THE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL AND COLLEGE CULTURES ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S DECISIONS TO STAY ON OR MOVE ON

COLIN FINNIE, IAN FINLAY AND CATHERINE RIDLER

SYNOPSIS

The staying on rates at Scottish secondary school steadily increased between 1984 and 1997 (the latest year for which figures are currently available). At age sixteen young people, wishing to remain in full time education, have a choice of remaining in secondary school or continuing their education in a further education college. Our research examined the effects that young people's perceptions of school and college culture had on their decisions of whether they remained in school or moved on to college. We found that some aspects of culture are important, particularly symbolic elements such as security and familiarity, and being treated as an adult. Other aspects of culture such as routines and rituals received a mixed reaction from our respondents. Our findings have implications for the way both schools and colleges should treat young people if they wish to become more culturally acceptable to them.

INTRODUCTION

We had the idea for this piece of research almost five years ago. We were part of a team of eleven researchers from the Faculty of Education, in the University of Strathclyde examining the interface between secondary schools and further education colleges following the incorporation of colleges and their removal from local authority control. That research looked at joint and overlapping curricular provision (see Taylor, Finnie & Ross, 1995). It involved interviewing senior staff in six further education colleges and over twenty secondary schools. It struck us quite strongly then that the cultures of schools and colleges are quite different. For example, different language is used. One of the researchers with a further education background was surprised to hear a secondary school teacher refer to S5 and S6 pupils (16 and 17 year olds) as 'the children'. There are also differences in size that lead to differences in culture. Head teachers of secondary schools are likely to know many if not all of the pupils in their schools. Pupils will certainly be able to recognise the headteacher. Principals of further education colleges are unlikely to be recognised by students and are likely to know very few students.

That initial research led to other funded projects which concentrated on organisational aspects of the boundary relationships between schools and colleges (see Finlay, 1995; and Finlay, Holmes and Kydd, 1997). Eventually we had the time to turn again to the question of differences in culture between schools and colleges. We wondered to what extent the experience young people had of school culture and the perceptions they had of college culture affected their decisions at the end of S4 and S5 about whether to stay at school or go to college.

Initially, we set out two aims for the project:

(1) to determine in which aspects, the 'culture' of the secondary school differs from that of the FE college;

(2) to identify which aspects of culture influence the decisions of school pupils and college students of the same age.

To meet these aims we; (a) gathered impressions from pupils and students about the cultural atmosphere in a number of schools and FE colleges; and (b) attempted to

identify what it may be about school or college which persuades young people to pursue their education in the setting chosen.

We were aware of the work by MacBeath *et al.* (1996) on school ethos. Since two of us came from a business studies background, we were also aware of some of the work that had been done on devising frameworks to explore organisational culture by writers such as Hofstede (1984), and Johnson and Scholes (1997). These ideas formed our starting point and are explored in greater detail in the next section.

We have since become aware that, compared with research into school choice at 11 years of age, research into school or college choice at 16 or 17 is limited. For example Hemsley Brown reports 'there is little research which concentrates on choice at 16+' (1999, p85) and further 'with the exception of Taylor (1992) and Foskett and Hesketh (1996), there has been little published research to date which concentrates on choice of post-16 college and the decision making processes of 15-16 year olds' (p85).

This paper reports on what can only be regarded as an initial and tentative exploration of the differences in culture between secondary schools and further education colleges but one which has produced some interesting and, to us, somewhat unexpected, results. Although the young people interviewed were reflecting on school and college culture, these reflections indicated a lot about how the young people viewed themselves.

BACKGROUND: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT THEORY

Education is ultimately about values. Business management is supposedly about more mundane realities: the profit motive, cost reduction, capital substitution, the bottom line. In recent years, however, there has been a growing realisation that organisational cultures matter and that they differ. Thus, working for Marks and Spencer is a qualitatively different experience from working for Woolworths. The differences run so deep as to be cultural. They also affect the organisation's success in terms of survival and profitability.

Strategic management theorists have attempted in recent years to examine these differences and there has been a growing consensus in the eighties and nineties about perceptions of cultural difference. Hofstede's (1984) analysis of the essentials of corporate culture suggested that it consisted of values and practices. In Hofstede's analysis practices comprise three other components, namely symbols, heroes and rituals. He further asserted that we could distinguish between organisations in terms of those practices. More recently, Johnson and Scholes (1997) developed the idea of the *cultural web* of values, beliefs and paradigms. They distinguished between values, beliefs and paradigms and the practices that operationalise them, namely routines and rituals; organisational and power structures; control systems; and symbols.

