The work experience placements of secondary school students: widening horizons or reproducing social inequality?

Richard Hatcher and Tricia Le Gallais


Abstract

Almost all school students at Key Stage 4 undertake some form of work experience in Year 10, usually of two weeks duration. The questions we address in this research study are whether the distribution of students to placements is differentiated by social class, and if so, what are the processes which contribute to it.

This paper is based on research carried out in five schools in one large urban area in 2006 and reported in Hatcher and Le Gallais (2008). The schools were chosen in order to provide a range in terms of their social composition. The data were gathered from three main sources: questionnaires and interviews with year 10 students and interviews with the staff responsible for their work placement programme. In addition to the school level data on social composition data about parental occupations were collected from the interviewed students. Further data was acquired from Education Business Links and Connexions.

Key findings are as follows. There was a significant correlation between school SES (as measured by FSM) and the social status of workplaces. The higher the school SES, the higher the percentage of students who found work experience in ‘professional’ workplaces. One factor was selection by employers: some ‘professional’ workplaces only offered places to students from high SES schools. However, the two principal drivers of student distribution to workplaces for work experience were student choice and the allocatory role of the school.

Student choice involved two elements: preferences for types of workplaces, and the ability to make contact and secure a placement. Both strongly correlated with social class as measured by both school SES and parental occupation. The higher the SES of the student the more likely they were to choose, generally in conformity with parental influence, a ‘professional’ workplace, and the more likely they were to achieve a ‘professional’ placement because family social capital often ensured appropriate contacts.

Schools were placed on a Directive/Non-directive continuum according to the extent to which they influenced the allocation of students to placements. All the schools tended towards the Non-directive pole, because of the priority they gave to student choice on both educational and administrative grounds. The consequence was that schools made little or no effort to widen students’ horizons and challenge patterns of social class reproduction resulting from student choice. The two lowest SES schools in our sample adopted a relatively more Directive approach than the other schools, but this took the form of linking work experience placements to students’ vocational courses, thus tending to restrict their vocational horizons.
Our research demonstrates that work placements tend powerfully to reflect and reproduce patterns of social class inequality, rather than to widen students’ vocational horizons. Our findings have important implications for students taking the new 14-19 diplomas: the government’s policy for work placements at Key Stage 4 to be linked to diploma pathways seems likely to prematurely foreshorten students’ vocational horizons and constrict their emerging vocational identities.

Introduction

Almost all school students at Key Stage 4 undertake some form of work experience in Year 10, usually of two weeks duration. The questions we address in this research study are whether the distribution of students to placements is differentiated by social class, and if so, what are the processes which contribute to it.

At the time the research was conducted the current guidance from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) was contained in two publications: Work Experience: A guide for secondary schools (DfES 2002a) and Work Experience: A guide for employers (DfES 2002b). The DfES guidelines for schools include advice about equal opportunities which refers largely to avoiding gender stereotyping. Implications for social class equality could be extrapolated, but they are not explicit, in recommendations that schools should ‘consider how far they should allow their students free choice of placements’ and ‘Students should be encouraged and given extra support when choosing non-stereotyped placements’ (DfES 2002a, p12).

Research studies of work placements for under-16s have also largely focused on gender issues (e.g. Hamilton 2003, Francis et al 2005, Archer et al 2006). They have demonstrated that, in spite of the guidelines, the distribution of work experience placements (WEPs) tends to exhibit patterns of gender inequality.

In 2008 the DCFS published three new publications on work-related learning, with a particular reference to the new 14-19 Diplomas. In spite of the research evidence on gender inequality in placements, issues of equality are notably completely absent from the two longest documents, The Work-related Learning Guide – First edition (DCFS 2008a) and Building on the Best: Final report and implementation plan of the review of 14-19 Work-related Learning (DCFS 2008b), which together amount to nearly one hundred pages. The third document, Quality Standard for Work Experience (DCFS 2008c) comprises 54 criteria, only one of which relates to equality of opportunity: ‘Equal opportunities are promoted and gender stereotyping challenged’ (p6).

