WORKING DRAFT – not for dissemination

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Respecting Young People's Informal Learning: circumventing strategic policy evasions

Abstract

This paper explores experiences at the interface of research and policy through the lens of informal learning. The paper contends that In order to further social justice it is essential to value the informal learning that takes place outside the confines of educational institutions. However, it also demonstrates the difficulties in getting policy makers to take this issue seriously. Formal education, in its fixity around the neoliberal human subject, will inevitably reproduce the values and assumptions that have created an unequal society in the first place. To achieve social change, what constitutes learning and where and how it happens must be rethought. The paper reflects on three research studies, two achieved, one imagined which help to reveal the extent and nature of young white working class informal learning. These findings challenge their positioning as abject, deficit and hating learning. It discusses the policy interest in these studies and the current move of white working class masculinity to the centre of political debate. It argues that despite the nominal attention to such working class lives, their informal learning was and is deflected and ignored by policy makers. It is not a question of educating policy makers better, but that policy actively chooses this blinkered stance because a shadow body of unrecognised informal learners helps to shore up the status of their privileged

qualified peers. The paper concludes that rather than pursuing familiar research pathways, partnership working and micro levels of research combined with alternative forms of communication and agitation may better serve to support young people's *own* fight for social justice.

Introduction

This paper explores experiences at the interface of research and policy through the lens of informal learning. The framework for discussing relationships between education, social justice and policy making, is often limited to the formal settings of nurseries, schools, colleges and universities. However, it is essential to recognise that significant learning takes place beyond these confines: at home, in communities, at work and leisure, through activism and volunteering, in arts and popular culture, in nature and via digital media. Whilst educational researchers have a key role in uncovering and understanding such learning, communicating its importance to policy makers is fraught with difficulties. The existence and value of this informal learning seem to be ignored in educational policy making. The emphasis is rather on a duty to constantly reinforce our status as employable neoliberal subjects by training and retraining throughout our lives; even with ever-decreasing resources to support this. Formal education is increasingly anachronistic, tied as it is to a belief in both the unified human subject who can be perfected by education (Pederson, 2010) and to a set of national beliefs and values that education should transmit. In this fixity it cannot help but perpetuate social inequality as it inevitably reproduces the values and assumptions that have created an unequal society in the first place. To achieve social change, what constitutes learning and where and how it happens must be rethought.

This paper focuses on the informal learning of marginalised young people and on how my research in this area has interacted with policy makers. Such young people are positioned on the margins of society because they do not fit the model of the successful neo-liberal subject. They have difficulties with formal learning environments and leave school with few or no qualifications. They struggle to find a job, or if they do, are trapped in low waged and insecure employment. Commonly such young working class people are perceived as hating learning, as being disaffected from society and as uninterested in being active citizens.

Marginalised youth is not a homogeneous group: there are many differences that shape their experiences, as well as the matters they have in common such as poverty. Geographical differences and the significance of place are often skimmed over in policy making. The focus on cities, in particular London, and on high profile and over-exaggerated 'risky' behaviour such as being in a gang (see CSJ, 2009) tends to ignore young people living in declining provincial or rural areas where different problems and patterns are thrown up (Leyshon, 2008). Similarly, patterns of engagement in informal learning are differently shaped by 'race', class, gender and disability.

 Young white men living in disadvantaged provincial areas are deemed to be the least successful group in the UK in relation to education (see DFE, 2010, DCSF, 2008 and NAO, 2008). White working class boys are less than half as likely to get five good GCSEs including core subjects, as the average student in England (Wigmore, 2016) and are the least likely group to go to university. They are seen as suffering a loss of some of the benefits of working class masculinity with the closure of traditional industries. Similar patterns have long been noted in the USA (see for example, Weiss, Proweller and Centrie, 1997). The events of 2016, particularly

Brexit in the UK and the election of Trump as President in the USA have been construed as a backlash against the neglect of marginalised white working class men; but are simultaneously entrenching and extending the power of white corporate masculinity.

