INTRODUCTION

Education and social mobility

The study of education and social mobility has been a key area of sociological research since the 1950s. The importance of this research derives from the systematic analysis of functionalist theories of industrialism. Functionalist theories assume that the complementary demands of efficiency and justice result in more ‘meritocratic’ societies, characterized by high rates of social mobility. Much of the sociological evidence has cast doubt on this optimistic, if not utopian, claim that reform of the education system could eliminate the influence of class, gender and ethnicity on academic performance and occupational destinations.

Today, the sociological study of social mobility could be characterised as an established or ‘mature’ field of investigation. There are well established ways of defining intergenerational social mobility, often associated with the contribution of Goldthorpe, Halsey and colleagues at Nuffield College, Oxford. The distinction between absolute and relative intergenerational mobility, has been developed to explain why social mobility since World War II is primarily attributable to changes in occupational (class) structure rather than being the result of increasing equality of opportunity. In other words, it has been the growth in technical, managerial and professional occupations, along with the decline in elementary jobs in agriculture and manufacturing, which account for the historical pattern of intergenerational social mobility.

This field of sociological inquiry also enjoys an established methodology. There have been detailed attempts to define social class in terms of employment relations – a necessary precursor to the study of both family class origins and occupational destinations. Advances in statistical techniques enable sophisticated analyses, including comparative research, which have taken the study of social mobility to new levels of complexity and insight. However, the significant accomplishments of sociological research in this field raise a number of issues relevant to this Special Issue.

Firstly, the transformation of education, work and the labour market, in both developed and emerging economies is having profound consequences for our understanding of the (re)production of life-chances. Therefore, to what extent are existing theories of education and social mobility fit for purpose in a rapidly changing world? What does the latest empirical evidence reveal about national and international patterns of mobility? The enduring significance of social class is established, but what role do gender,
ethnicity and race play and how do we understand their intersection with social class?

Secondly, research in the sociology of education has played a marginal role in respect to advances in the sociological study of social mobility. Where there has been an interest in education it has focused on class differences in education attainment in mediating the relationship between origins and destinations. The mass of research on student identities, aspirations and experiences of school, college and university has been overlooked, partly because it is primarily based on qualitative rather than quantitative methods of data collection. While this points to a weakness in mainstream mobility studies it also points to a failure of the sociology of education to engage in broader debates around intergenerational mobility, notwithstanding its engagement with wider debates on social inequalities and social justice. It also raises questions as to whether the next generation of education researchers will have the training in quantitative methods and techniques to engage in future mobility debates.

The Editors of this Special Issue have been greatly encouraged by the level of interest from potential contributors and by that fact that the call attracted enough high quality articles to justify a double-issue. We were also delighted to include an article by A.H. Halsey, Emeritus Professor at Nuffield College, Oxford. A.H. Halsey was a key advisor to the Labour government during the post-war period and gave the Reith Lectures on ‘Change in British Society’ (1978). He is widely known to the readers of this Journal as a key figure in shaping the sociology of education in Britain. He maintained a keen awareness of the need to tackle wider social inequalities, whilst emphasizing the potential of education to transform the relationship between origins and destinations, arguing that education ‘remains a friend of those who seek a more efficient, more open, and more just society’.

This judgement on the role of education is not only informed by sociological evidence but by Halsey’s own biography. His article in this volume, testifies to the extraordinary period of educational, social and economic change since his birth in 1923. He acknowledges that his family history was not typical of the working classes in the 1950s and 1960s. He also points to the importance of a scholarship and experiences in the RAF during World War II in determining his fate. He came to realize that recruits from private schools, who often talked about return to study in Oxbridge after the war, were no smarter that he was. The inclusion of these personal reflections in this volume, show the importance of both quantitative and qualitative methods in understanding education and social mobility, past and present. In his conclusion, Halsey turns to the ideals of the ethical socialist R.H. Tawney, as a consistent reminder that social justice can not be reduced to measuring the relative life-chances of people from different class backgrounds entering
professional or managerial positions. There is much more to ‘fairness’ than social mobility.

Tawney’s insights also inform the personal reflections of Diane Reay. In a similar vein to Halsey, she includes the follow quotation from Tawney, ‘…individual happiness does not only require that men [sic] should be free to rise to new positions of comfort and distinction; it also requires that they should be able to lead a life of dignity and culture, whether they rise or not.’ Reay offers a commentary on recent accounts of education and social mobility, arguing that they obscure wider questions of educational purpose and social justice. Despite the differences in generation and gender which separate Reay and Halsey, both came from working class backgrounds to become Oxbridge professors.

