AERS
Applied Educational Research Scheme

Research Briefing Paper 5 December 2008

The Scottish Independent Schools Project

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Introduction

This research briefing reports on the initial findings from the Scottish Independent Schools Project (SISP), developed to complement a range of other case studies supported by the Schools and Social Capital (SSC) Network of the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS). The SSC Network has focused largely on "disadvantaged" groups or communities while SISP, in contrast, sought to explore how social and other capitals work in and through a more privileged setting – that of independent schooling in Scotland. Social capital embraces the idea that social networks are valuable assets for individuals and societies, and is one of a number of 'capitals' defined by Lin (2001, 3) as 'investment of resources with expected returns in the marketplace'. A preliminary analysis of independent school websites showed how such schools represent themselves, revealing also the complexity of their categorisation. Case studies were then carried out of three independent schools involving the collection of a range of other data by means of interviews, focus groups and questionnaires.

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Key Findings

- Scottish independent schools are not easily characterised or categorised, which indicates the differentiated character of the independent sector as a whole. Thus, each case study school demonstrated a distinctive set of norms which its pupils were expected to understand and identify with, connected to its particular positioning in the field of independent schooling and Scottish education more broadly.

- Working with social capital was a strong feature of the case-study schools – in particular utilisation of intra-school (and its community) bonding norms, networks and connections.
- The websites invoked specific and differentiated interpretations of school-group networks, norms and values and identity positions, all of which served to enhance reputation; in social capital terms, this means the trust and regard in which the particular school is held by particular fractions of Scottish society.
- The websites also provided the schools with the opportunity to construct specific educational narratives contained, for example, in discourses of 'value-addedness' in relation to the range of activities and curricular opportunities offered, as well as promising wider experiences and achievements beyond the academic.
- There were noticeable 'gender regimes'. The single-sex schools demonstrated something of gender convergence amongst the middle-class girls and boys in their school subject choices and educational and career aspirations. The co-educational school had a more traditional gender regime in which boys constituted the 'normal' subject of the schools' dominant cultural values in relation to the foregrounding and privileging of traditionally masculine sports, academic subjects and curricular activities.
- The case-study schools were cosmopolitan in outlook, directing their activities and the schooling of young people toward participation in a globalising economy. In so doing, school discourses employed terms such as 'Scottish' and 'international' in specific and strategic ways.
- Issues of access for research purposes to the independent school sector and time and other constraints experienced by the researchers, placed limits on the range of evidence available for scrutiny and analysis.

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The Research

The research questions

Case studies of three Scottish independent schools were undertaken. The main research question was 'How do social and other capitals work in and through independent schooling in Scotland?' Subsidiary research questions included:

- How can the range of independent schools in Scotland be categorised, analysed and understood?
- How do schools represent themselves in prospectuses and websites?
- To what extent do current and former students, parents, teachers and headteachers in the case-study schools acknowledge the effects of different capitals on their lives?
- How do these capitals work through (case study) school buildings and organisation of space?

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Theoretical Underpinnings

The project worked with two theoretical approaches linked to the concept of social capital. The first draws on the work of Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000), Coleman (1988) and Woolcock (1998) to analyse bonding, bridging and linking as sub-types of social capital. This position argues for the building up of social capital in/through, for example, commitment to and support for family

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relations, community organisations and civic participation (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). These aspects of social capital are seen as leading to a more unified community, enhanced civic society, vibrant democracy, and greater social equality and cooperation generally. The second social capital approach is derived from Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1991, 2003, with Wacquant 1992), and was used in the project to develop the notion of intersecting 'multiple capitals' (for example, economic, social, cultural, and reputational, national, cosmopolitan). Bourdieu views the stock of such capitals as a zero sum game, in the sense that capital is limited and differentially distributed, and is used by elites to reproduce existing relations and practices of power. Further, such intersecting capitals can potentially be converted into economic capital. Bourdieu (1986) is therefore less confident than Putnam and Coleman about the possibilities of social capital contributing to societal development and improvement.

