

The June edition of Nexus focuses on the educational aspirations and opportunities of young people in Australia. Education is an important factor in people's lives and a major interest for many in the Social Stratification Thematic Group. The quality and level of education a person receives shapes their subsequent life chances. Education opens and closes doors to occupations, influences the quality of jobs attainable, and facilitates access to particular levels of income and standards of living. Throughout a person's life, education has ramifications for a wide range of other fundamental outcomes including health. Individuals' educational aspirations, and the opportunities they have to realise these aspirations, are shaped by where individuals start out in life. Class and socioeconomic inequalities in education have been noted throughout Australian history, yet remain today. This has profound implications for the life chances of young Australians from disadvantaged backgrounds and needs to remain on the public policy agenda.

The articles in this edition suggest that across the country young people's educational aspirations, and the barriers they face in fulfilling these aspirations, are being investigated using a range of approaches. The articles focus on young people nearing the end of the compulsory years of schooling and at the completion of senior secondary school, times when crucial educational decisions are being made. From interviews with young people growing up in low income families, Lucy Nelms and Janet Taylor note that high educational aspirations do not always match behaviour. Merete Skovgaard Schmidt takes up some of these issues in her doctoral research, which examines the mismatch between aspirations (to continue education) and attainments (early school leaving) in a rural context. Daniel Edwards details the structural

constraints facing young people attempting to gain entry to university. Taking a broader cross-national approach, Joanna Sikora and Lawrence Saha explore the educational aspirations of 15 year olds in over 40 countries. Many of their findings are in line with those of Australian studies, but they also find interesting and counterintuitive differences between countries with differing levels of inequality and economic development. A timely reminder of the unique but complementary perspectives offered by qualitative and quantitative approaches is provided by Daniel Edwards and Martin Forsey. Their concluding comments can be applied to each of the articles in this edition — despite different methodological approaches, each suggests that schooling in Australia remains one of haves/have nots and winners/losers.

Planning is underway for the Social Stratification Thematic Group session at the TASA and SAANZ Joint Conference in Auckland in December. Other social stratification activities around the country include two winter workshops being held at the University of Queensland in July. The first, by Bruce Western (Princeton University), is on inequality in a comparative perspective. The second, by Paula England (Stanford University), is on gender in labour markets and families. More information on these workshops can be found at www.socialscience.uq.edu.au.

If you would like to learn more about the Social Stratification Thematic Group, please contact us www.stratification.org.

Julie McMillan and James Rice
Co-conveners

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Michael Gilding

Sociology at QUT

Most of you, I imagine, will have heard of the proposed closure of the School of Humanities and Human Services, and its Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Social Science programs, at Queensland University of Technology. If the closure proceeds, there will be no dedicated Sociology program at QUT.

QUT's Vice Chancellor, Professor Peter Coaldrake, has justified the closure by stating that QUT is concentrating its resources into technology and business. In close connection, he has declared that 'QUT's reputation in the humanities is very largely in the creative industries space'. This rationale seems to be grounded in the federal government's view that Australian universities need to specialise more, rather than offering the same set of programs.

As President of TASA, I have written to Professor Coaldrake as part of the consultation process. I have observed that no matter how universities specialise, they still need the skills and insights of social scientists. In the case of QUT, I observed that major technology and business projects increasingly depend upon the input of the social sciences for their delivery – evident, for example, in the recent controversy around recycled water in Queensland.

Yet my response is a reactive one, grounded in a narrow instrumental understanding of the social sciences – as if their only purpose lies in their value to technology and business. It is strategically difficult in such defensive circumstances to make a comprehensive case for the value of the social sciences.

These events should remind us that there is nothing guaranteed about the future of Sociology – as several of our members observed in Germov and McGee's *History of Australian Sociology* (2005). TASA – and sociologists around Australia – will need to develop more proactive strategies to promote the value of Sociology – within universities and beyond.

The TASA Executive is considering one strategy directed to this end – namely, the employment of a media officer. Media coverage of sociological research is often sporadic and ad hoc, based upon chance rather than design. A TASA media officer would promote sociological research in Australia – for example, work published in *Journal of Sociology* and *Health Sociology Review* – on a more systematic basis. Of course this will only work if sociologists themselves are willing to engage with the media.

At a more local level, it is important that sociologists – in consultation with other academics in the social sciences and humanities – develop coherent strategies directed towards their own universities. To the extent that universities specialise more, we will need to engage in this process – both in shaping the ways in which they specialise, and in demonstrating the enduring relevance of the social sciences.

