UNIVERSITY'S NOT FOR ME – I'M A NIKE PERSON:

URBAN, WORKING-CLASS YOUNG PEOPLE'S NEGOTIATIONS OF 'STYLE', IDENTITY AND EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

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CONTEXT **A key aim for the New Labour government, first elected in 1997, was to increase the proportion of young people going to university. To achieve that aim more of these students will have to come from working-class backgrounds.**

However, despite a variety of plans and projects, the number of students from working-class homes who end their education as soon as possible remains high. Other studies have looked at the different experiences of the working class and the middle class within universities, suggesting that there are a whole range of personal, social and cultural dimensions to the differences between these two groups.

Recent work on education has been influenced by Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Habitus is a sense of social identity which shapes people's ideas of what is normal for them and others similar to themselves. The idea of habitus can be used to explain the way in which the middle classes dominate social institutions such as education because they belong to a culture that is similar to the dominant groups in society. In effect, they understand and know the rules of the social games that we all participate in and this makes life easier for them. Middle-class students often don't even have to make a decision about going to university; this is because they simply expect to go. Working-class students however, often feel out of place and uncomfortable.

This study is concerned with how working-class ideas and identity may shape young people's life choices. Many of the strategies that they have used successfully to gain status in schools, such as the adoption of consumer lifestyles, exclude them from middle-class norms and values and bring them into conflict with schools and colleges.

LINKS TO KEY DEBATES

This study is useful as an exploration of how qualitative research methods can help researchers gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of cultural productions for young people. It can be applied to analyses of differential educational achievement by social class and some of the conclusions could apply to analyses of gender as well. Relationships between schools and pupils are put under the spotlight as we learn about pupil subcultures and the hidden curriculum.

METHODS

This study took place over two years and intended to explore the values and culture of those students who were thought to be at risk of dropping out of full-time education before the age of 16. 53 respondents were chosen from six London schools. All were from working-class backgrounds and were more or less evenly split between boys and girls. In addition, the sample included a variety of ethnic groupings: white UK, white other, black African Caribbean, mixed ethnicity, Asian and Middle Eastern students.

The students were interviewed between one and three times over the course of the study. In addition, eight students completed photographic diaries and discussion groups were held with 36 others from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Interviews were not restricted to the young people: teachers, headteachers, careers advisors, parents and support staff were also interviewed. Interviews and discussions were taped and then transcribed. Parental consent was obtained before young people were allowed to participate and the students chose false names for the study.

EVALUATION

This study is useful because it produces qualitative data on the meaning of style for young people and links this cultural expression to working-class failure to succeed in education. It shows that young people who subscribe to youth culture and working-class styles are limiting their own access to routes for academic success. However, there is more at stake than just style; working class young people are shown as belonging to a culture in which they recognise that educational success is not for them. They hang on to their own culture because it provides status in their own social worlds. Teachers need support in helping students to challenge notions of style. If higher education were opened up to more students from less wealthy backgrounds, then working-class students would feel more comfortable in what is currently a middle-class cultural arena.

KEY FINDINGS

Clothes have a meaning that is far more significant than simply acting as ways of covering and protection from cold, rain or heat. They are important in terms of marking identity.

The display of particular items of dress and jewellery can be a clear indicator of social class in a code that others can read. More importantly notions of taste are used as a social distinction so that the working class are often seen as having 'poor' taste to the point where certain items of clothing associated with working-class youth such as 'hoodies' have become linked with danger, criminality and threat.

The young people in the study recognised this process and actively looked for identities for themselves in what they chose to wear. Young working-class people identified themselves as 'Nike' as opposed to 'Gucci' as a statement of their class identity. This is because certain clothing brands were seen as intrinsically fashionable and cool because they were associated with black masculinity, and therefore offered 'hardness' and 'street cred'.

Young people often invested a huge amount of time and effort into their appearance, with elaborate hairstyles, make-up, coordinated clothes and accessories. Some students spent considerable amounts raised through part-time work, up to £40 a week in one case, on style goods. It is suggested that this is because the young people attended schools and lived in areas with low social status. Many felt themselves to be failures or not as intelligent as their brothers or sisters.

Equally, those who did not subscribe to the ethos of labels made themselves vulnerable to bullying so the pressure on young people to participate in the culture is very strong. They resent the way that they have low status because they do not have access to the highest quality goods, but equally look down on those who cannot access the items that they own.

For many young people, buying into a style caused conflict with their schools who tried to enforce strict dress codes. They therefore set themselves up as rebellious rule-breakers. There was a gendered element to this: boys adopted the hyper-masculine styles of rap stars and girls wore sexually provocative clothing. This was in contrast to middle-class values of conservative clothing. Staff tried to combat street styles because of the consumer culture they represent and the belief that, to fund it, young people were attracted to criminal behaviours.

Pupils wanted to earn good money and rejected education because they were keen to join the job market. Being a student would mean that they would not have the cash to pay for street styles. In addition, there was an underlying feeling for many young people that higher education was for other people. Middle-class students were seen as unstylish and the working-class students felt that they would stand out and not belong.

Middle-class students had a number of ways of expressing their privilege; they certainly enjoyed conspicuous consumption but were able to do this in a number of arenas of cultural life, not just through clothing. In addition, when middle-class people adopted working-class styles and fashions, they could be seen as cool and ironic. A working-class or black person in a hoodie will be seen as 'dangerous' whereas a middle-class person may simply be seen as 'edgy'.

FIND OUT MORE

Archer, L., Hollingworth, S. and Halsall, A. (2007) 'University's not for Me – I'm a Nike Person': Urban, Working-Class Young People's Negotiations of 'Style', Identity and Educational Engagement. *Sociology* vol. 41(2). London: Sage Publications

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