningful engagement with education must involve the incorporation of education into the biography in a way that links positive outcomes in the future to participation and attainment. The concept can also be thought of as a way of coming to terms with the ways in which outcomes are not simply linked to the material resources of class, but also to a set of subjective capacities through which individuals are differentially equipped to manage their lives. Here Stephen Ball (2000) has tried to highlight the advantages derived by those who are able to act as ‘biographical engineers’, but also recognise that some young people have limited ‘coping resources’. In this context it can be argued that schools have an important role to play in teaching life management skills and helping build young people’s capacity for reflexive action and helping them to become aware of the very real structural barriers that must be negotiated.

Conclusion: Lessons for policy

In conclusion, I want to try and pull out some of the main implications of research on youth for educational policy. Briefly, what can be done to reduce the chances of marginalization and minimise the impact of socio-economic origins on educational outcomes? First of all we should not try to fool ourselves that education systems are able to fully compensate for deeply entrenched socio-economic divisions. As Basil Bernstein put it, ‘education cannot compensate for society’ (1970). We are currently in the middle of a world recession and may come to witness a greater polarisation rather than a trend towards greater equality. In the short to medium term, social mobility is not going to be brought about by a sudden growth of

opportunities at the top end of the labour market and commentators like Beck (2000) would argue that in the western worlds we are far more likely to witness a reduction in professional and managerial positions and the expansion of precarious job opportunities. The impact of social class has proved to be extremely resistant to change, and while economic conditions may be against us at the moment, I still believe that education can make a difference.

Inequality and marginalization is not simply part of the context in which we, as educationalists, operate. It is a core responsibility of education at all levels to actively strive to reduce the impact of social background on educational experiences and outcomes. Some groups will inevitable come into the educational system being much better equipped to learn; and this is not necessarily about ability or resilience, it's about resources and initial advantage. To tackle those inequalities so as to prevent marginalization it may be necessary to focus on the less advantaged rather than on the more vocal and demanding middle classes. It is certainly necessary to monitor performance at the group as well as the individual level with a view to triggering appropriate interventions where we become aware of under-performance.

Another issue that we need to address is the question of whether education is fit for purpose in contemporary society. If we look closely at schools today in either the UK or Canada, we might want to conclude that, in essence, they are more similar than they are different to those that existed in the heyday of industrialism. Young people are still expected to sit down and listen to formal lessons in traditional subjects. While progress has been made, on the whole the teacher is in control and the pupil is the subject rather than an active and empowered participant. It is the teacher – or often the state – that decides what the young person needs to know and how best to impart that knowledge. In this context the Australian educationalist, Johanna Wyn, has argued that if we are to equip young people with the skills they need in the modern world we need to abandon what she calls the 'industrial model' which priorities narrow outcomes such as qualifications and focus on 'socially orientated outcomes' such as capacity building, independence and decision making. In the modern world young people are going to have to be proactive, are going to need to be able to take decisions in unfamiliar situations and determine how and when to use education and training to further their goals.

Underpinning these issues is the question of how we help working class kids to fit into, and even thrive within, a middle class world. Research shows us that the way to do it is not to try and get them to turn their backs on their own culture or to work in ways that constantly values middle class culture over working class culture – that simply leads to resistance and alienation. Working class students have to be able to accommodate new ideas within an existing framework to maintain an authenticity. Certainly more working class teachers could help provide effective role models: the sort of changes we have seen in recent years mean that parents may be less able to provide their children with an adequate knowledge of the occupational world or offer suitable guidance. We also need to ensure that schools and classrooms contain a broad social mix to provide a context in which young people can broaden their social horizons.

Finally, we can lean some lessons from research on youth transitions. Young people's transitions from school to work are less likely to be linear movements, the greater complexity and protraction of transitions mean that back-tracking has become much more common and people need to be able to return to education as the need arises or as their interests shift. As such, a 'one-size-fits-all' model of education no longer meets the needs of young people. There are signs that education is becoming more flexible and imaginative here: there is a greater concern to try and engage young people of all ages, including those who have left early with few qualifications. Despite these positive moves, in Britain, and Canada, young people are still being marginalized and we have to continue to develop innovative ways of engaging those most vulnerable.

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