Ranking Journals

In the last issue of *Nexus* I discussed the possible ranking of sociology journals in anticipation of the RQF. I observed that there are good arguments against and for ranking.

Since then I have been contacted by a variety of members about this issue. Some are concerned that ranking is a pointless exercise in sociology on account of its disparateness; some are concerned that any ranking scheme will discriminate against local journals, and some are concerned about the risks of doing nothing, leaving our destiny in the hands of remote bureaucracies. I share all of these concerns.

In this context, the TASA Executive has asked Professor Mark Weston (UQ) to write a position paper on a ranking scheme for sociology journals in Australia. As far as I know, Mark has more experience on this issue than any other Australian sociologist, to the extent that he developed the ranking scheme at the University of Queensland. Mark has generously agreed to our request.

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Michael Gilding

(Cont.)

Once Mark has completed his paper, we will notify TASA members by the e-list, and post the paper on the TASA website with an Online Forum.

Please participate in the Forum. It's an important issue, and the Executive will only be able to take your views into account to the extent that you express them!

The TASA Office

The TASA Office is changing. Kate Riseley, who filled in for Gabrielle Rowan as Executive Officer while she was on maternity leave, has left to complete her thesis. And sadly, Gabrielle has decided not to return.

Our stalwart Queenslanders on the Executive, Wendy Hillman and Tara Renae McGee, are currently interviewing applicants for the position. We will have a new Executive Officer soon (hopefully by the time this newsletter reaches you).

In the meantime, thank you to Gabrielle and Kate for their sterling work running the TASA Office. And thank you to our members for their patience during this time of transition.

Michael Gilding
Swinburne University of Technology

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR AUSTRALIAN SOCIOLOGIST

In the latest version of the web based encyclopaedia Wikipedia, the worldwide entry for Sociology features the work of Australian Sociologist Professor Evan Willis (See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociology>).

In the suggestions for further readings, amongst the references to the works of Merton, Giddens and Ritzer amongst others is the primer 'The Sociological Quest' written by Willis. Featured is the US edition of the book published by Rutgers University Press in 1996. This grew out of the Australian edition, now in its fourth edition, first published by Allen and Unwin in 1993. There is also now a Norwegian adaptation, entitled "Pa sosiologisk spor" published with one of Willis' colleagues Aksel Tjora from Trondheim University, by publishers Tapir akademisk forlag in 2006.

Evan is Professor of Sociology and head of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe, and currently splits his time between the Bundoora and the Albury -Wodonga campuses. He has taught large first year courses for more than 25 years. In 1982 he received the Jean Martin Award for Best Thesis in Social Theory and Research (awarded by the then Sociological Association of Australia and N.Z.). In 2003, his book based on his PhD thesis "Medical Dominance" (published by Allen and Unwin in 1983; revised in 1989) was voted by peers as one of the ten most influential books in Australian sociology.

The Consequence of Increasing University Competition for the Educationally Disadvantaged

Daniel Edwards

Each year, the university pathway is chosen by many students completing the Victorian Certificate of Education. However, since the mid-1990s, a decreasing number of those with the ambition to attend university have been offered a place. The result has been a growing competition for higher education places in Victoria. Analysis of the consequences of this competition shows that the students who have been most affected are those in the more vulnerable positions in the education system. This raises issues about the capacity of the education system to provide equality of opportunity to Victorian students and is particularly concerning in the current context whereby 'it is increasingly recognised that Australians with low educational levels are vulnerable and at risk of being marginalised in a knowledge-based society in which labour markets require sophisticated skills and the capacity to access and interpret knowledge' (James 2002:2).

Growing competition for university in Victoria

Between 1996 and 2004 the number of students studying year 12 in Victoria rose by 11 per cent (or nearly 5,000 students) (ABS 2004).

In the same period, the number of university offers to year 12 students in Victoria decreased by 8 per cent (2,000 fewer places) (VTAC 1997; VTAC 2005). This change in supply and demand notably increased competition for university places. In particular, competition intensified for entry into universities that have traditionally been more academically accessible (i.e. their course entry levels are relatively low). Unlike the most prestigious universities, which employ high cut-off scores regardless of changes in the market, the academically accessible campuses are more sensitive to change in demand. Two universities in Melbourne which provide an example of this are Victoria University (VU) and La Trobe University, Bundoora. The entrance scores achieved by students gaining an offer to each of these universities rose appreciably

in the period between 1996 and 2004. In the case of VU, the median Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) of those receiving an offer increased from ten per cent below the median score of all students to three per cent above it. La Trobe increased from six to 16 per cent above the median (VTAC).

