Travelling Hopefully: an exploration of the limited possibilities for Level 1 students in the English Further Education System

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a study exploring the aspirations and learning identities of 3 groups of level 1 students in 2 English Further Education (FE) colleges. Emerging identities are explored in the context of classed and gendered dispositions and the educational positioning of the young people. The study finds that the young people's lifestyle aspirations have a heavy celebrity influence and that their occupational aspirations have an unreal, dreamlike quality associated with a lack of awareness of the trajectories they would need to follow to achieve their ambitions. Further, the paper argues that whilst the young people are developing identities in which learning, leisure, work and domesticity are synonymous, leisure identities assume the greatest importance to the young people. The paper concludes that this aspect of the young lives is significant since it provides an 'escape' from the mundane drudgery of a low value vocational programme and the inevitability of a future engaged in low pay, low skill work.

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Context and Methodology

32 students and 12 staff from 3 student groups in 2 colleges participated in the study which employed an inclusive methodological approach in an attempt to demonstrate value and respect for the young people (see Atkins, 2005). This was supported by a variety of data gathering methods including interviews, observation, limited documentary evidence, paper based data (e.g personal profiles) from the students and serendipitous data. Emerging themes from the data were discussed with and validated by the young participants.

Two of the three groups of students were drawn from St. Dunstan's College, which is located in an industrial town in the North of England and one from Woodlands College, located in a city in the English Midlands. Woodlands College had recently introduced a new level 1 programme in response to staff concerns about the existing curriculum. This programme, known as the 'level 1', consisted of multiple small accreditations related to literacy, numeracy and personal and social education with one day a week spent working towards level 1 NVQ units in a choice of one of four different vocational areas. Both groups at St. Dunstan's were pursuing nationally recognised GNVQ foundation (level 1) awards, one group in Information Technology (IT) and the other in Health and Social Care (HSC).

Culture and Class

The students were representative of two main cultural groups. Three quarters (24/32) were white working class with family backgrounds in the ex-mining communities of the Midlands and Yorkshire and six students came from Muslim families all except one of these having origins in Pakistan. All the students involved in the study (including the

two who fell outside these groups) came from lower socio-economic groups. Social class was reflected in lifestyle and parental occupation and was also evident in the gender stereotyped vocational FE programmes followed. Vocational programmes tend to be populated mainly by students from working class backgrounds (Colley et al 2003:479), have been widely criticised for socialising students into particular job roles (Helsby et al 1998; Ainley, 1991; Bathmaker, 2001) and tend to be regarded as of lower status than academic programmes (Bloomer 1996:145/148; Edwards et al 1997:1). Gleeson (1996:100) has argued that they are 'typically uncritical' and do not address important issues of inequality and social justice yet, despite these criticisms, for the young people in this study, a level 1 vocational programme at their nearest college was their only option.

Limited employment and education opportunities are available for unskilled 16 year olds with very low levels of credential. They are denied access to benefits but paid to stay in education as a result of policy implemented by a government intent on credentialising the whole workforce, yet are unable to stay at school as they do not have the pre-requisite credentials to study at a higher level. They are also effectively excluded from many work based learning programmes where training is only available at level 2 or above (e.g. plumbing and childcare), and from 'academic' re-sit programmes which normally require evidence of 'D' grade GCSEs. Thus, only vocational programmes are available and the 'choice' of these at level 1 is not only limited nationally (14-19 Reform Group 2004a:17) but also at a more local level as College Senior Management Teams (SMT) determine, for financial and strategic reasons, which programmes they will offer. The nature of guidance or allocation to programme is equally open to chance, often determined by factors such as number of enrolments and illustrated by Leonardo (Level 1, Woodlands):

> [I came onto Level 1] 'cos I couldn't get on to the course that I wanted to get on to…it was engineering, refrigeration and reconditioning. [I came on to the Level 1] because I didn't know what else to do

These factors combine to constrain young people to the extent that a decision to go to the local college and take a level 1 vocational course ceases to be even the 'pragmatically rational process' described by Hodkinson (1998:103) much less an active choice. Rather, in terms of socio-economic status and lack of credentials, young people like Leonardo are structurally positioned, perhaps inevitably, to make a transition to a limited range of low level, low status further education programmes in which they will be engaged in 'busy work' – useful for filling time and able to produce an individual 'socialised to work' (Tarrant, 2001) but of little value in terms of learning and education.

