Education and Social Class: How Did We Get to This and What Needs to Change?

Robin Simmons and John Smyth

This book draws together eight chapters on education and social class written by leading scholars based in the United Kingdom, Australia and the Republic of Ireland. The different chapters are based on a range of conceptual and empirical research, and focus on how class-related inequalities are enacted in schools, universities and the various locations in which vocational education and training is carried out. The authors draw on a range of traditions and use the ideas and arguments of a variety of critical thinkers. These range from Plato and Aristotle to Gramsci and Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, and Raymond Boudon to Avery Gordon and Valerie Walkerdine. Taken together, the different chapters

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R. Simmons (✉) · J. Smyth
School of Education and Professional Development,
University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK
e-mail: r.a.simmons@hud.ac.uk

J. Smyth
Federation University Australia, Ballarat, Australia
e-mail: j.smyth@hud.ac.uk

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represent a varied and wide-ranging critique of the classed nature of education but certain key themes run throughout the text. These deal with various objective and subjective dimensions of social class and include patterns of educational participation and non-participation; the interface between class, gender and other forms of difference; and debates about the relationship between education, work and the economy more broadly. Or, as Dave Hill points out in his chapter, the different ways in which social class affects where we live; the type of school we attend; the qualifications we are likely to get, and the jobs we obtain; how we are treated by teachers, careers advisers, employers and others in authority; and various other dimensions of our lives.

This concluding chapter locates the classed nature of education within a critical socio-historical framework, and reflects on some of the conundrums facing young people as they attempt to navigate the vicissitudes education and work. It also considers a number of strategies which may begin to ameliorate the multiple disadvantages facing working-class youth, or at least prevent their situation from worsening. These relate, on one hand, to the subjective practices of education as well as the more systemic matters which also shape young people's experiences of learning. We also deal with broader, structural questions about the relationship between education, work and social class more generally. Whilst lived experience is deeply important, we need to recognise that the social, economic and political context in which learning takes place can both intensify and exacerbate inequality or else go some way towards promoting equity and social justice.

Education and Social Class: Continuity and Change

Much political discourse in 'advanced' Western nations presents education as performing numerous positive functions for the individual, the economy and society more broadly. Typically, these include boosting national competitiveness and economic growth, 'up-skilling' the workforce, promoting social cohesion and driving social mobility. Education can be a progressive force and many working-class children, adults and young people have, over time, benefited socially, culturally and materially from various forms of education and training—not only in formal settings like schools, colleges and universities but also through trade union and adult education, in early-years settings, or via the numerous spheres of informal education through which learning also takes place. We should, however, also remember that education, at least for the working classes, has always been bound up with social control as much as emancipation (Lawton 1975).

The notion that those from different social backgrounds are more or less suited to particular forms of learning can, as Terry Hyland reminds us in his chapter on craftwork, be traced back to Ancient Greece and the relative value of different 'Forms' of education proposed in Plato's *Republic*. Such divisions have traditionally characterised Western education systems and, in England, the ruling classes have attended exclusive fee-paying schools since the Middle Ages. For most of the population though, formal education, where it has existed at all, has been provided mainly by religious and voluntary groups—a trend which has also been encouraged more recently through the introduction of academies and the free school movement (Ball 2012). Notions of education for democracy and the social good had nevertheless become popular by the nineteenth century, at least in some quarters—although events such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the 1867 Paris International Exposition also illustrated the inadequacies of laissez-faire in fighting increasing economic and military competition from Europe and further afield. Introducing the English 1870 Education Act, W. E. Forster claimed that:

> Upon the speedy provision of elementary education depends our industrial prosperity… uneducated labourers are for the most part, unskilled labourers, and if we leave our workfolk any longer unskilled they will become overmatched in the competition of the world. (Forster 1870)

Forster's words resonate with contemporary discourses about skill, globalisation, the knowledge economy and so forth but the social upheavals of industrialisation and urbanisation, and the rise of Chartism and other working-class movements, also led to a belief that formal schooling would help make the lower orders both more civilised and compliant. Adam Smith, for example, saw education as a means through which the working classes would become:

> [M]ore respectable…more capable of seeing through the interested complaints of faction and sedition… less apt to be misled into any wanton or unnecessary opposition to the means of government. (Smith 1785, p. 305)

Eventually the provision of mass schooling became unavoidable but this brought to the fore questions about how, where and for what purpose(s) working-class children were to be educated (McCulloch 1998; Brown 1987). Either way, state involvement initially related mainly to elementary education; state secondary schools continued to charge fees until after the end of World War II and no coherent system of technical and vocational education existed in England until the middle of the twentieth century. Whilst the mechanics institutes can be traced back to the Victorian era, provision was patchy and uneven, and many of England's major industrial centres were still without any adequate vocational education as late as the 1930s (Bailey 1987). The universities meanwhile remained exclusive institutions, catering essentially for the privileged few, at least until the 1960s.

