

SOCIOLOGY *and* SOCIAL CHANGE

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EDUCATION *and* SOCIAL CHANGE

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Series editor's preface

In response to perceived major transformations, social theorists have offered forceful, appealing, but contrasting accounts of the predicament of contemporary western societies with important and widespread ramifications for the analysis of all areas of social life and personal well-being. The speculative and general theses proposed by social theorists must be subjected to evaluation in the light of the best available evidence if they are to serve as guides to understanding and modifying social arrangements. One purpose of sociology, among other social sciences, is to marshal the information necessary to estimate the extent and direction of social change. This series is designed to make such information, and debates about social change, accessible.

The focus of the series is the critical appraisal of general, substantive theories through examination of their applicability to different institutional areas of contemporary societies. Each book introduces key current debates and surveys of existing sociological argument and research about institutional complexes in advanced societies. The integrating theme of the series is the evaluation of the extent of social change, particularly in the last twenty years. Each author offers explicit and extended evaluation of the pace and direction of social change in a chosen area.

Amanda Coffey offers careful and critical reflection on controversial debates and issues in educational policy and educational research during the 1990s. She analyses the ways in which changes in educational policy have affected the experience of education both for students and teachers. Very mindful of inequalities of gender, race and sexuality, she discusses issues that anyone with a concern for education will consider to be important. The book is based on a thorough survey of a wide body of literature in the sociology of education concerning not only institutional change but also methodological and ethical matters entailed in the research process. It makes a distinctive contribution to a field which continues to be responsible for generating considerable political disagreement.

Alan Warde

1 Introduction

New rhetorics and repertoires

This book provides a sociological commentary on contemporary educational times. Over the past two decades education has undergone significant transformations, in a context of wider social, economic and policy change. Transformations to education throughout the United Kingdom (UK) have been matched by similar changes elsewhere in the western world. The role of education has been (re)addressed in the light of the cultural and economic transformations of post-industrial societies, as part of an emergent policy repertoire. Shifting relationships between the individual and the state have been matched by rapid social and institutional changes. Postmodern discourses of uncertainty and fragmentation have sat alongside emergent rhetorics of economic efficiency, accountability and effectiveness. Within this changing scene, the role of formal systems of education has been questioned, challenged and realigned. Equally it could be argued that education, broadly conceived, has assumed renewed and increased importance in the quests for economic and social renewal and reconfiguration.

The New Right reforms of education, set in train in the UK following the 1979 election of a Conservative administration, were in part a response to wider concerns (across the political spectrum) about the role of education in post-industrial societies. As a key to economic prosperity, education had been found sadly lacking. By the mid-1970s formal education appeared to have failed in other missions too, such as equality of opportunity and social justice. The 1980s saw education systems ripe for reform, and assuming a central place in the realignment of public services more generally. The rhetorics of choice and diversity were adopted, which in turn altered the organizational, managerial and resource bases of educational provision. These were set into a broader policy framework – which centred the individual and emphasized a strong state. The result was a simultaneous diffusion and concentration of power. Parents were given enhanced choice, and schools given more decision-making and managerial responsibilities, while, at the same time, what was taught, how it was taught and how it was assessed became increasingly centralized.

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The changes that have taken place in education throughout the 1980s and 1990s are now well established, reasonably well documented and have increasingly been subjected to critical analysis. New (national) curricula have been introduced, with attendant pedagogical implications. Enhanced assessment procedures at all levels of compulsory (and indeed non-compulsory) education are now in place. Schools are increasingly subjected to comparative scrutiny, through the publication of league tables of performance and regular inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (the reports of which are also placed in the public domain). A diversification of school managerial arrangements has been encouraged through the local management of schools and grant maintained status, as well as the introduction of specialist schools and colleges. This diversification squares well with the pursuit of policies designed to create and enhance markets in education; whereby parents have the right to choose schools, and schools must seek ways to attract 'consumers'. Changes have also taken place in other sectors of education. Further and higher education have undergone similar processes of realignment. Teacher education and training has been reorganized, and the Teacher Training Agency established to ensure high standards and foster a regime of accountability. These extensive changes have had profound impacts on the relationship between education and the state and on the working conditions of teachers and learners.

