The Road to Oxbridge: Schools and Elite University Choices — **Source link** ⧉

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The road to Oxbridge: Schools and elite university choices

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This paper explores hidden messages sent out by schools about Oxbridge, using Basil Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing. Research in three case study schools captured these messages from their everyday practices and processes, including their events and activities, sorting mechanisms, interactions and resources. Whilst all of the schools sent out strong classificatory messages, marking out Oxbridge as special, they differed in their strength of framing, making explicit to differing degrees which students are 'Oxbridge material'.

Introduction

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge (together known as Oxbridge) occupy a unique position in the UK higher education (HE) system. Despite accounting for just 1.4% of all undergraduate admissions in the UK, these institutions have attracted a large amount of scrutiny and notoriety. They regularly receive criticism owing to the profile of their student intake. The Sutton Trust often single out Oxbridge, highlighting the social and educational

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characteristics of their intake (Sutton Trust 2011), as well as the occupational destinations of their alumni (Sutton Trust 2009). In one sense, such criticisms might be seen as valid, given the nature of their intakes relative to the population as a whole (HESA 2013). However, in another sense, this attention might be seen as unjustified given the inequalities in access to other research-intensive higher education institutions (HEIs) (Boliver 2011). Indeed, these two universities are embedded within a highly differentiated HE system. At the same time, Oxbridge can be seen as distinct, holding a certain kudos and appeal which is quite apart from other universities in the UK. Past research into the factors that might account for inequalities in access to research-intensive HEIs, such as Oxbridge, have more often than not explored the importance of social class, race and gender. Whilst these are likely to be some of the most important factors shaping HE choices, this paper focuses specifically on the role played by state schools in the shaping of decisions to choose Oxbridge.

Class position can play a significant role not only in the way young people conceive of the HE landscape, but also in their understanding of the importance of making the 'right' kinds of choices, as evidenced by studies in the UK (Ball 2002, Reay et al. 2005, Pugsley 2004) and USA (McDonough 1997, Mullen 2009). In the USA, Mullen (2009) shows how progression to prestigious Ivy League institutions is often seen as an expected and normalised transition for those from more wealthy and highly educated backgrounds. However, it is not only about knowledge of the HE market, and understanding the rules of the game, but is also about feeling comfortable making particular HE choices. In the UK, Ball et al. (2002) found that some young people from less-advantaged backgrounds felt that they did not 'fit in' and were uncomfortable choosing elite universities like Oxbridge. This contrasts with their more advantaged peers who are often said to have instilled within them from an early age an expectation and 'sense of entitlement' to not only enter HE, but progress to the more elite

HEIs (Allat 1993, Ball 2002, Power et al. 2003). At the same time, other studies have

indicated that it might not always be the case that working class groups engage in processes

of self-exclusion, or feel alienated from elite HE destinations, including Oxbridge (Baker and

Brown 2007). The adults in Baker and Brown's (2007) study, all from working class

backgrounds, reflected back on how they were attracted by a sense of 'romanticism' towards

traditional universities, which they saw as representing an 'otherworldly experience' (p. 82).

There are fewer studies that have focussed on the influence of educational institutions on the

shaping of university choices. Those studies that have paid attention to the school, have often

concentrated on the links between private schools and progression to elite universities. In the

UK and USA, private schools have been found to provide an important form of socialisation

for young people, preparing them for positions of power in the future, including progression

to elite HE destinations (Cookson and Persell 1987, Cookson and Persell 1995, Roker 1993).

Other studies, that have explored both private and state schools, have more often than not

drawn on the concept of institutional habitus in making sense of their influence (McDonough

1997, Pugsley 2004, Reay et al. 2005). The concept of institutional habitus has been defined

as a set of dispositions and behaviours which are the product of a school's past experiences,

staff, and pupils which have all contributed to its evolution (Reay et al. 2001). In the UK

context, Pugsley (2004) and Reay et al. (2005) have both drawn on this concept in their

studies exploring the impact of families and schools on HE choices. Pugsley's (2004)

research, based in south Wales, identified qualitatively different approaches to advising and

guiding young people across the different schools in her study. The 'market alert' schools in

her study were acutely aware of the importance of choosing the right kind of university.

