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# **Well-being *and* Social Justice? Engaging Young Adults on the Margins of Education and Employment**

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## **Introduction**

This paper is based on an ethnographic study of young people engaged in work-based learning programmes in two neighbouring local authorities in the north of England. The research took place during 2008-9, and was conducted in four learning sites offering training programmes for young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), or at risk of becoming NEET. Such training aims to promote the 'employability' of young people through emphasising the acquisition of certain attitudes, abilities and dispositions deemed necessary for the workplace. These are important aims, and we recognise that many of the young people directed towards work-based learning will benefit from education and training which attempts to build self-esteem and develop moral and spiritual well-being (Hyland 2011). However, the central argument of the paper is that, if employability programmes and the practitioners responsible for their delivery are to equip learners for socially and economically fulfilled lives, NEET young people and other marginalised learners also require access to significantly different forms of education and training. This, we argue, needs to develop not only the self-esteem and motivation of learners, but should also expose them to principled conceptual learning and traditional conceptions of skill rooted in a unity of knowledge and action (Simmons 2009). We draw on Bernstein's (2000) work on pedagogic discourses to analyse and problematise work-based programmes for marginalised young people and to offer an alternative vision for such learning – a vision which, we argue, offers increased possibilities not only for student well-being but for social justice more broadly.

The paper begins by placing contemporary discourses surrounding NEET young people in their social and historical context, and by discussing the complexities of this category. We review the research upon which the paper is based, summarising key findings and highlighting some of the tensions and contradictions apparent in work-based learning. Whilst we acknowledge that tutors are often enthusiastic and committed to the well-being of young people engaged in such training, it is argued that structural, material and cultural factors strongly bound their practice (Thompson 2010). We argue that various factors acting in synergy, including the funding regime, the nature of the curriculum, and certain forms of pedagogy associated with particular assumptions about NEET young people limit not only the scope of learning, but have far-reaching consequences for participants thereafter.

The paper concludes by offering an alternative conception of education and training for young people on the margins of participation. Whilst we acknowledge this would entail significant challenges for policymakers, training providers and practitioners, we argue that learners require programmes that both support and challenge them – intellectually and socially. Drawing on Bernstein (2000), it is argued that the acquisition of ‘soft skills’ and personal effectiveness need to be embedded in learning which provides access to more traditional modes of knowledge found in established forms of academic and professional training. Such an approach, in combination with coherent and sustained action to stimulate the demand for labour and for skill is, we argue, necessary if we are to shift from individualised and ultimately limited discourses of well-being to a more holistic model rooted in broader social and economic conceptions of social justice.

### **NEET young people – the rise of a problem category**

For three decades after the end of World War Two, the transition into adulthood was relatively straightforward for most young people. Whilst pockets of unemployment existed in certain parts of the UK, the majority of school leavers were able to secure a job reflecting their ambitions and expectations. Most left school at the earliest opportunity, often with few qualifications, and relatively few young people went on to post-compulsory education. Finishing school and beginning work was normally

followed in rapid sequence by leaving home, marriage and starting a family (Ainley and Allen 2010: 21). Low levels of unemployment masked the way some young people 'churned' between one job and another but the journey from youth to adulthood was nevertheless at its most condensed and unitary during the post-war era (Finn 1987: 47; Jones 1995: 23). Youth transitions have, however, changed fundamentally since the 1970s, and it is now unusual to leave education and enter full-time work at the earliest opportunity. For many young people, traditional patterns of marriage, family life, and other signifiers of adulthood are difficult to obtain. Nowadays, the lives of many young people, especially those from working-class backgrounds, are marked by complexity, uncertainty and individualisation – although structured inequality continues to be important (Beck, 1992).

The term 'NEET' was coined in the mid-1990s to replace the more politically sensitive 'Status Zero', which had previously been used to describe young people outside education, employment and training (the disqualification of 16-18-year-olds from unemployment benefit in 1988 had made the term 'unemployed' technically inaccurate). Over time the use of NEET as a label has broadened and nowadays is often used in relation to young adults up to the age of 24. Today, an increasingly diverse range of unemployed individuals are described as NEET, including teenagers with learning difficulties, young offenders and young people with significant barriers to participation such as single-parenthood or caring responsibilities through to university graduates seeking entry to the labour market. The NEET category therefore conflates a heterogeneous set of young people with different experiences and conditions into an artificially manufactured group. However, whilst NEET is a flawed construct, it is not without value. If nothing else, the term has helped keep the issue of youth unemployment on the political agenda and, despite the technical and conceptual problems associated with NEET as a category, being NEET is often closely linked to a range of disadvantages. These include an increased likelihood of long-term negative consequences such as ill-health, involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour, extended periods of unemployment and other forms of social exclusion (Brown and Hesketh).

