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Reid, James

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**Children and young people's voices in employability: Engaging with primary school pupils, student placements and the employability agenda.**

**A REPORT TO THE NATIONAL CHILDREN'S RESEARCH CENTRE MARCH**

**2015**

**Abstract**

As a consequence of the UNCRC it is expected that children and young people have a voice in the policies and practices that affect them, yet the 'employability' agenda cedes power to employers and government in deciding the skills and qualities required by professionals entering the workforce. This report focuses on student experiences on placement in a primary school setting in the north of England and their engagement of children's voice in that experience. Focussing on students as upcoming professionals, the discussion considers how placement is organised by the employability agenda and how children's voices can be marginalised.

**Keywords**

Engaging children, employability, managerialism, placement

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This report discusses the results of a small-scale study into employability experiences in a primary school, ages 4-11, in a large town in the north of England. The study generated qualitative data from students on a BA (Hons) Childhood Studies programme undertaking a placement module in the second year of their studies. The module is the vehicle through which the programme team meet the university's demand that all students have the opportunity for a placement and the students' needs for placement experience in a setting that they hope to be employed in the future. As such the module involves developing knowledge and skills, including soft skills, identified by employers as crucial for those employed in work with children. While the students undertook placement in a primary school setting they are not training as teachers, although many use the opportunity as experience in preparation for future post-graduate teacher training.

Placement is the term used to describe an opportunity for a student, or students, to work alongside other professionals, in the professional's place of work, to enhance and explore the knowledge and skills development of the students in preparation for future employment. All placements were for a minimum of 120 hours and took place in school for one day per week over an academic term. Childhood Studies students are not subject to regulatory body registration or prescribed professional competencies although they are required to demonstrate competence within the broad requirements of the setting in which they are placed.

Universities in the UK are required by funding councils to embed the development of qualities and skills required for future employment, known as 'employability', across the institution as a benefit to students and also to the economic and political landscape (for example, HEFCE 2011). Work placements have become integral within curricula and university students are gaining experience and developing their

knowledge and skills in the sectors in which they hope to gain employment. Consequently, as a feature of the student – higher education/future employment exchange, the relationship between tutors and students has been deprofessionalised with a focus on social efficiency and accountability rather than, ‘mutual, reciprocal, and democratic relationships’ (Biesta, 2004, 249). As such there is a focus on tutor effort and individual student responsibility in achieving employment leading to a sense of ‘individual fault’ and ‘private worry’ (Bauman, 2008, 6) about educational outcomes. The market in and of education is consequently a significant organising feature of the student experience (Glesson and Keep, 2004; Ball, 2009a).

As students become customers of universities and the universities in turn seek to convince students of the added value of their programmes of study in enabling employment (Boden and Nedeva 2010) significant research has been focused on the student experience of employability. Much less has been written however about the engagement of the end users of employability work who, in a primary school context, are the children with whom students are placed. While this study too generates data from student participants the focus is on the circumstances in which students on placement engage with children’s voices.

In the next section I discuss the concept of employability, its definition and focus on skills. I consider a number of the implications arising from the employability agenda for higher education students highlighted in the current academic literature, before presenting the data and conclusions.

### **Defining employability and skills**

Placements have been a significant feature of practice learning in professions for work with children and young people for some time. More recently the opportunity to learn in work settings has become a feature of programmes across the higher education landscape. Indeed the moves to prepare students with the skills and knowledge that are required to enhance society through an effective workforce are increasingly common across the western world (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014).

In the education sector placements have been a key feature of the teaching and assessment of student's competence in regard to the values, knowledge and skills required by the relevant regulatory and professional body for professional registration. Placements are therefore a key employability feature of programmes preparing professionals to work with children.

