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**Researching 'With', Not 'On': Engaging Foundation GNVQ Students in the  
Research Process**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses practical and methodological issues arising from ongoing case study research exploring the hopes, aspirations and learning identity of 4 cohorts of GNVQ Foundation (level 1) students in 2 English General Further Education (FE) colleges. This paper focuses on work with the student participants in the study and poses a number of questions. How can young people be engaged with a research process? How can that process be meaningful to them in the context of their lives and experiences? How can the significant ethical issues involved with working with these students be addressed? Part of the thesis for this work has been the lack of value placed on students enrolled on Foundation level programmes. Therefore, it was important to demonstrate value for them throughout this process, and one way in which this was achieved was by engaging the young people with the research process as actively as possible. Working within a Social Justice theoretical framework, and specifically considering the notion of knowledge/power relationships the paper outlines the participative approach which was taken in the development of interview questions, informed by the 'arenas of action and centres of choice' described by Ball et. al (2000:148). Further, it explores the practical issues and ethical tensions which arose associated with respecting the young people and facilitating their involvement in the research process whilst working within the constraints placed by their level of experience and understanding, and discusses some of the unanticipated challenges that arose from this process. The paper concludes with a discussion of the way the research has evolved in response to these issues and of the 'added value' to the research which has arisen from the participants' engagement with the process.

## **Introduction**

This research considers the aspiration and learning identity of four groups of students who were undertaking a level 1 programme (approximately equivalent to grades D-G at GCSE) during the academic year 2004/2005. The initial focus of the research was Foundation GNVQ, an area which has tended to remain outside much official discourse about GNVQ' (Bathmaker, 2001:86), but this was extended, at the suggestion of the organisation, to include a group of students undertaking a new in-house level 1 programme at Woodlands College. This programme consisted of multiple short courses with individual accreditation supported by Basic Skills and one day a week working towards a vocational option: these included Art and Design, Fashion, Business and IT.

Most of the students who participated in the study had progressed to their course from school. However, a small number had arrived from special needs provision within the college of Further Education (FE) at which they were enrolled. Most of the students were aged 16 or 17 though a few were older. The eldest, James, was undertaking the level 1 in-house programme at Woodlands College. He had spent the previous five years enrolled on various special needs provision and was 22 at the time of interview.

Within the current policy framework Level 1 students in general and foundation students in particular represent an 'invisible cohort' (Atkins, forthcoming 2006). This group of young people have not achieved at school, and are acknowledged within current government policy only by default i.e. in the absence of a level 2 qualification, rather than because they are working to achieve level 1. They are a marginalised group of learners who have very complex learning needs, often arising from complex lives and disrupted home backgrounds (Wellington and Cole, 2004: 101/102) and their transition from school (which has often been a negative experience) to adult life and to work is likely to be extended. A group of Health and Social Care GNVQ Foundation students participated in this research and many aspired to be nurses. It will take a minimum of seven years (four in FE and three in Higher Education (HE)) for any of them to achieve this, and at least two years to achieve the Governments stated minimum level of credential for employability. Bates (1997) has suggested that there is a need to undertake

research which considers young people's values, life experiences, social contexts and perspectives in order to be able to provide the sort of post-compulsory education which will 'articulate their lives and learning careers' as proposed by Bloomer (1996, cited Bates 1997). There is, therefore, a need to understand how young people perceive the reality of their lives, and how they contextualise their learning programme as a part of that life. Ball et. al. (2000) demonstrated that transitions are extended and messy processes which do not always result in the anticipated outcomes, even for those young people who do not suffer from the multiple disadvantage experienced by most level 1 students. In developing understanding about the transition experiences of these learners, it may be possible to move from the divisive pedagogical model currently found in England, which fails to 'articulate lives and learning careers' but which contributes to the replication of social class and to the structural discrimination experienced by these young people, and work towards the development of a theoretically and empirically derived model of productive pedagogy, such as that proposed by Lingard (2005) which he argues may be seen as socially just and appropriate in a post-modern, globalised society.

