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WHY UNIVERSITY? A CASE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL REPRODUCTION IN DISADVANTAGED SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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WHY UNIVERSITY? A CASE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL REPRODUCTION IN DISADVANTAGED SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Deborah Tranter*

Abstract

This paper draws on research undertaken as part of my doctoral thesis on the influence of school culture on the higher education aspirations of secondary students in one of the most socioeconomically and educationally disadvantaged regions in Australia: the outer northern suburbs of Adelaide. Using a case study approach, I am investigating the attitudes towards higher education of students from three schools in this area, with a particular focus on how and why these students make personal decisions about higher education.

Bourdieu's theory of reproduction in education and his concepts of field, capital and *habitus* offer one explanation of the ways in which the environments in which people are raised, their conditions of cultural and material existence, shape their attitudes, their means of interpreting the world, and their capacities to engage with academic discourse (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Using the voices of the students and teachers, I will use Bourdieu's theories to begin to explore and analyse how the culture of the three schools I am studying shapes the aspirations of students and contributes to their eventual post-school destinations.

Introduction

This paper has been developed from research I am undertaking for my doctoral studies at the University of South Australia on the higher education aspirations of students from secondary schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged regions. To begin with, it

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is important for me to assert that my research is based on the premise that higher education is a valuable opportunity that should be equally accessible to all, whatever their socioeconomic status. While I recognise that university is not for everyone, I believe that participation in higher education should not be determined by who your parents are, where you live or what school you attend. However, in reality, in Australia today we see a large disparity in higher education participation, very much determined by where one lives and where one goes to school. Recent research has shown that students in the affluent eastern suburbs of Adelaide, for example, are up to 7 times more likely to attend university than students from the outer northern suburbs, a region with the third lowest higher education participation rate in Australia (Stevenson, Maclachlan and Karmel 1999).

The benefits of higher education to the individual have been well documented in terms of increased employment rates, higher average salaries, increased social status and overall economic security (Anderson and Vervoorn 1983; Johnson and King 2000; Borland 2002). In addition, the overall benefit to Australia's social fabric of increased participation in higher education has been acknowledged by policy developers for some years (Dawkins 1988; NBEET/HEC 1996; Nelson 2002). Despite this, and a wide range of policy initiatives across the Australian higher education system, numerous studies have demonstrated that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are far less likely to attend university than others (Anderson and Vervoorn 1983; Williams et al 1993; DETYA 1999; James 2002). In order to understand why this group of students has remained the most under-represented of all the targeted equity groups in higher education (NBEET/HEC 1996; Nelson 2002), for my doctoral studies I have chosen to undertake a qualitative investigation of the culture of three secondary schools which are all located in the outer northern suburbs of Adelaide and have very low numbers of students who move on to university.

My research

For several years, I have been employed by the University of South Australia with some responsibility for attempting to increase access for students who have experienced educational disadvantage. In 1995 the university introduced a special entry scheme targeting designated 'disadvantaged' secondary schools with low rates of entry to higher education. This scheme (USANET) aims to improve access to the university for students from low socioeconomic and rural/isolated backgrounds. A three-pronged approach has been adopted: increasing familiarity with higher education, the addition of bonus points to tertiary entrance scores, and the provision of support for those students who enter the university through the scheme.

Using a case study approach (Stake 1994; Yin 1991), I am undertaking an in-depth study of the culture of three of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged metropolitan schools targeted by USANET, and the aspirations and attitudes towards higher education of groups of students from these schools. As part of this study I have been looking for any influences the outreach and access components of the USANET scheme may have had on the culture of the schools and the perceptions and aspirations of the students. The case study approach allows concentrated inquiry into the targeted schools, their students and their staff, facilitating an advanced understanding of the culture of the schools (Stake 1994) and the importance of that culture on the perceptions, attitudes and aspirations of their students.

My data has been drawn from observations at the schools, analyses of documents and statistics and a series of semi-structured interviews with staff and students (students in Year 10 and Year 12). I have also interviewed a small number of students who enrolled at the University of South Australia from each of the case study schools.

