

Equal possibilities not restricted opportunity: A critical reflection on the experiences of ‘Vocational’ transition within the context of post-16 sports education

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..... David Charles Rhys Aldous

Abstract

This PhD study explores the transitional experiences of working class students between institutions of Further Education and Higher Education within the field of post-16 sports education. It draws its empirical illustration from the interview and ethnographic data collected over an 18 month period between October 2007 and July 2009 from a group of six students who had enrolled on a vocational FDS Sc Foundation Degree qualification. The study is comprised of two interrelated parts: Part I of the study illustrates the conceptual and methodological considerations which have driven the exploration of the student experience. The theoretical approach for investigating these experiences is informed by the structurationist perspective of Rob Stones (Stones, 2005). Stones conceptualises the relations between agent and structure four interlinked areas: External Structures, Internal Structures, Active Agency and Outcomes. Conceptualising transitional experience in this manner offers possibilities for a more contextually sensitive, refined, developed and ultimately adequate ontology of structuration. In further developing the framework, the study draws upon the sociological understanding of Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu. The incorporation of these two distinguishable but related perspectives allows the framework to inform an understanding of the interconnections between the sanctioned practices of a context, the role of agents within a context and the power capacities that are derived from these relations (Mouzelis, 1991; Morrison, 2005). In doing so, it provides a number of lenses in understanding the practices and relations between Further and Higher Education and the consequences of this for agents who enter this transition. Part II critically reflects on the participants experiences. Drawing upon data collected at three institutions: Hope Further Education College (HFEC), Fawltly University-College (FUC) and Ivory Tower University (ITU), the study discusses and explores in depth how the relations between the participants and the external structures of the institutions begin to form three identifiable and conceptually distinguishable transitional experiences which are seen to be either Empowering, Fragmented or Failed. In reflecting upon such relations and experiences, the study suggests that discourses of opportunity surrounding vocational qualifications forwarded to these students prior to, and during their course, is rather more complex than previously illustrated and for some functions as more of a myth than empowering discourse. Rather than providing equal possibility, the relations and transitional experiences that are currently produced only afford restricted opportunities to students choosing this vocational pathway within post-16 sports education. In conclusion, the study begins to discuss the implications of the relations and experiences highlighted for present and prospective relations and practices, asking whether change is possible, creating equal possibilities, not restricted opportunity.

Key Words: Structuration theory; Quadripartite Framework; Transitional experience; Further Education; Higher Education.

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