### **Researching with – a conceptual framework**

The wish to research 'with' and not 'on' arose from moral and ethical concerns about social justice, and more technical concerns about the validity of empirical research in which the interpretation of data is exclusively that of the researcher but is represented as the 'truth' about a particular group. The power in the researcher/participant relationship is inevitably with the researcher, who often inhabits a very different social and political context to that of the participants and in turn this can increase the oppression of the participants through specific gendered or class based interpretations of the research process and data. This is particularly the case where other participants in the research are from traditionally oppressed groups, such as women, those with disabilities or people from specific ethnic groups with a history of oppression.

It may be argued that Level 1 students form a group which experiences oppression at many levels. Despite living within a 'democracy', if not a 'meritocracy' these young people are stigmatized, and structurally and institutionally oppressed in terms of their

social class, gender, racial group, perceived academic ability determined by level of credential, by caring responsibilities, by social perception and in some cases by disability. Thus, each young person who agreed to participate in this research reflected an individual, but multi-faceted case of multiple oppressions which resulted in many cases in exclusion from mainstream society. This exclusion is reinforced by a government policy which promotes credentialism whilst failing to recognise any value in a level one credential, thus devaluing the holder of that credential, and which also utilises a deficit model of social exclusion described by (Colley, 2003:169), thus attributing only perceived negative qualities to people who are categorised in this way.

Therefore, to research 'with' and not 'on' formed part of a response to this problem of the politics of power and the degree of exclusion and discrimination experienced by level 1 students. Fine (1994) has argued that intellectuals carry a responsibility to engage with struggles for democracy and justice whilst Griffiths (1998:114/115) outlines different forms of collaborative relationship (i.e researching with, not on), of 'joint theorizing and action' within the context of the power of agency and argues that such relationships are a means for developing empowerment, voice and ultimately social justice. The participatory approach developed in this research has been, in part, an attempt to respond to these arguments. This involved a re-thinking of the relationship with the participants in the research, and consideration of ways in which a more collaborative and empowering relationship could be engendered, such as developing the more dialogical process advocated by Gitlin and Russell (1994:184).

### **Research Context**

The methodology for this study involved the use of a case study approach. At each stage, however, the research was evaluated and discussed with the student participants as a means for developing inclusive strategies for the next stage of the process. Planned data collection methods included participant observation, examination of documentary records and interviews with professionals. Other data, acquired by serendipity rather than design included samples of student work, some of which reflected lives and cultures. This was offered by the students and will contribute to the final analysis. The key source of data

however, has been interviews conducted with 31 young people enrolled on level 1 programmes in two colleges: Woodlands College in Midport in the Midlands and St. Dunstan's College in Townsville in the North of England. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to give the opportunity to explore individual points of interest with the students.

The students formed four groups from the two colleges as follows: from Woodlands College, Group A was a group of GNVQ Foundation IT students and Group B were a level 1 group who were enrolled on the College's in-house programme. Both groups were diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity. Groups C and D were from St. Dunstan's College. Group C were a group of almost exclusively male students (the single female withdrew part way through the year). The group was ethnically mixed, but in numbers disproportionate to the local community; 60% of the group came from ethnic minority backgrounds, predominantly Pakistani, whereas the ethnic minority groupings in the local area represented approximately 4% of the community ([www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk)). These students were enrolled on a GNVQ Foundation IT programme. Group D was a cohort of GNVQ Foundation Health and Social Care students. This all female group was representative of the local community in terms of ethnicity.

Both colleges, though geographically distant from one another, are in areas which suffered significantly from the industrial decline of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Both serve areas of considerable disadvantage according to government measures. In 2004 educational achievement according to government measures (5 GCSE grades at A\*-C), was below the national average of 53.7% in both towns, but much higher in Townsville (46%) than Midport (37.8%). Unsurprisingly, Midport also fared particularly badly according to the indices of multiple deprivation ([www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination)) with an overall rank of 7 out of 354 local authorities in which number 1 is the most deprived. Townsville scored 63 on the same measure.