Most orthodox analyses present the 1944 Education Act as an integral part of the social settlement between labour and capital which took place after the end of World War II (Gewirtz and Ozga 1990; Batteson 1999). Undoubtedly, the 1944 Act introduced some significant reforms, including the replacement of elementary schools with a new system of primary and secondary education, and the abolition of fees for all state-run schools. It also raised the school-leaving age to 15, recommended new arrangements for special education and nursery provision, and triggered a great expansion of post-compulsory education across England and Wales. The Act has, however, also been criticised for its role in maintaining the existing social order (see Simon 1990). Both Church-controlled education and the public schools were, for example, left untouched despite considerable public support for the abolition of fee-paying schools and the exclusion of religious bodies from state-funded education. Meanwhile, the tripartite system of secondary schooling introduced by the 1944 Education Act arguably did more to maintain social divisions than reduce them. It is important to remember that leading figures within the Conservative Party were among the Act's most enthusiastic supporters and arguably they, in conjunction with a privileged civil service elite, were able to ensure continued selection and other socially-divisive practices (Chitty 1989).

The institutional structure of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools was also predicated largely on the assumption that children could be classified according to aptitude and ability, and the notion that different categories of pupils required different forms of schooling which would, in turn, best suit their character and intellect. Criticisms of the tripartite system are, of course, well known—not least its discrimination against working-class children and the central part it played in the reproduction of class-based inequalities in education and society more broadly (Batteson 1999). The flawed nature of the 11-plus examination upon which pupils' educational future was decided—and, by extension, their working lives thereafter—is also widely recognised. Though presented as an objective measurement of intelligence, the 11-plus was in fact heavily loaded in favour of the middle classes, and systematically biased against girls who had to achieve a higher mark to pass the examination—arrangements justified by a discourse of fairness and objectivity as well as ancient beliefs about the existence of different kinds of minds able to function more or less well at different levels of cognition (Humphries 1981, p. 48).

Cherry-picking 'bright' working-class pupils to go to grammar school was, however, championed as a way of increasing social mobility, and no doubt many such children rose above the status of their parents. This, of course, ignores the alienation and disillusion felt by many working-class grammar school pupils, and the tension and turmoil associated with leaving behind their social and cultural roots (see Jackson and Marsden 1962). It also overlooks the fact that much of the limited upward social mobility which took place in post-war Britain was driven by the expansion of professional and white-collar work across the welfare state, as much as anything else (Roberts 2011, p. 186). Various figures within the Conservative Party, including the current British

Prime Minister, Theresa May, have nevertheless called for the return of grammar schools because of their supposed ability to 'kick start' social mobility. Others on the Right are uneasy about the prospect of more state grammar schools, fearing they will undermine the fee-paying sector and prefer other methods of social sifting and sorting through free schools, academies, studio schools, and so on. Either way, neoliberal discourses of diversity and choice, efficiency and competition mean that virtually all forms of education now subject to commercialisation and marketisation—processes which systematically disadvantage those who lack the social, cultural and material capital necessary to make informed consumer choices in an increasingly complicated and cluttered marketplace (Ball 2003).

Education, Youth and the Labour Market

The tripartite system was partly justified by certain beliefs about the relationship between education and employment. Or, in other words, the notion that a basic education was sufficient for the majority in an economy characterised by mass production and a relatively low demand for highly-skilled, professional or managerial workers (Avis 2016). Generally though, young people enjoyed a relatively privileged labour market position in post-war Britain. The majority of school-leavers entered full-time employment immediately after finishing compulsory education at the age of 15 (16 from 1973) and this was usually followed by leaving home, marriage and parenthood in rapid succession thereafter (Jones 1995). At the beginning of the 1970s the average age of first marriage was 20 for women and 22 for men; forty years later this had risen to 28 and 30 respectively (Ainley and Allen 2010, p. 21). Relatively few entered higher education and, even after the expansion of HE in the 1960s, only around eight per cent of young people attended university, the majority of whom were white, male and at least relatively privileged. Whilst pockets of unemployment existed, most school leavers were able to find jobs consistent with their ambitions and expectations, and the majority of young people were eager to leave education behind and enter the world of work (Willis 1977).

