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Academic support and its influence on HE participation decisions: The continuing power of local culture

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Introduction

This paper explores why a group of young adults, living within traditionally working-class communities in Northtown, choose not to participate in HE and the influence that academic support has on their decision making. It considers the academic support on offer to the participants, at their place of study, and how the various mechanisms influenced their participation decision. The research indicates a particular complex attitude toward support, with participants appearing to view the academic related support offered by their sixth form as being a vital ingredient for success. This research proposes that the participants seemed to be comforted by the support they receive and that this, as part of an institution's habitus, (Reay, David and Ball, 2001) influences their decision making.

Methodology and data collection

This research follows a case study approach and draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Findings are drawn from a set of semi-structured interviews with 22 young adults at one sixth form. The Academy, of which Village sixth form is a part, is a relatively newly established provider of post-16 education in Northtown, opened in 2006. Those students attaining five or more GCSE grades at A* to C including English and mathematics is low and the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and others in the school is wide. A general thematic approach was employed to analyse the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke (2006). Whilst I was not looking for a predetermined list of specific codes and themes, I did take account of key Bourdieuan concepts that might help to explain the impact of academic support on the participants' HE decision making. For example, when reading the transcripts, I looked for codes and themes that might help to explain the participants' practices pertaining to academic support. For Bourdieu, practice is the carrying out of an activity that is formally named. Practices have structures, limits, points of harmony and meaning. I was looking for examples of common patterns of reaction that the participants shared, what they viewed as being acceptable ways of doing things when it came to academic support (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984 and 1990). I also looked for examples of the influence of the participants' place of study. In his interview with Loic Wacquant (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989) and in *The Rules of Art* (1996), Bourdieu describes a field as a social arena that has its own particular logic where struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989). He also suggests that a social world which is made up of multiple fields can be divided into sub-fields which follow the logic of the larger field, but that also has its own logic and rules (Bourdieu, 1998). Therefore, within this paper, I consider Village sixth form as a sub-field of the Field of Education and pay attention to the participants' position within that particular sub-field. I also looked for codes and themes that might explain the participants' habitus. Habitus can be understood by considering the inclination towards certain dispositions to actions and values which are gained from cultural history, or through being a member of a particular social group or class (Bourdieu, 1977; 1993).

Findings and discussion

The quotes that are referred to within this paper were chosen because they were the most interesting and they best represented the participants' points of view. The main themes that emerged from the data were: a vital ingredient for success; an over reliance on academic support and contradictory viewpoints. I am aware that gathering data via semi-structured interviews can limit the claims and assertions that can legitimately be made and that this, to an extent, limits this paper's ability to provide conclusive evidence. However, after accepting these caveats, this research nevertheless sheds further light on the influence that academic support can have on HE participation decisions.

A vital ingredient for success

When considering HE participation, the participants regularly referred to the stress and pressure that they associated with the intensity of the work and an increased workload, lots of deadlines, exams (rather than exams and course work), things being much harder and that, above all else, they would have to rely on themselves much more which worried them as they were not used to it. Autonomy was not something they appeared to want when it came to their studies. Whilst becoming more autonomous is likely to be a concern for all perspective HE students, for the participants, the idea that HE institutions would have much less support on offer was seemingly a real issue. It is worth considering the work of Fuller (2011) who looked at the importance of wider networks which were characterised by high levels of trust, emotional support and taken-for-granted assumptions that can generate collective perceptions of what the right decision is for a particular individual. The majority of the participants gave the impression that they were comforted by the support they received from their network, particularly within their sixth form environment. This point is illustrated by participant 19 when discussing what university life might be like:

I don't think it'd be as good as here 'cause, like, you've got loads of students haven't you at uni...here you can have 1:1 time with your teachers, 'cause classes are only really that small so I think it'd be a big change for me to go to uni to study. I feel at home here, you can go to teachers whenever you want and they'll help you...they don't make you feel like idiots.

This support appeared to instil a sense of belonging and even solidarity amongst participants. When it came to the expectation of support, for them it was the norm in terms of their educational expectations. They had common patterns of reaction and acceptable ways of doing things when it came to support (practices) (Bourdieu, 1977). The participants had even developed their own discourse that related to support in regard to getting it when they wanted it and the need for it, with participants talking about support in similar ways, in terms of the need for it and what would be needed should they have chosen to participate. As participant 3 points out:

Like working on my own where, like, here you get loads and loads of help and that from teachers, whereas there, like, you get your lectures and then you work on your own and it's not like that here, so I'm not quite that ready for it... At sixth form we get it when we want really, I wouldn't finish without because I need it.