It is clear from the interviews I have recently completed that schemes like USANET hardly touch the surface in influencing the attitudes and aspirations of secondary students in schools in the most disadvantaged areas. Such schemes appear to give hope to those students who are already interested in university, and to increase their expectations of success, but for the vast majority of students at these schools, university is an alien and inaccessible concept.

> I don't know about other schools, but the first time that I heard anything about uni, when I was in Year 12, like, we hadn't had, like, information … in Year 12 we went for like an excursion, like to, not this uni, but to like Adelaide Uni, and that's the first time I had ever, ever, been to a uni before in my life. I didn't ever know they were here. (Male second year uni student)

Attending university is not part of the culture of the schools and their student populations, not part of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the *habitus* of the students, the pre-conscious, shared set of acquired and embodied dispositions and understandings of the world developed through objective structures and personal history (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Harker, Mahar and Wilkes 1990; Oakley and Pudsey 1997). The schools have a pervading culture of academic non-achievement and the attempts of the universities to counter this through a variety of special entry schemes appear to have had little influence on student aspirations. Students only become aware of the schemes as part of the application process, near the end of Year 12, and have very vague ideas about how they work.

> We were classed an underprivileged school. I think everybody knew that. But I don't think we realised that we could get extra points for it though. (Female fourth year uni student)

> Because I think that the USANET schemes for them, if they are determined to go, it's probably only helping them to get in. But if they don't want to go I don't think that the scheme is going to make a difference to how they think. (Male second year uni student)

The schools

I will briefly describe each of the case study schools below. As discussed by Thomson (2002) in her study of teaching in 'rustbelt' schools, within the overarching category of 'disadvantaged schools', with many factors common to all three, each school has its own individual identity or 'thisness' (Thomson 2002), what Reay, David and Ball call 'institutional habitus' (2001). Like individual habitus, institutional habitus is acquired over years through a school's particular history, location, neighbourhood resources and issues, student mix and staffing. It involves 'a complex amalgam of agency and structure and could be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation' (Reay, David and Ball 2001: 16). Smith (2003) similarly discusses the 'ethos' of schools, connecting ethos with the notions of habitus and communities of practice. He states that a school's ethos

> is constructed through an interaction between the culture mix of teachers, pupils, parents, and the local community … and is mediated through organisational structures and processes, and also by staff culture, climate and competence. It … includes the qualities of the learning environment, … and the habituses brought to the school by pupils and staff and those that emanate from … the external environment. (Smith 2003: 466–467)

In all three cases the ethos, institutional habitus or thisness of the school conspire with the students' individual habituses to mediate against students' gaining entry to university.

The first school I visited, Greenfields High School, has an enrolment of around 600 secondary students, 20 per cent of whom are from non-English speaking backgrounds (a mix of Southeast Asian immigrants from the 1980s, mostly Khmer, and more recent Eastern European and Middle Eastern immigrants) and about 10 per cent are

Aboriginal. The rest of the students are from working-class Anglo-Australian backgrounds, many with parents who are unemployed or underemployed, but most living in owner-occupied or private rental housing. This school is located closer to the city than the other two schools, in a relatively new suburb within the northern suburbs, and serves a nearby market gardening area (where many of the Khmer families work). The school competes with three neighbouring public schools and a number of the new low-fee private schools in the area. As one of the former technical high schools, though comprehensive now for over twenty years, it has struggled to find a place in the local school hierarchy. In an increasingly competitive environment it is probably at the bottom of its local school pecking order, in danger of being residualised (Thomson 2002). Greenfields High School has moved in recent years to embrace the newer vocationally oriented curriculum options, with a wide range of 'VET in schools' opportunities and close links with the local TAFE institute. While there is still a relatively broad subject choice at the senior school level, a reasonable mix of the science-based and arts-based curriculum, several of the students I interviewed complained about limited subject choices compared with neighbouring schools. They also reported that TAFE was promoted heavily, with little discussion of university options. The students were generally negative about the school, comparing it unfavourably with other schools they knew, both in the neighbourhood and elsewhere in Adelaide. The immigrant students especially were acutely aware that they were not working to the same standard as relatives and friends elsewhere. There were many complaints about 'slack' teachers, lenient deadlines and low academic standards.