This paper challenges predominant views of marginalised young people as anti-learning by focusing on young people's informal learning and how it manifests itself. It will argue that such young people do not hate learning, in fact they love it, but this is an unrequited love because the education system and its policy makers do not love them (or it) back. It tries to unpick some of the assumptions about learning that lie beneath policy. Whilst it is vitally important to engage with policy and stake a claim to an informed position in the education debate, such engagement must also include conceptual challenges.

Context: Informal Learning and marginalised young people

Defining 'informal learning' is problematic. Making a division between formal and informal learning is not that helpful (Colley *et al*, 2003) given that whenever formal learning takes place there is always informal learning (Fuller and Biesta, 2008). Further, people do not necessarily conceptualise their activities as learning at all (Quinn et al, 2004). As Heyes says: "Informal learning is difficult to describe and categorise in a systematic way because it occurs through daily experiences. It is unplanned, sometimes fleeting and may result from chance encounters" (2012, p. 648). Notwithstanding these issues, a useful contextual distinction can be made between learning in formal educational, training or work settings and learning that takes place elsewhere voluntarily and primarily for pleasure. This is close to what

McGivney identifies as the 3rd category of informal learning: learning which arises from activities and interests, but which may not be recognised as learning (1999).

There is, of course, a history of research which identifies informal learning as an alternative source of positive identity. McGivney (2004:130) found that working class men have a well-founded scepticism about the rewards of formal learning, but not necessarily of informal learning. Archer et al, (2010) discovered that urban young people who were at risk of dropping out of formal education were still very actively involved in informal learning. In their ongoing research with working class youth in Wales Ivinson and Renold explore how informal pursuits like running and biking are integral to their formations and performances of self (see for example, 2016). Overall the vibrant intellectual life of the British working classes has been duly celebrated by Rose (2002) and Walkerdine (2007).

Nevertheless, work on informal learning often seems to go so far but no further in supporting the validity of self-directed learning outside of formal contexts. For example Heyes (2012) writing in the *Journal of Education Policy* draws on her research in Australia with the Glebe Pathways project in Sydney to argue the value of organised community activities for marginalised young people who have withdrawn from formal schooling and are not engaged in any education or training. She makes many important points about developing new forms of pedagogy, building on the interests of students not on a pre-delineated curriculum and she champions the vital collaborative nature of such projects across different agencies. However, this might be seen as formalised informal learning, it is not the free learning which young people engage in of their own volition, actively choosing to learn rather than being coaxed into it. This sense of agency in regard to their own

learning, despite the negative and harmful effects of schooling, is something that is little explored or recognised.

There is, of course, a danger in emphasising the importance of informal learning and skills, in that this can become a deterministic position which argues that a subsection of society will always be outside and therefore deserve a lower and different form of vocationally-led education. This position has been roundly contested by Young (2014), who argues that all should have access to elite education within an inclusive curriculum. My argument comes from a very different place to either Young or the determinists; it is rather a challenge to the very notion of inside and outside, a resistance to the reification of 'education' and a celebration of 'learning' and its potentiality.

Sadly, celebrating learning is not easy in the present context of mass youth unemployment and youth support cuts. One of the most important advocates for informal learning in the UK, the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education, (NIACE), has now become the Centre for Learning and Employment, with a concomitant shift in focus. In UK policy the focus on credentials and stratified learning outcomes is relentless (Maguire, Braun and Ball, 2014).This is exacerbated by an employment situation which sees even university graduates working at McDonalds and migrants working in conditions of virtual slave labour. Policy for marginalised youth is punitive, particularly if they are reliant on the welfare system and is underpinned by a critique of such young people as disaffected and unmotivated non-learners (Walkerdine, 2010). Giroux (2009) suggests that youth are similarly 'disposable' in the USA. The question I pose in this paper is: what would happen if policy recognised the validity of this informal learning and built on it rather than disrespecting and ignoring it; if it understood the reasons why love of informal

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learning was not extending to success at school? As I shall discuss, policy makers are interested in marginalised young people as they see them as a potential threat to the status quo; but they resist alternative narratives and alternative research evidence.

