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Top Girls

Young women and independent schools



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Research on independent education



Research on independent schools in England has been fairly limited to date. The most recent focus has been on the advantages that may accrue from being educated in an independent school, such as increased likelihood of securing an Oxbridge place¹, earning a higher salary², or achieving a senior position within the political, judicial and cultural sectors³.

Much less is understood about the ways in which independent schools educate their pupils and how different forms of education shape potential outcomes for young people. Furthermore, outside the independent school sector itself, relatively little is known about how the broader marketplace of fee-paying schools operates and the range of families that draw upon it. How do parents choose a school for their children? How do young people experience their education? What kinds of aspirations do they have – and how are these shaped both by their families and by the schools they attend? How are the advantages that an independent education bestows on those who receive it created and maximised?

Some of these questions have been examined historically by studies of the role of public schools in educating leaders in England⁴. Geoffrey Walford⁵, for example, has made a sustained contribution to this work through research on historical and contemporary trajectories within the independent schooling sector. Sara Delamont's study⁶ is also a key text, examining the curriculum offered, peer group socialization, and young women's anticipated futures in St. Luke's' girls day school (a pseudonym) in Scotland. However, these contributions largely describe

work completed in the past, and it is only recently that there has been a renewed research interest in the independent education sector, both in Britain and internationally.

In the UK, a recent in-depth study of Taylor's Girls' School (a pseudonym) by Alexandra Allan⁷ has examined the kinds of girls the school sought to develop, and how young women understood what it means to be academically successful. A research team in Scotland has looked at how three independent schools represent themselves through their websites, and how the headteacher, the layout of the school and its grounds, and the emphasis given to sport shapes the culture of an institution⁸. Gayna Davey⁹ has examined how an independent school in southern England sought to influence the higher education choices of its students. Most recently, our own work in four different independent schools in one area of England has focused on young women's perceptions of the school, their engagement with education and extra-curricular activities, and their future aspirations.

By engaging with the work of scholars doing important research on independent schools in North America, Australia, and parts of Asia and Latin America, researchers in the UK are beginning to extend their understanding of the special place that independent schools hold within the broader education sector. This work may assist schools in articulating more clearly benefits to be gained from an independent education, and the processes by which these are made possible – both for the individual but also more generally.



The study

The Top girls: Young women and independent schools study, which has been conducted over a three year period between 2010-2013, has examined three main research questions:

- The nature of the independent education market in one locality – what can this tell us about commonalities and differences between schools?
- How does an independent education build on and extend the perspectives of families choosing to send their child to a fee-paying school?
- What goals do young women in independent schools have for the future, both in terms of their own education as well as social relationships?

Four schools participated in the study. All were located in the same geographical area (a local authority comprising both urban and rural communities), and represent something of the range of schools available to families seeking an independent education.

- Co-educational, (predominantly) boarding school, HMC
- Co-educational, day school, HMC
- Girls-only, day school, academically very selective, GSA
- Girls-only, (predominantly) boarding school, GSA

Time was spent in each school – experiencing different aspects of a school day – before inviting around 25 young women from Years 10-13 in each school to participate in an in-depth interview. These interviews explored the reasons why girls had chosen to come to that particular school, what their experiences of it had been, positive and less positive events over the past 12 months, and plans for the future.

Over half of the young women were re-interviewed 12-18 months later. This provided the opportunity to look at the extent to which hopes for the future were being realised, and to further consider how young women seek to realise their aspirations. We also explored how schools had supported the transition to further and higher education and girls' wider futures.

In summary, 91 young women were interviewed for the study, 54 of whom were re-interviewed a year or so later.

A small number of interviews were also carried out with senior members of staff in each school to explore how they would describe the culture of their school and its unique selling points. Interviews also examined whether the school's pupils were viewed as coming from particular backgrounds, and how staff facilitated the development of confidence and aspiration in students.

Differences between schools

In talking to teachers and young women about the different schools families consider when deciding where to send their daughter, the wealth of variety in the independent sector became clear.

Participants distinguished between schools in a number of different ways: degree of academic selectivity; boarding or day school; and whether the institution was a traditional public school or newer (such as an ex-grammar school for instance). Family histories of independent education shaped parents' choice of school for their daughters.

Overall, our findings suggest that people, places and practices strongly influence parental choice.

Figure 1. Differences which it may be helpful to think about when considering how different schools position themselves.



