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Curriculum projects, learner agency and young people's fullness of life

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A recent article in this journal suggests that although *learner agency* is central to understanding young people's engagement with the curriculum, there is little exploration of such ideas in the field. In response, they argued for an Archerian approach to learner agency and a contextually, interpersonally, intra-personally and temporally situated curriculum that suggests the centrality of young people's educational reflexivity and associated learner agency for mediating the structural aspects of their educational lives. We reflect on this thinking through the lens of a curriculum project the design of which was similarly inspired by the work of Margaret Archer. We do so through the eyes of Grace, one of the young participants in the project. We learn from Grace that learner agency and curriculum engagement is not, as Archer's framework suggests, a substantively self-authored reflexive endeavour that can be made amenable to change through a bespoke curriculum project. Rather learner (agency) in young people might be more accurately theorised in pragmatist terms as something embedded in the drama of the fullness of their everyday lives of which the curriculum represents just a tiny part. The implications for the field of learner agency and curriculum studies are discussed.

Keywords: curriculum; Archer; reflexivity; agency; fullness of life; pragmatism

Introduction

Recently Manyukhina and Wyse (2019) suggested in this journal that although the issue of agency in general social theory had been a constant concern in the academic fields of sociology, anthropology, social psychology and psychology this had not been the case concerning learner agency in the field of curriculum studies. Given the centrality of purposeful doing in how young people might engage with the curriculum and hence learn, this seemed like a major deficiency. In reviewing this field of investigation, Manyukhina and Wyse note that the limited number of studies that do focus on learning agency seem to align with either one of two major lines of thinking. The first suggests that both young people's purposeful sense and exercise of educational

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thinking and doing concerning curriculum engagement and schooling more generally is in many respects determined by cultures and structures of class and their associated habitus and related capitals (Archer *et al.*, 2018), gender and ethnicity (Phoenix, 2009), place (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013) and more generally through the intersection of such factors (Archer, 2001). Such thinking is akin to the notion of various interconnected social hydraulics producing structured socialised selves that catapult young people into particular ways of behaving in mainstream classrooms. In many respects, these types of studies emanate from the field of sociology as a way of explaining patterns of curriculum engagement and academic attainment associated with particular social ascriptions.

From a different perspective, Manyukhina and Wyse note a second line of thinking that suggests that young people are the self-authoring masters of their own destiny. As such, curricula and pedagogical interventions are designed to support young people's self-authoring agency. The curriculum might then focus on developing both individual disciplinary cognitive capabilities and the 'mental muscle' required to enhance such capabilities. The latter might include developing positive mindfulness and growth-oriented mindsets (Dweck, 2006), or notions of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and self-regulation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007) as a way of enhancing resilience. Such skills/capabilities would then be owned by the individual and transferred to different curriculum settings as and when they might be needed (Bradley & Conway, 2016).

As Manyukhina and Wyse note both major lines of thinking are problematic, as each has theoretical and empirical limitations. For deterministic arguments, the limitation is about explaining how and why young people that in theory should not engage and succeed with the school curriculum in fact do so and vice versa. For individualised arguments, generally emanating from the field of psychology, the challenge is about accounting for the strong patterns of association between attainment and class, ethnicity, gender and place that continue to be in evidence, even given the attempts to counter such outcomes by appropriately focused curriculum and pedagogical interventions.

Given these challenges there is a growing recognition that such approaches to thinking about the dualism of structure and agency require a more sophisticated and nuanced approach (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Such an approach would interconnect or combine both sides—one that might account for individual agency in structural/cultural sociological accounts and in contrast, those that might deal with the strong relational, cultural and historic dynamics of society in individualised psychological approaches. Building on the work and ideas of a particular group of sociologists and (social) psychologists—including structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), reflexive modernisation (Beck *et al.*, 1994), social cognitive theories (e.g. Bandura, 1986) and ecological approaches (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)—a richer and more nuanced multidisciplinary theoretical approach is suggested that expands those alternatives that are either structuralist and deterministic in orientation or give unalloyed primacy to subjective agency. However, although such arguments might appear at first reading to provide greater analytical sophistication around the dualism of structure and agency what critical commentators contend is that such approaches appear

to conflate structure and agency without providing analytical clarity as to what each does in relation to other (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019).