Policy makers in the UK have expressed some interest in informal learning (BIS, 2010), but see it in predominantly in terms of how it might lead to employment. However, there is a gap between this generalised recognition and specific evidence on what it actually means for particularly marginalised groups to learn outside formal contexts. Although a process of consultation on informal learning, culminating in *The Learning Revolution* (DIUS, 2009) and the ensuing Transformation Fund, has taken place, this seems not to be accompanied by rigorous research and analysis. Moreover, the Informal Learning Consultation itself tended to ignore many activities that are potentially very important to learners (see NIACE, 2008), and it has been argued that the exercise itself simply drew attention away from widespread cuts in formal adult learning (Kingston, 2008). The evaluation by NIACE (2010) provides a broad brush picture of projects funded but is limited in scope and cannot explore how informal-learning permeates everyday lives and what that means. Other initiatives such as the Wellcome Trust's recent funding of research on informal science learning bring a desirable focus on this area, but the emphasis has been on catching the attention of children whilst they are at school. The implication always seems to be that once young people have failed in formal education they become lost causes for learning.

This paper will draw in particular on two studies of white youth in rural/provincial areas and on one planned study on young white working class men's engagement with informal learning which was never funded. Concentrating on white communities

has been seen as an 'act of white supremacy' (Gillborn, 2009) placing white interests at the centre, displacing the discrimination faced by women and minority ethnic groups (Gillborn, 2010), and obscuring class inequality (Reay, 2009). These arguments are valid ones, but nevertheless there is much to indicate that young white working class youth face serious problems. Young white working class men in particular pose the most significant challenge to the government's edict in the UK that *all* young people are to be involved in education or training up to the age of 18. In this paper I will discuss my attempts to bring this particular issue to the attention of policy makers in terms other than punitive ones.

The challenge of marginalised youth and education is persistently represented as one of changing minds, cultures and aspirations so that young men and young women can stop being non-learners and start participating in education and training. Rarely is it acknowledged that these young people are *already* actively learning and enjoying it, just in different contexts and with different motivations. In this paper I will point to some research which presents methodological challenges to policy positions, gives a more detailed picture of informal learning and which supports the idea that such learning is extremely powerful and valid in its own right. I will then discuss how policy makers have reacted to this evidence and this argument.

The Research

The paper draws on qualitative data from a range of studies. The theme of informal learning particularly emerges from two research studies (see Quinn et al, 2008 Merchant, Waite and Quinn, 2013) both of which focus on young white people. It also includes a study that never was, which wanted to focus on young white working class men and informal learning. This stemmed from an exploration of white working

class masculinity and lifelong learning in the context of drop out from university (Quinn et al, 2006). The first study, (Quinn et al, 2008, Quinn, 2010) was a qualitative longitudinal study located in South West England. This is an area which combines some wealthy cities and towns but also many depressed seaside towns and rural areas. The study involved 114 telephone interviews with young people aged 16-21 and a series of 36 face to face interviews with 20 young people all working in 'jobs without training', over a period of eighteen months. Jobs without training are the kind of jobs on which we all depend in our daily lives, for example if we want to get served in shops and cafes. They do not require high levels of qualifications; neither do they lead to opportunities for training: they are just 'dead–end jobs for dead-end kids' (Quinn, et al 2008, Quinn, 2010). The young people doing them are perceived by policy makers as a problem to be fixed, preferably by getting them back into formal education (DfES, 2007). However, we approached this project from a different methodological perspective, which in some ways was diametrically opposed to this policy position. Our premise was one of respect and our aim was to understand the learning *already happening,* whether at work or elsewhere *and* the values that young people themselves ascribed to their lives. We did not focus on what they lacked, but on what they did. Opening up the perspective in this way enabled recognition and reconceptualization to take place.

We found that, although these young people are deemed to have limited interest in learning, with poor qualifications and prospects, they are still engaged in multiple forms of informal learning. In their own time they were acting as DJs both live and digitally, making music, restoring cars, looking after animals and even practising magic. As we were willing to recognise the value they placed in these activities we were able to reconceptualise the role of learning in their lives. Both young women

and young men were active learners, suggesting that the particular demonising of young men as anti-learning is unfounded. These experiences were qualitatively different from being in school where they struggled with books and were positioned as part of "the thick bunch." These activities were sources of pleasure and pride, an opportunity for affirmation.