Gendered Roles and Domesticity

Socio-economic structures and those of the education system are not alone in denying opportunity to these young people. Adherence to traditional gender roles, or 'gendered habitus' (Reay, 1998: 61) in which both young men and young women appeared to view the gender divisions as natural and universal also formed a major part of the young peoples' dispositions and identities. The female students, whilst notionally rejecting domesticity as an option for the future, were all engaged in domestic activity at some level and a significant number undertook often onerous caring responsibilities in addition to their college course. Colley et al (2003) have argued that vocational learning is a process of becoming and that 'predispositions related to gender, family background and specific locations within the working class are necessary … for effective learning'. Further, they suggest that the dispositions of individuals on care programmes are shaped by the female stereotype of caring for others, something which was particularly evident in the students in the HSC group at St. Dunstan's.

However, there was a tension between these caring identities and in the students' expressed rejection of fulfilling a 'wife and mother' female stereotype, similar to that described by Hodkinson et al (1996:117/119) who found that, despite entering gender stereotyped occupations, young women made little reference to marriage and domesticity when describing their future plans and suggested that they were disinterested in marriage and domesticity after observing the impact of this on older sisters. Consistent with this, only 5/20 female students included children in their imagined future. Significantly, these students had no major domestic or caring responsibility within the home, unlike those of their peers who rejected domesticity as a possible future.

In contrast, the male students, irrespective of cultural or ethnic background, envisaged futures where they would 'look after' a wife or girlfriend and, indeed, a family in which 'look after' meant to provide financial support. The prevalence of such gendered values amongst the white working class ex-mining communities was highlighted by Jaskaren, a lecturer at Woodlands College:

> The other thing people should look at is general culture in the working class. If my son did better than me I would be proud but I have been to meetings in mining communities where if the son is doing better than dad he doesn't like it. Mining communities used to have a job for life and this engendered the attitude ' I don't need to study' – this attitude still prevails in the third generation. If someone does better the community doesn't want to know.
> (Jaskaren, Lecturer Woodlands College)

This comment demonstrates the way in which the prevailing paternalistic culture of the former mining communities maintains a status quo in terms of family hierarchy and consequently class status. Father/son relationships which discourage education in this way suggest that it is not only young women who are constrained by local cultural and

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gendered practices and beliefs which are regarded as natural and normal by the community.

Fantasy Futures

All the young people in this study, irrespective of gender or ethnicity, demonstrated a fascination with celebrity culture, and a conviction that one day they would experience a sudden transformation which would lead to a celebrity lifestyle. This was reflected most strongly in their aspiration to achieve an affluent lifestyle, but also in that when making their own choice of pseudonym during the fieldwork for the study, almost all chose the names of 'well known' celebrities drawn largely from the fields of sport, film, television or fashion. This preoccupation with a celebrity lifestyle formed a significant aspect of the young peoples' leisure activity in terms of their interest in popular culture, 'reality' television programmes such as 'Big brother' or 'Pop Idol' in which the winner received significant cash rewards and instant fame and high profile personalities such as the Beckhams.

Ball et al (1999:214) have discussed the concept of fantasy futures, a belief in sudden transformation, of waking up rich and famous (for example by appearing on Big Brother or winning the lottery), and this phenomenon has also been identified in a study of NEET (not in education, employment or training) young people in Wales (TES 2006). Some young people did, however, acknowledge the likelihood of a more mundane future. For example, Catherine (Level 1, Woodlands) wanted to be a dress designer but recognised that she was more likely to 'have babies and work in a clothes shop' whilst Al (IT, St. Dunstan's) wanted to be an IT consultant in America, but followed this up by saying somewhat wistfully 'I can dream it'.

