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Learning on the margins: experiencing low level VET programmes in a UK context

Abstract

This paper draws on an empirical study conducted in the UK to explore some of the issues surrounding young people on the lowest level VET programmes and make suggestions about ways in which the learner experience at this level might be enhanced. UK policy perception of young people undertaking low level VET programmes in Further Education (FE) colleges tends to characterise them within a deficit model of social exclusion, 'disaffection' and 'disengagement' (Colley, 2003:169). Many have special educational needs (Atkins, 2013a). They have been the focus of multiple initiatives in both the context of the New Labour 14-19 agenda, and more recently in the Coalition government's response to the Wolf Review of Vocational Education (2011). These initiatives have largely consisted of the provision of routes through a range of VET 'opportunities', allegedly to enable young people to engage with the 'knowledge' society (Bathmaker, 2005). This paper problematises these notions of opportunity, drawing on the 'little stories' of four young people to argue that the rhetoric which permeates Government documents fails to consider the significance of young people's social and educational positioning. Finally, the paper considers the implications of these issues in terms of future practice, policy and research in the UK context.

Introduction

There is a significant tension between the likely outcomes of undertaking a VET programme, particularly where it is at a low level, and the rhetoric of opportunity which forms much of the discourse in government papers. This tension is illustrated in the stories of the young people in this paper. The young people profiled here (Emma, Paris, Amir and Alice) all saw their course as an 'opportunity' which would provide them with 'good' qualifications and provide the basis to move on to higher level credentials and ultimately to Higher Education and/or a professional or technical role. For example, Amir wanted to be a Computer Programmer and Paris a Midwife. Clearly, acquiring such a level of expertise would require a prolonged skills development and extended transition which

would involve moving beyond a familiar habitus (Bourdieu 1990:52/53) to the unknown, where cultural capital would be 'stretched beyond its limits' (Ball et al 1999:212). However, despite their good intentions, 3 of the young people chose not to continue with such an extended transition, but to move into the world of work, ostensibly rejecting the 'opportunity' to progress. This paper contextualises their decisions, and the concept of opportunity within UK societal and post-16 educational structures and the habitus and agency of the young people themselves.

Context and Methodology

The young people profiled in this paper formed part of a larger case study exploring the aspirations and learning identities of level 1 VET students. In the absence of any other published research on this significant body of students, the study sought to answer four key questions:

- What does it mean to engage in post-16 learning as a level 1 student?
- How do level 1 students construct their learning identities?
- What factors influence or constrain the development of those identities?
- What aspirations for the future do level 1 students hold?

32 students and 12 staff from 3 student groups in 2 colleges in the north and midlands of England participated in the study, which employed an inclusive methodological approach in an attempt to demonstrate value and respect for the young people (see Atkins 2013b) and was conducted over the course of a single academic year. The study utilised a variety of ethnographic data gathering methods including group interviews and observation, as well as paper based data (e.g. personal profiles) from the students and serendipitous data, which provided detailed information about individual lives. Each method, and the way in which it was implemented, was designed to involve the young people in the conduct of the study as far as possible. For example, the young people chose to be interviewed in friendship groups and some elected to participate in some data gathering activities but not in others. The implications of this are significant, and have been extensively discussed elsewhere (see Atkins, 2009; 2013b) in the context of the socially just framework within

which the study was located. Recurring patterns emerging from a thematic analysis of the data were discussed with and validated by the young participants. The findings of the study are described as individual narratives. Whilst using only a small number of the original sample, the narratives presented in this paper are representative of all the young people who participated in the study and also reflective of both the exclusionary characteristics experienced by the wider group and of their hopes, dreams and aspirations for the future. Those profiled were all pursuing nationally recognised level 1 awards[1]in Information Technology (IT) or Health and Social Care (HSC).

Vocational Education and Training

Contemporary English level 1 programmes originated in 1993 with the advent of the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) Foundation award. This programme, and its successors (Currently BTEC awards at level 1 following several other iterations)) may be argued to have their roots in the New Vocationalism of the 1980s which was heavily criticised at the time (e.g see Cohen 1984; Dale 1985). This saw the introduction of initiatives such as Certificate in Pre-vocational Education (CPVE) and the Training and Enterprise Education Initiative (TVEI), both of which had broad similarities to successor programmes in terms of their content and structure as well as in terms of the criticisms levelled at them. Broadly speaking, such programmes (none of which has been the informed by research, pedagogical or otherwise) have been perceived as providing a preparation for low pay, low skill, class specific occupations. Level 1 courses such as those referred to in this paper cover a limited range of information and are assessed against standardised and nationally approved criteria. The content of these programmes lacks theoretical knowledge (Bathmaker, 2013:99) and emphasises what Unwin has described as the 'routine and practical' (1990:196), as well as skills such as adaptability and reliability, perceived to be necessary in young people to enable them to 'buy in' to, and become successful in, a new, post-Fordist workplace order (e.g. Helsby et al 1998:63; Bathmaker 2001:85).