The second study, (Merchant, Waite and Quinn, 2013, Quinn, 2013), explicitly followed up the theme of informal learning. It also took up the issue of learning through pleasurable engagement with nature, which was an unexpected finding of the first study. The focus here was on young people aged 16-25 living in a rural area which has been designated 'an area of outstanding natural beauty', comprising wild moorland fringed on both sides by the sea and by rundown seaside towns. The area, although beautiful, poses many problems for young people particularly around transport, employment and housing. Many of the former farms and cottages are now holiday homes or otherwise dedicated to tourism. Most of the young people involved in the study were unemployed or working in low waged jobs or on family farms; although there were some who had been to university and returned. Again it could be argued that the project approach was policy-resistant; not trying to 'solve' the issue of young rural people, but rather to appreciate them and their landscape in their own terms. It included exploring ineffable experiences of nature which were difficult to put into words; let alone into policy-speak.

The study explored their interests and activities via six focus groups and a survey. They were also given small cameras and asked to capture their daily activities. Some of the practical skills they demonstrated straddled work and leisure domains, for example working with animals. Overall, both young men and women took pleasure in the landscape around them with geographical and biological knowledge

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that came through walking, riding and biking across the moor. Learning outdoors in their own time and space, knowing how to understand and traverse the land was a very different experience from being in school where options were very much prescribed and limited. The significance of informal learning was pronounced, but as in the first study, the young people could not report being actively encouraged to build upon it in schooling.

In both studies the standard ethical issues of confidentiality, freedom to withdraw, informed consent and feedback were all carefully addressed. However, the main ethical concern was that the projects should not further the harm already done by schooling, or in any way reinforce the feelings of inadequacy that many of the participants felt, because of their perceived failure in education. By focusing on the significance of positive (and usually ignored) aspects of their lives and reflecting this in our writing we tried to redress the balance.

There is much more to know about marginalised young people and informal learning. In particular the above studies do not allow us to explore informal learning amongst minority ethnic or migrant young people who as Osler and Starkey argue are positioned by " discriminatory practices and public discourses that exclude minorities or which marginalise them within the imagined community of the nation" (2003, p.244). Yet we do know: informal learning can be vitally important; it has generated capacities and predispositions to learning (unlike school); but young people are not encouraged to celebrate it or use it as a pathway out of low-paid work or unemployment.

The final study was ultimately one that got away. All researchers have a pet study that cannot get funding and this was mine. In 2009 I wanted to do an ethnographic

study of the informal learning of groups of young white working class men in urban and rural settings across the UK. Methodologically I sought a fine-grained picture of how shared activities were built over time and what the accumulated effects might be. Rather than positivistic measurements or individualistic life-stories I wanted to explore positive networks and synergies. First attempts at securing funding from the Research Council foundered on what was deemed impossible and implausible: my claim that these young men might in the right context 'love learning'. I then approached a policy maker I had worked with on another project. First reactions were highly promising and indeed it seemed financial support was secured. However, in the end this came to nothing. Again the reason was not the topic of white working class masculinity and education, which was high on the policy list, but the approach to the topic, the fact that instead of fixing deficits it sought to celebrate and understand positives. There is a lesson here that I will return to later in this paper.

Conceptual Interventions

The findings of the above studies help to intervene in different discursive domains. The first dominant narrative is that white working class youth is 'abject' and 'threatening'. Debates on masculinity have focussed on 'laddish' masculinities which are blamed for encouraging boys' under-achievement (Ashley, 2009, Jackson, 2006) and for shaping a resistance to education (Francis and Skelton, 2005).This deficit model is informed by negative cultural narratives about the white working classes (Haylett, 2001). Young men are particularly highlighted, as they have been left behind by the decline in industrial manual labour (Fine et al, 1997; McDowell, 2003, 2007). They now loom large in the public imagination as threatening 'feral youths' (Quinn et al, 2006) embodying the masculine 'chav' characterised by alcohol consumption, violence and crime (Nayak, 2006). Working class girls are positioned

subordinately and always in respect of their sexuality: as 'baby faced mothers' open to scorn and ridicule on TV screens, as temptresses who beguile and betray young men in the context of crime (CSJ, 2015) or simply as 'meat' to be used and exploited, especially if they are in care, as in the systematic exploitation of young girls in Rotherham, UK.

