



A change of habitus: Working-class students and educational success

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Abstract

For students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the cultures of secondary schools can be alienating and the schooling experience can be traumatic in various ways. For such students to complete senior secondary school and enter university can be considered quite a remarkable success.

As the coordinator of a university access program targeting low socio-economic students, I wanted to find out from those who had made a successful transition to university how they dealt with their high school environments. This paper summarises some of the research done with a group of students participating in the access program and takes some of their comments to exemplify their common experiences. Through their anecdotes and insights, a pattern or trajectory emerged which has relevance for discussions of the deterministic nature of habitus. This paper is intended to illustrate the possibility that individual habitus can change through conscious effort but that change may come at a high price.

How is it that, despite prophecies of likely doom and failure in an education system that favours the advantaged (Apple, 1996, 2000; Henry, Knight, Lingard & Taylor, 1988; McLaren, 1989; Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002), some working-class children actually complete secondary schooling, make it to university and become successful in tertiary study?

This question constantly surfaced for me when listening to the anecdotes of first year students who had been assisted by a special access program at an Australian university. As the coordinator of the program, part of my role was to encourage low socio-economic status (low SES) high school students to consider tertiary study and then to advocate for them in negotiating undergraduate places. Reading the many, emotive applications that arrived on my desk each year – from refugees, young single-mothers, domestic violence survivors and those who were simply poor - and then hearing the matter-of-factly presented stories imparted by the students at orientation and in later discussions, it seemed that the passage from primary school to university was generally a cheerless process for them and, hence, any subsequent success at university quite remarkable. It was with these thoughts in mind that I researched the senior secondary school experiences of a group of students who had made a successful transition to university through the special access program. I wanted to shed light on their various coping strategies, particularly the ways they dealt with their high school environments.

The critical theory that underpins this research recognises multiple realities, the influence of society, culture and gender (Mertens, 1998). According to Mertens, the ontological assumption is that reality is socially constructed, as are phenomena such as minority-status. The aim of the researcher must be to bring to light the participants' meanings of their realities as constructed by them. To this end, I employed small focus groups, individual interviews, and on-line discussion to gather the data.

The research group consisted of ten female and two male undergraduate voluntary participants drawn from the university's access and support initiative for low SES students. The students had all commenced university direct from senior high school and, though there was a mix of urban and rural backgrounds and schooling, all were from families that could be considered working-class and low-income. The age range of the participants was between 18 and 24 years and all but two were the first in their families to enrol in a university course. There were two students from non-Anglo backgrounds, one Hispanic, one South-Asian, in the participant group. Eight of the students had transferred high schools at least once; three had attended schools in provincial towns within an hour of the State capital, whilst five had attended rural schools with the other four educated in the capital city.

This paper takes some of the comments of this particular group of students to exemplify their common experiences. Through their anecdotes and insights, a pattern or trajectory emerged which has relevance for discussions of the deterministic nature of "habitus" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This paper is intended to illustrate the possibility that individual habitus can change through conscious effort but that change may come at a high price. Pseudonyms have been used for the sake of confidentiality and all quotes from the students have been taken from the transcripts of the interviews.

Barriers for working class students

The imposition of middle-class standards and values permeates schools (Apple, 2000), shaping the "institutional habituses" (Reay, David & Ball, 2001) of those schools. Although usually applied to individuals, the notion of "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1997) provides a useful means of conceptualising the apparent conflicts between students from educationally marginalised groups (e.g., working class) and their schools. Together with peers and the wider community, schools form part of the individual's habitus, influencing decision-making (Slack & Thomas, 2002).

As a set of deeply embedded attitudes, or dispositions, habitus is "a rich interlacing of past and present" (Reay et al., 2001, para. 1.2), resulting in a view of the world and of one's place in it (Dumais, 2002). For individuals, habitus is inclusive of class, family, and individual experience (Wells, 1997), governing behaviour through an unconscious perception of what is "reasonable" to expect (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 226). Transposed to the field of institutions, habitus can be identified through relationships of the institutions with their communities and through the disposition of staff (Reay et al., 2001). Indeed, Bourdieu believed that habitus is the key to understanding how schools reproduce the social structure (Webb et al., 2002).