This work has been applied to the school and college context by, for example, Bush (1998) and Prosser (1999). Neither of these writers relate post-16 decision making to perceptions of school or college culture. Bush in particular refers to rituals, ceremonies and symbols as being key features in understanding the cultures of schools and colleges. Through these concepts, values are demonstrated. Bush cites Hoyle (1986) who argues that 'ritual is at the heart of school culture' and that 'symbols are central to the process of constructing meaning'. Bush also indicates the importance of the achievements of heroes and heroines in shaping perceptions of culture. For pupils sagas built around anti-heroes may create particularly strong impressions.

In summary, we feel that there are aspects of culture that could potentially influence decision making in young people and that while these aspects are well understood in terms of institutional strategic management there have been few published attempts

to relate then to why young people may be staying on or moving on with respect to specific institutions of which they have knowledge or impressions.

HYPOTHESIS GENERATION

It seemed to us that we could learn from strategic management theory as expressed by Hofstede, and Johnson and Scholes. The distinctive character of educational institutions has much to do with their practices - symbols, rituals, heroes, routines, structures. We hypothesised that young peoples' choices of staying on at school, going to university or attending a further education college may relate to their perceptions of cultural differences between institutions. Our particular focus was on 'staying on' or 'moving on' decisions at the interface between secondary school and further education.

Scottish educational statistics demonstrate the growing trend towards staying on (See Table 1).

Table 1

Academic Year	Staying on rates in publicly funded secondary schools		
	S5 (all)	S5 (voluntary)	S6
84-85	57.2	44.6	20.7
88-89	65.5	53.3	25.3
92-93	73.7	64.3	37.3
96-97	76.5	66.7	42.2

Source: Scottish Education Statistics Annual Review 3: 1998 edition (84-85 and 88-89 Figures from a previous report)

Around 7% of sixteen year olds and 9% of seventeen year olds go on to further education college.

METHODOLOGY

Previous research conducted by one of us had involved using inservice students on an initial teacher training course for further education as research associates (Finlay, Holmes and Kydd, 1997; Holmes, Finlay and Kydd, 1997). We decided to try out this approach again. It has the advantages of involving people who are close to practice in the institutions being examined; it introduces research to a wider range of teaching practitioners; and it demystifies research for those involved. We found working with practising teachers on a research project a rewarding experience. It is good to have ideas questioned and challenged whilst at the same time seeing practitioners gaining new perspectives on the situation in which they work.

There are also disadvantages in using practitioner researchers who also have full time jobs since they are not always able to find sufficient time to do justice to the project. Also, because we framed the project within a component of their course, an optional module called Introduction to Educational Research, the operational aspects of the module such as the timing of class delivery, and assessment schedules, were sometimes at odds with the demands of the project.

One very positive aspect of the project was the support that all the research associates received from their home institutions. It is unfortunate that they were all from further education colleges. We were unable to use the same model with

participants from secondary schools. However both college students and school pupils were surveyed.

The work settings of the research associates differed: of those whose research is reported on in this paper, three worked in different departments of a single Glasgow FE college, and the other in a town close to Glasgow. Previous work with research associates underlined the importance of good preparation and briefing. We had four days of briefing during tutorial time available for the module. During these four days we introduced the research associates to the models of culture identified above. We also reviewed the work that had been done on school ethos indicators by McBeath et al (HMI, 1992). The methods of social science enquiry were also covered with the class.

Since we wanted the research associates to have some ownership of their projects, to meet the criteria of the module, and to avoid simply exploiting students by forcing them to adopt our agenda and act as data gatherers, we encouraged them to devise their own projects within the general objectives of our overall project.

The research expertise of course participants varied widely and of the four reported on in this paper two had an existing and substantial track record in research and the remaining two had little prior experience. All used questionnaires based on the model provided by MacBeath *et al*. (1996) but incorporated a number of other categories and concepts derived from the work of Hofstede, and Johnson and Scholes. These included routines and rituals, organisational power and structures, control systems and symbols. As a result of differing contexts and circumstances, questionnaires were administered in different ways and so the findings are reported as case studies, with some general comment on the conclusions that are drawn. Three of the case studies focused on an FE college in a suburban area in the west of Scotland and on a secondary school in the local area. The fourth compared student and pupil perceptions in an FE college and a school in a city in the west of Scotland.