However, employability remains a contested subject (Tibby, 2012 Tymon, 2013), although there is agreement that it is part of wider neoliberal and marketised education policies (Wilson 2012) with government arguing 'students [are] at the heart of the system' (BIS 2011). In England, a common definition of employability is:

A set of achievements, - skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (HEA 2012)

This definition is notable in its conflation of 'employability' and 'employment' and it makes no account for whose needs for employment or employability (government, employers or students), are being met and how. Significantly it makes no mention of

the end user of employability who, in the context of this study, are the children and young people with whom the graduate professionals will work.

The definition frames employability as a need for students to develop a mix of skills and knowledge that, in light of their personal attributes, make them fit for a variety of roles in a chosen occupation. The focus on skills is consistent with professional development across occupations forming the children and young people's workforce. In the wider employability debates 'hard skills' denotes the qualifications, knowledge and technical ability to do a job and 'soft skills' denotes other attributes such as team working or time management (Margo et al. 2010) that are the difference between doing the job and being good at and in the job. However, what constitutes soft skills and personal attributes has also been contested with emphasis on particular skills depending on the nature of the job, industry and experience (Martin et al 2008). Some focus on practical skills involving self-management, communication, problem solving, and understanding the business; others on well-being, self-efficacy and self-esteem (EIU 2009). It is the former, with a focus towards entrepreneurship, which has been adopted by the CBI and National Union of Students as crucial to higher education student engagement with employability in England (CBI and NUS 2011).

### **The organising power of employability**

Individualism, where universities seek to enhance graduates' skills and knowledge as an economic resource and through which students gain rewards in adhering to instrumental approaches to work (Tomlinson 2010), is a significant aspect of the discursive framing of employability in a children and young people context. There is substantial debate on the relationship between employability policy and: (A)

universities; (B) employers; and (C) students. However, this produces an individualising focus on students (Biesta, 2004; Baltodano, 2012) which neglects the implications of the wider mediating relations of employability policy and (D), in the context of this study, the children and young people at the heart of schooling. In this regard employability is recognised as a state governed, labour market led, performative function of universities which gives rise to a number of concerns: firstly, a power imbalance that disaggregates graduate attributes from the needs of the children using the employment setting (Tomlinson 2010); secondly, a concern about who is setting employability needs in relation to who; and thirdly the creation of docile professionals (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Baltodano 2012).

The power imbalance between stakeholders is an encounter between the moral and the social so that gender, age, economic status, race, and other factors that distribute power and responsibility differentially and hierarchically are not considered within the employability agenda (Walker 1998). Where employability sets moral responsibility as the provenance of the individual student based on economically instrumental practices to be discerned intuitively and cerebrally, a concern is decisions in practice that are applied universally from an authoritarian position. The alternative is moral decision making that requires engagement in a process through which people in a particular context or setting; teachers, students and children, interact to develop understandings of what is desirable based on everyone's needs. Significantly, inequity in the distribution of power can privilege the policies and ideas of the elite. Those who possess power may appear imperious and at the vanguard of what is considered to be by society morally important.

Secondly, a power imbalance develops approaches to curricula and learning on placement which are narrowly focussed and do not account for all needs. In these situations it is most often the government's, employers' or universities understanding of students employability needs that are acted upon (Tronto, 1993). In this regard everyone in a placement is structurally exposed to the predominant neoliberal and marketised education policies as a consequence of their own lack of economic and political power and particular, rather than plural, interpretations of their wider rights to be involved in all issues that affect them (Lansdowne, 1994; Tronto, 2010).

Finally, the production of docile students and professionals (Baltodano 2012) is a concern since the requirement for particular types of student is framed in 'an economically instrumental way, based on human capital theory, and assum[es] a harmony of interests' (Benozzo and Colley 2012, 305) between some but not all stakeholders, including students, tutors, employers and government but excluding children and young people. In a context where what is defined as being employable occurs through mediating relations of the market, and where the autonomy of the academy is undermined as universities are appropriated through neoliberal policies as particular kinds of cultural spaces, wider approaches to participation and social justice are lost (Boden and Nedeva 2010). It is in these circumstances that Giroux (2002) argues that neoliberalism, of which the employability agenda is a part, is the most dangerous ideology of the time since it involves a shift in structural and cultural functions of universities from shared and collegiate practices to those that produce self-interested individuals with inevitable consequences for children and young people.