These schools were contrasted with others that were found to lack the competency and

expertise in negotiating the HE market. Reay et al. (2005) similarly explore differences

between the schools in their study by using the concept of institutional habitus. They found that the knowledge and social capital evident within the private schools made Oxbridge a real and realisable option for many of their students. For some of the young people in their study, it was not just expected that they apply, but they sometimes felt pressure to do so, with the school making clear that it was the most appropriate choice. Whilst institutional habitus has been the dominant conceptual framework drawn upon in past research, it has its drawbacks (Atkinson 2011, Donnelly 2014). One such drawback is in terms of the assumed interconnected relationship between school intake characteristics and organisational practices and processes. Whilst these two are closely related, and largely intake characteristics play and important part in shaping what happens in school, this may not always necessarily be the case for every school (Donnelly, forthcoming, Donnelly 2014).

In extending further the body of research exploring the role played by schools in mediating choice of university, this paper adopts a different theoretical approach. Drawing on research carried out in three case study schools, it considers the kinds of messages they sent out about Oxbridge using Bernstein's (1975) concepts of classification and frame. Before going on to discuss the nature of these messages, and the bearing these may have had in shaping perceptions and positioning in relation to Oxbridge, the theoretical and methodological approach is first explained more fully.

Applying Bernstein's theoretical ideas

Bernstein's (1975) theoretical framework draws attention to the more hidden aspects of the curriculum and educational transmissions, and his concepts of classification and frame are particularly useful at elucidating these. The notion of boundary strength underlies the

concepts of classification and frame, which refer to the underlying structure of the curriculum, and also the context of educational transmissions. Classification does not refer to what is classified, but to the extent of separation between school knowledge, and so gives the basic structure of the curriculum. Strong classification indicates a high degree of insulation between contents, with strong boundaries keeping content separate from each other. Strong classification is usually associated with a strong hierarchical ordering of content. Whilst classification refers to the degree of separation between content, the concept of frame refers to the context in which knowledge is transmitted and received, and specifically the pedagogical relationship. When framing is strong, there are clear boundaries in what knowledge may be transmitted and received by teacher and pupil, whilst weak framing entails blurred boundaries in the kinds of knowledge which may be transmitted and received. Strong framing results in reduced options, whilst weaker framing creates a greater range of options.

Bernstein's work has been drawn upon within a range of empirical studies to help understand a variety of educational problems (Gamble 2010, Walford 2002, Walford 2007). Elsewhere, I have shown how his concepts are also useful in making sense of the kinds of messages schools send out about HE choice from their routine and everyday practices and processes (Donnelly 2014). In applying these concepts, classification is useful in exploring how schools present the HE system, in terms of the extent to which it is portrayed as differentiated, and whether particular universities are marked out in any way. Alongside this, framing is a valuable concept in elucidating underlying structures of power, and the ways in which this is manifested in terms of the range of universities mentioned within the context. Taken together, these paired concepts can provide useful insights into the ways in which mundane aspects of school life can carry hidden and often implicit messages about the nature of the HE landscape and choice of Oxbridge.

Data and methods

Whilst the specific focus of this paper is on Oxbridge, the data drawn on here was collected as part of a wider study which explored the 'school effect' on progression to university more generally (Donnelly, forthcoming). In order to illustrate the kinds of messages schools send out about Oxbridge, three of the case study schools from the original study are drawn upon here. These schools, known as 'Maple Grove', 'Dockside', and 'Oakville', are all based in the same urban locality in south Wales. In the original selection of case study schools, attention was paid to their intake characteristics, with reference to the proportion of their sixth form in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). EMA is a means-tested grant for those in post-compulsory education, which is still available in Wales, and was used as a proxy measure for the social class characteristics of their sixth form intakes. This might provide a better indicator of the social composition of a school's sixth form, as opposed to take-up of Free School Meals (FSM), which is a school wide measure. Using this measure, it is clear that Dockside has a greater proportion of disadvantaged students than Maple Grove and Oakville (table 1). Indeed, Maple Grove and Oakville have a very similar intake profile, with around a fifth of their sixth form students in receipt of EMA.