For young men especially, the transition from school to work was often collective as well as speedy and the mass movement of boys from school into the factories, mines and mills of post-war Britain was commonplace. Meanwhile, girls and women suffered systematic discrimination at home, in the school and at work but females were still an integral part of the workforce—not only in retail, administration and the service sector but on the factory floor of British industry. All in all, readily available work, increasing prosperity and relatively affordable housing meant that youth transitions were at their most condensed, coherent and unitary during the 1950s and 1960s (Jones 1995, p. 23). Employment alongside peers, siblings and older workers offered working-class youth a degree of continuity and stability that is largely absent today.

It would be wrong, however, to romanticise the past. Hugh Beynon's (1973) *Working for Ford* illustrates some of the bleakness of industrial labour in post-war Britain and, whilst proletarian employment was often linked with particular forms of solidarity, overt sexism, racism and homophobia were commonplace at school, work and across society more broadly. Similarly, Dennis et al. (1956) study of a Yorkshire coal-mining community and Young and Wilmott's (1962) research in the East End of London provide some insight into the harsh realities of working-class life during that time. The role of education in all this must not be forgotten and Dave Hill's chapter in this book provides an overview of a variety of Marxist and neo-Marxist critiques of the role of education in the reproduction of labour power in capitalist society. Hill reminds us, amongst others, of Bowles and Gintis (1976), Gramsci (1971), and Althusser (1971) as well as the work of Bourdieu, Bernstein and others influenced by Marx to a greater or lesser extent. It is, however, also necessary to recognise the importance of critiques rooted in other traditions. Durkheim (1903/1956), for example, argued that one of the key functions of education was to produce a common social and cultural heritage, but he also recognised its role in the differentiation and selection of the social division of labour.

Either way, the demise of much of the UK's industrial base was accompanied by the disintegration of the youth labour market and employment opportunities for school leavers have been severely attenuated, especially in terms of access to stable, full-time jobs. Consequently, most young people remain dependent on their parents for far longer periods of time than was the case for previous generations and they remain in education, especially on a full-time basis, far longer than in the past. For large sections of youth, attaining the traditional signifiers of adulthood has become disordered, delayed or, in some cases, suspended almost indefinitely (Ainley and Allen 2010, pp. 40–42). Youth transitions—if transitions remains the right term—are increasingly fractured, individualised and unpredictable, not only in the UK but also in North America (see Cote and Bynner 2008), continental Europe (see Roberts 2009), and elsewhere (see Scarpetta et al. 2010).

Alternative ways of conceptualising the lives of young people have emerged in response to the profound the social and economic changes that have taken place in advanced Western societies, such as the UK. Postmodern perspectives, for example, tend to downplay social class and foreground other forms identity, emphasising the fluidity of social relations in increasingly uncertain times. The basic argument is that the relatively stable trajectories and predictable life chances associated with Fordist societies such as post-war Britain have been superseded by circumstances in which choice, risk and agency have come to replace the certainties of traditional 'modernist' societies (Maffesoli 1996). Admittedly, such ideas have some appeal and there is evidence to suggest that many young people no longer see social class as their primary source of identity (Cohen and Ainley 2000, p. 83). We undoubtedly live in a highly-consumerist society; style and fashion are often fetishised, and the rise of new technology increasingly blurs virtual experiences with reality. The notion that are people free to negotiate their identities unimpeded by the restrictions of social class is, perhaps understandably, attractive for many—as well as expedient for those keen to divert attention from the gross inequalities associated with neoliberal capitalism (Simmons and Thompson 2011, p. 56).

There are, however, other ways of understanding the increasingly complicated, fractured nature of contemporary society. Ulrich Beck (1992), for example, recognises that Western societies have experienced far-reaching social and economic restructuring, and that the collective experiences which characterised post-war society are no longer central to the lives of many young people. But such processes, he argues, should not simply be conflated with notions of freedom or empowerment. Beck (1992, p. 35) uses the term 'enforced emancipation' to describe the ways in which individuals are now compelled to make decisions about education, work and other facets of social life against a backdrop of social and economic insecurity. Geoff Bright's work in this book and elsewhere (for example, Bright 2016) provides important insights into processes of continuity and change in post-industrial settings, and how class, gender and other forms inequality are reconstituted in such locales. Bright's research and that of Walkerdine (Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012), Michael Ward (2015) and others helps us understand how working-class communities—and the education of young people within such settings—remain structured and constrained by narratives of the past, even now the industries upon which were once based have gone and labour is now largely affective rather than manual. What is clear is that the restructuring of the UK economy has led, over recent decades, to a massive redistribution of wealth and life chances in favour of the most privileged sections of society at the expense of the rest of the population. Evidence suggests that Britain is a more unequal society than at any time since Queen Victoria was on the throne (see, for example, Dorling 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

