

OPINION

Preparation and aspiration

Access to higher education for working-class students

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One of the outcomes of the *Bradley Report* (Bradley *et al.* 2008) is that Australian universities have a new incentive to enrol students from low socio-economic status. Consequently, a flurry of (mostly administrative and pedagogical) interest is growing around knowledge concerning the targeting, recruitment and retention of low socio-economic status (SES) students (CSHE 2008; Priest 2009). Some academics from working-class backgrounds recognise, in the current debate, an opportunity to break a long silence—or rather to challenge the ways that we have been persistently and sometimes insidiously silenced. For me, at least, this is both political and personal: ‘political’ because access to education is a fundamental social good that is at present distributed in very uneven ways (Furlong and Cartmel 2009) and personal, because I am a university teacher who was once an low SES student.

I know that my experience as an erstwhile low SES student affects my teaching and interactions with students, but it also influences the way I interpret ideas about the implementation of policies regarding university access and equity. At a recent conference, for example, I heard a lot of discussion about raising the aspirations of low SES students. It seemed that every speaker thought this needed to happen at an earlier age, until eventually the debate settled on how to embed a sense of entitlement to and enthusiasm for higher education in primary school children. The following reflections consider my own experience in relation to two strategies advocated as means to

increasing the enrolment share of low SES students: first, raising aspirations (as early as possible), and second, familiarisation programs. Sad to say, I doubt the kinds of familiarisation or aspiration-raising activities being currently advocated would have helped smooth my own academic path. Having said that, I would not care to imply that such programs are never useful, or that they should not be implemented. I’m sure that my story isn’t typical. (But then, whose is?)

I never thought of our family as ‘poor.’ We *weren’t* poor. There were lots of things we didn’t have, but food and shoes and a warm bed were guaranteed, and I took them for granted. Never being destitute—and never being denied something that really mattered—was one factor among many that slowed any sense I had of class consciousness. My intelligent, capable parents offered measured encouragement for whatever interested us, having had little opportunity or support themselves. My mother finished a year 10 commercial stream, and in her family was considered over-educated. When my siblings and I started school, mum worked part-time—first in a mechanic’s office, and then as a teacher’s aide at a local primary school—again, as a part-time, casual employee. In school holidays, she earned nothing at all. My father started a year of ‘technical school’ after primary school, but hated it and left to work as a messenger boy at the port. He served in the Navy during the latter part of World War II, and when the war ended, worked as a shoe salesman. Later, after he’d met my mother, he joined the Commonwealth Public Ser-

vice under a scheme to support returned servicemen, and worked there (very unhappily, suffering chronic mental health problems) for most of the rest of his life. He remained at 'entry-level' in the public service for many years because he had not completed high school. In order to move up to the next salary band, he completed adult matriculation, but never moved far up the wages ladder. In the long run, stealing money was more appealing to my dad than earning it, and he initiated a number of wildly clever, lucrative 'schemes'. He never did manual labour for a living, so maybe we weren't unequivocally 'working class' after all. But I know that my parents thought of themselves as working class, and money was always tight.

My mum and dad started with nothing, and did the best they could. They were, however, streets ahead of their own parents, who had worked in flour mills, on railway gangs, and cleaning other people's homes. My parents modelled self-improvement through adult education—my mother attended myriad Workers' Education Association evening courses, and my father taught himself astronomy and navigation. Dad took my older brother, sister and me to the council library every Thursday evening. We didn't have bookshelves at home, but the library was a place I knew and loved well. I know my parents had educational aspirations for my siblings and me, even though they knew next to nothing about what tertiary education involved. I knew, nonetheless, that I had the intellectual capacity to attend university, and I understood that I could go.

