'There was never really any question of anything else': Young People's Agency, Institutional Habitus and the Transition to Higher Education

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Abstract

International research into educational decision-making has been extensive, focusing on the way in which young people and their families assess the different options open to them. However, to what extent can we assume that different groups of young people have equal access to the information needed to make such an assessment? And what role, if any, do schools play in this process? Using in-depth qualitative interviews from two schools with very different student intakes, this paper examines the key influences which shape young people's choices. Decisions about whether to go on to higher education are found to reflect three sets of processes: individual habitus; the institutional habitus of the school, as reflected in the amount and type of guidance provided; and young people's own agency, namely, the conscious process whereby students seek out information on different options and evaluate these alternatives.

Key words: social class; institutional habitus; educational decision-making; secondary schools

Introduction

International research into educational decision-making has been extensive. Studies have tended to focus on the way in which factors such as social class and gender shape post-school expectations and choices (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Shavit et al. 2007). Explanations for the patterns found can broadly be divided into frameworks which emphasise rational choice and those which emphasise social (or socio-cultural) reproduction. From a rational choice perspective, post-school choices are seen as reflecting an assessment of the relative costs and benefits attached to different options, costs and benefits which differ by social class (Erikson and Jonsson 1996). The assumption made is that the decisions taken are rational but little attention has been given to the information used by young people in evaluating their options. Social reproduction theorists focus, in contrast, on the way in which different economic, cultural and social capitals are possessed by different social classes and the resulting formation of different dispositions to learning, exemplified in the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1984).

Both sets of theories can be seen as devoting comparatively little attention to the impact of school organisation and process. Rational choice theorists focus on decision-making at the level of the family and/or the young person, tending to view the school as a 'black box' rather than unpacking the potential role of the school in shaping aspirations. In contrast, Bourdieu's theory has been extended to allow for the effects of 'institutional habitus' on post-school choices (Reay et al. 2001, 2005). However, the way in which institutional habitus plays out at the school level has not been fully unpacked.

A further issue relates to the relative importance of structure and agency in young people's decision-making. There has been considerable debate about Bourdieu's work, with some commentators arguing that his focus on habitus as durable and largely unconscious results in an overly-deterministic explanation (Jenkins 2002) while other theorists maintain that the framework allows for the possibility of agency and even, in certain contexts, reflexivity (Reay 2004; Sweetman 2003; Adams 2006). Even if we accept the latter perspective, it is clear that Bourdieu's framework does not generally focus on 'deliberate, knowing, decision-making' (Jenkins 2002, p. 97). In this paper, we therefore use the term 'agency' to reflect the conscious decisions made by young people in deciding whether to go to university and which college or course to attend. In this way, we allow for potential variations in expected pathways within individual schools and between schools of similar social composition, reflecting the way in which young people negotiate and use different sources of information and advice, an issue that has been relatively neglected in previous research.

By comparing student experiences in a fee-paying middle-class school and a working-class school drawing on the Irish Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS), this paper provides new insights into the kinds of information and advice which shape social class differentiation in the transition to higher education. Using qualitative interviews with students and staff in each school, we examine the level and nature of formal guidance and whether guidance structures and school values reinforce or counter prior student expectations of progressing to higher education. Post-school planning is here conceptualised as reflecting three sets of processes: individual (and familial) habitus, that is, the young person's dispositions and orientations which have developed interactively over their life-time; the institutional habitus of the school; and 'agency',

the conscious way in which young people assess and choose among different post-school options. Before presenting our study findings, we outline existing research on the influence of school context on the transition to higher education.

