Douglas Fish Course: MA History Education (2011-12)

Investigating Research Coursework Two

A critical review of the following educational research articles: 'How can we enhance enjoyment of secondary school? The student view' (Stephen Gorard and Beng Huat See, 2011) and 'Social Justice and school improvement: improving the quality of schooling in the poorest neighbourhoods' (Ruth Lupton, 2009)

Key issues raised and arguments developed by the authors

For Gorard and See, the key question is how, in the view of students, their enjoyment of secondary school can be improved – overcoming factors which tend to inhibit this enjoyment [2011: 671]. Citing Ofsted survey data (2007) which find that 42% of pupils did not enjoy school and 79% who say enjoyment could be increased by making lessons more interesting and fun, the researchers see enjoyment as "important in its own right" [2011: 671]. They argue that policy makers in England have only recently taken an interest in enjoyment at school in its own right, in spite of it being "a long-standing area of interest for some commentators and many practitioners (Barth, 1970; Stables, 1990; Harris & Haydn, 2006)" [2005: 672]. Drawing on range of previous and literature, therefore, Gorard and See believe that any policy initiatives documents (such as 14-19 Reform Programme) intended to enhance student enjoyment must be implemented at school-level for such aims to be realised [2011: 672]. Central to their argument is the claim that, "enjoyment, unlike attainment...is not particularly stratified by the standard student background variables...nor is there evidence of a clear school affect" [2011: 671].

Alternatively, Lupton examines the issue of improving the quality of education at high-poverty schools, arguing that "Social justice in education demands, at the very minimum, that all students should have access to schools of the same quality" [2005: 589]. Citing a number of policy interventions to help achieve this, "going back to the Educational Priority Areas and comprehensive movement of the 1960s (Benn & Simon, 1970; Halsey, 1972; Benn & Chitty, 2004)", she argues that "all the evidence suggests that in England, even within the state sector, equality of education provision is still far from a reality" [2005: 589-90]. As well as pointing out the disproportionately large number of high-poverty schools in 'special measures' (Ofsted, 1998), Lupton also highlights Ofsted findings (2001) that schools with large numbers of children entitled to free school meals (FSM) were associated with low inspection grading in a number categories such as 'quality of education' [2005: 590]. In order to achieve 'social justice' – that is equal quality of education for all children - she argues the need for a whole school contextual change for high poverty schools (such as greater financial resources) and not (as it is often argued) for a focus on staff performance management – a "managerialist paradigm" as she puts it [2005: 591].

Methodology and findings

For their research, Gorard and See chose a sample of secondary schools in England, catering for 14-19 year olds (2007/2008) via a public educational database (Edubase); they also examined annual school census pupil intake data, as well as achievement data [2011: 672]. Therefore, according to Creswell, they opted for a case study approach - "the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system" [2007: 73]. Though selecting cases randomly within the above categories (such as achievement), the authors acknowledge, however, "The inevitable level of replacement meant that the sample was not random" [2011: 672]. Forty-five cases were selected and both surveys and interviews conducted, involving a range of participants including students (around 3000), teachers and parents; the researchers introduce variables to illustrate the effect of factors, such as free school meals (FSM), on pupil enjoyment and used a system to remove this so as to check validity. However, only the findings regarding Year 11 and those adults working with them were published, suggesting perhaps a purposeful sampling strategy [Creswell, 2007] and this, according to Silverman - by its very nature – affects the reader's ability to interpret the findings [2011: 19].

The researchers treat the survey variables of 'enjoy school' and 'most lessons are interesting' (agree or disagree with both) as 'dependent'; the remaining variables are "used as potential explanatory variables" such as gender – the latter apparently representing factors unique to individual students rather than school factors affecting all in the case of the former [2011: 674]. They go onto explain how the 'personal' variables were added in stages: background characteristics; school-level ones; and finally students' responses to other survey items –a chronological or "biographical order" of characteristics - as they put it; "Placing the school-level variables before the individual ones also allows the greatest possible role for the influence of institutions (schools) on student outcomes" [2011: 674]. Although they cite some unexplained variation, they authors point to the unpredictable nature of people as a main explanation for this. They add the variables at each stage, and then remove them in backward step, "according to their 'effect' size" [2011: 674]; some are not used at all as they are deemed insignificant regarding the outcome. They refer to each variable having a "calculated coefficient" – what might be described as its contextual importance to the model; for example, "the coefficient for a real number variable is a multiplier (so that 0.9 for school-level free school meals (FSM) might mean that the specified outcome is only 0.9 times as likely for every percentage of the school intake eligible for FSM)" [2011: 674]. The latter could therefore be interpreted that FSM children are almost as likely to enjoy or not enjoy school as those not in this category.