Guidance is also provided in two publications from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, Work-related learning for all at key stage 4 (QCA 2003) and Work-related learning at key stage 4: Guidance for school coordinators (QCA 2005). The QCA guidance documents surprisingly make no reference to equality issues apart from the single claim that work-related learning, which includes work experience, can raise self-esteem and aspirations (QCA 2003, p3). While this can be interpreted as referring to social class as well as gender, it confirms the overall picture in official guidance literature on work placements at KS4 that equality issues are entirely marginal and that they largely concern gender stereotyping.

The issue of social class inequality, not referred to explicitly in any of the official guidance (and also not an issue in the recent CBI research report on work experience, CBI 2008), is also largely absent from the research literature on work placements at KS4. However, research into work placements for post-16 year olds indicates that social class may be an important dimension in terms of the relationship between allocatory and choice processes and the social character of workplaces (Hall and Raffo 2004). There is a large body of research literature in the field of student choice, ranging for example from primary school pupils’ choice of secondary school (Lucey and Reay 2000) to career choice (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), which shows a consistent pattern of social class differentiation,
in which family cultural and social capital is a significant factor. Our research explores to what extent work experience placements at KS4 confirm these patterns of social selection and reproduction or disrupt them. The full research report (Hatcher and Le Gallais 2008) on which this paper is based offers a detailed analysis of how work experience programmes are organised and implemented in a range of educational establishments. Our findings identify the key issues concerning work experience placements and the allocatory process and we put forward recommendations to encourage schools to adopt a framework of provision that enhances rather than limits young people’s career aspirations. This paper concentrates on four key areas:
- The social status of work experience placements (WEPs)
- The schools’ allocatory processes
- Student choice
- The students’ experience of WEPs

The research process

Selection of schools
This study is based on research carried out in five schools in one large urban area. Identifiers have been removed and pseudonyms used with regard to the schools, local place names and other features. The schools were chosen in order to provide a range in terms of their social composition. Initially four comprehensive schools were selected but as the data was gathered we felt that we needed a fifth school, namely AVON, which has an intake selected by ability. We used eligibility for free school meals (FSM) as a proxy indicator of the socio-economic status (SES) of the school populations. The percentages at the five schools in 2006, the year when the student data collection took place, were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AVON</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEDFORD</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUMBRIA</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEVON</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESSEX</td>
<td>63.1%</td>
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</table>

This figure relates to the whole school. The figure for Year 10 alone may differ slightly, although a substantial variation in social composition is unlikely. We recognise the limitations of FSM as an indicator of social class. It is a rather crude indicator which can disguise important differences between schools with similar FSM percentages. Nevertheless, it serves our purposes in allowing us to select schools with, taken overall, substantially different social compositions. For analytical purposes we group them into three categories as follows:
- High SES school – AVON
- Middle SES schools – BEDFORD and CUMBRIA
- Low SES schools - DEVON and ESSEX

Data collection
Questionnaires were completed by the Year 10 cohort in each of the five schools, amounting to a total of approximately 1000 Year 10 students.

Interviews were carried out with 98 Year 10 students: 20 at each of four schools, in groups of five students, and 18 at the fifth, again in four groups. Notwithstanding the limitations of the relatively much smaller sample of students interviewed compared to the questionnaire respondents, the social class composition, in terms of parental occupation, of the interviewees aligns closely to the SES of the schools, which means that the social class composition of our interview sample corresponds to the social class composition of our questionnaire sample. This allows us to draw some generalisations from the interview sample and apply them, at least with some degree of confidence, to the wider year group cohort.
One interview was carried out at each school with the teacher or teachers responsible for their work placement programme. The teachers selected the students to be interviewed, chosen to provide a gender mix and a range of ability according to the schools’ criteria.

Staff from Connexions provided data concerning post 16 education destinations and Education Business Links (EBL) provided detailed information about the types of work placements undertaken by the students attending the schools involved in this research. Whilst their cohorts differ from ours the data offer patterns and trends which we regard as broadly congruent with those relating to the students and placements involved in this research.

Practical considerations dictated that questionnaire and interview data collection from students took place at different times in different schools in relation to work experience, as follows. We have taken account of this in our analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Questionnaire Pre WEP</th>
<th>Q Post WEP</th>
<th>Interview Pre WEP</th>
<th>Interview post WEP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AVON</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>BEDFORD</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>CUMBRIA</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEVON</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESSEX</td>
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</table>

Figure 1

**Types of workplaces**

Education Business Links use 23 categories to identify work experience placements. This would have been unnecessarily detailed for our purposes and we therefore condensed them to the 16 workplace categories identified below:
Some employment sectors are well-represented and others are less so, or are absent. This is due not only to school allocatory processes and student choices but also to local patterns of employment and to legislation preventing work experience at KS4 on health and safety and other grounds (for example, in the medical field). A further factor emerged which, if true, would affect the potential work experience placement in socially differentiating ways, namely the perception by some teachers that some employers offering professional placements restricted them to grammar school (and private school) students.