Schools and the transition to higher education

Research in a number of European countries (Iannelli 2004; Pustjens et al. 2004) has shown that schools differ in the proportion of students going on to university, controlling for factors such as gender, social background and prior performance. A body of research conducted in the United States, dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, indicated the way in which the social class composition of the school operated as an influence on college aspirations and entry (Boyle 1966; Bain and Anderson 1974). Fewer studies have tried to unpack the mechanisms underlying this compositional effect, although recent work using the concept of institutional habitus would appear to have addressed this gap to some extent. Institutional habitus can be regarded as the impact of a social group on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through organisations such as schools (McDonough 1997; Reay et al. 2001, 2005). In this way, social class becomes embedded into the school organisation and culture over time, although this can change as schools and catchment areas mutually shape and reshape each other. Bourdieu's concept of institutional habitus can thus help to explain how different sets of influences come together to make certain choices for students unthinkable, possible or probable (Bourdieu 1984). Young people who are members of the dominant groups enjoy advantages in decision-making through their prior knowledge of, and easy access to, various forms of capital (economic, social and cultural) (Ghosh, Michelson and Anyon 2007; Stanton-Salazar 1997). The emphasis on academic pathways in schools serving middle-class areas will reinforce existing

student and parental ambitions and views. Through its institutional habitus, a school may thus convey particular views of higher education to students, which may even include 'tastes' for specific institutions.

While the concept of institutional habitus is now commonly used in research on transitions to higher education, few studies have examined the concrete processes whereby institutional habitus influences student decision-making. In a study of four US high schools, McDonough (1997) indicated that school habitus is manifest through curricular offers, that is, providing the kinds of subjects which facilitate college entry, and through guidance facilities. McDonough's work appears to suggest that the *amount* of guidance provision is a key factor. Other research, however, appears to suggest that guidance may play a potential role in challenging classed expectations; guidance counsellors are found to be especially important sources of college-related information for young people with no family traditions, or experience, of higher education who make a choice to pursue such a pathway (McDonough 1997; Carbrera and La Nasa 2000; Perna and Titus 2004; Foskett et al. 2008). The extent to which the nature of school-based guidance reinforces or challenges 'taken for granted' assumptions about the progression to higher education has, however, rarely been examined.

The framework adopted here is that institutional habitus is manifest through learning organisation and process within the school and through guidance provision. The paper focuses on the influence of guidance provision, bracketing off the issue of learning organisation and process for current purposes. Previous research on this cohort of students has shown the ways in which the social class mix of the school influences

both achievement and retention through a range of practices, including ability grouping, access to higher level subjects, pace of instruction and teacher expectations (Smyth et al. 2006). This paper draws on the concepts of institutional habitus and of young people's agency in order to better understand how expectations are formed and decisions made in two contrasting school settings where formal guidance, informal influence and individual agency interact to shape young people's post-school decisions.

The Irish educational system

The Irish secondary system is comprised of a three year lower secondary programme, at the end of which students take a nationally standardised examination, the Junior Certificate. Grades achieved in this examination influence the type and level of subjects that students can access at upper secondary level (Smyth and Calvert forthcoming). The lower secondary phase is followed by an optional 'Transition Year', and a two-year upper secondary programme, at the end of which students take the nationally standardised Leaving Certificate examination. Over four-fifths of students stay on in school to the end of upper secondary level. The Irish educational system can be characterised as 'general', rather than vocationally specific, and relatively undifferentiated in comparative terms (Smyth et al. 2001). At least in theory, therefore, the vast majority (93%) of young people who complete upper secondary education are eligible for entry to higher education. As well as higher education, other routes open to school leavers include Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) (further education) courses, apprenticeships, other State training schemes, a 'gap year' and paid employment.

In Ireland, applications for undergraduate degree and sub-degree courses within higher education are centralised nationally through the Central Applications Office (CAO). Applications must be submitted by the end of January in the academic year prior to entry; thus, students make their choices four months before their final examination. Entry is mainly based on performance in the Leaving Certificate examination, with applicants awarded 'points' for each grade achieved up to a total of six subjects. Because the Irish system operates on the basis of *numerus clausus*, applicants for specific places are ranked in terms of points (grades) with the highest-ranking candidates offered a college place. The points required for higher education entry may vary between fields of study and institutions as well as from year to year, because of variation in student demand for certain courses. Participation in tertiary education has expanded rapidly in recent years, with over half of the secondary school cohort now making the transition to college (McCoy et al. 2010).