Steventon High School is located further north, in the heart of a highly stigmatised area. It was one of the academic secondary schools in the former binary system of technical and academic high schools in place until the early 1980s and is one of the larger state schools in the region, with close to 1000 enrolments, and has a specialist arts focus. The school's population is highly Anglo, with a very small number of non-English speaking students but a reasonably large Aboriginal population (about 12 per cent). The students at this school were less inclined to compare themselves unfavourably with other state schools than were the students at Greenfields High, perceiving that their school was the best in the area and mostly unaware of schools outside their immediate neighbourhood. They were, however, generally negative about their experience at school, aware of the stigma of going to school at what they variously called a 'ghetto school' a 'retard school', 'a school of drop-outs' and 'a druggie school'. Their negative attitudes to school were applied to all state schools and many of them saw the local private schools as the only source of a 'good education'.

With relatively high enrolments at Year 12, Steventon High School was able to offer a broad range of subject choices. Unlike Greenfields High School, it had not yet

embraced the vocational education pathway. In fact it was still strongly attached to the more traditional competitive academic curriculum (Connell et al 1982), proud to be the only state school in the area still offering the double maths, physics, chemistry and academic English option that the students call the 'suicide five'. Students interested in going to university were counselled into these subjects to maximise their opportunities but many had not achieved the literacy, numeracy and study skills to manage this curriculum and the school had a very low Year 12 pass rate and progression rate to university. The proportion of families on the subsidised school card scheme was very high here (between 60 and 65 per cent, compared to a state average of around 35 per cent) with high levels of unemployment and other welfare dependency amongst the parents and very high public housing occupancy. While Greenfields High could be considered a working-class school, Steventon was more of an 'underclass' school (Gans 1995, cited in Martin 2003), though the arts focus and adherence to the competitive academic curriculum had attracted a group of students with high, though often unmet, aspirations.

The third school I visited, Edinburgh High School, is probably the most disadvantaged urban school in the state, on a wide range of indicators. It is a small school (around 400 students), another former technical high school, which has struggled for enrolments for some years and has become highly residualised (Thomson 2002). As one teacher rather baldly stated, 'the only people who send their kids here either don't care or don't know enough to care'. On the fringes of suburbia, with open fields and market gardens nearby, it is nevertheless a highly urban student population, almost without exception living in the extensive public housing in the area and with very high rates of unemployment and welfare dependency in the community. Again, the population is mostly Anglo-Australian, with an increasing number of Aboriginal students (around 10 per cent of the students, mostly in the junior years). There were no students from recent immigrant families here. The school is the designated special education focus school in the region and has two vertically grouped special education classes catering for around 40 students with intellectual and communication disabilities. At least an additional 40 students in the school are on negotiated education plans to assist with diagnosed learning difficulties and around 70 per cent of the incoming Year 8 students have a reading age 3 to 4 years behind their peers. These figures all point to a disproportionately high level of complex and aggregate disadvantage within the school population, with high levels of poverty, inter-generational unemployment and individual and family transience.

The range of subjects available to the relatively small group of students in Year 12 was extremely limited at this school. The competitive academic curriculum was seen as largely irrelevant to (and outside the capability of) the vast majority of students; there

were four students who applied for university both the year I visited and the previous year. While TAFE might be seen as more relevant by the school population, there was only one additional student who applied for TAFE.

Interestingly, the students at this school were far less disgruntled than those at the other two schools. They were aware that the school was stigmatised but thought this was unfair; they generally liked the teachers and enjoyed coming to school. However, they did not come to school to work! Even at the Year 12 level, very little work was occurring in class, and homework was not part of the culture of the school either.

Why not university?

