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An Exploration of One Educational Career: The Differing Experience of Compulsory, Post-16 and Vocational Study

Emily began her educational career as most children do in primary school. The majority of the work that she completed was “hands on really. We had to do lots of, erm, topic books” and this, she found, engaging and interesting, perhaps because the goal oriented perception of the work she was completing complimented the theoretical and academic aspect of it. Alongside this, Emily explains that she had a solid friendship base at primary school and this was enhanced by her positive relationships with her teachers who “were easy to talk to teachers [who] [...] made class fun”. This approachability in teaching staff clearly enhanced Emily’s perception of school and it could, therefore, be argued that it is the practices of the teachers that enabled Emily to have a positive and engaging working relationship with them. This act of mutual recognition between participants is one that Wenger (1998) cites as being a key element in relationships between individuals as a way of governing their social interactions through understanding each others’ roles and intentions. It is this ability to successfully participate within the community of the primary school classroom with teachers and peers that will enable a child to learn comfortably (Dean, 2000). In line with the Vygotskian theory of passage through the Zone of Proximal Development, Emily has illustrated here that it is through her relationships with her “more competent peers”, the teachers, that she became engaged in learning at primary school (Moll, 1992).

Emily left primary school aged eleven and moved to high school. She explains that she wasn’t daunted at the prospect of moving schools as although it is a “much bigger building, much wider age range of people there” they had:

“been round the school already and ‘cos I knew a lot of people that were going to the same school, it made it a lot easier [...] So it didn’t make things so hard to get used to”

Clearly, from this statement, friendships and relationships were very important to Emily when she moved schools. The fact that the friendship groups remained the same gave her continuity during the transition. Also, she had already visited the school before attending there; the transition period was effectively extended and began whilst she was

already at primary school, contrary to the standard transition experience (Marshall & Brindley, 1998; Tobbell, 2003).

An important part of Emily's life at high school was her interest and participation in team sports. She was a member of the school's netball, hockey and rounder's teams. She explains that "I liked being [good] at stuff – netball etc". Contrary to this is her notion of giving up at things that she doesn't enjoy doing or doesn't think that she is good at. For example, in her educational timeline, she wrote

"Can't see [the] point of doing things I'm no good at – like Art and Music.

In Year 7 & 8 – Music liked to make us play [the] keyboard and sing. I can't do either – felt embarrassed having to sing in front of people"

She further expanded on this saying "I can't sing, can't play an instrument [...] we only did them subjects 'til year nine [...] when we could get rid of them." Whilst this could be perceived as an arguable defeatist attitude, it is also apparent that Emily, from a young age, knew what interested her and what she had no interest in at all. Emily accepted that whilst in this situation, in classes that she did not enjoy or wish to participate in, she was a peripheral participant within the school as the schools' practices were forced upon her, thus restricting her interaction with the curriculum as well as limiting her input into any educational decisions (Wenger, 1998). Despite this, she does not seem to have been harmed by this enforcement as the only expression of these feelings of restricted participation was in classes such as Art and Music. Whilst she did not enjoy these subjects, her maturity at this age accepted that "they [the teachers] were only doing their job".

At aged 13, Emily was able to choose her GCSE subjects. She explains that her subject choices were based around things that she enjoyed:

"more so than something that I though would do me better in the long run.

I picked history because I enjoyed doing history [...] Business studies I picked for two reasons, one because I thought it would be helpful for future and two because the year before us had done like, little, erm, projects were they were a company and sold things."

Research completed on school subject choice (see Elsworth, et al, 1999) indicates that when given a choice of what to study, students will choose subjects that they enjoy, therefore enhancing their experience and leading to increased classroom motivation and performance. This rationale is clearly represented in Emily's subject choice. The reflection on her experience, of being able to direct her education for the first time,

demonstrates that when she was given the opportunity to influence her education, she became an active participant; this involvement is exhibited through her decisions surrounding subject choice, which she made because they suited her.

Rigidity in the National Curriculum is something that restricts student and teacher engagement in the classroom, preventing effective learning (Moriarty et al, 2007). This is also accepted by the DCSF (2008) who confirm that in order to enhance the learning experience, the curriculum needs to become more personalised to the needs of the children. From analysis of Emily's experience, this is something that she would have benefited from. She did not find the subject provision at school, in subjects such as Art and Music, relevant to her. Her adult-like self-identification from this age meant that she wanted to be challenged differently; with something that she could see would give her value. One way Emily saw of doing this was in completing a company-based project through her Business Studies GCSE.

In addition to school, Emily took it upon herself to gain work experience and got a part time job at just fourteen. Emily's identification of her desire to do gain employment questions the design of the education system in that those that partake in it are not being prepared for the world of work, after leaving school (Arum & Shavit, 1995). She explains that her part time job was on a market stall, where she worked every Saturday as well as "overtime during the school holidays [...] obviously I wanted money". This in itself is a recertification that Emily had identified herself as an adult as she was enjoying the autonomy and independence that money brought, as "It was a bit of a buzz being able to save up and go out and buy a new coat. [...] Which was obviously something my friends didn't have because they didn't have a job". In centring this experience around her relationships with her friends, Emily demonstrates that her friends remained very important through her educational career. This is likely to be because the majority of her friends had been with her since she started school so had built and maintained their own community within the practices of the two schools that they had so far attended.

From analysis of the Ofsted reports for the two schools that Emily attended, it is clear that in both environments the school had policies in place to enable social interaction and positive attitude formation of the attending children. The report on Emily's primary school states that the pupils "develop trust, good relationships, and learn to work collaboratively and care for each other" (Ofsted, 1997: p14). This practice was then further built on by Emily's high school where bullying is noted as being low, students

“considerate and celebratory of each others successes and achievements” (Ofsted, 2002: p9). Throughout the research, Emily has demonstrated that it was her relationships with both teachers and friends, combined with the practices of the schools that enabled her to engage with the curriculum, despite its inherent rigidity.

At aged 16, Emily completed her GCSE’s and left high school. After being in education for eleven years, Emily was “bored of learning [and] wanted to work”. She wrote that “Mum said had to get [a] job or go [to] college. Couldn’t find a job, went [to] college”. In her interview, Emily expands on this saying that she had “applied for loads and loads of jobs and I did have a couple of interviews, but nobody took me on because I didn’t have any experience”. As a result of this, Emily attended the local sixth form college, although she said “I didn’t really want to be there, so I didn’t put in as much effort as I could have done because I didn’t wanna be there”. What is interesting about this transition is that her friendships at this point seem to be less influential in her decisions than before. She explained that “nearly all of them [her friends] went to college”, but despite this, it wasn’t an environment that she wanted to be in. This is indicative of the practices that society expects of individuals, to succeed in the education system, as Emily was unable to gain employment having only attended compulsory education. Attendance at college was not a practice that Emily wished to participate in, yet due to societal pressures had no other choice.

Gardiner (1999) states that "schools and colleges are seen by young people as largely successful in providing academic knowledge, but are regarded by many as failing to teach the practical, life and social skills that young people see as important. The majority (63 per cent) of 16-25-year-olds believe that schools do not prepare people for life in the real world" (p203). This analysis of education is an experience that Emily had, as she felt the need to take on a part time job whilst still at high school in order to fulfil her desire to have some work experience - she evidently did not see the subjects that she was studying at school to be preparing her for work life. Similarly, this view is accepted by industry as when Emily left school and attempted to get a job, she was still not experienced enough to get work. This further questions the validity of the current curriculum as it is unable to provide a strong grounding for individuals to successfully gain employment following completion of compulsory education.

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