Guidance and counselling have been provided in secondary schools in Ireland since the mid-1960s, with schools allocated guidance hours on the basis of the number of students. The 1998 Education Act stipulated the provision of guidance as a statutory requirement in schools, specifying two central aims – ensuring "that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices" and promoting "the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students". The Act does not, however, specify what constitutes appropriate guidance. As a result, research has indicated that the relative focus on educational guidance (e.g. choice of subjects and subject levels), provision of information about post-school options and personal counselling varies markedly across schools (McCoy et al. 2006). Similarly, the extent to which guidance provision involves timetabled classes as opposed to

appointments with individual students varies significantly. In the context of what are perceived by principals and guidance counsellors to be inadequate resources, more time tends to be allocated to the senior classes and much of the effort focuses on completing the application for higher education entry (McCoy et al. 2006). In addition, guidance counsellors in schools serving working-class populations are more likely to emphasise the personal support aspect of their role than those in other schools. The way in which guidance is provided in the two case-study schools analysed in this paper will be discussed in later sections.

Data collection and analysis

This paper draws on information from questionnaires and in-depth qualitative interviews with final year students and school personnel in two case-study schools. Interviews with guidance counsellors and school principals focussed on the organisational structure and ethos of the school in relation to preparing students for life after school. Focus group interviews with students dealt with their opinions of formal guidance at the school, the extent to which they access informal guidance, and their plans for the future. This in-depth analysis has allowed for greater insight into how students make decisions in their final year and, in particular, the factors influencing their aspirations. At the time of interview, applications for courses in higher education had been submitted, but the further education (PLC) application process was still ongoing.

This paper forms part of the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) which involves over 900 students across twelve case-study schools in Ireland. Students in these schools have been followed since their transition to secondary education right through

lower and upper secondary levels. This paper contrasts the experiences of final year students in two schools with very different social class intakes, Fig Lane and Barrack Street, thus allowing for in-depth analysis and direct comparison. This analysis is based on questionnaire data and focus groups which were held with four groups of six students in Barrack Street in addition to individual interviews held with a guidance counsellor and the school principal. Data from student questionnaires in Fig Lane are used in addition to focus group interviews with nine groups of six students. Data from interviews with two guidance counsellors and the school principal are also analysed.

Our first school, Fig Lane, is a coeducational fee-paying secondary school which is middle-class in profile and located in a large town. Students are very engaged in schoolwork and teacher-student relations are broadly positive, with low levels of school drop-out. Students had high levels of Junior Certificate performance and the vast majority intend to go on to higher education. Barrack Street, our second school, has been specifically selected as it is somewhat unusual compared to the other working-class schools in the study. In contrast to Fig Lane, student intake at Barrack Street girls' school is working class and local, although the school once served a larger catchment area and had a more mixed social intake. Students in Barrack Street are more engaged in schoolwork than students in other working-class schools and have already performed well in their Junior Certificate (lower secondary) exam. One of the most notable features of Barrack Street, however, is the aspirations of students who intend pursuing courses in further and higher education when they leave school.

The data presented here draw on student discussions about formal guidance at school, other informal influences impacting on their post-school decisions and their

expectations for the future. Using data from student questionnaires and face-to-face interviews with sixth year students from Fig Lane and Barrack Street provided rich insights into the process of decision-making. We situate these young people's opinions within the social and institutional structures and seek evidence of the different ways in which young people's post-school decisions are formed.

Fig Lane

Knowledge of higher education institutions, college courses and the application process is a form of cultural capital commonly held by more privileged families (Lamont and Lareau 1988). Fig Lane students did not appear to be the first generation in their family to attend college. As a result, students could ask advice from their parents and other people they knew who had done certain courses:

> Parents and people that you know that are doing certain courses.
> Yeah, ask people that done the course before.

