

“Wading Through Water” - Parental Experiences Of Their Child’s HE Choice Process

Overview and context

In an increasingly marketised and competitive UK HE environment (Molesworth et al., 2011), understanding the student decision-making process has become very important. At the same time, there has been an increase in parental involvement in this choice amongst certain groups of parents (Coughlan, 2008; Moorhead, 2009; Fearn, 2010) with some students, and their parents, seeing themselves as consumers or co-consumers (Williams, 2011). Choice has been presented as a positive force in education, with “responsible parents” making appropriate educational choices for their children (Gewirtz et al., 1995: p.21). HEIs therefore need to consider the role of parents in this process, as it may be that they over-estimate their role and assume that parental involvement leads to a more thorough, informed choice process. Thus the aim of my study is to explore parents’ accounts of their experiences and involvement in the process leading up to the choice of where and what their child will study at HE. This includes exploring choice and decision-making in a holistic way, by taking into account the situated nature of this process and that in this context choices are made with and for someone else.

Literature Review

Whilst traditional views of choice see it as purely rational with the aim of maximising utility (Hargreaves-Heap et al., 1999), there has been a move towards considering other, and often complementary, perspectives such as the emotional and experiential aspects of choice (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) and to seeing the importance of the context and social nature of choices (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Allen, 2002).

Most previous studies on student HE choice unsurprisingly focus on the student perspective. Many studies originate in the US and Australia (Bers and Galowich, 2002; Mazzarol et al., 2000) and whilst there are some qualitative studies, the focus is often quantitative (e.g. Maringe, 2006). The use of quantitative approaches and decision-making models in some of these studies can lead to an assumption that student choice is rational. Some of the findings from these studies include that students can become overwhelmed by the amount of information available, due to their lack of experience and a lack of clear criteria for choosing HE (Moogan & Baron, 2003). HEIs have been criticised for not addressing this and for focusing on selling (Molesworth & Scullion, 2005) rather than informing students and of not providing some key pieces of information (Moogan et al., 1999; Briggs, 2006).

The literature that does exist on parental involvement in UK HE tends to focus on it from perspectives such as under-represented groups, often linked to Bourdieu’s work on social and cultural capital (e.g. Brooks, 2004; Ball et al., 2002). It reveals a wide range of overlapping influences which include social class; ethnic group; parental educational level and gender (including both that of the parent and the student). The findings from these studies are often seemingly contradictory, reflecting the complex and messy nature of this process. The majority of these studies use qualitative research, but most of them focus on students’ perceptions of their

parents' involvement, except for a few studies, such as: Reay et al. (2005); Reay (1998); Pugsley (1998) and David et al. (2003), which interview parents. However parents are not the sole focus in any of these studies and they often seem to play a supporting or complementary role to the child. Thus there is a gap in the literature for a study which foregrounds parents' experiences.

In summary by focusing on the parental perspective in UK HE choice, this paper will add to the limited number of studies in this area, making a contribution to the literature on choice and decision-making through exploring parental experiences in depth. Whilst the intention is not to provide a normative process, it may also provide some useful insights for HEIs, who may have little real understanding of parents' role in this process.

Method

My research adopts a qualitative approach with a view to trying to explore parents' accounts of their experiences in depth and detail. The sample consists of 16 parents whose child was in the midst of going through the HE choice process. Participants were mainly recruited from a co-educational comprehensive school on the south coast of England, and were predominantly from the middle classes (noting Brooks' (2003; 2004) observation about how broad this group can be, as the majority of them had not been university educated). Participants were white and all were female except one. The method adopted was long unstructured phenomenological interviews which allowed parents to discuss areas which were important to them and to recount their story in their own way. This generated 27 hours of data. Data analysis was consistent with Thompson, Locander & Pollio (1989; 1990) and consisted of two stages. Firstly, detailed readings of each transcript were undertaken to produce an idiographic analysis of each narrative to get a sense of each participant's 'life-world.' Quotations and sections of interest were examined carefully and related back to the whole interview, so that they were not taken out of context. Once this was completed, the second stage consisted of looking for patterns across interviews, what Thompson et al., (1989; 1990) term global themes. I took care to ensure that these themes were supported by evidence in the transcripts. These themes are now discussed in the following section.