Other capitals were also taken up, such as 'cultural capital' identified by Lin (2001, 43) as that involved in mutual 'social identification' and 'reciprocal recognition' and 'national capital', developed in relation to the Scottish nation by McCrone (2005, see also Bourdieu, 2003). A further interest was the impact of globalisation, and the extent to which the case-study schools were constructed as Scottish, British or cosmopolitan. Sport (containing physical and embodied capital) also took on greater salience because of its evident importance to the case-study schools.

Gender featured in the analysis also, due among other things, to the single-sex character of two of the case-study schools. Finally, a framework concerning the dimensions of power (c.f. Bishop and Glynn, 1999; Schools and Social Capital Network, Project 2 Policy Review Group Report, 2006) was adopted to illuminate the processes of legitimation, representation, benefits and so forth both within the schools and in other bonding, bridging and linking relationships.

Access to the schools

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Contact with the independent school sector proved difficult initially and raised doubts about whether research access to the sector as a whole was a possibility. The difficulties of access confirmed, in a methodological sense, the ways in which power operates, and the need for researchers' reflexivity regarding sensitivity to potentially intrusive investigation. Refusal to participate (by several schools) resonated with the constraints experienced by other projects seeking to research the powerful (e.g. Fitz, 1994). After extended negotiation, three schools agreed to participate: an all-girls; an all-boys; and a mixed-sex. These were then allocated the pseudonyms Augusta (girls), Balfour (boys) and Charteris (co-educational).

Access operated differently for each school, and was most straightforward at Augusta, probably reflecting the profile and research orientation of the school and its self-perceived strong positioning as a leader in Scottish schooling. Access to the co-educational school involved lengthier negotiations, concerning the potential impact on the school's reputation of any perceived unfavourable findings – possibly indicating a desire to constrain the research team's independence.

Data collection procedures and methods of analysis

The research team developed a range of instruments for the collection of data. These were interview and focus group schedules, questionnaires for pupils and observational checklists.

For each case-study, data collection involved the following:

- Examination of school documentation, including prospectus, promotional materials, websites, yearbooks etc.;
- Interviews with heads and/or senior members of the school management team;
- Interviews with five teachers in each school, including the head of sport/ physical education;
- Tour of school and observations of use of space;
- Observations of daily routines such as assemblies, refectory-use, beginning/ end of school day;
- Questionnaire completed by all Year 8 /S2 students;
- Focus groups with 2 groups of Year 8 /S2 students;

Initially, the websites of all schools in the Scottish independent sector were accessed and analysed for common characteristics with the aim of distinguishing the different orientations of the schools. Following this, the website texts of the case-study schools were further analysed using a post-structuralist discourse-theory approach (MacLure, 2003; Mills, 1997). The interview, questionnaire and focus group data from the three case-study sites were initially sorted and analysed using N-vivo. The questionnaire responses to the school question 'School is like a....' were classified into seven categories (A-G), ranging from unambiguously positive to unambiguously negative and according to gender; and emergent themes were read closely and analysed to uncover how the school was imagined as a unique place and space. The observational and field-note data also underwent analysis as to the significance of space and school routines in relation to the schools' own narratives and use of capitals.

Analysis and results

Categorisation

Initially, the research team examined and developed data sets to categorise independent schools in Scotland according to a number of characteristics including location, structure and fees. The details of this categorisation are not reported here but, overall, it was clear that the independent sector in Scotland is differentiated in character with each school developing a distinctive set of norms linked to an institutionally-based emphasis concerning, for example, particular philosophies and ideas on 'liberal feminism', 'new/softer forms of masculinity', or provision of English or Scottish curricula and examinations.