To some extent we have witnessed the emergence of a policy consensus about the role of education. The new Labour administration in the UK, in place since 1997, has not made any significant moves to retract educational policy reforms of the recent decades. If anything a tougher line on issues such as testing and assessment, school (and teacher) inspection and educational management issues has been taken. The market philosophy that enshrines the contemporary educational arena looks relatively safe in these new hands. What has altered, perhaps, is the framing rhetoric that accompanies these policy agendas, with an increased emphasis on notions of community, democracy, citizenship, participation and empowerment, set within the broader context of a learning society. Thus the extension of educational change has been (re)cast to take account of these changing political aspirations. But the direction of change has remained relatively consistent.

While there is a policy consensus, albeit reformulated, there are still tensions between policy imperatives and the lived reality of education. Many aspects of educational change – such as teacher training, new curricula and the (re)definition of knowledge, funding and school management, the new school inspection systems, testing and assessment, parental choice and school selection – remain areas of contention and conflict. Equally, there are areas of education that have remained relatively untouched by recent reforms. For example, it could be argued that equality and social justice issues have remained at the periphery of contemporary educational priorities. Hence significant commentary and critique have accompanied the new educational agendas. These are explored in the course of this volume.

(Re)positioning the sociology of education

The transformations that have taken place in education over recent decades have affected the place of sociology within education, and the sociology of education as an empirical discipline. The new policy repertoires have played a significant part in a detheorizing project. Sociology as a school discipline has been undermined in national curricula, and is no longer a theoretical marker in education, for example in the training of teachers. Educational research agendas have become increasingly policy-driven, related more to evaluation than interpretation. This has probably led to a decrease in academics working in the field, certainly those that clearly identify themselves as sociologists of education. It has also meant an ambiguous significance for sociological work on education more generally (see Delamont 2000, for an account of the ambiguous position of sociology of education within the discipline of sociology as a whole).

An alternative perspective would be to stress the rich educational landscape that has resulted from these policy shifts. The changes to educational arenas have provided the opportunities for a remapping of this landscape. Classic sociological questions about the relations between education, economy and society or structural relationships between education and other social 'institutions' have needed to be revisited in the light of reform. At the same time, new areas of research and analysis have been generated – as new structures and processes have been augmented. Contemporary sociology of education must also be placed within broader disciplinary contexts and social movements. The challenges of postmodernism, and alternative perspectives offered by social movements such as anti-racism, feminism and queer studies, have provided new frameworks of analysis, including a reformulated politics of identity and cultural difference. These have established new research agendas and generated new questions for the sociology of education, as Brown *et al.* (1997: 13) note:

Whereas the sociology of education was previously dominated by issues of access, selection and equality of opportunity, issues of knowledge, pedagogy and the politics of difference have assumed far greater significance in the study of education as a site of struggle. This reflects broader debates within the social sciences about postmodernism and the cultural politics of difference.

In many ways the sociology of education has undergone transformations of its own, paralleling the changes that have taken place in its research sites. It is perhaps useful to characterize these transformations in terms of emergent strands. First, without doubt there is now a substantial amount of policy sociology being undertaken in educational arenas. However, given the relatively weak position of the sociology of education within the discipline more generally, and the ways in which sociology has systematically been linked to radical, subversive or soft perspectives, the suffusion of sociological analyses, strategies and perspectives are often played down. Second, sociologists of education have been increasingly concerned with educational discourses, experiences and identities. That is concerned with mapping and

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understanding the ways in which discourse shapes and is shaped by multiple educational realities. This draws on critical perspectives and qualitative research strategies, and has focused on articulating the gendered, sexualized, racialized and biographical contexts of teaching and learning. Third, there has been a movement towards a new political arithmetic model (Brown *et al.* 1997), which reformulates some of the classic sociological relations of class, family (in)equality and education. This has sought to rise to the challenge of charting the educational landscape, in socially accountable ways. This responds to some of the critiques of the postmodern position and re-establishes the need for quantifiable data, while recognizing that this must be placed in the context of mapping the *process* as well as the *outcomes* of education. As one of the major institutions of modern society, education has enjoyed a resurrection as vital agent of social change and cultural reproduction (or interruption). As a discipline, sociology is primarily concerned with documenting, explaining and understanding social processes and social change. Hence sociology has a major role to play in making sense of contemporary educational transformations, and relating these to wider processes of social and cultural change.