But, ten years after I left school, none of us had graduated. My sister had started a teaching course, and dropped out after a couple of years. She got married, had three kids, and worked as a cleaner in a shopping centre. (She's a health professional, now, but that's another story.) By the time he left school, my brother had a more substantial criminal than academic record, and a sizeable drug habit. His heartbreaking life ended soon after his 25th birthday. And me? I was the most thoroughly 'prepared' of all of us. At my (state) primary school, I'd done well enough in a music aptitude test to be one of six in my year to be offered free violin lessons. I was lent an instrument and allowed half an hour of group tuition, with a visiting music teacher, every week. No-one in my family had ever had music lessons before. Having those violin lessons confirmed my parents' idea that we were surely rising through the class ranks.

Thinking about my father's response to my violin-playing touches me deeply. Every six months or so,

he'd bring home a classical record. The first was a K-Tel record of Strauss waltzes. He played it, loudly, at our highly dysfunctional dinner table. I think I suspected, even then, that it wasn't 'right': I sensed that my father's effort to bring home some cultural capital in fact exposed our lack of taste. That K-Tel record, with its bright purple cover, would be recognised by most people as a piece of classic 70s kitsch, but to us it was high-class dinner music—it was what we thought rich people did. (Even now, I have no faith in my ability to differentiate 'real' art and kitsch, especially where those in the know adopt an ironically embracing attitude to the latter. I can never tell whether they're being sarcastic or not.) I didn't take to Strauss. Those lurching waltzes still set my teeth on edge. But later records—including a boxed set of Mozart wind concertos, and David & Igor Oistrach's rendition of the Bach double violin concerto—were childhood treasures. Having a knowledge of classical music is great class camouflage. Much later, at various times when I thought it prudent to try and 'pass' as middle class, knowing Beethoven from Brahms was a shibboleth.

I loved classical music, but as a teenager I followed my older brother and sister in all matters of taste. There were only three-and-a-half years between us, and my brother's knowledge about everything that mattered, in high school, meant that I never became a music nerd. Every day after school we'd have Iggy Pop, Led Zeppelin, Lou Reed and Bob Dylan blasting at full volume in the lounge room. At school I did the minimum required—which, for me, was very little. My grades were so poor that I was threatened with having to repeat year 11. When the Principal relented and promoted me to year 12, I made a point of scoring straight A's in the first term, after which my normal, negligible effort resumed. (No wonder my teachers were so infuriated by me.) My parents had so much on their plates—what with my brother's offending, my father's mental health, and their own divorce—that I was more or less excused from accounting for my falling grades. Nobody at school counselled me about what I was doing, and no-one suggested that I consider anything other than a career in music. I probably wouldn't have listened, in any case.

I stayed at school only because I wanted to continue with music—not so much the violin, but a new love, the bassoon. I had been awarded a scholarship each year since I was 14 to take bassoon lessons at the conservatorium. My teacher, Mr Wightman, would smoke cigarettes throughout the hour; sometimes, when I

went into his office late in the afternoon, he would be napping in an armchair. We got on famously. When I sat next to Mr Wightman in the Conservatorium orchestra most Saturday mornings, together we were the oldest and youngest players. The Conservatorium was part of the University of Adelaide. My visits, twice a week during the school year, constituted an extensive familiarisation program: in theory, at least, it is hard to imagine a better preparation for tertiary music study. But one-on-one lessons and orchestral practice did not really prepare me at all for what was to come.

I left home the same week I left school, and not a moment too soon. I was 17 and moved into a share house, taking a room my brother vacated when he left the state, as he frequently did. The rent was \$55 a week, and there were five of us there. Rent of \$11 per week sounds like a bargain, and (even back in 1981) it was, but my weekly income was only \$17, so I supplemented it as well as I could.

Even two months in, I was finding it difficult to make classes at the conservatorium. Mr Wightman retired, suffering lung cancer, and I disliked his replacement. As a single-study scholarship student, I'd only attended personal lessons and orchestra rehearsals, but as an undergraduate there were many more classes required, and the cultural differences between me and my fellow students became more and more pronounced. The vast majority of music students were from the wealthy, inner eastern suburbs. Their parents thought nothing of investing in a better clarinet for young Hugh or Simone, even at \$5000. My parents could no more have bought a professional-level instrument for me than fly me to the moon. Mr Wightman lent me a decent bassoon, and I played that. I ate leftovers off other people's plates in the refectory while my classmates talked about what kind of car or house their parents were buying for them. I was very out of place, but I no longer experienced not fitting in as a failure on my part; I no longer wanted to fit in. So, with 'F's buzzing like flies around my academic record, I left.