Whilst the young people in this study acknowledged that their futures were likely to be more mundane, they did not appear to see any

dissonance between their anticipated future employment and their lifestyle aspirations. Paris (GNVQ HSC; St. Dunstan's) for example, wanted to be a midwife, but envisaged herself living in 'a mansion' in North Yorkshire. Leonardo (Level 1: Woodlands) expected to become a self-made multi-millionaire. Although his plans for achieving this were somewhat vague, and certainly inconsistent with his occupational ambition to become a refrigeration technician, they were not apparently unrealistic to those who were interviewed with him. This inability to detach an occupational aspiration from a fantasy lifestyle seems to suggest that the young people perceive their occupational ambitions to be as likely or unlikely as winning the lottery.

It appears that the achievement of occupational ambitions may indeed be as likely as winning the lottery. Knowledge about career pathways, credentials and the potential length of transition was limited to one student (Abdul, IT St. Dunstan's) who had observed his cousins' transitions through higher education. Of the other 31 students who participated in the study none had any idea of the pathways, credentials or length of transition necessary to achieve their aspirations, and, like the young people in Bathmaker's (2001) study, they showed no inclination to investigate this.

However, having such dreams, whether of fantasy futures or even fantasy occupations may be necessary to enable the young person to accept the reality of 'here and now' and to enable them to rationalise pragmatic responses to imperatives such as the need for money. The drudgery of the low pay low skill work that many young people engaged in, or progressed to, was only ever perceived to be temporary in the context of a belief in a sudden transformation to fame and fortune or the possibility of a return to an education which would enable them to fulfil their occupational aspirations.

'Buying In' to Learning?

At interview all the young people who participated in the study expressed a clear verbal commitment to 'doing the course' and to the concept of lifelong learning, creating an image of industriously using their level 1 programme to build up to the future. All anticipated progressing through an extended transition to a professional or technical role, suggesting that their apparent commitment may have been the instrumental motivation based on a form of credentialism promoted by educators and policymakers described by Ecclestone (2002:20).

Each young person expressed a clear perception that working hard and achieving 'good' credentials was important. This was expressed in a number of ways. For example, Wayne (IT St. Dunstan's) explained how important good attendance was to success, which he defined in monetary terms:

> I have just got to keep coming to college and keep coming till the years have gone past because I've got three brothers who did the same and they earn about £8 an hour now

Jade (HSC St. Dunstan's), like Wayne, compared herself with her siblings, in this case to emphasise how credentials might give her a better future:

> My mum's wanting me to be go into a job where it's qualified and there's plenty of money behind it 'cos she wants me to do good. Like my sisters, I've got three sisters older than me and they've turned out to be just mums, they've got nowhere in college and nowt like that and I just want to prove to me mum that I want, I *can* get qualified and get far *(original emphasis)*

These young people perceived themselves to be working hard in pursuit of their goals, and expressed confidence that with continued commitment they could achieve their occupational ambitions yet data from observations and staff interviews indicated that they spent most of their

time 'doing leisure' rather than 'doing work' providing an interesting contradiction between personal rhetoric and reality. Most of the young people interviewed were clear and confident in their responses and did not appear to be expressing the lifelong learning rhetoric in the sense that they believed these were the answers I expected. Rather, this appeared to be their reality, at least at that moment in time suggesting that their apparent buy in to the lifelong learning rhetoric formed, at least in part, a recognition of the societal value placed on credentials and occupations and reflected an attempt to move beyond the dispositions they brought from past learning programmes (Ecclestone 2002:144) and to be valued within a hierarchy of lifelong learning.

Despite this, only 12/31 of the young people progressed to level 2 provision, with the remaining students failing, withdrawing or choosing not to pursue level 2 study. It has been suggested that some young people remain on low level vocational programme out of a belief that 'qualifications will get them jobs' (Bathmaker 2001:90), and that even relatively low status programmes and credentials can buy a degree of economic capital or be used to engender more cultural capital (Colley 2006:25). However, Colley's study related to Level 3 CACHE Diploma students and whilst her argument may be extrapolated to students on higher level vocational programmes, it seems that for students on level 1 vocational programmes there are two significant factors which prevent this happening. Firstly, level 1 vocational programmes such as those followed by the young people in this study carry no occupational currency and cannot, therefore, be exchanged for economic capital. Secondly, many of the young people were not on programmes they had 'chosen' but on programmes to which they had been directed. This seems to suggest that many level 1 students may be undertaking programmes in subject areas in which they have no intrinsic interest.