Manyukhina and Wyse's (2019) response to such concerns is to radically rethink learner agency through the work of Margaret Archer (2003). Her critical realist perspective suggests the analytical separateness of structure and agency, each with their own causal powers all the while recognising that structures are only empirically evident once enacted through the reflexivity and agency of individuals over time. For Archer such reflexivity occurs as inner reflexive deliberations—or inner dialogues—that reflect the interplay between people's nascent and evolving 'concerns' (the importance of what they care about) and their 'context' (the continuity or discontinuity of their social environment). However, based on our own experiences of developing and implementing an Archerian inspired curriculum project, we arrived at different conclusions about reflexivity, learner agency and the curriculum. Through the particulars of one student's life (Grace; pseudonyms are used throughout), we show how curriculum engagement cannot be understood primarily as a self-authored reflexive and mediating agentic endeavour. Rather, what young people such as Grace think and do with regards to curriculum projects and schooling more generally is perhaps better understood in pragmatist terms as an integral and constitutive part of the fullness of their evolving historical, cultural and material social experiences of everyday lives (Roth, 2019). This suggests the centrality of the concrete actions of the integrated young person in environment practices that locates agency in the first instance in experience rather than reflexivity, which involves both doing and undergoing (Dewey, 1934/2008), including the undergoing of one's own actions (e.g. Roth, 2011). It is this second aspect, the agents of agency who are subject and subjected to the reigning (internal, external) conditions, that has not been attended to in existing frameworks of agency.

In developing our thinking, we are guided by a number of theoretical influences that derive from the tradition of pragmatism as it was developed with respect to philosophy (e.g. Dewey, 1929/1958), sociology (e.g. Mead, 1938) and psychology (e.g. James, 1890). This tradition overcomes all dualisms by replacing the *thing*—the subjects and objects of learner agency, such as Grace and the curriculum we designed—at the heart of much curriculum and student agency analysis by the *event*—the curriculum experience of Grace as part of her school and wider life—as the fundamental unit of analysis and theoretical category (James, 1907). Importantly, the event is to be thought in evental terms where the very notions of subject, object, agency and so on have to be rethought as events, that is, as continuously in flux. For example, there never *is* a subject, but always only a subject continuously becoming other than itself and, because the future always comes with novelty, other than what could have been foreseen (Roth, 2019). That is, nature as a whole then 'is viewed as consisting of events rather than substances' (Dewey, 1929/1958, p. xi). In this evolving universe the fundamental aspect of life is an irreducible doing and undergoing (Dewey, 1932/1985). The experience of organisms (e.g. students) can be understood in terms of the organism's *functional coordination* with their environment (Garrison, 2001; Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Here, a point that is not clear from previous studies, both organism and environment are events rather than things that are brought

into contact by means of tools—it is only in this way that we can capture the sense of aliveness of being alive (e.g. Ingold, 2011). Events either overlap in some way (temporally, spatially), and therefore, have essential aspects in common, or they do not overlap, and then, are external to one another and have no effect on each other. The relation between actions and consequences thus cannot ever be causal because they are part of the same irreducible event (Dewey, 1929/1958). In experience, the person and its environment form one unit in the manner exemplified above where the beginnings and endings of actions lie in the environment (James, 1912; Dewey, 1932/1985). This relational perspective implies that the activities of an individual can never be fully understood in isolation; even the act of thinking involves a back-and-forth movement between organism and environment (Il'enkov, 1977; Mikhailov, 2001). Dewey therefore speaks about 'organism-in-environment-as-a-whole' (Dewey & Bentley, 1949/1999).

One upshot of this relational pragmatic perspective is that within the enacted curriculum field, young people such as Grace, her teachers and the curriculum project become immanent in each other (cf. Roth, 2019): each act is woven into Grace's and her teacher's continuities of experience, although for each their set of continuities reflect different evolving and historic biographic combinations of recurrent experiential patterns. Any such continuity, therefore, is the result of all the (social, natural) events in which Grace (and her teachers) as agent(s) (a continuity of experience) has been part and with which she has intersected. Grace as a living individual student, therefore, emerges from the fullness of life of her relations in all the social fields that make her biography, not merely from her own reflexively mediated actions with regards to the structuring influences of her curriculum experience within school. We suggest that it is in the dynamic and evolving drama of young people's fullness of life (social action) as the unit of analysis that subjectivity and agency in the curriculum take place, 'in phases of action, rather than as something outside or preceding it' (Joas & Kilpinnen, 2006, p. 324).