### **Early Participation**

The first step in developing a dialogical, participative research process was to involve some of the participants in the research design. As a result of this, one of the four groups of students contributed to the development of the interview schedule. In addition to the moral and ethical reasons for this participation, discussed above, methodologically it ensured that the investigation was grounded in the reality of the participants' lives.

Group A from Woodlands College was approached to participate in the development of the schedule. This was a pragmatic decision, as access to St. Dunstan's college was still under negotiation, and there was a limited time frame, dictated by the academic year, in which to develop the interview schedule and conduct the research.

In exploring issues around aspiration and learning identity, the starting point was to consider what was important to these students and which aspects of their lives should be explored. These questions were put to a group of mixed gender, mixed race GNVQ Foundation students who had recently begun their programme. In order to stimulate a response, the students were shown a pre – prepared flip chart (fig. 1) showing a diagram based on the model of 'arenas of action and centres of choice' described by Ball et. al (2000:148). This model describes the different aspects of a young persons life and provides a framework for understanding the transition experiences of young people as they seek to negotiate the different arenas. Using this as a starting point, it was explained to the group that all these parts of their life would be important to them, but sometimes one part might be more or less important – for example, if there was friction at home, or someone was ill, this area might assume greater importance. To illustrate this, the circle surrounding home was extended during the explanation. (Fig. 1)



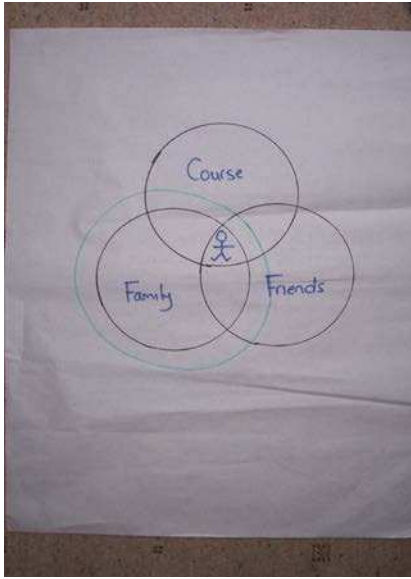


Fig. 1

The group was then subdivided into small friendship groups. Using flip chart, a medium with which they were familiar, the group was asked to identify the most important factors in their lives.

Perhaps reflecting differing priorities or possibly differing understanding or interpretation of the task, there was a difference in emphasis in the themes which arose from the students work. Despite this, they all ascribed importance to broadly similar areas. The themes which arose from the first group placed greatest emphasis on money and the course that they were enrolled on and generated questions which were related largely to the course itself and to financial issues, such as ‘Do you like your course?’ and ‘Do you get EMA (Educational Maintenance Allowance<sup>1</sup>)’. The themes which arose from a second group, a mixed group of three male and three female students also emphasised aspects of the course. This group had, however, asked for the support of their tutor during the activity and it seems probable that this influenced the emphasis in their responses.

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<sup>1</sup>EMA is a means tested allowance of up to £30 per week, payable to young people between 16-19 in full time education. Payment depends on regular attendance.



Figure 2.

Amongst the third group, consisting of three female and one male student the activity engendered considerable debate and was most productive in terms of ideas and outcomes (fig. 2). These young people had a wider range of important issues to share which seemed to suggest a greater concern with the family and leisure activities (Ball et. al. 2000: 148) rather than the course, although this did feature in their responses. This could have reflected the gender split within the group all of whom came from traditional working class backgrounds with fixed gender roles.

Finally, a group of three male British Asian students gave responses which reflected the greatest concern with the future and eventual employment (see fig. 3, below); the emphasis on the course was in terms of how this might help to facilitate them achieving their ambitions, which were heavily influenced by the perceived success of extended family members. This seemed to suggest that this group had clearer aspirations (a good business) than their peers. It was evident from this early activity that there were significant gender and racial differences in the identification of 'important' which would need further exploration at the data analysis stage.

