

Intentions and Participation: a Response

Paul Croll, Institute of Education, University of Reading

Abstract

The paper responds to a critical account in the *Online Educational Research Journal* (OERJ, July 2010) of an earlier paper of mine in the *British Journal of Educational Studies* (Croll, 2009). I show that the criticisms are misplaced, first because they do not match patterns in the data which support my interpretation and second because the paper's analysis of consistency over time contain several errors which entirely undermine it. I go on to argue that to suggest that young people's intentions may be 'meaningless' as the paper does cannot be reconciled with the highly structured nature of these intentions and their match to changes in behaviour over time. Finally I argue for the importance of taking account of young people's agency in social explanation and show how the findings could have a practical significance.

Response

In July 2010 a paper appeared in the *Online Educational Research Journal* which criticised a paper of mine published in 2009 in the *British Journal of Educational Studies*. In particular, it took issue with my analysis of the relationship between early intentions for educational participation expressed at the start of secondary education and the actual post-16 behaviour of young people. My comments on this critical paper fall into three parts. First, I take the critique on its own terms and show that it fails through inconsistency with the data and a number of serious errors in the analysis. Second, I argue that the critique should not be taken on its own terms and that the analysis of intentions is crucial to understanding behaviour, notwithstanding the importance of the other variables identified in my original article. Finally, I make some brief remarks on the practical relevance of these very robust findings. Whenever I refer to the critique this is OERJ (July 2010) and whenever I refer to my own paper this is Croll (2009), not 2010 as it is mistakenly referenced in OERJ (July 2010).

The critique argues that because most young people say they plan to stay on and also that most young people actually stay on the predictions from the year 7 data are little better than would happen by chance. But this ignores the fact that the figures for the accuracy of predictions made in my paper were the aggregates of the predictive power of planning to stay on and planning to leave. Most young people do not leave but saying that you will leave when you are in year 7 is a good predictor of leaving at the end of year 11. Of those saying they would stay on in year 7, 78.1 per cent actually did so. Of those saying they would leave, 66.7 per cent did leave education at 16, compared with 28.4 per cent of the total sample who left. This provides very firm evidence for the predictive power of early intentions.

The critique then goes on to discuss the consistency of intentions over time. It gets off to a bad start with an elementary error. The paper repeats figures from my paper showing that at some point about 93 per cent of pupils expressed an intention to stay on. This figure is then made the basis for an entirely erroneous calculation. The author writes that, ‘With around 72% of pupils staying on, this means that at least 67% of stayers (.72 times .93) will have expressed an intention to do so even if such intentions are completely meaningless.’ Of course, this is completely wrong. In the very unlikely event that the intentions are meaningless and unrelated to outcomes, the percentage of stayers who will have expressed an intention to stay at least once will be 93 per cent, the same as the figure for the total sample. The discussion then leads almost immediately into another error. The paper correctly points out that 86 per cent of those expressing an intention in year 7 say they will stay and that the equivalent figure for years 8, 9 and 10 is 88 per cent in each case. It then proceeds to take the product of these four values to calculate an expected frequency of being consistent on all four occasions (59 per cent). But this is only valid if the analysis for years 8, 9 and 10 only included those expressing an intention in year 7 and the analysis for year 9 only included those expressing an intention in years 7 and 8 and so on. As my paper makes perfectly plain, and as is absolutely clear from the figures, this is not the case. Some of those saying they will stay on in year 8 said that they did not know in year 7 and some children continue to move in and out of expressing an intention and saying they are not sure throughout the four or five years. Consequently

the composition in terms of earlier intentions of those saying they will stay at any particular point varies from occasion to occasion so the product of these values does not tell us anything about chance consistency. This mistaken analysis also contains a further error. It has taken the percentage of those expressing an intention who say they will stay on in each year (years 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11) as the percentage of people asked in each of their interviews (interview 1, 2, 3, 4 and sometimes 5). That is, it has assumed that the first interview is always year 7, the second always year 8 and so on. This is why it says that the figure for the fifth interview drops to 84 per cent, the value for year 11. But the missing interview for those who only have four can occur in any school year and many of the children will have their year 11 interview as their fourth interview, having been non respondents in one of the previous years.