What follows is our empirical and theoretical 'story' as to how we arrived at this different view about learner agency and curriculum engagement.

The curriculum project—an initial application of an Archerian approach

Our experiences of initially utilising Archer's thinking on reflexivity and agency was through a curriculum project that we devised in collaboration with a secondary school located in a highly disadvantaged urban neighbourhood in England. In this work, we developed a curriculum intervention that was designed to enable a small group of disengaged and disaffected middle year students (aged 13–14)—who in Archer's (2003) terms might have been labelled 'fractured reflexives'¹—to alter their forms of reflexivity and to re-engage purposively with the mainstream school curriculum. In particular, we focused on Archer's ideas that explored how courses of action for such young people might be enabled through their reflexive deliberations that—with appropriate levels of support—are able to subjectively determine and change their practical projects in relation to their objective structural and cultural biographical circumstances (Raffo *et al.*, 2015).

In developing our intervention, we started by exploring examples of educational curricula that might challenge what appeared to be restricted forms of educational reflexivity and agency demonstrated by the target group of young people in the school. We therefore examined curriculum and pedagogical options that focused on engaging young people with learning that made connections to their lived worlds, and in particular to their experiences within their families and communities that reflected potential funds of identity (Hedges *et al.*, 2011). Our aim was to build a curriculum around culturally resonant knowledge, and to scaffold from such *curricula of engagement* to learning of cultural capitals needed for mainstream academic success. As such, educational reflexivity and agency were to be changed and enhanced for young people if teaching and learning in school engaged with their lived worlds thereby helping to connect their specific educational experiences to emerging broader personal and social identity (Nieto, 1999).

Perhaps one of the best-known practice exemplars of such a strategy is the culturally responsive *funds of knowledge* approach (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2005).² Inspired by such an approach, our project team aimed to develop a curriculum opportunity for young people to be involved in exploring their community locales and to interview family and community members. We intended to enable students to search out and document the respective positive lifeworlds and assets around them. In our project team discussions, a theory of change was proposed that suggested that a funds of knowledge method would be invariantly reflective of all of our young people's lived context and would, therefore, be implicitly recognisable to them. Hence, although rarely utilised in their formal mainstream schooling, it would be a stimulant for reflexivity by being more inherently and intrinsically motivating and engaging. The particular issue of generating an end product at the close of the project would enable all young people to move from more peripheral positions at the start to take on, agentially central roles as they developed practical skills/competencies associated with key aspects of the intervention. Together these experiences and achievements would provide a stimulus for new forms of more autonomous educational reflexivity and agency for each young person—'I can and I am succeeding in school and I know how to'. Past research suggested that these new forms of reflexivity and agency would mediate their structural and cultural educational conditions in ways that would enable them to transfer new forms of agency to the mainstream curriculum. Such activity would then result in improved general school attendance, progression and attainment for each young person.

In conjunction with the school, we developed the curriculum intervention project 'Who Do You Think You Are?' (WDYTYA) to support a target group of students (and their families) to develop their educational reflexivity and agency by becoming reporters, collectively acting as secretariats of the community's memory. A resulting showcase was to capture (through film, book and exhibition) the history and culture of the local area, privileging the significant funds of knowledge located in local neighbourhood, family and school contexts. It was a project, therefore, that, in design, very much reflected Manyukhina and Wyse's (2019) Archerian notion that the curriculum should be contextually, interpersonally, intra-personally and temporally situated. The intervention lasted for approximately 6 months and took place in the school every Friday morning for 2 hours.

Methodology

For this study, we aimed to understand whether and how our curriculum project assisted socio-economically disadvantaged and disengaged middle year pupils to re-engage with mainstream urban schooling. We wanted to better understand the extent to which our approach resonated with the lived worlds of our young people, and hence, how it might enable new forms of educational reflexivity and agency and associated educational change. As consequence, we decided to adopt an 'ethno-case study' (Parker-Jenkins, 2018) research design where the *experiences* of the young people were the main units of analysis and the intervention and teachers/the school sub-units. *Experience* here is understood as the unity and identity of person and environment, which has practical, intellectual and affective-emotional characteristics (Dewey, 1934/2008; Vygotsky, 1994). The person and the environment being alive, *experience* is continuously unfolding, novel and surprising (Roth, 2019). In undertaking the case study research, we focused on some of the key actions and reflections about general living, school life and the intervention provided by individuals participating in the programme, and others that were central to their educational and more general lives. In collecting such data, we then documented individual stories that contained reflections and observations about their experiences in the home, school and life pursuits that together reflected their aspired and actual life pathways. Data and stories were generated through the utilisation of the following research methods.

