

## **Working-class heroes**

Interviews with 'working-class' university students suggest new ways to think about social class, identity and university aspirations. Murdoch University's Dr Jane Pearce, Professor Barry Down and Elizabeth Moore explain their research.

With government policy encouraging wider participation rates from under-represented groups of people within the university sector, working-class students have found themselves to be the objects of numerous policy prescriptions and recommendations.

What seems to be largely missing, however, is an understanding of how students themselves make sense of and negotiate their educational identities and futures. Their voices and perspectives are mostly absent from policy analysis and debates.

We undertook a small study, drawing on a series of conversations with students on a small regional university campus to explore what it means from their perspective to be included in or excluded from the benefits of education and how social class fashions their life chances.

While social class has held a prominent position in the sociology of education literature to explain educational inequality, it is a term that has largely been excised from recent policy debates in favour of less controversial terms such as disadvantage, low socioeconomic status (SES), at risk, disengaged and so on.

As bell hooks points out in her book *Where we stand: Class matters*, class is nowadays an 'uncool subject' because it makes us all 'tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand'. After all, Australia is supposed to be classless society where individual effort and talent determines how high people can rise on the ladder of opportunity, not social class.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that class analysis of our social and political institutions is often dismissed as irrelevant or unhelpful. For us, however, the category of class resonates repeatedly in our work with university students from working-class backgrounds. We believe it remains a salient and powerful category in understanding the cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging of students in education at all levels.

## **The study**

To better understand these cultural processes we set out to examine, through interviews, the experiences of a small group of university students from a community typically described as 'disadvantaged'. We wanted to look behind the statistics that show a long history of unequal access to university education in Australia, such as those found in the *Review of Australian Higher Education*, also known as the Bradley Report, to develop a snapshot of how students from working-class backgrounds experience university education.

We invited students to share their stories of how they came to be at university, and what it was like for them once they got there. Importantly, we wanted to understand, through the use of stories, what kinds of obstacles and barriers get in the way of their learning and what assets and resources most help them.

In pursuing this project, we turned to Pierre Bourdieu's writing on class, particularly his 1996 book *Reproduction*, to understand how the processes of economic and cultural reproduction occur in educational institutions such as universities.

Bourdieu propounded the concept of habitus, defined in his 1982 paper, *In Other Words: Essays towards a reflexive sociology*, as 'a system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment... as well as being the organising principles of action'. Our habitus is a set of acquired understandings or perceptions through which we interpret our everyday world. It is deeply affected by our upbringing and education, our gender, age and racial background, and other social, industrial and political structures within which we live.

Bourdieu's concepts of institutional and cultural habitus are especially helpful in illuminating the norms and practices of institutions and of particular social classes, and the ways in which particular cultural habitus are not only reproduced but contested and transformed. We want to provide a sense of how these complex cultural processes are worked through by some of our students.

### **Dropping out**

Brian's story tells us something about how masculinity and working-class culture impacted on his own aspirations and expectations. In Brian's words:

Going to uni just wasn't on the cards for us, the kids I went to school with. The bosses' kids went to uni. They got the cars and we borrowed ours. I knew that once I turned 18 I could go to work in the foundry and earn good money and become a man. It's really mixed up with the identity of who you are as the man: part of the image of being a bloke. Most of the kids I knew started drinking from an early age because that's what you did, and then once you got old enough to work you tried to match the other guys who were the veterans.

Brian's story is a powerful example of the kinds of constraints facing many working-class boys as they struggle to construct a sense of self within the prevailing working-class habitus. In the setting he describes, education reinscribes the demarcation between those with power and those without. Those with power, 'the bosses' kids', are in a position to retain power because they can go to university. For kids like Brian, university was just 'not on the cards' and they now face futures that are likely to be circumscribed by a lifetime of work in the foundry. We see how the habitus of the school and that of the broader community have together resulted in a particular world view and of Brian's own place in it.

We saw similar evidence of the impact of institutional habitus on the behaviour of other students as they made decisions about their individual and collective futures. Students like Bec, Franci and Kath believe that 'people like us don't fit in at school'.

Bec was a transient child. When she did turn up to school the teachers used to tell her off because she didn't have the 'stuff' that the other kids had. Franci also failed to fit in at school; she thinks this was because her mum was a single parent. The teachers put her at the back of the class and told her not to disturb anybody else and just stay there. Because of this she thought she was too stupid to go to university. Kath discovered that sometimes even if you do the 'right thing' such as answer a question correctly you still get into trouble. She found that for students like her (she is Indigenous) it could sometimes be detrimental to know anything, because you ended up with a clip around the ear.

Not fitting in because of 'deficit' stereotypes associated with being a transient child, or the child of a single parent, or an Indigenous child who knows more than she ought to, has led to these students becoming 'problems' in the classroom. Again, institutional habitus works in largely unconscious ways to exclude significant numbers of working-class students from the benefits of education.

