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Opportunity and Aspiration or the Great Deception? The case of 14-19 vocational education

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Opportunity and Aspiration or the Great Deception? The case of 14-19 vocational education

The policy discourse around those young people who are the focus of the 14-19 agenda is one of negativity which, in its use of language such as non-academic, disaffected, disadvantaged places young people firmly within a deficit model. This model frames these young people as low achievers with low aspirations, routinely dismisses them as non-academic yet claims to offer opportunities in the form of a vocational education which, according to the rhetoric, will lead to a lifelong nirvana of high skill, high paid work, personal satisfaction and opportunity (providing they continue to engage in lifelong learning) something which many young people take on trust.

Drawing on original empirical research, and working within a framework informed by Marxist and social justice concepts this paper contests the assumption that these young people have low aspirations, arguing that falling within a deficit model, constrained by discourses of negativity, powerless to change a system which militates against them and lacking the agency for change their chances of achieving those aspirations are almost non-existent.

The paper poses a number of questions. What are 'high' and 'low' aspirations? What is 'non – academic'? Why, every year, are nearly half of all young people characterized in this way? What is, or is not, an 'opportunity'? It argues that notions of opportunity are, in fact, smoke and mirrors, a massive deception which enables the channelling of these young people into the low pay low skill work market in readiness to fulfil government demands for cheap labour as and when it is needed. Finally, it concludes with proposals for change in the 14-19 and PCET systems which could provide a more equitable and effective framework for young people to achieve their hopes and dreams.

Introduction

The government policy surrounding the 14-19 agenda has consistently used a discourse around opportunity, whilst placing the young people themselves firmly within a deficit model associated with discourse such as socially excluded, disaffected, disadvantaged, non-academic and having low aspirations. Related policy using a similar deficit model – this time around a need to professionalise the sector and initiated in the DfES paper *Equipping our Teachers for the Future* (2004) has simultaneously been played out with the FE teachers who are responsible for the 'delivery' of the vocational curriculum.

Whilst the 14-19 agenda purports to be directed at all young people, it is evident that certain groups, particularly those such as low achieving young people and those from lower socio-economic groups – and these young people are often one and the same- will be directed towards a lower value vocational route within a 'divided and divisive' (Tomlinson, 1997:1/17) education system, which 'differentially prepares some young people for [university] and others for work' (Ainsworth and Roscigno 2005:263). This differentiation of young people by social class and ability is indicative of a school system which is comprehensive in name only but which in reality is highly stratified in terms of both perceived academic ability, and more particularly, social class.

Considerable work has explored the so-called vocational/academic divide, but this a relatively crude way to explore the inequalities across an education system where, within either the 'academic' or 'vocational' sector, multiple layers of hierarchy exist related to credential type and subject. Markedly different levels of societal esteem are placed on these different subjects and credentials, and consequently, on the young people who pursue them. These hierarchies and societal values are largely unacknowledged, always highly significant in the life chances and opportunities they engender and inevitably result in those young people who undertake lower level vocational programmes falling at the wrong side of the 'sharp divide between valuable and non-valuable people and locales' (Castells 2000:165).

Within the field of vocational education myriad subtle hierarchies exist between different subjects, between NVQ and broad vocational credentials and between different levels of credential. At the bottom of these hierarchies and the 'economy of student worth' (Ball *et al*, 1998), are the learners who form the focus of this paper: those enrolled on broad vocational programmes (such as the Diploma and BTEC qualifications) at levels 1 and 2 post 16.

These are young people who do not meet the government expectation of 5 x GCSEs at grades A*-C or the equivalent by the age of 16+ and who for a variety of reasons are not able to move on to an occupational (NVQ) route leaving level 1/2 broad vocational programmes in the FE system as their only option. Whilst there are significant issues around class, gender and opportunity for those who, at 16+, progress to level 3 vocational programmes in the FE sector, the challenges facing those entering level 1 and 2 programmes are much greater, not least because of the much extended transition they face and the far more limited exchange value of lower level credentials. Further, lower level programmes in general and level 1 programmes in particular, have been excluded from much academic and policy discourse. My concern in this, as with other papers, is to address some of these inequalities.