Consequences for the educationally disadvantaged

Outlined below are the fortunes of the Victorian government school sector in general, and then government school students in one particular part of Melbourne, in order to highlight the impact that this trend has had on disadvantaged groups.

... ..the proportion of government school completers gaining an offer to university declined from 57 per cent to 49 per cent.

Government school students face many hurdles in the education system. The calculation of year 12 ENTER scores (which determine entry to university in the majority of cases) is based on the assumption that all students are competing on a level playing field. However, the government school sector faces a number of disadvantages in comparison to other school sectors, particularly independent schools.

These include lower spending per student, lower socio-economic status (SES) of the student body, and the fact that they are often required to be welfare providers as well as education providers. These and other factors make the field less than level when it comes to the pursuit of post-school educational options.

Between 1996 and 2004, the proportion of government school completers gaining an offer to university declined from 57 per cent to 49 per cent. The growing competition also affected the other school sectors, but not nearly as severely: in 2004, 77 per cent of independent school students still gained a university offer (VTAC).

The increasing scores for entry to the more academically accessible university campuses were particularly detrimental for the fortunes of government school students. For example, the indexed median score of students gaining an offer to VU in 1996 was 0.90, the same as the median score of all government school students that year. As noted above, by 2004 the index for offers to VU had increased to 1.03. But the median government school score during this time had remained relatively unchanged (it was 0.89 in 2004). Therefore, actual academic achievement was not substantially declining in this time, but the rising academic entry requirements meant far fewer government school students gained access to this and other previously accessible campuses. The share of government school students gaining an offer to VU declined from 56 per cent in 1996 to 51 per cent in 2004 (see figure). The decline in the share of these students at La Trobe Bundoora was even more severe, from 53 per cent in 1996 to 44 per cent in 2004. At the same time, the share of the relatively higher scoring independent sector at VU and La Trobe grew by similar margins. These univer-

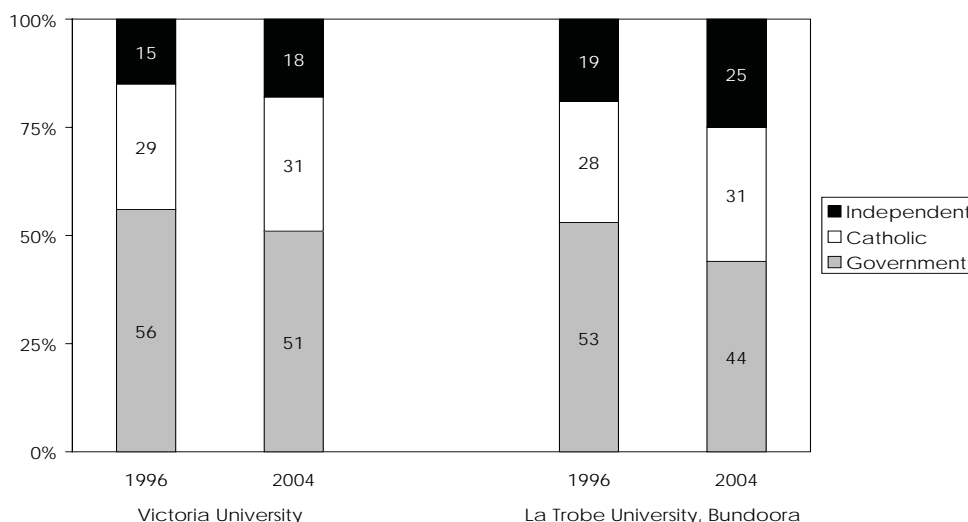
This issue has added complexity when the government school sector is examined on its own.

sities still provide a valuable pathway to university for government school students, but serious accessibility problems for future year 12 students are likely if the trend identified here continues.

This issue has added complexity when the government school sector is examined on its own. Within this sector there is a growing differentiation of outcomes. The outer south eastern fringe of Melbourne provides an example of an educationally disadvantaged area struggling as a consequence of growing academic competition. This area has relatively low SES (although by no means the lowest in Melbourne), students on average achieve low

ENTERs in year 12 and the area suffers as a result of geographical isolation from academically accessible university campuses (the few offering access to students with lower year 12 results are on the other side of the city in the west and north). Government school year 12 completers in this area are the least likely in Melbourne to enrol at university. The growing academic competition for university places has meant that students with marks that were likely to offer access to some universities in earlier years are no longer in a position to compete. In addition,

Figure 1: Share of offers to 'academically accessible' university campuses gained by different school sectors, 1996 and 2004 (Source: VTAC, unpublished 1996-97 & 2004-05)



The Consequence of Increasing University Competition for the Educationally Disadvantaged

(Cont.)

limited local availability of academically accessible university places in this region has meant that schools have diverted their attention to other post-school pathways. Vocational curriculum specialisation has become almost universal in secondary schools in this area, resulting in fewer academic options for government school students.