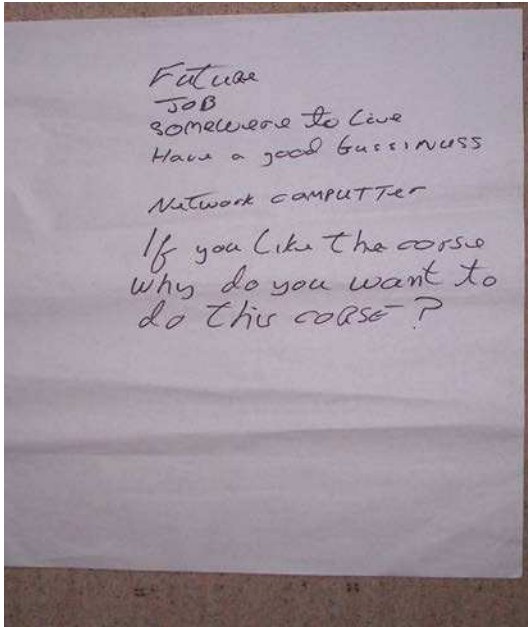


Fig. 3

The questions and ideas arising from each point on each flip chart were compared, and most appeared on more than one occasion. All were used to generate the questions used in the interview schedule, together with two additional questions relating to GCSE grades and parental support which were included to facilitate exploration of possible reasons for low achievement at school and to assess the level of support available to the young people participating in the research.

### **Developing the process, facilitating involvement**

Once the interview schedule had been completed, an initial meeting was held with each of the student groups to discuss the research. The explanations given were supplemented by an A4 handout which explained the purpose of the research, how the students might participate, and the ethical framework for the research. Handouts, a medium with which the students were familiar, were used throughout the process to summarise information given verbally and to act as a point of reference for the students. These were all produced on a single side of A4 paper, and made use of illustrations and white space in order to ensure they were accessible to all members of the student group. Language was checked for readability, again to ensure that each document was accessible to all participants, bearing in mind that some had English as a second language and many had very low levels of functional literacy (below level 1). All handouts also included contact details in

case any student had questions or concerns they wished to raise at any time and students were encouraged to use them to comment on, and criticise, the process 'so far'.

Subsequent to the initial meeting those students who agreed to participate were interviewed in small friendship groups. All participants were interviewed at least once, with the exception of one student from St. Dunstan's College who did not wish to participate, but who later 'opted in' to some written activities, and five students from Woodlands College who contributed to the question development activity, but chose to withdraw prior to interview. The interviews, which were tape recorded and later transcribed, were carried out during the course of the academic year, and a number of factors influenced when they could take place. One of the colleges, for example, had an OFSTED inspection during the year, and was unwilling for me to visit in the weeks preceding the inspection. As a result of this, students were interviewed at different times during the year, something which might have influenced their responses. Therefore, those students who were interviewed very early in the academic year were re-interviewed towards the end of their programme, to confirm the accuracy of data and identify any bias which might have arisen as a result of the timing of the interviews.

At the visit following interview, each participant was given two copies of their transcript, one to keep and one to annotate. Most students chose to do this in the groups in which they had been interviewed. They made only minor amendments, such as to the names of the schools they had attended – no student wished to change content in terms of their opinions or other data they had given, or indeed to amplify it. Whilst this may indicate satisfaction with the integrity of the data they had contributed, it is more likely to have been a reflection of the fact that the students could not imagine any eventuality which would lead them to alter their responses, thus leading them to place very little relative value on an activity perceived by them to be repetitive and unnecessary.

Additional data was gathered from the student participants' using participant observation during sessions in college. This activity was carried out with three of the four groups, using a 'stream of consciousness' approach. The level of participation was dictated

largely by the tutor on each occasion – during the first session it was only possible to sit and take notes, on the second there was some interaction with both students and tutor, and during the final observation, with the Health and Social Care group, the tutor and students, aware that I had previously taught this subject, asked for my contribution to the lesson. Issues around coursework and inspection meant that it was not possible to observe the fourth group. During the two final observations, students read and commented on the notes that had been taken, as well as contributing their own opinions about what was happening in the class.

