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Citation: Atkins, Liz and Flint, Kevin (2015) Nothing Changes: Perceptions of vocational education in a coalition era. *International Journal of Training Research*, 13 (1). pp. 35-48. ISSN 1448-0220

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2015.1051344>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2015.1051344>>

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Nothing Changes: Perceptions of Vocational Education in a Coalition Era

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Abstract

This paper explores young people's perceptions of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in England. The study draws on interview and focus group data from a [funding body] funded project. Parallel studies were carried out in The Netherlands, South Africa and England. This study reports on the English project. It found that serendipity, contingent events and influence of significant others are most influential in choice of vocational program and that young peoples' understandings of possible career paths vary in sophistication, differentiated by age, program level and subject area. Perceived attractiveness of VET was closely associated with societal perception of their programs (which the young people considered to be negative).

The paper considers the implications of these findings in the context of recent major policy initiatives in England. It concludes that whilst some recent policy initiatives, such as the introduction of University Technical Colleges may be successful in raising the esteem of some forms of elite and specialised VET, broad vocational programs at lower levels, and short courses associated with 'employability' and 're-engagement', will continue to be held in lower esteem and to confer little educational advantage on those young people, largely drawn from working class backgrounds, who pursue them.

Key words: Vocational Education; VET; Aspiration; Careers; Marginalisation; Social Class

Introduction

This paper explores the implications of the findings of a qualitative study carried out in summer 2010 on behalf of [national funding body], which explored young people's perceptions of vocational education in England (see Atkins, Flint, and Oldfield 2011). The study raised a number of key issues in respect of the vocational education available to young people in England, which are explored in the of contemporary coalition policy in respect of vocational education, and the likely impact of that policy on the lives and experiences of young people such as those who participated in this study.

In 2010, after 13 years of centre-left New Labour administration, the right wing Conservative party won the general election, but failed to achieve an overall majority necessary to govern and entered into a coalition agreement with the smaller, centrist Liberal-Democrat party, becoming known simply as the 'Coalition'. Responding to imperatives such as the impact of the 2008 financial crisis, but also seeking to reverse policies seen to inconsistent with centre right ideology and acknowledging the continuing failure to address issues of parity of esteem, the coalition commissioned the Wolf Review of Vocational Education, published in 2011. The recommendations were accepted in full (DfE, 2011) and subsequent policy has been broadly based on this report. As part of the attempt to achieve greater parity of esteem between vocational and academic credentials, and to achieve greater global competitiveness, new 'elite' centres for vocational education, known as University Technical Colleges, were announced. These are aligned to universities or multinational businesses, and take small numbers of academically able students from age 14-19. However, little has been done to address the needs of the lower attaining young people who are not considered equipped for this type of education, and most enter programs in FE colleges –who draw their students primarily from lower socio-economic groups - which are largely unchanged from those on offer under New Labour. Thus, despite the Coalition's clearly articulated commitment to raise the status of vocational education and training (DBIS, 2012:6), their promises retain hollow echoes of the failures of their predecessors (e.g. see DfES 2005:17). The policy acknowledgement that the value placed on vocational education is generally low, and the strong association between VET and lower attaining young people reflects rhetoric which is widely used in England and Wales, as well as notions of deficit which have become insidiously embodied in discourse around vocational education internationally. For example, Wallace (2001) provides an early UK critique, whilst Dalley-Trim, Alloway and Walker (2008), and Polesel and Clarke (2011) offer an Australian perspective. It was in this dynamic context that this research was undertaken, and in which the discussion of the outcomes of the study are located.

