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Raising the participation age in historical perspective

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Background

Since the introduction of compulsory education in England the school leaving age has been progressively lengthened to 11 in 1893, 12 in 1899, 14 in 1918, 15 in 1947 and 16 in 1972. Legislation has now been passed to raise the 'participation' age in education and training to 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015. The antecedents of this recent legislation have been prominent in contemporary debates and historical arguments have bolstered the case for change. For instance, in 2007, the secretary of state for education, Ed Balls, emphasised that the new legislation would increase equality of opportunity by enacting a long-term historical commitment to raise the leaving age to 18, dating back to the 1918 Education Act (Balls 2007; DCSF 2007). He also asserted that, in 1972, few preparations were made and that this caused considerable confusion at the time.

Research Questions

This paper will place these recent policy developments in historical perspective. It will identify a number of key continuities and changes between past (1947, 1972) and present incarnations of the policy in order to identify areas where 'policy learning' (Raffe and Spours 2007) from the past could be fruitful. In particular, it will examine contested meanings of compulsory education, financial considerations, curriculum and the nature of youth.

Methods

Although compulsion was a foundation upon which the modern educational system was constructed, only a limited amount of critical academic attention has been given to the successive raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA) (Seaborne 1971; Finn 1987; Crook 2005; Norris 2007; Simmons 2008; Kewin et al 2009). The paper will adopt a historical framework to contextualise and critically assess the raising of the participation age. It will be based on documentary methods including an examination of press coverage, archival records of politicians and civil servants as well as contemporary policy documents.

Frame

The approach will engage with the theories of historical documentary research (McCulloch and Watts 2003) and develop an 'objective' analysis of the historical context alongside an evaluation of the contested subjective meanings that were deployed in relation to extending compulsion. Indeed, this issue has been crucial to the development of the education system as a whole and is much more than a simple administrative and technical matter. Theoretically, the reform will be conceived in terms of broadening educational opportunity whilst also constraining and regulating the lives of students: 'opportunity' went hand in hand with imposed limitations and new forms of socialisation.

Research findings

The substantive part of the paper will focus upon long-term dilemmas and contradictions in which contemporary policy is embroiled.

The broad arguments in favour of, and in opposition to, raising the school leaving age in the twentieth century will be compared to more recent debates on raising the participation age. The underlying assumptions will be drawn out and changing notions of equality, social justice and economic

performance will be examined. This will help to explain differences in the way extending compulsory education has been conceived in terms of a continuum from a means of broadening equality of opportunity (Benn and Simon 1972) to being viewed as an additional burden to be channelled appropriately and 'another year to be endured' (Finn 1987).

Indeed, education has been viewed as both a cost and a benefit which contributes to the economy in the form of human capital. Financial considerations and projections have been a recurrent theme in the decision to extend compulsory education and have taken various forms. For example, the timescale on which projected benefits are returned to society and economy vary significantly. This issue is particularly pertinent given the current debate about public expenditure and whether the measure might be delayed as it was in 1968-1970.

Preparing an appropriate 14-19 curriculum has been a further essential element of recent policy and explains why it is not to be implemented until 2013 and 2015. Despite claims that preparations were inadequate in the past, considerable work was undertaken by the Schools Council and other bodies to update the curriculum. These activities will be assessed in the light of continuing tensions over the nature of liberal and vocational education. For example, it is not yet clear how far contemporary developments have managed to address the historical shortcomings in relation to vocational education.

The nature of youth and childhood has been a further aspect of attempts to extend compulsory education and training and this paper will also chart the changing assumptions and fears in relation to young people. In the post-war years, youth was represented as being the future prosperity of the country as well as having the potential for social disruption through delinquency. Although these fears have continued, contemporary policy makers have had to address eighteen-year olds as adults.

A historical framework helps to clarify these issues and this offers considerable potential for policy learning from the past.

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