Though playing down the importance of the precise figures in the data, the researchers point to the variables' "relative importance and [that] the direction of their 'influence' could be an important clue to the determinants of student enjoyment at school" [2011: 675]. They find that 44% of Year 11s enjoy school and 38% state that most of their lessons are interesting [2011: 675]; as they point out this is lower than findings by Ofsted mentioned at the start of the research – which they say may be because the latter focuses on all school years. From their logistic regression model, the authors find that personal student backgrounds explain some variation in general school enjoyment; they point out, however, that "Very little of the variation in responses is explicable by school-level factors...most of the differences between those who enjoy and those who do not enjoy school are

related to individual experiences of education" [675]; likewise, student responses to 'most lessons are interesting' show an even more convincing pattern in this respect.

The rationale the researchers seem to give for their approach seems to be that, having *quantified,* through survey analysis, the sources of enjoyment at school like interesting lessons and the chance to discuss their work, they now wish to *qualify* it through student interviews to examine the nature of that enjoyment [2011: 678]. They argue that, although students suggested having a good social life at school was key to their enjoyment, and "an end in its own right...almost all made a connection between such social interaction and learning" [2011: 678]; one interviewee saying, *"I have enjoyed [school] as you make friends and have experiences which teach you things as well as achieving good grades"* [2011: 678]. Alternatively, the authors present similar results for those disengaged in their learning. With regard to lesson quality therefore, the authors refer to "student reports of enjoyment are a kind of barometer of when things are going well in a lesson and when they are most definitely not" [2011: 684]. They claim that by performing a comparative analysis between their model and equivalent ones, they ensured "[their] results [were] not spurious patterns" [2011: 685]. "The scale of relationship between the predictors, such as student background, school mix or student experience of justice, and the two outcome variables here is substantial over a reasonably large sample...the results are credible" [2011: 685].

Although Lupton has also approached her research as qualitative case study, unlike Gorard and See - who draw on the data analysis of surveys, interviews and focus groups (a quantitative and qualitative approach) - she has focussed on interviews, taking a purposeful sample of a small number of teaching staff from four secondary schools, in what she describes as "extremely disadvantaged areas of England" [2005: 592]. Lupton points out this commonality in serving high-poverty areas as the reason for their selection in her research; they were neither 'failing', nor 'bad' schools - this being the judgement of Ofsted itself [2005: 592-3]. Therefore, her aim was "to illuminate contextual impacts on quality, across a range of schools where quality varies" [2005: 592]; within her own sample she acknowledges differences and therefore seeks to qualify any conclusions about the significance of these 'contextual factors' on an individual as well as general basis.

To establish the context of the schools, "an initial phase of work was carried out...based on interviews with head teachers and local education authority (LEA) representatives, collection and analysis of socio-economic data, and mapping of pupil post codes [followed by an exploration of] "the impact of context on school organisation and practice [involving] qualitative interviews with each head teacher and a sample of teaching [and support] staff" [2005: 592-3]. They were asked to think about the meaning of 'quality' provision and the effects upon it in different circumstances, based on "eleven aspects of effective schooling [such as 'high expectations'] (Sammons et al., 1995; Sammons, 1999)...and to consider their implementation in schools in different settings" [2005: 593]. "Unstructured observations were also carried out, and supporting documentation (such as attendance and prior attainment data) were collected" [2005: 593]. As she explains, "[Her] article draws on the data in two ways. First, it briefly summarises what appeared to be the distinctive features of the contexts of these schools, taken as a group. Second, it assesses how these contextual features impacted on school processes and practices, and specifically on quality. The final part of the article draws conclusions for school improvement policy for the poorest neighbourhoods" [2005: 594]; specifically the research seeks to look at contextual causes, then their consequences, and finally seeks to make policy-makers aware of these.