By contrast, in Boroondara, a relatively affluent area in the inner east of Melbourne, the proportion of government school students gaining an offer to university has increased during this time of growing competition. The social, cultural and financial advantages of many of the students at these schools, as well as their proximity to a wide range of university campuses and the willingness of some government schools in this area to concentrate on academic pathways, seemingly allows these students to thrive in the context of an increasingly competitive education market.

Conclusion

The competition outlined here has led to a stratification of educational opportunity for school students in Melbourne. The differentiation of outcomes has ramifications not only for the life chances of individual young people, but for individual communities and Australia as a whole.

In the context of a growing professional labour market (Birrell and Rapson 2006) and in addition to the well documented shortage in traditional trades, there is an acute need to provide a range of opportunities for young people to follow their desired post-school pathway. Those with the ambition and aptitude must be given a realistic chance to compete for university places regardless of the school they attend or the social, cultural and economic background of their family. Creating this equality of opportunity is a considerable challenge for federal and state governments. The first step in this direction should be to re-evaluate the organisation and specialisation of government school systems, to ensure students have access to a range of options within the public system. The second is to increase the number of government funded university places in Australia in order to rectify the current imbalance whereby we have a growing

population and an increasing professional workforce, but stagnation in the provision of university places.

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2007 Nexus Schedule

	<i>Submission Date</i>
Cultural Sociology	Friday, 24 August
Contact: Brad West Brad.West@flinders.edu.au	
Mental Health	Friday, 26 October
Contact: Julie Henderson Julie.Henderson@flinders.edu.au	

Life Chances at 15

Lucy Nelms and Janet Taylor

What impact does family income have on the education and work aspirations of young people? This article reports findings on school engagement and post-school aspirations among low-income young people from stage seven of the longitudinal Life Chances Study.

The Life Chances Study

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a large welfare agency with a long history of research into causes and effects of poverty and disadvantage. The Life Chances Study was developed in the context of this research (and the famous Hawke promise 'No child shall live in poverty by 1990') and the need to examine the impacts of disadvantage on children over time in a changing social world. The Life Chances Study was inspired in part by the British documentary 'Seven Up' series.

The Life Chances Study is a longitudinal study of children born in 1990 in inner Melbourne. The study commenced with 167 children from very diverse backgrounds including high and low-income families and a range of ethnic groups. It has continued to look at the impact of family income as these children have grown up. Most still live in Melbourne but some are in regional Victoria, interstate and overseas.

Stage Seven of the Life Chances Study

At the end of 2005, 41 selected Life Chances participants were followed-up as 15 year olds (the age of the end of compulsory schooling in Victoria) for stage seven of the study to explore their school engagement.

They comprised 33 who had grown up in persistently low-income families and, for comparison, eight who had grown up in persistently high-income families. All of the young people were interviewed (except for one due to the severity of his disability) and completed a short survey; and in most families one parent was interviewed.

The low-income group included a high proportion

of: sole parent families; parents who were unemployed; parents with few educational qualifications (12 mothers and 12 fathers with Year 9 or less) and both parents from non-English speaking birthplaces (nearly two-thirds of families). (For full details of method see the full report of stage 7, Taylor and Nelms 2006).

School engagement

Engagement with school can play an important role in young people's current well being as well as influencing their futures.

A school engagement score from the survey showed that, as a group, the 15 year olds were less engaged with school than when they were aged 11 and 12. They were also less engaged than their 15 year old peers from high-income families, for example half the high-income students were defined as highly engaged but only one in eight of those on low incomes.

The findings from interviews with the young people can be considered in terms of three key aspects of school engagement identified by Fredricks et al (2004): behavioural, emotional and cognitive.

For the 15 year olds, school factors involved with behavioural engagement (attendance and participation) included control of bullying, discipline culture in relation to absenteeism and other transgressions, and assistance for those who missed school. Participation in activities such as sport and drama was an important aspect of their enjoyment of school for many, although others chose not to participate. Conversely, missing out on school camps and excursions was an issue for some 15 year olds, with the cost of these a major barrier, though sometimes a hidden one.