It just seems that all the vets’ jobs and all the high flying jobs, the journalist jobs and things like that, the accountancy jobs and the surveyors’ jobs, all the placements are harder to get because those placements have already gone to grammar school students.

(Teacher A, CUMBRIA)

We asked the teacher at AVON, the selective school, if there were some employers who only take people from his school.

We are probably in competition with some schools in some jobs, and in other schools not. It is because you are a grammar school, because some people will know you, you get offers of some jobs that other schools may not, I would imagine, but I don’t know. (Teacher, AVON)

Furthermore, once links are established between schools and employers they tend to be perpetuated from year to year, making it difficult for a school to break into existing networks.

Finding 1: Some employers prefer to offer WEPs to students from high SES schools.
**SES of students and type of workplace**

We examined the data to see whether we could identify patterns of correlation between the social class categories of the schools and percentages of students in various categories of work placements. The most popular placements were in schools, in particular nursery or primary, but there was no correlation between school composition and this category of placements. However, a number of employment sectors did exhibit a clear correlation with school SES. We were particularly interested in the social status of workplaces. We derive the concept of workplace social status in part from the UK National Statistics Socio-economic Classification of occupations (Rose and Pevalin 2001). A case in point is our category ‘medical/pharmaceutical and legal’, which we have created to exemplify a ‘professional’ set of workplaces.

The table below is based on the questionnaire data in Figure 2. We have grouped the data in three categories: Higher, Medium and Lower. The purpose of this categorisation – which we use in a number of tables in the report – is simply to provide a clearer picture of the pattern of responses. The procedure we have adopted for creating the categorisation is to take the range of responses and divide it into three equal parts. We do not claim that in all cases it is statistically valid but it does provide a useful framework for discerning patterns in the data. (In the full report we provide a statistical analysis of the data in these tables.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>% of students in medical/pharmaceutical and legal WEPs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>AVON</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>BEDFORD</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CUMBRIA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>DEVON</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ESSEX</td>
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</table>

**Figure 3: Questionnaire data**

AVON students obtained more placements in the ‘medical/pharmaceutical and legal’ category than the other four schools, exemplifying a clear social class correlation. In this respect our findings confirm those of Hillage, Kodz and Pike (2001) and of Francis et al. (2005). However, ESSEX, a low SES school, also placed a significant number of students in these areas. This school was identified from student comments to be the most directive of the five schools in terms of finding such placements for its students. In other words, we can see a combination of social class factors and, in the case of ESSEX, school-effect factors at work.

We were interested in the staff perspective on the relationship between student choice and workplace social status. Both DEVON and ESSEX serve areas of high social deprivation and relatively high unemployment. Their teachers felt that the students’ work experience aspirations were very limited:

Some students are quite – I hate to say it – limited, they want to work in sport and they’re not really interested in much else. (DEVON)

They want to go to the [City centre shopping area], they want to work in a shop and that is pretty much it for a lot of them, or they want to go and work in a garage. They are still quite restricted in their choices. (ESSEX)

Shops and garages typify ‘non-professional’ workplaces in occupational terms. The response from the AVON teacher was significantly different with a wider range of workplaces and a much higher proportion of students in professional or quasi-professional placements. However, the social status of workplaces can also be defined by the social status of their users, as in the example below: riding centres are distinctively middle-class.
(Our students choose) riding centres, you know things that they do for a hobby, sports, riding centres to go and ask if they can work there, you know, those sorts of things. We get very few shop ones, very, very few. Most people here are…our turnout for university is huge, and most of them are going to consider themselves getting a degree and then doing something with that degree. They wouldn’t see themselves as working in a shop. So unless they’re thinking of taking a degree in retail or something like that, management or something like that, they wouldn’t be that interested in doing it. (AVON teacher)

Finding 2: Overall there is a significant correlation between the social status of workplaces and the SES of schools. The distribution of students to workplaces exhibits a combination of social class patterns and school-effect differences.