Over the next ten years, I worked in cafes, restaurants, fast food retailers, and (occasionally) as a musician. Sick of my chaotic life, and still freshly bereaved, I finally accepted a 'proper' office job. Armed with a more robust sense of who I was and where I stood, I enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts degree at Adelaide University. Going back to the same university wasn't easy. Throughout the whole of my part-time study there, I was scared that someone would discover my previous record of failure and disqualify me from my course.

What's more, I had thoroughly internalised the oppressive equation that rich people are somehow 'naturally' smarter than others, and my confidence was very low. But I had a decent job that allowed unpaid time off to attend certain classes (a fact which relieved me of the burden of actually choosing topics), a loving partner and a safe home.

Even more crucially, at 25 I had endured loss, betrayal and bereavement. I had a strong sense that there was nothing any university boffin could do to me that would hurt worse than the troubles I'd already suffered. I neither wanted nor needed friends at uni. My social life—my friends, family, and partner—remained markedly working class. I was strangely, newly respectable to them, in the same way I knew I was exotically disrespectful at uni, (not that I showed it, if I could help it). I was weirdly intellectual in one part of my life, and a closet bogan in the other. Juggling these identities was sometimes uncomfortable, but the pleasure and pride I experienced in learning, and in learning to excel, made up for that. Not quite fitting in within either realm eventually settled into an uneasy kind of balance.

My father was in prison the year I completed honours, and continued his sentence while I went on to postgraduate study. My partner's best mate was in the same prison at the same time. I associated with them, and other credentialed criminals, as much as I did law scholars and politics professors. It is difficult to describe the experience and effects of my inhabiting these clashing cultures, except to say that I remain acutely aware of the distance between them. At one point in my PhD candidature, I doubted (as most of us do) my ability to finish my thesis. My already tenuous self-confidence had been shaken when a fellow student jokingly announced, in front of my supervisor and other esteemed academics, that she was, apparently, officially 'White Trash'. She explained that she'd just come across a new definition of the term. To be classed White Trash, she said, you had to have a relative in jail. And, she went on, because her sister's husband's cousin's son was doing time for theft, or possession, (or something), she fit the bill. The murmurs of amusement that followed were whimsically ironic - to the people around me, this was a quaint, slightly silly conversation about categorisation. For me, it was an occasion of corporeal betrayal: my face and ears flushed red, and my heart pounded so hard that I could hardly speak. Not that I said anything—there was nothing to say that wouldn't frame me as hard done by, ashamed, or spiteful, and I was none of these.

I recounted all of this to one of my partner's football team-mates. We were in the local leagues club after a cold Saturday match, drinking red wine. He rallied me. You don't want to worry about that! You will finish your schoolwork, you'll get your PhD. You wanna know why? Because you can, that's why.' He was right: I could, and did.

I know, however, that going to a university campus as part of a year 9 school excursion, or being encouraged to 'aim high' from a younger age would not have seen me graduate any earlier or easier. As an undergraduate student, what I needed, above all else, was a financially secure environment, along with a modicum of material and 'moral' support for my efforts. As a low SES school-leaver with criminal connections, and an attitude problem, that was (almost by definition) what I did not have. Indeed, I cannot see how it would have been possible for me to succeed in tertiary study while the most basic circumstances of my life were so difficult. For me, being 25 was a lifetime older than 17. That eight-year age difference meant that I could listen to university lecturers and tutors without suspecting them; it meant that I had a greater investment in, but less fear of knowledge.