Consequently, it may be argued that those young people who do not 'progress' through multiple levels of vocational programmes are simply making 'pragmatic decisions' (Hodkinson 1996:125). That is, they are exercising agency constructively in the sense that they are recognising the constraints and limitations they live within and using their limited cultural capital as a basis for gaining whatever economic capital they are in a position to secure. Emma and Naz (both IT St. Dunstan's) provide examples of this. Emma had wanted to 'do leisure and tourism' but this had failed to recruit and she had been directed to an IT programme in which she expressed disinterest. Emma worked with her mother as a part-time cleaner at a local supermarket. Naz had enrolled for his programme on the basis of a 'D' grade GCSE, this being the highest he had achieved in any subject. He spent weekends working with his father as a construction labourer. Naz failed his GNVQ and Emma withdrew from her programme after one term. Although these students' destinations were formally unknown to the college, their friends suggested that both had continued with their existing employment in a full time capacity. This suggested that they were making the best use of existing capital in the form of family connections to obtain low paid, low skill work which would generate an immediate, if very limited, economic return, rather than hoping that a vague and distant future would provide credentials necessary to get the job (and economic return) that they aspired to.

Working Hard at Doing Leisure

The young people expressed a conviction that they were 'working hard' – something which was consistent across all groups and individuals – despite published research (Bathmaker 2005:89) and other empirical data which contradicted this. This phenomenon appeared to reflect a need to conform, possibly as a result of 'the inculcation of social discipline' (Cohen 1984:105) arising from their level 1 programmes as the young people are prepared for a pre-ordained position in the labour

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force (Helsby et al 1998:74). The students are clear about what holds a value educationally – attendance, motivation and effort (Bathmaker 2005:89) and appeared to perceive themselves to be conforming to this (and thereby demonstrating their value as members of a learning society), despite the fact that they behave 'as if education happens by a process of osmosis' (Macrae et al 1997:505). Failing to conform brings with it the likelihood of becoming an 'outsider' who does not participate in lifelong learning. Whilst these young people might not be able to analyse the impact of social exclusion arising from non-participation in education and subsequent employment in low pay low skill work, they may well recognise that such a process would lead to a loss of their imagined future.

The classroom activity considered by the young people to be 'hard work' was open to three different interpretations. In addition to the perception of hard work by the students, the staff group had a perception that the students lacked concentration skills and my own interpretation was that the students were using the time as an opportunity not to learn, but to negotiate arenas and identities mainly associated with leisure activity. It is apparent that young people experience considerable tension in negotiating between different arenas as they try to reconcile the demands of social lives which are 'pivotal elements of their identities and are equal to, if not more important than, their educational selves' (Ball et al 2000:59), of college and learning towards which they have a somewhat ambivalent attitude, and work or domesticity, both regarded as generally unpleasant necessities. The students all claimed to 'love college' but the focus of this was on maintaining friendships within the group rather than any course-related activity. During classroom observations the activity the students engaged in was primarily focussed on discussions related to social and leisure activities they were planning or had recently participated in.

Leisure also provided the imperative to work since the social activities the young people engaged in were all expensive. Alcohol use was consistent across both genders and all cultural and religious groups and translated as 'socialising with friends' both in the evenings and at lunch times. 'Hanging around' with friends often also entailed going to a pub or someone's home and drinking alcohol as well as activities such as meeting in town and shopping. Hobbies such as dance and sport also entailed a significant financial outlay as did the use of a mobile phone, the make and model of which were significant in conferring status. However, this leisure activity was critical in providing a form of light relief, something to look forward to in lives that were perceived by the young people to consist largely of the mundane and boring – college, work and domesticity.

