

On the Mechanisms of Social Inequality

Studies of young people's educational outcomes, social participation, and well-being

Erica Nordlander



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

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Author: Erica Nordlander

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Abstract

The present thesis seeks to explore the bases of social inequality, particularly how it is reproduced and can potentially be counteracted. The aim is to describe and explain how structural factors – first and foremost class and young people's various practices – give rise to a process of creation, distribution and acquisition of resources of importance to different outcomes in young people's lives. In the thesis it is argued that by studying young people's different practices and by relating them to the characteristics of the family of origin, we can obtain a more comprehensive picture of how resources that are related to the varying outcomes among young people of different social origins are acquired, distributed and created. The aim of the thesis is investigated through four empirical studies.

Study 1, investigates the relationship between class origin, educational attainment, and two features of social participation: agency and voice. In Study 2, adolescents' subjective well-being is in focus and investigated in relation to school performance, gender and class origin. Study 3 explores whether, and to what degree, young people's activities are important links between class origin and school grades in upper secondary school. The final study builds on Study 3 and focuses on the importance of young people's class origin, school grades and activities for entering higher education.

The aim of the thesis calls for extensive information on the life of young people. With a unique combination of survey data, both from the young themselves and from their parents together with registry data, this thesis can answer to these high demands on data. Study 1 uses data from the Survey of Living Conditions (ULF) collected by Statistics Sweden. The remaining studies (2-4) make use of a several data sources, but are mainly focused on ULF and the annual child supplement of the Survey of Living Conditions (Child-ULF) conducted between 2001 and 2005. In addition to ULF and Child-ULF, the data in Study 2-4 have been complemented with registry data comprising grades and entry to higher education. The data as a whole, also allow a longitudinal focus, as the survey data were collected between 2001 and 2005 and the registry data contain information up to 2009.

The conclusions of the thesis can be summarized in one important point: If we are to understand the mechanisms underlying different life outcomes among young people, it is of great importance that we take into consideration young people's different conditions and practices. It has been made clear that young people's different practices and life outcomes are closely related to their class origin. Yet it should be noted that this does not always have to be the case. The present thesis has shown that young people, through different actions, can break the pattern of social reproduction. In order to support this, and to counteract social inequality, it is therefore important to increase opportunities for young people to take part in resource-generating practices.

Key words: Young people, conditions, practices, resources, life outcomes.