Students, however, are not very dependent on their parents in making post-school choices, with just 30 per cent regarding their mothers, and 34 per cent their fathers, as very important in their decision. In many ways, the choice of higher education has become normalised over time through family and peer expectations:

> Interviewer: What has helped you to decide that you want to go to college?
> There was never really any question of anything else.
> Yeah, you're just missing out if you don't go to college.
> I suppose family as well.
> Yeah, you're kind of expected to go to college.

These comments convey an extraordinarily high level of expectations and confidence. It is not simply that they aspired to attend college, rather that they planned on it.

Through its institutional habitus a school may convey particular views of higher education opportunities to its students (Reay et al. 2005). Schools attended by middle-

class students tend to provide more guidance counselling and support through the college application process (Mullen 2009). Fig Lane not only provides students with the rigorous academic training necessary to meet college admission requirements but also supplies an important form of socialisation that helps students prepare for higher education (see Cookson and Persell 1985). Formal guidance at Fig Lane is structured with students participating in a weekly guidance class and a timetabled one-to-one interview with the guidance counsellor (in the first term). Over 80 per cent of students had had over four guidance classes in their final year but despite this level of provision Fig Lane students were dissatisfied with guidance class (just 15% being 'very satisfied'):

> I found he didn't help us as much, he should have helped us a lot.
> Yeah I didn't think it was that good.
> He didn't tell us, he didn't really show me any, like courses that I'd like.
> He [would] just kind of stick on videos about the CAO.

Students at Fig Lane did not seem to lack information; rather they viewed guidance classes where their own specific interests were not being discussed as 'a waste of time' when they could be studying for the exams instead:

> I think they should do it like he should tell you what's on this week and if you are interested in that, go, if you are not just go and study.

Students therefore often had little interest in the guidance provision as they had already made up their mind:

> Didn't make much of a difference to me anyway…If you know what you're going to do, it doesn't make any difference.

They seem to have a clear idea of what they want to do regardless of the information they receive from the guidance counsellor. Just 26 per cent stated they would like to know more about the different options available and just 17 per cent felt their guidance counsellor was important in them making their post-school decision.

Fig Lane school holds expectations about suitable destinations for its students. Most students at the school (76%) expect to go to university when they leave and these expectations are supported by guidance strategies which involve college visits, assisting with college applications and contacting college representatives. Students attend three open days and the choice is theirs as to which institution's open day they wish to attend. Overall the guidance counsellor is more hands-on and there appears to be a direct link between this élite school and an élite university where the guidance counsellor has personally organised tours of the campus and opportunities for students to meet with college staff and students:

> They [students] were given a general kind of admissions talk on all the programmes and they were then brought off in groups on average of about ten, on tours of the campus, by present students of that institution, and they found that fantastic and they were able to ask the questions. And then they were brought back and certain faculty heads then spoke to them about their own individual faculties and the course on offer. And they were treated to lunch then and brought back.

Both students and staff recognise the effectiveness of this guidance strategy which normalises college entry, familiarises students with university life and provides unique access to college information.

The principal is explicit about the role of the 'guidance programme' in preparing students for, in many cases, two specific prestigious universities. Parental expectations influence the focus of the guidance provided at the school:

> [Names of colleges] would be our big follow-on institutions here, and hence that's why we have put the programme together. The vast majority would go on to those courses and hence that's why our sixth year classes and our guidance programme would be geared towards that. I would say there's an expectation amongst the parents out there of me that that is a major part of my role to prepare them for applications to those places.

Some information is provided on alternatives to university such as PLC courses and apprenticeships. However, Fig Lane did not organise any open days to PLC colleges, despite some students wanting to do these courses when they leave:

> They only organised for the ones they wanted to go to like [name of university] and what else [name of university], that was it. But not any of the PLC courses like, say a lot of people want to do PLC courses but no open days for them, organised now by the school.

The guidance counsellor did, however, go through the options for students wishing to pursue PLC courses, training programmes or other options:

> The PLC sector we would go through eh that, applications and the whole systems there.
> Different options, the different ways into courses.
> FAS and all those, all the other things if you don't want to go to college.

Despite this information being made available, just 3 per cent of students surveyed in Fig Lane expect to go on to do a PLC course when they leave school.