Emotional engagement with school (a sense of belonging and value) was diverse, with some 15 year olds from low-income families speaking very enthusiastically about school, while others were less keen. Relationships with teachers and friends were important in this.

Life Chances at 15

(Cont.)

Cognitive engagement with school (a belief that school is 'for me') seemed to be generally very high: all the low-income 15 year olds stated that school and education were important for them and all said that their parents also thought so. How much education was essential was a more complex and contested question. For many, education was a means to an end and there was a stated expectation that a good education would lead to a good job. Some, but not all, expressed their enjoyment of learning for its own sake. Some of the 15 year olds with limited emotional and behavioural engagement in school could still say school was important for them.

The interaction of various aspects of school experience and school engagement seems key in understanding both the outcomes for young people and in considering policy and practice.

Career and education aspirations

Most of the 15 year olds who had grown up in low-income families planned to complete Year 12. Twenty five of 31 who were still at school wanted to finish Year 12, two wanted to finish Year 10 and three didn't know. Most wanted to go to university (26), some naming university along with another destination such as TAFE. All of those who did not plan tertiary studies planned other post-school training for specific jobs.

Two young people had already left school. A boy from a very disadvantaged sole-parent family had left and commenced a part-time community agency education program. Also, a girl left school to live with her aunt's family interstate. She had thought she might start at a new school there, but instead ended up working at a fast-food outlet to contribute financially to the household.

The low-income young people all anticipated completing at least enough further education/training to match their desired occupation. They indicated a broad range of occupations they aspired to. The occupation most commonly aspired to was teach-

er (mentioned by girls only). Many young people were considering several occupations, often from very different fields. These seemed to reflect a wide range of interests that these young people currently hoped to explore through work. For example one girl wanted to be a pharmacist and a cartoonist.

At age 11 and 12 almost all could name a job they wanted, but by age 15 around one-third of the same group could not. Mostly the young people's occupational aspirations had been subject to a process of mediation and change as more information about higher education and the world of work became available. As one 15-year-old girl reflected:

... you always change your mind. Like when I was young I wanted to be a lawyer. And I didn't even know what it was. But now I don't want to be that.

Generally the young people felt supported in their choices and there was a match between parental expectations around post-school paths and the activities and aspirations of their children.

Overall it might be concluded that growing up in a low-income family has small but important effects on this group of young people's future plans. The participants revealed experience of structural limitations and then considerable individual agency such as one boy who remarked:

It's going to work out the way I want it. My destiny goes how I plan my life so [my parents' background] has nothing to do with it. I choose my own destiny.

Will the low-income young people be able to fulfil the aspirations they have outlined at age 15? Other Australian longitudinal data (Beavis et al. 2004) suggests that while their plans may not be strongly influenced by socioeconomic status, they will have more difficulty implementing them, compared with their more advantaged counterparts.

However with most aspiring to enter higher education (the first generation in their family to do so), if

Most of the 15 year olds who had grown up in low-income families planned to complete Year 12.

they do not succeed it will not be because in their middle secondary school years they did not have the desire or interest and (for most) it will not be due to a lack of parental encouragement.

Conclusion

While the Life Chances Study is a relatively small study, its value rests in its longitudinal perspective on young people growing up in both advantaged and disadvantaged circumstances. The study allows us to explore some of the experiences of school and post-school aspirations and points to the need to promote disadvantaged young people's engagement with school and to provide affordable opportunities for their further education and training.

Stage 8 is currently underway and is exploring both of these areas with the full Life Chances study sample.

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Note: The full report of stage 7 is available from website www.bsl.org.au

Authors' note: Stage 7 of the Life Chances Study has been generously supported by the Bokhara Foundation and by a donation from the late Mrs Prue Myer. Our continuing thanks to the families in the study.

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For more information or to apply online, please visit <http://positions.usyd.edu.au> and search by the reference number.

The Determinants of Educational and Occupational Expectations: A Comparative Study of the "Frog Pond" Effect

Joanna Sikora and Lawrence J. Saha

The study of educational and occupational aspirations and expectations is well established in occupational attainment research because these are seen as the social-psychological factors driving young people to achieve (Saha 1997). Although research into aspirations began earlier (Caro and Pihlblad 1965), it was primarily the work of Sewell, Haller and others who established the importance of these variables in the so-called "Wisconsin Model" as contributing factors for occupational success (Otto and Haller 1979).