At this point in the fieldwork, a debate with participants about anonymisation was instrumental in my suggestion that they chose their own pseudonym. The response to this was interesting, and a clear gender difference was reflected. Most male students found the process amusing, and offered ‘joke’ names, most of which were related to aspects of perceived masculinity, such as sexual prowess. A majority of the female students chose the names of contemporary ‘celebrities’ and there was a relationship between these choices, which appeared rooted in notions of wealth, fame and celebrity, and the aspirations expressed by the students during interview. Interestingly, almost all students, irrespective of gender, expressed (often unrealistic) dreams and aspirations at interview, anticipating both wealth and celebrity. This was the case even where the student had an apparently clear career aim which would seem to preclude wealth and fame, such as nursing or working in a sports shop.

A final visit was made to share my interpretation of the emerging issues from the data with the students, and for them to evaluate this. The emerging themes had been summarised on a final handout, again making use of pictorial representation, white space and clear, unambiguous language. Two copies of the handout were given to each participant – one to keep, and one to comment on. In order to encourage the students to use some form of analysis, they were asked to say whether they thought each statement was true or false, and why they thought each statement was true or false. The responses to this were variable. Some students wrote copiously, providing considerable, rich, data, others made brief (sometimes unclear) annotations and some simply identified true or

false. Wellington (2000:24/25) has suggested that this approach, in which the participants effectively checked that my interpretation accurately reflected their views and attitudes, is a form of methodological triangulation. However, I would argue that it's instrumental value is less than it's moral and ethical value, in that it provided a further mechanism for demonstrating respect and value for the young people participating. Further, such an approach also provides a basis for greater insight into the feelings and views of the participants:

‘Conceiving of the activity of interpretation in terms of an ontological condition (i.e. as a fundamental grounds of our being-in –the-world) rather than as a methodological device is what puts the inquirer on the same plane of understanding, so to speak, as those he or she inquires into’

Schwandt 1998:229

### **Methodological Challenges**

Communication with the participant group formed the most challenging methodological issue of the research. It was necessary to explain the research process to the students in clear and unambiguous terms, using language with which they were familiar; this meant providing verbal clarity whilst ensuring there was no loss of meaning in my own communication. Ultimately, for example, this meant describing research as ‘finding out’. The unsophisticated language used in the explanation was necessary to engage these young people and facilitate them to have sufficient understanding of a somewhat abstract process to contribute to it in a meaningful way.

Verbally, the students use of less sophisticated language provided great clarity of meaning on almost all occasions, unobscured by rhetoric, as they contributed their views on life, educational credentials and the transition from education to work. Fine (1994:20), discussing her work on low-income adolescents in America reported that they gave ‘vivid’ accounts and were readily critical of society and the education system. This suggests a comparatively high level of verbal ability and social awareness, similar to that expressed by the level 1 and foundation students in this study.

Occasionally, however, young people did find themselves 'lost for words' as they struggled to express a feeling or opinion in written form, particularly when they were asked to review my early impressions of the data and to make comments on this. This interpretation was presented as a handout, with each theme summarised into a short sentence, and space to comment in writing beneath. Natalie, a Woodlands student who had made an articulate and critical contribution in her interview, wrote 'They are all true but I don't know why I think this'. This was surprising given her verbal contributions (she knew exactly why she 'thought things'!) and may have reflected a low level of functional literacy, something which was evident across each of the groups who participated. Wellington and Cole (2004:103) noted similar difficulties in their research, reporting that they had to support articulate young people to complete questionnaires when it became apparent that they had difficulty with the written word. The difficulties experienced by the participants' in this study may have had implications for the eventual interpretation of the data, which might have been better shared verbally. It may be argued that the voice of the students' was ultimately diminished by their difficulty in using this medium, and that they may have been able to give a richer, and more detailed interpretation had this part of the research process been carried out verbally, perhaps in small groups in the same way the interviews had been conducted.

### **Ethical Tensions**

'The MAIN CRITERION for educational research is that it should be ethical.....Ethical considerations outweigh all others' (Wellington, 2000:54). The need to consider the potential ethical issues at all times and in all aspects of the research process and the human relationships encompassed within that process is also identified by Denzin and Lincoln (2000:19). The significant ethical issues anticipated in undertaking this study were those of informed consent and considerations around the use of participants' voices.