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[1] Level 1 is the lowest mainstream credential in the UK. It equates to the expected level of achievement of the average 14 year old and is broadly equivalent to the Australian Certificate 1

Further criticisms of the new vocational programmes and their successors have been made in the context of the aims of the programmes, regarded by many commentators to be preparing young people for a particular role in the workplace. This notion has been dated to Callaghan's Great Debate about education (Clarke and Willis 1984:3), amid arguments that it led to a perception that young people need to be inculcated not only with the skills, but also with the right *attitudes* for work. Further, that those in need of inculcation with the 'right' attitudes belonged to a particular category of non-academic low achievers, thus assuming a deficit model for these young people (Moore 1984:66). These arguments have persisted through the intervening decades. Programmes such as CPVE and latterly broad vocational programmes have instilled social disciplines such as team-work, attendance and punctuality (Cohen 1984:105; Bathmaker, 2013:99) and thus may be argued to have prepared the young people for specific, low pay, low skill occupations (Helsby et al 1998:74; Bathmaker 2001; Atkins 2009). In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that a recent study by Bathmaker (2013) found a lack of consensus amongst Awarding Bodies, policy makers and employers about what constitutes useful (and hence valuable) knowledge in a vocational context, and, perhaps more worryingly, about the purpose of vocational education. The confusion she highlights amongst stakeholders is significant, since this may be a key factor in the low quality of much English VET – if no-one is quite sure what it should look like or what it is for, how can it possibly become the 'world class' (DfE 2011:1) system the government aspires to? It seems more likely that such programmes will continue to offer a knowledge-lite curriculum which provides busy work but no meaningful skills or education for the most marginalised young people as they navigate difficult transitions from school to work. Participation in such programmes, for the students, thus contributes to a pre-ordained positioning within the labour market becoming in turn a determinant of future life chances and contributing to the replication of social class in future generations.

Policy Echoes of Choice and Opportunity
Successive governments, whilst acknowledging the impact of social exclusion and perceived educational failure in the form of lack of a minimum level of credential, have none the less placed young people categorised in this way into a deficit model (Colley

2003:27/28) whilst simultaneously rehearsing a rhetoric of opportunity which suggests that any young person can be or do anything providing they engage with the 'opportunities' on offer. Within this rhetoric however, irrespective of the ideology of the incumbent government, potential opportunities are heavily circumscribed by economic policy and market forces. Crucially, they are all also vocational in content, in keeping with a long standing policy narrative that 'vocational education is a vital underpinning for our economy' (DfE, 2011:1; see also DfES, 2006). Thus New Labour rhetoric is echoed in more recent policy from the Coalition government, despite their differing responses to major national reports on vocational education[2] (Bathmaker 2013).

In addition to maintaining long standing targets that young people entering the labour market should be educated to minimum level 2 in English and maths and level 3 in vocational skills, recent Coalition policy has put in place 'supported internships' (2013) and 'traineeships' designed to facilitate the most marginalised young people to undertake VET credentials alongside on the job training. However, a similar approach (Foundation Learning Tier, (DfE, 2010)) introduced by New Labour was unsuccessful due to low levels of employer engagement (Atkins 2013a) and there is no suggestion that this situation has improved in the interim. Further, there is no suggestion in any policy document how to provide for those young people deemed inappropriate for these programmes. This seems to suggest that the only offer open to them will continue to be a limited range of low quality, low level, broad vocational programmes (Working Party on 14-19 Reform, 2004; Wolf, 2011) which offer minimal exchange in the education marketplace (Bathmaker, 2001) and none at all in the labour market (Keep, 2005).