Table 1: *Characteristics of case study schools*

School	EMA take-up (%)
Maple Grove	22
Oakville	23
Dockside	45

Qualitative research was carried out in these schools, collecting rich and detailed data on their everyday practices and processes, to explore further their practices and processes, particularly relating to HE preparation. Ethnographic methods were used, which included observation of key school events and activities, interviews with teachers and students, as well as the collection of documents and other artefacts. Ten young people (aged 17/18) from each school were tracked over the course of their sixth form studies, and interviewed at least twice during this time. Around 4-5 teachers were also interviewed in each school, including Heads of sixth form, subject teachers, form tutors, as well as the school careers advisor. The events and activities observed included assemblies, tutorial periods, and a range of HE preparation activities. To further explore the settings, the documents and artefacts collected (or recorded if they could not be taken away) included information booklets, 'hand-outs', letters to parents, signs, notices, posters and other artefacts. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect the anonymity of schools, teachers and the young people who took part.

Oxbridge material? Classification and framing of higher education choices

The sorts of messages sent out by the case study schools about Oxbridge are explored here using Bernstein's (1975) concepts of classification and frame. In doing so, an attempt is made to shine a light on the underlying structures of everyday aspects of school life, including events and activities, interactions with teachers, grouping and sorting mechanisms, as well as the selection and arrangement of resources. The following discussion is organised around the differing strengths of classification and framing evident across the three case study schools, beginning with strong classification and framing at Maple Grove and Dockside.

Strong classification and framing: Maple Grove and Dockside

Strong classificatory messages were sent out at Maple Grove and Dockside, making explicit the distinctiveness of Oxbridge, whilst also making clear which students were 'Oxbridge material'. At Maple Grove, Oxbridge specific events and activities were held, including a talk from the University of Cambridge and a school trip to an event specifically about applying to Oxbridge. Each year, the school also took a group of sixth form pupils to the University of Oxford for their 'open day'; pupils would stay overnight in one of the colleges and teachers showed them the city and university. Similarly, Dockside held a trip to the University of Oxford, which the Head of sixth form said was to make pupils aware that "it was there… and was an option". Instead of holding its own talk, Dockside took students to a neighbouring school to hear from the University of Cambridge:

> *MD:* And was it quite useful, the [Oxbridge] talk?
>
> *Emma:* Yeah it was, but the guy was from Cambridge I think, and he mainly talked about his university, and you didn't get to find out that much about Oxford, but he said that it was basically pretty much the same kind of thing, so… Yeah 'cos he was talking about his campus and how they have split them up into groups and stuff, so you didn't hear about Oxford, all he talked about was the entrance things you need, like you need to sit certain tests and stuff, but he mainly talked about Cambridge….

As Emma recalls here, the speaker talked about Cambridge in a way that constructed it as distinct from other HEIs, in terms of its college system and the special admissions process. Both Maple Grove and Dockside did not hold any other institution specific talks or events. This contributed to a marking out of Oxbridge as special, distinct, and separate from other

HEIs. It made explicit a message that the HE system is differentiated and hierarchically ordered. In doing so, this strong classificatory message made distinct a particular 'Oxbridge' identity.

The separation and marking out of Oxbridge was also evident from the processes these two schools had in place for supporting young people in making their applications to university. At Maple Grove, those who decided to make an Oxbridge application were guided with their personal statement directly by the Head of year 13, which was a different process separate from other students not applying to Oxbridge. Similarly, at Dockside, the Deputy Headteacher, who is also an English teacher, met with only the Oxbridge students to help them with their application, which again separated the Oxbridge candidates from other students. On one level, these differentiating practices might be interpreted in a pragmatic way, but at the same time, they also carried implicit messages that Oxbridge is distinct and special in some way.

At the same time as marking out Oxbridge, these two schools also sent out strongly framed messages about who is 'Oxbridge material' and therefore should be making an application. This strong framing was most evident from practices and processes at Maple Grove. At the beginning of the sixth form year, the Head of year 12 did an analysis of the year groups' General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results, which are the qualifications taken by young people at the end of their secondary education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This practice was carried out in order to identify who were considered the academically 'able' students, and thus who might be 'Oxbridge material'. Typically, those who achieved mostly grades A*/A in their GCSE examinations were singled out as such.