Christians (2000:139) has argued that meaningful application of informed consent 'generates ongoing disputes', whilst Fine et. al. (2000:107/128) pose the question 'Inform(ing) and Consent: who's informed and who's consenting?' and raise issues about

the validity of informed consent. Within this study it has been necessary to consider the ethical implications of requesting 'informed' consent from an audience, consisting largely of student participants who will be unaware of the human relationship issues arising from ethnographic studies, and who will, by definition therefore, be giving consent but not informed consent. Whilst this may satisfy some ethical guidelines, in terms of conducting educational research as moral practice Sikes and Goodson (2003:48) have suggested that 'this view reduces moral concerns to the procedural: a convenient form of methodological reductionism'. This issue has been addressed by taking a situated, reflexive approach, whilst bearing in mind that 'taking account of my own position does not change reality' (Patai 1994:67). At a practical level, this has involved keeping participants involved and informed throughout, using both verbal and written forms of communication, and attempting to establish an ongoing dialogue with participants through the medium of email as well as face to face on my visits to them.

The engagement with participants throughout the study, in which they contributed to the development of the research process and to the interpretation of the data, also enabled a dialogue about the criteria for what could become public knowledge. This dialogue was critical in demonstrating respect for persons as well as promoting participant interpretation and enabling the voice of the students' to be heard. As Bassey (1999:74) has argued, researchers taking data from persons should do so in ways which recognise those persons' initial ownership of the data and which respect them as fellow human beings who are entitled to dignity and privacy.

It may be argued that creating opportunities for participants to interpret and analyse data demonstrates respect for the people involved, and avoids conducting research which might be criticised as 'exploitative' or unethical. However, how to make 'voices heard without exploiting or distorting those voices is (a) vexatious question' (Olesen 2000:231). The control of the interpretation and selection of the data to be used lies largely with the person conducting the research and as such is open to misinterpretation in a variety of ways. Fine (1992b) has discussed different ways in which the participants' voices may be misused. These include the use of individuals' data to reflect groups, making assumptions



that voices are free of power relations, and failing to acknowledge researchers own position in relation to the voices. She develops these arguments further (1994:19) in her discussion on ventriloquism, in which she considers the implications of the researcher exerting control over the data by electing to use extracts which underpin her own values and perspectives. A further consideration is that of the interpretation of data and its relationship to 'truth'. Any work seeking to construct knowledge about the identity of young people, and to understand how they perceive reality, inevitably involves extensive interpretation of the contributions made by participants in the research. In any act of interpretation, however impartial the writer aspires to be, the person writing the text has a stronger voice than those contributing to it (Simons, 2000:40) and, whilst the text may be written with integrity, reality or truth can only ever reflect the perception of the individual. Indeed, Usher (2000:27) has argued that 'all claims to truth are self-interested, partial and specific'. These debates highlight some of the ethical and philosophical dilemmas raised by the use of the voices of others, including the tension between the need to 'listen to quiet, less powerful voices' (Griffiths, 1998:96) and to reflect those voices in such a way as to retain the original integrity and meaning of the words.

Griffiths (1998:127) also considered the issues around the use of voice and proposed an analysis of the concept of voice, arguing that exploitation of the researched can be avoided by using such an analysis as a framework for understanding what is and what is not exploitative. Using this analysis supported a reflexive approach and provided a framework to support an appropriate and ethical response to issues as they arose.

In fact, the most significant problem in the representation of voice, and the selection of data to be used was anonymisation of the participants. Those students who agreed to participate were happy to give information, and to contribute to all parts of the process, including giving (often critical) opinions on my initial interpretation of the data. However, almost without exception the young people were very reluctant to be anonymised, despite having disclosed intimate details about their lives. These covered a wide range of highly sensitive issues such as a history of care, criminal activity, pregnancy and medical problems. Interestingly, all the disclosures were made almost

ordinary in the context of the language and lack of emotion used during each disclosure, perhaps reflecting the huge complexities of life faced by these young people on a daily basis. Therefore, the dialogue that evolved became less about what I, as the researcher could use, but more about me explaining the necessity for anonymising the participants and their institutions and explaining the potential consequences of making some of this information public. This conflicted with the students' wish to be recognised for their contribution: recognition was perceived to be others beyond the group knowing both that they had participated and what they had contributed. Ultimately, it became necessary to deny the young people the voice that they might have chosen, and which seemed to be related to notions of fame and celebrity, in order to give them a more public voice which could contribute to the debate on level 1 provision and the lives of students who access it.

