

Who I was, Where I am, What I want to be

A research project exploring young people and their parents' experiences of and investments in elite schooling

The research project

The research project sought to explore the social and educational experiences of a small group of young people in two selective, private schools in the UK.

The project began as a follow-up study, returning to work with young women who had been involved in a previous PhD project focusing on gender and achievement in one private and selective primary school. The young women were originally aged ten at the start of the first research project and were aged seventeen (in their first year of sixth form study) at the beginning of this follow-up study.



The project expanded to include young men who had recently joined the private sixth form department that these young women now attended. The project also involved a small group of young women in one further private, selective and single-sex sixth form department.

Given the follow-up nature of the project, the research was particularly interested in exploring the young peoples' experiences of life in an elite school setting over time. Hence the project became known as the 'Who I was, Where I am, What I want to be' study.

However, the project also focused on the young peoples' and their parents' investments in a private education (i.e. why they had chosen this educational pathway in the first place and why did they continue in this decision). Related to this were two further concerns:

1) To explore perceptions of risk (what were the social and educational risks that these young people felt they faced and how did they feel that a private education protected them?)

2) The role that gender and class played in these young people's lives and experiences (e.g. How being a young woman impacted their perceptions of risk and of schooling. Their relationships with and perceptions of others outside of this privileged school environment).

Research methods

The project had an ethnographic focus and utilised a number of different qualitative methods, including:

- **Self-directed photography and film:** Many of the young people used a digital cameras or camcorder belonging to the project to generate images that they felt represented important aspects of their lives. These images were then discussed in interviews. Some of the still images were also used to develop photomatics (a series of still images edited together in a sequence on screen).



- **Collaborative film making:** One group of young people in the project worked together to produce a film that they felt represented some of their experiences in private education and which built upon themes that had previously been generated.



- **Individual and focused group interviews:** Many of the young people chose to meet with the researcher on their own or within their friendship groups to discuss their experiences. These interviews took many forms: retrospective, prospective and present focused interviews, photographic memory interviews and photographic feedback interviews. Some of the young peoples' parents also participated in individual interviews to discuss their views on private education and risk.

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Project insights

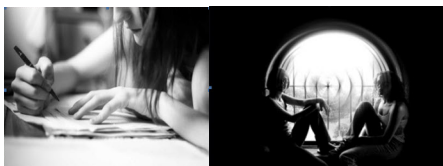
The young people

- The young people stressed the importance of academic achievement and felt that only 'exceptional achievement' could guarantee their ability to compete in the challenging world in which they lived. Many of the young people reported putting 'their lives on hold' in order to achieve. Many also mentioned feeling overwhelmed by work and being intensely scrutinised by their teachers, parents and peers.
- A celebratory culture of achievement was felt to exist within both of the schools, but this was also understood to be complicated by intense competition, rivalry and the need for peer acceptance.
- Some young people mentioned spaces that they had carved out in the school day, or that they had found within the school building to create times of fun and freedom. These spaces could be viewed as safety valves, allowing small freedoms but ensuring that standards were still maintained.
- The young people often talked about parental concerns of sexualisation. In a largely single-sex environment many of the young women felt as though they lived heavily regulated lives in this respect.
- The school was often discussed as providing a 'protective bubble', which many felt presented a great risk to them when they came to leave the school. Other findings also challenge the certainty of the protection within this school bubble and the fixity of the boundaries that were felt to exist between the school and the 'outside world'.
- The young peoples' networks outside of the elite school system were often limited. When they did exist they often linked back to state primary schools. Global networks, citizenship and mobility were deemed more important. The schools were seen as playing an important role in preparing them for success in these tasks in the future.



The parents

- Private education was regarded as a significant investment in the future and an early form of risk prevention by all of the parents in the project.
- Schools were chosen because they were 'well known' in the local communities and were felt to be able to manage uncertainty and produce the results that the parents wanted. Schools were also chosen for their familial values, something that was seen as particularly important for girls in order to ensure their well being and happiness.
- The reasons for investing in a private education varied amongst families, although a large number of parents cited special educational needs and former experiences of bullying as reasons. Those who did not cite these reasons often had a long familial involvement in private education. Despite the often hefty financial burden that this option presented families, many of the parents regarded this as the only way to secure a safe and protected environment for their children to develop in.
- Parental concerns largely centred around academic achievement. There were growing concerns that a private education would no longer guarantee a place or an interview at an elite university (and some felt that it may even prevent the successful securing of a place).
- However, many still felt that the 'all round' nature of the education that their children were provided at school, combined with the confidence that it produced in them, was something that could only be secured in this setting and that it would give them a stronger foothold for competing with others in the future.



For further information and more detailed insights please see the project web site:

www.researchproject.weebly.com