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## Power and employability – student’s experiences of powerlessness

James Reid, University of Huddersfield

### Abstract

This paper reports on the findings from a Higher Education Academy funded project (January 2012 – April 2013) entitled ‘Developing a variety of approaches to work placement to enhance knowledge and skills for employability’ which focused on three different approaches to undergraduate students’ experience of placement in schools during the second year of their studies. The paper posits a neoliberal presence in higher education. Predominant themes from the data include concerns about the influence of external obligations in shaping practice learning and consequently the importance of peer support in enabling learning and in enhancing employability. External obligations foster a credentialist approach, where students seek advantage over others by having an opportunity that enables them to foreground ‘desirable’ skills, competence and personal attributes (Tomlinson, 2008), and relegates learning, authority and autonomy, thus raising concern of employability as a political technology. This also means that students lack power and, in this work placement context, the voice of the end user, the pupil, is silent. Findings suggest that collegiality is helpful in enabling students to work within a more holistic notion of employability.

### Introduction

Since the 1980’s the ‘social revolution’ that has framed employability in the public sector has been neoliberalism. This has involved a significant shift in the State’s relationship with workers so that the former wields unrivalled power through semi-autonomous agencies such as The Teaching Agency and the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted). In this regulatory context professionals working with children and young people in the public sphere have no choice but to engage with the managerialist, performative agenda (Ball 2003). In the public sector employability is immanently political.

For universities too, Scott (2012) has recognised the ‘slow car crash’(p.2) of regulation and guidance in which external bodies funded by government, such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England, reinforce governmentality yet assert that academics will seek to critique and counter the prevailing hegemony. There is a dilemma for academics therefore who are concerned about the efficacy and workability of reforms ‘but occupy roles that force them to engage with the implementation of the Government’s proposals’. There is a need for academics to avoid the ‘treason

of the clerks' (Benda 1927/2006) and to work to develop graduates who can challenge orthodoxy yet work within it. The responsibility is not only professional but moral since, in public sector work, the end users of the labour of our graduates include the vulnerable in society.

My own, on-going research reveals high levels of concern about a shift in the relationship between teachers and their pupils so that they are expected to care about the pupil in terms of progress rather than caring about the whole child. Students undertaking work placement in school contexts are therefore potentially faced with a managerialist system that frames employability in terms of willingness to adapt to a regime focussed on such progress.

The purpose here is two-fold; the first is to problematize 'employability', not to define it as a problem, but to enhance understanding of the concept as a mediating power in developing the social relations between the State, universities, students and children and young people. Secondly, to seek an approach to work placement that balances the student's expectations for employment with the academic concern for criticality that requires students to recognize children as people with equal rights; to look at them with respect, and to grasp what policies of many types mean for the opportunities and experiences of children and young people (Nussbaum, 2010, p.26).

### **Universities, neoliberalism and employability**

This paper focusses on undergraduate students' experience of placement in the second year of their studies on a BA (Hons) Childhood Studies programme. Childhood Studies comes under the auspices of studies in education and therefore has a broad interest in terms of work placement opportunities including schools, children's centres, nurseries, prisons, and looked after young people. The placement is offered as an element of a module that is focussed on employability as part of the university's commitment in meeting the objectives of the Dearing Report (1997) and later policy drivers and initiatives (UKCES 2008, 2009, 2010; CBI 2009; CBI/UUK 2009; Browne 2010; BIS 2011, HEFCE 2011). Thus curriculum and pedagogical practices reflect prevailing structural, ideological and student demands, but also seeks to challenge these, since:

The idea that human sciences like educational studies stand outside or above the political agenda of the management of the population or somehow have a neutral status embodied in a free-floating progressive rationalism are dangerous and debilitating conceits.

(Ball 1997, 271)

Marketization and neoliberalism have been recognised as particular issues in the education sector for many years. In this context, Biesta (2004) raises a concern for the 'deprofessionalization' of the

relationship between tutors and students so that universities have been positioned as providers of a service and students as consumers of that service. The outcome for tutors is that the ideological foundation for employability, as an aspect of their labour, is based on social efficiency, where the 'culture of accountability makes it very difficult for the relations between ...students and educators/institutions to develop into mutual, reciprocal, and democratic relationships' (Biesta 2004, 249).