Bourdieu, according to Webb et al. (2002), believed habitus would doom working-class students to failure as they would not be able to hide their working-class, and therefore redundant, backgrounds and their lack of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This seemingly deterministic nature of habitus has been contested, with some observers believing it possible to develop a new habitus through the acquisition of cultural capital or for the habitus to be adapted to a greater or lesser extent (Delpit, 1997; Desmarchelier, 1999). Mills

and Gale (2002) suggest two types of habitus – reproductive and transformative – in which those with the former habitus accept their presumed fate and the constraints of their social circumstances, and those who possess the latter habitus are able to improvise through developing a ‘feel for the game’ (p. 18). How such different attributes come about among people from similar social backgrounds, though, is unclear.

The experiences of members of the research participant group, however, suggest that some degree of change to their individual habituses has occurred at some particular turning point (Hodkinson, 1999) to create and to open up new opportunities as a result. Further, this change has come about through considerable effort (Zevernbergen, 2001), and at a significant cost to the individual.

Exclusive school practices

Disparities between institutional habituses and those of the student group were described by the students in the ways that, through a form of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), their various schools created practices that failed to acknowledge the realities of working-class students, even where such students comprised a major cohort of each school.

One revealing example of school practice marginalising working-class students was given by Taryn who attended a state-run “disadvantaged” school servicing a working-class area. Her experience with the visit of the country’s leader to her school exemplified the thinking that appeared to have permeated the school culture. According to Taryn, certain students were selected to greet the Prime Minister. These students were selected initially by the school principal: “[t]hey were the rich bitches and I just felt, no that’s so wrong, how dare they like characterise people, like neat presentation and stuff”. In the interview, Taryn rationalised the need, from the principal’s point of view, to ensure that the selected students were of neat appearance for such an event. She also, however, highlighted the fact that the selected students were representative of only a privileged minority of the school’s student population.

Through its selection process (“smart school uniform and being a straight-A student”), Taryn’s school had effectively denied the opportunity for poorer students to meet their national leader and refused to allow the majority students to represent their school. Although upset and disappointed by the school’s discriminatory practice, she rationalised that this was a consequence of education funding policies: “...they’re trying to be too much like a private school [...] they are trying to get so much government funding that they’re trying to sell it hard like a private school. It just leaves all the [low] socio-economic children far behind.”

Physical appearance and school uniform figured prominently not only in Taryn’s feelings of marginalisation but in many other situations reported by the other participants in the research group. Taryn, Yolanda, and Jenny spoke of how, unlike their more affluent school peers, who were mostly the children of professionals, they would have to wait for annual sales and then use “lay-by”

systems putting aside a few dollars a week, to purchase clothes. Clothes were also an issue for Georgie who initially attended a private school to keep up with her friends from primary school, but became embarrassed by her financial situation and could not afford to compete with the designer label clothing of her “very materialistic” peers. These situations were often accompanied by feelings of low self-esteem and dissociation from school for many of the students interviewed and indicated a quasi-private orientation of some state secondary schools. For Sophie, for example, the imposition of a strict uniform policy simply did not allow exemptions for her family’s lack of finance to buy the official items. Her unauthorised clothing was a constant predicament for herself and those teachers who required conformity to standard dress codes. Jenny, on the other hand, was more than happy to conform to uniform requirements even if she appeared a little shabby. Her fear was of “plain clothes day” when she would have to wear exactly the same clothes as she was always seen in when not in school uniform as she had only one suitable clothing alternative to her school uniform: “they could tell the people who were poor and everything and I felt really different, you know?”