Young People

This paper draws on data derived from a wider case study of young people on level 1 Further Education programmes. Data from two groups of students, enrolled at the same institution, inform this paper. A participative, multi-method approach was used which included the use of group interviews, observation and written and serendipitous data provided by the young people. Both groups were undertaking one- year level 1 programmes, one in IT and the second group in Health and Social Care. From the IT group, of 8 students interviewed 4 hoped to work as computer programmers or IT specialists; 1 to follow his grandfather into the RAF; 1 to work in sales, 1 to work as a fitness instructor and 1 as a receptionist.

The last two are noteworthy. Emma, the only female in the group, wanted to be a fitness instructor and had applied to do leisure and tourism. The course was under subscribed and she was directed to IT by advice and guidance staff at the

college. Emma left before the end of term one. Samir, who aspired to work as a receptionist, had been educated in special schools as a consequence of severe physical disability which confined him to a wheelchair. He believed that his enjoyment in meeting new people ideally fitted him for this type of work. Of 12 (all female) students in the Health and Social Care group, 7 wanted to do nursery nursing, and 1 each to do midwifery, nursing, teaching and social work respectively. 1 student had no aspirations for the future, apart from maintaining her friendships – this young woman, Keira, was the sole, unsupported carer for a terminally ill parent.

None of the young people in either group had parents or role models employed in the occupation they aspired to and none had parents educated above FE level 2. Where parental occupation was known, it was low skill, class and gender specific. All were confident that their qualification would help them to achieve their aspirations and, like the young people in Bathmaker's (2001) study, conflated 'good' qualifications with 'good' jobs emphasising the advantages they believed would accrue from attending college. In doing so, these young people, all of whom came from working class backgrounds, typified Macrae *et al's* (1997) typology of 'hanging in' in the face of multiple political, social and economic barriers to education. Six individuals - Paris, Naz, Wayne, Angelina, Kate and Samir – are discussed in the context of this paper.

This rehearsal of government rhetoric, and the hope that they would achieve ambitions to work in skilled, technical and in some cases professional roles which fall within the scope of the 'high skill economy' (DfES 2003b; DfES 2006; Leitch 2006), seemed to be indicative of high, rather than low, aspirations and contests government assertions which conflate low achievement with low aspiration. All except one of the occupations (receptionist) identified required credentials at minimum level 3. The achievement of a minimum level 3 credential by 70% of 19 year olds by 2020 has been identified by the government as a key long term target of the 14-19 reforms.

Discourses of Inequality

This paper goes on to explore notions of opportunity and aspiration in the context of this data, considering the impact of policy and government rhetoric

and on the lives of these young people as they sought to make their transition from school to work. The language in which young people on vocational programmes are variously situated and their relationship to and with government rhetoric, reflects a number of subtle and bitter ironies when considered in the context of the reality of their lives, the structures that constrain them and the limitations on their potential for agency. This discourse both forms and reflects part of the antagonistic relations in education and social formation (Avis, 2007:175/176) which impact powerfully and unequally on the lives of young people and which need addressing in a broader, more socially just, political and societal sense.

Despite their over-use in government documents, terms such as aspiration and opportunity are not defined or problematised. Aspiration, for example, is normally expressed in terms of raising aspirations despite evidence (e.g Bathmaker 2001) suggesting that young people do aspire to career type jobs, irrespective of social background, but do not know how to achieve that aspiration, and are not given appropriate guidance within the current system.

Similarly to aspiration, the term opportunity is considerably over-used in policy documents where it is always closely related to vocational education. The rhetoric presents an idealised image of high pay, high skill work which is available to all who engage with lifelong learning. There several fundamental problems with this. Firstly, it associates opportunity with forms of education and training which have been shown to have more limited exchange in the jobs market than academic credentials which are notionally of the same level (Robinson, 1997:35), something which is not acknowledged in either policy or Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG). Thus, the whole notion of opportunity becomes premised on a deception.

Secondly, using heavy marketing 'opportunities' – which are heavily classed and gendered in content and in the occupational areas they are notionally linked to – are sold to specific groups of young people an action which contributes to the ongoing reproduction of inequality, class and labour power. Thirdly, notions of opportunity are closely linked to the policy beliefs around the value of progression and engagement, both of which fail to recognise or acknowledge the

particular difficulties associated with length of transition for those young people entering at the bottom end of this particular educational hierarchy.