During the interviews I conducted with the students I talked to them about a recent article from the local newspaper with the headline 'Our great uni divide' (Williams 2000), highlighting the huge variation in university participation between the northern and the eastern suburbs in Adelaide and I asked the students why they thought this might be so. The students' responses varied widely, and included financial reasons, distance, a preference for employment, and concern about the high cut-off scores to get into university. The Year 12 students, in particular, appeared to recognise the cultural divide they must cross in order to get to university and that for most of their peers the idea of three or more years of schooling is not at all appealing. The 'pull of the labour market' and the short-term goal of a good job is particularly strong for working-class boys (Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000; James 2002)

> People from our area are more, anxious to go out and get a job and earn money instead of, they won't stick around and go to school for another 4 or 5 years. They wanna go out, get a job, earn some money…. They want money *now* instead of wait a bit, going to school for another 3 years, getting a better job and getting more money. They wanna get the money *now*. (Male Year 12 student)

University is not part of the lived experience of the students' parents, their communities, themselves. It is not part of their taken-for-granted way of being in the world, their *habitus* – and they know it!

> Not many of our parents went to uni. If you think about this, and so, that's why we're *in* the northern suburbs … and I think that's, we kinda, look at our parents and go, well, they're not doing too bad. I don't need to go to uni; it's a waste of money, waste of time. I can just go and get a job like my parents and bum around for a while, and I reckon that's

> what it is…. It's kind of just the whole influence. We don't have real educational influences, you know. (Female Year 12 student)

The students recognise that the expectations of their parents and their communities are different from those placed upon students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and that their life choices are different too:

> They have parents that are in a high socioeconomic background, you know, with more money and for them the parents push them more than the average income person. They have higher expectations… (Male Year 12 student)

> It's because the people in, like, other areas, their parents are business-class people. They're like, into uni, and so they would want their child to go to uni as well. So, there would be a lot of pressure to them to succeed and, over here there's more working-class families where parents didn't actually get to do that type of work and, yeah, if a student here like does not achieve well in school, it's not really, um, demeaning to them, you know, they're not going to be ashamed or … but in another, another area where it's rich and stuff, yeah, failing high school would be really, you know, bad. (Male Year 12 student)

The issue of shame in this last quote was raised by a young man from a Southeast Asian background who had extended family members who were more affluent and who was under considerable pressure from home to succeed. For this young man, there was no choice:

> I have to pass high school and go to uni.… Yeah, I've always been brought up, um, with the knowledge that I had to pass high school so … so not passing high school wasn't an option for me, so I'm here. (Male Year 12 student)

This young man did eventually get to university, but had to repeat his Year 12 in order to do so. He was one of a significant minority of immigrant students at the first school I visited, most of whom felt considerably more pressure on them from home to complete their Year 12 and gain a place at university than did the Anglo-Australian students. Despite this, the school's dominant culture was not oriented to academic achievement and only a small number of students managed to gain a place at university each year, a high proportion of them from immigrant backgrounds.

As a number of previous researchers have discussed (Connell et al 1982; Anderson and Vervoorn 1983; Williams et al 1993; Ramsay et al 1998; Clarke, Zimmer and Main 1999; Smyth et al 2000; Teese 2000; Collins et al 2000; James 2002), there is a huge complexity of reasons why students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to complete Year 12 and gain entry to university. These include family and community expectations, financial hardship, ambivalent attitudes to education, short-term rather than long-term goals, limited role models/mentors, low self-esteem, poor literacy, numeracy and study skills, inadequate academic preparation, lowered expectations and standards, poor attendance patterns, the distraction of a critical mass of disengaged students in the classroom, and an unstable, often inexperienced and sometimes uncommitted teaching staff. I do not contest the legitimacy of these explanations and indeed my research confirms their effects, to the extent that some of them form the main themes for my data analysis. For this paper I will focus on just four of these themes.