The key concern is not that universities should not be developing employable graduates or have business relationships or relationships with business and wider stakeholders, indeed there is a tradition of this; it is that there has been a shift in the terms of power, role and responsibilities in relationships between the State, employers, universities, students, and children and young people, in the production of 'human capital' (Yorke & Knight 2007). In this prevailing regime who is asking the children and young people what they think a good professional is? This is a significant question in light of successive governments' commitment to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1988) which requires the child's views to be taken into account and acted upon.

## **Methodology**

The study involved the experience of two groups of six students undertaking a placement, each managed differently:

Group one. Six students; each undertook a placement in a different school. This is a typical placement scenario where a student is placed individually in a setting, usually working in a classroom.

Group two. Students worked in partnership with an identified school utilising problem based learning and a change project with the aim of developing a resource for the pupils and school. They were not initially classroom based but negotiated this as part of their experience.

The students were all female with a wish to work in the primary education sector. Twelve students across seven placement settings and three local education authority

areas were involved. Utilizing a case study approach, the ‘case’ being ‘children’s voices and student employability through work placement’, the experiences of each of the groups of students was analysed to develop understanding of how employability is constructed and realised in student social interactions on placement. The benefit of a case study is the use of a combination of data generation methods; semi-structured interviews, student’s written reflective accounts of their experience, observations and mentor reports, to develop rich descriptions and understanding of a contemporary phenomenon (Stark and Torrance, 2005, 33). Of course there are limitations to a small scale study. However, the use of these data gathering methods are conducive to listening to participants including children and young people (James and Prout, 1997; Clark, 2011) and give rise to an important concern about the ideological narratives informing the employability agenda.

The project also aimed at enabling students to listen to the children with whom they worked on placement. To do this the school council was funded with seed money to meet a need identified by them, a new use for a playground space. In this exchange the children are a primary client and the students act as project managers. Through focus groups the children and young people’s views on what makes a good practitioner were gathered to reconceptualise the employability debate from the children’s standpoint.

One way of drawing out relevant findings from the data is to develop a series of composite narrative accounts of students’ employability experiences and perspectives of the social interactions that enhance employability. The examples of data below, for example, may be brought together as a conversation between the

participants, each making a comment on their experience. The aim is to synthesise the data and reveal patterns of connections between a variety of experiences that maintain the integrity of the context in which the data is generated and avoid a paradigmatic reduction of the data through coding (Colley 2010). The readings enable the researcher to understand two worlds; that of the individual students in doing their work on placement, and that of the system in which the children and young people are present in which various approaches to employability involving power, responsibility and needs are played out.

## **Findings**

### **Placement as work experience encouraging instrumental practices**

The overall story being told in the data involved a focus for all students on their future employment prospects with the placement experience, at the outset, being seen as ‘a chance to get experience so I can get a job. I *need* to get a job’ (my emphasis). Students viewed the placement as ‘work experience’ akin to what they did in school or college prior to university rather than as an opportunity to develop the full range of employability skills. The need for a job, or an income, to ‘pay my debt and live’ also brings into focus the potential of the power of the market in higher education to underpin the status of individual responsibility and consumerism as a feature of students’ response and attention to employability.

Each student undertook their work placement in a school and were required to work within the national curriculum, the school’s policies and procedures, and the standards and requirements of the regulator, Ofsted (for example, Ofsted 2014). Every student reported having had a ‘good’ experience insofar as they were able to

experience and use the tools of the job, for example, planning and assessment proforma. Indeed each student foregrounded the managerialist aspects of the work in classrooms, above building relationships with children, as an essential need for their placement experience. That the need of regulators for particular types of data from school mediated the work of teachers was immediately evident in student reports. Recording and reporting tools were a significant organizing feature of the work and where students did work with individual pupils or small groups it was because a lesson plan or pupil's individual education plan required it, or it was necessary to generate evidence of pupil progress:

It was the head teacher who offered the placement, not the mentor. At first I was a bit of a burden and had to do what I was told, mostly working with the TA (Teaching Assistant)... I did eventually get to do my own lesson plan, after I showed I understood the forms... I really enjoyed my placement after that.

