

BOOK REVIEWS

Aspirations, education and social justice: applying Sen and Bourdieu, by Caroline Sarojini Hart, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012, 208 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4411-8574-7

While many books and papers in education studies entail the word aspiration, there are only a few that elaborate on the concept in more detail and go beyond a reduced understanding of aspirations as the answer to the question, ‘what job do you want to do in the future?’ Refreshingly, this book shows that writing about aspirations is to write about the kind of future we desire with all the complexities related to this. It engages with a truly comprehensive theme, which is running through historical as well as contemporary debates in education. The book aims at nothing less but, ‘proposing the direction for a new pursuit of social justice in education and beyond’ (5). Writing about aspirations, the author might have felt invited to take on such an ambitious agenda.

The book is pioneering for the capability approach in two ways. First, it draws on the capability approach and applies its normative framework to education policies in ‘developed’ England, as opposed to most studies with a human development perspective which focus on ‘non-developed’ countries. The book demonstrates that the merit of the capability approach, shifting the focus away from competitive advantage on to human well-being, can be valuable for ‘non-developed’ as well as for ‘developed’ contexts. Second, it aims to advance the capability approach and make it more applicable for educational research by blending its normative principles with elements of social theory referring to Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus*, *capital* and *field*. A number of quantitative studies already demonstrated the value of the capability approach as an evaluative tool to measure disadvantage, but the importance of social structures for the capabilities themselves would often remain unclear. Challenging this very point, Hart explicitly combines the capability approach with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Moreover, this book contributes to the vast literature on the damaging effects of neoliberal policies by critiquing widening participation policies for their exclusive focus on the economic agenda.

The book is divided into nine chapters. The first chapter sets out how the book’s title relates to current developments in education policy. Drawing on the example of Aim higher policies which started in 2001 as ‘Excellence Challenge’ policy, the chapter demonstrates that despite a rich historical and geographical legacy in thinking about education, the focus on English education policy shifted towards the increase in participation rates in education and an economic instrumentalism underlying this expansion. Hart confronts both of these trends. First, she noticed that despite the fact that some students experienced greater opportunities through programmes such as Aim higher, the ‘normalisation’ of higher education led to an increased feeling of exclusion among those who did not have a chance to participate in them. Second, policies based on enrolment figures lack in information about the quality of the experience of those participating which is essential from the perspective of social justice.

The second chapter discusses the capability approach and its potential to provide a convincing alternative to economic instrumentalism. It provides a helpful introduction to readers

who are new to the language of the capability approach and lists some of its critical aspects, most importantly about the relationships between social structures and individual freedoms. As Hart points out, the application of the capability approach in the field of education is still relatively recent. However, criticising economic instrumentalism from the perspective of educational research is not a novelty. For instance, when mentioning A.S. Neill's Summerhill School (founded in 1921) as a counterexample to economic instrumentalism, Hart relinquishes to emphasise the link between the capability approach and educational theory that is underpinning schools like Summerhill. Referring only to the capability approach without acknowledging the steps which were previously made in that direction carries a risk of reinventing the wheel. Perhaps there was not enough space for that kind of analysis within this book, however, an important link between the educational theory and the capability approach remains missing.

The third chapter aims to utilise the concepts of *habitus*, *capital* and *field* from the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, combining them with the capability approach. The benefit of enriching the capability approach with this particular social theory becomes clear in this chapter, where the readers get provided with conceptual tools that help them understand how the 'feel for the game', that is the explicit and implicit rules in the field of higher education, differs among young adults (58).

Chapter four presents Hart's own research strategy and methodology based on the previous theoretical chapters. The amount of data collected in two study sites in England with a total of more than 1000 participants is quite impressive. However, the treatment of quantitative and qualitative data sometimes causes confusion in the very understanding of aspirations. For example, in chapter five, Hart differentiates between the 'true' and the 'apparent' aspirations, the former representing one's individual aspirations and the latter representing the expectations and aspirations of significant others, both of which can be quantitatively measured (92). However, in the qualitative analysis, there is hardly anything 'true' to be found in the students' expressions of aspirations, but what emerges in their statements are rather various strategies of managing hopes, desires, fears and expectations for the future. It appears that any expression of an aspiration belongs to the habitus of that person and it cannot be simply pinpointed to categories of 'true' and 'apparent'.