School roles in the allocation process

This section explores the extent to which students made their own free choices and arrangements of placements and the extent to which they were directed to placements, or allocated them, by their schools. Based on student perceptions we identified three strategies on the part of the schools in our sample. One was to invite students to find and arrange their own placements, making use of family contacts, etc. We call this approach ‘Student Independent’. A second strategy involved the use of a list of placements and the assistance of brokers, and possibly self-identification materials designed to match students to types of placements. We call this approach ‘School Supported Independence’. The third strategy, referred to by a small minority of students, involved the students being assigned placements, generally because they had been unable to find their own. We call this approach ‘School Directed’. Each school implemented a mix of strategies. We placed schools on a continuum from Lower to Higher Directive, depending on the particular combination they adopted. Figure 4 below summarises the data drawn from the questionnaire responses.
The data here raises two issues: the predominance of student choice, whether supported by the school or entirely independent; and the extent of social class differentiation between the schools.

**The predominance of student choice**

Though there were significant differences among the schools in the combinations of strategies they adopted, all gave most weight to student choice. We are aware of other schools which adopt a predominantly Directive policy, allocating students to placements. The schools’ justification for the relatively Low Direction stance adopted by the five schools in our sample was fourfold. First, work experience was regarded as an opportunity to experience something of the world of work, which might be, but was not necessarily, related to future career choice. From this point of view there was no need for the school to match workplaces to students. Second, student independent choice was a key factor in the success of a placement (including simply ensuring attendance). For four of the five schools (the exception is ESSEX) the most effective way of meeting student preferences was to encourage them to make their own choices and arrangements independent of the school.

Personally I feel that the students who found their own are hopefully more likely to make a success of it particularly if the student does display challenging behaviours. (Teacher, DEVON)

Third, student independence was valued as an educational aim. And fourth, it is also in the interests of the school in the sense that it reduces the school’s administrative workload.

Let’s be honest, my concern is to get 156 people 156 places. .. But there is not enough time provided to go around and check that everybody has got a super placement (Teacher, AVON)

**The extent of social class differentiation**

The overall pattern shows a correlation of school SES and degree of independence of student choice: the higher the school SES, the higher the proportion of students who experienced a ‘Student Independent’ approach. Similarly there is a clear class pattern with regard to the ‘School Directed’ approach: the two lowest SES schools adopting a more Directive approach than the other three schools. However, the social class pattern is qualified by school-effect factors. BEDFORD, a middle SES school, has a particularly strong emphasis on students obtaining their own placements. And with regard to ‘School Supported Independence’ the extent to which schools provide support for student choice – via, for example, Connexions – has more to do with school policy than school SES.

This pattern is confirmed by another question in the questionnaire which asked students about the influence of school and careers staff.
There are clear social class differences. Students in the two lowest SES schools say that they are influenced by staff very much more than students in the other schools. ESSEX has the highest response with regard to the influence of school and careers staff which indicates its distinctively more interventionist approach compared to the other four schools.

**Finding 3:** Overall, the higher the SES of the school the more its strategy is oriented to Student Independence. School SES correlates inversely with how Directive the school is. Students at the low SES schools were more influenced by school staff. However, the extent to which Student Independence is supported by assistance from the school is a school-effect factor (i.e. a matter of school policy).

**School support for student choice**
The principal form of support for students making their own choices was the provision of databases of potential placements. These were either databases compiled by the school itself or ones made available by broker agencies such as Connexions. At CUMBRIA, for example, while half of the students found their own placements, staff tried to match placements to students in at least some cases, using their database of previous placements.

> We...keep a bank of (WEPs) and as and when we find a student which fits the bill we might well push them in that direction saying ‘well actually you can have this placement’. (Teacher, CUMBRIA)

There are two issues here which need further research. First, to what extent might the selection of workplaces in databases, whether compiled by the school or provided by brokers, promote social class differentiation, perhaps by reproducing previous patterns of socially differentiated take-up of places or by being tailored by brokers to individual schools? Second, to what extent might the use of self-identification materials by students tend to confirm existing socially differentiated vocational identities rather than challenge them?

**Finding 4:** Student choices based on the use of databases of possible work placement vacancies may tend to confirm existing vocational identities rather than challenge them.