The notion of being NEET is related to particular conceptions of worklessness. Rooted in neo-liberal understandings of unemployment, the role of the individual and

the state, NEET as a policy discourse locates the responsibility for worklessness with the individual rather than as deriving from broader economic and labour market conditions. Within this discourse there is an implicit assumption is that there is something inherently 'wrong' with NEET young people. It is almost as if worklessness is viewed as an individual condition which must be cured (Simmons and Thompson 2011). This is accompanied by certain assertions about the nature of employment and the economy where, rhetorically, both individual well-being and national competitiveness are dependent on the skills, abilities and aptitudes of the individual worker (Avis 2009). Flowing from this, there have been a series of initiatives which have aimed to engage or re-engage NEET young people through various forms of pre-vocational and work-based learning. Over time, numerous training courses have been launched and re-launched and, although the names of these schemes often change, essentially they share the same aims: to increase the 'employability' of young people. In other words, they attempt to equip participants with attitudes and qualities deemed necessary to compete successfully in the labour market - despite the fact that the causes of unemployment lie as much in a lack of demand for labour as in any workforce deficits, successive governments have chosen to overlook such matters (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

### **The research project**

The research upon which this paper is based was conducted in two neighbouring local authorities in northern England: 'Middlebridge' and 'Greenford'. Middlebridge has a population of about 400,000 and is made up of two large post-industrial towns, and surrounding villages; Greenford is centred on one major town and its satellites, and has a population of approximately 200,000. In both authorities service industries have replaced much of the traditional industrial base but manufacturing is still a significant source of employment, accounting for around 20 per cent of the workforce. During the research, unemployment rates increased significantly, from approximately 2.5 per cent in June 2008 to nearly 5 per cent in June 2009. In Middlebridge, 84 per cent of the population are white British; the largest ethnic minority groups are of Pakistani or Indian descent. Greenford has a smaller ethnic minority population: around 10 per cent are non-white, being mainly of Pakistani descent.

The project explored the experiences of learners and practitioners on employability programmes, and consisted of two phases. Phase one mapped provision across both authorities; phase two involved an ethnographic investigation of four case-study sites. The ethnography comprised 87 hours of observations and 58 tape-recorded and transcribed interviews (plus 5 unrecorded). Interviews were conducted with learners, tutors provision managers, and Connexions Personal Advisers. Fieldwork commenced in November 2008 and ended in May 2009. Photographs and field notes were used to document the environment, use of space, use of time, learner behaviour and relations with staff, learning activities and teaching styles. This enabled as detailed a picture as possible to be constructed, particularly where the experiences of learners were concerned. Although some could express their views and opinions with lucidity, others – especially the young men – were less articulate and interviews alone would have produced more limited data. The names of participants have been changed, including the names of providers. The case-study sites are described below:

*Middlebridge College:* The employability programme at Middlebridge FE College aimed to improve skills and confidence, and to help learners access further education, work or training. Progression to other courses offered by the college was regarded as a strength of this provision. Seven observation visits were conducted and provided 22 hours of data. 14 learners and three tutors were interviewed.

*Action for Youth:* This voluntary provider offered training in motor vehicle maintenance, engineering and building maintenance. Learners participated in work-related projects, outdoor pursuits and residential activities. Most tutors had an industrial rather than a teaching background. Four observation visits provided 20 hours of data. Interviews with 17 learners, one tutor, a placement officer and an administrator took place.

*MGC Training:* This private training provider ran Level One qualifications and work experience placements in retail and warehousing childcare, and adult care were offered. Sport and fitness and health and beauty were encouraged by the provider. Four observation visits generated 10 hours of data; interviews were conducted with nine learners, a senior manager, two tutors and an administrator.