As research findings on aspirations and expectations accumulated, it became apparent that not all social groups had equally high levels of these "life plan" variables. Indeed it was often the more disadvantaged groups, such as immigrants in the USA, who seem to have the highest levels of aspirations and expectations (Portes, McLeod, and Parker 1978). More recent studies, using data from selected developed countries, explored in more detail how institutional contexts, demarcated by the degree of stratification and vocational differentiation of education systems, affect career expectations above and beyond individual and family characteristics (Buchmann and Dalton 2002; Buchmann and Park 2005).

Parallel to the above body of research, studies which originated with the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) data began to identify similar patterns in aspirations, expectations and attainment between countries. Little (1978) first noticed in the data from the second IEA Science Study that students in less-developed countries had higher levels of educational and occupational expectations than those in more developed countries. An early attempt to explore this unexpected pattern was reported by Saha (1982), in which a multivariate analysis of six widely different countries showed that the pattern was persistent even after controls. An expanded analysis in a more comparative context confirmed that these "life plan" expectations among 15 year olds in 18 countries were persistently higher in less developed than developed nations (Saha 1992).

These very high expectations of the disadvantaged, both immigrants in host nations, and students in developing nations, are surprising given that research on subjective inequality established that, although distorted by the homogeneity of reference groups, perceptions of inequality are largely accurate. An individual position in the objective hierarchy of occupations, education levels and income determines class self-perceptions. It is thus natural to expect that privileged upbringing will boost youth's educational and occupational expectations.

We became interested in these issues as new data, which made possible more sophisticated statistical analyses, became available for further study. To examine whether this counter-intuitive pattern is indeed the case, we have analyzed the 2000 and 2003 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys which collected information on these issues in over 40 countries. Applying multi-level analyses to partition the variance at the individual, school and country levels, we have sought confirmation of previously established patterns.

First, we have found, in line with prior studies, that girls expect to complete more education and achieve higher occupational status than boys. So do children of well-educated parents in high-status jobs. Students who were placed in vocational programs by age 15, have more moderate expectations. Moreover, school characteristics affect students' plans above and beyond individual differences. Elite admissions based on academic achievement, external accountability of a school in terms of curriculum building, as well as average parents' occupational status within the school, boost students' expectations of future educational and occupational attainment. But somewhat counter-intuitively, although in line with conclusions of earlier studies, we have found that, all else being equal, students in less developed countries affected by greater economic inequality are more ambitious. Inequality, operationalized by the Gini index, is directly related to educational and occupational expectations. The greater the amount of inequality in a country, the higher is the education-

al and occupational aspirations of students within them. Although only a small portion of the total variance, about 5%, can be attributed to country level differences among PISA participants, a large part of it is explained by economic inequality and the level of economic development, tapped by the GDP per capita at purchasing power parity. Although these two country characteristics are not as powerful predictors of career plans as individual characteristics of students, they remain significant even after many factors at the individual and school levels have been taken into account.

One could argue, however, that the effect of country characteristics in our analysis is a product of selectivity within the population of 15 year olds participating in the surveys. Clearly, countries with greater inequality and lower GDP most likely would have a lower proportion of the age group in school, because of lower retention rates (Keeves and Saha 1992). Thus the 15 year-old students in these countries could be simply a more elite group than students in countries with less inequality and higher GDP. Therefore we repeated our analysis limiting the sample to elite students identified as the top 20 per cent, based on Reading scores, within the population of 15 year-olds in each country. For instance in a country in which 100 per cent of 15 year olds are enrolled in high school, we included the top 20 per cent. By contrast, in a country where only 63 per cent of the same-age students are enrolled, we included the top 32 per cent (i.e. 20/63) students. This adjustment did not change the contextual effects of inequality and the level of development, so the higher expectations in the poorer countries cannot be explained by the selectivity hypothesis.

Several theories offer explanations for this pattern. First, it is possible that the tighter coupling of education with life plans in countries with higher levels of inequality serves to boost the expectations of students. In effect, it might be argued that these students perceive that their employment prospects are more closely related to their educational credentials than students in advanced developed countries where wider occupational choices exist

(Suda 1979). Second, the theories of relative deprivation and the "revolution of rising expectations" also appear consistent with the findings. The idea behind these theories is that persons who compare themselves with other more advantaged persons, and who see themselves as equally deserving, will aim higher, and expect higher, in terms of career attainments. This phenomenon is related to what is sometimes referred to as the "frog pond" effect (Davis 1966). Put simply, the "frog pond" effect occurs when one takes into account the self comparative context within which an individual behaves. Thus, a high ability student in an elite university will not aim as high for a career as will a similarly high ability student in a non-elite university. Likewise, a student in a developed nation with a well-established educational system may be less ambitious than a student with similar ability in a developing nation with a less well-established educational system. Students in lesser developed countries aim higher because, from their perspective they are big frogs in little ponds. In the end, it appears that some kind of "frog pond" effect provides the most plausible explanation for our findings, suggesting that this aspect of social comparison occurs even within countries, and not just within and between schools as previously found.