Finally, such rhetoric fails to acknowledge the real difficulty for these young people, which is how to move from their current educational and societal positioning to the place they dream of being, a transition to the unknown, where however well motivated or determined to 'transform the habitus' (Bourdieu, 1980c; 1993a:87) cultural capital would be 'stretched beyond its limits' (Ball *et al*, 1999:212). Thus, the reality for individuals is that, constrained by classed and gendered dispositions and expectations and placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of the education system, there is no opportunity to move anywhere other than onto the next low status vocational course or into low skill, low pay employment.

Other inequalities arise from the discourse of negativity surrounding vocational learners, which makes use of language such as non-academic and low-achieving. Non-academic tends to be used as a euphemism for vocational, despite its own negative connotations. However, like other language used to describe young people on vocational education programmes and the programmes themselves, it is conflated with non-achieving and with low aspirations. The assumption that young people who do not meet government benchmarks in terms of GCSE grade A*-C all have low aspirations or are of low academic ability homogenises individuals and fails to recognise them as having value as citizens and human beings: rather, it perceives them as problems to be solved. It is particularly significant that this deficit model is closely associated with young people from specific class backgrounds who are largely located in the PCET sector and in schools which are perceived to be 'lower achieving' in the context of government league tables.

This significance may be observed in the failure of policy discourse to acknowledge the economic need for a 'pool' of casualised, low pay low skill workers to be called upon when the need arises – as Ecclestone (2002: 17/19) suggests, not all employers want or need highly skilled workers. Thus, the idealised opportunities portrayed by a post-Fordist, high skills rhetoric form another facet of the deception visited on young people when the reality of the

jobs market facing post-16 learners in the current economic climate is one of unemployment, or low skilled, temporary work with low status training as an alternative to Further or Higher Education.

Structure, Agency and Horizons for Action

Bourdieu consistently contended that the 'objective probabilities' of particular trajectories are largely determined by social class (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Bourdieu 1990) and this was the most significant mediating factor in the experiences of the young people in this study. Growing up in an ex-coalfield at the start of the 21st century, their horizons for action (Hodkinson *et al* 1996) were heavily influenced by a particular local social and economic landscape (Ball *et al* 2000:8), which included high rates of poverty, worklessness and long term sickness in the predominantly working class community from which they came. Their choices already orientated as a consequence of their position in the field of this particular community (Bourdieu 1990:66) their agency was further constrained by a broad range of factors, including societal and embodied structures and characteristics such as class, gender, race and disability which also influenced subjective perceptions about the suitability of particular careers (Hodkinson *et al* 1996:3) but also by the limited number of L1 courses (see Working Group on 14-19 reform 2003), and the non-availability of an academic route. None of these young people had achieved sufficiently high grades to enter school sixth forms, or do re-sit GCSEs in their FE college.

Also limiting their horizons for action were the lack of appropriate careers guidance, the potential length of transition to achieve their aspiration and economic support issues – only two students were supported by their parents, most were in receipt of benefits and the others relied on a combination of part-time work and/or EMA, which is discontinued at age 18. For young people entering level 1 courses post-16, only level 2 will have been achieved by 18 meaning that they would then have to find the means to support themselves for a further two years if they were to achieve level 3.

These constraints have two outcomes. Firstly, they eventually lead many young people to exert their agency by withdrawing from FE to move into employment, and secondly, contingent on this withdrawal from education, they also revise

down their original career aspirations so that intending nurses become carers, and dreams of being a computer whiz-kid become the reality of work at PC World – perhaps inevitable outcomes given the particular social and economic circumstances of the town, and the additional factors limiting their horizons for action.

Despite the social and economic constraints they lived under, all the young people who participated in this study expressed the intention of pursuing and achieving 'good' qualifications. This intention was fuelled by a belief that 'good' qualifications would give them 'good' jobs and better 'opportunities' in the brighter, better future promised by post-Fordist rhetoric. For example, Paris's reason for enrolling on a level 1 Health and Social Care course was that *'I enjoy looking after children and I just thought I'd take it a bit further to be a midwife'* whilst Wayne (who left the course to go an unknown destination) was firm in his belief that *'I have just got to keep coming to college and keep coming till the years have gone past because I've got three brothers who did the same and they earn about £8 an hour now'*. Similarly, Samir believed that the course led to *'a very good qualification'*.