*Aim for Work:* This private training provider ran a flexible programme of work placements and tasters, help with basic skills, and NVQs in administration, retail and warehousing. Five observation visits provided 10 hours of data, and interviews were conducted with 11 learners, one tutor and an

administrator. As at *MGC Training*, staff at *Aim for Work* regarded themselves as having strong employer links which helped learners to obtain work placements and progress into paid employment.

Gender distribution varied widely between providers and, although no provider discouraged potential learners because of their gender, patterns of enrolments reflected traditional gender roles. Learners who did not conform to these divisions were in a minority, and sometimes sat and worked separately from other learners. They often did not stay long, leaving for courses or other providers. Those who remained were not necessarily committed to the provider's vocational specialism; for example, one young woman acquiring joinery skills actually aspired to work in animal management. Another female learner, unable to obtain a childcare placement due to previous offending, had begun to learn motor vehicle maintenance at Action for Youth but had disliked it and was working mainly on acquiring the basic skills qualifications she believed necessary to obtain clerical work. The representation of ethnic minorities in our sample was broadly in line with the local population, but well below the proportions in local schools (31 per cent in Middlebridge and 17 per cent in Greenford). Despite lower average levels of educational achievement amongst those of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and African-Caribbean descent, there is evidence that young Asian and African-Caribbean people have negative perceptions of work-based learning, particularly lower level programmes (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 2001).

## **Findings**

Many of the young people that took part in the research faced significant disadvantages and barriers to participation. For example, just under half of the learners were living in one-parent households, compared with a quarter of all 16-17 year olds in the UK (Barham et al. 2009, 27). A significant minority of learners had difficult personal circumstances, including caring responsibilities, domestic violence, youth offending, illness and learning disabilities. The practitioners we interviewed recognised this.

It could be from families that have gone off the rails; it could be from sink estates; it could be from kids in care; it could be from youth offending; it could be young people who simply haven't got an idea of what they want to do with the next stage of their lives ...

(Manager interview, Middlebridge College, 6.10.08)

Well a lot of them come along with personal and social development issues because they are estranged from family and they have mental health issues and alcohol and all stuff like that.

(Connexions PA interview, 8.01.09)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the learners were difficult to engage but most who took part in our research were actually fairly 'mainstream' young people.

Well in Year 10 I got my predictions for GCSE and they were for A\* and a B in English but for personal reasons I stopped going to school ... I would have got good GCSEs and I were proper enthusiastic as well ... I did some coursework though and I got a grade A for that.

(Emma, Middlebridge College, 2.04.2009)

Whilst many had spent periods being NEET, half had experienced paid work, and nearly half had at least one GCSE at grade C or above. Virtually all of them had aspirations for work or further education, and some had ambitions to go on to higher education or professional study. More than 80 per cent of the young people on the programmes we researched came from a household with at least one parent in paid work. Furthermore, those from families without employment were not from households without a history of employment. The young people we came across in the course of our research were basically ordinary people from families not dissimilar from working-class learners more generally. Most had quite traditional attitudes and ambitions – including finding a job and obtaining the other signifiers of adult life (Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011).

The practice of tutors and personal advisors working on the programmes we studied was constrained by structural and material factors, as well as dominant discourses surrounding NEET young people. There are significant constraints and pressures placed upon practitioners working with NEET young people: a curriculum increasingly prescribed, codified and controlled by the state; an intensely target-driven culture; and a funding regime which militates against stability and continuity of

provision. Low pay, high staff turnover, and poor working conditions detract from the experience they are able to provide. However, whilst the direction and purpose of education and training is driven, to a large degree, by social and economic change and the priorities of policymakers, practitioners are not without agency. Indeed, educationalists have an important role to play in mediating and sometimes subverting policy, and there is a long tradition of practitioner resistance and progressive practice in working with marginalised learners - see, for example, the work of Gleeson (1983) on YTS tutors, and Ainley (1990) on TVEI in schools. In our study, we found that tutors were normally caring and concerned about the well-being of the young people with whom they worked, and some found space to engage with young people in constructive and progressive ways.

10.45am Sue starts a discussion about free school meals.

A mobile phone rings, Sue asks [the owner] to put it away. Some of the learners swear and Sue reminds them, 'Language'.