FINDINGS

Case study 1 involved pupils in a secondary school. It was carried out by Susan Gibb and involved a survey of 18 sixth year pupils. Gibb identified security and familiarity as the main reasons for staying on at school. Written comments at the end of her questionnaire included the following statements:

> 'I know the people here.';

> 'I would miss it too much, so why leave when I didn't have to.';

> 'I feel more confident at school than I would at college. College is more intimidating than school. Being around lots of new faces is a scary thought because at school you know and get on with most people.';

> 'I stayed on at school because I already knew everyone there, I was at the top of the school and therefore treated with respect. I was friendlier with the teachers and the school had a relaxed atmosphere in the senior school. In the senior part of the school there are more privileges.'; and

> 'At school, you have grown up with friends so you get used to the environment you are in. It's friendlier, good cooperation between staff and pupils.' (Gibb, 1997, appendix)

These answers to the open-ended questions supported the results of the small survey conducted by Gibb. She writes of the symbolic aspects of the cultural web:

> Of the items that relate to the symbolic aspect of the cultural web, the most important indicators for the pupils were 'I like school because the teachers

know me' (16 agreed), 'I get more respect being in 6th year' (17 agreed), 'I get more freedom being in 6th year', and 'The head teacher talks to me or says hello to me personally' (13). Although the students are very positive about their school - all respondents agreed with 'I think this is a good school' and 17 agreed with 'I enjoy being at school' - they also have a positive perception of college. All agreed that 'People like college because they are treated like adults', 17 agreed that 'It's good that younger and older people mix at college, 16 supported the statement 'People like college because they can wear anything they like' and 15 agreed that 'Colleges seem like welcoming places'. It seems that, in symbolic terms at least, pupils like the safety and familiarity of school, without feeling the need to compare college unfavourably. (Gibb, 1997, p5)

Some of these same sentiments were echoed by fifth year pupils in another secondary school surveyed by Robert Ross (Case Study 4). In responding to a question on why they stayed on at school, the pupils felt that being in the same environment was important and that going to college would involve them in a different structure. One pupil indicated, 'Don't think I am grown up yet'. Friends, being in 'your own environment' and 'school- you are used to it' were also given as influences on 'why we stayed on here'. The pupils sampled by Ross did not appear to have the same relationship with teachers or the perceptions about freedom in the senior school as the pupils surveyed by Gibb. The pupils surveyed by Ross complained that at school one 'must go to classes', there is 'more discipline' and 'everything is - "you must do this" - no flexibility.' It is not known whether these differences in experience and perception are due to the difference in schools or the difference in the way fifth and sixth year pupils are treated. Despite these negative perceptions, the security and familiarity of school and friends resulted in these pupils staying on by choice.

Case study 2 involved students in a college and investigated students' perceptions both of school and college. It was carried out by Chris Deegan. Deegan used some of the same questions as Gibb on a group of 15 college students who were undertaking a course in college that they could have done in school. He identified similar responses to some questions. For example, 10 agreed with the statement 'Pupils like school because the teachers know them', 10 also agreed that 'Pupils at more respect being in 5th or 6th year', and 11 agreed that 'Pupils get more freedom in 5th or 6th year'. However, 10 disagreed that 'Pupils enjoy being at school', and all 15 disagreed with the statement that 'Pupils like school because the headmaster talks to them personally'. One possible explanation for the difference in responses of Deegan's college students and Gibb's school pupils is that it is young people for whom school is a less enjoyable experience and who are not recognised and spoken to by the head teacher, who find college a more desirable option.

The results of the study undertaken by Kenneth Park (case study 3) sheds further light on the perceptions, based on memories, that college students have of school. Park administered a questionnaire to 46 full-time college students who had entered college directly from school. They were aged between 15 and 18. 27 of the 46 disagreed with the statement 'I enjoyed being at school' Park wrote 'People who did not like school but wish to continue in education might find that college is the only option available.' Other responses obtained by Park provide possible reasons for this negative perception of school. 27 of his respondents disagreed with the statement 'I found school work interesting', and 37 agreed with that 'At school I was treated as a child'. Park writes of this last finding:

> This perhaps highlights the fact that schools are designed to educate children and not adults. Many people of this age will ... think they are adults and will be capable of conducting themselves and thinking in an adult fashion ... and

feel they have outgrown the school system. The passage from childhood to adulthood is ... important ... and those experiencing this transition could easily become disenchanted with an institution which did not recognise this transition. (Park, 1997, p6)

Thus, with due allowance for methodological variability, there was a fair amount of common ground between the responses in all the case studies. Perceptions of both school and college seemed to be positive. The *symbols* of being welcome at school - freedom, respect, being known and acknowledged by teachers when you had reached S5 or S6 - were acknowledged by a majority of pupils. Similarly, perceptions of being welcome at college, the age-mix at colleges the liberal dress code of colleges - taken to be *symbols* of people's treatment in colleges - were all positive. Interestingly, a follow-up interview with the pupils in case study 1, about *control systems* in schools and colleges, yielded the information that the statement "Colleges are big and noisy" was perceived *positively* by young people rather than being seen as a drawback of a college.