When we examine the role of individual agency at Fig Lane, students appear quite independent in their post-school decision making. They depend little on their friends in making their decisions about what to do after school, with just 12 per cent feeling their friends were a 'very important' influence. However, on closer examination, it seems that students' subjective assessments are most likely based on the multiple habituses of family and school over longer periods of time. For these students, decision making in sixth year is not about whether to go to college but rather about which college to go to and what courses to take. Social networks seem to play a role where students have decided to pursue higher education and wish to gather specific information about courses or the type of college to attend. Students assess their own 'institutional fit' in this process. For this student, the choice of university is obvious based on her personal associations and familiarity with the college:

> My friend has a house in [name of town] so [name of university] is kind of the obvious and I really, really like the college anyway and my dad went there as well.

In some cases students are seeking a particular field of study, for others aspects of the campus environment were important to them (Mullen 2009). The history or prestige associated with the college also plays a role:

> Whichever is like the best history of that course, like say [name of university] would be good for medicine, if you wanted to do medicine because they're prestigious or whatever.
> Good craic [fun] as well.
> You can't go to a college you're not going to enjoy.

Barrack Street

Research recognises that working-class students are not only disadvantaged in social and economic terms, but they also lack the social access to information about higher education available to their more affluent peers (see, for example, Reay et al. 2005). Disadvantaged students and their families tend to be more dependent on their schools for access to the resources relevant to post-secondary educational attainment. In contrast to Fig Lane, students in Barrack Street are the first generation in their families who (intend to) go to college and, as a result, specific knowledge about college entry and courses is not easily available at home. Despite this, family influences play a significant role and students consider their mothers (75%) and fathers (60%) to be 'very important' influences in their post-school decision making. There are two important contrasts with the Fig Lane group: firstly, students in Barrack Street are much more reliant on their parents in considering their potential options; and secondly, the role of mothers is much more important than that of fathers, indicating that familial habitus may be gendered for these working-class girls.

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Guidance counsellors are especially important sources of college-related information where young people with no family traditions, or experience, of higher education make a choice to pursue such a pathway (McDonough 1997; Perna and Thomas 2004; Foskett et al. 2008). However, like students in Fig Lane, they are frustrated by the lack of adequate guidance. The difference is, however, that Barrack Street students lack specific information about post-school options and they feel the onus is on them to gather their own information about higher education:

> I don't think it's [guidance counselling] helpful.
> She gives you like books, she doesn't organise like things to do with you, like say to go to colleges and have a look around colleges, she doesn't do that.

In contrast to Fig Lane, students in Barrack Street show a clear lack of knowledge of the colleges they can apply for and in particular the specific courses available to them. Guidance provision at the school appears to be less structured and students are dissatisfied with the number of guidance classes and one-to-one sessions they have received in their final year with just 19 per cent having been to more than four guidance classes (compared to over 80% of Fig Lane students). Fifty-nine per cent of students in Barrack Street wanted to know more about the different options available to them and 67 per cent would like more information on the different courses available in college (compared to 26% in Fig Lane).

Overall our findings show that students have quite negative interactions with their guidance counsellor who they feel 'does not care' about them or have enough time to meet them. Students consider 'open days' held at various colleges and universities to be important sources of information, although the school only allowed them to attend one in their final year. When some students attempted to go to more than one open day, they got into trouble with teachers who felt they were trying to miss school:

> You know like you don't know which college you want to go to so you have a look at a few, then one of the teachers was running amok saying 'what did yous go to all them for?'. You know, because they are saying we are dossing and missing classes and all.

When we spoke to the guidance counsellor at Barrack Street, a very different opinion of formal guidance emerged. She explains how each student gets an 'individual appointment' to go through their subjects, possible points and aspirations for the future. She feels they are 'comfortable' about coming to see her:

> You would of built up a relationship since they were in first year, we try to work with them along the way, so by the time they come into sixth year they'd be quite comfortable about coming [to one-to-one sessions].