Aims and scope of the book

Education and Social Change has been written against this backdrop of changing educational times, social and economic transformations and attendant shifts in the sociology of education. The book aims to explore the contexts and policies that have shaped educational change over recent decades, through an engagement with sociological commentary and critical perspectives. The book reflects three levels of transformation.

1 Changing educational landscape(s)

Over the course of the book, many of the educational reforms that have occurred over the last twenty years or so are documented and subjected to critical scrutiny. To focus the discussion, school reforms in the UK (and specifically England and Wales) are used as the main descriptive framework. Cross-references are made to other educational sectors, to illustrate the pervasiveness of the policy climate. Comparative materials from Europe, Australia, New Zealand and North America are also drawn upon, as part of a broader locational process. A main aim of the text is to demonstrate that the landscape of state education has undergone significant change, and that this has consequences for institutions, professionals, social groups and individuals, as well as for the focus of sociological research. A theme running through the book is an examination of the extent to which these shifts have fundamentally altered the processes, outcomes and lived realities of schooling. Arguably there has been a good deal of educational continuity in the face of change. While there is much that is new – curricula, markets, assessment and inspection procedures, teacher training guidelines and practices, a new promotional culture and recast educational providers and consumers – there

are still gendered teacher careers, everyday experiences of the classroom teacher at the 'chalk face', differential educational performances and outcomes, school stratifications, and a range of identities and biographies being crafted and (re)produced with/in educational settings. Hence with change comes continuity. The balance between the two is a theme running through the chapters.

2 *Social, cultural, economic and policy transformations*

Education provides a solid case study from which to observe and make sense of wider shifts in social, cultural and economic life. Education systems have been repositioned as central to the processes of cultural reproduction and economic regeneration. Shifting labour market needs, the move to credentialism and notions of the learning society have played important roles in rethinking the aims and outcomes of education. At the same time cultural arenas and social institutions have been recast in the light of both economic factors and contemporary social movements. Conceptualizations of the family, sexuality, contemporary racisms, the state, the city, leisure spaces and workplaces have been challenged and reformulated – within and beyond educational arenas. Education policy formations should, therefore, be viewed as both specific to the recasting of a particular institution and set of social processes and indicative of more general and widespread policy cultural, economic and policy agendas. The connection between the specific and the general provides one of the main elements running through the book.

3 *New directions for the sociology of education*

Sociological work on education has also undergone transformations, which are documented and explored in the course of the book. Social science generally, and sociology in particular, has benefited from (and been challenged by) the perspectives and theorizing offered by a range of new social movements, for example postmodernism, post-structuralist feminism, post-colonialism and anti-racism. These have permeated through to the sociology of education, which has benefited from these new theoretical frameworks and 'ways of seeing'. The emergent policy agendas have provided whole new research agendas, as well as new contexts for exploring long-standing sociological concerns. So alongside critical commentary on the range of policy measures has come re-examination of issues such as educational outcomes, social and educational stratification, equality and social justice, knowledge, pedagogy and educational processes. Arguably policy transformation has given rise to a renewed, sociologically informed research effort (although this kind of policy research is often not self-defined as sociological). Equally there has been increasing funding opportunities for policy-informed educational research. Hence sociological work on education has had to adapt, at least in part, in order to survive.

The last two decades have also witnessed methodological developments and innovations in social science research. These have informed, challenged and changed the ways in which research is undertaken and represented, not

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least in educational studies. These have partly come about as a response to postmodern, feminist and other critiques of social science research, and have set about rethinking the processes, practices, relationships and outcomes of research endeavours. Educational research has been relatively slow to respond to the new opportunities put forward by such critiques, and it would be wrong to over-emphasize the impact of such articulations on the sociology of education in particular. Equally it would be misguided to argue that postmodern discourse and practices have passed by unnoticed. The biographical or narrative turn has had an important impact on the ways in which educational experiences, processes and policies are researched and understood. Similarly those working within educational/sociological research have addressed issues of representation, and new representational modes have been tried. Sociological work in the field of education has also been the subject of recent (and ongoing) methodological critique and debate of its own. This adds a further dimension to understanding the transformations that have occurred within the subdiscipline.

