

BOOK REVIEW

The Making of a Left-Behind Class Educational Stratification, Meritocracy and Widening Participation

by Fred Powell, Margaret Scanlon, Patrick Leahy, Hilary Jenkinson and Olive Byrne, 224. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press (2024) 978-1447367956

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The Making of a Left-Behind Class Educational Stratification, Meritocracy and Widening Participation, written by Fred Powell, Margaret Scanlon, Patrick Leahy, Hilary Jenkinson and Olive Byrne, contributes to an already vast literature on educational inequality. Three core themes are progressed throughout the book, which include educational stratification, meritocracy and widening participation. These themes are interconnected with the failure of equality of opportunity to address class and ethnic divisions in society and the need for alternative policy solutions such as the concept of equality of condition. Although referring to the Irish education system and using empirical data from an Irish study, *UCC Widening Participation in Higher Education Project*, the book contends that the local is global and draws parallels between the Irish context and wider global policy developments.

The book is composed of theory and data, using a range of concepts for analysis such as civic and democratic values, educational equality, social justice and human rights. The voice of marginalised people from disadvantaged communities is integrated into the text but most of the content is devoted to conceptual and theoretical consideration of educational inequality. Drawing heavily on the work of Bourdieu, the authors also manage to incorporate a vast array of other theorists and references to several seminal books on the topic. Although there is a specific focus on the limits of meritocracy and educational stratification for widening participation and addressing inequality in education, the authors raise questions about the role of the Welfare State, the future of University education and the wider backlash to equality as demonstrated in recent US legislation.

A key strength of the book is the capacity of the authors to integrate and interconnect several issues related to educational disadvantage. From a methodological perspective, the combination of theory and data is welcome, with an exceptional level of theoretical and conceptual analysis.

Educational inequality is the focus of many texts and authors but the focus on the welfare state gives this book an added element to the analysis. It is solution focused and presents the welfare state and equality of condition as two key aspects of achieving educational equality. The authors explain equality of condition as an approach that includes public funding for education, structural change, and a need for a cultural rethink of the purpose of education. This approach is contextualised within a neoliberal policy focus on competition in education, which the authors maintain is at odds with democratic society. They refer to this as the need to reconcile 'the utilitarian demands of neoliberalism to commodify higher education with its original humanist educational mission'. There are excellent statements throughout the book that support arguments and solutions for greater equality in education, including the eloquent claim that 'the welfare state and public education normatively promotes community and solidarity by supporting the building of an ethical civil society around its population, encompassing all its citizens regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliation'.

Class inequality in education dominates much of the discussion but there is also an exploration of racism and education with a specific examination of educational disadvantage for Traveller and Roma communities. In particular, the exclusion of 99% of

Travellers from higher education positions the Traveller community as part of those *left behind* in the quest for widening access to higher education for all.

The term 'left behind' underpins the overall argument as the authors maintain that the widening access agenda has left behind half the Western population leading to a new form of stratification in society. Educational stratification is presented as a global problem and the authors maintain that the term 'left-behind' class is most useful for understanding this issue because it offers 'a powerful metaphor for a market economy and politically polarised society that is divided by class and ethnicity'.

This book has masterly integrated a wide range of inter-related, yet often separated within literature, concepts and issues related to educational inequality. It will be of interest to undergraduates, postgraduates, academics, researchers and policy makers that want a broad overview of educational inequality from a theoretical perspective, whilst also addressing specific barriers to equality in practise. Although the theoretical frame is sociological, it will also be of interest to social policy analysts given the focus on the role of the welfare state with respect to addressing educational disadvantage.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.