Sue starts the discussion by asking if they think everyone should have a balanced diet. Tom comments that they used to have burgers at school but then they changed it to pasta so he 'nicked off home'. Another learner says he only used to go into school to get his Panini and then he'd go home again. Most of the learners ... think everyone should get free school meals, to alleviate the issue of bullying for dinner money.

(Field notes, 29.01.2009)

The nature of the curriculum and the learning experiences the young people on employability programmes require particular consideration. Typically much the content of employability programmes for marginalised young people is based upon what Basil Bernstein (2000) described as generic modes of knowledge – or in other words, generalised, de-contextualised activities such as 'problem solving', thinking skills' or 'learning to learn'. Whilst not without value if accompanied by other forms of learning embedded in particular vocational, intellectual or social contexts, when delivered without an underpinning core of subject-based knowledge and skills, such activities are of little utility. They become especially problematic when, rather than providing access to new knowledge or skills based upon traditional craft or technical ability, such practices are coupled with an over-emphasis on routine processes such as repeated CV writing, skills audits, and similar activities. There are, after all, only

so many times a young person can improve their interview technique or update a CV before a salutary conclusion is drawn: that is, coherent knowledge and skills need to be gained in order to add substance to any softer inter-personal abilities that have been accrued (Simmons and Thompson 2011 p. 171).

## **Conclusion**

The *Wolf Review of Vocational Education* (2011) highlighted that many low-level vocational and pre-vocational training programmes provide participants with little or no advantage, and that most employers continue to prefer to recruit those with more traditional qualifications based upon recognised forms of academic or vocational knowledge. In Bernsteinian terms, this reflects a preference for *singular* modes of knowledge represented by traditional academic subjects, or at least the *regional* mode, which is often encountered in modern higher education and is particularly associated with the higher professions. Such forms of knowledge are related to dimensions of social class and privilege, but also possess explanatory power and enable complex and coherent understanding to be developed in ways which generic modes of knowledge do not allow (Simmons 2009). It is both sad and ironic that provision which purports to help disadvantaged young people to find work, in some ways, contributes to their continued exclusion and, obviously, this is a significant problem – not only for NEET young people but also for practitioners working with them. If NEET young people are to be given access to coherent knowledge and skills they need access to training which facilitates this. This would require not only a remodelling of the work-based learning curriculum but staff recruitment and retention strategies, remuneration, and meaningful career pathways all need to be addressed if NEET young people are to receive consistently high-quality learning programmes. Furthermore, if young people are to be provided with access to coherent principled forms of knowledge, staff responsible for teaching and learning need to possess the necessary knowledge and skills to enable this to take place. Practitioners need to be particularly skilful in order to devise challenging yet accessible learning opportunities in a range of contexts. Access to ongoing professional development which provides both knowledge and skills-based learning opportunities is particularly important for those working with learners on the margins of participation (Simmons and Thompson 2011 p. 173).

Having said this, no training programme however effectively delivered can compensate for a lack of job opportunities. If the state is serious about providing meaningful opportunities for NEET young people there needs to be significant change not only in the nature of education and training provided to those without work but in the political economy more broadly. An extensive Keynesian-style programme of public works – restoring housing, engaging in environmental initiatives, and improving local and national infrastructure – would go some way towards stimulating the labour market and creating demand for traditional forms of craft skill (Allen and Ainley 2011, p.19). A range of other measures could also be used to increase the demand for particular forms of skilled labour: for example, statutory licenses to practice across the economy; a system of levies and benefits which encourage employers to promote education and training; and state incentives which reward high quality production strategies. It would be naïve to suggest that the changes in taxation, labour market regulation, and social and economic policy more generally which are necessary to achieve such ambitions are easy or straightforward to implement. Nevertheless, such measures are required if fair and meaningful work and educational opportunities are to be provided young people. Unfortunately, this is not on the present Government's agenda. Indeed, deep public spending cuts can only damage the organisations most likely to deliver increased employment, and especially highly skilled employment: local authorities, universities, the health service, and other areas of the public sector. The changes we propose to work-based learning for NEET young people can only be productive and contribute to social justice if they are part of broader political and philosophical realignment and a significant shift in attitudes to the well-being of young people.

- The authors would like this paper to be considered for the Ian Martin Prize for its contribution to social justice

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