Despite their aspirations, and apparent buy in to policy rhetoric, the young peoples' horizons for action were severely constrained by the factors discussed earlier in this paper and their 'choices' limited to decisions around whether to remain on programme or leave, whether or not to work alongside the programme and whether to continue on to level 2 or to utilise their limited cultural capital in a search for employment. Thus, the choices they made were not their own, but were pragmatic and rational decisions 'influenced by the complexities of the relations of force within a particular field' Hodkinson (1998:103) and which were 'heavily circumscribed by class' (Bloomer 1996:148).

Ultimately, for most young people entering low level vocational programmes individual agency is so heavily restricted by the systemic and embodied structures of state, society and the education system which 'serve to reproduce inequality' (Avis, 2007:162-167) that the movement beyond a familiar habitus (Bourdieu 1990:52/53) needed to make an alternative future becomes all but

impossible. Significant amongst these structures is government education policy and its focus on opportunity.

Opportunity and Aspiration – smoke and mirrors

'Opportunity' has formed a major plank of 14-19 policy over the past decade (see for example DfES 2002; 2003; 2005). However, the 'opportunities' alluded to in government rhetoric are heavily circumscribed by economic policy and market forces, rather than being influenced by educational need or benefit; a reflection of the subordination of the education system to the economic system where it merely exists as a structure for the reproduction of class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:178/179; see also Avis, 1996:81).

Significantly, they are all also vocational in content. Whilst the ostensible reason for this is to provide skills for the 'powerhouse of a high skills economy' (DfES 2006:1) the impact of such policy is to constrain many young people by directing them onto low level vocational programmes. Once directed onto a narrow vocational path, young people are automatically denied the opportunities available to those who pursue a subject based (academic) route – two different pathways with diverse and unequal outcomes in terms of future life and work. Further, in the case of broad vocational courses such as the Diploma, no occupational 'skill' is conferred although such programmes do foster a process of 'habituation to the vocational culture' (Colley 2006:17) and in doing so teach the skills - such as conformity and punctuality – necessary for low pay, low skill work.

It may be argued therefore, that notions of opportunity for young people on low level vocational programmes generate an illusory, but appealing image of skilled, technical and professional work, entirely unrelated to the low pay, low skill drudgery which is much more likely to become their reality. This illusion is achieved, at least in part, through the marketing of a particular image of vocational education which sells the associated ideas of opportunity and high skill, highly paid work despite the low level vocational programmes which are marketed as opportunities having no credibility beyond the institution (Bathmaker, 2001). More recent work (Keep 2009:40) has criticised the marketing of education and training and questioned the policy belief that

effectively marketed, 'demand led' education and training together with improved IAG, will increase participation and achievement and argues that the 'selling' of education and training is bound to fail if people 'have any inkling' that low level vocational qualifications deliver only the very limited gains of low pay, low skill work with few or no opportunities for progression.

Although the young people in this study all expressed a 'buy-in' to vocational education, and to a large extent, rehearsed the rhetoric around opportunity and high pay, high skill work, 1 withdrew during the programme, 2 were unclassified and 10 of the remaining 17 were undecided or did not intend to progress to level 2 but planned to leave. According to one student, Angelina, the decision to leave was due to an imperative to 'get some money behind me' reflecting financial concerns which loomed large for many of these young people. These decisions to exert agency in withdrawing from education and seeking employment are, perhaps, indicative of the fact that at least some of these young people had 'an inkling' that their course had minimal exchange value in the employment market and had decided to exchange the vague promise of something better at the end of a much extended transition for immediate economic return, albeit low pay and low skill.

Thus, the idea of high skill work is, for many, simply a dream in a labour market where the 'power of exchange' (Smith 2008:16) conferred by a low level vocational programme is negligible or non-existent. These young people had conflated good qualifications with good jobs but left with a credential which offered no exchange value and placed them in a subordinate position in the labour market. An alternative 'choice' - to exchange the credential for more cultural capital - by following the 'coherent progression routes' to 'level 2 and beyond' (DfES 2006; 2007), not only leads to a much extended transition, but, as Colley (2006:25) has argued, for these young people is available only on vocational courses and at relatively low status institutions.