Keira, a Health and Social Care student from St. Dunstan's College, posed the second major ethical dilemma. Prior to the interview, the class tutor had informed me that Keira had carer responsibilities for her mother, but that the college was unaware of the nature or extent of these responsibilities – Keira would not discuss her home situation. She was interviewed with three friends and throughout the interview process sat holding hands with one of these friends. She spoke quietly and in monosyllables in response to questions, and was much less forthcoming than her peers, who were all very keen to contribute. When asked what her family thought about her course Keira became visibly anxious, and did not respond. Another group member, Brady, reported that Keira's mum was disabled and 'she can't talk to her about it'. Subsequently, whenever discussion with the group referred to family in any way Keira began to cry and was comforted by her friends. I suggested discontinuing the interview, but both she and her friends refused. The group had recently completed a unit on their learning programme covering confidentiality in care settings. Despite this, and my own explanations about confidentiality they retained an imperfect understanding of the term, the other students suggesting that Keira disclosed her circumstances to me, and reassuring her that 'all this is confidential and she won't say anything to anyone, ever'.

Inevitably, this created two significant dilemmas for me. Should I carry on as requested by Keira and her friends, or discontinue the interview in view of her distress? Should I disclose that distress (and any of Keira's confidences) to the tutor, in view of her apparent significant home difficulties, and breach the trust and understanding of the group? What was the right course of action in terms of valuing the individual? Ultimately, I made a decision to carry on, despite Keira's distress, because she and her friends were adamant that this should happen. I did, however, suggest that she talked these issues through with her tutor. In doing so, I was uncomfortably aware that I had crossed the line between 'researcher' and 'pastoral support', but felt that such a response was both necessary and appropriate given Keira's level of distress and vulnerability. Fortunately, this problem was resolved after the interview, when, supported by her friends Keira asked to talk to her tutor and disclosed the extent of her responsibilities, which involved being the sole carer for a severely disabled, bed-ridden mother. The day before, her mother had been admitted to the local hospice for respite care. As a result of this disclosure, Keira was provided with ongoing support by the college support team.

### **Adding Value**

This study took on an organic form as, at each stage in the process through dialogue with the young people participating, different methods of involving them were discussed and implemented. Using this approach, rather than being restricted to a rigid, pre-planned methodology has facilitated a far greater involvement of young people than I originally anticipated would be possible. Such involvement has not only enriched the process in terms of human relationship and experience, but has enhanced the research in terms of the wealth of data which has ultimately been generated. This data has included unsought material such as work which the students wished to share, particularly where this was electronic and could be emailed to me. On one occasion, this included the draft pages for a website asking for my comments. Ultimately, the greatest added value has been the privilege of working with so many enthusiastic young people whose dreams and aspirations remained undimmed despite the complex and difficult circumstances they experience in their daily lives.

The early findings of this research show a dichotomy – almost without exception, these students had very high aspirations. Many also had significant academic potential despite their relative lack of academic credentials. However, only 2 of the 31 interviewed knew how to achieve those ambitions in terms of the progression route or credentials they might need, confirming Bathmaker's (2001) findings. Truly, these were impossible dreams. Whilst this data requires further analysis, such findings demonstrate the significant structural and policy failings which will effectively deny many of these young people the opportunity to achieve their aspirations. Finally, the outcomes of this study highlight the urgent need for further research in this area to generate a greater understanding of the complexities of the lives and transitions of these young people, in order to facilitate a more constructive policy context and to aid the development of the productive pedagogy described by Lingard (2005) which might enable at least some of these young people to realise their dreams and aspirations.

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