Chapters six and seven explore the structural opportunities and burdens, the interviewees faced, in pursuit of their aspirations. Findings about the strong influence of family background and positive as well as negative institutional discrimination practices on students' educational choices are well known. The most illuminating part might be her observation of the profit some students from marginalised backgrounds can make, from the symbiotic relationships between their individual habitus and the institutional widening participation habitus. In turn, those who do not find themselves in such a symbiosis feel additionally excluded. This finding is elaborated further in chapter eight, which critically revisits some of the policy assumptions outlined in chapter one. It stresses that the economic promise of higher education makes students buy into the *game* and subdues alternative aspirations and non-economic roles of higher education, only to remain unfulfilled for various reasons. It reduces the range of legitimate aspirations to those related to the project of the capitalisation of the self and rational market behaviour.

In the final chapter Hart focuses on the aspect of social justice as a process, as opposed to a finite goal and calls for a shift from 'raising aspirations' to 'nurturing aspirations' and from 'widening participation' to 'widening capability' (182). According to her vision, 'an open institutional commitment to accepting the value of alternative futures to higher education, even for the most able students, would enhance the agency of young people to openly discuss and develop their aspirations' (183). This vision, emerging from a capability approach

perspective, provides a radical alternative to the picture drawn based on her analysis of widening participation policies in the previous chapters. However, such vision falls short in explaining the success and attraction of investing into 'playing the game' when the *game* itself fills the places at the top and at the bottom. Alternative aspirations might be accepted by institutions, but within the current socio-economic hierarchies one is only free to pursue them once the economic success is allowing them to.

This book is of great interest for everyone using the capability approach from a sociological or educational perspective. It offers a profound critique of widening participation policies and the wider neoliberal discourse that revolves around economic instrumentalism. This book should be on the reading list of everyone interested in deeper understanding of aspirations. It shows that the meaning of aspiration is not so obvious and that it should be used (in educational, but also public and policy discourse) with more care. As many books before, it raises more questions than it could answer, which is not surprising given the ambition outlined at the beginning. However, it does provide the reader with food for thought, at least in case of the readers who are lucky enough to afford it or to find it in their libraries.

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England's citizenship education experiment: state, school and student perspectives, by Lee Jerome, London, Bloomsbury, 2012, 254 pp., £71.25 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-4411-2224-7

After a decade of the introduction of citizenship education into the secondary schools of England, Lee Jerome produced this book to provide a case study of curriculum reform under the Labour Government. The book, which is based on a thorough policy analysis and creative field research, successfully answers the two main research questions: The first, what kind of citizenship education did New Labour create, and how did it fit with a broader reform and modernizations agenda? And the second, what happened as a consequence of the policy?

The book is divided into two main parts under which there are chapters. The author chose to start with a thorough representation of the vision behind introducing citizenship education linking this vision to the political theory, which guided the work of the Labour Government. Then he moves effortlessly to the second major part of the book where the field research and findings are linked, compared and contrasted with the government's vision. All the main ideas and arguments in the book are neatly organised and clearly sign posted. The reader is taken from one idea to the other with a smooth flow. The author successfully positions the book in the political, theoretical and academic context which highlights his point that any policy can only be properly understood within the political context in which it arose (xix) and makes this book a useful resource for anyone interested in citizenship education, education policy in relation to political theory or even interactive research methods. The reader does not have to be an expert on citizenship education in England.

The author uses a clear framework for the analysis of the policy documents and the research data and to compare and contrast the vision and the reality. This framework is based on a three-discourse model: Rights and responsibilities, community and diversity and