

**Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training Working Paper 26
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**CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF DECISIONS ABOUT EDUCATIONAL
PARTICIPATION AMONG 14-19 YEAR-OLDS**

Professor Andy Furlong, University of Glasgow

Abstract

The continued increase in levels of educational participation and patterns of attainment among young people from less advantaged social backgrounds suggests that class cultures can no longer be seen as providing significant barriers to educational progression. Indeed, it can be argued that this increase in educational participation has been facilitated by processes of cultural convergence in which the benefits derived from qualifications are more or less universally acknowledged. At the same time, it is clear that some young people are put in positions at school that effectively promote processes of cultural resistance as survival strategies.

This paper provides an overview of some of the ways in which class cultures impact on patterns of educational participation. It draws on three recent studies in an attempt to differentiate barriers to educational progress that can be tackled through school reforms from those that originate or are constantly reinforced in the community. In the light of these observations of the cultural dimensions of the educational decisions of 14-19 year-olds, a brief assessment is made of the likely impact of the Tomlinson proposals.

Key words

Class cultures; educational orientations; educational decisions.

Introduction

In Britain, some quite radical changes in patterns of educational participation have been taking place over the last decade or so. At all stages, levels of participation have increased, minimum aged school leaving became a minority experience some time ago and we are about to reach the stage (already reached in Scotland) at which

fifty per cent of young people will enter higher education. These changes have inevitably led to a situation where groups of young people who traditionally left education at the earliest opportunity (predominantly those from the lower working classes, those with below average levels of attainment and those from certain minority groups) are now more likely to experience various forms of continuing education and training, including higher education. At the same time, persistent patterns of disadvantage associated with factors such as social class, neighbourhood deprivation and 'race' are still deeply entrenched. Those from lower working class families, for example, are still more likely than their more affluent peers to leave education at the minimum age, to follow vocational rather than academic routes and, when they succeed in entering higher education, to join shorter courses in less prestigious institutions (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Raffe *et al.*, 2001).

These changes and continuities are well documented and the intention here is not to highlight patterns of educational participation among 14-19 year-olds that are associated with social locations but to examine some of the ways in which the cultural dimensions of socio-economic positions impact on decisions about educational participation. The recent 'Tomlinson Report' (Working Group on 14-19 Reform, 2004) on the reform of the 14-19 curriculum and qualifications recognised a need to 'raise participation and achievement by tackling the educational causes of disengagement and underachievement and low post-16 participation' (p.3). Yet Tomlinson's brief was to focus on institutional frameworks (which are badly in need of repair) rather than address the complex relationship between class cultures and processes of schooling. The serious and persistent underachievement that is associated with social class can be *reduced* by reforming the curriculum but equal opportunities are dependent on more far-reaching policy reform.

Subjective orientations towards educational participation were once seen in relatively simplistic terms, essentially as class-based rejections or acceptances of middle class educational cultures and related expectations regarding future patterns of participation in the labour market. In accordance with the contemporary tendency to explain social action through recourse to the 'structure-consciousness-action' model, responses were seen as subjective reflections of objective structures of opportunity. Willis (1977), for example, explained the experiences of lower working class boys in

terms of their resistance to middle class school cultures which were seen as largely irrelevant to their future lives in manual occupations. Today the cultural dimensions of decisions about educational participation are recognised as being more complex and tending not to involve such strong cultural-based rejections of the value and benefits of extended education (Biggart and Furlong, 1996; Ball *et al.*, 2000). The increased emphasis placed on educational attainment in working class families stems, in part, from a growing awareness of the importance of credentials in the modern economy. It can also be linked to a breakdown of a visible dichotomy in the labour market between working class and middle class jobs that has accompanied the decline of manufacturing industry as well as a more educated parentage and a trend towards employment in smaller work units where social divisions are less visible: factors that have been linked to the so called 'epistemological fallacy' of late modernity in which linkages between objective structures of opportunity and subjective interpretations of social position become increasingly tenuous (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997).

In this paper I provide an overview of some of the ways in which class cultures impact on patterns of educational participation. The intention is to highlight the various ways in which social reproduction occurs within an educational system that appears to have become more inclusive in so far as young people from all social classes are increasingly likely to remain in education beyond the minimum leaving age and to enter advanced forms of education. By doing so it should be possible to differentiate barriers to educational progress that can be tackled through school reforms from those that originate or are constantly reinforced in the community. This will allow us to make an assessment of the likely strengths and weaknesses of Tomlinson's proposals.