- a detailed biographical interview with the individual,
- an interview with the individual's guardian,
- lesson observations of the individual's engagement with the project every week,
- the individual's contribution to a post-intervention focus group activity that focused on the intervention's strengths and areas for improvement,
- written evidence from key teaching staff about the individual's general school engagement/attainment pre- and post-intervention,
- detailed reflections about the individual's engagement with the project from staff involved in delivering the intervention.

With the consent of participants, interviews were audio-recorded and transcripts, together with various other related data, were later crafted into narrative portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The development of narrative portraits involves condensing interview transcripts, observations and written evidence to a page or two in length to produce a readerly text which preserves, as far as possible, the words of participants while holding on to the key ideas and themes of relevance to the research (Smyth & McInerney, 2013). Although this is an inherently political process, with rarely a single story to be told, narrative portraits can convey contextualised and descriptive accounts of the lived realities and interests of young people that cannot be captured so readily in selected quotes.

The story of Grace

How did the curriculum project help change the educational reflexivity and agency for young people in ways that mediated the structural and cultural educational

constraints in their lives? In this section, we use Grace's narrative portrait as an exemplar. In many respects it highlights starkly the multitudes of life practices, over and beyond the analytical centrality of Archer's mediating individual reflexivity, that were influencing her evolving experience, including her participation in the curriculum project and schooling more generally. We document her narrative portrait through a number of overlapping themes. An important aspect of what we learned from Grace was that her school life could not be disconnected from her home life. In our theoretical terms, her on-going experiences at home were present in her experiences while in school. Home and curriculum matters are not two spaces external to each other that are somehow brought together in a third space. Instead, home and school experiences are continuously present *within each other* and are interwoven with one another.

Grace's home life

Her family background. Grace is from Zimbabwean heritage, was born in the UK, and has lived in Manchester all of her life. Her mother passed away when she was just one year old. Thus, Grace is brought up mostly by her father. Grace's father has had a number of other relationships. Consequently, there are numerous half siblings Grace knows about, but with whom she has no contact. From this group of siblings, Grace stays in regular contact with her older sister Miriam and occasionally sees her older brother. Although Miriam and Grace live near each other, there have been years during which they have had no contact at all. This was due to Miriam's unhappy and estranged relationship with their father. Grace's father works at a university relatively close to where they live, although the family's socio-economic circumstances means that Grace is eligible for free school meals (a proxy used in England for poverty).

Deficits in early childhood family life. For most of her life, Grace's father had been the main caregiver. This resulted in what she describes as a whole number of deficits in her early upbringing. Grace suggests that this was due to her father's inability to deliver both maternal and paternal roles, which she attributed to the Zimbabwean male culture. In particular, Grace describes early problems with personal hygiene, an area of parenting considered unacceptable or inappropriate for a Zimbabwean father, where her dad offered little help. In addition, Grace also remembers that when she was in primary school her school uniform was rarely washed. Eventually, her teachers and social services supported her with clean clothes and guidance on personal hygiene.

Family life in Grace's early years was often isolated. Her father would very often work or read in the evenings/weekends at home and expect her to stay quiet and out of the way, entertaining herself. Occasionally he would help her with her homework. However, this happened infrequently. She spent most of her time as a child either entertaining herself at home playing with dolls and other toys and watching TV. She classified herself as 'addicted' to the TV and one of the first things she could do independently was to turn the TV over to the Disney Channel. Adults around her would say, 'Isn't she clever, look at her changing the channel'. She rarely did things with her

father (she learnt to ride her bike from her friends in the street) and had no experiences of family days out.