In case studies 1, 2, and 3, there was less approval of the *routines and rituals* of school and college life. School assemblies, sports and other corporate occasions met with a mixed response in all three case studies with around half of the pupils or students agreeing that they fulfil an important role and the other half disagreeing. Case study 4 produced a version of what constitutes routines and rituals that was at odds with the other case studies. These were perceived in case study 4 as being school dances, special events such as celebrations of Halloween and charity events, plus inter-school or inter-college competitions. On such definitions of routines and rituals, respondents in case study 4 felt that there should be more such events.

Some colleges have introduced graduation ceremonies, overtly *rituals*, into their annual programmes of events. In each of the case studies, pupils/students had mixed feelings about these or were unimpressed. A majority of the student respondents (12 out of 15) in case study 2 disagreed with the statement that 'students like college because there is a graduation ceremony at the end'. Of course they may still approve of such events without feeling that they contribute to 'liking college'.

Interestingly, both pupils and students responded to the questionnaire item 'I would only go to college if my friends were going' in a way that surprised us. We expected peer solidarity to be much more important. There was a 50-50 split on this one among both pupils and students in case studies 1 and 2, suggesting that decisions about going to college are influenced by factors other than bonding with peers. Case study 3 reinforced this impression. Only 24% of the students polled felt that they had been influenced by friends' opinions of college. Seventy-four percent of respondents were uninfluenced by friends. Case study 4 was quite rich in anecdotal evidence, however, that decisions to attend one FE course, in Sport Studies *were* influenced by the careers officer or by other pupils or staff. There was, however, no frequency count of responses in case study 4, and so these responses may represent the views of only a small number of the 12 young people whose opinions were canvassed. Influences on staying on at school, in addition to those listed above, included 'To get more highers while still at a young age', 'So I could complete modules and Highers', and 'My Highers are important'. Thus, achieving qualifications was important.

Organisational factors (*routines* in terms of Johnson & Scholes' cultural web) did not deter pupils from wishing to have a taste of the college experience, high approval rates being reported in case studies 1 and 2 of the opportunity to try out college courses.

CONCLUSION

This research was relatively small scale covering a total of 90 young people in two secondary schools and two colleges. There are strong indications of issues that need to be addressed by schools and colleges in the way they address the needs of these young people.

Our main finding is perhaps the self evident one that young people appreciate being treated as adults and resent being treated like children. The behaviour of both school teachers and college lecturers sometimes acts in opposition to this view of young people. We have already reported above the comments of a school teacher referring to S5 and S6 pupils as 'the children'. In other research (Finlay, 1995) school staff expressed concerns about colleges 'poaching' pupils and college staff spoke of schools 'hanging on' to pupils. Young people of 16 to 18 years old do not see themselves as children. They do not see themselves as commodities to be poached or hung on to. They do see themselves as rational actors making decisions based on what they want. Sometimes what they want will be the security and comfort of a school they know rather than college, even when they recognise some of the benefits that college life offers. These findings are not unique to this study. Ainley and Bailey (1997) found a similar difference between treatment at school and college in the South of England. For example they report college students mentioned being treated as an adult at college citing symbolic factors such as calling the lecturers by their first name; not wearing a uniform; and classes not being compulsory (page 83). A respondent to Ainley and Bailey's survey also mentioned being treated ' like a baby' at school (p81) and the feeling that school offers more support and security exemplified by statements such as one is 'looked after' more at school (p87).

Hemsley Brown (1999) highlighted the importance of the self image young people have of themselves and found that young people choose an institution in which the culture matches this self image (pp.86 and 89).

The pupils in the survey reported positive attitudes to colleges, and yet had decided to stay on at school. Reported levels of interest in colleges were high, with high positive response rates to questionnaire items about colleges being welcoming places, where you are treated like an adult. There was also a high reported interest in sampling college courses. If they are perceived also as welcoming places with generally good reputations, why don't more 16 to 18 year olds choose to attend them? The two main reasons seem to be a reluctance to leave the security of school and a perception that courses such as highers are better followed in school.