Although students feel the guidance counsellor is 'too busy' to see them, she feels that due to the small class sizes at the school that they are given 'extra time' and guidance support and a 'reasonable preparation for life'. This highlights the different constructions of what guidance counselling is for the guidance counsellor and the students. Counselling for students from this 'type of school' often focuses on personal counselling rather than specific college counselling (Rosenbaum et al. 1996). For some students, guidance support appears to be influenced by perceived social problems and 'family issues' at the school:

> They may have broken homes, they may have sometimes a drug problem in the family, yeah. We would have issues around that for some of them.

There is a suggestion that the extra time given to students and increased demand for guidance services is to do with the 'dysfunction in some of their backgrounds' rather than career-related matters:

> Here they really do get a fair bit of individual attention, now they need that here, our type of school requires that because sometimes … they are coming from problematic backgrounds…but I do think that in generally we give them a fair bit of time, a fair grounding in....the rules of life and the expectations of life really.

The principal also refers to the 'backgrounds' of students and the objective of the school as being to allow students to become 'independent' and 'make a life for themselves':

> I know teachers enforce it a lot and we enforce it that they're educating young women to be independent women and there's a huge amount of that because of the backgrounds that they come from.

These comments provide an insight into the cultural differences between students and staff. It is unclear what the 'preparation for life', 'rules of life' and 'expectation of life' mean to the guidance counsellor, and what implications this has for the advice given to students. What emerges is a gap in expectations where students appear to have higher aspirations than their teachers and guidance counsellors. Although over half of those surveyed expect to begin a degree (52%) in the first year after leaving school, student aspirations seem to be in conflict with expectations of their guidance counsellor who wants them to be 'realistic' and warns that 'they mightn't get the points' for degree programmes:

> I can't even talk to my guidance counsellor. Just, she just puts me off every time I go to her like so I'll do it myself.
> And she shouldn't be doing that, she should be encouraging you.

The guidance counsellor is not shy about influencing college decisions and even convincing students that they should not apply to college (Rosenbaum et al. 1996). Students feel 'put down' by the choices given to them and the reaction of the guidance counsellor when these 'options' are contested:

> The career guidance counsellor always puts us down as well … she says 'I don't think … you have to be realistic [name of student]', I go 'what do you mean realistic, that's what I want, I'll work for them points if that's what I want to do'. 'Ah but you have to be realistic, why don't you go for this?'. I don't want to go for that like.

Other teachers have made it clear to students that they expect very little of them when they leave school. Students are upset by suggestions that they will not 'go for anything' and become pregnant:

> They are just saying you are not going to go for anything, we are not going to do anything, you're all going to be pregnant, you know, that's what he's saying to us. We will be on the welfare. Like … anyway to students like, it's disgraceful.
> Sometimes I feel like getting As.

Instead of withdrawing or becoming disengaged from school, students appear to react to these low expectations and are mobilised to do well at school, which is an unusual form of resistance.

Low expectations are also evident in how staff at the school blur the boundaries between further and higher education in discussing post-school options. The term 'college' is used to describe both further education and degree courses which, in an Irish context, is significant as life chances following on from these qualifications are very different. This use of the generic term 'college' highlights the discrepancy in expectations between the staff and students and exemplifies teachers' low expectations for students. The guidance counsellor uses the term 'college' for any education where students go 'a little bit further':

> Going to college is important for them, college is, so they can take pride in going a little bit further and getting a good qualification.

Differentiating between the types of post-school education may not seem necessary if, because of family background, students are only expected to have limited progression. Students, however, are clearer about this distinction and feel the school is sidetracking them towards Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses instead of courses in higher education:

> Yeah like for people who want to go onto college like they [are] just shoving PLC courses down your neck. Like there's nothing wrong with PLC courses and all but if you have your heart set on college like and someone's telling you PLC courses all the time and telling you that you won't get into college like. Actually saying you are not going to get into college, don't bother trying like or anything like.