Education, Knowledge and Social Class

The collapse of the UK's industrial base meant that mass unemployment was commonplace across much of Britain by the end of the 1970s, especially among young people. As the youth labour market slumped, various government-funded training schemes were created to fill the void, the first of these being the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP), established in 1978. Five years later over three million young people were engaged in such provision. YOP and successor programmes, such as the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), were, however, often criticised as low quality and undoubtedly many (though not all) employers used school leavers as cheap labour and offered little meaningful training or work experience in return. Consequently, increasing numbers of teenagers chose, almost by default, to stay on at school or go to college to pursue more conventional forms of education and training (Simmons and Thompson 2011, pp. 49–50).

The YOP can nevertheless be regarded as something of a watershed. On one hand, YOP represented a recognition that the days of readily available work for young people were coming to an end. At the same time though, the assumptions which underpinned YOP, YTS and the like problematised both the education system and young people themselves rather than Britain's relative economic decline, and the rise of structural unemployment which accompanied it (Ainley and Corney 1990). The introduction of YOP and YTS also marked a turning point in terms of the curriculum, and here Basil Bernstein's work on pedagogic discourses helps us to consider the significance of such programmes. On one level, the rise of such programmes was linked to an increasing incursion of the state into educational policy and practice, and the entry of 'non-educational discourses' into the education system—at least for provision aimed at young working-class people (Bernstein 1999). Previously, there had been a reluctance to impose direct state control over either teachers or the curriculum, a stance influenced, in part, by the rise of totalitarianism in continental Europe, as well as a far greater spirit of trust and partnership between central and local government than that which exists today (Grace 2008). There was, in Bernsteinian terms, a substantial insulating boundary between educational discourses and those of the state (Bernstein 1977, p. 42). The introduction of YOP, however, signalled a significant shift and thereafter successive governments have intervened more and more intrusively in the education system. Ewart Keep (2006) described this as akin to 'playing with the biggest train set in the world'.

Bernstein (2000) identifies three forms of pedagogic discourse which he links to different forms of knowledge, and which he also argues are related to different levels of explanatory power. Bernstein describes these discourses as the singular and regional modes of knowledge which he associates with high-status forms of education and training, and the generic mode which, he avers, is more recent and largely associated with lower-status programmes of learning. The singular mode is, according to Bernstein, found mainly in traditional academic subjects such as English, mathematics, history *et cetera*, whereas the regional mode is normally associated with quasi-professional preparation, such as social work or teacher training—although such forms of learning have, over time, become more and more procedural and instrumental in nature as the state has increasingly intervened in such programmes. Those planning to work in more prestigious areas of employment, such as law or medicine, are, it is argued, generally provided with access to both singular and regional modes of knowledge. The generic mode, in contrast, tends to prioritise 'everyday experiences' of education, work and social life at the expense of more traditional forms of learning based in principled, conceptual knowledge, or established professional or vocational practice.

Today, many employability programmes aimed at young people outside education and employment are largely based upon CV building, interview techniques, communications exercises and other generic modes of learning deemed relevant to the world of work. This is often accompanied by discourses of compassion, care and student-centred learning, and justified by claims about various deficits experienced and exhibited by those on the margins of education and work (Simmons and Thompson 2011). Bernstein, however, points out that generic modes of learning are not only lowly regarded by educationalists and employers but also deficient in terms of explanatory power. In contrast, conceptual knowledge, it is argued, provides access to forms of understanding and critique which the generic mode is simply unable to provide. For him, it is the distance or 'discursive gap' between general and theoretical principles and everyday knowledge which provides the 'crucial site of the yet to be thought' (Bernstein 2000, p. 31). This, according to Bernstein, is the space where powerful, perhaps dangerously powerful, knowledge is created—where new and novel ideas can be generated, convention challenged and inequality questioned. Simmons (2015) argues that:

> The exclusion of working-class learners from forms of knowledge which allow them to challenge inequality and oppression is obviously problematic for those interested in notions of education and social justice, but…

> is awkward even if one accepts dominant discourses about…education and social and economic wellbeing. The rigors of the 'knowledge economy' will, we are told, mean that young people are required to repeatedly change occupations and develop new forms of knowledge and skill… Yet education and training, at least for the working classes, increasingly excludes creative, critical and analytical learning. (Simmons 2015, pp. 98–99)