Other stories highlight how many working-class students self-select out of education by making a conscious decision not to sit the competitive tertiary entrance examinations. From their perspective, sitting the exams was a waste of time because the academic curriculum was seen to be the preserve of the smart kids from middle-class backgrounds.

Megan is one of those students who didn't do her final exams because she felt it would 'bring the school down', and she didn't want to be responsible for that.

Jen also worried about doing the exams, because everyone told her how stressful it was going to be. She knew she would not cope well with the stress, so she decided not to sit the exam.

Scott was doing fine during Year 12, and was all set to take his exams, but when he did badly in his mock exams it 'freaked' him out so he chose not to sit the final exams.

At Dylan's school, students had the idea drilled into them that if you didn't do the exams you might as well drop out. So Dylan followed the script, dropped out and went to technical college instead.

Marie also self-selected out of education. Marie wasn't encouraged at school even though she had straight A-grades, so rather than go on to further study she left with her girlfriends at age 15 and got a job. Marie thinks if she had been a boy she would have stayed on, but nobody suggested that she should.

These stories highlight the gatekeeping role of the formal examination process in sifting and sorting different classes of students. Students, first, appear to measure themselves against the 'gold standard' provided by the examination system that separates the learning 'failures' from the learning 'successes'. They then collude in the sorting process by taking matters into their own hands and making a decision to withdraw. Megan puts the school's reputation before her own future. Jen has been told how difficult and stressful exams are, so on this basis she decides to opt out. Scott, panicked by his experience of failure, did not sit his exams. Even Dylan, though he frames his own script as one of resistance when he acts against the grain by dropping out, also effectively colludes in his own exclusion.

These different narratives show some of the ways in which the everyday practices, habits and routines of institutional life shape students' educational experiences and learning identities and in the process perpetuate the established social order. For each participant in this research their social class background has circumscribed their life chances.

What is interesting is that educational inequality is brought about when students' futures are bound by their social class habitus rather than individual capabilities, dreams or aspirations. As Carolyn Shields, Russell Bishop and André Mazawi argue in *Pathologising practices: The impact of deficit thinking on education*, when school failure is blamed on the individuals because of their class affiliations it contributes to a 'deficit' form of thinking that pathologises students and predisposes many to disengage from schooling. Such practices are expressed in discourses that frame the experiences of students and teachers, and sustain the idea that existing power relations and associated educational inequities are deemed to be natural and just.

## Re-writing/righting identities

Happily, these stories do not end here. Despite their largely negative experiences of schooling, all the students are now studying successfully at university.

There is a strong indication in students' stories that what they have done is against the odds, in terms of cultural habitus. These experiences contradict Bill Williamson's assertion, in his 1981 article 'Class bias', that once a person is constructed into a particular class they remain 'objectively definable and largely fixed/unchanging'.

On the other hand, these stories also challenge the position taken by many sociologists since the 1980s that class identities have weakened. Mike Savage, in his 2003 review essay, *A new class paradigm?*, provides a more appropriate account when he suggests that while there have recently been 'fundamental social changes' these involve 'the re-working rather than the eradication of social class'.

It seems that students are shaping more fluid identities at the intersection of more traditional notions of 'working' and 'middle' class, as they engage in an institution colonised by middle-class culture and values. Taking this approach, we can now begin to appreciate how students' desire to learn is often embedded in the realities of their working-class identity rather than through any notion of innate intelligence or ability.

Dylan believes, for instance, that university changes your life. Because of this, he would now love to teach at university. He wants to teach people who are like him, those that 'should not' be at university. More than anything else, this is what keeps him there.

Kath believes that university allows you to do and be whoever you want to be. She is now better able to understand the world from the perspective of people like her. She is studying human resources, and the experience of her present work as a casual clerical assistant makes her think that the human resource practices she sees in operation have nothing to do with humans at all. She is excited about being able to change this after she qualifies.

Bec, who went to at least 26 schools between the ages of five and 11, now wants to be a teacher. She wants to know how she can challenge children's learning identities so as to avoid academic failure, low expectations and limited futures. She knows how hard it is for many children just to get to school on time, let alone bring shoes or lunch.

And Marie is studying community development and wants to work with young people in her local community. She says it's about equality. The gap is too wide, and she believes it can actually be bridged. She is angry when people who have never lacked privilege think they know what being underprivileged is like. She thinks you only have a really good sense of it when you have actually been there.

These stories suggest a different analysis of identity, aspiration and social mobility, with students from working-class backgrounds seeking the status and power afforded by middle-class occupations not for their own individual status, but rather so they can work to improve the life chances of others from a similar class background. What we find here is a strong sense of civic responsibility and solidarity. Participants do not see their futures in terms of becoming middle class, but in terms of giving something back to the community to which they belong.

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