The period from the 1980's is particularly significant since during this period, accountability was promoted as a form of empowerment (Power 1994, 1997). In this regard empowerment was seen as the universities' ability to respond to the new audit agenda by taking the mantle of reform from the political sphere and perpetuating and developing it from within. In schools empowerment is seen by inspectors as the ability of teachers to achieve pupil progress. Following Foucault, Shore and Wright (1999, p.558) have argued that audit is therefore part and parcel of 'political technology', '*a relationship of power between scrutinizer and observed*' [original emphasis], or indicative of 'governmentality' (Foucault 1991). Universities have become environments of 'otherness' (Bauman 2002, 2008; Biesta 2004) between the constituents, managers, academics and students, where, to draw on Strathern (1997), neoliberal practices 'reduces professional relations to crude, quantifiable and, above all, 'inspectable' templates' (Shore and Wright 1999, p.557). As such 'autonomy', 'trust' and 'collegial or democratic governance in flat structures' is replaced by 'hierarchical forms of authoritatively structured relation' (Olssen and Peters 2005, p.324-325) and consequently, the universities themselves mirror the managerialist structures students will encounter on placement in public service settings.

As universities respond and restructure themselves to meet the demands of the predominant ideology they are also a means through which the neoliberal agenda is perpetuated; that is, one in which students are prepared for being entrepreneurial and economically productive members of society; a society in which the roles, autonomy and definitions of 'professional' are also restructured through relations of competition, productivity, accountability and control (ibid). For Nussbaum (2010) and Ravnich (2010, p.72) the twin conceits of organisational restructuring, and curricula and pedagogical restructuring represent a challenge to democracy and are the antithesis in producing 'a certain type of citizen: active, critical, curious, capable of resisting authority and peer pressure'. Following Freire, Marta Baltodano (2012, p.490) argues that, 'the banking concept of education sanctioned by neoliberalism' is *training* students to become 'docile citizens', and consequently, uncritical approaches to employability simply support 'the appropriation of universities as cultural spaces' (ibid, p.495) (my emphasis).

Baltadano raises a contradiction of the personal and professional selves for students; as 'docile citizens' who are exposed to a narrative of freedom, choice and empowerment in education, yet the system is tightly regulated, governed and situated by government as crucial to the production of human capital and wealth. In this way the predominant narrative is used to frame what are desired, appropriate and valued 'modes of action', that is; 'the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed' (Foucault 1994, p. 341). Students and the children who they come to work with have little or no say in what are seen as desired and desirable attributes.

The shift from the political and ideological sphere to one where the individual is tied to the state through systems of policing and control is an important critique of the neoliberal agenda in higher education with relevance for the contemporary requirement for employability. It is in this context that Ball (2003) focuses on the 'terrors of performativity' for education professionals and, subsequently, creeping privatisation in education (Ball, 2009); both of which have been important in achieving a shift in the purpose of higher education so that universities are seen now as central to the development of fit for purpose graduates for the knowledge economy and economic prosperity as a whole (Olssen and Peters, 2005). It is in these circumstances that Giroux (2002, p. 425) views 'neoliberalism (as) the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment' since it involves a shift in structural and cultural functions from shared and collegiate practices to those that produce self-interested individuals.

The key concern is not that universities should not 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 hierarchical regime who is asking the children and young people what they think a good professional is?

### **Methodology**

In seeking to problematize employability and to explore an approach to work placement that balances competing stakeholder demands there is a need to understand students' experience of becoming employable. An 'extended case method' (Burawoy et al, 2000) was utilised, since the method:

Takes the social situation as the point of empirical examination and works with given general concepts and laws about states, economies, legal orders, and the like to understand how those micro situations are shaped by wider social structures (p.282).

Burawoy et al (1991) also argue that:

As observers who also stand outside the life worlds they study, scientists can gain insight into the properties of the system world, which integrates the intended and unintended consequences of instrumental action into relatively autonomous institutions. (p. 284).