In this particular instance, the structure of the sub-field of sixth form education and the habitus of the participants were aligned. Within this particular sub-field, it was taken for granted by the participants that they would receive an amount of support that would enable them to pass their Level 3 qualification. Their habitus was structured by the present circumstances in which they found themselves. It matched the logic of the sub-field; the participants seemed to be attuned to the practices of the sub-field, the unwritten rules of the game, the doxa. Within Village sixth form they felt like 'fish in water'. Their habitus had provided them with a feel for the game, a practical mastery (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989). As level 3 students, the participants may be seen to have some credibility, or capital, in this particular sub-field, with only a small percentage of the population of Northtown gaining a level 3 qualification, yet if they were to participate in HE, success in this particular field was far from certain, as it would be dependent on them mastering that field's unwritten codes, manners and behaviours (Atkins, 2009, citing Grenfell and James, 1998). For them, this required support – a lot of support. The interview testimony gave the impression that there was a definite fear and a belief that such support would not be available if they participated in HE. They would not have anyone to turn to. Their expectations of the support mechanisms on offer to them, should they participate, appear to have impacted on their strategies and seem to have, in part, guided the participants' choices and behaviours which has then impacted on their decision making. As participant 20 points out:

Yeah, here I feel like I've got some more support and I, like, know teachers so they are easier to approach and to ask for help. If we're stuck on a certain part of us course, we can go and say "will you be able to help me out with this?" and they'll come and sit down with you and spend so long with you until you get hang of it.

An over reliance on academic support

The idea of what makes the right amount of support is particularly interesting, as it seems that the support that the majority of the participants had been offered at their place of study hindered their progression into HE. Indirectly, something that is to all intents and purposes seen as a positive appears to be having a detrimental effect, as the expectation of a lack of continuing academic-related support is a reason for non-participation as the participants have not learnt to cope independently. Without any exception, all of the participants discussed the amount of support they received at their place of study and many quickly related this to what they would need from HE, should they participate. There was also reference to relaxed deadlines at sixth form and the participants did not expect to get the same treatment at university.

Participants either made direct reference to second chances or alluded to them.

This is illustrated in the testimony of participants 15 and 16:

Second chances here, like, if you don't hand summat in then "give it me next week" makes you get it in but there I don't think you'd get that. I think it'd be if you don't get it on this day, you don't get it in. You get a lot more assistance I think than you would there. I think it'd just be like, right you listen, you do that and then you go off and do it.

Because if I don't meet deadline here then they just give you a different deadline or say "give me it when you've finished" where at university I'd probably get kicked out or summat.

As a result of the support mechanisms that are in place, the agency of the participants appeared to be reduced. Atkins' (2009) suggests that individuals can become over-reliant on the support offered by some educational institutions (as part of an overall network), which can lead to what could be described as a 'diminished self' and reduced agency, with a discourse of fragility being bought into (Ecclestone, 2004, 2007 cited in Atkins, 2009)

The majority of the participants outlined how the additional support they received helped to build their confidence and self-esteem academically, although, in actual fact, as discussed above such personalised one-to-one support appeared to have a negative impact in relation to their participation in HE. The idea of standing on their own two feet, with what they believed to be little or no support, was seen as a reason for non-participation. They did not appear to have the cultural repertoire or 'toolkit' to enable them to develop appropriate strategies that would allow for them to participate in HE because they viewed support as the main ingredient of success. None of participants indicated any awareness that, at some point, they would have to be able to do things for themselves. The perceived lack of support seems to have impacted on the strategies that they devised. This was not to deal with a potential lack of support should they participate, but to find an alternative to participation.

An over-reliance on support mechanisms at their sixth form appears to have disempowered them. As a result, there was a real belief that they could not cope without the same amount of support they received whilst at sixth form, with participants expecting, and becoming reliant upon, support. This is illustrated well by participant 7:

As soon as we get into the common room they ask us what they can help us with before I've even thought about it...this suits me fine.