I begin by looking at orientations to education among under 16 year-olds then focus attention on decisions about educational participation made at age 16 and at 18 plus. Three main sources of data are used; the first is the West of Scotland Twenty-07 study, a longitudinal survey of 15 to 28 year-olds carried out by the MRC Social and Public Health Unit at Glasgow University which was used for a recent study of youth transitions conducted for the Scottish Executive (Furlong *et al.*, 2003). As part of this study, forty young adults took part in in-depth interviews which included interpretations of their educational and labour market biographies. These

biographical interviews are used to look at the orientations of under 16 year-olds and at decisions at age 16 and 18 plus. The second source is a qualitative study of young men who had encountered a period of long-term unemployment which was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) (Furlong and Cartmel, 2004). These young men, most of whom left school at the minimum age, were also given the opportunity to reflect on their educational experiences. The third source is a longitudinal survey of what we refer to as 'qualified but disadvantaged' young people who were interviewed several times as part of a project on socio-economic disadvantage and access to, and experience in, further and higher education, again funded by the JRF (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; 2003).

Educational orientations of under 16 year-olds

For young people to fulfil their potential educationally and to be well disposed towards continued learning, it is important that they develop positive, or at least instrumental, orientations towards the school during the compulsory years. As Ball and colleagues (1999) suggest, young people must establish a 'learner identity' and even identify a 'possible self' (Markus and Nuriyas, 1986) that involves employment in an occupation requiring advanced education or training. Those who feel that their labours are not being recognised or rewarded or fail to appreciate any future benefits that can be derived from school work may reduce their efforts or seek to have their status acknowledged in non-school contexts such as the peer group.

Among the less academically successful young people (who were predominantly working class) it was clear from our research that many had become seriously disillusioned with schooling at an early stage and had had either lost, or had never developed, a motivation to engage with schooling. Sometimes disaffection seemed to be entrenched within the culture of the schools where it was almost expected that young people from particular areas or families would leave at an early stage with few qualifications (as was in fact the case). There was evidence that some experienced difficult transitions from primary to secondary schools and never managed to settle in their new environment. Also noting the difficulties associated with the change from primary to secondary schooling, Ball and colleagues drew attention to one girl who had experienced primary school as an 'oasis of peace and quiet' for whom secondary schooling became 'yet another battleground that soon became intolerable' (1999, p.206). Similarly, in the Scottish studies, many spoke of enjoying primary school but

failing to engage with the secondary school. Young people could experience feelings of discontinuity and could feel lost or threatened in classes where there were no familiar faces. Whereas primary schools are often small, neighbourhood based and relatively homogenous in terms of their social composition, secondary schools tend to have wider catchments and socially more heterogeneous. Retrospectively some of the participants thought that their social circumstances had had a detrimental impact on the ways they were treated by certain teachers. Some spoke of encountering negative teacher expectations more or less as soon as they entered the secondary school with teachers sometimes 'tarring' them with the same brush as older siblings or relatives. Others who struggled academically and who had been used to receiving extensive support from primary teachers sometimes felt that they were left to their own devices at secondary school while

My sister was above me in school and my two cousins went to the school as well. So when I went in I got tarred with the same brush. It started the first day I walked in, and it just carried on from there. There was a lot of problems with the headmaster, he used to bang your head against a glass cabinet and used to grab your face like that. He did it to me a few times. He was a character, let's put it that way. A real character. (James)

Among those who did make a good start in the secondary school, some began to lose interest as a result of poor performance in exams and tests. They lost confidence in their ability and lost the motivation to learn. More frequently there was a gradual loss of motivation which could be linked to patterns of attainment as well as the development of outside interests which began to take up more of their time and energy. Among the middle and low attainment groups, attitudes to school were often ambivalent. They appreciated a need for qualifications in order to get decent jobs, but were never stimulated academically and tended to regard school as a chore. These young people often felt that teachers focused on the academic hi-flyers and saw themselves on the periphery of a system centred on the needs of the academic elite.

I wasn't interested in school. I'm not a thinker. For me, sitting studying over books and trying to learn things that, at the end of the day, you really weren't honestly interested in, was just a complete waste of time. (Catherine)

When I started really getting into music, I wasn't interested in anything else. I was just playing in wee bands and stuff. I wasn't interested in going to classes or anything like that. (Patrick)

In schools in deprived areas, there was often a culture of truancy to which young people had to subscribe in order to be accepted as part of the peer group, the strong pull of the social and cultural environment could be hard to resist (Williamson, 2004). In fact those who stood out as being bright or hardworking were frequently seen as 'different' by the peer group, resulting in a cycle of bullying ultimately leading to truancy as the victim sought to avoid regular contact with the perpetrators. As Williamson notes, in lower working class communities, it isn't 'cool to be clever' (2004, p.26) and those who enjoy school have to keep quiet about it so as not to 'lose face' in their peer group (2004, 28).