This leads us to think critically about the notion of the knowledge economy. Whilst there are pockets of high-skill employment and labour shortages in some niche areas, there has in fact been a substantial 'hollowing out' of employment at craft and technician level. In Britain, the largest areas of employment growth have, since the 1980s, been in care work, retail, hospitality and catering, and routine call centre jobs (see Elliott and Atkinson 2007). Qualitative research provides us with some insight into the realities of life at the bottom end of the labour market where workers serially 'churn' between various forms of poorly-paid, insecure and transitory employment and low-level training programmes which purport to equip them for labour market success but usually fail to do so (see, for example, Shildrick et al. 2012; Simmons et al. 2014).

Meanwhile, there is significant evidence to suggest that low-level vocational qualifications often provide little labour-market return (Wolf 2011). This is perhaps unsurprising as there has always been prejudice against such forms of learning, especially in class-conscious England—although this has arguably been exacerbated by the promotion of various courses devoid of a coherent knowledge-based curriculum. Many practitioners working with young people on employability programmes are hard-working, well-meaning and provide significant levels of support and encouragement to learners, but such provision often fails to provide meaningful progression for those who undertake them. Simmons and Thompson's (2011) study of Entry to Employment (E2E), an employability programme for 16–18 year olds classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training), found that the most common outcome for young people undertaking E2E programmes was a return to being NEET, and that the second most common outcome was embarking on another employability programme.

Progression to higher-level training was rare and labour market entry was, where it occurred, usually unrelated to their experiences on E2E.

Aiming Higher?

Education plays an increasingly dominant role in young people's lives although the nature and purpose of participation varies considerably according to social class, and the reduced availability of waged labour means that education's role as a mechanism of social control has become more important than ever (Ainley 2016, pp. 40–41). It is also difficult to avoid the Marxist concept of the reserve army of labour (Marx 1867/1976, p. 781) when considering the position of working-class youth in contemporary society—although 'army' also implies a degree of organisation and solidarity which has been largely shattered by the processes of de-industrialisation, unemployment and underemployment which have taken place since the end of the 1970s (Bourdieu 1998, p. 98). The effects of all this are painfully apparent in Geoff Bright's chapter, and the pain and suffering associated with de-industrialisation should not be underestimated, especially for working-class youth who have effectively been relegated to various forms of alienated learning intermingled with intermittent employment in low-skill, low-pay and insecure service-sector jobs.

Whilst such processes are experienced most sharply in working-class communities, large sections of middle-class youth are, as James Avis points out in his chapter "The Re-composition of Class Relations", are also vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the neoliberal project. The words of Lisa, Assiz and the other young people featured in Diane's Reay's chapter in this book illustrate how increasingly even a 'good degree' from a prestigious university is not sufficient to secure a graduate job. Nowadays more and more employers demand a variety of other abilities, experiences and achievements over and above formal qualifications—whether this takes the form of creative, expressive or sporting achievements, 'gap-year' internships, extensive overseas travel or other accomplishments (see Brown et al. 2011). Such demands systematically favour those with the family support, economic resources and social connections necessary to enable them to accrue the forms of human capital increasingly demanded by many employers, especially in sought-after roles in finance, law, the media and so on. So, whilst all students find themselves squeezed in a more and more crowded and competitive labour market, those from working-class backgrounds are particularly disadvantaged by such processes (Brown 2013).

It is worth considering the classed nature of higher education in a little more detail. On one hand, there has been a massive expansion of participation in HE. Until the 1960s, as little as 2% of the population went to university, whereas approximately a third of all young people in the United Kingdom now go into higher education. This remarkable growth is due to various factors, although successive governments have all to a greater or lesser extent encouraged the growth of the student population. This has been more or less overt but all mainstream political parties have, at least since the 1960s, argued that increased participation in higher education will both aid economic competiveness and offer various individual and societal benefits—including, of course, driving social mobility and increasing economic competitiveness. On the other hand, the collapse of the youth labour market has, as we know, reduced viable alternatives for young people, especially in terms of access to stable, full-time employment. Meanwhile, vocational and work-based learning continues to be regarded as low-status and undesirable by most young people and their parents (Ainley 2016). The expansion of university education in Britain is nevertheless remarkable both in absolute and relative terms, and a significantly larger proportion of its population now attends university than is the case in most OECD countries, including the UK's long-standing economic rival, Germany.