The potential is therefore that the researcher can understand two worlds: that of the individual and people in doing their work, and that of the system from which theories of powerful mediating technologies can be understood. So, there is potential, for example, to develop understanding of how employability (as an external mediating force) comes to dominate or be resisted by those labouring under its reach. However, this is problematic since, if students are 'docile citizens' (op cit.), accepting employability as an external mediating technology only serves to reinforce their lack of power and commitment. The research explicitly sought empowerment of students as partners. The imperative was therefore to ensure an ethical approach in the management and participation of the project as well as at an ontological level in revealing and researching the 'problematic' (Smith, 2005), *student's experience of employability through work placement*. The latter necessitates working from the standpoint of the student's experience and not imposing or articulating any objective or normalising concepts as present or relevant. The terms inherent in neoliberalism were not used by the participants; however their talk and other data reveal a powerful mediating presence.

Smith (1987, 1990, 2005) posits a social ontology in which the lived experiences of participants are central to exposing ruling relations inherent in institutional texts. In researching students' experiences of work placement, for example, there is no prior assumption of the meaning or mechanisms of employability since to do so would be to objectify the participants to this sociological discourse. Instead, employability is only explored in how it is subsequently exposed through talk, observation and other means in the field. The literature is not offered 'to reveal objective states, [but as an aid in locating] and tracing the points of connections among individuals working in different parts of institutional complexes of activity' (DeVault & McCoy 2002, p. 753). The purpose is not to generalise but to consider literature; texts and processes that have generalising effects.

A 'case study' approach was adopted and adapted utilising Smith's social ontology. The standpoint was that of the student and how their employability experience on placement came to be socially

constructed and co-ordinated. Understanding of the students' experience was achieved through rich descriptions. The strength of case study is that it can take an example of activity and use multiple methods of data collection to interrogate it (Stark and Torrance, 2005, p.33). Data collection included: interviews, students' written accounts, mentor reports, and tutor observations made during work placement visits. These methods foregrounded the student's experience of the social interactions of how employability was articulated and co-ordinated as an aspect of their work.

Data was gathered from the experiences of three groups of six students, each group undertaking a work placement in a school but managed in a different way to the others. Each work placement was for a minimum of 120 hours, typically one day per week over an academic term:

- Group one. Students individually undertook a work placement with different school and mentor. This was a common work placement scenario.
- Group two. Students worked in partnership with an identified school utilising problem based learning and a change project. They were not classroom based and worked across the school.
- Group three. Students worked individually but in a single setting. Each individual was part of the school community and there was no requirement that they undertake any group work with each other.

### **Findings**

Each group undertook their work placement in schools and gained, in their view, "good" experience that helped them better understand the context of work with children and young people and the particular demands of the job. The data reveals key differences, however, in each group's and individual's experience of employability.

All of the students participated in their work placement under the mediating power of the national curriculum, the vestiges of The Every Child Matters agenda (DfES 2003) and the standards and requirements of the regulator, Ofsted (2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). This was particularly evident for the six individual students, as borne out in work placement reports and mentor comments that foregrounded skills, attributes and attainment arising from these externally imposed standards. These students acted in the capacity of teaching assistants, not trainee teachers, and were expected to demonstrate evidence in practice of both pedagogy and relationships with individuals, groups of children and the wider school community. 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; as both work (doing care) and progress orientated (Ruddick, 1998).

Notions of good practice and employability were consistently based upon pupil progress and the management of behaviour. This is unsurprising since the regulator's guidance states that judgements about the quality and effectiveness of education are based upon:

- achievement of pupils at the school
- quality of teaching in the school
- behaviour and safety of pupils at the school
- quality of the leadership in and management of the school.

(Ofsted, 2012)

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 barrier 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. Students found it difficult to question or discuss this approach to education and were effectively powerless to demonstrate alternative pedagogies or a wide set of skills, knowledge or attributes. It was consistently a student's ability to work to achieve pupil progress that competence was set. Consequently, the relevance for the student's experience of work and how they come to be employable is a fundamental reconfiguration of the 'relationship between the state and its citizens' (Biesta 2004, 237) and of pedagogy and care.

While the students enjoyed 'doing' work they found the experience to be a lonely and frustrating both practically and philosophically. They were isolated from other students and unable to develop an effective approach to evaluating and criticising practice through peer support. They also understood how the imposition of standards and notions of "good practice" were objectifying of them and the children – no one asked them or the children what makes a good practitioner! The majority of students accepted the terms of their experience as necessary to gain the right type of experience, the right type of mentor reference, to give them an advantage in the jobs market. Some made the decision that pursuing career in education was not for them. All of the students agreed they had more to offer than was valued in the terms set by powerful mediating, external forces. Creativity was stifled, there was little opportunity to work collegiately or collectively, and most important of all, relationship was constructed as a feature of normalising practice.

