

The Socio Cultural and Learning Experiences of Working Class Students in Higher Education

Within the discourse of Widening Participation, working class students are often regarded as potential drop outs, and therefore as a risky investment for university recruitment. This research presents a very different picture. It demonstrates the resilience and commitment which working class students employ in order to 'get in and stay in'. But it also shows that their experiences differ between universities and that these structurally unequal experiences exacerbate the already excessive challenges and demands that working class students are often faced with over and above the requirements of their course.

- Structural inequalities between institutions can enhance or undermine students' learner identities and their dispositions towards learning at university → Policy makers need to address the unequal funding streams and the drift back towards a binary division between the different universities.
- Working class student experiences are frequently disjunctive and marked by tension and competing demands. → Students need more financial support so that they do not have to take paid employment whilst studying.
- The working class students in our study demonstrated great resilience and commitment to their studies, often in the face of adverse structural discrimination and oppression. → Working class students should not be seen as high risk and problematic
- Students' learner identities are influenced by previous experiences of school, their current university experience and their social circumstances. → More work needs to be done in primary schools to enable children to understand how to realise their aspirations
- The students deconstruct and reconstruct their social and class identities creating hybrid identities. → Universities need to be mindful of the diversity of needs, cultures and ways of being amongst their students, maintain high expectations of their students, and enable them to maximise as broadening an experience as possible.

The research

Aims

To explore working class students' experiences of higher education and their impact on students' learner and cultural identities

To compare and contrast the social and cultural experiences of working class students in different types of higher education institution, and the extent to which these experiences are gendered and where relevant 'raced'.

To examine the impact of the experience of university on the construction and re-construction of the students' identities, and to explore the processes of compliance or resistance which students adopt to position themselves as effective learners.

To contribute to the theoretical understanding of social class and learner identities within the higher education context.

Working class students' experiences of higher education: the students and institutions

This research was carried out in the context of a polarised system of mass higher education, with working class and mature students attending post-1992 universities in greater numbers.

The four higher education institutions (HEIs) in our study comprise a post 1992 university, Northern; a civic pre-1992 university, Midland, an elite university, Southern and a college of further education where the students undertake Foundation degrees in conjunction with Northern, which we term Eastern College. All are very different in terms of wealth, mission and admissions policies, as well as in location. These factors impact on the students' socio-cultural and learning experiences in a range of ways.

The working class student participants at the four institutions differed in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, qualifications, domestic responsibilities and finance. The middle class students at all the universities had more knowledge of and preparation for university life and what to expect of it than did the working class students. Many middle class students expressed a strong sense of entitlement about going to university, frequently engendered by their families and schools. For the working class students, attendance at university at all was often by luck rather than planning, and even for the Southern working class students it was often surprisingly serendipitous.

Students' qualifications, their route to university and their school experiences are

key aspects of the formation of their learner identity. A key difference between students at Southern and those at Midland and Northern is the self-confidence that Southern students have about themselves as successful learners and high achievers. This is matched by a level of self-assuredness among middle class students at all three universities.

By contrast, a number of the students at Northern express a lack of self-confidence and a sense that they are unworthy to be at university at all. Students at Northern often hold academic qualifications which are tenuous in relation to the demands of their degree courses. Fewer A level points are required to win a place. Eastern College students tend not to identify as university students and did not identify with Northern University, which validated their Foundation degree.

Institutional Effect and Learner Identities

Our data suggest that an 'institutional effect' or institutional habitus (Reay et al 2005) is a variable by which class processes are played out in the higher education experiences of students. The universities and college in our study have institutional habituses which link their organisational culture and ethos to wider socio-economic and educational cultures. This means that there are greater differences between student experiences at different universities than between the experiences of students from different backgrounds in each university. Of course, this is not to say that the working class students in the respective universities had the same experiences as their middle class counterparts.

Expectations of programmes and their delivery differ between HEIs and subjects. Students at Southern University have to live on campus and are forbidden to take jobs during term time. Most are young students from school and without family commitments, making their term work hard and intensely focussed, with thorough immersion in their subject and in academic culture.

Southern University's College system creates the conditions for strong identification. Students live and eat in College, which provides a personalised student support network. A range of competitive relationships are devised to raise the students' commitment to both College and University life, with wealthy Colleges able to provide their students with bursaries.