Comment [LA1]: date

Yet, when young people fail to achieve what is for many an impossible dream of achieving the credentials to participate in a 'high skills' economy, blame is attributed by the state to the individual (Ainley and Corney 1990:94/95) since 'what is described as a 'lifetime entitlement to learning' is effectively a lifetime *obligation* to acquire and maintain marketable skills' (Levitas, 1999:121, my emphasis); in other words, those who are not successful in achieving particular levels of credential are also considered to have

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[2] See Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004); Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education (Pring et al 2009); Wolf Review of Vocational Education (2011)

failed to meet their perceived civic responsibility of engaging with lifelong learning. The individual difficulties experienced by many young people on low level post-16 programmes, in terms of engagement with learning and progression to higher level credentials, leading to such perceived failure, are outlined below. It seems unlikely that the circumstances for any of these young people would have been better had the changes recently enacted in coalition policy (DfE 2011; 2012) already been in place.

Findings

Paris

Paris was 16 years old, she described herself as 'English' and came from the dominant white working class community in the locality. Paris was enrolled on a Level 1 HSC Programme at St. Dunstan's College. She had made a transition to this programme from school, having achieved four GCSEs, two at very low grades (G, F, C, C). A fifth subject received an unclassified grade. Paris's mother worked at a local food processing factory in a supervisory capacity and her father was unemployed. As well as attending college Paris also worked part time (25 hours weekly) as a packer at the same factory as her mother. The job was obtained for her by her mother who demanded that Paris should support herself now she was 16. Paris had one brother, who she thought was employed, but with whom she had no contact. She had come onto the programme for 'experience' which would help her to achieve her career aim – she hoped to become a midwife –however, she was unclear about the credentials and transition period which would be necessary to achieve this. She had no close family or friends who were employed in midwifery or related work. Paris had clear lifestyle aspirations, and did not see any dissonance between her desire to own 'a mansion in North Yorkshire [and] a Porsche' and a career in public service. She was unusual in her group in that she had no domestic responsibilities at home. Unlike most other female students, she envisaged having children at some point in the future, although a male partner did not form part of this imagining. Leisure was a key aspect of Paris's life and created considerable tension in terms of the demands on her time arising from work and the perceived demands of her college course. She perceived time in college and time at work in similar terms - as necessary occupations which prevented her from participating in the social activities she enjoyed. There was an emphasis on the

amount of time this took, despite the fact that all full time FE courses are currently delivered over only 16 hours, or three working days and Paris clearly differentiated between seeing her friends at college and seeing them in the evening. Despite apparently subscribing to the rhetoric of lifelong learning, and acknowledging her need to gain 'good' qualifications, Paris had difficulty in adapting to the GNVQ requirements and was unclassified (failed) at the end of the programme. Although her destination was unknown to the college, her friends suggested that she continued with her employment at the food processing factory.

Alice

Alice was 16 and enrolled on a Level 1 HSC programme at St. Dunstan's College. Like Paris, she described herself as 'English' and came from the dominant white working class community in the locality. Alice lived with her parents and five younger siblings. Her father was disabled and did not work or contribute to domestic tasks in the home and her mother worked as a Care Assistant. She also had three older sisters, all living away from home and all full time mothers. Alice worked part time at a local fish and chip shop as well as attending college. She was obliged to make a financial contribution to her family because her mother was 'on the minimum wage'. Financial pressures created other difficulties for Alice as well: her domestic responsibilities arose largely from the fact that her mother worked 12-14 hours at a stretch to maximise the family income and, as the eldest daughter at home, she was expected to fulfil her mother's domestic role in her absence. She regarded her 'lifestyle' as 'different' to that of her friends and placed a low value on the role of mother as opposed to gaining credentials describing her sisters as 'just mums' and saying that she wanted to: 'prove to me mum that … I can do it and get far'. Alice hoped to be a nurse and was aware that this would involve years of study including a University programme. She reported that she had enrolled on the Level 1 programme 'because I didn't get right good [grades] in my GCSEs'. Whilst she did not know anyone already working as a nurse, her mother's work as a care assistant in a nursing home did provide a possible link to potential role models. However, despite this, Alice also indicated that she might leave college at the end of the Level 1 course to 'get some money behind me'. Alice's rejection of motherhood and domesticity was consistent with her

apparent buy in to credentialism and lifelong learning, expressed in her aspiration to 'go to university and be a nurse'. It was possibly less consistent with her view at the end of the programme that she would leave college to 'get some money behind me' before returning to education at a later, unspecified, date expressing a perception that low pay low skill work would only be temporary. Alice completed the Level 1 programme and achieved well, being predicted a borderline pass/merit at the end of the programme which could have enabled her to progress to level 2, and subsequently level 3 before making a transition to Higher Education. Despite this, when she left college at the end of her course she had no firm plans for the future. Despite the effort that Alice put in to achieving her Level 1 award, it will not provide access to employment in HSC, where minimum level 2 credentials are required. Given her imperative to contribute to the family finances, it also seems unlikely that Alice will be in a position to return to full time education in the foreseeable future.