Describing and analysing schools through a focus on people, places and practices enables us to understand each school in greater depth, and the experiences it aims to provide for young women.

Our analysis also highlights distinguishing features between independent schools in England in terms of:

- The heterogeneity of the student population (i.e. the range of family backgrounds girls come from)
- The degree of academic selectivity of the school

Both of these markers strongly shaped the culture of each of the four schools studied, how well young women felt they 'fitted' into the school, and what girls understood the purpose of their education to be. Some stressed academic attainment above all else, whereas others placed the emphasis on accomplishment in extra-curricular activities such as music, drama and sport as key to an individual's sense of self and her future.

Abbey Mill's never [selected on the basis of who is likely to attain the highest marks for exams], they look for other things in girls. ... They're out to get the best [out of the] cohort that they [can] ... the pressure from the school is more that you can do this for yourself, rather than you must achieve straight A*s ... [The Head teacher] was saying that you should not have one string to your bow sort of ... It's not a bad thing to have that – 'You must try everything' sort of ethos because it does mean you do try everything, so then you do find the things you like ...

(Helen, girls-only boarding school, one year after finishing school)

Surety and the self

Key ideas developed through our study include the importance of confidence and self-surety to young women's academic and personal development. These concepts help us understand the kinds of advantage and 'added value' that an independent education provides to their students.

Central to the development of confidence is the ability to identify oneself as having a unique combination of qualities and abilities. What supports such forms of expression is having a strong sense of affinity with, and connectedness to others. This promotes a sense of belonging, of fitting in, of having the right to be at a particular independent

school and to aspire to a particular form of future employment. Interviews with members of staff in schools suggested that self-sureties were often driven from within families. However, schools saw themselves (and the young women in our study support this perspective) as playing a significant role in embedding and extending such ways of thinking and feeling – with positive consequences for the young women concerned.

Critical to our work is the finding that it is not just schools or just families that cause young women to have the resources, skills and orientations to achieve their goals. Rather, it is the interaction between the family, the school and the young woman that is critical in determining plans for education and the future, and subsequent outcomes. We explain this in a little more detail below.

The family and the school

Families shape their daughters' ways of seeing, behaving and reacting. Thus, how a girl develops as a young woman and the future to which she aspires, is influenced by the way she has been brought up. Furthermore, how she interacts socially with others, the kinds of networks she cultivates, and the value given to friendships and the peer group are also linked to values and experiences laid down within the family. Girls' actions and perspectives are shaped by their mothers', fathers' and siblings' educational histories and their own self-projects with respect to educational attainment, career pathways and understandings of what 'success' should be.

The school, in turn, adopts a particular orientation towards the kinds of young women it seeks to support, the emphasis given to academic attainment, and how this should be combined with accomplishments in extra-curricular domains. The ethos and culture of a school are shaped by its history, the way it seeks to position itself within the broader (independent) education market (as a traditional public school, as a highly academically selective school and so on), and the kinds of families it has traditionally sought to engage with and attract.

Sophia, who had been on a full bursary and been Headgirl, returned to her coeducational boarding school one year after starting at a Russell Group university. She reflected on her visit,

'I kind of saw every aspect of the school, and when you see it in that holistic sense I think you do value it more, and you come away and you're like "Wow they actually do so much for us that they actually really care".'

Projects of the self

Young women therefore find themselves negotiating their own self-projects within a set of expectations influenced by their families and the school they attend. Negotiating a self-project is both a conscious and unconscious process. While certain discourses are taken as given by many of the young women in our research – such as the view that academic attainment and subject choice are central to determining your future – factors influencing young women's decisions are not always fully understood, or actively considered and made sense of.

The process of developing a self-project has a strong emotional or affective dimension to it. For example, if a young woman feels excited about her future, or is worried about a choice she has made, or is frustrated or angry with her family about the pressures she feels she is being put under, or experiences moments of pleasure when she attains a successful outcome, this may affect her subsequent decision making. Feelings and affective responses are key to understanding what drives a young woman's self-project – through decisions and self determination, and through ways of responding and thinking about things.

Internal conversation

The ways young women understand their emotional responses to everyday experiences are driven by broader ideas shaping what it means to be a successful young woman, a daughter within a particular family, and a pupil at a specific school. Our findings suggest that emotional responses, drive what might be called an 'internal conversation', or a process of reflection, for girls. By far the majority of young women in our study were trained in the art of being reflective. They were deliberate about their decisions because they accepted that they should adopt a considered approach to reaching a desired destination or a particular goal.