Reflecting the school tradition of a transition to further education, 37 per cent of the girls expect to be in a PLC course in the year after leaving school. When students deviate from this well established post-school pathway and wish to progress to courses in higher education, they meet with some resistance:

> Like when we were doing the CAO she was like 'this is a joke I haven't seen this many people filling out CAOs in all my life you know'. You know in the room.
> Basically putting you down like.
> There was 20 of us or something and she was like wow this has never been like this and all. As if to say to people like what are *you* doing this for.
> Yeah.
> Like she should give everyone an equal chance like, whether you are able for it or not like. If they want to do it let them like.

The principal too expresses surprise at the number of college applicants and attributes this ambition to the peer effect among a particular 'group of girls':

> This is a very ambitious group of girls, this one, it's great to have them, you know. But it depends on each year, you know. Yeah, they are very ambitious as a group this year and they are rubbing off each other.

He views the school context as a secondary factor and highlights the individual agency among this group who are different to other cohorts in that they are 'ambitious' and reinforce each other's goals and plans. This agency is evident in how students gather information and view any potential sources as important in their post-school decision making. Although dissatisfied with the information available, students consider their teachers and in particular the career guidance counsellor as very important; peer influences are also strong for this group, with over forty per cent considering their friends to be 'very important' in influencing their post-school

choices. It would appear that, in this case, friendship groups played a role in supporting non-traditional choices rather than adopting the 'taken for granted' route. The most important source of advice and support is their parents, especially their mothers, indicating the ways in which social class and gender interact in complex ways; the mother-daughter relationship is thus used as a resource by girls in Barrack Street, albeit in a context where their mothers have no direct experience of higher education.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the processes influencing post-school planning among final year students in two secondary schools with contrasting social intakes. Decisions about whether to go on to higher education are seen as reflecting three sets of processes: individual (and familial) habitus, that is, the dispositions, preferences and orientations developed by the young person over time; the institutional habitus of the school; and young people's own agency, here taken to mean the conscious process whereby students seek out information on different options and evaluate these alternatives.

There is a large body of work, centring on the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu, which has analysed the implications of the unequal distribution of economic, cultural and social resources for an individual's habitus (see, for example, Robson and Sanders 2009). Our analyses indicate that students in Barrack Street, a working-class school, and Fig Lane, a middle-class school, have very different sets of economic, cultural and social capitals upon which to draw in the educational field, in keeping with social reproduction theory. Fig Lane students have parents and siblings who have gone on to

higher education, providing them with knowledge about what to expect from college and information on which university to attend and what to study. In contrast, for the girls attending Barrack Street, university is geographically closer but culturally far removed from their immediate social networks. These girls also experience a mismatch between the dominant culture exemplified by the school and their own working-class culture, with their families described as 'dysfunctional' or 'problem' by some school staff.

Quite a number of studies have gone beyond a focus on individual and familial habitus to explore the way in which social class can operate through the school context to shape student choices and plans. However, fewer studies have unpacked the way in which the institutional habitus of the school is reflected in day-to-day organisation and process (for exceptions, see McDonough 1997; Reay 2001, 2005). This paper highlights contrasting institutional habituses in Barrack Street and Fig Lane, habituses which are made manifest through the academic climate and through guidance provision. We focus here on the nature of guidance provision but it is worth noting the way in which the assumption of a seamless transition to higher education is built into the academic climate of Fig Lane, in particular through the strong encouragement of all students to take higher level subjects (see Smyth et al. 2006).

Institutional habitus is reflected in the nature of guidance within the school. Barrack Street girls receive less guidance time than students in Fig Lane because they attend a smaller school. But the crucial difference is the nature of the guidance given. Students in Fig Lane are given detailed information on the type of courses available within higher education and taken to several college open days. There is an in-built

assumption that they will go on to university, to the extent that students report receiving little information on other possible options, such as further education. Guidance in Fig Lane therefore reinforces individual and familial habitus in such a way that the decision is not about *whether* to go to college but about *which* university to attend and *what* to study there. In contrast, the girls in Barrack Street report receiving much less information and guidance appears directed at providing the students with information about 'realistic' options, that is, about further education rather than university. They are 'allowed' to attend one college day but a desire to obtain more information by attending several open days is ironically interpreted by school staff as a covert form of truancy.