Although the nature of the PISA data does not enable direct tests of these theories, the inverse relationship between levels of economic inequality and career plans warrants more future interest. It is possible that with the rapid worldwide expansion of tertiary education the differences between the aspirations of students in richer and poorer countries will disappear. Yet, if these differences persist, we will need to understand better why living in a poorer society with higher levels of economic inequality results in more ambitious career plans among youth. We plan to pursue our project when the new PISA data set, with a larger number of widely differing countries, becomes available.

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The Determinants of Educational and Occupational Expectations: A Comparative Study of the "Frog Pond" Effect

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CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The Cultural Sociology Thematic Group is organising the next edition of *Nexus*.

TASA members working in this area are invited to submit short articles by 24 August to Brad.West@flinders.edu.au.

For further details, see <http://www.culturalsociology.org> or contact the Cultural Sociology Thematic Group convenor.

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Across the Qualitative/Quantitative Divide?

Reflections from Two Research Fields

Daniel Edwards & Martin Forsey

Two researchers, one an ethnographer, the other, a sociologist with a penchant for quantitative methods. We have met only twice, at TASA conferences as it happens and both times we have presented papers in the same panel. This is hardly surprising given our shared interests in the social effects of schooling and the inequalities they reflect. One of us works in Melbourne, the other in Perth. Yet despite the desert that lies between our research sites (both physically and methodologically), they speak to each other in profoundly simple and obvious ways. The first time we met in 2004 the ethnographer wrote and spoke of teachers, schools and social class (Forsey 2004) in a single high school (Ravina High), while the number-cruncher detailed the increasing stratification of post-school outcomes across the Melbourne metropolitan area.

The middle-class students at Ravina High are thought by many of its teachers to override the more confronting tendencies of the apparently smaller number of working-class kids attending the school. This is what makes Ravina High an easier workplace than schools where the 'rougner', working-class backgrounds outnumber the 'smoother' middle-class students. Such 'folk knowledge' creates a structuring logic that produces inclusionary and exclusionary practices that have profound implications for schools and their students in many parts of the world (Forsey 2004, p.10).

In Melbourne, the influence of school reputations on the choices being made by middle-class families were shown to be having a dramatic effect on the post-school pathways of government school students. In a marketplace that had become 'every school for itself', those with the least financial, cultural and social capital were left to struggle. Figures extracted from university enrolment data, matched to the school attended by students prior to enrolment, revealed a small clique of government schools in an affluent pocket of suburbia that had steadily increased their academic performance in the decade from 1993 to 2003. Meanwhile, schools in 'rougner' areas (to use Forsey's terminology) had been left behind in the increasingly competitive education market.

Neither of the observations could have arisen out of the other project, and while both studies can stand up on their own two feet, they are stronger when standing together.

We next met in Perth and presented in the panel specially convened by the social stratification group. Daniel showed data indicating the impact of rising competition for university on disadvantaged students, while Martin reflected on an interview based study of the choices made by parents and their children regarding the types of school they have attended and the strategic choices they have taken.

Daniel's analysis delved into a time series of data identifying patterns of change occurring in university accessibility. The statistics revealed that the provision of university places was failing to keep up with demand and that this was particularly detrimental for the ambitions of students attending government schools and for students living in outer suburbia, where 'choice' in education was limited (Edwards 2006).

Martin's research helps show the complexities of the choices taken by middle class parents and their children. While there are many parents who have been involved in moving their children from the public to the private who are satisfied with the results of their decision, there are others (a smaller minority) who have been far from content with what they have experienced on the other side of the fence. Contradicting what some of the more orthodox neoliberalists might say, the private sector does not necessarily generate greater levels of efficiency and accountability; their standards are not automatically higher than those found in the public sector. Not only that, as one student found out when he pierced his eyebrow, the private system can be enormously intolerant of the sort of individualism he sought to express. Interestingly, it was in a school run by the apparently rigid, rule-bound bureaucracy that he found greater levels of tolerance for his slightly altered appearance.