Findings

These are the initial findings from my doctoral thesis. 'Parenting' was the key theme which represents the dominant way in which parents accounted for how they experienced the choice process which their child undertook.

Parenting

Much of my discussions with parents seemed to be not about the detail of the actual choices made at different stages in this process, but about how they managed the process with the child. Thus it seems as if the choice process was experienced as part of the overall parenting experience. Within this theme, I have identified four often overlapping experiences: Negotiation and Discussion; Balance and Control; Knowledge of the Child and Preparation for Adult Life (Transition).

Negotiation and Discussion

Despite the fact that there were examples of parents having long conversations with their child, this theme was mainly about how parents tried to get their child to talk; so often it was more about a lack of discussion. Sarah tells us that “[*It was*] quite hard to get him to sit down and chat about things. It was quite hard work.” Some parents felt that they needed to find the right time for discussions, with times when the child was quite chatty and other times when s/he was not. They discussed tactics for trying to initiate conversations, such as Mary who resorted to asking her daughter “*what’s your thoughts at the moment, what are you thinking?*” in an attempt to get her to open up. This theme was also about some parents holding back on what they wanted to say, so as not to either put the child off, or influence the choice process too much. “*Well, I’ve always tried not to say ‘well if I was you’, because I’m not the one who’s doing it*” explains Alison and Jackie says that “*I have to keep my mouth shut a bit*”. These two elements in particular are what I term ‘negotiation’, as at times it seemed that parents were very much ‘tiptoeing’ round their child, and were unable to discuss things with them in as much detail as they would like, had to choose the right moment for discussions, and were not always able to express their views freely.

Balance and Control

This was about those parents who were heavily involved and who were then trying to stand back and get the child to do more. Thus they were trying to find a better balance between their involvement and that of the child. However, at times, this was tempered by a feeling that if the parent didn’t control the process, then it would not be done properly, and so there was a tension for some participants between feeling that they should be less involved, but also wanting the choice to be made ‘properly’, and being reluctant to give it up. Chloe describes this as a form of ‘letting go’, “*but I’ve sort of had to get it into my head he is 18. If he stuffs this up it’s him stuffing it up not me and likewise he has to make the decision about accommodation*”. So she’s ‘had’ to accept that he needs to make certain decisions and be allowed to make mistakes. However, she then describes an instance where she can’t ‘let go’, as she checks on what he’s done, and finding that he’s made a mistake in filling out one of the forms, she has to intervene to rectify it. Thus this illustrates how difficult it can be to stand back and leave things to the child. Even Clare who is very heavily involved and is reasonably happy with that, describes one instance where she tries to get her son to engage more fully with the process: “*I seem to remember a conversation at one point where ...[he said] did he really have to go or whatever and I thought, no, come on, you’re just letting me do all of it herewhich is why I would bring him over to the computer and say look through this syllabus*” Thus we have parents who are trying to encourage their child to become more involved, but on the other hand some are balancing this with not quite being able to let go.

Knowledge of the Child

Whilst of course all respondents knew their child, and at times used this knowledge to decide how best to interact with him/her during this process, my focus here is where parents spoke at length about how a particular course or institution would (or would not) be suitable for him/her.

“...This isn’t actually your character, J, you know, this isn’t you” Jasmine says about one university’s focus on the social life. She goes on to explain that *“...I think he flourishes better in a smaller environment. So that’s what I was looking for, what kind of environment it was. You know, would he get lost in all of this?...”* For some participants this then included somewhere feeling ‘right’ for the child, which Mark illustrates saying about one HEI that it was *“just her sort of university”* with *“her style of people”* and Lizzie says that *“I could see D there”* about her son on a visit to an Open Day. This knowledge could also lead to heavy involvement in the process, as some parents spent a lot of time and effort trying to find the ‘right’ course or HEI for their child. In some cases they had particular aspects that they were involved in researching, such as employment rates, accommodation or contact hours. Clare describes the detailed process of finding the right sort of course for her son: *“I think I weeded out the first stage, I’m trying to think what happened.Some of them I thought looked great, but I don’t think he’d cope with it.....because I’m aware of his attention span as well, he needs to be doing practical things....”*