**Widening students’ horizons?**

Our research has demonstrated that in general the lower the SES of the school the less likely placements are to be located in managerial and professional workplaces. A fundamental issue in terms of work placement allocation and social reproduction is whether schools actively attempt to widen students’ horizons and open up new options.

This was not seen as an issue at AVON, the high SES school, where vocational aspirations were high and for most students their placements corresponded to them. But the other schools recognised that widening students’ horizons was an issue (both ‘horizontally’, in terms of other comparable job sectors, and ‘vertically’ in terms of the social status, i.e. ‘professional’, of workplaces). The problem for the schools is that this principle of equal opportunities was seen to conflict with the principle of student

<table>
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<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Influence of school and careers staff %</th>
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<td>High</td>
<td>AVON</td>
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<td>Middle</td>
<td>BEDFORD</td>
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<td>CUMBRIA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>DEVON</td>
<td>45</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ESSEX</td>
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Figure 5: Questionnaire data
choice. DEVON staff commented that ‘everybody is aware and try to encourage the students to aim high and to fulfil their potential’ but that they prioritised students’ independence in arranging their own work placements and did not feel they had tried to encourage students to move outside their comfort zone. BEDFORD staff admitted that their efforts to raise aspirations were more implicit than explicit.

I do try and persuade them to do something a little bit more. Especially the brighter ones, who I know are very bright, but I would never force them; there is no point, in my opinion. (Teacher, ESSEX)

However, ESSEX did adopt a more interventionist strategy than the other schools, and this would seem to at least contribute to the comparatively higher number of placements in professional areas than either of the two middle SES schools.

In general the picture from our five schools corresponds to the findings from studies by Hamilton (2002) and Semple et al. (2002).

Teachers appear to take a pragmatic approach. Some staff are more concerned about finding appropriate placements which engage pupils’ interest for the duration of the work experience week and ensure their attendance. This is a more important consideration to many than addressing traditional/non-traditional placement issues… overall most feel it is pupil preference which is the driving force for placement choice. Outside influences – parents, peer group, social background – are strong and teachers feel they have to respect pupils’ choices. (Hamilton 2002, p2)

**Linking work placements to vocational courses**

There is one further aspect which needs to be taken into account: the linking of work placements to vocational courses. This issue was strongly class-related because such courses are predominantly in lower SES schools. An indication of this can be seen in the Connexions data for 2006 concerning courses undertaken post 16 by students from four of our five schools, where the higher SES schools are studying predominantly ‘A’ levels (BEDFORD: over 72% of students) and the lower SES schools have sizeable numbers following vocational courses (DEVON: over 70% of students). The high SES school provided no vocational courses, but for the lower SES schools they were a priority in terms of student attainment. Teachers recognised that there was a conflict between linking work placements to vocational courses and wanting to widen students’ horizons:

You see I don’t know which way to go really because the government want all the students to do vocational and they want their work experience to go with that but I want them to look outside the box and not just doing what everyone else does and not just doing what we do in school. (ESSEX teacher)

But the dominant factor was the perceived benefits of vocational courses: ‘Our results have gone up from 18% pass rate four years ago to 50% last year’. (ESSEX teacher). As the new Diploma courses come on stream this issue is likely to become much more significant, since government policy is that students should undertake work placements tied to their Diploma courses DCFS (2008a), particularly in the absence of any recognition in official guidelines of issues of social class inequality and reproduction.

**Finding 5:** No school was effectively widening students’ career horizons. Because career aspirations were class-related, the schools’ policies tended to confirm class differences in student aspirations rather than raise them.

**Finding 6:** There was a correlation between lower SES schools and vocational courses. Consequently linking work placements to vocational courses tends to limit opportunities to widen the employment horizons of students in lower SES schools.
Student Choice

There is a large body of research literature in the field of student choice, for example choice of post-16 provision (Ball, Maguire & Macrae 2000) and career choice (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), which indicates a consistent pattern of social class differentiation. This research examines student choices by identifying the reasons behind their preferences, and their capacity, in terms of social and personal resources, to translate these preferences into practice. The two were related: reasons for choices could be pragmatically governed by what could be easily arranged.