An epiphany about brutal encounters. An isolated early childhood and an associated lack of personal care are compounded by what Grace sees as a difficult even tumultuous relationship with her father. Grace did not get on very well with him, and at the start of the WDYTYA project in Year 9 (aged 13), she disclosed that there had been regular instances of over-chastisement from him. During this time where she was talking to school professionals, she described the epiphany moment when she realised for the first time that this was not the normal experience for everybody else her age. She recounts how on one particular day in primary school she went into the toilet just to 'think about it on her own'. This epiphany was consolidated by an intervention from Blessing, her stepmother, when she had stood in front of her father to prevent him from hitting her. The hitting then stopped for a year after that incident. She then made a disclosure to the school and was referred to Children's Services. Her sister, Miriam who had experienced much the same thing when she was younger, also verified such incidents. Grace explained that getting in trouble in school was often a catalyst for physical chastisement by her father. When asked why this had not changed her behaviour, she explained that life at home was 'a tiny space'. When she got into school she felt so 'giddy' with the excitement of the bigness of the place that she would just be 'silly and get into trouble' before she knew it—impulsive behaviour that resonated with what many teaching staff had observed.

Her closeness to, and estrangement from, her sister. At the start of the WDYTYA project, Grace moved out of her fathers' house and lived with Miriam, with whom she felt very close. Miriam is a nurse and has two children of her own aged 6 years and 2 months when Grace moved in. Miriam was off work on maternity leave at this point, giving her more time to spend with Grace and taking on the maternal role in Grace's life. In so doing, she would often set down behavioural expectations of Grace at home, particularly in relation to her school-related work. This included prescribing 3 hours study each evening whether or not Grace had any homework.

Miriam also offered personal guidance to Grace. She was concerned that friends and social media appeared to be very important things to Grace and that she was quick to follow their lead and emulate their behaviour. For example, she was concerned when she saw that some of Grace's friends had put pictures on social media of themselves in swimwear. Miriam talked to Grace about this being inappropriate for a young girl of just 14 years. For Grace such experiences were about opening up new possibilities of being herself, for experiencing the newness and bigness of the social world beyond what she saw as an isolated and closed early life. Although both admitted to being very close, Miriam's attempt to set rules, maintain boundaries and ensure that Grace was supported on the 'right path' to achieve all that she was deemed capable of, were not totally appreciated by Grace. Indeed, shortly after the WDYTYA project, she returned to her father and Blessing.

Grace's school life

Problems with early schooling. Grace started primary school but lacked many of the basic skills that a child of that age would be expected to possess. For example, she recalls struggling with fine motor skills such as how to hold a pencil that in her words put her at a 'disadvantage against other children of that age'. She believed that teachers at school had to teach her skills that she should have learned from a parent at home. In school, Grace was in her words 'dumb' not enjoying school and with very few positive memories of teachers. It was the constant shouting at by teachers that made her generally miserable—the only bright spot being her relationship with the 'lunch man' who was 'kind' to her. This continued through her primary years, and every time the family moved house she moved schools ending up in three different primary schools over 5 years. It had been an unsettling time for her.

Secondary schooling and her likes, freedoms and challenges. Although Grace recognised that during primary schools she was unsettled and isolated, she contrasted those experiences with opportunities during her adolescent years in secondary school. These experiences have helped her generate a creative feeling, with an immense love for music and drama. In fact, Miriam compared Grace's 6 hours at secondary school to her being 'on stage' where 'she comes into her own'. Grace was in many respects enthusiastic about the grandeur of secondary school life but recognised her own inherited limitations that she contrasts with others: 'If you are clever and doing well in primary, you will continue to do well in secondary'. Grace described on numerous occasions her difficulties through primary school and the need to 'catch up' when she first started the secondary level. This resulted in her feeling bereft of some of the academic foundations that were implicit for others who had 'sailed straight through'. However, she has had 100% attendance throughout her schooling and 'would never dream of missing any time'. Some subjects at secondary school, such as English, she initially found boring. She acknowledged that if she found something difficult or boring she would talk too much in class and end up 'getting herself in trouble'. Although Grace found mathematics quite difficult, she said she loved her teacher who was 'weird like me'. In general terms, however, Grace saw herself as often disruptive in lessons and talked about a time when she got up and walked out: 'I had a headache and asked to go for some paracetamol and was told I could not leave the lesson, but I just got up and left anyway'. She said that she often felt guilty about behaving badly and disrupting lessons—the caveat being that this was not the case for those teachers with whom she did not get on.