Preparation for Adult Life (Transition)

This was experienced by some participants in terms of feeling that their child was prepared for adult life and independence and often that they had facilitated this process: *“....So he’s at the stage where he needs to strike out and do his own thing. Yes, and he’s quite happy. I mean...he can cook.....You know, he’s old enough to stand on his own two feet. You know, he’s had a bank account for a year so he’s pretty well set up and if he needs to find work there he’s got qualifications that are a trade...”* Chloe tells us, expressing some pride in her son’s maturity. Although this contrasted with a few parents who felt that their child was not yet ready to leave home and who worried about how he or she would cope *“you don’t have to go to uni now, you can always go later...”* Alison suggests to her daughter.

Conclusion

This research captures and epitomises participants’ experiences of parenting and in many cases it is overlaid with the issues of dealing with a teenager during what can be a stressful time. It is about the ways parents engage and interact with their child through careful negotiation and discussion, using their knowledge of the child to devise ways of trying to get them to talk. At times it felt as if some of them were working very hard to try to keep the peace. It is a significant time in this relationship, as it is a period of transition, and is about ‘letting go’ and about the child becoming an adult and making his/her own choices, so for some parents there was a tension between wanting to ‘let go’ and wanting to maintain control. Their fear of being too controlling, contrasted with wanting the best for their son or daughter. Parents whose child was not engaging with the process had to work at trying to achieve a better balance between their involvement and that of their child. However, at times other parents felt excluded from the process, not listened to and that their advice was ignored. Part of the originality of my study derives from its methodology which foregrounds participants’ experiences and the meanings that they attribute to them. The resulting rich, detailed accounts of how relationships impact on a choice process such

as this make an interesting contribution to the existing choice literature which tends to privilege individual choice (Giddens, 1991; Gabriel & Lang, 1999).

It is clear from my findings that parental involvement in this process is complex, with some parents being more heavily involved than others and this is often due to the relationship with their child. In some cases their involvement is confined to certain choice factors (for example accommodation, finance or employment rates). However, their role and influence cannot be ignored by HEIs who may want to consider how to target parents and whether they have different requirements to students, including different choice factors, which then need to be addressed in marketing materials and at Open Days, including perhaps through different channels. The purpose of my study was not to provide recommendations to HEIs; nevertheless, my findings did reveal a few practical tips for them. For example, with regard to Open Days, these include: ensuring that parents can be involved in them if they wish and that they are well run with staff who are well organised, informed, welcoming and efficient: parents and students of course make judgements based on these things – Chloe says that *“he felt if they can’t organise an Open Day what’s the rest of it going to be like?....”* There was frustration when staff members couldn’t answer questions or appeared rushed. One Open Day was described as a bit like a *“production line”* with talks being scheduled very tightly back to back and people being ushered out of Lecture Theatres before they could ask questions.

As universities move to a more marketing focused approach to student recruitment, there is a danger that they over-estimate the sort of choice processes that students and their parents engage in. This has implications for student retention and satisfaction levels, as HEIs seek to get the right match between student and institution (Kinnell, 1998; Baldwin & James, 2000). Parents’ increasing role may reassure HEIs and the government that ‘appropriate’ choice factors are being taken into consideration. However, my study reveals that parents are not always well informed about different types of institutions and courses: *“I pretty much think that degrees are much of a muchness if you choose psychology, that’s what I think”* says Natalie. Even those participants who had attended university, found things had changed and one participant said that it was all more *“complicated”* now, particularly the application process which confused some of them. For example, Clare wonders, *“can you possibly put an insurance [choice] that’s actually a higher point-age than your first choice?”* There are of course more HEIs and courses offered now in a wider range of subjects than during the 70s and 80s when many of my university educated participants are likely to have studied. Thus parents may not be as well informed about HE or the application process as HEIs might assume and of course they are having to manage this choice process with their child. At times participants put maintaining a good relationship with their child over making what they felt to be a good choice. So parents’ role and influence is complex and for some this is an emotional process. HEIs need to be aware of this. They should also continue to focus on students as the primary target for information, as some parents are not able to get as involved in the process as they would like and others are leaving choices to the child in order to maintain a good relationship with him or her.

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