While the evidence from these studies highlights a variety of ways in which social class impacts on young people's experiences of schooling, it is important to differentiate between the impact of class cultures on *orientations* to school and the, often rational, responses to *experiences* in an institutional setting that projects strongly held sets of assumptions on the part of teachers and fellow pupils. In the studies referred to, in hindsight young people frequently regarded themselves as having been let down by the system. While they often admitted that their own actions and behaviour at school had not been helpful, they acknowledged the value of schooling, usually regretted not having worked harder, but often rationalised this by highlighting a lack of support or even victimisation. Several years later some could even pinpoint specific incidents that had changed their orientations to schooling. Although teacher expectations and curriculum content clearly contributed to the development of a culture of ambivalence towards, or even hatred of, schooling, it was evident that such reactions were comfortably accommodated and reinforced within community based peer groups.

Decisions at 16

In all three research projects it was very clear that decisions at age 16 were strongly affected by the resources that young people were able to access. Educational attainments were a key resource: they opened up a clear route for progression through the upper secondary school and on to higher education.¹ A good set of qualifications also generated an associated benefit: strong encouragement from teachers for them to remain in education. For middle class pupils this source of support tended to bolster the encouragement that they already enjoyed from their families while for some working class pupils teachers could be the sole source of explicit academic encouragement. The problem was that while we were provided with plenty of examples where young people spoke about proactive teachers putting great efforts into ensuring that educational hi-flyers (*especially* those from less advantaged families) remained in full-time education, there was very little evidence of teachers going out of their way to retain average and low attaining pupils. In fact, teachers were more likely to encourage less academic students to consider work-based routes.

When young people's decisions to remain in education were positively encouraged by their families (particularly when parents always assumed that they would remain in education), early leaving tended not to be seriously contemplated. Indeed, some young people were quite clear that their parents would not have permitted them to leave education at 16. For the more advantaged young people, parental encouragement to remain in education tended to be coupled with support from the school. In contrast, those who lacked strong parental backing for a decision to stay on rarely encountered compensatory support from the school unless they had excelled academically.

I think it was drummed into me that I wouldn't be allowed to leave at 4th year. My parents certainly pushed me and it was expected that I would not leave in 4th year and that I would stay on for Highers.
(Steve)

¹ The alternative route involving transfer to FE at 16 or 17 to take general academic subjects is less developed in Scotland than in England.

Decisions at age 16 were very much coloured by past experience. Young people whose early experiences had been very negative often had such bad memories that they refused to contemplate any form of employment or training that would involve having to return to a classroom situation. Those who had not done too well (or had unexpectedly performed poorly at Standard Grade) often felt that all further routes had been blocked and failed to consider any other form of education or training, even where a range of alternatives were available.

To be honest with you, after my experiences in school I don't even want to think about it. I am not even interested in education any more to be honest with you. It is a bad experience and I don't like it, you know. (Matt)

Just basically fed up with it. I just I wasn't getting anywhere, I never really got on. I didn't get a great deal of O Grades, I only got three the whole time I was there – and I had to sit two of them twice. (Una)

The advice and information that young people were able to access at this stage was often poor or provided without due regard for the persons own preferences or aptitudes. They were not always made aware of sources of financial aid and some made decisions about post-16 participation without a proper awareness of alternative routes. With the parents of working class pupils often employed in traditional industries, there was also evidence of an unfamiliarity with jobs in new services and the sorts of education and training needed for entry.

When I think back there was no guidance for me. I didn't know what university was, they didn't tell you. The careers advised me and I said I wanted to be a policeman, maybe if everything else fell through something like that. They advised to be a traffic warden, I just thought that that sums up the whole training, so I left high school with no idea of what was happening next. (Jamie)

The research evidence discussed here was collected before the introduction of Educational Maintenance Allowances, although in Scotland small bursaries for post-16 study have been available for a number of years. Even so, there were several

examples of young people deciding to leave school because of a need to supplement family income. In some cases parents made it clear that they could no longer support educational participation, but more frequently young people were already well aware of the hardship caused by their dependence and had resolved to find work in order to help the family finances.