The fact that so many young people now go to university is generally presented as a cause for celebration, especially in official discourse. But crude figures conceal various dimensions of inequality which have, somewhat paradoxically, actually been exacerbated by increased participation. We have long known that not all forms of HE are equal and that students from different social backgrounds tend to go to different institutions to study different subjects—which, in turn, generally lead to different outcomes and destinations (see, for example, Ainley 1994).

This is still the case today: usually working-class participation takes place at lower-status institutions and entails studying less prestigious vocationally-orientated subjects. This can, in part, be explained by the fact that working-class students generally achieve lower grades, although this is not the full story: generally, high-achieving working-class students do not apply to elite institutions even when they are qualified to do so. There are different ways of understanding such processes and dominant neoliberal discourses often berate working-class youth, especially those from the so-called White working class, as lacking in ambition, aspiration and so forth—although this has been criticised as inaccurate or over-simplified by much academic research (see, for example, Nayak 2009; Stahl 2012, 2015). Evidence suggests that working-class students are often deterred from applying to elite universities because of their reputation for snobbery and exclusiveness. Diane Reay's reflections in this book on her own experiences of attending an elite university in her youth provide some sobering insights into the tensions and struggles endured by working-class students at such institutions.

The ideas of Pierre Bourdieu have been used extensively to analyse working-class students' orientations to higher education and their experiences of HE (see, for example, Reay et al. 2009, 2010). Raymond Boudon (1974) offers a rather different—but nevertheless important—explanation of class-based inequality. Ron Thompson's chapter "Performance, Choice and Social Class" draws on Boudon's distinction between the primary and secondary effects of social stratification to explain the impact of social class on educational performance and choice. For Boudon (1974), the primary effects of social stratification—in other words, the cultural and material dimensions of class help explain why children from working-class backgrounds generally achieve less well than their more advantaged peers. But even when these differences in performance are allowed for, educational and social aspirations remain strongly influenced by social class. The secondary effects of social stratification help explain why even high-achieving young people from working-class backgrounds are still less likely to go to university, or do not attend more prestigious institutions even when they are qualified to do so. For Boudon, those from lower-status backgrounds have 'further to travel' and the costs of remaining in education—including tuition fees, living expenses and opportunity costs such as lost earnings—must be weighed against the potential benefits of participation and the risk of failure. Arguably, such concerns have intensified over time both in absolute and relative terms, as tuition fees have risen and first-rate qualifications no longer guarantee labour market success. Even more able students from poorer backgrounds are therefore likely to be deterred from going to university or decide to study locally at less-prestigious institutions alongside other working-class students (Ainley 2016, p. 65).

What is clear is that the graduate labour market has not kept up with the massive expansion of HE and so large swathes of young people are effectively over-qualified and underemployed despite dominant discourses about the demise of low-skill work, the rise of the knowledge economy and so forth. For Allen and Ainley (2013), many young people are effectively 'running up a descending escalator' as they put in more and more time, effort and money for diminishing returns. Schools, colleges and universities have, in turn, been recast as cogs in an educational conveyor-belt increasingly driving debt and disappointment. Meanwhile, many occupations which traditionally offered secure professional (or at least para-professional) employment are becoming proletarianised—not least teaching.

An Agenda for Change

Historically, formal education has been largely alien and hostile territory for working-class youth. Education for the lower orders, where it existed at all, focused mainly on discipline, morals and religious instruction although, as we have seen, a combination of political expedience and economic necessity eventually led to mass schooling in Britain. Access to education expanded throughout the twentieth century but the tripartite system introduced at the end of World War II meant that the experiences of those from different social backgrounds remained deeply divided. The relatively buoyant labour market, the creation of the welfare state and the limited redistribution of wealth nevertheless helped facilitate at least some reduction of social inequality—processes supported by the introduction of comprehensive schooling in the 1960s and 1970s. The rise of neoliberalism then marked a significant turning point and the 'rolling back' of the limited gains in social justice associated with the post-war consensus have, since the 1970s, been both far-reaching and profound. Virtually all forms of learning have been progressively colonised by neoliberal discourses of performativity, competition, choice, and so on. Diane Reay's (2017) book *Miseducation* provides some sobering insights into how working-class culture is often disregarded, disrespected and violated by the strictures of the neoliberal school—from the vicissitudes of setting and streaming to the narrowing of the curriculum and the overt discipline meted out in 'super-strict' schools.