The two groups of students have differential access to social capital through their family networks. In Fig Lane, student access to a family network familiar with the 'rules of the game' in higher education is reinforced by the social networks of school staff. The guidance counsellor in Fig Lane had the connections necessary to arrange a 'special' open day for the students, one which provided information more closely tailored to their needs and preferences. American research has indicated the way in which schools can adopt different strategies of linkage with universities, in some cases acting as 'brokers' in the transition process (Hill 2008). The system of higher education application in Ireland is more centralised, allowing less room for the school to intervene directly in the process. However, even in this context, schools can develop closer links with certain universities, links which grant students privileged information and 'insider' knowledge, as is the case in Fig Lane.

Differences between the schools in institutional habitus, coupled with differential possession of economic, cultural and social capitals on the part of students, would lead us to expect marked differences in the post-school plans of students in the two schools. Such differences are indeed evident – 82 per cent of Fig Lane students plan to go on to higher education compared with 52 per cent of Barrack Street students. However, the social reproduction perspective does not provide an explanation of why slightly more than half of the students in this working-class school plan to go to college, a significantly higher percentage than for other working-class schools in the broader study upon which we draw.

Our analyses point to two sets of factors which are needed to unpack this pattern. Firstly, previous studies have often treated school institutional habitus as almost monolithic in nature rather than the on-going result of tensions and contradictions. Barrack Street can be seen as part of a broader Irish tradition of religious-run schools catering for working-class and lower middle-class groups in inner city areas. Historically, such schools, while not providing a classical élite education, nonetheless provided an important route to social mobility through academic achievement, especially for young men. Over time, Barrack Street school became 'creamed off', attracting a more economically disadvantaged intake from a narrower catchment area, but important elements of the earlier academic habitus remained, in particular a strong emphasis on homework and study. This emphasis provided the girls in the school with, what Bourdieu terms, institutionalised cultural capital in the form of relatively good grades in their lower secondary examination. This cultural capital can thus serve as a resource even when other forms of capital, especially economic and social, are absent.

Secondly, studies using a social reproduction perspective have often been criticised for neglecting the role of young people's agency in the processes at play. This contrasts with the rational choice perspective which emphasises the assessment of the different costs and benefits attached to various pathways. Our analyses indicate differences within, as well as between, schools in the future plans of young people. While Fig Lane students generally take the transition to university as given, they evaluate the different colleges and courses open to them in terms of their academic interests, the social 'fit' of the college and so on. The students in Barrack Street appear to attempt to obtain information on potential pathways through as many sources as possible. In the words of Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), the girls attending Barrack Street 'are neither dopes nor pawns' but are making 'pragmatically rational decisions'. Moreover, both sets of students are able to critically evaluate the information they receive through school-based guidance. Our findings point to the need to integrate the rational choice and social reproduction perspectives. Young people make rational decisions about attending higher education but this rationality is 'bounded' by their individual, familial and institutional habituses and it can in no way be assumed that the information to which students have access is complete or impartial.

Some of the girls in Barrack Street go further than critical evaluation, using particular forms of capital, especially the cultural capital they have secured through reasonably good exam results and time invested in homework and study, to challenge the guidance counsellor's perspective of a 'realistic' pathway, namely, further education. In the interviews conducted, the girls overtly criticise the construction of their

horizons as limited; in effect, they challenge the 'taken for granted'. Unlike much of the literature on working-class male resistance through misbehaviour and/or withdrawal from school (see, for example, Willis 1977), for at least some of the working-class girls in this study academic achievement was itself a form of resistance to classed expectations.

In conclusion, this paper has focused on intentions regarding higher education participation among final year secondary students. Research is currently being conducted to follow this cohort of young people into the post-school period and document their actual destinations. This should yield further insights into the complexity of the decision-making process and of the role of structure and agency in shaping young people's early career paths.

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