The school then brought this group of who it considered to be its potential Oxbridge candidates together:

> Head of year 12: ...what's nice about that is when you meet with that group of students it's the first time that for a lot of them that they have heard that they are that good, and even if they are not interested in Oxbridge it's quite good for their self-esteem and their motivation as well, so they start to think a bit higher and aim a bit higher, so of that group then we will identify, you know we will talk a bit about Oxford and Cambridge and tell them that they are good enough to think about the idea of this, and then they start to consider it, and then from that will come a group of students who will end up going to the open days and things like that…

This strongly framed message reduced the range of HE options presented to students and made explicit the kind of destination they should pursue. The continuity of the practice across successive cohorts, irrespective of who is the Head of year 12 (this changed each year in the school), would suggest that it is an *institutional* practice. In this sense, it was not so much the effect of an individual teacher, but appeared an historical practice perhaps connected to wider institutional cultures.

Interactions between teachers and students in both school contexts also tended to be strongly framed in terms of HE destinations. At Maple Grove, the Head of year 13 talked about how he had encouraged those students who he considered academically 'able' to attend the school trip to Oxford. Similarly at Dockside, strong framing was evident from the kinds of interactions between the Head of sixth form and students, based upon preconceived notions of the ideal Oxbridge candidate. A chance conversation with the Head of sixth form revealed

routine judgements that were made about the students taking part in my study. The following extract from my field notes are brief comments made by the Head of Sixth form about the students I was interviewing:

Abby - 'BBB student… middle of the road student'

Rachael - 'Underachiever'

Rhys - 'He is not Oxbridge, but thinks he is…'

James and Sam - 'Yeah, they are both Oxford… James is very good he wants to do veterinary science, and is very able. Sam in comparison is not as good – he hasn't got that same edge.'

Lauren - 'I would be very surprised if she turned up for the interview!'

Tom - 'Not sure about his ability… he is quiet… but he is a good student…'

Fieldnotes, Dockside

It is clear that these students were differentially positioned by the teacher in terms of being 'Oxbridge material'. James and Sam were perceived as being suitable candidates, whilst the possibility of Oxbridge was not even alluded to in the accounts given about other students, which implicitly implies they were not considered as potential candidates. This was with the exception of Rhys, whose apparent aspirations were dismissed by the teacher, who made explicit that he was not considered 'Oxbridge material'. It is difficult to say precisely how the teacher arrived at these judgements, in terms of the differentiating processes operating within the school. However, it is likely that prior attainment played an important part in shaping the teacher's judgements. At the same time, more socio-cultural factors concerning the attributes of the individual students might have also been important. For example, whilst

James and Sam had very similar levels of prior attainment, the teacher judged James to have 'the edge' over Sam, suggesting other aspects of their social identities were important.

The strong framing of interactions with the group of students judged to be 'Oxbridge material' was evident from the Oxbridge talk hosted by a local school to which Dockside accompanied students. As this was hosted by a different school, there were limited spaces for Dockside students. It appeared that the Head of sixth form prioritised who were perceived to be in most need of this event, and who would benefit most from attending, which were those students positioned as 'Oxbridge material'. Whilst all students were made aware of this event by a notice displayed in the common room, the Head of sixth form also specifically approached certain students:

> *MD:* So was it like a teacher who approached you?
>
> *Emma:* Yeah [the Head of sixth form] came to me and said "do you want to go [to the talk]?" And I was like- "I don't know whether I want to go there"… and [the Head of sixth form] was like- "well if you go [to the talk] you can find out more information to see if you wanted to go there or not"…
>
> *MD:* Do you know who else [the Head of sixth form] spoke to?
>
> *Emma:* She spoke to a few of the boys, and me, and my friend Jane I think she spoke to, but there were only a few of us that went.