Academic writing suggests all people are capable of engaging in reflection about their future – the difference seems to be that the young women educated in independent schools we have talked to, were able to formally articulate this process and see it as a 'natural' way of moving forward. Understanding the nature of young women's internal conversations and the factors that shape the reflections girls have – is useful in being able to anticipate why some young women pursue particular life choices or specific career trajectories, while others follow a different path.

Producing confident, resilient and focused young women

High levels of assuredness and optimism were found among most of the young women interviewed. Confidence in the future was strongest where there was a good match between family expectations and the ethos and culture of the school. Where young women had experienced difficulties at home, or where there was a disjuncture between their family's values and those of their school, a more fractured sense of self emerged. This caused young women either to have a less confident approach to the future, or to display more aggressively competitive projects of the self.

Developing more detailed ways of thinking about what shapes young women's trajectories can help schools and families think more carefully about how best to support individual young women in their current education and in their relationships with others. By understanding how the family, the school and the individual together shape practices and orientations – we may be able to facilitate the development of confident, articulate, assured and resilient young women ready to make future contributions that go beyond traditional conceptions of femininity.

Significantly, while almost all the young women in our study demonstrated high levels of assuredness, almost all could see aspects of their lives that required further development. By influencing the internal conversations girls engage in – it may be possible to enhance their optimism about the future, enabling them to embrace the challenges they come across when leaving school, when competing for jobs, and when dealing positively and constructively with set-backs.

I think if you're going to become famous or you're going to become well recognised it better be for something good. And acting was great, you know that's very good, but I think being ... a member of parliament is very worthwhile because you get to really understand how the country's run and you can influence important decisions which ... for me like the new train system which is going to go through X [nearest big city], I'm strongly, strongly against ... but I'd like to be a CEO, I'd like to be a banker, there's all that that's open to me.

(Francesca, girls-only day school, Year 10)



Conclusions

Our research has been driven by a wish to explore how independent schools create settings in which young women can develop confident and aspirational orientations towards the future. We have approached our work through a focus on the kind of environments different schools seek to offer young women.

By spending time in four quite different schools, we have become aware of the range of family backgrounds young women come from as well as the cultures of different schools. The ways in which girls engage with the educational and cultural resources available, and the expectations their families have about them, help young women develop their aspirations for the future.

The degree of alignment between the family and the school also helps shape young women's self-projects, which in turn influence their choices and practices. Understanding these processes helps make better sense of how different young women engage with their education. This way of understanding decision-making should enable us to create spaces that more readily engender confidence, resilience and a secure and forward looking sense of self.

A focus on developing different kinds of sureties in young women (self-surety, surety about the future, surety about educational success, and surety in interacting with others) may be a useful way of developing future work in schools. Through our work and its focus on (i) people, (ii) places and (iii) practices, we have argued that we can begin to identify how different kinds of sureties can be cultivated and encouraged.

Our research findings also urge a clearer focus on the emotional dimensions of school life – the kinds of affective atmospheres within schools, and how young women identify and talk about the feelings experienced through their education and interactions with others. Emotions play a critical role in influencing young women's self-understandings and self-worth, and their plans for the future.

Future research

Empirical and theoretical questions remain. *The Top Girls: Young women and independent schools study* offers just the beginning of an important, collaborative, approach to understanding the important benefits, effects and outcomes of the independent sector in England.

Questions we are keen to examine further include:

- What are the longer-term outcomes for the young women in our study? How do girls continue to draw on and make sense of their education, and how can we support them in attaining the kind of future they wish for? We have started to examine this question as we stay in touch with our research participants, a proportion of whom have now left school.
- How do parents make decisions about the kind of independent education to provide for their children and which specific school to choose? How are these expectations fulfilled or challenged when their children start school?
- What are the experiences of young men who are being independently educated? How do these differ, both experientially and in terms of outcomes, from those of young women?
- What kinds of differences do young women and young men experience in single-sex and coeducational independent schools; and how do these experiences shape their orientations to the future?

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these ideas further with representatives of the independent schooling sector and with individual schools – with a view to potentially developing collaborative study/ies both to inform understanding of the way in which an independent education shapes the experiences and future orientations of students, and to showcase the excellent practice that individual schools provide.

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