An individualist discourse of responsibility and the requirement for a disciplined and "docile" (Baltodano, 2012) entrepreneurial self are both of national and international concern. Governments



combine structural power to control the population for economic activity (Gill, 2008). Indeed Mitchell (2006), as an example, reveals how the European Commission has undertaken 'a steady movement... towards an individualist discourse of responsibility for lifelong learning and the constant mobilization of work skills' (p.392). It was this that most frustrated the group of students working in a school as a team on a change project, in the sense that they had a collective experience but not one that enabled them to demonstrate their individual attributes – an individual work placement was more desirable. Indeed the primacy of individualist practice was reinforced for them when, despite planning, agreement for the project, and acknowledgement of the benefit for pupils and the school, participating pupils were not released from lessons by teachers who voiced concern about pupils' progress. From this, the students felt that the teachers did not value their contribution and 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. They began to fracture as a team.

The continuing rise of the power of the market in a neoliberal state has underpinned the status of individual responsibility and individualism so much that Bauman (2008, 3) views moves from the 'principle of the communally endorsed, collective insurance against individual misfortune and its consequences' to emphasis on 'individual fault' and 'private worry' (6) as the basis of a modern day 'social evil'. Whilst Bauman acknowledges the emotive and perhaps unhelpful nature of the latter term his focus is on how the diminution of the social state and the modern concern for consumerism and individualism (and all that entails) leads to a state of cognitive dissonance. Resentment is inevitable, he argues; 'whenever there is a gap between the extent of formal rights and the material ability to fulfil them' (Bauman, 2008, p. 5).

In the second placement context employability skills were accumulated but the fluid and increasingly contracting nature of the jobs market lead to concerns about employment and the threat of unfulfilled expectations. For this group of students, social recognition for efforts and achievements, reassurance about the relevance of the experience for their future, skills enhancement and the 'right' attitude (Garsten & Jacobsson 2004) were not enough. Continuing development of employability skills in an individualistic, normalising context was seen as a means for the individual to achieve dignity and avoid humiliation. Bauman (2008, p.11) cites the following definition of humiliation:

the act is humiliating if it forcefully overrides or contradicts the claim that particular individuals ... are making about who they are and where and how they fit in' (consequently), a person feels humiliated when s/he is brutally shown, by words, actions or events, that they cannot be what they think they

are ... Humiliation is the experience of being unfairly, unreasonably and unwillingly pushed down, held down, held back or pushed out (Smith 2006, pp.28-39)

Where humiliation is felt by students on work placement it does not suggest an empowering or enabling experience. 'Care' came to mean care of the self. They worked collectively but not collegiately and they became focussed on wanting to meet their own needs. Peers and pupils were 'other' insofar as they were necessary to demonstrate desirable skills. Employability was socially constructed.

The relationship between work placement focussed on regulatory obligation, and student/professional authority and autonomy is a matter of degree and power. Thus where the employability agenda is set at national and international level by policy makers and employers and subsequently endorsed by universities, and when employment is of individual responsibility, authority and autonomy is diminished in favour of externally set obligations (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). The students who worked individually were pleased to have demonstrated competence against the desired externally set obligations; the students who worked as a team on the change project had more authority and autonomy but were frustrated in light of the powerful mediating effect of the external obligations. Authority and autonomy were set aside and were of value only if they enabled access to experience and evidence of attainment against these obligations.