We can see here that this interaction as described by Emma between her and the Head of sixth form was strongly framed around Oxbridge entry. The Head of sixth form exerted a great deal of control in this interaction by mentioning the Oxbridge event, which made explicit to Emma that she is one of the students who should consider applying there. A more

weakly framed interaction about HE destinations might have instead involved the Head of sixth form asking Emma which HEI she would be interested in hearing more about, which would have opened up a wider range of HE options. At the same time, interactions with other students, who were not judged to be 'Oxbridge material', appeared more weakly framed. Oxbridge did not appear to be mentioned directly to these students, and so their HE aspirations may not have been narrowed in the same way by the school.

For some of the young people attending Maple Grove and Dockside, these kinds of messages might have had some bearing on the ways in which they conceived of their HE choices. Ben's account illustrates how a strongly framed interaction with his teacher at Maple Grove may have had an influence on his decision-making:

> *Ben:* If I decide to choose medicine yeah… I'd apply [to Oxford] because my Geography teacher recommended me to apply … he said: "you might as well have a go really"… "you might as well see if you had a chance"… So I think I will apply.

We can see here how Ben's teacher narrowed the range of possible HEIs, which gave him less autonomy in deciding where he should be applying, and sent out a message that Oxbridge was the most appropriate destination for him, and that he should definitely apply. Ben also recalled the experience of being called to attend the special Oxbridge meeting and being singled out by the school. This seemed to legitimise further his sense of being 'Oxbridge material', and could have been an influential factor in the way he conceived of his HE choices and potential. Of course, it is always difficult to isolate the influence of one factor such as the school, and it could be that Ben's class position might have had a greater bearing on his decision making. Indeed, Ben talked about the strong expectations he had

from home to progress to HE and the ways in which his parents and siblings emphasised the importance of choosing the 'right' kind of university.

Charlotte and Patrick, who also attended Maple Grove, similarly aspired to progress to Oxbridge and were also made aware that they were the kind of student who could apply through the school's sorting mechanisms. It was evident from their accounts that they felt capable of making a successful application and did not display any feelings of doubt about their perceived level of academic ability or chance of being accepted.

> Charlotte: …you might get accepted [to Oxbridge], and if not then it's just writing a personal statement a bit earlier and having it done so…

> Patrick: …it feels a bit of a privilege if you go there because- well you know- it's got so much facilities and- everyone does so well- you feel like- if you have got the grades to get there I feel like I should sort of like give it a try- that's sort of why I am thinking of it- I am thinking 'cos I got quite good grades at GCSE- I am thinking well I should apply for Oxford 'cos if you get good grades you should give it a try- 'cos well you know it's a opportunity, it's a good opportunity, so that's sort of why I am thinking of it.

Their feelings reflected the kinds of messages sent out by the school: that all those who meet a specific grade requirement are capable of Oxbridge, and therefore *should* 'have a go' and make an application. However, whilst Charlotte and Patrick went on to make Oxbridge applications, and were invited to selection interviews, they both failed to get any offers.

It could be that attending Maple Grove may have made a difference to shaping the decision-making of other students like those drawn upon here. Indeed, around thirty students at Maple Grove attended the Oxbridge event held for schools in the local area, which represents around a fifth of the cohort. Again, it is hard to say to what degree the school might have had a bearing on the decision making of these students. However, the influence of the school might become clearer when comparing how similar students fared in more weakly framed contexts, such as Oakville, as discussed in the next section.

Strong classification, weak framing: Oakville

Oakville similarly made explicit the separateness of Oxbridge as a HE destination, which was evident from the school context in a number of different ways. A visual cue in the sixth form common room carried a strong classificatory message about the HE system:

> *Head of year 12:* …and did you notice in the common room that there are big honours boards up on the wall?
>
> *MD:* no…
>
> *Head of year 12:* …there are big wooden boards – some of them have got people who have basically represented Wales in different sports, there is one with the Head boys and Head Girls names on there, and there is another one with kids who have gone off to Oxford or Cambridge…

The school was making explicit here what it considered to be academic and sporting 'success'. The absence of other HEIs, and the privileging of Oxbridge, marked the two universities out as special and distinct from other HEIs. Strong classification was also

apparent in the organisation of HE preparation activities in school. Announcements were made in school for all those interested in applying to Oxbridge to attend separate events and meetings which took place from early summer until October. This separation of Oxbridge applicants from those considering other HEIs again signalled the separateness of these universities from other HE destinations.