The second narrative is that working class education is a history of failure. Educational research suggests that marginalised youth's rejection of education is a reaction to an education system that is inimical to their needs. Reay (2004; 2006) argues that education for the working classes has always been about failure. The white working classes are constructed as coming from families who 'don't care' about education and are often viewed as a threat to middle class children's education and wellbeing (Reay et al, 2007). Drop out from HE has also become another assumed marker of working class failure to succeed (Quinn et al, 2004). Pupils who have experienced difficulty in formal education are seen to exhibit 'spoilt' learner identities (Reay and Ball, 1997) and their interests are seen as illegitimate (Archer et al, 2010). Whilst education is associated with 'finding yourself' for the middle classes, it is often experienced as 'losing yourself' for the working classes (Reay 2001). White working class boys are alienated by the link between schooling and neoliberal discourses of aspiration (Stahl, 2015).

Drawing on existing research on informal learning (and developing it more extensively) gives a very different standpoint on these narratives. The abject is something that we push away, that we can't bear to see, a sign of death and disintegration, both an imaginary and real threat that 'ends up engulfing us' (Kristeva, 1982, p.4). Marginalised youth are only abject until we see them properly. What are they really doing? If the answer is: many pleasurable and knowledgeable things,

then the image of abjection fades away. Similarly, their activities challenge the terms of success and failure, losses and gains. Education may have failed them but learning hasn't, it is part of everyday engagement and an opportunity for demonstrating capacities. Conceptual interventions are opportunities to overturn these narratives and reset the terms of the debate. Looking at young people's informal learning effectively dismantles their subjugation as abject non-learners and throws the problem back at formal Education. Without such dismantling they are completely trapped.

Strategic Policy Evasions

 I want to consider just how these studies have been received in policy circles. Although these projects all worked from a position which tried to de-stabilise rather than meet policy expectations, they also had a policy and practice dimension and were constructed to contribute to the agenda around young people. 'Jobs without training' was a UK policy construct, a way of designating a group in deficit with the explicit goal of reducing the numbers in this category and getting them into training (DfES, 2007). Subsequently the government has partly got round this problem by making staying on in formal education compulsory for longer. The jobs without training study gained policy interest in the UK and I was invited to speak at several policy-orientated seminars involving government ministers. I was also called as an expert witness to the *House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee* who held a series of meetings focusing on 'Young People who are Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET).' These policy exchanges always came up against blind spots when it came to the significance of young people's informal learning and its value. It was not possible to switch the discourse from deficit to potentiality. Similarly the second study was commissioned by a National Park Authority in the UK

to help them better engage with young people. It was positively received but subsequent engagement with the National Park does not seem to indicate that their vision of young people has changed significantly.

The same is true with the putative research on white working class boys. Having written on this issue I was invited to speak at various policy and practice-oriented seminars and conferences. As I mentioned earlier, I entered into discussions with a government department to do research in this area. Initially this was received with great interest and wheels put in motion to make this a reality. However, once I stressed that I wanted to focus on building from existing informal learning this project was summarily abandoned.

Now the subject of white, working class, masculinity is making headline news. The rise of Trump in the US and the Leave vote in the referendum in the UK have both been attributed to the surge of a toxic, misogynistic, racist, white masculinity (Solnit, 2017). They have also been linked to the revolt of ignored and abandoned white working class communities. The rural and the provincial have moved to the centre of cultural debate in the USA, for example in *Hillbilly Elegy (*Vance, 2016). In the UK Stahl (2015) and Hanley (2016) have gained more media circulation for their work on class than seminal researchers such as Reay (2009, 2006, 2004, 2001) and Skeggs (1997) ever did. In her first speech as Prime Minister in 2016 Theresa May specifically highlighted that white working class boys were the least likely to go to university. However, despite this rise in public visibility, I have not seen any evidence that the deficit position of white working class masculinity has been abandoned in policy discourse. The working class are only visible as victims on whose behalf others have agency, and who serve to promote the interests of the already rich and powerful. The tone is elegiac with terms like 'the lost boys' suggesting they are

already dead and gone (see Wigmore, 2016). They do not do anything or learn anything: they are just the residue of industrial decline. They do not have pleasures and possibilities outside of work or education, and the concept of their loving informal learning is as invisible as it has ever been.