Teaching staff

The schools I am studying are all located in communities where very few people have attended university, where the *habitus* of the community is not shaped by this experience and, if anything, is quite hostile to it. In most cases teachers are amongst the only people that the school students are likely to meet who have any experience of higher education, hence the role of teachers in encouraging, or discouraging, students to aspire to university is crucial. These schools are all defined by the Education Department as 'hard to staff' schools. They are avoided by many teachers and rely on a much higher proportion of recent graduates and contract staff than is usual (Thomson 2002). The schools, and the students, have to manage with a constant stream of reluctant transferees and contract staff, many of whom are ill equipped to cope. Not surprisingly, there is a high level of staff turnover. The Year 12 chemistry class at one school had five teachers last year, and the last one did not come back at the beginning of term four! Of course, there are a number of accomplished, dedicated teachers at each school I have visited, some of whom have specialised in teaching students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is these committed and highly skilled teachers, with sufficient support structures behind them, who are the key to lifting opportunities for the students at the so-called 'disadvantaged' schools, a position well supported in the research (Connell et al 1982; Smyth et al 2000; Thomson 2002). Certainly the students I interviewed at the university talked about the importance of particular teachers in encouraging and supporting them.

> My chemistry teacher, who I had for maths as well, she was just fantastic…. I mean, if you needed any extra help, she'd stay there with

> you until seven o'clock at night to make sure you got your work done and she'd be there for you at lunch and recess and before school and gave us all her phone number. (Female third year uni student)

> …and he was heaps of help with, like, our essays, because we didn't do a lot of essays at school, and when it came to doing all the essays for Year 12 it was, oh, I don't know how to write an essay, so, and he'd go through it and go, 'oh you need to do this and you need to make sure these sentences make sense' and, and you'd give him a draft every week and he'd go through it again and, yeah, he was really good… (Male second year uni student)

The students are aware, however, that teaching is not easy at these schools. In fact some of the teachers are quite open in comparing the students negatively with other schools.

> They say, look, I taught at these schools, and they'll tell us what, like what's wrong with us and our attitude and everything, and some of us it gets through and some of them it doesn't. And a lot of them, if another contract comes up, they take it, because they feel like, they're, like the teachers must feel they're not achieving anything either! (Female Year 12 student)

The students and teachers continually reinforce the value of positive relationships between the students and the teachers. Every teacher I interviewed commented that this was one of the most important factors influencing student aspirations and attitudes to school. The students really appreciate a good teacher and acknowledged that there are a few excellent teachers at each of the schools, a small number who have been important mentors for some of the Year 12s. Unfortunately such relationships are not able to develop when teachers are constantly moving.

> You can't do that with teachers here. We've had teachers that leave all the time so, that's why at this school there isn't that much, um, communication between teachers and students, because the ones that we did Years 8, 9, 10, 11 with, they've gone! … So it's hard to build up any kind of a relationship. (Female Year 12 student)

At all three schools the students recognise that the teachers are prepared to put in the work if the students are. If the students are not prepared to work, however, neither, it seems, are the teachers, at least according to the students:

> If you're prepared to work hard the teachers are prepared to work with you, if you know what I mean. If you work, like, if you make the effort to put all you've got, then they make all the effort to help you, but… Oh, they're *very* determined to keep some of us here. But they don't make any effort for those who are … *pains*. (Female Year 12 student)

The teachers themselves talk about the huge challenges of teaching in schools like these:

> There is no greater uphill battle in my teaching experience than what is right here.… This is a real work out. This is high order teaching skills every single day to get kids involved and interested and learning something. (Teacher)

> As a teacher you need to have the resilience to actually not get put off by the fact that kids aren't learning. The teacher has to keep going. So there's got to be *something* that actually keeps you going, so that, even if only ten are doing it, I'm still doing it for these ten and, I hope, I'm going to attract more kids into it. (Principal)

Edinburgh High School is unusual in having negotiated a special staffing arrangement so no teacher is appointed without having chosen to go there, even if the choice is influenced by a fast track to permanency or promotion. Combined with the relatively small enrolment at the school, this arrangement has created a very different feel at the school (a much younger average age for a start), a friendlier, more caring environment and better morale amongst the staff, although there are still factions, dissatisfactions and exhaustion. It also may explain why the students I spoke to at this school, almost without exception, were very positive about the teachers and the relationships they have developed with them.