Financially we always struggled and it was just a thing to go out and get yourself a job. (Gayle)

My Dad had been diagnosed with arthritis and at about that time had to give up his work. My Mum wasn't really coping with it all and, you know, it was all personal circumstances. It wasn't anything to do with my actual school or anything. And she (Mum) said, 'well I can afford to keep you going through 6th year, but I can't afford to put you through university or college or anything like that'. So I thought, well, the whole thing's a waste of time, you know, I might as well leave now and try and get myself a job. (Louise)

In cases where young people did not have to contend with severe family hardship, those who were doing reasonably well at school tended not to face cultural barriers to participation at 16 plus. However, opportunities (or perceived opportunities) in the local labour market did have a direct bearing on decisions made at age 16. A strong supply of quality jobs (especially those providing recognised training) could draw people into the world of work. Conversely, a perceived lack of opportunities could help persuade young people to remain in the 'safe' environment of the school (the 'discouraged worker' effect). Indeed, in Working Paper 22 (*Reflections on a curious absence: The role of employers, labour market incentives and labour market regulation* published by the Nuffield Review), Keep (2004) has argued that patterns of participation in education are affected by the 'signals and incentives being sent by the labour market'. Among those who stayed on due to an absence of attractive alternatives in the labour market are a sizeable group of young people who drifted through the upper secondary school, collecting some additional qualifications without having any developed idea about where continued study may be leading them in career terms; these young people are able to avoid decisions about their educational futures until age 18.

Decisions at 18+

While at age 16 and 17 young people are often able to postpone career decisions by remaining at school, at age 18 most young people are put in a position where a choice has to be made. While a few of those from less advantaged families will leave education at this stage for financial reasons, in the main educational attainment is by far the greatest predictor of routes followed at age 18. At this stage, among our JRF sample of disadvantaged young people, the vast majority of those who had the qualifications that facilitated progression to higher education either entered higher education or took time out with the intention of progressing at a later stage. A few young people, often strongly influenced by their families, decided that the returns from further study were not necessarily worth the investment. Those who lacked the qualifications to progress to higher education either sought employment, followed a full-time vocational course at further education or took a general educational course at further education in the hope that they would subsequently qualify for higher education.

My dad said it a few times, that he had heard stories of people going to college and going to university and getting degrees and ending up with nothing at the end of it. I thought about that. Hence the reason why I went to get work. (Richard)

With strong associations between social class and qualifications gained at 18, those from less advantaged families are often prevented from accessing courses at elite institutions or entering the most prestigious courses. Qualifications, however, are not the only factor associated with decisions made and cultural factors have a strong bearing on educational destinations at 18 plus. With few of the less affluent young people being able to contemplate moving to a different city for higher education, decisions regarding institutions are strongly affected by financial concerns. It is not uncommon for the less advantaged to select the institution closest to their home in order to minimise travel costs, even when they could gain entry to a more prestigious institution at the additional cost of a short bus fare.

Partly the reason I took the year out was because of the student loans being introduced. My parents can't afford to support me, so

I'm saving up this year so I've got some money behind me when I do go away. (Fiona)

I just saw the [job] advert in the 'Eileanbeg Telegraph' and I didn't quite fancy going away straight away to university, so I took a year out and thought that would be quite a good job to have and gain me experience as well. (Elaine)

Strategies to reduce cost included selecting shorter courses, taking time out to save money prior to starting university and working long hours to avoid debt. Indeed those from poor families had a keen awareness that students were being asked to take on levels of debt that had never been contemplated in their families, even for housing needs. Less advantaged young people had a tendency to select courses with a vocational orientation and courses with very direct links to identifiable careers (particularly medical semi-professions such as nursing where young people are provided with financial support) in order to minimise the risk of making a poor investment. In Scotland the bursaries available for study at further education also affected decisions about post-18 routes.

Young people who had attended schools that had a strong working class intake frequently felt uncomfortable in higher educational institutions that were dominated by upper middle class students. Buildings in older institutions could make them feel ill at ease, as could 'posh' lecturers and fellow students. For these reasons some students who were able to gain entry to elite universities applied to new universities or further education colleges as places where they thought they would be more 'at home'.