Appearance was a relatively minor problem for Peta, who attended a private school which, as could be expected, maintained a middle-class habitus and displayed such a disposition in the expectations of students and in staff-student relationships. Peta’s conflict was based rather on judgments of her entire working-class background. Peta’s home life was very disruptive and her living conditions were far from ideal, her home being in an isolated area and consisting of a converted shed with her bed in the kitchen, and no TV or computer. Despite this severe disadvantage, Peta achieved the Dux award for her year, but even so was not accepted by many as a suitable student for such a school. There was a strong, negative reaction from many students and their families to her winning the award. Many of Peta’s peers were forthright in letting her know that she did not deserve any awards, let alone the Dux. The influential parents of one runner-up had substantial economic and cultural capital invested in the school and expected a return on their investment. They lodged a complaint on the basis that their daughter had been at the school longer, was a member of the local parish, and a building at the local boys’ school had been named after the family. By comparison, it was pointed out, Peta came from a “fairly unsavoury background” and was not considered to be “suitable material to represent the school community at its ‘best’”. The award stood, however, but the impact on Peta’s self-esteem continues to this time where she will still play down her own high achievement and use evasive responses if directly asked about her (very high) university grades.

Alienation from the peer group

Experiences such as Peta’s with peers were common to the research group. The participants shared a feeling of alienation from their peers, failing to obtain the acknowledgment from peers deemed essential in the development of adolescents’ identity (Kroger, 1989; Wyn & White, 1997). If identity is a consequence of social and institutional interaction (McCarthy & Moje, 2002), it would suggest that the generally negative interactions of the participants should have on-going negative consequences for their identity development. Indeed, for some of the students, the long-term effects they have observed in

themselves would support this proposition. Peta's on-going low esteem has already been mentioned and Georgie, who had become fully self-supporting at age fifteen, stated that she was still trying to overcome her inability to communicate reasonably in both social and personal relationships, believing the cause of this difficulty to be in her earlier interactions with hostile peers.

The general view of the various schools' peer structures was of a mainstream peer group and a disparate group of "others". There were two basic responses among the research group to these peer environments. Firstly, some of the students deliberately isolated themselves from their peer groups with whom they failed to find common ground. Brian, for instance, was regarded as an outsider, having arrived at his secondary school long after all the other students had formed their friendships. Brian had escape routes and hiding places in the school grounds as his only means of avoiding regular beatings and described himself as an "outcast". Both Sanjeev and Sarina maintained a separation between their school and non-school peers, Sanjeev in particular being keen to ensure a complete division between people within his ethnic community and those at his school.

Secondly, some of the students sought out specific individuals whom they felt were more appropriate to their own aims and interests. In these cases, individuals appear to have been selected on the basis of strategic considerations rather than for social companionship. Sarina, for example, chose particular students to mix with at school for the sake of "not being a loner" and then discarded them when she had achieved her aims. Others chose companions specifically on the basis of perceived academic inclination, or, as Sophie described them, "the nerds" of her school, with whom negative responses to obtaining good grades was not an issue. Georgie also stated that she would deliberately spend time with those who were "definite about going to university, finding out more about tertiary opportunities from them". Similarly, Lara had sensed that there was a better future for her if she mixed with academically-inclined students. The few who had friends from more affluent families also seemed generally to accept them as temporary relationships which dissolved when the unspoken rules of social place were transgressed.

Choosing education

Being from working-class, low income, and sole parent families, the participants generally found they had little in the way of either cultural or economic capital; however, the families of some were prepared to "gamble" (Webb et al., 2002, p. 24) their minimal economic capital in promoting their children through education (see also, Brown & Lauder, 1997). Sophie, for instance, gave great credit to her sole parent mother who "juggled" her income to ensure Sophie could attend school excursions whenever possible and participate in extra-curricular activities, such as ballet lessons. Like Sophie, Lara possessed an ambition to be a professional dancer. In her case, however, this desire ended when her sole parent family was unable to finance dance lessons to the skill level required for the university auditions.