A pervasive managerialist discourse of teaching limited opportunities to contribute holistically to students' and pupils' experiences as co-learners and to the co-construction of learning.

This was particularly evident for group 1 where the students acted in the capacity of teaching assistants and were expected to demonstrate evidence of administration, pedagogy and relationships with individuals or groups of children and the wider school community. As such there was a commitment to 'soft' skills such as listening and good communication. However, where there was recognition about the student's attainment in developing positive relationships with children, mentors focussed on relationship as a pedagogical device in helping to achieve desired learning outcomes rather than as a social and emotional or widely defined caring attribute. In this

context the caring aspect of relationship was emphasised as an organizing exchange between pupil and student; that is, the student developed instrumental caring skills as important to student progress (Ruddick 1998) rather than as an exchange in developing understanding and empowering the other.

Indeed, where students discussed the development of communication and other interpersonal skills it was in a context of managing learning behaviour. As one student said:

Some of the kids were difficult in groups and I learned about differentiation. It was important to try to develop a relationship with these on an individual level so they could show progress and their behaviour didn't affect the learning of others.

Notions of good practice and skills for employment were consistently based upon pupil progress and the management of behaviour. This is unsurprising since these are crucial to the regulator's judgements about the quality and effectiveness of education (Ofsted 2015). Quality of teaching is constructed on the basis of pupil outcomes. Where a pupil's behaviour was in opposition to these key judgements they were seen as 'other' and as a risk to the learning of the many. Students, at times, were involved in working with pupils on a one to one basis or in small groups as an exercise in exclusion rather than inclusive education:

I enjoyed working with small groups or individual children. Sometimes to give them a boost or when their behaviour in the class wasn't helping them or other children we would work outside the classroom... sometimes you couldn't help thinking that they were missing what was going on in the classroom. Although I was helping them and developing myself I couldn't help

thinking that they were seen as a problem to be sorted out away from everybody else.

Students found it difficult to question or discuss this approach to education with their mentor or their peers and were effectively powerless to demonstrate alternative pedagogies or a wide set of skills, knowledge or attributes in the classroom. Little attention was paid to the student's own learning needs in light of the wider needs of children and young people, and their professional development was couched in terms of; being able to follow instructions, work under the guidance of the class teacher, and help pupils' progress towards their targets.

### **Placement or displacement?**

All such student attainments were construed positively without evidence of a critical concern for the institutional power at the helm. Consequently there were indications of instrumental practices and performativity in the mentors' judgement of student attainment and employability (Ball, 2003). A significant concern in this regard is the extent to which performativity develops the already gendered primary education context and directs women teacher's work through the use of masculinist technologies so that they struggle to maintain the social aspects of their work (Latimer and Ozga, undated). This resonates with criticisms in feminist literature on care; Carol Gilligan, for example, has criticised male orientated theoretical-judicial approaches to child development (1982). An important consideration for Gilligan of the predominance of the justice perspective in the field of education is the silencing of the care perspective as an aspect of women's work (Gilligan et al 1988). Consequently, while the students enjoyed 'doing' work on placement they found the experience to be fragmented, lonely and frustrating at times, and lacking care. In an

approach to education that displaces mutual and reciprocal practices of teaching with managerialist requirements students were isolated from other students, being ‘too busy and always having other stuff to do’, and unable to develop an effective approach to evaluating and criticising practice through peer support.

