

Option blocks that block options: higher education aspirations and opportunity structures in secondary schools in England (0256)

Jessie Abrahams

Cardiff University, UK

Abstract

Despite the expansion of the UK higher education sector in recent years, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds remain less likely than their advantaged counterparts to apply or be offered a place at university- particularly at elite institutions. Governmental responses to this tend to revolve around 'raising aspirations' in disadvantaged communities. Through exploring opportunity structures in three contrasting secondary schools in England (one private, one state in a wealthy catchment area and one in a socio-economically disadvantaged area), this paper provides a challenge to such an approach, highlighting vast structural inequalities in young people's ability to demonstrate academic excellence. Whilst some schools provide an enhanced landscape of opportunities and immense support with making subject choices, others impose 'blocking systems' upon subject slots which serve to restrict options and block futures. Overall this paper argues that young people's academic outcomes must be viewed in context of the opportunities presented to them.

Outline Paper

Context

The chances of entering higher education can be seen as the product of a selection process, which throughout the school system is applied with very unequal severity, depending on the student's social origin. In fact, for the most disadvantaged classes, it is purely and simply a matter of **elimination**

(Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979:2 emphasis in original)

One of the major reasons for this 'elimination' relates to the 'attainment gap'; young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have continued to achieve lower GCSE grades than their advantaged counterparts. In 2012/13 only 37.9% of pupils eligible for free school meals¹ achieved 5 A*-C GCSEs including English and maths compared to 64.6% of other pupils² (DfE, 2014). Political responses have tended to revolve around 'raising aspirations' in disadvantaged communities. In 2012 David Cameron addressed the conservative party conference with a speech in which he promised to build an 'aspiration nation', commenting: *'It's that toxic culture of low expectations – that lack of ambition for*

1 Free school meal eligibility (FSM) is commonly used in government documents as an indicator of deprivation. It has been problematized for its inability to capture all pupils living in poverty, but it is argued that it is the most useful measure currently available (for discussion of this see Gorard, 2012).

2 This statistic only includes pupils educated within the state sector (DfE, 2014), if private school students were included no doubt this gap would be much larger.

every child- which has held this country back.' (Cameron 2012). This paper, in line with previous literature (Rose and Baird, 2013; St Clair et al., 2013), contradicts this political approach. Rather than lacking aspirations, many disadvantaged pupils in my research faced structural blocks in school which restricted their chances of securing places at university.

Method and Theoretical Framework

This paper presents findings from my ESRC funded doctoral research focussed on three contrasting secondary schools in England. Grand Hill Grammar³ (a private fee paying school), Einstein High (a state school in a wealthy catchment area) and Eagles Academy (a state school in one of the most disadvantaged areas in England). Data drawn upon includes: 800 questionnaires gathered from pupils in years 7, 9 and 11 in each school; 60 semi-structured interviews with a subset of these pupils alongside one careers advisor per school and field notes collected through daily observation alongside targeted observation of careers events. This paper mainly draws upon the theorising of Pierre Bourdieu (1979; 1990) to analyse the data and aims to contribute to an understanding of how school systems and regimes continue to have strong implications for young people and where they are likely to end up.

Summary Findings

Option time in Year 8 is extremely important. The decisions you make now will be a significant step for your future life choices

(Vice Principal, Eagles Academy, Year 8 Option Booklet)

As indicated in this quote, decisions to take certain GCSEs (or A Levels) over others is directive of the pathway a young person can follow. Arguably this quote stresses the importance of pupil agency in this process, however, as this paper will demonstrate, school structures and practices are largely influential in this 'choice' making process. Intervening to influence and structure opportunities. Pupils at Grand Hill Grammar can select from 14 optional subjects at GCSE and 35 at A Level. Those at Einstein High can select from 11 GCSEs and 32 A Levels. In contrast, the Eagles Academy pupils' choices are restricted by the imposed 'blocking system' whereby they must select out of 3 GCSEs in each of two 'blocks' and out of 5/6 subjects across 4 'blocks' at A Level. Many pupils I interviewed had been negatively affected by the blocking system. One year 11 pupil Charlotte, told me about how she wanted to study Health and Social Care and Music but unfortunately they were in the same block, instead she was allocated to Sport Science:

Charlotte ...we didn't really have a lot of options...and you're kind of like even though you don't want to do something, even if you don't really know much about it, it's kind of what's more appealing to you than the other thing and... Sport Science was like the bottom one I don't really, I don't like it at all

Jessie So they just allocated you into that one, there wasn't a choice between any other ones?

3 All schools have been given Pseudonyms

Charlotte *They told me afterwards it's because like Health and Social Care and Music are on like the same block so they're on at the same time so I couldn't have had both*

In addition to the structures imposed upon choices, there exists inequalities in regards to the *type* of subjects offered in each school and the level of institutional support with making decisions. For example one careers advisor at Grand Hill told me that the A Levels they offer are '*generally the ones that the Russell Group universities like*'. And invested a lot in ensuring her pupils understood the value of 'the package'. Certain subjects offered at Grand Hill (Latin or Classical Civilisation) distinguish their pupils as possessing a particular form of valued intellect. In contrast subjects such as Construction BTEC, offered at Eagles Academy, result in pupils being labelled as an inferior calibre student. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) discuss the way in which educational institutions reproduce inequalities as they translate social class hierarchies into academic hierarchies. Abstract subjects which are undertaken by the dominant classes (such as Latin) come to be viewed as the most legitimate and valuable forms of knowledge.

Conclusions and Implications

Through differences in the curriculum, subjects offered and restrictions placed on choices, young people's options are vastly unequal. When these pupils leave school and write a CV they are compared on the same terms, with their successes and failures marked as indicators of their individual intelligence, however their chances of building the necessary and 'valuable' credentials are *not* equal. Working-class young people in disadvantaged schools are affected by these institutional structures and practices in multiple ways. First in regards to the limited GCSE and A Level subjects on offer compounded by blocking systems which further restricts options. Secondly the subjects offered tend to hold less 'value'. Thirdly, they are less 'clued up' as to the specific usefulness of these different subjects, thus rendering them less able to make an 'informed choice' about which subjects to study and how different combinations will help them in the future. Universities need to challenge the differential and arbitrary value attached to particular subjects and understand them as markers of class privilege rather than intelligence.

Bibliography

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