> The teachers are really good here. They're like your friends.… They treat you like adults…. And they want to help you. They don't try and not help you. (Female Year 12 student, EHS)

> Yeah, my cousin goes to a private school and, he's, it's just way too strict. There's no socialising between the teachers and the students. Everyone doesn't like each other. (Male Year 12 student, EHS)

For the other two schools, however, and many like them, teachers are often struggling, sometimes reluctantly, in an environment that is as alien to their *habitus* as theirs is to the students and they are not as resilient as we might wish them to be. The impact on standards and expectations is often then quite detrimental:

> And so staff develop their own ways of dealing with it.… And some of those methods of dealing with it are not very conducive to making the situation better. They actually continue to contribute to a culture of non-achievement. And I say that because I could just about quote the Year 8s I spoke to … who in fact basically say that. They're picking up from the classroom that, not every teacher, but they, they pick up that there's this view that you really don't have to do it. And nobody's really going to make you much, and that you, if you wanna do it, you really have to develop that inner urge to do it…
>
> I actually see it as people's emotional way of coping, is to drop their expectations, *because*, if they maintain their expectations, they probably … can't emotionally survive. (Principal)

Standards and expectations

A number of the students talked about the shock they felt when they came to Year 12 and first met a state-benchmarked curriculum:

> Year 8, 9 and 10, they just kind of let you do what you want. You bludge around a bit, and when you hit Year 11 it gets a bit harder, but I don't think they really prepared us for Year 12, because I went through my other high school years thinking, yep, this is going to be easy. I'm going to do this fine and then through Year 12 I mean, I went whoa, this is *really* hard…. I did *very* good in my junior years, and then I'm absolutely doing really bad in Year 12 because I just didn't, I wasn't prepared for it. I wasn't prepared to do the work because I hadn't had to do it before. (Female Year 12 student)
>
> That's why I found it so hard in Year 12, because, the fact that we *are* lower and then when they put us in Year 12 we have to do the work that the rest of the state is doing, and maybe that's why it was so hard to adjust to it. (Female Year 12 student)

> The quality of education in Year 8, 9 and 10, and Year 11. It's like, in Year 12 everything just hits you. Like, there's no knowledge, background knowledge of any information, of most of the information we're taught and if they were able to, um, give us some background information about, lets just say biology, and just taught us a bit that was relevant to what Year 12 was like, then we could like handle it much better. (Male Year 12 student)

At all three schools both the Year 12 and Year 10 students commented that Years 8, 9 and even 10 were virtually a waste of time; that students could get away with doing no work and still pass. In particular, several of the Year 10s actually complained that they had less homework in Years 8 and 9 than they had had at primary school!

The Year 10 students recognised too that they were not being sufficiently prepared for the senior years of school. They were not getting enough practice in 'the game' of schooling.

> In a way it's going to hit us heaps bad when we get into Year 11 and 12 because we don't really have homework in Year 8, we don't have any in Year 9 we have like a tiny bit, maybe once a fortnight, and then Year 10 we hardly have any homework as well. (Male Year 10 student)

From the teachers' point of view, however, the students arrive at secondary school ill-equipped for the academic curriculum, already lacking the cultural capital and that pre-conscious set of dispositions, the *habitus*, required to be successful at school.

> I teach a lot of very intelligent kids but I think the bottom line is they have grown up in a particular culture which works against academic success … No I don't think it's about intelligence, unless intelligence is a kind of behaviour or a set of behaviours, which it may be actually. But in terms of ability to grasp concepts I think that there are just as many of them who can do it but they are very disadvantaged by lots of things. (Teacher)

Bourdieu's theory of reproduction in education uses the concepts of field, capital and *habitus* in developing an explanation of how the environment in which students are raised, their conditions of cultural and material existence, shape their attitudes, their means of interpreting the world, and their capacities to engage with academic discourse (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Using the metaphor of a game, in the game (Bourdieu's 'field') of education the understanding of how the game is played and how

to win forms part of the *habitus*. The more practice or experience one has with the game, the stronger the *habitus*, the more successful one is likely to be. Bourdieu's theories are a useful way to analyse what it is about the schools I am studying that means their students are so much less likely than students at middle-class schools to complete Year 12 and move on to university and how students from these schools struggle to know 'how to play the game' of the competitive academic curriculum.