Grace's love of performing arts and the WDYTYA intervention. Grace's love of music derives from her church activities where she engaged in gospel singing with the choir. Miriam in particular recalls that it had become increasingly evident through her choral singing that Grace did in fact possess a good voice. This passion grew with time and Grace was clear that this was all she cared about when she had reached Year 9—'music is literally [like] me'.

Grace stated that she was happy to be part of the WDYTYA programme, knowing that the university and school had chosen her to take part and that it contained elements of music and drama. She felt the programme to have helped her mix with people she might not have ordinarily been friends with, thereby helping her not to 'judge others'. In fact, she was surprised by how well she engaged with other students in the group: 'my favorite activity was the one where we did drama. I enjoyed that because I like doing it and it helped us explore ourselves during the acting activity'. In addition, other drama workshops enabled a short production where 'we did a play and with our play it showed who we are and how we are similar to other people. It also made us realise how we relate to each other in many different ways'. In addition, the photography sessions (Photography 2—friends) enabled her to express ideas about what she saw in others and how others photographed and saw her. Grace stated that these photography workshops and all the drama and music sessions were particularly enjoyable as they related to 'performing arts, which I love'. The music sessions actually were not part of the WDYTYA project, but the staff did try and partially adapt the programme to meet her interests. This love of the performing arts found its fullest expression in the final exhibition of the project where she performed a number of solo songs, accompanied by a pianist, which she described as a musical articulation of herself. She was at her most confident behind the microphone and her performance elicited an emotional response from both teachers and researchers. The relational potency and enthrallment of the performances captured for all of us the essence of why this art form is her career and general life ambition.

Although she liked participating in the project, her engagement was not trouble free. As in other areas of school life she would quite often 'get into trouble' with the staff running the programme largely because she quite regularly would not engage with some of its aspects that she did not like or find interesting. She thus often gravitated back to the music department whenever she got the opportunity where she would informally practice her singing. This also meant she missed project sessions. In particular, she did not attend most of the local archaeology sessions that she felt were too technical and reminded her of mathematics: 'It reminds me of maths and me and maths ... if maths was a person me and maths would be enemies!'

Although the intervention intended to bring about collaborations between students and their families, Grace did not engage family members (not even in the final exhibition). In addition, although she did not feel that the project had helped in other curriculum areas of the school it had helped her understand people better: 'Now I understand a bit more about them, so I don't judge them as much as I used to'. However, although little had changed with regards to her learning in mainstream lessons (something that was confirmed by some of Grace's schoolteachers), there was a sense in which the 'special' relationship that she had developed with Miss Harley through the programme had been a catalyst for her 'trying that little bit harder. I didn't want to make Miss Harley disappointed in me'.

In reality, all she wanted to do was to pursue her dream of singing, although she did know that a career in this area is likely to be hard to achieve and sustain: 'I know it's hard but I need to make sure I keep on doing as much as I can to be able to make that possible'. Given such passion, many elements of everyday schooling had become peripheral to Grace resulting in a lack of engagement in many elements of

school life and her becoming generally disaffected with certain school subjects and teachers—an aspect of her schooling that was creating an on-going tension between her and her sister. In this, she not only recognised that her sister was supportive of her ambition to be a singer or songwriter, but she also highlighted how her sister felt she was focusing too heavily on this one ambition. As Miriam stated, ‘Everyone wants to be a singer but you need a plan B. What happens if you wake up in 50 years’ time and you are still pursuing this?’ These warnings, however, had little impact on Grace, particularly during Year 9, although she did acknowledge and respect Miriam’s concerns: ‘She is proper serious about learning’. Grace could see the importance of a general education, but then, at least, she did not really care about it for herself. Grace firmly believed in having a good singing voice and aspired to be a famous artist. Paradoxically, this is also something in which her dad believed evidenced by the fact that he had taken her intermittently to recording studios to capture her performing her favourite songs.