So why these blind spots and this reluctance to engage with this issue? Why such misrecognition and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1984)? It is naïve perhaps to expect anything else in a world where policy makers specialise in 'decision-based evidence making', producing, shaping and interpreting data in ways that legitimise the policy decisions they want to make. Indeed (and ironically given our focus on social justice) it was the government's own Social Justice Centre in the UK which was most active in producing 'evidence' demonising youth (see Silver, Clark, Lone and Williams, 2014). As I have discussed, deficit positioning is the foundation-stone of both structure and discourse around marginalised young people. So a shadow community of marginalised learners exists in parallel to the world of formal education. Social justice demands "social connection" (Young, 2010) between and across these two communities, but it is not currently in the interests of those with power and privilege to break down these divides. I would argue that it is not a question of educating policy makers better, but that policy actively chooses this blinkered stance because a shadow body of unrecognised informal learners helps to shore up the status of their privileged qualified peers. To address this failing and make the right 'social connection' is thus counterintuitive for current elitist education policy. Validating informal learning also threatens those who have much invested in education as a bounded field, policed by professionals and 'leaders'; including ourselves as education researchers. This reality check does not mean that it is futile for educational researchers to work with policy makers; just that it is extremely difficult.

Policy is partly generated by cultural narratives. Cultural narratives define what is 'real' or important and cultural narratives can and do change. A first step is to acknowledge that informal learning is a legitimate subject for educational research. Educational researchers then have work to do in demonstrating just how real and how important informal learning is for young people. Respecting young people's informal learning would be a fundamental move toward justice and to a reconfiguring of what learning is and where we might find it.

Conclusion

 With former colleagues I recently reflected on the issues involved in engaging and impacting, through the mirror of an ESRC seminar series we had organised together on *New Perspectives on Education and Culture* (Quinn, et al, 2014). Our conclusions were that attempting to shift the policy conversation when the terms of the dialogue were already set was indeed fraught with difficulty. However, we argued that even monoliths have what Teresa de Lauretis' calls the space-off: 'social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati' (1987, p. 25).

The question here is where is the space off for the dialogue on informal learning when formal channels have not proven successful? Perhaps it should take place through social media because in the digital domain the self-taught and the marginal have helped to displace the notion that only an elite and formal education prepares one for success; although the downside of this is the post-facts nature of the internet and the dismissal of expertise. Furthermore, although full digital inclusion is still very problematic, it is young people who are the major creators within this domain (Bull et al, 2008). Perhaps only young people themselves can change the cultural narrative

about their lives, just as only women could take charge of their own liberation. So is there a role to play for the educational researcher within this scenario? On reflection, attempting to corral work on informal learning within the bounds of formal funding and policy making may be a mistake. Partnership working and micro levels of research combined with alternative forms of communication and agitation may better serve to support young people's *own* fight for social justice. Research could explore and name as learning those daily forms of knowledge that may be routinely disregarded, even by the knower herself. This would need to be a negotiated and mutual process where the 'knower' includes the researcher. There are some hopeful signs from other disciplines. Archival work in sociology and literature has revealed the informal creative lives of working class women across history (see for example Tamboukou, 2016 or Merish, 2017). Similar work with the living young could help change the cultural narrative for young people.

 Truly recognising, respecting and rewarding young people's learning outside the spheres of school, college or even community organisation, implies a radical re-envisioning of both education and the existing social (and ecological) order. As such it is a good starting point in our quest for social justice and should be a vital consideration for this Special Issue.

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