Significantly no one asked them or the pupils with whom they worked, ‘what makes a good practitioner’? Yet they set aside their frustrations and remained happy with their experience for a number of reasons: firstly, the majority undertook previous work experience in primary schools when they were at high school or college and this placement at university was an extension of that earlier experience. Secondly, the placement offered the opportunity to focus on their own needs for employment and, thirdly, the experience of using the materials of the contemporary primary education system, as one student said, ‘I’ve always want to be a teacher... The main thing was to do the job to be able to get a job.’ Their focus on placement as work experience providing an enhanced opportunity for employment, rather than also developing a wider range of skills including self-efficacy skills, brings into focus performativity and materiality as factors in employability. The power of historical discourses and experiences in western schooling practices about occupational preparedness, an individualised approach to responsibility for gaining employment, and consequently student’s personal epistemologies (Billett 2014a) are also of concern.

In addition, a temporal dimension is also evident in the students’ development and management of time. Isolation from their peers was not as a result of the geography of a particular placement setting but of their use of time and willingness to fill their days by prioritising certain tasks, many in preparation for placement and reflecting

their mentor's full schedule of work that extended into time outside school. Indeed many of the students discussed receiving or sending emails from/to their mentor throughout their waking hours. Such time jealous students and time jealous mentors (Billett 2014b) were not time poor but constructed their days on the basis of an historical, performative and individualist approach to work and learning. In these terms students and mentors actively managed their time so that they jealously guarded the time required to work with managerialist forms and procedures at the expense of other relational aspects of the role:

It's all about the forms. Everything has to be written down for the teacher for her planning file in case Ofsted come. It's not what I expected but you just had to do it or you would be in trouble.

Consequently, the needs of the children and young people were misplaced in favour of those of the students themselves in light of the prevailing agenda.

### **Placement or misplacement?**

This individualist discourse of responsibility (Tomlinson 2008) came to eventually dominate the experience of students in group 2 - the group of students working in a school as a team on a change project. The students' day was organised so that they could plan and prepare as a group in the morning for work with the pupils in the afternoon. While they had a collective experience and one that presented opportunities to develop and evidence a wide range of knowledge and skills, including critical soft skills, over time and as a consequence of a school inspection, each became increasingly frustrated and focussed on their desire for an individual classroom experience. They perceived the need to demonstrate their individual

attributes in a classroom as one of competitive advantage over their peers, including those in their team at the school:

In friendship groups people can hold back a little, the project was a hindrance... I was prevented from getting everything out of the placement I wanted so I did something about it, I got to do some work with year two.

Once again, relationship was constructed as a feature of perceived instrumental classroom practices and there were arguments about individual versus team needs, responsibilities and effort. Indeed the primacy of individualist practice was reinforced for them when, despite agreement for the project and acknowledgement of the benefit for all involved, participating pupils were not released from lessons by teachers who voiced concern about the possibility that the students' team project would adversely affect pupil's progress and inspectors' views. Since teachers didn't value their contribution the students found it increasingly difficult to appreciate the knowledge and skills they were developing collectively and became concerned that they were not exposed to a classroom experience necessary for employment. That they fractured as a team was also a consequence of the most vocal group members mirroring the power of the teachers in foregrounding needs of a particular kind and seeing their behaviour as moral insofar as managerialist tasks were achieved:

I did everything I needed to do to get the experience I wanted and that was to work in the classroom with the teacher. I couldn't let anybody get in the way of that.