Those students who were deprived of family support found work to provide some economic capital to invest in their education. Georgie, Yolanda and Peta

had no choice but to work as all were financially self-supporting and their Youth Allowance did not provide enough income for all their needs. Georgie, for instance, would often walk the long distance to school to save the bus fare. But working also had a detrimental effect on their studies and their social lives, as Peta indicated: "I got a job and supported myself through school, when I could find the time to attend". These students chose to invest their sparse resources in educational needs such as fees and books, rather than on social activities, acquiring whatever institutionalised cultural capital that education could confer upon them. Regardless of their relationships with their schools, then, education became a refuge from domestic and/or social tensions, and a means of social mobility.

Kirsty was probably the most expressive of a dependence on education, stating that she had turned to her studies as a source of hope as "the hope of a better future was all I had". Kirsty had been "disowned" by her family during her senior secondary education and became fully self-supporting. Staying focused on her goal of university was, she said, the only thing that would keep her on track, telling herself "I was going to get out of trouble and go to uni". Even after two years at university, Kirsty was still reliant on her education as her means of "deliverance", commenting that after each long vacation she would get "back into it and I felt really good about it - every time I've started a new year, a new semester, I've always gone 'this is going to be it'". Kirsty indicated her continuing fear of losing this relationship with education, maintaining that "if I wasn't here [at university] I don't know what I would be doing and I'm afraid of not continuing because I'd have nothing else left".

For all, education was seen as the most accessible means of upward mobility or deliverance from their domestic and social difficulties. As such they became like Willis's (1977) "ear'oles" and Walker's (1987) "Three Friends" in that they became school compliant. This strategy concurs with Bamber and Tett (2001) who, using the concept of habitus for their study, stated that working-class students must "critically examine and change some of the underlying assumptions on which their lives have been built" (p. 10). Indeed, the research group appeared to have been fairly reflexive, making deliberate attempts to change their habitus, finding solace in education. For instance, Jodie, who came from a rural area, stated that she did not "want to get stuck in the whole barefoot and pregnant at an early young age - sort of thing you see happening in little country towns".

The students' choice of education led to them acquiring cultural capital and something of the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1997, p. 583). Delpit believed that success is predicated upon acquisition of that culture and that non-participants could learn these rules and codes of participation (e.g., linguistic forms, communication strategies, presentation of self). She added that children, therefore, needed to be encouraged to learn and value their own culture but also to learn the language of power (e.g., formal English) as one would a second language (see also, Webb et al., 2002). Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) took this idea further, introducing the concept of "power literacy" or "the ability to recognize the ways power operates to create oppressive conditions for some groups and privilege for others" (p. 2). These views, though they propose useful strategies, border on a deficit model, in which the student is expected to adapt and the system, together with its exclusionary practices, remains unchanged. Zevenbergen (2001), however, proposed changes to the pedagogical practices

that exclude some students, rather than the students themselves having to learn the “new codes” (p. 214) of classroom interaction.

Turning points

According to Webb et al. (2002), Bourdieu believed the habitus of working-class students would disqualify them from educational success as they would signal their unsuitability through their words and actions. However, each of the research group exemplified the ability for individual habituses to change, sometimes radically, at a turning point that can be self-initiated or forced (Desmarchelier, 1999; Hodkinson, 1999). Brian’s story, for example, shows that intellectual mobility, through re-orientation of individual thinking can provide such a turning point. Brian received advice from a religious studies teacher about fighting back that helped him to stand up to bullying and effected a major change of attitude which led to him being voted into a student leadership position by his peers in his final school year. Many of the students acknowledged the efforts of individual teachers. In fact, over 50% of the participants praised particular teachers for their role in directly motivating them and providing a high degree of care. These teachers usually stood out as positive role models, demonstrating habituses that were in marked contrast to the apparently unaccepting habituses of the schools. Such influence provided for many of the students the necessary turning points at which their personal habituses appeared to change or adapt. Other examples of turning points for a number of the group were presented by such events as a transfer to another school, forced or otherwise, which provided them with opportunities for a positive and conscious change. Both Peta and Georgie, for example, following time out of school, moved to the same inner city State high school. Contrasting strongly with their previous schools, this one, according to Peta, presented “a culture of people who were different, or just comfortable being themselves”.