Websites

Findings from the website analyses for the three case study schools indicated that the schools' profile of activities was targeted at supporting pupils' wider potential achievement beyond the specifically academic (see Forbes and Weiner, 2008). Thus, the websites suggested particular values and a menu of practices that produced specific forms of capital that in the view of the school would be of special benefit to 'its' young people. Individual expression and fulfilment, creativity, endurance and teamwork, character-formation, and the provision of comfortable surroundings, were all exemplars of discursive elements which interwove with the central promise of exacting high academic

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Emergent themes

A number of generic themes have emerged from the research, in the sense that they apply to the three case studies, although others are specific to a particular school. Examples of generic themes include: utilisation of social capital; social reproduction; the role of tradition; and gender.

Social Capital

Working with social capital proved to be a strong feature of the case-study schools. However, this tended to involve intra-school (and its community) bonding norms, networks and connections, rather than linking and bridging forms of social capital. There was also evidence of a specific relation to trust exemplified in the comment from a teacher that *'trust is given rather than earned'*. Interestingly, there was a comparative lack of the explicit utilisation of social capital in the websites, although other capitals were evident such as cosmopolitan, cultural, physical and reputational. Each school appeared to understand and utilise specific forms of national and cosmopolitan capital in its positioning and representation in the Scottish and international independent school market.

Tradition

The utilisation of tradition was characterised by the swift induction of new staff and pupils into the particular school networks, norms and ways of doing things. Central importance was given to intra-school norms relating to rituals: such as, for example, prize giving; assemblies; church services; sponsored walks and runs; and sports weekends. This included: 'bridging and bonding'; inter-school sporting matches; intra-school and intra-house 'bonding' events; and competitions. The architecture of the schools also evoked a traditional 'public' school ethos.

Relationships to State

Autonomy was exercised in general decision-making and in understanding the specific needs of the fraction of the social class to which the school aspired. These were mainly the Scottish parents who shared the school dominant narrative(s). However, the schools were reliant on the legitimising functions of the state regarding, for example, inspections of care, boarding accommodation and examinations etc.

Privilege as normalised

The schools positioned children in state schools, that is the 96 percent of the Scottish school population as 'the other'. This is shown in a teacher interview: *'most of the schools in Scotland'* (meaning Scottish independent schools). The staff frequently resisted comparing or ranking their own and other schools in the independent sector either within Scotland or with England.

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Social Class Reproduction

Social class reproduction was found to be a strong though a varying feature of the case-study schools. For Augusta, this was linked to: outstanding academic achievements; responses in curricula to global changes as in the teaching of certain languages; the development of a cosmopolitan disposition; and a *'girls can achieve anything'* ethos. These were accompanied by an awareness of the privileged position of the school amongst staff. For Balfour, this focused on producing young men with a range of skills including 'soft'

skills for national and global labour markets in the professions and business. For Charteris, the main task was to educate the professional social classes, that is the lawyers, engineers, and doctors of the future. There was an emphasis on 'good' discipline and socio-cultural conformity rather than elitism or privilege.

Gender

Gender was found to be significant in shaping the context in and through which capitals worked in the case-study schools. Charteris exhibited the most 'traditional' gender regime, exemplified in its privileging of boys' sports, boys' greater overall confidence and apparent lack of gender awareness among staff. On the other hand, staff at both Augusta and Balfour exhibited an awareness of gender. For example, at Augusta, a liberal feminist tradition persisted in an explicit discourse of girls' high academic achievement and aspiration. At Balfour, traditional forms of masculinity, for example, on the rugby pitch, were being re-negotiated alongside newer, more urbane and 'sensitive' forms of middle-class masculinities.

Space was also found to be gendered. For example, the narrative of boys as necessarily active and needing space was articulated by one school in relation to its extensive playing fields. This offered a contrast to the girl's school narrative which portrayed a more crowded and shared space of talk and conversations.

Schools' discursive positioning

The staff and management of the schools consciously employed a selection of preferred discourses relating to, for example, high standards of pupil care, exacting standards and excellence in academic attainment, and pupils' achievements in activities beyond the required curriculum. Student discourses were often more romantic. Charteris, for example, was frequently portrayed as a rural idyll composed of sunny, summer afternoons spent on the grass amidst beautiful scenery with the quiet noise of sporting activities going on in the background. Both staff and students self-monitored their school's positioning in terms of their talk. There was frequent discussion among students of how they, at the case-study schools, were perceived by others as 'snobs', for instance. Countering the idealisation and realisation of school discourses as above, students also articulated concerns about: uncomfortable spaces; lack of freedom; crowdedness in corridors; lack of places to congregate; and over-strict rules of access.