Reasons for student preferences

This section is concerned with the motivations behind the choices made as expressed by the students. In the questionnaire this was an open-ended question and students could give as many reasons as they wished. The categories of ‘enjoyment’ and ‘interest’ together represented the highest number of responses. Less than a third of students mentioned ‘possible future career’, but there was a significant class difference between the two lowest SES schools and the others. A possible reason for this might be that these students have a less developed concept of their employment futures. Another is that links to possible careers were simply less salient in relation to other more immediate factors such as travel distance, to which they gave greater importance than students from the other schools.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>‘possible future career’. %</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Higher</td>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>AVON</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>BEDFORD</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CUMBRIA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>DEVON</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ESSEX</td>
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</table>

Figure 6: Questionnaire data

Finding 7: There is some evidence that a link between students’ choice of work placement and their future career plans is less significant for students at low SES schools.

Influences on student choice

In the questionnaire students were asked who had influenced them in the choice and arrangement of their placements. We have already dealt with perceptions of the role of school staff; here we consider the role of parents. Students across the five schools believed overwhelmingly that they made their own decisions but over 60% at each of the schools stated that their parents were key influences upon their choices. The important issue here concerns the nature of the influence and the extent to which social class was a differentiating factor. Previous research findings concerning the influence of parents on the decision-making of young people shows that social class is a significant factor (See Wright [2005] for a comprehensive review of the literature).

The perceptions of the teachers we interviewed were that social class background was a significant factor in the ways in which parents influenced students’ work experience choices. The scope of parents’ aspirations at AVON were described as follows:

…we have had people going to places like British Aerospace, Lucas Aerospace, working in a drawing office, that sort of thing and then there is this ceiling of where (the parents) would not want their child to go and experience. The other side of things, as it were, because they would never want them in the manufacturing hands-on side of things. (Teacher, AVON)

Conversely, at DEVON the school’s catchment area included an estate with a high level of social deprivation and the teachers interviewed felt that that might lead to low expectations by parents and
pupils. However, some working class parents were seen as having higher aspirations. For example, at BEDFORD:

The one young lady I mentioned earlier, mum works in a canteen and she is certainly not an intelligent mum, but I think mum thinks that she could have done better for herself and I think that she is going to make sure that her daughter is going to do as well as she can because she didn’t perhaps take advantage of her opportunities. I suspect that mum is actually living her life through her daughter and perhaps removing some of the choices that the daughter would like…’No, this is what is good for you’…the other ones tend to have a less proactive role, they stand back and say ‘look I’m working at such and such because I didn’t take my chances’…so those are the two that tend to come through. (BEDFORD staff)

**Finding 8:** Teachers perceived social class differences in parents’ aspirations and expectations for their children’s careers: parents of students at higher SES schools had higher aspirations.

**Parents’ social and cultural capital**

High parental aspirations do not necessarily mean that parents have the social and cultural capital to enable them to be translated into appropriate work placements. We explored this in our interviews with students. The class differentiation in parents’ social capital which students were able to make use of in finding placements is indicated by the following data based on interview responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>What do your parents do? %*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Managerial and professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>AVON</td>
<td>63</td>
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<tr>
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<td>DEVON</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ESSEX</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7: Interview data. The categories are derived from Rose & Prevalin’s (2001) classification. The figures do not add up to 100% because the categories ‘unemployed’ and ‘insufficient information to categorise’ have been omitted.

It was almost exclusively students from the higher SES schools who referred to links that parents had with managerial and professional contacts, exemplified by this student at AVON:

Well I was interested in law and my dad helped me find a placement. It’s because well the barrister was a friend of my dad and the judge is a friend of a friend of so I got it sort of like that. (Student, AVON)

The social capital which families can mobilise to secure work placements is related to their cultural capital. One indicator is whether family members have attended university. The pattern of university attendance by parents and/or relatives corresponds closely to the SES composition of the schools. AVON has 91% of family and relatives who have attended university. At 40% for DEVON and 24% for ESSEX the two low SES schools have the highest percentage of students with neither family nor relatives having attended university.