Positive relationships with teachers. In many respects, one teacher has been centrally important to Grace’s life: Miss Harley. Grace (and Miriam) felt that, through her support and her numerous interventions, she has been of enormous assistance to the family. Grace acknowledged that Miss Harley had been the first to believe her about the violence she had experienced at home. Until then, Grace felt that other adults had assumed that she was ‘making things up’. Not only did Miss Harley provide her with emotional support, but also through the project that she designed and delivered in the main, believed in her capabilities. Grace recognised this belief as being key to other relationships with teachers that have contributed to her educational well-being. For example, she talked about Miss Bevan, the daughter of Miss Harley, who had really believed in her English capabilities, particularly as demonstrated through elements of the WDYTYA project. She understood that Miss Bevan had taken a gamble by moving her to a top set English class in Year 10 post-intervention. But it was one that she felt had allowed her to flourish, particularly with regards to her creative writing/expression that she felt has also helped her in her drama, music and song-writing. According to Miss Bevan her academic achievements improved quite dramatically in the subject over the following couple of years.

What can we learn from Grace?

Grace’s story describes significant forms of experiencing that are suggestive of her becoming in and through various phases of her life, highlighting some of the dramas of transition and liminality that most vividly illuminate the interconnections of her unfolding life as event, including her engagement with the intervention. The preceding account shows how home experiences come to bear on school experiences, and school experiences come to bear on home experiences. These experiences are present in and to each other. With the project ending, it became pertinent to ask what Grace’s story suggests about the proposed aims for our intervention. What can we learn from Grace as it pertains to her learner agency? In particular, what can we learn from

Grace that might take the field of learner agency and curriculum forward and what might this suggest for curriculum policy and practice in broad terms?

Instead of the intervention bringing about a transformative changed reflexivity and associated learner agency as first envisaged, what we in fact witness is a whole host of multifaceted occasions and forms of experiencing that weave into the dramatic continuity of the fullness of her life (Roth, 2019). Grace could never be understood and classified as a static subject with particular forms of fractured reflexivity and associated agency, but rather she continuously became in and through experiencing, which included both acting in her world and simultaneously being affected by this world and by her own actions. But as subject, at any instance she could not anticipate with any precision who she would be only short time hence. It might be suggested, therefore, that rather than seeing Grace as a subject we acknowledge her as a subject-superject, one that is subject-becoming-other-than-herself in unforeseen ways from her own actions (Whitehead, 1929/1978). What we see through Grace's evolving biography is a summation of her fullness of life at any key moment that suggests who Grace is at that moment (subject) and upon which builds in non-additive ways new forms of being and engaging in new unfolding occasions/experiences (superject).

We therefore see that all aspects of the project are potential occasions for new forms of experiencing. However, the story of Grace also makes clear that there are key occasions and experiences—the drama sessions, specific photography sessions, her performance at the final exhibition—with which she interconnects through her experience. She did so not because of the intervention's projected leverage on reflexivity and agency suggested by our hypothesised theory of change. Instead, she changed because the social action of these elements of the project, as she was experiencing them in relation to her summated life at that moment, were both simultaneously affective and developmentally rich. This suggests that all the occasions and experiences that makes up the intervention for Grace, 'positive' and 'negative', need to be understood as part of the interconnecting social action of the intervention that is also part of her with others in the school and beyond. This is exemplified notably by Grace's deepening relationships with Miss Harley and Miss Bevan and their key actions that relocated her from middle-set to a top-set English in Year 10 (14–15 years old), precipitating a different set of unfolding occasions in Grace's life-as-event that culminated in her enhanced classroom engagement and achievement in the subject.

Together what Grace's story suggests is that the curriculum cannot be hermetically sealed off from life-as-event as a whole or from the types of experiencing that are integral to the continuity of that dramatic life. Schooling in general, and curricular interventions in particular, are just sets of unfolding occasions for individual young people that are enmeshed and interconnected with all other unfolding occasions in which an individual life-as-event is part. This therefore suggests that young people's educational agency is not, as we had first theorised and envisaged, a substantively mediating self-authored reflexive endeavour but rather should be seen as relationally embedded in their evolving historical, cultural, material and social experiences of everyday life of which education in general, and curricular interventions such as ours in particular, represent just different parts. At any one moment, the concerns for schooling may actually be minor compared to the issues that the individual is

confronting in the event of life as a whole (e.g. at home). Because mind/body actions in the life context are interconnected and integral to the constitution of the becoming individual, Grace cannot just abstract from it—she would not exist without it. In the context of schooling, such thinking does not include or exclude any particular aspect of curriculum *per se* but recognises that each needs to be understood as part of young people's evolving fullness of life as a minimal unit of analysis. These parts do not have elemental function, existing on their own, but are organic and functional in the constitution of any experience. As such, curricula and pedagogies have the potential through their enactment, of which young people are integral, to either reproduce conditions of social action that result in young people disengaging or they can become creatively integral to young people's continuity of life as event which are then developmentally enabling for them.