Regarding the local (and unique) differences between her samples, Lupton argues, "that school improvement strategies must be based on subtle appreciations of context"; therefore appropriate resources should be provided on an individual basis [2005: 595]. Nevertheless, she points out that her interviewees (teachers) highlight a number of 'common contextual features' at high-poverty schools, not present at those with a more affluent intake [2005: 596]. Categorising this part as 'impact on quality' Lupton first focuses on the challenge of hiring and retaining staff, highlighting the "deterrent effect of this environment on staff recruitment...one school had "what could only be described as a staffing crisis [half were unqualified and the turn-over was extremely high]" [2005: 596]; though considerably less problematic in the other three schools, the latter acknowledged the fragility of their situation with regard to recruitment [2005: 596]. She presents extracts of her interviewees in their own words – as did Gorard and See – one particularly striking remark being, *"your teachers cannot focus purely on high quality teaching and learning because they're focusing so much on other things [such as behaviour problems]...it makes it harder"* [2005: 597]. Therefore, Lupton argues, "Downward pressures on quality arise...not just through the underperformance of staff and the need to make trade-offs between teaching, management and pastoral care, but because resources for individual aspects of schooling are simply too low relative to demand" [2005: 601].

Conclusion

In their conclusion and evaluation, Gorard and See point to some of the limitations of their work and "suggest some of the practical implications...if accepted" [2011: 684]; for example they have only been able to measure a certain number of things in their research and left out many, such as "[many] school-level characteristics derived from the official school census data" [2011: 684]; representativeness was also highlighted as limited, partly because "the focus groups were largely selected for [them] by the schools themselves"[2011: 684]. However, they claim their data is comparable with the official data already existing (such as student attainment); also, they were assured during their lengthy research experience at the schools (totalling five years) that "the vast majority of students [took] the chance to express their views very seriously indeed" [2011: 685]; this latter claim backed up by the extracts from interview transcripts illustrated in their paper. They conclude that their work can help to bring about improvements in English (and other) schooling [2011: 686] and that if teachers are mindful of students' views and their enjoyment of learning they will take measures to improve it, in part by expanding already existing good practice [2011: 688].

Drawing her paper to a close, Lupton poses the question of whether, "In the light of these contextual pressures, should we conclude that high quality is unattainable in schools with high-poverty areas?" [2005: 601]. She argues her findings point to the contrary, and calls for better resources given the limits of staff performance management, and contextual changes such as a more socio-economically balanced intake; also not just focussing on exam results and "an [Ofsted] inspection system designed only to support improvements in quality, not to 'name and shame' schools that are failing" 2005: 602]; this system, she seems to argue, is therefore failing to address the problems high-poverty schools face [2005: 602]. Whilst presenting her paper as but one critique of current school implementation policies, she calls for greater funding to offset these contextual pressure as part of core school budgets, arguing that "it is clear that current measures fall well short of the unequal

distribution of resources that will be needed if equal quality is to be achieved" [2005: 602]. She returns, finally, to her original point that social justice demands equal school provision and that this requires "improvement strategies that are based on an understanding of the critical importance of what goes on outside the school for the quality of education that is delivered within it...only once this is appreciated are more promising policies likely to follow" [2005: 603].

In terms of their theoretical perspectives the articles differ somewhat, although it could be argued they share similar traits; both had an element of critical theory in their discourses, although this seems more pronounced in Lupton's work where she seems to identify what Creswell describes as "oppressive structures" in society preventing social justice for children from poor areas [2007: 27]. There is also a distinct postmodernist trait in the way Lupton writes, highlighting the contextual difference between schools serving deprived areas and those catering for more affluent children. Gorard and Huat See, on the other hand, seem to work from an almost post-positivist viewpoint, "[conducting] their enquiry as a series of logically related steps, [believing] in multiple perspectives from participants...espousing rigorous methods of qualitative data collection and analysis" [Creswell, 2007: 20]. Both research articles appear to have conducted their research ethically, if measured against the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research in that consent was gained from all participants voluntarily [2011: 6] and the names of participants and the schools remained confidential [2011: 7]. Neither of these papers claims 'objectivity' in their methods or conclusions, and both seem conscious of "contextual sensitivity" of their cases [Silverman, 2011: 17].

Drawing on a range of existing literature and relevant data, the research carried out there appears to be sufficient information to address the questions well, if not unambiguously. Given its much wider scope, the Gorard and See paper does seek to generalise what they find in that they recommend national changes based on these findings; Lupton, however, does not seek to generalise – on the contrary, she points to differences in her sample and expresses a desire to contribute to existing research in her field, not chance national policy. Related work by Barton (2009), Grever et al., (2011) and Andrews et al., (2009) also seems clarify the importance of a student voice in understanding how to improve their education; also how unique contextual differences must be taken into consideration for its delivery. Indeed, how can educators and policy makers know what is best for children in their education if they are unaware of the views of students themselves?

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