If we want to calculate the consistency in intentions to stay on which could have occurred by chance we should use the figures from the second column of my Table 1 which shows the percentage of the total sample saying they will stay on in each year. These values are: 67.1 per cent, 70.2 per cent, 72.8 per cent, 75.4 per cent and 75.0 per cent (Croll, 2009). The product of the first four of these (the equivalent of the OERJ analysis) is 25.9 per cent, well under half the value given in the critique. However, this calculation is flawed in the same way as the critique's because of the lack of a one to one match between interview number and year. A better procedure is to replace the figures in the analysis with the average of the five years. This gives a chance consistency of 27.0 per cent, also well under half the figure claimed.

After this catalogue of errors it may seem redundant to comment further on the analysis but one more general point should be made. The author of the critique seems to have mistaken the purpose of the analysis of consistency. The paper asks, '...how impressive is this core of 41% of pupils with consistent responses over time?'. But the figure is not meant to be 'impressive' and there is nothing in my paper to suggest that people should be impressed by it. The point is that it shows that a minority, but a pretty substantial minority, of pupils always expressed positive views on future participation. More importantly, it contrasts with the figure of 1.5 per cent who always said that they planned

to leave. The very much greater consistency of positive than negative intentions for participation has practical implications as I shall indicate below. It also has implications for arguments about the extent of anti-school subcultures and sub groups of pupils at odds with the values of the school (for a more general discussion of these issues see Croll, Attwood and Fuller, 2010).

So far I have taken the critique on its own terms and shown that it does not stand up to scrutiny. However, the assumptions underlying the paper, especially in ignoring the relevance of intentions in the explanation of social action, are also highly problematic. The paper says that intentions may be 'meaningless'. It is hard to think what would be the model of interview responses which could result in young people's reply to a question about staying on at school being meaningless. Presumably a meaningless response would be given at random and so an equal number would say that they would stay, leave and did not know. Of course this is not the case and very many more young people say that they will stay, just as very many more later do stay on. It is instructive to compare these figures, coming from the late 1990s, with Ryrie's (1981) study in Scotland about 20 years earlier. Here, at a time when participation rates were about half their current levels, 36 per cent of young people planned to stay in education, just half of the level in the BHPS data. So to accept the argument in the paper we have to assume that young people can give meaningless responses which nevertheless correspond to actual trends in social behaviour.

The neglect of intentions is also apparent when the critique turns to achievement and socio-economic factors as predictors of participation. Of course, these also figured substantially in my paper. It is suggested that if such factors were included in a statistical model to predict participation then intentions would drop out of the model. Whether or not this would be the case would depend on the structure of the model and on the order in which variables were entered into it. When predictors are themselves highly correlated, statistical models cannot on their own determine the relative influence of and interactions between the different variables. To begin to address these issues we need theory. What I am doing here is part of a wider project to re-examine the well established correlations

between demographic and socio-economic factors and various educational and social outcomes, in order to establish the processes by which such factors influence the actions of individuals to create systematic patterns of outcomes (see, for example, Croll, Attwood and Fuller, 2010). Young people's intentions and young people's choices are probable links between background factors and the individual actions that result in the differences in participation between groups. In such an approach, even if intentions are not needed statistically they are still needed theoretically.

My paper concluded by relating the results to the important recent Nuffield Foundation Report on 14-19 curriculum and assessment (Pring *et al*, 2009). What I argued that my results show is that we should start addressing issues of children's orientations to education at an early point in their school careers and that, as Richard Pring and his colleagues have argued (Pring *et al*, 2009), the point at which young people actually make participation decisions is too late to influence the choices of many of those who are not committed to educational participation. Highly relevant to such interventions is the demonstration that consistency of negative intentions is much less than for positive ones. Worryingly, two-thirds of those who say in year 7 that they will leave at 16 carry through this intention. More encouragingly, virtually all of them waver in this intention at some point in their secondary school careers. The demonstration that virtually none of the young people are uniformly negative about future participation suggests the possibility of interventions to improve participation rates.

References

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