Students' exposure to managerialist demands allied to the their beliefs regarding a fluid and increasingly contracting jobs market led to concerns about employment and

the threat of unfulfilled expectations. This was reinforced at times by messages from others, including those on placement elsewhere, that to gain advantage in becoming an education professional they should have classroom experience. For this group of students, tutor recognition for efforts and achievements, reassurance about the relevance of the experience for their future, skills enhancement and the 'right' attitude (Garsten and Jacobsson 2004) were not enough; 'I know we learned things working together but it wasn't enough. I hated the group work and was much happier working on my own'. They developed an individualist discourse based on a combination of their experience of power in the group and the wider institutional discourse of risk and deficit. As one student said, 'I am not prepared to risk my career by working in a team'. Conflict was an aspect of organizational, institutional and individual mores and as soon as teachers began to voice concerns about releasing pupils for the team project the students began to question the risk this posed to their future aims and how any deficit should be met. During the placement experience, unlike the other group, the students in group 2 made collective and individual representation to tutors about their negative feelings about the placement experience; 'it's not a bad placement I just want to do something different. I want to work in a classroom'. Interestingly, they talked of being 'frustrated', 'angry' and 'held back' by working in a group which raises concerns about the power of the institutional in individualizing emotional labour (Colley 2006). Students began to identify being misplaced as a consequence of the hidden curriculum centred on dealing with the emotional demands of the placement, they thought their purposes and needs could be best met elsewhere.

### **Placement or emplacement?**

Significantly, data from group 2 showed that they were able to achieve greater balance between evidencing managerialist obligations and being social, autonomous, critically reflective practitioners at the beginning of the placement. In particular they were able to work alongside children in identifying the qualities required of them as practitioners. This was achieved in a focus group that discussed the types of questions the children would ask if they had a job to give one of the students. The questions included:

- If you had £10 to spend on anything what would you buy?
- You are in charge of the school for a day, what changes would you make?
- What's the one thing you would NOT want to see on the lunch menu?
- If you were an animal what kind of animal would you be?
- What is the last book you read?
- If you could trade places with any other person for a week, who would it be?
- How would you describe yourself in three words?
- Tell me your favourite joke?

These questions focused on the need to explain what they, the students, would do to meet the needs of the children, and contrasted with the questions used by the school in interviews for employment that focused on the applicants explaining what they could do to meet the needs and requirements of the prevailing performative framework. At this time significant emphasis in the students' work was on working alongside the children on the project but this changed following the arrival of Ofsted for a school inspection which did not have a favourable outcome.

The focus on the School Council as client in the project encouraged collaboration and allowed the students to collectively discuss and reconcile powerful mediating obligations with a broader appreciation of responsibility and need:

Having your friends to talk to was really good to talk through some of the things we had learned at uni [sic] like standards... We supported each other when we wanted to do things the teachers didn't seem to do, like let the kids take charge of the display.

Being part of a group was crucial to achieving this since it enabled them to evaluate their individual experience collectively and to present and speak with greater authority and autonomy in the school. They achieved this in their efforts working on behalf of the pupils to develop the outdoor spaces most utilised by the children. Using a project management approach the students were able to consult with the pupils as clients in the design and purpose of 'friendship stops' in the playground, places where children who are lonely or sad could go and talk to another pupil. The pupils identified a place beside a wall and asked for the wall to be decorated, choosing the scheme and colours of the decoration. The students consequently liaised with school managers on the pupils' behalf in the procurement of materials and permissions to undertake the scheme.

Not only did the project enable the students to experience the educational work of the school, they were able to do so from both within and outwith the classroom. As a consequence they came to understand the tension between managerialist demands and the wider needs of pupils. Consequently the students were able to experience and demonstrate skills and abilities in negotiation with each other, the professionals

in the school and the pupils. The key difference between this group and their peers in group 1 was the space they achieved to think about and work with the concept of employability, to consider institutional power and to apply this understanding to reconceptualise the concept.

Ironically, this was made apparent when the school made the decision, without consulting either the pupils or the students, to pull the wall down:

[I wanted] to show you how far [we] got with the project before we went in today and our wall was fenced off and they told us the wall is being torn down because it is unsafe (yes this actually happened!)  
They've known for 3 weeks and we only started painting it 3 weeks ago...

