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The school-level framing of higher education entry

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Background

There has been much concern about inequalities within the higher education system – specifically, the under-representation of students from lower social class groups and state schools at leading universities. The Sutton Trust found that there were 3000 state school students who ‘missed out’ on places at leading universities. These places were instead taken up by their equally qualified, privately educated counterparts (Sutton Trust 2004). Research on university choice, and in particular on access to leading universities, has been mainly focussed at the individual level, with studies exploring factors such as social class and identity (Reay et al. 2005), family influences (Pugsley 2004), peer groups (Brooks 2003), and finance (Callender and Jackson 2008). A further factor, the school’s influence, has also been touched upon (Pugsley 2004, Reay et al. 2001) but in doing so the studies have not been able to disentangle the complexity created by the matrix of influences on choice to reveal any true ‘school effects’. The analysis they present of the school’s influence is wrapped up in a multitude of other influences – social class, family, and friends. This is perhaps because of sampling decisions that have led to there being too much ‘noise’ from these other influences.

Research Questions

Moving away from private/state comparisons, there is a need for a more explicit understanding about the way different state schools may influence university choices. My own research explores the nature of a school ‘effect’ on choice within higher education, and seeks to understand how specific institutional structures and processes may account for any ‘effect’. In this way, it attempts to contextualise the choice process by taking into account the school-level structures and processes within which choices are made.

Methods

Past research which has paid attention to the school ‘effect’ has sampled across diverse institutional types – further education colleges, private schools, and state schools – and as such have portrayed the higher education support as a good/bad continuum, with private schools providing the ‘best’ and further education colleges ‘lacking’. This research has shown how diverse institutions may differ in the way they prepare their students for higher education, however it is questionable to what extent they have found any institutional ‘effect’ on higher education destinations. In order to reveal a school ‘effect’ my sampling decisions were based upon the concept of finding a pair of schools which had an identical intake, similar attainment, but differential outcomes in the form of higher education destinations.

The qualitative fieldwork which I conducted within the two sets of paired schools aimed to understand what may have accounted for their differential outcomes in terms of higher education destinations. The research design derives from the ethnographic research tradition, and in line with this tradition, the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding ‘from within’ about the process of higher education choice within the four case study schools (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). A mixture of interviews with both staff and students, observation of key sixth form events relating to higher education, and documentary analysis were used.

Frame

This research draws on a range of theoretical ideas in order to make sense of the schools’ institutional structures and processes, and the way in which they may be influencing choice. From a

social interactionist perspective the theoretical framework seeks to understand the cultural, social and spatial configuration of the four case study schools. Bernstein's (1975) conceptual ideas on school culture, and in particular the 'expressive' and 'instrumental' orders of schools, are drawn upon to understand further the practices, priorities and behaviours of the four case study schools. Ball's (1981) work on the social relations of comprehensive schools, and Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) concept of 'educational triage' are also drawn upon in order to take into account the social mechanisms which we already know to be apparent within schools. The spatial (Massey 2005) configuration of schools is also given close attention within the analysis, with reference to the sociology of space within school.

Research findings

It was found that there are significant differences across the four case study schools in terms of the way students are prepared for their transitions post-18. The schools differed in terms of their institutional structures and processes, which may be accounted for by their differing cultures (Bernstein 1975). It was found for instance that the programme of support for supporting students in making their higher education choices/applications varied. Examples of this variation in support include: talks/events arranged, staff advice and guidance, tutor support, and application advice and guidance. The differing priorities of the sixth forms led to differing levels of space (Massey 2005) for higher education. It was also found that various discriminatory mechanisms exist across the four case study schools in terms of higher education choice, in particular for Oxbridge entry.

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