Education cannot be run according to the rules

Across the Qualitative/Quantitative Divide? Reflections from Two Research Fields

(Cont.)

of a pure market. Apart from the fact that schools offer services to the community, the sorts of products they deal with, such as knowledge, care and direction, cannot be commodified. Even those responsible for so-called private schools are rarely conducting a straightforward for-profit enterprise. More often than not they have a religious, or quasi-religious, mission to fulfil. Furthermore, it is not an open market. For many of the highly desirable traditional schools, demand exceeds supply, so they can pick and choose who can enter and who can remain inside. Far from being the great source of openness, freedom and democracy that some would have us believe we will find in private enterprise, they are capable of imposing rules that squash individual freedoms.

Pointing in similar directions

While we have both taken a different methodological pathway and have analysed the experiences of students in education systems on different sides of Australia, our conclusions both point in the same direction. In subtle and very unobvious ways, schooling in Australia is increasingly becoming one of 'haves' and 'have nots', 'winners' and 'losers', and this is not simply a government/private school dichotomy, it is happening within our once all-encompassing, multi-disciplinary government school systems as well.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods obviously should be complementary and yet they rarely seem to unite, perhaps this is because the skills and the 'mindset' required for both seldom come together in the one person. The solution is obvious and raises questions as to why collaborative projects are so few. Who knows, perhaps one day we might be able to bring our projects together and work on similar questions in the same city. We are confident that it will be a highly productive and revealing study.

Daniel Edwards

Monash University

Martin Forsey

University of Western Australia

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MOBILITIES THEMATIC GROUP UPDATE

From very humble beginnings, and after our initial meeting at the 2006 TASA conference, in Perth, we now have more than the fifteen members required for both the proposal and the thematic group to proceed. We have a total of twenty-three members, from various Australian universities and from outside academia.

Jeremy Northcote (co-convenor) has written the proposal, and this was distributed to all members.

The proposal has now been submitted to the TASA Secretary for presentation at the July Executive meeting.

We are looking forward to our first authentic thematic group meeting, to be held at the TASA/SAANZ conference in Auckland, in December.

Wendy Hillman
Mobility Co-convenor

Postgraduate Roundup:
Young People's Post-Compulsory Educational Choices in
Rural Australia

Merete Skovgaard Schmidt

While completing my undergraduate studies I taught at a rural high school where I was daily confronted with a bundle of perplexing questions. Why were so many students disengaged from their education? How did this relate to the dreams of commencing further education and training that they described to me? And why did many young people drop out of school regardless of their families' support for them to continue? The sense of unfulfilled potential conveyed by these questions lies at the heart of the PhD project which I have recently commenced at the University of Tasmania. The study aims to shed light on the experiences of young rural Australians to contribute to policies which will increase post-compulsory educational retention and completion.

My study's point of departure is the relatively low retention rates in rural Australia. It seeks to contribute to an understanding of how young rural people's subjectivities intersect with their social environment to influence their decision to leave the education system or commence some form of post-compulsory education. It is especially concerned with providing a holistic account of how their educational choices are shaped by their immediate social environment, in particular family, school and community, and the broader policy environment especially education, the labour market and welfare.

Although the demographic variables influencing post-compulsory educational choices in rural areas are well known, there has been little investigation of the subjectivities of the young people. My study seeks to address this by utilising case study methodology and participant observation in a rural school. Combined with in-depth interviews with students, family members and teachers, this will permit an emic account of how the intersection between the young people, school environment, family and place influences their post-compulsory educational choices. Interviews with policy makers and analyses of education, welfare and labour market policies will add further insights into the research questions.

The paradoxical theme of some students leaving school early despite the desire to continue their education was a major finding of my (2006) Honours thesis. One additional finding was that these young people associated early school leaving with a sense of failure. This theme will be explored in my PhD thesis by locating it within Bourdieu's (1990) theory of symbolic violence. This refers to 'every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis for its force' (p. 4). Thus, symbolic violence can be exercised by the family as well as social institutions such as the education system, and disposes agents to perceive their situation as natural.

As a migrant from Denmark I am also considering the possibility of including a comparative component involving fieldwork in my home country. This has the potential to provide important insights into the research questions because the rural/urban educational divide is far less marked in Denmark compared to Australia. Over the next few months I will explore whether the comparison is practical and methodologically sound. Meanwhile I remain deeply committed to my project and to the young people whose futures it explores.

Merete Skovgaard Schmidt
University of Tasmania

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