

## **Engaging with childhood: student placements and the employability agenda.**

### Abstract

Employability is an organising narrative within the global, neoliberal economic discourse, with relevance across different educational contexts. Most attention is paid to attaining the knowledge and skills relevant to gain employment and competitive advantage. This is particularly concerning in university programmes that develop professionals who work with children.

Placements are a common approach to embedding employability within university curricula. This article explores student placements in primary school settings in the north of England. Analysis considers students' engagement with their own learning and with the children who are essential to that learning, who may be marginalised as a feature of it.

**Keywords:** Childhood, Employability, Higher Education, Placements.

Placement, the opportunity to learn alongside children and young people in their homes, schools, nurseries/kindergartens, and other settings, is a long-standing feature of university vocational education programmes. More recently the neoliberal 'employability' discourse has come to be a significant organising feature of university education (Tomlinson, 2012) and an aspect of global economic relations (Hill, 2002; Olssen and Peters, 2005). Consequently, increasing numbers of university programmes offer students a placement. Significantly, the employability discourse is focussed on the needs of the market and ignores wider political and moral concerns, including children and young people's needs, in the socially mediated relationship between politics, power and people's experience of the employability agenda (Reid, 2016).

This article reports the results of a small-scale study into employability of university students undertaking a placement in primary schools in the north of England. The study generated qualitative data from university students on a BA (Hons) Childhood Studies programme in the second year of their studies. Consideration is given to the employability discourse and how concomitant practices on placement involve children and young people. In the next section I discuss how employability has mediated the work of universities internationally. I then examine the concept of employability, its definition and focus on skills. I highlight a number of the implications arising from the employability agenda for higher education students discussed in the current academic literature, before presenting the data and conclusions.

### **Employability: 'Governing' work in Universities and understanding of childhood**

Over the past twenty years, in common with many countries globally, the UK has increased access to higher education in order to secure a highly skilled workforce to compete with other knowledge based economies. A significant aspect of this competition is the development of employability skills, particularly through work placement (BIS, 2011a; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014). This trend is common throughout Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states (Brown et al, 2008). The growth in the number of students attending university, and their employability, are understood as necessary for continued economic prosperity, individual success, and reduced social inequality (Leitch 2006). Knowledge and learning are therefore recognised as drivers of productivity and economic growth (OECD, 1996). In the UK, learning through

placements is now a common feature of university programmes (BIS, 2011a). Indeed, curriculum innovation is a feature of the development of human capital at all educational levels (Ailwood, 2008).

In this regard universities are part of a system of governmentality (Foucault, 2000), as sites that take up the employability discourse and immerse students within particular modes of action and politically desired outcomes (Davies and Bansel, 2007). As many jobs working with children have become graduate roles, universities have responded by ensuring that the knowledge, skills, values, and other attributes required by employers to be successful in these jobs are central to the curriculum (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Indeed, universities in the UK are required by funding councils to embed the development of skills required for future employment across the institution as a benefit to students and the economy (for example HEFCE, 2011). Work placements have become integral and university students are gaining experience and developing their knowledge and skills in the settings in which they might gain employment; which for childhood studies students includes, early years, primary and secondary or tertiary education, or youth work sectors.

There has been a range of critiques of policy and practices in higher education especially in response to neoliberal relations of governing. Concerns have been raised that, in 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). Issues have also been raised about placing the responsibility on the individual student to achieve employment because it

is seen to lead to a sense of personal culpability and apprehension about educational attainment and opportunity. Consequently, questions arise about the nature of the relationship between the student and child / children with whom placement occurs. Where conflation of the needs of the economy, the needs of individualised student, and the needs of the child / children, with 'learning' through placement occurs, there are political, ethical and moral relations of governing (Reid, 2016) that mediate and organise childhood. This includes a normative engagement between university student and child in placement that produces a particular form of rhetorical child (Burman, 2013).

The employability discourse, in part, governs through a narrative of 'choice' in which individuals are responsible for making their own choices in achieving their economic prosperity (Davies and Bansel, 2007). This focus on individual responsibility leads to an erosion of relational autonomy which overlooks the needs and vulnerabilities of other stakeholders (Tronto, 2013), especially children and young people. The disjuncture between the contemporary focus on universities involved in the production of entrepreneurial students framed by a global skills agenda, and universities as sites of cultural and social exchange (Baltodano, 2012) has raised ethical concerns (Biesta, 2004). Indeed, in subjects involving work with children, there is a danger that the focus is on children as objects of study in gaining future employment, rather than subjects in the development of new understanding.