The objective conditions provided by the sixth form seems to have made this reliance on support a fruitful strategy, within this particular sub-field, as all of the participants gained their level 3 qualification. Support in the sixth form was easily obtainable because it appeared to have become part of the fabric of the institution. The history and the experiences (Ingham, 2009) of the sixth form seemed to have partly shaped the institutions' habitus in relation to what it communicates to members of staff and students. Support that stunts the autonomy of the participants seems to have been inculcated into the habitus of the participants by their sixth form. Support, as a value, seems to have been institutionalised into the institutions habitus. Patterson (2010) points out that the key to institutionalising a value as being to concentrate power in the hands of those who believe in the value. Consequently, the importance of support is transmitted from the sixth form's hierarchy, to the respective staff members and finally to the participants.

As schools and sixth forms are judged in terms of results and achievement, it is not surprising that they offer so much support. However, this appears to have become counter-productive in relation to HE participation. What appears to be excessive

support is viewed as the norm and the fact that the majority of participants seem to suggest that they needed the support on offer appears to a reason for non-participation.

Contradictory viewpoints

Whilst there were not many definite gender differences in the participants' reasons for not participating in HE, there were some with a minority of male participants' attitudes to support. Whilst there appeared to be little evidence of my male participants viewing participation in HE as being incompatible with their notions of working-class masculinity, there was evidence that the support they envisaged needing involved costs and risks to their masculine identities (Archer and Leathwood, 2003). However, it is worth pointing out that this minority of male participants was somewhat contradictory in its viewpoint. On the one hand, they discussed the benefits of support and how it was something that would be needed should they participate, yet there was also an inference, from some, that this was a weakness.

What's the point of going to uni if you can't do it yourself and you need loads of help from people you don't know? What's the point...? (Participant 6)

There were also some examples of 'laddish' behaviour with some participants blaming being lazy or the fact that they "... couldn't be arsed" (participant 12) as a reason for not participating in HE (Mac and Ghail, 1994; Francis, 1999). Yet interestingly, for these participants, the support on offer seemed to counterbalance their own self-proclaimed laziness or lack of motivation. One possible explanation is that, for this minority of male participants, the support they anticipated needing to successfully participate negatively impacted on how they viewed themselves. I am not suggesting that the constructions of 'laddishness' as 'being lazy' was used as a strategy to protect self-worth (Jackson, 2002 cited in Burke, 2007) as the participants clearly had some academic ability and were not as lazy as they led me to believe, given the qualifications that they gained. It was more that being recognised as someone who needed "...a shed load of support..." (Participant 12) in an alien environment appears to have made them worry about how this made them look to people they did not know. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, excessive support in an environment where it was the norm was viewed as acceptable and expected. Being known as someone who was getting support in an arena where it was not viewed as the norm appeared to be unacceptable for this small group of males. The most confusing aspect of this discourse was that these participants were not expecting any support, had they participated in HE anyway, yet they seemed to worry just as much about getting excessive support as about it not being available. However, in spite of this minority discourse, it is worth noting that both the majority of the male and all of the female participants had the same attitude to support. These participants were happy to talk about needing support, should they participate. There was no indication of this being viewed as a weakness it was something that was needed and something they valued.

Conclusions

This paper has indicated that participants appear to view the academic related support mechanisms offered at their sixth form as being a vital ingredient for success, and that the anticipation of less or no support, should they participate in

HE, was a reason behind their choice not to participate. The testimony suggests that participants seem to be comforted by the support they received at sixth form and that this, as part of the institutions' habitus, appears to give them a sense of belonging. Within their sixth forms, their habitus appears to align with the sub-field of sixth form education. They were attuned to the practices of the field and the unwritten rules of the game; they were 'fish in water'. As discussed throughout, the sixth form appears to have instilled a need for academic related support in the participants. Whilst this helped to build their self-confidence within the sub-field of sixth form education, without guarantees of similar levels of academic related support in HE, the participants gave the impression that they were not prepared to participate – to gamble. The expectation of academic related support was the norm in terms of their educational experiences and expectations, if they were going to succeed. The low expectations of academic support, should they participate, seemed to have a negative impact on them with regard to HE participation. Their cultural repertoire, their 'tool kit', did not appear to stretch to HE participation without a substantial amount of academic related support. Academic related support appeared to have been inculcated into their habitus and support as a value had been institutionalised within the sixth forms and normalised by the participants, so much so that the majority inferred that they were unable to participate unless they had guarantees of the same amounts and types of support, should they participate.

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