Emma

Emma was the only female student on the Level 1 IT programme. She described herself as 'English' and had strong roots in the local former steelwork, former mining white working class community. She had progressed from 'another course' at St. Dunstan's but was unclear what she had done previously. Equally vague about her achievements at school, Emma thought she might have two GCSEs, but could not recall either the grades or the subjects. She had originally applied to do leisure and tourism but the programme failed to recruit and she was subsequently directed to the IT programme on which she was the only female student. As well as doing her college course, Emma was in full time permanent employment. She worked as a cleaner at her local Tesco store, a job which had been obtained for her by her mother, who also worked there. Emma was not in contact with her father, but had two siblings. Her sister also worked as a cleaner, and her brother as a warehouse packer. Emma had modest aspirations in comparison to some of the other young people who participated in the study, and these could, therefore, have been argued to be more realistic. She aspired to work in a Gym as a Fitness Instructor and to own her own home. She believed that completing her Level 1 programme, and later a GNVQ Intermediate in Leisure and Tourism, would enable her to do this. Despite having clear

aspirations and having planned how to achieve them, Emma withdrew at the end of term one. The college had no record of her destination but at the point of withdrawal she did not have either the skills or credentials necessary to work in her chosen occupation. It seems likely that Emma continued to work in the low pay low skill occupation that she was pursuing concurrently with her level 1programme.

Amir

Amir was 16. He described himself as Pakistani although he was born in England and he formed part of the largest minority ethnic group in Townsville. He was a student on the Level 1 IT programme at St. Dunstan's College, and had progressed to it from a local comprehensive school where he had achieved all D grade GCSEs. Amir lived with his parents and three younger siblings. His mother was a housewife, and his father had a mobile shop. Amir had a part time job helping his father in the shop at weekends. His siblings were all still at school. Amir wanted to be a computer programmer and described a possible transition which would lead to 'a good job that I will stick with'. He had no friends or family who could provide him with a role model for this, but did not regard this as a problem. He did think that he would need further qualifications in order to become a computer programmer, but was unable to be specific about the nature of those qualifications, or how long it might take to achieve them. He thought that in two years he might go to University and spend two years there. He anticipated that once he had achieved his occupational ambition, he would 'get married, and live in a bigger town, not boring Townsville'. He anticipated a marriage arranged by his parents and accepted this as normal and inevitable. In common with other male students from his community, Amir showed a heavy investment in his cultural and family life. He regarded this as completely separate from his leisure activity, in which he also invested heavily and saw no dissonance between the two despite participating in activities in his leisure time which were frowned upon by his family (e.g. going for a drink). Amir achieved a pass in his GNVQ and intended to progress to the Level 2 Diploma in Digital Applications (DIDA).

Structure and Agency

Each of these young people hoped for something better in life; indeed, for all of them, as for others in earlier research 'hope is a powerfully recurring motif' (Ball et al 2000: 110/111). They had a sense of anticipation; a belief that one day something would happen that would change their lives for the better. However, given their individual circumstances and the lack of opportunities in all areas of their lives, the likelihood of such change seems negligible. It is significant that despite the extensive policy discourse around raising aspirations (e.g. DfES, 2003; 2006; DfE, 2010;) that not only did these young people have high, if unrealistic, aspirations, given their social and educational positioning, but it is also apparent, that in the construction of policy which defines these young people as having low aspirations (e.g DfE, 2010) the 'voices of those whose aspirations are the object of scrutiny are absent from the discussion' (Sellar and Gale, 2009:14). For Paris, Amir, Alice and Emma, the field of FE in which they were operating orientated their choices (Bourdieu 1990:66), but individual agency determined which choices were made and in turn was influenced by individual habitus, motivation and values as they struggled 'to make the world a different place' (Reay 2004: 437).