Successive governments, in the UK and elsewhere, have nevertheless promoted education and training as the supposed solution to a variety of social and economic ills—many of which are related, in large part, to the gross inequalities caused by the neoliberal project. This remit is as unrealistic as it is wrong-headed but the structures and processes of education have nevertheless been fragmented and reconfigured to produce a complex quasi-market which systematically disadvantages working-class youth whilst simultaneously masking increased inequality in discourses of excellence, opportunity and ambition. Meanwhile, the anxiety and paranoia surrounding education is now palpable—not only for children and young people but also teachers, parents, administrators and policymakers. The consequences of all this takes many forms—whether in terms of teacher turnover, sickness and disillusion, the rising incidence of mental health problems among young people, student dropout, or the various forms of estranged learning which increasingly take place in our schools, colleges and universities (Ainley 2016, pp. 66–67). Education could, in Habermasian terms, be said to be facing a legitimation crisis (Simmons and Smyth 2016).

To begin to putting this right is no small challenge but there are nevertheless tangible ways in which the current situation could be improved. These we describe as the pedagogic, the institutional and the structural.

The Pedagogic

The introductory chapter of this book considered ways in which schools and other sites of learning can become more accessible and positive places for working-class youth. One challenge is to devise a curriculum and a pedagogy which engages working-class youth, and provides an alternative to the frankly oppressive forms of schooling which now characterise the state education system. We argued that the ways in which schools are structured and run can either exacerbate inequality or help promote a climate of inclusion. We discussed the importance of space and place; school culture; and different approaches to teaching and learning, drawing on the work of Smyth and McInerney (for example, Smyth and McInerney 2007, 2013; Smyth et al. 2014) and others (for example, Moll et al. 1992; Gonzalez et al. 2004). Louise Archer's chapter, which uses a 'funds of knowledge' approach to consider social class in the classroom, also has important things to say about creating more socially-just forms of pedagogy.

There has, over time, been a significant narrowing of the curriculum, especially in state schools and particularly for working-class youth, who are increasingly exposed to a more and more utilitarian approaches based largely upon the '3Rs' alongside various forms of employability training. Art, drama, music and other forms of creative learning have largely been stripped out of state education and so working-class children, whose parents often lack the economic and cultural capital to source and fund alternative provision, usually miss out (Reay 2017). Arguably, such injustices could be addressed through the re-introduction of a more balanced and, frankly, more interesting curriculum but it is also important to think about the role of teachers in all this. Teacher's work has, over time, become more and more measured, managed, monitored and controlled, as greater and greater expectations have been placed upon them by parents, employers and especially the neoliberal state (Smyth et al. 2000; Smyth 2001). Teaching has, in many ways, been reduced to the conditions of waged labour, undergoing processes of deskilling and fragmentation not unlike those described in Harry Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (Ainley 2016, p. 49). The increasingly performative and pressured nature of schooling leaves teachers and lecturers little space to engage in creative and critical practice, but the immiseration and alienation of teachers is no accident. Successive waves of neoliberal reform have led to a combination of conservatism, competition and fear in our schools, colleges and universities (see Smyth 2017 on the latter). A combination of repeated aggressive inspection, increasing performativity and discourse of derision (Ball 2012) is, on one hand, driving many teachers out of teaching—especially those who are newly qualified—whilst also demotivating those that remain, and deterring others from pursuing teaching at all (Ainley 2016, pp. 90–91).

Respecting teachers, providing teachers with better terms and conditions, a more agreeable working environment and greater degree of freedom would entail substantial changes both in terms of the allocation of resources and a broader reassessment of the way in which teachers' work is organised and managed. It would also require a rethinking of the knowledge and skills that teachers need in order to engage young people in more critical and creative ways. Teacher training programmes are now dominated by a largely procedural and utilitarian curriculum at the expense of conceptual knowledge rooted in traditional academic disciplines and this, we believe, is problematic for various reasons. On one hand, teachers need access to forms of learning which allow them, individually and collectively, to critique and challenge the oppressive policies and practices of the state, and its impact both upon them as practitioners and educational processes more broadly. On the other hand, teachers also need to be provided with opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to foster creative and critical learning in young people—and this, we argue, can only be achieved if teacher training provides alternative ways of thinking about the nature and purpose of education in society, as well as the practical and operational tools needed to function effectively at the 'chalk face'. This, in turn, is also necessary if young people are to be developed not only as productive workers but also as well-informed consumers and active, critical citizens (see Simmons 2017). Such initiatives would allow a significant remodelling of the role and function of teachers in society but they cannot be realised in isolation. Radical institutional change is also necessary.