By contrast, most students at Northern University (70 per cent of our questionnaire responses) and Eastern College (all those interviewed and who responded to the questionnaire) live at home. Northern students work part-time, between 10 and 20 hours per week. Most Midland students lived in halls or student accommodation in town. Only two respondents (both working class) lived at home. A minority had part-time weekend work. At Northern and Midland

students attend lectures, although these are not compulsory, and seminars and lab work for the sciences. At Northern there is little tutorial time unless the student seeks it out. By contrast, at Southern University and to a lesser extent Midland, there were regular small-group tutorials where the expectation was that students made substantial contributions, and were challenged and questioned by both their peers and teachers. Even if they wanted to, they could not remain passive learners.

At Northern a system of on-line learning was being developed to encourage students to access lecture notes, module guides and learning materials remotely, avoiding the need for university attendance. Although students said that their tutors were helpful and approachable, it was incumbent on the individual student to take the initiative. Northern students demonstrated more evidence of fragile learner identities, displaying anxiety and a lack of confidence in their own abilities. They expressed the need for more opportunities to discuss ideas with their tutors, but, paradoxically, were encouraged to work on their own or interact via the web. At Midland the structured support was similar although more module and personal tutor contact seemed to be available.

The key difference between these two universities and Southern is the way in which they provide support generically rather than targeting it at the individual student. Once a student is accepted into Southern, resources are targeted to ensure individual success for all. Students receive detailed feedback each term on how they are progressing in relation to their degree classification.

The socio-cultural experiences of working class students

The social field of the university offered opportunities for enhancing or compensating for students' habitus and for the acquisition of social and cultural capital. At Southern the social opportunities were wide-ranging. Working class students were either daunted by these options or, in their first year especially, were anxious about managing their time effectively and keeping on top of their very demanding workloads. The social life at Midland was a central part of the university experience. The students' union was the hub and provided extensive society and sporting opportunities. The halls of residence, structured through a village type of organisation, provided the social field through which students were enabled to make friends and to associate with a diverse set of people from different social classes, ethnicities and subject areas.

At Northern the social facilities were limited and our case study students used them rarely if at all. Two reasons accounted for this. As they lived off campus, they went

home once their lectures or other academic commitments had finished. In addition, their family, childcare or employment commitments meant that they had little time for such 'extras'. Crucially, the lives of the Northern (working class) students did not revolve around the university, and the same applied to students at Eastern College. The Northern and Eastern students had a more homogeneous experience than that of students from Southern and Midland. It differed little from their social experience of life before university. Their experience was echoed by that of two of the South Asian students at Midland. They tended to socialise with other South Asian students, not necessarily by choice.

Belonging and fitting-in, a central theme in much work on widening participation, is more nuanced and complex than has been thought. It involves students' identities both as learners and socially. At Northern, the working class students fitted in socially with some ease. But as learners, several who felt passionate about their subject and were committed and hard-working felt they were at odds with their peers, who tended to be more instrumental learners and had a *laissez faire* attitude to turning up and doing the work. On the other hand, working class students at Southern, whilst at times anxious and overwhelmed by the social aspects of Southern, are often comfortable academically. On going there they can find their academic and learner identities validated. They are surrounded by other "nerdy geeks," as they themselves were labelled at school. For Midland students there is more diversity in all respects, and therefore more opportunity for students to find their niche and meet people with whom to identify.

Students can succeed without participating in university social life. But the social opportunities provide the opportunity for students to access information from peers, and increase their dispositions to learn and progress in new ways. For middle class students, the social experience appears to be central to their motivation for going to university. The university experience is more holistic for them than for working class students. For this group, university is about opening up opportunities; meeting new and different people and developing their identity. For these students the university provides the field in which they can enhance their privileged selves and extract greater value than hitherto, not just in terms of their subject of study, but also in terms of social and cultural capital. By contrast, many of the working class students do not have the time for this, don't have the opportunity, or don't perceive the merits of this activity.

Major implications

Given the structural inequalities that exist between HEIs and the institutional effect that impacts on students' learner identities and learning opportunities, policy makers need to address the unequal funding streams that exist between pre and post 1992 universities as well as between further and higher education. Policy makers also need to arrest the apparent drift back towards a binary division between the different types of university. This could go some way to counteracting the hierarchical and often in some cases negative, perceptions that exist about different HEIs.

The working class students in our study have complex lives and for many, depending on which university they attend, the university experience is not central to them. Participation in the universities differs quite markedly between students, depending on the these circumstances. In some universities, the experience is central to the lives of the students and wholly absorbing. Elsewhere, the student experience was only one part of their already busy lives, frequently as a result of financial pressures. Students therefore need more financial support so that they do not have to take paid employment whilst studying. Also, universities need to reach out more actively to these students to bind them in and provide acculturation into the university experience.