The turning points experienced by the students frequently involved breaking away from their families with four of the twelve participants becoming estranged from their families and fully self-supporting during their senior secondary schooling. This tends to confirm that social mobility and academic success for working-class students requires breaking with class practices and distancing from their home community (Connell et al., 1982; Desmarchelier, 1999; McDonald, 1999). This process is disturbingly similar to a much earlier work (Jackson & Marsden, 1965) on the educational passage of English working-class students which reported distancing from families and neighbourhoods to be a prerequisite of academic success. Even those still dependent on their families during their senior schooling appeared judgmental not only of their peers but of family members. For example, Sophie spoke of an elder sister who “didn’t have any aspirations to do anything, I mean, she left home at 16 and started having babies”. Likewise, Sarina, rebuked her brother who had “dropped out half way through Year 12 and has not done much study and he’s exactly the kind of person I was trying to avoid myself becoming”.

Some of the statements of the participant group also suggest that their various turning points saw them break away from any class-related identity. For instance, as well as Jodie’s “barefoot and pregnant” remark reported earlier, the

comments of some of the students regarding their school peers demonstrated a certain disdain which might also indicate the changed nature of their habituses and social position. Students who had been “looked down on” by peers were now taking a judgmental view of them, commenting disparagingly, for example, on the school “drop outs” and those who took up a vocational education course rather than university.

As well as distancing from family and community, dismissing any relationship to working-class culture could be considered “cultural suicide” (McLaren, 1989) and may be a further prerequisite for educational success among working-class students (Hey, 1997; Tierney, 1999). This raises the question of whether the responses to the turning points experienced by the students could be perceived as acts of cultural suicide. However, while these students appeared to be very aware of economic divisions in their schools and peer groups, they did not seem to be aware of specifically cultural differences affecting these divisions. Neither did they demonstrate any consciousness of class, with their references to working-class experiences being limited to financial rather than broader cultural matters.

McLaren (in Munoz, 2002, p. 9) provided a broad concept of working-class, including “white-collar workers whose conditions are similar to those of manual workers”. Even though the students’ families would fall within this broad definition, the students did not meet McDonald’s (1999) three dimensions of working-class consciousness; that is, affirmation of the dignity of work, experience of community, and opposition to middle-class individualism. In fact, their relationship to the last criterion would appear to be inverted by the participants as they mostly demonstrated competitive striving and aspired to middle-class careers, with a significant number having chosen teaching. They would, therefore, fail McDonald’s test of class-consciousness and could not be considered “working-class” from that perspective.

In Connell et al. (1982), the dilemma facing one working-class adolescent is recounted as, in order to become an academic achiever, he has to break with family relationship patterns and isolate himself from the interactions with peers that build solidarity. The difference between this anecdote and the accounts of the research group is that they seem to reject any inclination towards solidarity with their working-class peers. Acts of cultural suicide, then, may have happened but would not appear to be the kind of dramatic and terminal act suggested by the concept. On the other hand, perhaps cultural suicide had occurred in a less dramatic fashion and over time rather than at one specific turning point. This situation may have been such as anticipated by Gee (1996) and McLaren (in Rizvi, 2002) who believed schools were promoting middle-class values of quiescence, placidity and compliance. Where this may be considered to be an act of symbolic violence visited upon the participants, for the research group, it seems to have no conscious cultural dimension.

Perhaps a more fitting explanation, then, can be found in the work of Bourdieu (in Webb et al., 2002) who suggested that, in order for symbolic violence to take effect, students must in some ways collude with the process through accepting their place in the school culture. He proposed the concepts of “illusio”, or being caught up in and by the game and believing it to be worth playing, and “misrecognition”, where the situation feels like second nature. These concepts

appear to be exemplified by many of the comments and attitudes displayed by the participants in this study.