Practically, both groups of students experienced employability as individualistic, teaching for pupil progress and a powerful externally set construct; however, for group two understanding at the beginning went beyond ‘teaching’ to encapsulate ‘education’ and ‘learning’ and a more holistic and participatory practice. This was based on the notion of a project as an appropriate vehicle in engaging with the children as partners in the education process (Hannam 2004). To avoid the exclusion experienced in other approaches to placement the students worked to foreground pupil’s views and participation. They approached the School Council, the pupil’s representative body, to identify themes and volunteers. Negotiation then occurred with teachers to encourage each class to contribute and agree individual pupil participation. Pupil participation was ultimately based on the pupil’s desire to be involved in the project and work with the school council. To identify the focus of the project the students worked from the pupil’s position, taking into consideration their

views, availability and skills. The student's own learning was a consequence of this approach rather than a condition of it. Significantly the approach developed by the students alongside the pupils is indicative of inclusive and participatory practices that acknowledge children's capacity and agency (McLaughlin, 2015). The project established children as co-producers in the development of the students' learning and competence; began by identifying the children's own interests; and, acknowledged the children's voices in a context both of the aims of the project and the wider employability agenda. In this regard the students were not simply placed by the university within the school but achieved 'emplacement' alongside the children in foregrounding their interests. Unfortunately this was quickly undone as a consequence of managers' actions:

At the beginning it was all about the kids and working with their agenda. Now it's all about degrees of progress (the expectation that every pupil will make at least two levels of progress against the prescribed standards of the national curriculum in an academic year).

## **Conclusion**

As universities, including those in West Yorkshire, have responded and restructured themselves to meet the demands of the employability agenda they are also a means through which students are prepared for being entrepreneurial and economically productive citizens; a society in which the roles, autonomy and definitions of 'professional' are restructured through relations of competition, productivity, accountability and control (Olssen and Peters 2005). Consequently the concomitant organisational, curricula and pedagogical restructuring represent a challenge to democracy (Nussbaum, 2010) and are the antithesis in producing 'a certain type of

citizen: active, critical, curious, capable of resisting authority and peer pressure' (Ravitch, 2010, p.72). The concern therefore is that the employability agenda produces capabilities and qualities in an economically instrumental way.

It is notable that the *The Fifth Periodic Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* (HM Government 2014) provides a narrative with emphasis on the quality and standards agenda rather than children's rights within prevailing policy. However the report does acknowledge children and their participation and highlights statutory guidance in which schools are strongly advised to pay due regard to the Convention (DfE, 2014). Nonetheless the guidance is short on detail and simply provides an explanation for the concept of 'pupil voice' and suggests the benefits of listening to children include encouraging active participation in a democratic society (in other words learning to become a good citizen) and better achievement and outcomes (it helps to meet targets for pupil progress). In light of the statutory guidance, *The Periodic Report* states that 'in England, over 99% of schools have measures in place that enable pupils to have a say in the running of the school; and 95% have a school council. Ofsted seeks the views of pupils as part of school inspection' (HM Government, 2014, 42). However, children are consulted as an aspect of the socially mediated relationship between politics, power and their experience where market imperatives drive educational policy (Kincheloe 2008). Consequently, the focus on a marketised education system creates the opportunity for particular excluding practices and the exclusion of voice (Ball 2003). This is an issue of which university staff, students and practitioners throughout West Yorkshire, and beyond, should be cognisant.

It is possible to develop an approach to employability that is cognisant of children's rights (emplacement) but these may be diminished if: universities focus on economically instrumental practices (placement); schools and teachers are required to focus work in other areas (Office of the Children's Commissioner 2014) (displacement); and the power of individualism is ignored (misplacement). Consequently how 'voice' is manifest is in the power of the State and has come to mean satisfying the market's needs and individual needs as consumers of education (Ball 2009b; Biesta 2004) rather than the more democratic notion of practices that engage with the perspective of the needs of the child. There is a need for all involved in the training and development of future practitioners to ensure that they are reflexive of their work and to evaluate the extent to which children are able to exercise their participation and to be heard in a context of increasing performative practices.

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