Onwards or Upwards?
Pathways and persistent inequality in the United Kingdom’s comprehensive education system

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Abstract

The UK’s comparatively open and flexible education system provides more options for individuals from less advantaged backgrounds to participate, and has a high uptake of tertiary and adult education. However, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds remain proportionately under-represented at the highest levels of post-compulsory education. The complex relationship between expansion, the diversification of educational systems and freedom of choice in modern liberal societies means that the background from which students are drawn remains highly relevant to their progression. Multiple options and qualitative differences between courses and institutions puts the onus on students and parents to make correct career decisions - if students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are found more often in less prestigious educational pathways, then prestigious higher level institutions are likely to remain exclusive.

The major contribution of my dissertation is the development of an overview of UK educational and labour market pathway formation and its influence on individuals’ educational trajectories and social positions. More specifically, I expand on Kerckhoff’s (1993) work on “Diverging Pathways: Social Structure and Career Deflections”, taking into account changes since the introduction of the comprehensive system, gender differences and adult education. I further the distinction between a pathway and a trajectory in life-course research and elaborate on the debated question of “persistent inequality”, taking the theoretical perspective of “effectively maintained inequality” (Lucas 2001) into account.

Finally, I consider the role of interactions between different types of inequality (cumulating dimensions). This thesis finds that students from more educated backgrounds are more likely to choose academic subjects and pathways early, which influences their performance and further progression opportunities. It also finds that men and women differ regarding educational pathways, that vertical gender inequalities and horizontal gender differences at first labour market entry have remained relatively stable over the latter half of the 20th century. And finally, that adult education and learning is subject to a “Matthew effect” (Merton 1968).

Finally, while economic factors proved likely to be the key driving force for
the salience of polity issues in party competition, the results did not indicate that dominant cultural values produced any effect on polity/policy issue competition.

Jury: Fabrizio Bernardi (EUI), Cristina Iannelli (Univ. Edinburgh), Patricia McMullin (Ph.D. candidate), Hans-Peter Blossefeld (EUI) (Supervisor) (Angela O’Rand participated via videolink)

Bio

Patricia McMullin is a PhD researcher at the Department of Social and Political Science in the European University Institute and part of the research team on the ERC funded international comparative research project 'Education as a Lifelong Process – Comparing Educational Trajectories in Modern Societies'. Within the project she analyses gender differences in labour market entry, and cumulative disadvantage in adult education, in Great Britain. Her PhD thesis deals with persistent inequality in the comprehensive educational system in the United Kingdom. Her main research interests focus on educational inequality in accessing third level education, employer sponsored adult education and early childhood education. Additionally she is interested in longitudinal data analyses, program evaluation and comparative research.