Our findings from student responses concerning class differences in family and cultural capital were supported by the perceptions of teachers. They felt that parents in higher SES schools were much more likely to have the contacts to arrange placements in professional workplaces. At AVON:
Some will be better placed for experience than others, but it’s always the way, isn’t it? It’s contacts and things like that. Some will move in circles where perhaps parents, we’ve got a lot of professional parents around and professional sons…and they could say ‘oh yes, your uncle so and so has got a good place’ and others will not be in a position at all. (AVON teacher)

Family contacts are particularly vital to access placements in workplace sectors which are often not on school or broker databases: as Francis et al. (2005, p34) point out ‘only those pupils with the right connections have opportunity to access such placements’ as ‘journalism and television’. For students at ESSEX and DEVON managerial and professional placements in general, as well as certain specific employment sectors, were not easily attainable through parental contacts. It is at this point where intervention by the school or other agencies becomes essential if the work experience placement is to provide them with the opportunity to expand their horizons.

**Finding 9:** Students at the higher SES schools were much more able to use family contacts to access work placements in professional workplaces.

The work experience placement: student roles and responsibilities

The final issue we address is whether there is any social class differentiation in the roles and responsibilities undertaken by students in their work placements. The data is drawn only from the three schools – AVON, CUMBRIA and DEVON – where the data was collected after the students had completed their work experience. However, these schools span the range of SES.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job roles</th>
<th>AVON</th>
<th>CUMBRIA</th>
<th>DEVON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Menial tasks</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer service/reception</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office/admin work</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping with children/in classroom</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using IT skills</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure activities</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work shadowing</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible tasks eg putting up medicines etc</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treated as colleague</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 8:** Interview data

There are some striking differences here which are class-related. Only 2% of students at AVON identified the type of work they carried out to be ‘menial’, compared to 21% of CUMBRIA students and 34% of DEVON students. A much higher percentage of students at AVON than at the other schools reported that they had undertaken responsible tasks and work-shadowing and had been treated as a colleague. For example:

Well the first week I was in barristers…and everyday I went to the City crown courts…and just saw the work the barristers do. One day we sat in the judge’s office with the judge and spoke to the judge and that. (Student, AVON)

Some placement staff not only spent time teaching new skills to the students on placement with them, they also discussed how the students might progress with their interest in that type of work. This mentoring took place in predominantly professional occupations and was reported disproportionately by AVON students.
I was talking to the solicitor and he told me all the qualifications that you need. He said well you have to be quite clever as well to take up the job and quite argumentative... (Student, AVON)

**Finding 10:** There was a correlation between school SES and the educational value of the placement. Students at the high SES school were much less likely to undertake menial tasks and much more likely to undertake responsible tasks and work-shadowing, and to be treated as a colleague and receive mentoring within a professional context.

**Discussion**

The conclusion of our research can be expressed in one sentence: the distribution of students in work placements is strongly differentiated by social class. This is the outcome of multiple social processes which are tendential and probabilistic rather than categorical but which have a cumulative effect which powerfully reproduces patterns of social class differentiation. We have identified the principal social processes which lead to this outcome. For reasons of space we have omitted any discussion of how social class differentiation may itself be differentiated by gender and ethnicity, though we offer some discussion of this in the report on which this paper is based, along with some other less important factors which may also play a role.

We want to end by considering how these social processes of class differentiation can be conceptualised as a complex totality rather than a list of factors. Our starting point is Bourdieu’s concept of a social field as a structured system of social positions and relationships (Wacquant 1989). At the centre of the cultural-educational field in its widest sense is a social class-differentiated field of work placements. Its boundaries are set, in spatial terms, by the workplaces of the local economy. Not all workplaces are accessible however: some exclude school students’ placements for legal reasons. Access to what remains, the field of locally available workplaces, is shaped in socially differentiating ways by three sets of social processes. One is social differentiation by some employers who discriminate between students from different types of schools. Much more important is differentiation as a result of the combination of student choice and school strategies. The predominant strategy schools employ is to prioritise student choice. This tends to reproduce social class differentiation. Forms of school support for student choice may themselves reinforce social selection. While schools may encourage students to widen their horizons in terms of choice of placements, this has limited effect in altering patterns of class reproduction. Where schools actively intervene to direct student choices it is mainly to link them to vocational courses, and this itself may powerfully close down other options and narrow horizons.