Data from the third group showed that they were able to achieve greater balance between evidencing external obligations and being an autonomous, critically reflective practitioner. This group worked individually in a classroom in the morning and negotiated permission to work together in the afternoon on a project across the school. The crucial element of their experience was the capacity to work out from within the classroom, as Scott (2012) suggests, from the 'inside', to develop understanding of: the prevailing mediating obligations, their need for an individualistic experience, and the teacher's concern for pupil progress, in a shared space for collegiality, creativity and diverse approaches to pedagogy. When working individually their feedback was similar to that of their peers in group one; however, the presence of other students in the setting enabled them to reconcile powerful mediating obligations with a critical 'anti' approach – an employability/anti-employability dialogue. Being part of a group was crucial to achieving this since it enabled them to evaluate their individual experience collectively and to consequently present and speak with greater authority and autonomy collegiately. They were able to experience and demonstrate skills and abilities in negotiation with each other, the professionals in the school and, importantly, with the pupils. The key difference between this group and their peers was the space they achieved to think about and work with employability, to challenge the social construction, and to apply this

understanding to reconceptualise the concept. Practically, the other groups experienced employability as teaching for pupil progress; this was true for the third group also; however, their understanding went beyond 'teaching' to encapsulate 'education' and 'learning' and a more holistic practice.

### **Conclusion**

Unsurprisingly this focus on the agenda of external forces, in particular Ofsted, in defining quality practice and employability focused on pupil progress, has not met with universal consensus. The primacy of the market and successive neoliberal policies have seen the job market in education become more uncertain, with tenure of employment increasingly reserved for those who have the appropriate and continually developing knowledge and skills biography that evidences or assures pupil progress. A conditional jobs market requires those seeking employment and those *training* future practitioners to accept, arguably, questionable practices. Choice is being removed from the individual student on placement in a classroom as the collective and social responsibility for pupil progress is now understood as a risk to be managed by the individual. Garsten and Jacobsson (2004, p. 8) argue that employability, 'denotes the capacity of individuals to adapt to the demands of employment. This requires skills enhancement, continuous learning and also, according to one discourse, showing the "right" attitudes (initiative, flexibility, availability)'. Future income and status are therefore a function of their own particular levels of knowledge, skill, and willingness to work with the normalising practices required by regulatory and legislative bodies. A lack of such willingness risks unemployment and sets the student seeking employment as individually responsible and without power.

Numerous philosophical approaches to education inform the content of university practice placement modules yet many educationalists follow Sylva (1987) to argue that, 'education is about nurturing the moral, aesthetic and creative aspects in children's development, not about "getting the country somewhere"'. Many education professionals struggle to work outside the external obligations. As a consequence one tension in the focus on skills and abilities for employability is that students are part and parcel of the transformation and redesign of the way people work. The structures of work are changing and students are co-opted as agents of change through the employability agenda and the concomitant responses of university programmes, that is, to convert and be converted. Employability is socially constructed. In public education contexts, valued practice and experience is coming to mean taking care of pupil attainment and care of self. In this market, the danger is that the student lacks power, and the end user, the pupil, is voiceless. Parochialism and essentialism are apparent. The alternative is to develop an approach with students and pupils at the centre so that their need for employment is balanced with an educational experience of the

'common good' (Baltodano 2012, p. 489). This is achieved by the student working from the 'inside' out.

By parochialism I mean two things; firstly that, 'employability' is a significant interest of politicians, employers, academics and employability professionals with other stakeholders, such as students or children and young people, at times being passive recipients of its inherent technologies or being ignored altogether. Secondly, there is a significant literature on the development of a conservative, neoliberal education system (for example: Ball 1998, 2009; Giroux 2002; Hill 2002, 2003, 2004) and within such as system notions of employability, allied to choice, are proffered as crucial selling points in the economic exchange for higher education between students, universities, employers, and the State. Yet in this exchange the State has significant power, less so the universities and less again, the student. The discourse of employability and choice hide wider social dynamics and for universities have come to mean satisfying individual students' wants as consumers of education rather than the more democratic notion of higher education as a liberal environment for the generation and dissemination of knowledge (Biesta 2004). It is a system of vested economic interests.

The concern to avoid essentialism is rather more straightforward; not to problematize employability is to cede power to controlling interests, with the potential to over simplify an important aspect of higher education provision and student experience. Employability is more than a number of dyadic relationships – university/student, student /employer, student/child - there are many more variables such as gender, class, race, et cetera (which are not discussed in this paper) that move employability out of the shallows into deeper understandings. It is incumbent on us all to seek a deeper understanding and experience for our students, to avoid social relationships that are individualistic, parochial and essentialist. An approach to this is to work with the individual's wants and needs but to create a space for collegiality and consideration of a wider, more holistic stance.

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