For these young people, individual agency is heavily restricted by the structures of the state, society and the education system. In terms of the state, they are constrained by government policy, both economic and educational, which 'orients choice' by determining the vocational nature of the limited curriculum available to them (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004; Wolf, 2011). External structures such as the education system and societal attitudes mean that those programmes are held in very low esteem and do not provide a clear route or preparation for employment. In terms of society, the young people inhabit a field pre-determined by social class and local culture or habitus, as well as embodied structures such as disability, gender and race which result in less access to cultural capital (Reay 1998:56). Thus, in respect of developing learning identities and negotiating successful transitions to the world of work, these young people are constrained by multiple barriers and however well motivated, or determined to 'transform the habitus' (Bourdieu 1993a:87) the options available to them are very limited. Their learning programmes did not provide an occupational qualification and acquiring such a credential

would mean an extended transition period requiring determination, motivation, financial capital and parental interest and support.

In the cases of these young people, however, Paris's and Alice's parents were unwilling or unable to provide any financial capital, and irrespective of any parental *interest* in learning it is significant that none of the parents of these young people had educational achievement beyond level 2. Thus, the parents themselves did not have the cultural capital to generate academic profits for their children and social class reproduction becomes more likely as educational experience and achievement is 'inherited' in the form of cultural capital (Ball et al 1999). The failure to 'progress' and access 'opportunities' was not confined to Emma, Alice and Paris. 32 young people participated in the original study, 21 of whom were undertaking the same level 1 programmes as the young people discussed in this paper. Of these 21, although 16 achieved the award, (broadly consistent with national averages) only 9 planned to progress to a level 2 programme, figures also consistent with those discussed by Ball et al (2000) in respect of level 1 students who participated in their study. It is possible that of the 9 in this study who intended to progress not all translated into future enrolments – some may have found employment over the summer, for example. Those who did not intend to progress included 3 young people who had achieved Merits[3] and 4 who had passed the award in addition to those who had failed or withdrawn. These data suggest that nationally, around 50% of level 1 students are not taking up progression 'opportunities' irrespective of Government incentives such as free tuition and Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)[4]. This illustrates a clear failure on the part of government to acknowledge or understand that opportunities are 'not just out there waiting to be chosen', but are created, influenced and constrained through the 'dispositions of habitus' of the young people as well as by 'externally located opportunities in the labour market' (Hodkinson et al 1996: 149/150). Further, where educational progression does take place, the only option is to move to another level of VET programme, and not only do these tend to be regarded as of lower status than academic programmes (Bloomer 1996:145/148) but they are highly gender stereotyped

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[3] At that time, the programme was credentialised at three levels: Pass, Merit and Distinction.
[4] A means tested allowance of up to £30 per week to support 16-19 year old students to remain in education. EMA was withdrawn in England by the Coalition government in 2011 as part of the austerity measures, but remains available in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

and populated mainly by students from working class backgrounds (Colley et al 2003:479), implying that the English post-16 education system exists as a structure for class reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:178/179).

Opportunity – The Great Deception

The commitment to learning expressed by Alice, Paris, Emma and Amir was grounded in a desire to achieve 'good' qualifications, reflecting a buy in to the post Fordist rhetoric that credentials will facilitate engagement with the 'opportunities' available in the new economy, and fulfil the promises of a brighter, better future for all based on continual up-skilling and engagement with lifelong learning. They were undertaking courses that they had 'chosen' and continued to make very significant, albeit limited, 'choices' throughout the programme (whether to remain on programme or leave, whether to work or not, whether to continue to level 2 or to seek employment). It was apparent though, that the young people were making choices that were not their own, but were pragmatic decisions 'influenced by the complexities of the relations of force within a particular field' Hodkinson (1998:103) and 'heavily circumscribed by class' (Bloomer 1996:148).

Thus, the notion of 'choice' as utilised within policy documents does not exist for these students, since it assumes independent, rational choice made in response to the 'opportunities' available to young people. This also assumes an availability of jobs (Atkins, 2013c) whilst simultaneously failing to acknowledge the move from a youth to a secondary labour market characterised by poor working conditions and 'pervasive unemployment and underemployment' (MacDonald and Marsh (2005 p.111/112). It is this labour market for which young working class people, particularly those with very poor academic attainment at 16+, are destined, rather than the high skills global knowledge economy beloved of post Fordist rhetoric which figures in their 'impossible dreams'. Thus these young people have been the victims of an immoral misdirection which is perpetrated on the 'low hope' (te Riele, 2010) young people who are the main focus of most English VET policy. They are prepared for and directed to low level VET courses which have minimal exchange value in education or the labour market, but are encouraged to believe that they are on a 'good' course which will enable them to achieve 'good' qualifications

from which they can achieve anything they want. Finally, the stories in this paper suggest that, despite the high aspirations of all the young people profiled, they are structurally positioned, partly 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. Ultimately, for three of these young people, the choice was to respond to the imperative to generate financial capital, albeit at low levels, and to make a transition into the world of work rather than to pursue a vague and insubstantial hope of something better. Government identifies level 2 credentials as the minimum for 'employability', yet all these young people were employed, albeit in low skill low pay work tending to support Ecclestone's argument that there is a hidden agenda around the need for a pool of low pay, low skill workers (2002: 17/19).