Student choice itself is powerfully shaped in social class-differentiating ways, depending on students’ horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), which are determined both by the objective possibilities within the work placement field and by subjective perceptions of them. The concept of socioscape (Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2005) captures the socially-differentiated local ‘landscapes of choice’ within the ‘new urban economies’. In that context the decisions students make are governed by a number of factors, which can be divided into career-related and non-career related factors. Non-career-related factors include geographical proximity of workplace, opportunities for part-time jobs, familiarity (for example, choosing student’s own primary school), ease of arranging (for example, at parent’s workplace) and immediate interest and enjoyment (for example, in placements in clothing and record stores and hairdressers). Career-related factors, arising from students’ emerging vocational identities, encompass both decisions based on firm choice of future career and decisions based on ‘seeing if I like it’. The two major influences on student choice are teachers and other staff, and parents. Parents’ aspirations tend to be socially differentiated, but whatever their aspirations their ability to translate them into practical help in securing appropriate work placements is also socially differentiated because it is largely depending on their socially differentiated cultural and social capital. Cultural capital comprises knowledge about placements: why to choose, how to arrange, the significance in relation to future employment. Social capital comprises the social networks parents and
students are able to mobilise to identify and arrange placements. In short, middle class parents tend to have access to professional placements; working class parents don’t.

The field can be schematically represented as follows:

The social field of work placements is a spatial metaphor but it also needs to be seen in a temporal perspective: it tends to reproduce itself on both annual and generational timescales. Patterns of cultural and social capital tend to be at least partially reproduced across generations as both
consequence and cause of limited social mobility in class terms. In the school context, mechanisms of social class differentiation are transmitted from one year cohort to the next in the form of inherited links with particular sets of employers who have provided placements, inscribed in school and brokers' databases and teachers’ and advisers' practical knowledge.

The significance of social class reproduction in work placements at KS4 is unclear, because the extent to which work experience actually influences future career choices and destinations is unknown. It requires further research. What is certainly the case however is that as it is presently constituted it does little or nothing to widen students’ career horizons by purposefully exposing them to workplace situations beyond those most familiar in terms of their family class backgrounds. There is some evidence from our study that a more directive approach by schools (viz, ESSEX) may have some effect in opening up new options, but it is more likely to be used to tie placements to vocational courses.

This has serious implications for the new Diploma courses. It is government policy, and likely to be adhered to by the schools, that KS4 work placements should be geared to the Diploma courses students are following. This is likely to restrict students’ range of experiences in two ways, ‘vertically’, in terms of excluding students from working class backgrounds from professional placements, and ‘horizontally’, in terms of excluding placement options in other employment sectors. Diplomas are likely to be offered predominantly in schools serving working class areas and to be taken mainly by students from working class backgrounds (Allen and Ainley 2007). Traditionally ‘academic’ schools are likely to continue to offer only GCSE courses (AVON is a case in point). Of course, within a Diploma industry sector there are professional jobs, but it may well be the case that placements focus on the more ‘practical’ side. In addition, placements will be tied to Diploma courses, and schools are likely to offer only a small number of Diplomas. While the full range will be available within a local area, it may well be that students will prefer to stay in their familiar school environment, which will further restrict the range of work placements available to them.

**A WEP policy for widening horizons**

What would a policy on work experience look like which was designed to challenge students’ existing class-shaped conceptions, aspirations and emerging vocational identities rather than reproduce them; to widen horizons rather than confirm them? Its fundamental principle would be to expose students to a range of work experiences broadly representing the range of types of workplaces, in terms of their social status and class composition. This would enable students from low SES schools to have an experience of high status managerial and professional (as well as high skilled technical) workplaces (as well as students from high SES schools having an experience of non-professional workplaces in addition to managerial and professional ones). It would entail retaining an element of student choice but situating it within an interventionist policy driven by educational and social justice objectives and enabled by a reorientated and enhanced support and administration system.

In addition to the limited vocational horizons perpetuated by work experience as it currently operates there is another aspect of work experience which is not part of our research, and which has not been mentioned so far in this paper, but which is significant in educational terms. One of the aims of schooling should be to enable students to develop a critical understanding of the world of work. The citizenship curriculum is one place where this can happen. This is a further reason for giving students direct experiences of a range of workplaces.

These two aims – the more narrowly vocational and the broader educational – could be best achieved by a series of workplace experiences of different types, ranging from work placements as now to short study visits, commencing earlier than Year 10, and integrated into the wider curriculum much more than work experience tends to be at present. (The revised Key Stage 3 curriculum, with more emphasis on cross-curricular and project-based work, can provide a favourable context.)
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