In McDonald's view (1999), young people in contemporary society must act with a calculative attitude, weighing risks and possibilities, as they negotiate community, networks of opportunity and subjectivity to become "entrepreneurs of self" (p. 121). The participants have demonstrated something of the necessary sense of agency to be considered such contemporary entrepreneurs, through, for example, consciously choosing education as a resource for social mobility and their strategic selection of associates. As with the concepts of *illusio* and *misrecognition*, this also would seem to require an acceptance of the middle-class competitive striving promoted by many contemporary schools (Apple, 1996; Connell et al., 1982), in contrast to the cooperative coping observed in working-class culture.

A common trajectory

Regardless of Bourdieu's seemingly deterministic predictions, he has suggested that the *habitus* of agents, in interacting with a given field, in this case the field of education, find "in a definite trajectory within the field under consideration a more or less favourable opportunity to become actualized" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 105). In my discussions with the research group, a number of points emerged suggesting such a trajectory, or a pattern of development that moves from exclusion to educational success, defined for this purpose as gaining entry to a tertiary course. These developments were shared in various ways by all the participants, and comprised four major elements (figure 1).

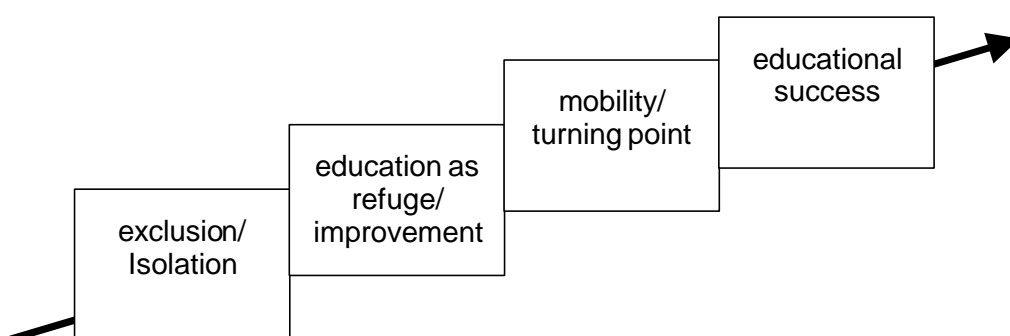


Figure 1: A common trajectory

First, each of the students told of exclusion, sometimes self-imposed, from mainstream peer groups in their schools. Yolanda, for instance, avoided friendships at school "because they were on drugs or stuff like that so I just didn't associate with them" while Kirsty experienced such hostility from peers that she would "go home crying at the end of the day". Second, engagement in education served as not only a distraction, but a potential source of salvation or mobility and a solution to their domestic and/or social problems, such as those

described by Peta and Brian. Third, mobility through geographical relocation, such as Jodie and Sophie, or individual re-orientation, such as Lara and Sarina, created opportunities for change and personal development. Finally, the participants were able to gain access to higher education to partially realise their educational ambitions.

This model is a simplification of the shared experiences of the students and the order of events for some individuals may not be consistent with the order of these stages. It does, however, serve to illustrate commonalities in the ways the students have interacted with the field of education. Perhaps these particular students possessed transformative habituses compared to their peers, but testing this possibility was beyond the scope of this research. More important is the path they followed, that the students altered their habituses at some turning point, distanced themselves from their peers and, in some cases, from their families, and became “entrepreneurs of self”. Although their individual habituses did not match the institutional habituses of their schools, members of the research group were able to gain some of the cultural capital essential for progression through the education system.

The voluntary nature and limited size of the research group make it impossible for generalisations to be made about low SES students. Their experiences, though, add an insight into the ways that can be used by working-class students to find success. I am not, however, suggesting that the strategies used by these students should be replicated by others. In fact, success for these students has been achieved by overcoming a deal of negative experience caused by the mismatch of their habituses with those of their secondary schools and their peer groups. Perhaps the lesson from their experiences is that making a conscious and painful effort to change one’s habitus can offer a means to achieve success in an unwelcoming environment, but the cost of that change is family, friends and culture. These students have, however, achieved educational success and found a more welcoming culture at university than that offered by their schools. In time, they will know if the long term results have justified the price.

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