WHAT IS SUCCESS ANYWAY?

EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF SCHOOL LEAVERS IN SCOTLAND

RESEARCH FINDINGS

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Each year in Scotland, around 50,000 young people complete their secondary education and leave school. This period of educational transition is full of opportunities and yet also presents challenges and risks. It is a period where significant decisions are made and life chances established. This research explores the experiences and outcomes of school leavers in Scotland, looking specifically at the shaping influence of migrant/ethnic identity and socio-economic background class.

This mixed methods study draws on in-depth interviews, focus groups and analysis of the Scottish School Leavers Survey. Together, these approaches reveal new insights into the significant differences in post-school destinations and aspirations of school leavers. For example, White Polish and White Other pupils are less likely to go to university than any other minority ethnic group, even once socio-economic differences are taken into account. Yet the qualitative fieldwork reveals high aspirations and attainment within these groups.

This research raises questions about the persistence of educational inequalities and illustrates how this is underpinned by the ways in which educational success is constructed and measured and how minority identities are negotiated in the transition to adulthood.

In addition to fieldwork in schools, quantitative methods were used to examine trends in the destination of School Leavers over the past decade. The analysis focused on the anonymised records of over 470,000 school leavers between 2006-2016. The process of linking the School Leavers Survey with the Pupil Census (using the Scottish Candidate number) provides information on the destination of each school leaver alongside other details such as age, gender, ethnic and socio-economic background.

This briefing paper provides a summary of doctoral research carried out between 2015-2018, funded by the University of St Andrews. Access to the full thesis can be found online at https://tinyurl.com/packwoodthesis
Over the past 25 years, the proportion of pupils leaving school and going to University has risen by 16 per cent whilst the proportion of pupils moving on to employment and training has fallen steadily (Scottish Government 2018). Looking more closely at these national trends, there are differences in destinations by gender, socio-economic background and ethnicity.

The chart below highlights the gender differences in the destination of school leavers; with ten per cent more females than males progressing to Higher Education between 2012-2016. A trend reflected across most OEDC countries and which remains largely unexplained.

Below, the chart highlights the stark socio-economic gradient in the destination of school leavers. Using data from the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (5=least deprived quintile, 1=the most) the analysis shows that Higher Education remains the least likely post-school destination for pupils living in the most disadvantaged communities in Scotland. Three times as many school leavers from affluent areas attend university compared with peers in the least affluent areas.

Finally, the chart below illustrates post-school destinations by ethnicity. It shows the high proportion of Asian Chinese pupils who leave school and go on to Higher Education (74 per cent); this is more than twice the proportion for White Scottish (36 per cent). Higher Education is also the most common destination for all five of the Asian ethnic groups (Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani and Asian Other). The ethnic group most likely to attend Further Education are White Polish pupils (43 per cent) and White Other (30 per cent). Some of these results are striking, but not unexpected. The large proportion of Chinese leavers entering Higher Education, for example, is consistent with the existing literature (Mok & Platt, 2018). However, this study shows, for the first time, that the probability of going straight to University is lowest among White Scottish and White Polish young people. Detailed analysis reveals that even after accounting for the level of English and socio-economic background White Polish and White Other groups lag behind other minority groups in terms of progression to Higher Education.
Qualitative fieldwork shed light on everyday experiences of transition. Key themes included the influence of family and peers, navigating decision making, learning to 'have a plan B', the pressure of expectations as well as broader questions about how success is defined and measured.

**NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY**
I'm so confused, I'm so lost, I used to feel confident about my plans but I don't know anymore. (Sasha)

I am just here till I find something. I don't want to leave school without anything in case I don't find anything else for a while. (Josh)

It's strange because I really don't know what I want to do. I don't really want to be like 'this is definitely what I want to do' in case I don't like that. (Danielle)

**MEASURING SUCCESS**
I think success is knowing how to be happy and positive and find your own way [pause] to be happy. (Lilli)

I think school tends to focus on careers but I would quite happily take these subjects because they are interesting but I think that is often lost slightly! (Corran)

Passing all your grades and getting a job at the end of school. That is success. (Kyle)

I want to be happy – to get on well with my parents, find my way, find a really good job I'm interested in. (Ana)

**LEARNING TO FAIL**
My exams didn't go as I hoped, on the contrary, they went as bad as I dreaded they might. I'm having to learn to take the bad with the good. (Lucas)