The working class students in our study demonstrated great resilience and commitment to their studies. Universities and policy makers need to address the admittedly unintentional construction of working class students as high risk, or problematic learners.

Prior school and other learning experiences are important in helping to prepare students for university, including the need for high expectations of working class students. Widening Participation initiatives need to reflect on the strategies currently employed, and on which pupils are targeted. More work needs to be done at primary level and secondary schools need to provide more information and advice about how young people can realise their aspirations.

Students deconstruct and reconstruct their social and class-related identities. Some distance themselves from the old version but most seek to manage multiple versions of themselves, creating hybrid identities. Universities need to be mindful of the diversity of needs, cultures and ways of being amongst their student body and they need to adapt to their student body, whilst maintaining high expectations of their students and seeking to enable them to maximise as holistic experience as possible.

Processes of change, compliance and resistance in the constructions and re-constructions of identities

Our initial concern was that students regarded as the working class Other would be unlikely to identify themselves as such. In fact, all of the case study students identified themselves as working class or as having a working class background. Most expressed pride in their class identities and in their own achievements, given the struggle against hardship and structural inequalities they had experienced. There was awareness and experience of class prejudice intersected by race and gender, particularly in relation to masculinity. The students expressed a sense of difference and not fitting in, but also asserted that they are not prepared to accept that this makes them inadequate or inferior.

Social and cultural experiences at university make students confront their own difference both in the university and at home. Through this process they deconstruct and reconstruct their identities. Some distance themselves from their old self, but most seek

to manage multiple or hybrid versions of themselves. There are also particular ethnic and gender dimensions to this.

For all students, wherever they are based, the university experience is undoubtedly one of change and also of challenge. The students in our research are at the sharp end of both of these dimensions. But for most, it is clear that the university experience has been agentic and often liberating. They have been enabled to define their identities, gain a sense of control over their lives and enjoy the opportunity to express themselves as intellectuals. It has provided a relief from family pressures, even if only momentarily, and shown them that "people like me are capable of going to university".

Further information

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Conference papers and interim reports can be found at:
www.tlrp.org/dspace/handle/123456789/628

The warrant

This project worked with students at four institutions described in the text, and in six subjects. Where possible it used the same disciplines in each institution: Law, History, English, Chemistry, Engineering, and Economics, and three in the FE college, Arboriculture, Performing Arts, and Early Childhood Studies

A questionnaire was distributed to all year 1 and 2 students undertaking these subjects at the four HEIs. In the questionnaire we asked whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview and subsequently interviewed all who agreed to do this or who we were subsequently able to make contact with.

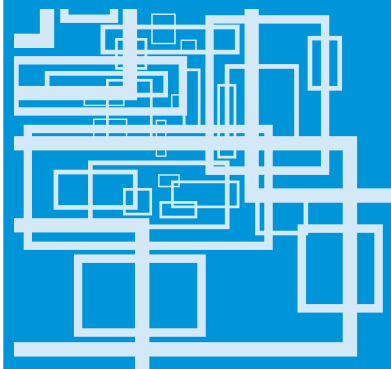
Middle class (48) and working class (41) undergraduate students, 18-21: 65; 22-25: 4; 26+: 15; (age not known: 5), including white and minority ethnic (8) women (51) and men (38) were interviewed in groups or on a one-to-one basis. Although we had asked in the questionnaire about parental occupation, whether students were the first in their family to attend university, etc, we were able to gain more reliable information on this in the interviews. 27 working class case study students were subsequently identified and agreed to participate in follow-up interviews over two academic years. 16 tutors and admissions and widening participation officers were also interviewed. A small number of lectures were observed and participant observations of local contexts were carried out for contextual purposes.

1209 questionnaire returns were analysed and 158 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Contact was maintained with the case study students via email and through occasional meetings.

Students' social class was determined by employing the UK Office of National Statistics Social and Economic Classifications: middle class L1-6 (or SC1 and 2), working class L7-L14 (or SC3-8) of parental or mature student occupations, together with information on parents' and immediate family members' education profiles. We also identified whether the students were first in their family to attend university.

Data Analysis
Grounded theory complemented by existing conceptual frameworks including: Bourdieu's concepts of social, symbolic and cultural capital and habitus and field, and Bernstein's concepts of for example visible and invisible pedagogies and realisation and recognition rules, were employed.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



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June 2008

ISBN-978-0-85473-818-2



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