> I think that there are a lot of things about the English curriculum that are very exclusive for kids around here.… The *hard* part of it is the *high* order intellectual skill of analysing literary texts. I mean it's, it's still another universe as far as the kids are concerned, and one that they have to navigate largely on their own. (Teacher)

> I think that you develop your concepts through the reading that you do, and the talking that you do, and the things that you hear and understand and take in. And if your language development isn't flash, this means that not only can you miss the surface meaning of things, but of course you miss the sub-text, as well, which is where you get a *lot* of your more *subtle* sort of concepts and things like that. And these kids' language development can be *appalling*! And, so, I have this sort of theory, that their … just their conceptual development's behind where kids of similar age and stage [are], and therefore, and *that's* where I think a lot of their sophistication lacks, and their ability to communicate as effectively.… And when you *read* some of their unadulterated text, you actually, I mean, I have had Year 12 stuff … where you actually have to sit and read it out loud to get the sort of phonetic sound of what it is you're reading. (Teacher)

This second teacher here talked about 'Steventon speak', how the students actually speak a different language, as it were. They have not learnt to write in a range of different styles, so when they do write they use their 'Steventon speak' rather than understanding that one needs to write differently for school. (A young woman I know from the area who has recently completed her doctoral studies talks about speaking 'Steveton' and how she has learnt to adjust her language for the situation in which she finds herself.)

Subject choice

A number of recent publications (Lamb and Ball 1999; Teese 2000; Collins et al 2000; Fullarton, Walker, Ainley and Hillman 2003) point out the filtering effect of the

subject choices students make (or have made for them), with students from lower SES backgrounds selecting subjects 'that pay significantly differential dividends with regard to post-school destinations…. the higher education and career pathways made possible or restricted by the combination of subjects studied in year 12' (Collins et al 2000: 85). As Teese and Polesel comment (2003), a highly stratified academic hierarchy of subjects divides young people into a social hierarchy of post-secondary options. This hierarchy not only determines whether a Year 12 student's combination of subjects will qualify her/him for entry to university, but also which course of study and which university a student is able to access.

In the interviews with Year 12 students particularly, subject choice was discussed at some length. The students at the largest school, Steventon High School, appreciated the wide range of subjects available to them and recognised how advantaged they were. They were proud that the school was the only one in the area that offered the full academic curriculum and many of the Year 12 students looked down on students who chose the 'easy' options (the publicly assessed and school-assessed subjects, as opposed to the publicly examined subjects), to the extent that a number of them had chosen a combination of subjects that was quite inappropriate for them, both academically and career-wise. The dominant belief behind subject counselling in the senior school appeared to be to keep students' options open and maximise their score, regardless of the students' prior academic achievements or vocational aspirations.

At the other end of the scale was Edinburgh High School where there were only six Higher Education Selection Subjects (HESS) available to those students who might be interested in qualifying for university entrance. All but two of these subjects were the publicly assessed rather than the publicly examined subjects, subjects like Studies in the Social Sciences, Home Economics and Physical Education. Art (four students) and Biology (two students) were the only publicly examined subjects taken the year I visited, although the school had originally also offered Chemistry and a single maths option, which were not taken up by students. The other subjects offered were a mix of the school-assessed subjects and vocational subjects (a student must pass at least four HESS subjects to gain university entrance but can count one school-assessed subject towards their tertiary education score). This school had determined that the traditional competitive academic curriculum was not applicable to its students. They had focused on subjects that they thought would be relevant and achievable for the students, which might fit their *habitus*, but all at the low end of the curriculum hierarchy that Teese and Polesel discuss (2003). In making these choices for the students the school had severely limited their opportunity of gaining a tertiary entry ranking (TER).

Motivation

In my early analysis of the interviews with both students at the schools and those enrolled at the university, the most important factor in achieving a place at university, and persisting there, seems to be a very high level of inner motivation. They are determined to make it, no matter the distractions.