A further feature of the neoliberal discourse involving children and the training of competent professionals is the 'misrecognition' of 'child as educator' (Burman, 2013), that is, the child as a partner in learning which legitimates the need for placements in

the settings where children are found. Child-centred university curricula and practices promote a harmony of interests and engage a formulation of child as subject to which particular socio-cultural knowledge can be attributed. However this attribution is a normative and essentialising proscription compatible with contemporary neoliberal policy (Burman, 2013), that is, 'child' is a particular trope in the power relations between children and adults who govern. There is increasing evidence of neoliberal 'governing' of childhood (Smith, 2011). This includes the development of early childhood curricula (Ailwood, 2008) taught at universities in the production of early years practitioners; gendered approaches in the children's workforce including the mediation of emotion (Colley, 2006); and approaches to 'student voice' (Bragg, 2007) which do no more than decontextualise 'voice' to particular sites of interest at particular times and which lack authenticity (Spyrou, 2011). Such critiques highlight significant relations of governing in the abstraction of 'childhood' inherent in the employability agenda.

### **Defining employability and skills**

Employability is 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, 2011b). 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 recognition of three key stakeholders: government, through an economic imperative in a globalised market; individualised students, in the foregrounding of skills and attributes; and universities, implicit in the responsibility of enabling students to achieve the necessary 'skills, understandings and personal attributes'. Significantly it makes no mention of the end users of employability who, in the context of this study, are the children and young people with who 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 the 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 Confederation of British Industry and the National Union of Students (2011) as crucial to higher education student engagement with employability in England.

The concern with the foregrounding of the individualised student attaining skills for 'chosen occupations' is the reduction of learning and vocation to employment and a particular role (Dewey, 1916). For Dewey (1916: 307) 'a vocation means nothing but such a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and also useful to his associates'. In these terms, achieving employability through placement must also include the children and young people in the placement setting as 'associates'. Yet they are absent in definitions of employability and are regarded as no more than a recipient of a student's skills. Moreover vocation is seen as a matter of the conditions chosen by the learner, not government or universities, as necessary for his or her development and growth (Higgins, 2005).

## **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. This group however enabled consideration of placement work outside the classroom.

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 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. A combination of data generation methods was utilized to develop rich descriptions; semi-structured interviews, student's written reflective accounts of their experience, observations and mentor reports (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 and understanding children and young people's experiences (Clark, 2011).

The project also aimed at enabling students to listen to the children with whom they worked on placement. To do this, in the project, 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 the primary client and the students act as project managers. Through a focus group 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. Ethical procedures were guided by the university's ethical policy and the requirements of the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2011). In particular, attention was paid to the children's right to consent to participate. Care was also taken to ensure children of all ages and dis-abilities had the opportunity to take part. While purposive sampling was used, pupils were consulted on their participation, through the focus group. The university students self-selected the type of placement



they undertook. This approach matches the 'consult' stage of the 'wheel of participation' of the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England (OCC, 2014: 5). Although the original idea was presented to the children they were otherwise involved at every step of the planning and initiation of the project.

## **Findings**

The overall story being told in the data involved a focus on the students' employment prospects, with the placement understood as, 'a chance to get experience so I can get a job. I *need* to get a job' (my emphasis) to 'pay my debt and live'. Students viewed the placement as 'work experience', akin to what they did in education prior to university, rather than as a wider learning opportunity with pupils as associates in learning.

Each student was required to work within the national curriculum, the school's policies and procedures, and the standards and requirements of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (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, including planning and assessment proforma. Indeed each student foregrounded the managerialist aspects of their work in classrooms above building relationships with children. That the need for particular types of data 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 it was primarily to generate evidence of pupil progress:

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 students' placement work 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:

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.

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 pupil progress (Ruddick, 1998) rather than as an exchange in developing understanding and empowering the other. As a result, where students discussed the development of soft skills it was in a context of managing learning behaviour.

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, 2014). 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 in school and were effectively powerless to demonstrate alternative pedagogies or a wide set of skills, knowledge or attributes. Little attention was paid by the students to the wider needs of children and young people, and their success on placement 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:

Every [pupil] knew their targets and the teacher wanted me to make sure they were working towards them... This was because the teacher's work was also monitored.

The students' placement develops a connection with the pupils that is partial and based on performativity (Ball, 2003), that is, it illuminates a relationship in the actuality of the work but disguises complex relations of ruling. The pupils are framed as benevolently contributing to the learning of the university student on placement. Consequently, learning is a matter of proximity between the students and the pupils, since this is necessary in the development and assessment of the students' skills. However, the pupils are also framed in terms of outcomes and their future contributions to the economy; they are seen as responsible, active agents in the students' employability but are also assessed for riskiness within their own trajectory in meeting the demands of the neoliberal discourse (Burman, 2013).

