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The Sociology of Education in a Cold Economic Climate: young people in the recession

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Background

For many decades, research within the sociology of education has emphasised the complex ways in which young people's social backgrounds have influenced their progression through the education system, their occupational destinations and consequent wider life chances. Researchers have also emphasised the role that the organisation of the education system and of schools more specifically have played. In recent years, these debates have been dominated theoretically by approaches drawn from the work of Bourdieu. Much less attention has been paid to approaches based on notions of 'rational choice', as represented, for example, in the work of Boudon.

Research Questions

This paper aims to explore these issues through a re-analysis of a number of empirical studies conducted through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. In particular, it explores the ways in which the specificities of time and place need to be addressed in order to produce more satisfactory theoretical frameworks. It is argued that this theoretical development is especially relevant, given the overall aim of the PhD study of which this paper forms a part. This wider study sets out to investigate the transitions of young people from compulsory into post-compulsory education and their anticipated transition on to higher education or employment. It asks whether the current economic climate and heightened youth unemployment has a part to play in informing the decision making of young people within a particular socio-cultural context of South Wales.

Methods

The study uses qualitative methods of data collection; interviewing young people who have already made the transition onto further education or training about the decisions they made prior to making their transition and about the transitions onto higher education and employment which they anticipate making in the future.

Frame

The study critically engages with two prominent and distinct traditions of social theory: Cultural reproduction and rational action theories. It critically considers the notion that the social environment (such as family history of participation in post-16 education and socio-economic background) 'pushes' young people towards making certain decisions and post-compulsory education transitions. Critical engagement with 'rational action theory' however will explore the extent to which rationalized 'trade-offs' are made by young people between delaying employment and increasing credentials through participation in further education or training within a competitive but fragile labour market.

Research findings

The paper concludes by elaborating on some of the implications of the foregoing analysis for research on young people during the recession.