The willingness of these young people to invest significant emotional and financial resources into their social lives is indicative not only of the importance they place upon it but also of the fact that they are constructing different biographies, in which their social life forms the most important aspect of their identity, to the extent that learning identities may be abandoned in order to generate the economic capital necessary to pursue social activity. This is consistent with Unwin and Wellington's findings that young people are increasingly seeking out alternatives to full time education (2001:51) and may provide a further explanation for the significant number of students on level 1 programmes who fail to achieve or who do not progress within education. This phenomenon may also be compared with the 'choice biographies' emerging amongst more affluent adolescents where work, leisure and study are 'balanced' and 'flexible' in order to generate more cultural capital and facilitating the presentation of a disconnected transition in a positive light such as a 'good' gap year (Ball et al 2000:68). The high priority placed by the young people in this study on social lives and leisure indicates that these priorities are common across

social class boundaries although the young people in this study do not have the same material and cultural resources to create a positive choice biography as do their middle class peers. This positioning thus limits both their participation in education and their ability to participate in society as consumers.

Whilst many aspects of their social lives were benign, others were less so and concerned behaviour related to sexual activity, the use of illegal drugs and alcohol. Using individual agency in this way leaves the young people open to judgements such as 'disaffected', 'disengaged' or 'socially excluded'. Social lives which involve aspects that may be subject to such pejorative discourse are articulated in a particular way which provides relief from an otherwise mundane life, in which there are almost no opportunities to change the status quo yet also provides an opportunity to challenge or resist that status quo by indulging in behaviour which is at odds with a wider and more readily accepted culture in society.

However, placing the greatest emphasis on their leisure rather than their learning identities and exercising individual agency in this way will not enable them to engage with the 'system' and negotiate a transition to a professional occupation. A more likely outcome is the development of a form of agency which provides at least an illusion of independence and overtly rejects state sponsored institutionalised education systems. Another form of this is disaffected behaviour in the classroom, stigmatised by government and society but reflecting nonetheless a clear rejection of a system about which many young people have few illusions. Thus, Naz (IT St. Dunstan's) stated that he preferred college to school because 'It's about being treated with respect and no uniform' but continued to exert individual agency in his rejection of the conformist GNVQ culture. He attended sporadically, spoke provocatively, used class time to pursue discussions about leisure activities and rarely submitted any work. Such behaviour reflects an adolescent sub culture which uses

dress, language and behaviour 'consciously at odds' with the official culture of the institution and which works in tandem with the schools' distinction between 'good' and 'bad' students as it reproduces the social relations of the wider world (Webb et al 2002:123/124).

Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the key themes arising from this study and suggests that as the young people involved attempt to develop identities and negotiate their transitions from school to work, a number of things are happening. They are developing identities in which learning, leisure, work and domesticity are synonymous, but where leisure is of the most fundamental importance. Unreal hopes of something better than mundane low skill low pay employment and the lifestyle that that can support rely on sudden, almost miraculous transformations which could place the young person in a position in which they had no financial concerns and would facilitate their engagement with leisure activity whilst simultaneously causing them to be held in a higher regard by the rest of society – valued more, rather than valued less.

This paper has also highlighted the irony that these young people have similar occupational aspirations to their more educationally successful middle class peers but are more constrained by fundamental structural forces and lack the agency and cultural capital to realise those aspirations. There are particular tensions between their verbal commitment to education and lifelong learning rhetoric and other behaviours which are indicative of a more ambivalent, instrumental view of education contrasted with a recognition of the societal value placed on learning and an apparent desire to be viewed as 'buying in' to learning, something which, of itself, confers a degree of societal value. Despite this apparent 'buy in' most of the young people reject a system which can only offer them an extended transition on low value courses.

Instead, many choose to utilise what limited capital they have in return for low skill, low pay work which can finance their leisure and social activities. In addition, characteristics such as class, gender and vocational education serve to bind each young person more firmly into their allotted place in society – one where they are unqualified, low paid, low status and unvalued and structurally positioned, partly inevitably, to make choices that are not their own and to do low level activities and be 'busy' (rather than engaged in learning) as a preparation for low pay low skill employment. The tensions outlined here are key factors in that most Level 1 students fail to fulfil their aspirations but drift into low skill, low paid employment, denying them opportunities and simultaneously maintaining a status quo in terms of social class structures.

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