The fact that the young people were all already in employment – which in the case of two of them at least was relatively secure and within the formal economy - also raises the question whether the three who withdrew would have had improved life chances and employment prospects had they completed a level 2 programme, the only educational 'opportunity' available to them. This could only really be determined by exploring the longer term outcomes for young people whose transitions involve low level VET programmes. However, assuming he is successful on the DIDA programme, Amir will still not have a level of credential or knowledge which articulates with entry to the occupation he hopes to pursue. Instead, he faces an extended transition which will also require considerable family support if he is to move beyond his familiar habitus (Bourdieu 1990:52/53) and achieve his goal of a professional or technical career. For Emma and Paris, and even for Alice who achieved a Merit grade, the reality is very different to their original aspirations, as they join the bottom, marginalised 30% of English society who are either idle or working for 'poverty wages' (Hutton 1995:14). Ultimately, the rhetoric of opportunity in policy documents ignores the fact that 'hope is not about putting on rose coloured glasses and ignoring the difficulties' (te Riele, 2010:44) whilst also obscuring the reality that for young people operating at the margins of the education system, vocational education forms a (pre-destined) path to the drudgery of low pay low skill employment and social class reproduction.

Conclusions

Although branded as 'new', the initiatives alluded to in this paper (traineeships, supported internships) bear strong similarities to other programmes which have formed part of the vocational offer in England over the past 30 years. As such, they are little more than a re-branding of existing, low value provision and thus seem likely to become part of a long litany of failed initiatives. Significantly, the group perceived by many to be the most challenging – the most disengaged young people who do not hold a statement of SEN – fall outside the provisions of both these initiatives, raising important questions about the Coalition's broader commitment to developing a more inclusive society. Further, the existing insufficiency of apprenticeships, together with the significant difficulties that have been noted in engaging employers with Foundation Learning (DfE, 2010) does not provide an optimistic context for the launch of either traineeships or supported internships, both of which will involve young people in need of extensive support from both colleagues and employers if they are to have any chance of making a successful transition to the workplace. The implication of this in the short, medium and longer term is that the educational offer available to the most marginalised will continue to be a limited and heavily criticised range of low-level broad VET programmes.

This policy chaos has been generated within a context of significant academic research and several major government reviews into education at these levels which has taken place over the past decade. Much of this work has made useful suggestions for the development of a new curriculum which might more effectively support marginalised young people to make a transition to adulthood in which they can be active citizens. Drawing on this, and existing scholarship which has generated some understanding of this group of young people, there is a need to reconsider the curriculum at its lowest levels, taking into account questions such as what would be useful knowledge? What would confer the greatest cultural capital? What would be inspiring learning? Should it be 'vocational' or 'general' or should we be identifying 'useful' knowledge outside the strait jacket that determines what is or is not 'academic'? These pedagogic questions should also be informed by the extensive body of scholarship which for example, suggests what a 'good' vocational

curriculum might look like and that which explores the nature of valuable and useful knowledge.

Drawing on such scholarship would facilitate the development of a new and innovative curriculum which confers some cultural capital on the young people who pursue it. Marginalised young people need, and deserve more than failed initiatives and re-branding exercises. Involving them in the development and/or evaluation of a new curriculum which draws on contemporary scholarship and theorizations around useful knowledge would offer a meaningful and effective way of promoting social and educational inclusion. Firstly, it would enable the 'voices of those whose aspirations are the object of scrutiny' (Sellar and Gale, 2009:14) to be *present* at the discussion and secondly, it would represent a move towards 'disrupt[ing] the construction of centre from which ...exclusion derives' (Graham and Slee, 2008:279). Finally, there is minimal research exploring the impact of broad vocational education on the lowest attaining and most marginalised young people (see Ball et al, 2000; Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2009) and none which explores the longer term outcomes for young people whose transitions involve low level VET. Like the development of a revised curriculum, this is an issue which demands urgent attention from the current administration.

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