They all speak a certain way and you are not impressive anymore, but then you're poorer. I did not feel working class until I went to uni because I am not particularly working class. Now I feel incredibly working class and I feel like a wee socialist that stands up for what she believes in, in uni. (Trisha)

Some of them come from places like Milton Keynes and that and sort of like think they are better than you, but other people are just like

from like Glasgow or Edinburgh – whatever and are just average people really. (Hamish)

Working class students who did enter elite institutions, especially when they joined courses on which there was a high proportion of upper middle class students (such as law or medicine) tended to have great difficulties fitting in on a cultural level. Some switched courses as a consequence, others withdrew into their old social circles in their neighbourhood rather than mix with fellow students. Indeed, irrespective of courses or institutions entered, few less advantaged students enjoyed a full social life with their college peers as most were forced to work long hours to subsidise their studies.

Because I live out in the northeast of Glasgow, because I travel and I don't have a car either and drive. So it kind of means that as far as things like night life goes and being part of the student life I don't have anything to do with that really. I am more involved with people from work [the Co-op shop] and stuff who aren't basically students. You feel you are missing out on student life quite a lot by not being out there. (Jenny)

Having overcome a range of cultural barriers to educational progression within the secondary school, we would perhaps expect to find that decisions at age 18 are not so strongly affected by class cultures. Yet it is at this stage that culture comes strongly into focus as the less advantaged young people who have managed to get by in the relatively compact social world of the school decide that they are unwilling to make the sort of adjustments that would allow them to be absorbed into an upper middle class university culture. Those who are most adversely affected by these cultural barriers are the very brightest young people from the most disadvantaged families who have managed to obtain the grades that would allow them to enter the most prestigious courses at the most elite institutions.

Conclusions

The continued increase in levels of educational participation and patterns of attainment among young people from less advantaged social backgrounds suggests that class cultures can no longer be seen as providing significant barriers to

educational progression. Indeed, it can be argued that this increase in educational participation has been facilitated by a processes of cultural convergence in which the benefits of derived from qualifications are more or less universally acknowledged. At the same time, it is clear that some young people are put in positions at school that effectively promote processes of cultural resistance as survival strategies. There is also an extent to which schools can be somewhat complacent when it comes to providing support and encouragement to the middle and lower attainment groups. Where these young people lack strong support at home, the school may be the only potential source of encouragement. It is also clear that processes of cultural convergence have not progressed to the stage where young people from working class families have the confidence to allow themselves to become absorbed into the overwhelmingly middle class cultures of the elite universities.

The 'Tomlinson Report' has made an impressive attempt at suggesting practical ways in which the causes of disengagement and underachievement can be tackled through reform of the curriculum and qualifications. Tomlinson and his team would undoubtedly recognise that the social and economic contexts from which the traditional underachievers are drawn represents a set of barriers that are so deeply entrenched that even radical reform of the curriculum is unlikely to result in the establishment of a level playing field. So, if (and it could be a big if) Tomlinson's proposals were implemented, what difference would they make to the educational experiences of less advantaged young people?

The young people included in the studies reviewed here provide some powerful insights into the ways in which school experiences can disadvantage those from lower working class families. The Tomlinson proposals may improve orientations towards school and help stimulate interest by increasing the relevance of the curriculum through the 'functional core' of the proposed new diploma. Ideally this should lead to the establishment of a learner identity and enhanced motivation for further study beyond the core. As disillusionment with the school often stems from poor performance and the negative signals derived from grades in numerous tests and exams, reducing the amount of formal assessments and allowing young people to progress at their own pace may help prevent the creation of working class 'failures' in the compulsory stages of secondary schooling. However, it must be recognised that changes to the curriculum and to forms of assessment will not

automatically result in the school environment becoming more stimulating: great effort and commitment on the part of the teaching staff are also required. There is also a concern that the establishment of different routes through the school may result in a social apartheid that may exacerbate cultural difficulties faced by the upwardly mobile lower working classes who have progressed through school at a relatively slow pace.

Finally at least three big issues that are not addressed by Tomlinson must be tackled in order to increase equality of opportunity. First there is the issue of finance that clearly impedes progression for some young people. The new Educational Maintenance Allowance is likely to have provided crucial help for some young people, but it is too early to fully assess its impact. Second, teachers can hold on to negative stereotypes of young people from certain families and neighbourhoods. Some of these young people might be challenging to teach, but apparent disinterest can mask a desire for stimulation and approval. Third, there is a need to address cultures of truancy and find ways to ensure that young people don't buy into the idea that it is 'not cool to be clever'.

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Address for correspondence

Professor Andy Furlong
Department of Sociology
Anthropology and Applied Social Sciences
University of Glasgow
Glasgow G12 8RT