We would point to the high level of rationality among young people in their curricular choices. We would point out that, throughout the secondary school experience, the affiliations with their peers that had been fostered in primary school are weakened by sectioning classes. The conventional wisdom about peer-group pressure among adolescents can perhaps be questioned as a result of this research. It seems that young people's decisions are not always influenced by their peer group and they are capable of individual decision-making. Our survey showed that young people have positive perceptions of colleges. They may, however, be a little wary about testing those perceptions against the reality of college life. Perhaps with Higher Still, when all courses can be studied at school, college or in a partnership of both, colleges will more effectively get their message through to upper-school pupils and the apparent resistance to attending college will be overcome.

One finding in the case study with the largest sample (46) (Park, 1997) was that 40 pupils strongly disagreed with the statement "My careers teacher advised me to come (to college)'. According to Park this confirms the belief, that many in FE have held for some time, that teachers do not seem to consider FE an appropriate route for their pupils. Park (1997) speculates that perhaps teachers are aware of the prevailing culture in FE and are influenced by this.

Both the questionnaire responses and the analysis indicate a lack of trust and cooperation between some school teachers and some college lecturers. During the debate which preceded the General Teaching Council decision to allow qualified college lecturers to teach in secondary schools in certain circumstances, a number of contributions were made that illustrate the prejudices that do exist on both sides. An FE member of the General Teaching Council made the comment 'I do have a quiet shudder when I see some of the things that are taught in schools. Do school teachers have the qualifications to teach some Scotvec modules?' Statements made by secondary school staff illustrated prejudices on their side. One head teacher suggested that 'There was a risk that some lecturers would be teaching beyond their competence. Recent financial pressures on colleges had seen attempts to lure pupils who would have been better off at school.' This statement not only questions the competence of college lecturers, it also questions the competence of young people in making their decisions about their futures. Another secondary school representative on the General Teaching Council alleged that 'There are many people in FE teaching subjects in which they are not qualified and definitely not to the standards we would wish for' (TESS, 1996). It is essential for the provision of an integrated service for young people that steps are taken to improve cooperation and reduce prejudices on both sides.

The perceptions and experience young people have of school and college culture does seem to influence their decisions about where to continue their education after the compulsory years. The symbolic aspects of culture, particularly the extent to which young people are treated as adults, and the security of the known culture appear to be strong determinants in decision making. Are young people any different from older people in this regard?

REFERENCES

Ainley, P. & Bailey, B., (1997) *The Business of Learning: Staff and Student Experiences of Further Education in the 1990s* London: Cassell.

Bush, T., (1998) 'Organisational Culture and Strategic Management' in Middlewood, D. and Lumby, J. eds., (1998) *Strategic Management in Schools and Colleges* London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Finlay, I., (1995) *Bridges or Battlements: Current Relationships between Colleges, Schools and Education Authorities*, Glasgow: University of Strathclyde.

Finlay, I., Holmes, S. and Kydd, L., (1997) 'Institutional Boundary Management: experiences of Scottish colleges since incorporation' in Levacic, R. and Glatter, R, *Managing Change in Further Education*, London: FEDA.

Foskett, N. H. and Hesketh, A., (1996) *Student Decision-Making and the Post-16 Market Place* Southampton: Heist and University of Southampton.

Gibb, S., (1997) *Research Report* Unpublished, Glasgow: University of Strathclyde.

Hemsley Brown, J., (1999) 'College Choice: Perceptions and Priorities' in *Educational Management and Administration* 27:1, 85-98.

HMI, (1992) *Using Ethos Indicators in Secondary School Self Evaluation* , Edinburgh: SOED.

Hofstede, G. H., (1984) *Culture's Consequences*, London: Sage.

Holmes, S., Finlay, I. and Kydd, L., (1997) 'Time and Money, Money and Time' *Management in Education* 11:1, 30 - 33.

Hoyle, E., (1986) *The Politics of School Management,* Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton.

Johnson, G. and Scholes, K., (1997) *Exploring Corporate Strategy*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

MacBeath, J., et al (1996): *Schools Speak for Themselves*, Glasgow: University of Strathclyde.

Park, K., (1997) *An Investigation into Student Perceptions: Image, Culture and Ethos at College,* Unpublished Research Report, Glasgow: University of Strathclyde.

Prosser, J., (1999) *School Culture,* London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Taylor, M J (1992) 'Post 16 Options: Young People's Awareness, Attitudes, Intentions and Influences on Their Choice' *Research Papers in Education* 7:3, 301-304.

Taylor, D., Finnie, C. and Ross, M., (1995) 'The Secondary/Further Education Interface' *A Journal for Further and Higher Education in Scotland* 19:1, 13 - 17.

Times Educational Supplement Scotland, (1996) 'General Teaching Council to review Higher Still college-secondary partnerships' *TESS*, Dec16, p 1.