You don't really hear about how people who have maybe slipped up but still manage to get where they are. (Lynn)

If you don't fail at something you won't achieve, if there's nothing wrong with it you won't try to improve something. So, in a way, things have to get worse before they get better. (Ana)

**WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES YOUR BACKGROUND MAKE?**
If I had stayed in Russia I feel like it wouldn't be good for me. I would have never got my grades. I'm trying to do my best because I know that my Mum brought me here to get my education. (Sasha)

I think if I was already wealthy, I don't think I would be trying. If your parents are already rich and have loads of money I don't think you try as hard. (Josh)

If I was born a different race I think … I would probably have a different job. I think Asian people are more likely to take risks in order to become [claps] boom! [successful] (Akash)

I think what my Mum and Dad do and how they motivate me influences me a lot. I feel like parents are really important. (Faye)
KEY FINDINGS

THE SHAPING INFLUENCE OF FAMILY BACKGROUND
- All minority ethnic groups (apart from White Polish) show a higher probability of progressing to Higher Education than White Scottish pupils.
- Many students who were not born in the UK describe learning skills and flexibility through their migration experiences which in turn have helped them in educational transition.
- Strong evidence of the persistence of the poverty-related attainment gap, the odds of going to University for pupils living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods are much lower than those living in affluent areas and this gap has widened over time.
- Evidence of high aspirations among school leavers from the most disadvantaged areas but inconsistent and advice and support can limit choices and restrict opportunities.

COMPETING IDEAS ABOUT SUCCESS
- School leavers are naturally focussed on ‘results’ and ‘grades’ and ‘plans for the future’. They have an acute awareness of external expectations from parents, teachers and peers as well as the standards they hold for themselves.
- Students are often torn about what constitutes success. Stating that success is about ‘doing your best’ and ‘reaching your potential’ whilst also feeling pressure to conform to unspoken expectations, with ‘going to university’ seen as the main performance indicator.

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT TRANSITION
- Strong evidence of the positive impact of well-resourced class teachers having time to mentor students in the senior phase. Pupils spoke of subject teachers who had known them since S1, understood their ‘true ability’ and could offer advice and signpost to subject-specific opportunities.
- Some students encountered conflicting/contradictory advice from home/school and relied heavily on information and advice from peers. This underlined the value of regular contact between home and school through the senior phase.
- Many students discussed the benefits of being exposed to the ‘real world of work’ - through part time employment, work experience, vocational training etc. These opportunities helped students to see the relevance of their learning, provided motivation, financial independence, new skills and confidence.
CONCLUSIONS

This study raises important policy questions about the education of young people in the senior phase of school. Most notably the opportunity to broaden definitions of success and look for innovative ways to measure achievement beyond grades and normative standards such as economically productive positive destinations.

Secondly, the research also raises questions about the integration and support available for migrant young people in the transition to adulthood. In particular, concerns have been raised about the prospects for young Polish (and White Other) school leavers who are not progressing to Higher Education at the same rate as other young people despite aspirations to do so.

A third policy implication of this study is in the area of coaching and mentoring. Contributing to existing evidence on the value of mentoring for young people in transition. It is argued that mentoring, within school hours by teaching staff can make a significant difference to the most vulnerable students. Additional resources are required to release class teachers to provide regular support for students in the senior phase. Sharing their professional and personal experiences to support pupils and parents as they navigate uncertainty and change.

Finally, an important theme to emerge from this research has been the existence of hidden racism. Young people often struggle to articulate difference and perceive that discussing differences may somehow be misconstrued as racist. This worrying finding requires a strategic response. The current equalities agenda has made progress in embedding ideas of respect, tolerance and the importance of valuing others.

Participants in this study were familiar with the concept of equality and were keen to present themselves as inclusive, however, this often resulted in a refusal to discuss difference. It is in this environment, that experiences of discrimination were found to be downplayed and narratives of differences are muted.

Further work is required to create an environment where young people feel they have the language to discuss difference and are empowered to call out everyday racism when they see and experience it.

Thank you to all those who contributed to this research. In particular the schools, staff and parents for facilitating this project and especially the young people who shared their insights and experiences.

References -


Access to the full thesis can be found online at https://tinyurl.com/packwoodthesis