Conclusions—broad implications for policy and practice

The curriculum project was designed to re-engage a group of disengaged young people into the mainstream curriculum on offer at an urban school in England. Although small scale we suggest that the discussions about the various challenges facing the school, the Archerian, sociological perspectives underpinning the project as a potential solution and its implementation and the ensuing analysis together provide a cypher for more general on-going curriculum debates/arguments. Although we do not attempt to develop analytical generalisations for practice in our research, the inadequacies in our initial approach lay with the essentialist theoretical generalisations we made about how our intervention would work in practice. In particular, this related to the way, we theorised how the curriculum project would impact on young people's mediating educational reflexivity and ensuing agency, and hence, how it would then be transformative of their engagement with the mainstream school offer. As we document above, these are far from the invariant properties associated with young people's engagement with curriculum interventions, and schooling more generally.

So what are the implications of such thinking in relation to educational policy and practice on learner agency and the curriculum? Our study is not about articulating a radical departure and change to the broad essence of the schooling project, its curriculum and pedagogy and its organisation that has been with us for many decades perhaps in rather static ways. That is for a different type of article with different and more general concerns. Instead, we recognise that, for good or for bad, the school curriculum in many societies is part of the way in which young people get classified and categorised as to who they are and might become, with authentic and deep learning arguably playing a minor role. This system of curriculum and schooling is deeply imbued in the national psyche of the majority of its citizens including its young people in many country contexts and becomes a signifier of the opportunities that a society might provide its young people. As in life more generally, it is a way of being that is stratified and has continuity. Our argument is not so much that many young people are alienated from the content of mainstream curriculum and its pedagogies more that they have been alienated from much of the schooling process because such processes do not explicitly complement or extend materially or culturally their

biographies of social experience (agency) associated with their fullness of life as event. It is a line of argument that resonates with other studies that have focused on how the texture of students' everyday lives—in school, at home and with their friends—affect a broader notion of the learner (cf. Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016).

In summary, what this study contributes to the field of curriculum studies is a methodological approach and associated theoretical developments that focus on young people as subjects that are simultaneously subject and subjected to the conditions that their mere agency contributes to creating in a collateral manner. Our newly evolved focus on learner (agency) and the curriculum, therefore, is on continuous becoming as predicated on social *experience*, which includes the acting in and undergoing of the conditions (including one's own actions), in their entirety. What this means is a differently constituted approach to Manyukhina and Wyse's multi-focus lens that explores how individual *and* social influences bear upon agency as separate, and yet, interconnected/mediated entities—ones that can come together, through appropriate curriculum and pedagogical manipulations, to enable students to become autonomous, self-guided learners. Rather we see learner (agency) through the dynamic and evolving young people's fullness of life (continuity of experience and becoming) that is predicated on the individual *in* the social and the social *in* the individual as a unified whole. It is through understanding the dynamic nature young people's multitude of integrated person and environment occasions as event as a whole (fullness of life) that provides a deeply relational understanding of what they do and who they are. This is not about explicating how the curriculum in isolated ways might help to mediate and support the self-authoring and autonomous agentic young person because, as we have argued, such an individualised subject does not exist. Rather the individual is in, and emerges out of, the relational that is suggestive of the outside continuously being inside and the inside being outside. Hence, schooling and the curriculum experienced through pedagogy occurs for the individual through the fully relational and embedded social, a view that resonates strongly in Grace's story. We conclude by suggesting that understanding learner agency and the curriculum, therefore, requires us to appropriately locate each/both in an integrated way into young people's fullness of life as unit of analysis.

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NOTES

¹ According to Archer, fractured reflexives are those whose internal conversations intensify their distress and disorientation rather than leading to purposeful courses of action. As such, fractured reflexivity lends itself to passive agency: its proponents' deliberations go round in circles and lack conclusions. In the case of young people who demonstrate fractured reflexivity in schools this can result in disorientation with the curriculum and ultimately disengagement from schooling.

² Today, we know that both funds and knowledge are thought as things contrary to the eventual approach we have been led to.

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