The Institutional

The first thing to say is that the notion that there is an education system at all is increasingly questionable. The word system implies a degree of coherence and rational organisation which simply no longer exists, especially in England where power has been incrementally stripped away from local authorities, and organisational structures have been fractured and splintered into a confusing and disjointed quasi-market without any meaningful or effective form of co-ordination. The waste of time, energy and resources associated with all this should not be underestimated, though nor should the damaging effects of institutional and individual competition, both for teachers and young people. The basic unfairness associated with the hyper-diversity we witness in England—seen, for example, in the favourable funding given to academies and free schools at the expense of comprehensives—also needs to be addressed (Reay 2017). A far more equitable funding regime and a radical decluttering of the institutional landscape are therefore necessary.

The promise of a better-funded publicly-accountable National Education Service based upon cooperation rather than competition; improved pay for teachers and support staff; a comprehensive review of assessment; and a much needed remodelling of apprenticeships and vocational education are central to the British Labour Party's current education policy—and would, at least in principle, go some way towards improving these matters. As would the proposal to abolish university tuition fees in England, which are now extraordinarily high, both in absolute and relative terms. Opponents of progressive reform point to the significant costs implications of all this but there are at least two strands of counter-argument. First, current arrangements are, contrary to official discourse, actually incredibly expensive both in financial and human terms. Substantial savings could be made simply by jettisoning much of wasteful duplication and complex machinery needed to service, maintain and measure the confusing jungle of funding, institutions and qualifications which now exists. The deeply flawed and hugely expensive English university tuition fee regime is an obvious case in point, although the extensive processes of privatisation, outsourcing and subcontracting which we now see across virtually all forms of education and training is also incredibly inefficient and wasteful. Second, of all the things on which public money is spent, education, in our opinion, is one of the worthiest. Expenditure should therefore be regarded as a wise investment rather than as a cost to be cut.

The Structural

Curriculum and institutional reform are, we have argued, badly needed if we are to create a more socially just and inclusive education system. But education, as Basil Bernstein (1970) notably said, cannot compensate for society's ills. Consequently, educational change needs to be accompanied by a far-reaching programme of social and economic reform. On one hand, there needs to be an extensive programme of job creation, especially for young people—although this needs to foreground sustainable, skilled jobs which offer working-class youth the prospect of meaningful and rewarding careers. An extensive programme of public works, restoring housing and building new homes, environmental initiatives, improving local and national infrastructure and so on would go some way towards bridging the opportunity gap that currently exists. Importantly though, such initiatives should not to be left to the market which has, over the years, only served to dispossess the working classes. The state will need to intervene both directly and indirectly—in terms, for example, of returning the railways to public ownership, creating a national care system, re-empowering local authorities to build new homes, and so on—and also by introducing a comprehensive system of licences to practice across a broad range of work, and through legislation to encourage high-quality production strategies throughout the economy.

Such measures would go some way towards providing young people with forms of opportunity and security which have been incrementally stripped away over time. But making such substantial change would be no easy task, not least because it would require the abandonment of the neoliberal project which has served the rich and powerful so well over recent decades, and the construction of a viable democratic alternative. This would require not just political will and ability but also a significant redistribution of wealth and resources throughout society. Those with vested interests will, of course, be keen to resist such ideas but there are at least some signs of a will for change. Politics is, as we have seen of late, increasingly fluid and unpredictable but there is at least some sign of a rejection of the status quo. This is perhaps especially the case among young people in the UK who, in 2017, voted overwhelmingly for the democratic socialist policies proposed by Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party—although, of course, the Conservatives were nevertheless re-elected. Brexit meanwhile presents complex and multifaceted challenges but we should remember that the Leave vote was strongest in places like Stoke, Hull, Sunderland and Doncaster—or, in other words, the working-class towns and cities that have suffered most from deindustrialisation and neoliberalism.

All this presents considerable conundrums. Whilst the Right undoubtedly sees Brexit as an opportunity to further exploit the working classes, leaving the European Union may also open up progressive possibilities, for example, through the renationalisation of key industries and utilities which is not possible under current EU regulations. This would, of course, require the election of a Labour government committed to its present agenda and this is by no means a foregone conclusion. There is, however, no doubt that substantial social and economic change is necessary if we are, as Jackson and Marsden expressed so eloquently, to build an education system which:

> [A]ccepts and develops the best qualities of working-class living and brings these to meet our central culture. Such a system must partly be grown out of common living, not merely imposed on it. But before this can begin, we must put completely aside any earlier attempts to select and reject in order to rear an elite. (Jackson and Mardsen 1962, p. 246)

These words are as relevant today—indeed perhaps more so—as when they were written over fifty-five years ago.

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