While these articles draw on personal reflections the article by Brown offers an analytical account of education and its relationship to social mobility. Brown claims that much of today’s policy rhetoric has ignored the lessons of sociological evidence. This consistently shows that intergenerational social mobility is not the result of a more meritocratic society but of changes in the occupational structure contributing to a growing middle class. However, he also argues that the current sociological agenda needs to be extended in order to account for the fact that the lives of many students and job seekers are not characterized by social mobility but greater social congestion, as they struggle to match the promise of the opportunity bargain to labour market realities.

The ‘application frenzy’ to which social congestion in the job market has given rise, is developed in the article by Weis and Cipollone. Drawing on ethnographic research with affluent and elite students in U.S. secondary schools, they examine the ‘class work’ now required to stay ahead of the crowd. Although this involves considerable time, effort and resources it makes it more difficult for those from less privileged backgrounds to stay in the competition, given a lack of material and cultural assets that reinforce social class differences in educational outcomes.

The article by Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, complements this account through an examination of class differences in capital mobilization and acquisition by students and their families to enhance their prospects in the graduate labour market. Through an innovative research design which matches ‘paired peers’ from high and low ranking universities within the same city, they offer an intriguing account of how the ‘class work’ cited in Weis and Cipollone’s study plays out in English higher education, in ways that compound rather than alleviate social inequalities.

Thompson and Simmons also investigate the intensification of positional competition within educational systems, drawing on the work of Boudon and his model of social opportunity. This focus on Boudon’s contribution is particularly timely given the dominant position of Bourdieu within the sociology of education today (his contemporary in Paris). Boudon offered an
early explanation of why educational expansion was unlikely to lead to higher rates of social mobility. Based on an analysis of post-compulsory education in England they conclude that Boudon’s ideas are of considerable value in assessing the impact of educational reforms on wider social opportunities.

Boudon’s contribution to the study of education and social mobility demonstrates the importance of quantitative methodologies noted above. The article by Devine and Li presents statistical data on the changing relationship between origins, education and destinations in the 1990s and 2000s. They highlight some of the complexities of assessing the hypothesis of merit-selection discussed in a number of articles in this Special Issue. Despite current concerns about declining rates of intergenerational social mobility, they find some evidence of a weakening relationship between family origins and educational performance (measured by academic attainment) for both women and men. They also find a weakening relationship between family origins and occupational destinations, again offering some support to the hypothesis of merit-selection. However, they argue that the role of qualifications in determining occupational outcomes has not strengthened as hypothesized by merit-selection, suggesting that other factors such as social networks play a key role in determining labour market outcomes in a context of mass higher education.

Mountford-Zimdars, Jones, Sullivan and Heath present evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey since 1983, to assess how people perceive the changing role of higher education and its relationship to social mobility. They discuss the changing policy context within higher education, highlighting a greater emphasis on the private, rather than public, benefits of going to university – an important justification for the introduction of a ‘user pays’ model of funding. Drawing on questions such as, ‘How important is it for working class people to go to university?’ and ‘Do you think that students leaving university have better or worse job prospects nowadays than they had 10 years ago?’ they found that the negative media headlines concerning the ‘value’ of higher education, had not resulted in a negative shift in social attitudes. People continue to recognize the individual value of higher education and its public worth. They also found some evidence of people becoming more worried about the state of the graduate labour market.

In examining the perceived value of a university education and its relationship to future life-chances, the next three articles present qualitative evidence that draw on Bourdieu’s conceptual framework based on habitus, cultural capital and field. Byrom and Lightfoot offer an account of how students from working class backgrounds respond to failing course modules and whether this leads them to re-think their career plans. Despite lacking the cultural capital associated with middle class academic achievement, Byrom and Lightfoot found high levels of resilience towards completing their respective courses. They also found that family members played an
important role in encouraging those they interviewed to keep going in their pursuit of an academic degree and better future.

He Li adopts a similar conceptual approach to investigate how academic ‘stars’ from rural neighbourhoods in China, experienced the transition to an elite university in a major metropolitan district. Based on a detailed qualitative analysis, He Li reveals how the habitus that had contributed to educational success in rural China, led to feelings of alienation and anomie as rural students struggle to cope with prejudice and material disadvantage whilst studying alongside urban elites. This article raises interesting questions concerning the applicability of ‘western’ class analyses to the urban-rural divide in China. How these matters are conceptualized equally raise important issues for understanding education and social mobility, as this article shows that despite the rural exodus to the cities, those originating in the countryside continue to experience prejudice and inequalities within education and the labour market.