Oakville also produced separate 'Oxbridge guides' for students completing their application, which further served to mark out these HE destinations as distinct from others. Two separate Oxbridge talks were also held within school, given by Oxbridge speakers, the first of which was given towards the beginning of year 12, and the second in year 13 near the time of the Oxbridge deadline.

> George: …yesterday evening, a woman came to talk to us about the application process and generally how it is in Oxford and why it's such a nice place to go and study and how finances and things work, and so it was a talk for those who've already decided, but are looking to get- looking to get more information about just how finances and things work. It's like after you've committed your decision, how to maximise your chances of getting in with interviews and personal statements and also how you're going to manage yourself once you're there, and things.

We can see here how Oxbridge was constructed very much as a different 'place' to go and study. No other university speakers, such as those from post-1992 HEIs, came to speak to students specifically about what made them distinct as an institution, and this focus on Oxbridge sent out strong classificatory messages about its distinctiveness.

Bernstein (1975) illustrates how strong classification tends to create a sense of membership to a particular class or collective. Similarly, the strong classification at Oakville served to mark out a kind of Oxbridge identity, in terms of what defines a potential applicant, their traits and characteristics. During one of the talks given by the Head of sixth form to those who put themselves forward for Oxbridge, this identity was made explicit:

> Head of sixth form: …and for Oxbridge of course you're looking at a whole new ball game there, they are looking for outstanding people, and although you are all very good, they are looking for outstanding people, people who I could put down on a reference saying this is one of the best students we have ever had. That's what they are looking for…

Whilst the school sent out strong classificatory messages, marking out Oxbridge as distinct, weak framing was evident within the context, which meant it was not made explicit who were considered to be 'Oxbridge material'. For example, the school did not individually target specific students and tell them that they *should* come along to the Oxbridge meetings. Instead, the school sent out an open invitation during assembly to "all those interested in Oxbridge" to come along to Oxbridge specific events.

> Head of year 12: …we always get a good number wanting to apply [to Oxbridge], initially you know we start saying, well, when they come back after their exams in year 12, 'cos they will be back at the end of this term, the ones- they are asked to sort of make themselves known if they are interested in applying to Oxbridge, and of the initial number who come forward, once they start investigating and thinking about it,

some of them will drop off, and then, the number must go up and down a little bit but we probably get at least a dozen applying each year…

The Head of year 12 made clear here the school's practice of asking students to "make themselves known" if they are interested in applying to Oxbridge. In other words, students had to decide for themselves whether Oxbridge was appropriate for them (based on their worldview). This differed from Maple Grove where stronger framing made explicit to students if they *should* make an Oxbridge application. Instead, Oakville was expecting its students to negotiate the context for themselves and either select or reject Oxbridge.

The more weakly framed messages sent out at Oakville, which did not make explicit who *should* make an Oxbridge application, could have meant that some students felt less capable of applying than if they had attended Maple Grove or Dockside. Malika (who attended Oakville), had strong expectations from home to enter HE, and her parents appeared very much involved in helping her choose the 'right' university. This meant Malika is likely to have progressed to HE and a research-intensive HEI irrespective of the school she attended. However, it could be that attending Oakville made a difference to whether she considered herself 'Oxbridge material'. At the beginning of her sixth form studies, Malika was interested in making an Oxbridge application and was attracted in particular to the city of Cambridge and the appearance of the university.

> Malika: …it was a sort of idealistic sort of view in my head that it would be really nice to go there, I have been there, I went there on a medical workshop day, that was really good, 'cos I loved the city, most of all I loved the city 'cos of like all the architecture… and it's really pretty.