Dreams and Aspirations

Despite this, the government continues to market vocational education as 'opportunities', a policy which is apparently blind to the impact of exclusionary characteristics and constraints on individual agency of many young people

working at or below level 2, and synchronously with this, refers to the need to raise aspirations. In the 2009 DCSF paper *IAG Quality, Choice and Aspiration*, which forms part of the overarching children's plan, the word aspiration is preceded by the words *low*, *raise* or *raising* on all but three occasions, and the six principles of impartial careers guidance, intended to form the basis for a 'high quality' and 'excellent' service, include 'raises aspirations' as the fourth principle. This suggests that all IAG policy is predicated on a policy assumption that all or most young people have 'low' aspirations, or alternatively, that those with 'high' aspirations will not be in need of IAG services. Despite aspirations being a key focus of the paper, the term is defined only vaguely, as it is used in the same context as enabling young people to 'reach their potential'. Whether this refers to developing their potential for agency, or, more likely, their potential to achieve a Diploma, is not made clear.

The selling of a notion of opportunity is also achieved through a particular approach to the official advice given by the IAG counsellors who promote vocational education and which, as Stanton (2008:60) has argued, do not give the whole picture. Stanton injects humour into his argument as he illustrates this point by suggesting what IAG counsellors might say, if bound by similar rules and legislation as Independent Financial Advisors yet he makes a serious point. Too many young people are sold an image of vocational opportunity which is inconsistent with the reality – they are given no 'inkling' of its exchange value in education or the workplace. In addition, many more are directed onto vocational programmes based on superficial or transient inclinations towards particular activities or occupations. Many of the young women in this study, for example, had not known what they wanted to do post 16, and had been directed to Health and Social Care by IAG services because they liked babysitting or visiting elderly relatives, neither of which is a strong indicator of suitability for a career in care. Further, they were, with one exception, unaware that a health and social care broad vocational credential has carried no occupational exchange value in the field of care since the Care Standards Act (2000) required all care workers to hold appropriate NVQ credentials.

Of equal concern, despite all having received some Careers Education and Guidance, none of the young people in this study, whose aspirations included

jobs such as nursery nursing, nursing, teaching and technical careers in IT had any idea of how to achieve their aspiration. Most had only the haziest concept of university – Naz thought he would have to go to University for two years to become a computer programmer - and Kate gave a not untypical response to questions about her more modest career hopes:

EJA	What sort of job with children would you like?
Kate	Class Assistant, a nanny something like that.
EJA	OK. Do you know what sort of qualifications you need for that?
Kate	Yes.
EJA	What do you need?
Kate	I can't remember.

This lack of knowledge about how to achieve aspirations suggests that where policy is predicated on the assumption that aspiration is low, it misses the point, which is that young people need to be supported to generate the cultural capital which will enable them to achieve their aspirations and develop their understandings of the world. This may not be helped by particular forms of discourse and pedagogy in use in FE which also serve to reinforce the illusion of opportunity and form a more subtle aspect of the marketing of vocational education, particularly at lower levels. The pedagogic approach used with these young people, whose previous experience of education has often been negative (Coffield *et al* 2007:724) has been criticised for relying heavily on approaches and interventions such as building self esteem (e.g see Ecclestone 2004; 2007; Ecclestone and Hayes 2009) and engaging in 'busy work' rather than focussing on generating more cultural capital.

Such approaches, however well -intentioned, encourage the belief amongst young people that they can do anything, and in doing so, particularly in the absence of honest and informative IAG, limits their potential for agency and encourages them to rehearse unrealistic aspirations. By focussing on unrealistic aspirations and not generating cultural capital, this comes to form yet another of the societal structures which serve to keep these young people in their allotted place in society and maintain a status quo (see Atkins, 2009 for a more extended discussion).

I move on to make some proposals for change which might help young people like Paris, Naz, Wayne, Angelina, Kate and Samir to realise their potential for agency as they 'struggle to make the world a different place' (Reay, 2004: 437).