> I've seen what my parents have got, and I've seen how hard they've had to work to get what they want and … I want *more* than what they've got…. I want … to be able to go to uni, get a job that's going to pay more, because usually if you go to uni you're going to get a job that *pays* more. So if you can do that, like I wanna get more than my parents have got and I think that's what all, like the majority of people that from these suburbs that go [to uni], is what, people who want more than their parents have got. (Male Year 12 student)

This was from a young man with an extraordinary amount of self-motivation, who had saved up $10 000 working long shifts at Hungry Jacks so he could move interstate to undertake a performing arts degree (into which he was accepted). He had experienced harassment from many of his peers because of this dedication to an area of study that is not valued by young males in his community.

The university students I interviewed (Tranter 2003) also talked about the high levels of motivation which kept them firstly at school, and then at university.

> Self-motivation. I wanted to do well and, like, I seen people around me who didn't do well, and I think if you're going to be there, you may as well work and do the best you can, otherwise it's pointless going and you can just go out and get a job instead of being at school. So I figured, make the best of it and do well, because I knew others hadn't done well, and I wanted to be better than them of course, cause I'm a competitive person, and I always compare myself to other people. (Female first year uni student)

One young woman organised herself to visit all three university open days, including one at least 40 kilometres away on the opposite side of town, and talked to the advisers available for the courses she was interested in, without any assistance from parents or the school. One young man persisted through two years of both Year 11 and Year 12 (at least once because of poor subject advice), and fathering two children, to finally enrol in his chosen course.

These students appeared to have a much higher level of motivation than many middle-class students, for whom family and school support guide them through the uncertainties and distractions of adolescence to achieve the expected goals of a satisfactory Year 12 score and entry to university. For the vast majority of young adults struggling with these distractions without the support of family, school and peers, it is not surprising that so few do make it to university. It is only those with an extraordinary degree of motivation who persist, despite the wide range of discouraging factors in their personal and school lives: the dissonance between their familial and school *habitus* while at school (Reay et al 2001), their 'dislocated *habitus*' when at university (Oakley and Pudsey 1997: 7) and the stereotyping they all have to bear, to a greater or lesser extent, because they come from a community that is highly stigmatised.

> Because a lot of people think northern suburbs school, they're not going to go to university they're just going to be on the dole or leave school at Year 10, or whatever … these sort of stereotypes affect the people that live there, they start to believe that that is the way that they are and that's all they can achieve. (Male second year uni student)

> You always have the fear that people are going to say 'Oh which school did you go to?' and you're going to say 'Oh XXX' and they're just going to look at you and say 'How the heck did you get here? What are you doing here?' sort of thing. (Female fourth year uni student)

The students who had made it to university all travelled long distances each day to attend, intensifying their sense that they did not really belong. All but one of the university students I interviewed was still living in the northern suburbs, even those who had moved from their family home. A number admitted that they felt more 'at home', more comfortable living in the community in which they grew up. Most expressed a commitment to working back in their communities when they graduate, while acknowledging that they now do not quite belong to their old world:

> I see friends like, that I haven't seen for ages and they go, 'Oh what do you do now?' 'Oh I go to uni.' 'Are ya?' I go 'Yeah', and like 'Oh', and it's sort of, like, 'Oh, well I'm not talking to you now'.… I don't know; I feel weird, like, and they don't understand … 'What do you want to be a teacher for?' (Female third year uni student)

These students have reached the stage where their experience at university has moved them away from the *habitus* within which they grew up but they have not yet acquired

the dispositions and cultural capital, the *habitus*, to make them feel 'at home' within the field of the university.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed some of the themes emerging from my research which are useful in drawing out the connection between school experience and further education. In my discussion of their experiences at school I have attempted to highlight the hurdles my informants encounter in moving from a *habitus* of the working (or increasingly non-working) class through that of a school system that is often in conflict with their familial *habitus* and is struggling to educate students in an increasingly inequitable world, and then, for a very small number of students, to the even more alien *habitus* of university. Social and educational disadvantage are inextricably linked in the lives of these young people (Thomson 2002) and within a highly stratified schooling system they are not getting 'a fair go', despite the tireless efforts of many highly committed teachers and school leaders. In a nation where university participation is now part of the expected life journey of more than half its young people, this participation is increasingly determined by where one lives and where one goes to school.

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