However, after getting a grade 'B' in one of her modular exams during her 'AS' year, Malika reconsidered her intention to apply to Oxbridge, despite being predicted three 'A' grades in her final 'A-levels'. This result in one of her modular exams appeared to knock her confidence somewhat. Following this, Malika felt that she did not have the academic ability to make an Oxbridge application, which perhaps came about due to the kinds of messages she was in receipt of from school. Unlike Ben, who attended Maple Grove, Malika did not appear to be aware of any messages from her school that she *should* make an Oxbridge application. When I asked if teachers had said anything about her choices she responded with:

> *Malika:* Teachers? About choices? Not really. Teachers are more like… well no, not really. They don't really help about choices about what uni to go to, they leave it to us. They help in terms of like personal statements and actually applying but the whole telling us about universities they won't really… 'cos at first I wanted to go to Cambridge… so I was in the Cambridge group in school and so I had to go to meetings in school and things like that, and then I changed my mind and decided I didn't want to go there, and the teachers didn't really say either way, they just let me get on with it.
>
> *MD:* So they didn't say you should stay in the [Oxbridge] group?
>
> *Malika:* No, they didn't. So if I said I didn't want to do it they were like fine, but if I said I wanted to go, then they said that was fine too, they don't really help when it comes to choices, I don't think they can really…

It is evident here that the kinds of messages sent out at Oakville gave Malika a greater degree of autonomy to decide for herself whether she had the potential to make an Oxbridge application. The school did not make explicit to Malika through its practices and processes that she was 'Oxbridge material' and so *should* be making an application. As a result, it could be that her self-doubts concerning her academic ability were perhaps given greater weight in her decision not to make an Oxbridge application.

Like Malika, Louise was also academically able and had strong aspirations from home to progress to university, but rejected making an Oxbridge application on the grounds of her perceived low academic ability in relation to her peers. Louise never initially expressed a desire to make an Oxbridge application, despite having the grades to do so. Instead, it seems that she did not even get to the stage of considering it as a viable option, and had ruled it out altogether.

> *MD:* And have you been to visit Oxford or Cambridge?
>
> *Louise:* No! [laughs] I'm not applying there! [laughs]
>
> *MD:* Right, why is that?
>
> *Louise:* … I also don't think I would meet the requirements, they are very tough on GCSE's, and you know, academics, whereas I am doing well this year, I got 4 A grades at AS but I don't think I'd- cos with the people going for it, there are a certain type of people like the people going for it from this school have got all A* grades at GCSE whereas I got 6 out of 10, so I wouldn't be in the running I don't think, so realistically I just decided not to go there-
>
> *MD:* And does Oxbridge have a minimum of how many grades you need, or?

Louise: I'm not sure I think it might do, but I don't know. I didn't really look at it at all cos I just didn't think I would get in, so…

MD: But if you got 4 A grades at AS level, that's… showing strong academic ability isn't it?

Louise: Yeah but they then also look at your marks 'cos you can put down your marks. And they were good A grades that I got, but they weren't like 100%s. Like my friend Gareth, I think you spoke to him earlier-

MD: Who?

Louise: Gareth, brown hair, he is going for physics, and he has got 98%, 97%, 99%, so he is going for Oxbridge, because he can, because he is fantastic, so going against people like that I just wouldn't … get in… [sighs]

The kinds of messages Louise was in receipt of from school may have shaped this perception about Oxbridge applicants, and despite her strong academic ability, she distanced herself from those she considered capable of applying. Louise negatively positioned herself against her friend Gareth, who she perceived to be one of the students who *should* make an Oxbridge application, rather than herself. If Malika and Louise had attended Maple Grove, they would have been marked out by the school's processes as 'Oxbridge material' given their attainment, which may have influenced their decision to apply. Attending Oakville, and being left to decide for themselves whether they are capable of applying for Oxbridge, could have meant that their negative perceptions of their own academic ability in relation to their peers may have been made to matter more in their HE choices. It might also have been that gender played an important part in mediating these choices; however it is hard to say without a wider sample of students to draw upon.

Discussion and conclusions

Whilst the majority of past research has highlighted the importance of class positions in mediating progressions to Oxbridge, the role played by school level practices and processes has been explored here. More often than not, past studies that have paid attention to schools tend to draw comparisons between those in the private/state sectors. However, the subtle distinctions between state schools have been highlighted here. Schools, like families, may differ in the subtle kinds of messages they send out to their students about what is most appropriate, and what they should do, in terms of their HE choices. Although school processes are not the same as family processes, there are some parallels here with the way in which middle class parents may not explicitly say "you have to go to Oxbridge", but the expectation to do so might be evident from the more invisible cultural processes within families (Pugsley 2004).