Methodology

Issues here were concerned with how to research power and 'the powerful' and the extent to which the 'powerful researched' may seek to control, deny or restrict access or otherwise to control the research process and outcome.

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Areas for Further Consideration

The examination of the other side of 'disadvantage' in this project has identified schools that though different in some ways, have a number of commonalities. For example, they appear committed through their curricula, extra-curricular and 'caring' activities to developing in their students the habits and dispositions necessary for 'successful' futures. Habits of hard work and hard play are cultivated in the long school day at Charteris, which often includes extra-curricular activities and considerable travel before and after the school day. Similarly, at Balfour, boys are active from eight in the morning until eight or nine o'clock at night, with opportunities to develop

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prowess in a wide range of sports and cultural activities. Teachers model hard-working dispositions through their accessibility at afternoon and evening preparation sessions and often at weekends too.

The concept of 'capitals' has proved useful for the analysis in showing, for example, how the schools (and the parents who pay for their children to attend) invest their resources and the kind of expectations they have of the returns that might be gained. Thus each of the schools *'works'* with its cultural legacy of grounds, playing fields and architecture, and the artefacts contained therein. Highly visible portraits of headteachers and former headteachers provide an object reminder of the schools' eminent histories and legacies. Institutionalised cultural capital is also evident in the schools' emphasis on academic achievement and, particularly, their credentialised success relative to other schools in the state and independent sector. At Augusta, particular pride is taken in the very wide choice of subject options available at public examination level. Additionally, career breakfasts with former Augusta students, who are now successful professionals, provide a telling example of how social and cultural capital are employed for the benefit of the students. Other capitals can similarly be used to illustrate particular areas of each school's profile.

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All the case-study schools, it seems, are adept at trading in different capitals, yet also recognise the importance of local social networks. It is only rarely that one is reminded that these educational experiences are not for all. For example, the Augusta website indicates that some bursary support might be available for those parents who cannot afford the full fee. The schools are involved in creating a distinctive market position, each of which is reflected in their representations concerning, for example, building international citizenship, developing softer versions of masculinity, producing liberal feminist/career oriented young women, and so forth.

There is little sense of discourses of change, except in improvements to school buildings, facilities and the overall school environment

There is little sense of discourses of change, except in improvements to school buildings, facilities and the overall school environment. Augusta alone mentions an aim of increased diversity in the student population. Balfour articulates a commitment to producing 'new men' though conservation rather than change seems to be the most important signifier. Nonetheless, opportunities for world travel, learning languages of the new emerging economies, internationalism and diversity run alongside this static stance with the websites indicating that the school managements, at least, have a knowledge and understanding of recent global economic shifts. Use is made of research to show, for example, the benefits of single-sex schooling (Augusta and Balfour) or particular pedagogical approaches (Charteris). Thus the schools are able subtly to re-position themselves vis-à-vis new potential pools of parents in Scotland and other countries and also in relation to local parents who appreciate that their children will need to live and work in a different, more globalised, world.

Conclusion

At this stage of the analysis, it is possible to give only a preliminary description and tentative interpretation of the case-study schools' use of capitals, and their ability to understand and interpret a changing agenda to their and their students' benefit. How this might be useful to those on the other side of 'advantage' has yet to be identified. Potentially though, it would seem that a comparison of what we have called the 'spatio-temporalities' in

which the young people in the three case-study schools live and develop aspirations for their futures, might be very usefully contrasted with those of less advantaged young people who have a far less 'intensive' educational experience and in much less auspicious surroundings. Implications might then be drawn in both policy and practice terms which might lead to an opening up of the kind of educational opportunities offered by independent schools to the benefit of the entire Scottish school population.

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