### **Placement as culturally masculine?**

Student self-reports of attainment 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 attaining employability (Ball, 2003):

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.

In the gendered context of primary school settings a significant concern is the extent to which performativity directs women teacher's and student's work through the use of masculinist technologies so that they struggle to maintain the social aspects of their work (Colley, 2006; Latimer and Ozga, undated). This resonates with criticisms

in feminist literature on care; Carol Gilligan (1982), for example, has criticised male orientated theoretical-judicial approaches to child development. An important consideration for Gilligan is the predominance of the justice perspective in the field of education which silences 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'.

Under the performative gaze they were 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, overall, 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 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, 'you need to know about planning and assessment and how to use the forms'.

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. Their focus on placement as work experience providing an enhanced opportunity for employment,

rather than also developing a wider range of experience for skills development, brings into focus performativity and materiality as factors in employability. There is also a concern about the power of historical discourses and experiences in western schooling practices about occupational preparedness, individualism, and students' personal epistemologies (Billett, 2014a). A crucial aspect of these schooling practices in recent years is the consistent organizing power of developmental psychology which frames pupils (and students in light of their own previous school experiences) 'as culturally masculine' (Burman, 2013: 233). It has been acknowledged that an aspect of the rise of development psychology is the framing of pupils as measurable against desired educational and behavioural outcomes (Fendler, 2001), through which pupils are problematized for making inappropriate choices and failure (Smith, 2011). The transition of the discourse of individual responsibility in achieving proscribed outcomes for employment, from early schooling to university and beyond, is one that deserves more attention.

### **Placement – choice and risk?**

This individualist discourse of responsibility (Tomlinson, 2008) came to eventually dominate the experience of the 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 eventually saw 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 when, despite agreement for the project, participating pupils were not released from lessons by teachers who voiced concern about the possibility that the project would adversely affect pupil's progress. 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 performative 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 their belief of 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 students in 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



and employability. They thought their purposes and needs could be best met elsewhere. However, the issue isn't group work, since the students who undertake placement individually work as part of a team. The issue is placing responsibility on the individual student to achieve employment and how this leads to a sense of 'individual fault' and 'private worry' when working alongside peers (Bauman, 2008: 6).

This invites further comment on the presence of choice and risk. Once again the idea of being able to choose placement to meet one's own needs is part of the economic exchange between a fee-paying student and the university. However that choice is also a form of 'governing' since the choices are made in light of the demands of the ruling discourse. That is, a choice exists only insofar as the individual student's requirements for advantage in the jobs market by developing skills on placement meet proscribed employer needs (Rose, 1999). Further to Rose's argument is an acknowledgement that individualism is accompanied by consumerist notions of autonomy (Smith, 2011) with these ideas mediating the experience between students and pupils.

## Discussion

There are limitations to this study including in relation to scale. Furthermore, although the analysis does include an acknowledgement that the students' previous educational experiences breed an instrumentality in students that higher education struggles to enlighten, this requires further explication. The fact that students were happy with their placement experiences may have something to do with expectations developed historically across all levels and experiences of education. Nonetheless,

this paper serves as a timely reminder about what we do in higher education that shapes our understanding of and engagement with childhood.

In defining governmentality Foucault (2000) suggests layers of ruling for governing conduct. One layer involves the discourses that frame knowledge and practice in meeting the needs of the powerful in a globalised, neoliberal market. As universities 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: 72). The concern therefore is that the employability agenda produces capabilities and qualities in an economically instrumental way which frames children as objects in the educational process and sets vocation as a matter of employer defined skills and attributes.

Individualism, where universities seek to enhance graduates' skills and knowledge as an economic resource, and through which student's gain rewards in adhering to instrumental approaches to work (Tomlinson, 2010), is a significant aspect of the discursive framing of employability that implicates children. 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), the children and young people at the heart of placements. In this regard employability is recognised as a state governed, human capital 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 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, a concern is that decisions in practice 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 placement relationships with 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.

It is notable that the UK government's *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).

Alanen's (2011) call for a critical childhood studies that involves explication of normative practices and relations of ruling or 'governing' also requires consideration of the political and moral discourses that shape understanding of childhood. The

employability discourse and use of placements to enhance the skills and knowledge necessary to employability arise from a globalised, neoliberal approach to education at all levels. There is a need to move beyond understanding employability as a matter of individual responsibility but to view it, and placements, as concerned with wider relations of power that require understanding of how relations are set for all, including the children and young people, involved. The challenge for university tutors is to redress the power imbalance in placements so that children's voices are recognised and foregrounded. One way forward is to enable students on placement to critique the employability agenda from the children's standpoint. This would require the utilization of children's views and the development of soft skills, valued by children, and therefore crucial to working as collaborators in each other's learning.

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