Bernstein's (1975) theoretical framework offers an insightful way of understanding the hidden messages carried by schools about university choices (Donnelly 2014). His concepts of classification and frame enabled a more precise analysis of the ways in which everyday aspects of schools can send out messages. So, whilst many private schools are often said to transmit a 'sense of entitlement' to Oxbridge (Reay et al. 2005), Bernstein's analytic tools shine a light on how this might happen, in terms of the underlying structures of power and control. For example, the separation of students into groups can be a powerful device signalling strong boundaries between Oxbridge and other universities. His analytic tools have proved highly adaptable to exploring the significance of various different aspects of the school, including interactions, artefacts, school practices and processes as well as sorting

mechanisms. In doing so, the framework provides a more subtle and nuanced analysis. Whilst aspects such as levels of support and staff expertise are undoubtedly important with regards to Oxbridge (Pugsley 2004), schools can also carry more hidden messages about HE choices. For example, even where a school might lack teachers with knowledge about Oxbridge, they may still differ in the extent to which they make explicit who is 'Oxbridge material'. In this way, Bernstein's framework brings to the surface the implicit, and often hidden, messages schools can carry.

The state schools drawn upon here sent out strong classificatory messages, marking out Oxbridge as a distinct HE destination. However, the kinds of messages sent out varied in their degree of framing, making explicit to differing extents whether you should progress to Oxbridge. These messages were evident from their more routine and everyday aspects. Those explored here include events and activities, sorting and grouping mechanisms, processes for supporting students with their university application, and interactions between teachers and students. It could be that these sorts of practices, in part, evolved from a pragmatic need to meet what are considered to be the individual needs of students. Nonetheless, they act as powerful devices signalling to young people a sense of *what* (and in some cases *who*) is considered as 'Oxbridge material'. From the case study schools drawn upon in this paper, it is also noteworthy that differences in strength of framing were not always associated with their intake characteristics.

The impact of school attended on perceptions and positioning in relation to Oxbridge was explored by comparing similar students across different schools. Whilst difficult to say definitively, more strongly framed messages, which make explicit who should progress to Oxbridge, might encourage more applications. It could be that being afforded this

positioning by the school is important in shaping some young people's HE choices. At the same time, more weakly framed messages might mean that some young people do not identify themselves as 'Oxbridge material' despite having the academic ability to apply. In order to understand the impact of these messages, greater understanding of young people's social background is needed, including the nature of support from parents, siblings and friends. hese findings also warrant further research to explore their impact on different groups of young people situated in varied institutional and geographical contexts.

The different kinds of messages sent out by schools are important because they are likely to carry both risks and benefits. In one sense, strongly framed messages, which make explicit who should apply to Oxbridge, might help to overcome some young people's sense that these universities are out of the realms of the possible (Ball et al. 2002). Some young people may apply when they may not have done otherwise without this encouragement from school, particularly those from less-advantaged backgrounds where university may not be the 'norm' or be expected. In this way, these sorts of messages from school could benefit both the individual, in terms of their possible future success in the graduate labour market (Brown et al. 2010), and also the institutions, and in turn wider society, through more equitable Oxbridge admissions. At the same time, these kinds of strongly framed messages might also pose risks. If schools make explicit to some young people that they are 'Oxbridge material', but they fail to gain a place, it could lead to a negative sense of self. Indeed, Power et al. (2003) found that failing to gain an Oxbridge place was a deeply distressing experience for some young people. Strong framing might also make it difficult for some young people to assert their true preferences in terms of choosing universities. Finally, for those from less-advantaged backgrounds, the transition to an elite HEI such as Oxbridge could in some instances be a painful experience (Reay et al. 2009). It may involve a dislocation from their

own social class background, if they have to conform to more middle class norms, behaviours and notions of 'success' (Archer and Leathwood 2003).

Acknowledgements

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