Proposals for changes

The discussion in this paper raises a number of implications for policy, practice and social justice. This section makes tentative proposals for broad and related changes in policy and practice in vocational education across the 14-19 sector. These proposals are intended to contribute to a wider debate on vocational education.

Most urgently, there is a need for a radical change in the discourse used in policy documents and subsequently rehearsed by practitioners in the sector.

Consideration must be given to the power of language and in particular to the way in which particular descriptors such as disaffected, disengaged or non-academic have come to be pejorative terms used in the context of a deficit model of youth. Colley (2003:169) has argued that such changes would be more likely to occur if society – and government - accepted social exclusion as something that society inflicts on the disadvantaged, rather than as a set of characteristics it attributes to them. Such an approach could provide the basis for a move from a position in which blame is attributed to young people for perceived shortcomings, to a more socially just position in which there is a greater recognition of the part societal structures and hegemony play in the dispositions and experiences of young people, and more understanding of the way in which these structures articulate with the 'ongoing (re)production of labour power' (Avis 2007: 176).

Acknowledgement and understanding by practitioners as well as policymakers of the ironies in the language used and the practice developed through the mediation of that language would support a move towards a more meaningful curriculum, particularly at lower levels. Facilitating these understandings amongst teachers would also require significant policy movement. If young people are to be enabled to generate greater cultural capital and potential for agency, then teachers too must have greater potential for agency than is

possible within the current context of the instrumental, centralised curriculum they are expected to teach, which emphasises 'busy work' and the development of self esteem. This could only be achieved by changes to the teacher training curriculum, itself instrumental and centralised, and a reintroduction of subjects which might help generate the political and social understandings teachers need to develop more meaningful forms of pedagogy– such as the sociology, philosophy and history of education.

The consideration given to the power of discourse should be extended to the specific use of language such as choice and opportunity, which, in the interests of truth and morality should at least be clearly defined and not used to suggest that the outcomes of diverse and divided pathways are likely to be similar, or even that the choices *within* one pathway are directly comparable to another. This should extend from policy discourse to practice in areas such as IAG and would mean that *honest*, clear and comprehensive careers advice and guidance should be available for all young people which clearly outlines the benefits and disadvantages of each route on offer. For example, that an NVQ in engineering done as part of an apprenticeship carries greater economic currency than one done as a training programme at college or with a training provider, that a level 2 will generate fewer opportunities than a level 3 and that an engineering degree will generate greater economic return and career opportunities than any of the other options but will take longer to achieve and will involve greater initial cost to the individual. This is particularly important as choices are made earlier (Colley *et al* 2008) and those choices can be defining in terms of eventual occupational outcome.

Summary

The reality of vocational opportunities is then very different to the smoke and mirrors of the illusion marketed by government. Those who succeed in 'hanging in' and find their way to work in the field they wanted to enter, have often had to revise down their aspirations –carers and shop assistants instead of nurses and technicians –whilst those who find themselves unable to continue or to conform to the requirements of Lifelong Learning 'opportunities' withdraw from their courses, in an act of agency which places them firmly within the government deficit model of those who do not engage and results in blame being

attributed by the state to the individual (Ainley and Corney 1990:94-95) for failing to meet their perceived civic responsibility of engaging with lifelong learning. This is despite those young people having made a rational choice which involves the exchange of immediate financial capital, albeit at a low level, for a vague, insubstantial promise of something better at the end of a much extended transition.

Thus, far from these young people being able to access choices and opportunities which would lead to a secure future in a high skill economy, they are structurally positioned, perhaps inevitably, to make choices that are not their own, and to be denied the kind of opportunity which might enable them to achieve their aspirations. These young people are, then, opportunity-less, but are still sold the illusion that they can do or be anything whilst being engaged in low level, 'busy' activities (rather than learning) in preparation for low pay, low skill employment. Policy approaches of this nature form the basis of a massive immorality, in which young people are offered a fantasy of impossible dreams and non-existent opportunities if only they engage with low level vocational education within a divided education system which 'contributes to the reproduction of social inequality' (Colley, 2006:27). Rethinking policy in these areas is essential if the system is to have any chance of becoming less divided more socially just, enabling at least some young people to make the world a different place.

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