For what it is worth, my experience suggests several ways that low SES school-leavers might be encouraged to access university. The first, perhaps paradoxically, is that the desirability of moving directly from school to university should be open to question: not just for rich kids on family-funded 'gap' year travels, but for everyone (Furlong and Cartmel 2009, p. 72). Asking low SES students to move directly from school to university, without all the invisible supports that help wealthier students, is a hard ask. I do not mean to suggest that low SES students who want to move directly from school to university should not have every opportunity to do so—and perhaps one way to facilitate this for some would be to offer low SES students access to 'halls of residence' accommodation at discounted rates. But if students do not have the resources to eat well, sleep well and live safely, they cannot be expected to study effectively. The same goes for those low SES (and other) students who begin university, but find themselves out of their depth—whether socially, academi-

cally, or otherwise. (Mistakes arising out of immaturity seem to have fewer consequences for the rich.) The option to suspend study should not be interpreted as failure (Furlong and Cartmel 2009, p. 73), and re-entry to the same or a different course should not be penalised. Most importantly, those people who were low SES school-leavers but who did not go directly to university should be encouraged over the following ten or twenty (or lifetime) years to keep considering further study. That is, the current incentives to enrol higher numbers of low SES students should extend far beyond school-leavers.

For me, the single most important policy the government could enact to effect its 'education revolution' would be to abolish tuition fees; HECs, the 'Higher Education Contribution Scheme'. Working people who

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were low SES school-leavers find it difficult to see how a university education will advance their financial interests, particularly if they are already in full-time work (as parents, employees, or combinations of both). The HECS system implies that there are monetary rewards attached to university qualifications.

While there is certainly a correlation between wealth and higher education, it is by no means clear that education—or even intelligence (Gladwell 2008)—confers the privileges of a middle class lifestyle and not the other way around. Thus, offering a better education to working-class people does not necessarily mean that they will be 'promoted' into the middle-class, or magically qualify for middle-class incomes (Benson 2009; Kastberg 2007, p. 64). If opportunities for the acquisition of wealth continue to depend on the value of cultural capital apart from or beyond formal education, it is misleading to hitch earning potential to university study. That is not to say that higher education does not broaden opportunities and enhance life: the ability to use knowledge critically, ethically and confidently is surely desirable in and of itself. Education does not have to be vocationally oriented to be enriching. The cost of study is currently articulated to assumed future earnings in ways which deter low SES school-leavers and more mature students, but which matter much less to students from well-off families.

Finally, the fact that there were lecturers at my university who recognised my scholarly talents without judging my life circumstances mattered enormously to me. If, the second time around, certain lecturers and supervisors had not looked beyond my class cluelessness, I would never have persisted with undergraduate, let alone postgraduate study—in fact, I would never have been offered a place. I know, now, that key lecturers and supervisors saw elements of their own experience in mine. And now, as my own teaching and learning practices continue to mature, I recognise aspects of my own experience in my students' lives. Most importantly of all, I take courage and strength from those working-class students I teach, and from those students and colleagues whose stories are similar (and yet always uniquely different) to my own (Tokarczyk & Fay 1993; Dews & Law 1995; Ryan & Sackrey 1984; Strom 2001). It is telling that, as my academic career has unfolded, I have felt progressively less need to 'pass' as—that is, to pretend to be—respectably middle-class. That my willingness to consider my own working-class background has intensified at the same time as my position as a respectable middle-class academic has become more assured is no accident. The irony is deep, complex, and abiding.

Working class people in general, and low SES students in particular, are no more or less intelligent than anyone else. In our under-representation at universities, however, we are sometimes wrongly positioned as intellectually deficient (Kadi 1996). The problem in extending the opportunities higher education affords to under-represented groups lies not in low SES students themselves, but in the social relations that produce them as such. Looking for the first and most influential point of intervention is like looking for the beginning of a loop. Instead, we should attend to the wisdom and experience of those whose situation has some resonance with our own, and build along the paths their steps have already worn. Most of all, universities should be places where class differences, along with other diverse personal and cultural identifications, can be critically productive rather than shaming and exclusive. And this has to start, both inside and beyond the classroom, now.

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