Education and Social Change draws on a range of contemporary examples, and engages with a range of literature in order to explore these different layers of transformation. Themes which run throughout the book include

- The dynamic relationship between state, institution and individual; examining the shifting boundaries, changes and continuities in the context of educational, economic and social transformation.
- The notion of the educational trajectory or career; understanding the differential outcomes and pathways of educational actors and institutions (learners, teachers, schools) and the ways in which these are reproduced and/or interrupted in new educational times.
- Educational biographies and the politics of identity; the connections between educational experiences and the (re)construction of identities in contemporary society. This engages with contemporary understandings of multiple (fragmented) identities, and recognizes the importance of biographizing (and representing) the social.

Organization of the book

The chapters of the book are thematically organized, to reflect major areas of contemporary educational policy, practice and sociological research. The first three chapters that follow this introduction are all concerned with changes to the educational policy arena, and the ways in which these have impacted on processes, practices and experiences. Chapter 2 addresses the auditing of education and particularly focuses attention on the enhanced evaluation and inspection of schools and teachers (and students, families and communities). It highlights the changes that have taken place to these inspection processes, and the ways in which these have led to a new culture of surveillance within educational arenas. The definition and reality of school failure is examined. Chapter 3 explores the concept and realities of marketization in relation to recent educational reforms, in particular considering how the

quasi-marketing of schools has operated in practice. This includes an examination of issues such as parental choice (and empowerment), marketing strategies and the promotional culture. Chapter 4 examines contemporary understandings (and questionings) of educational knowledge, contextualized by the definition and implementation of national curricula. This relates a particular policy formulation to wider sociological questions of the legitimation and certification of particular versions of knowledge. The chapter adopts a broad understanding of what counts as knowledge, in order to explore relationships between school and knowledge (re)production.

The book then turns to a consideration of the experiences and outcomes of educational processes, through an exploration of educational trajectories and biographies. Chapter 5 engages with the biographical or narrative turn in educational research, in order to explore processes of identity (re)construction within a framework of the politics of cultural difference. The lives and experiences of teachers and students are explored in this context, through selected examples of educational identity (or biographical) work. Chapter 6 addresses recurrent themes of the sociology of education, namely outcomes and (in)equality. The chapter specifically locates educational outcomes to economic and social transformations. It revisits issues of inequality and social justice, and engages with contemporary research and policy debates about the role of education in post-industrial society. Contemporary debates about educational achievement are also addressed here. Teachers, and the work that they do, form the focus of Chapter 7. While the experiences and biographies of teachers are discussed throughout the book, it also seems appropriate and timely to consider transformations (and continuities) to the teacher's work and the teaching profession as separate topics. Teachers are critical to policy implementation and to the day-to-day operation of educational life. This chapter hence explores contemporary teaching realities in the light of policy transformation and educational continuities.

The final substantial chapter of the book moves the focus to methodological concerns and research praxis within the sociology of education. I have chosen to include such a chapter in order to document the transformations that have taken place, and are still taking place in social research and the ways in which these relate to educational research. Sociological work on education has been at the centre of recent methodological controversy, as well as playing a part in reshaping the discipline. This parallels the transformations taking place in education and the ways in which these relate to social, economic and policy shifts. The chapter explores some of the recent methodological debates that have occurred within the subdiscipline, and also considers wider criticisms of educational research. This chapter also engages with new methodological innovation, especially in the area of representation.

While *Education and Social Change* has been written as a coherent text, its internal organization means that individual chapters can be read on a stand-alone basis. This, together with an aim of making the text accessible to a wide readership, means that there is a degree of repetition between chapters. This does, however, enable links to be drawn between issues, debates, empirical examples and further reading.