The importance of Bourdieu’s appeal within the sociology of education is again revealed in I Lin Sin’s ethnographic study of Malaysian middle class students and the use of foreign education to enhance their occupational prospects. A distinction is drawn between ‘foreign’ and ‘local’ cultural capital to capture the complexities involved in using Bourdieu’s conceptual framework when engaged in comparative analyses. The article suggests that Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital needs to be extended to take account of education in different social and geographical contexts, especially in the conversion of cultural capital into economic and social advantage.

The question of origins and its relationship to educational performance is the focus of Ye Liu’s quantitative study of the Gaokao (National College Entrance Examinations) in China. The article shows how the Chinese government has placed considerable emphasis on the Gaokao as an expression of the country’s commitment to meritocratic competition. A survey of almost 1000 university students in two Chinese provinces did not reveal a ‘strong socioeconomic selection’ but the importance of parental education, as those with parents in professional occupations scored highly. The study is also consistent with He Li’s study given that ‘the Gaokao punishes those from rural areas for lacking equal educational opportunities and resources at the school stage, and justifies their inferior status with demonstrable outcomes in the examinations.’

Sociological research aimed at understanding the intergeneration transmission of inequalities rarely focus on field of study or the school curriculum. Kraaykamp, Tolsma and Wolbers present a quantitative analysis of intergenerational transmission of educational inequalities in the Netherlands, based on survey data between 1992–2009. They extend existing studies of social class backgrounds by investigating parental ‘field of study’ and what impact this has on the subject choices of their offspring. The authors suggest that while there has been an increasing tendency for men to follow
‘economic’ specialisms, women are opting for medical, economic and socio-cultural fields of study. However, they also contend that the intergeneration transmission within specific high status fields of study has become more important within a mass system of higher education. This may also reflect differences in labour market structure between the Netherlands, which has an ‘occupational’ labour market as opposed to the ‘flexible’ labour markets found in Britain and the United States.

The article by Iannelli contributes to this line of inquiry by seeking to assess the role of curricular content on patterns of social mobility. Drawing on the British National Child Development Study, Iannelli examines subjects studied in secondary education and occupational destinations. It is shown that studying high status subjects is particularly important for gaining access to a high ranked university, enhancing opportunities within the graduate labour market. It is also claimed that most of the advantages associated with a selective school education are accounted for by the curriculum studied. This invites further research on the hierarchy of school knowledge as manifest in the organization of the curriculum and its subsequent impact on access to higher education. It also raises questions about the signifiers of cultural capital and their impact on patterns of social mobility.

The next two articles shift the focus back to ethnographic studies of ethnicity, race and the education of refugees. Vincent, Ball, Rollock and Gillborn present the findings of their study of middle class Black Caribbean families. They examine family histories that typically involved migration from the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s. Interviews with second generation parents highlight the importance of education to their own social mobility but also its role in securing middle class status for their children, as they still perceived their families’ social standing to be insecure. This not only reflects current labour market conditions but ‘the racism that still exists in education and employment, albeit manifesting itself now in more subtle, but still insidious, ways.’ In conclusion, they argue that race cannot be ‘added on’ to class analysis because it changes how class works, how it is experienced, and how it impacts on social identities.

The article by Koyama highlights the new realities of transnational movements of people that present a challenge to existing theories of education and social mobility based on ‘methodological nationalism’. Koyama examines the experiences of a small sample of refugees in the United States to argue that the usual ways of measuring social mobility are less applicable as some of those entering the United States are highly educated but underemployed because their academic and professional qualifications are not recognised or valued in the US labour market. She points to issues of language proficiency, initial job placement, access to networks, and entrepreneurial activity, as possible indicators of social mobility for refugees. She concludes that the personal struggles of these refugees to make their way in the world may appear to fit the trajectory associated with the Ameri-
can Dream but that this misses the precarious realities of life of many refugees and their families.

Finally, the editors would like to note that the articles in this Special Issue were not commissioned and are not intended to constitute the state of the field. But they do offer an insight into the range of ideas, theories and research evidence that exists with the sociology of education. They also tell a more complicated and nuanced story about the role of education in social mobility to that espoused by the current Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, who takes the view that reforming the school curriculum and lifting aspirations will help achieve a fully meritocratic system, as ‘bright’ children from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed academically and secure well paid positions in the labour market.

The purpose of this Special Issue is to generate debate both within mainstream sociology (if such a thing exists) and the sociology of education, at the same time as recognising the invaluable contributions of other cognate disciplines within the social sciences. What this double-issue of the Journal demonstrates is the continuing importance for the sociology of education to take a leading role in researching education and social mobility, a task which in many respects began with the work of A.H. Halsey.

Phillip Brown, Diane Reay and Carol Vincent