Literature Review

The body of work on school to work transitions in the English context identifies three key themes or issues which also appear in the wider literature on vocational education. These include social class, gender and parity of esteem, and a majority of the studies draw on a Bourdieusian analysis of these issues (e.g. see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992a; Bourdieu,

1990; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), drawing particularly on concepts such as structure and agency, and field and habitus in order to explain the existence and impact of the structural inequalities in the broad field of education. Social class is a significant issue in the UK context, since class hierarchies and cultures are deeply embedded throughout society and influence many aspects of life. It is a particular issue in the vocational context because educational outcome is closely associated with social class, and also because the vocational curriculum is class specific and accessed largely by young people from lower socio economic groups (Colley *et al* 2003:479; Macrae *et al* 1997:92). This is particularly apparent at 16 + where ‘the intake to different types of institution – further education (FE) colleges, tertiary colleges, schools and sixth form colleges – differs significantly in terms of prior attainment, social class and ethnicity’ (Stanton and Fletcher, 2006). Further, social class is a key societal structure which is instrumental in forming attitudes and perceptions amongst individuals. This has significant implications for career decision making, since, as Wright (2005) has argued, subjective attitudes and perceptions play an important role in young people’s decision making. She goes on to argue that ‘it is through these subjective attitudes that aspects of class, gender, ethnicity, education and labour market opportunities are internalised and influence perceptions of opportunities and what is appropriate, perceptions which also reflect individual personalities and life histories’.

Closely associated with social class is gender identity. This has particular implications for vocational education in which many of the programmes pursued by young people are not only class specific but also heavily gendered (Colley *et al* 2003:479) in both content and in the occupational area they relate to. Examples of this are the almost exclusively female childcare groups and the engineering programs which recruit almost exclusively male students: both are heavily gendered. This adherence to ‘gendered habitus’ (Reay 1998: 61) in which young people appear to view stereotypical gender divisions as natural and universal, has been recognised to form a major part of their dispositions and identities for over two decades. In 1993, in a book based on the outcomes of the ESRC 16-19 study, Bates questioned why working class girls continue to enter working class, gender stereotyped jobs; Skeggs later (1997:57) suggested that this was because women were positioned by historical (class-based) legacies and the limited range of opportunities open to them. Later, Fuller and Unwin (2003:11) found that apprenticeship intakes were split on heavily gendered lines and Colley *et al* (2003:471) and Clarke (2002: 62/77) have both suggested that young women on care and childcare programs demonstrate dispositions shaped by female caring stereotypes.

This supports earlier work which implies that gendered educational choices made at an early stage have a long term impact on job opportunities. Hodkinson *et al* (1996:148) found that all the young people in their study chose occupations within traditional gender stereotypical roles, arguing that individual schematic views of the type of jobs an individual may or may not do are developed within a class-based and gendered habitus, meaning that ‘choices’ are constrained by these factors. Put simply, this means that a young person who views male and female gender stereotypes in very traditional, class based terms will not consider programs or occupations which they perceive to be inappropriate to their gender (e.g. young men will not take up childcare since this is seen as ‘women’s work’). This powerful influencing factor thus has significant implications for young people’s career decision making in the way it both constrains and enables individual agency.

In addition to the complexities of class and gender, Vocational Education in England has a long, troubled and troubling history in policy terms. Governments of all political persuasions have sought to address issues related to perceived poor quality of vocational education, and its lack of parity of esteem with the academic curriculum since the tension between the vocational and academic curriculum and their relationship to social class was noted by the 1868 Taunton Commission. However, this has consistently been (unsuccessfully) attempted by changes to the VET system, particularly in terms of assessment, rather than by addressing any of the structural societal issues which have contributed to the inequalities between the vocational and academic systems and has resulted in polarised perceptions of the young people who pursue the two different pathways.

The ‘English tradition’ of ‘education for leadership’ (McCulloch, 1991, p.10/11), based on Platonic principles and originating in the 19th century, successfully embedded structural, class-based social inequalities into the education system which remain apparent today. In the VET context, these inequalities were exacerbated by mass youth unemployment in the late 1970s, leading to the ‘new vocationalism’. This saw the introduction of a wide range of full and part time, vocationally related programs, offered in both schools and Further Education (FE) colleges, and intended to ‘prepare’ (rather than train) young people for work. These initiatives, largely regarded as low quality, ranged from Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) to Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) in the 1980s, General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) in the 1990s, as well as more recent

failed initiatives such as vocational GCSEs. These programs have been heavily criticised as forms of social control which have sought to inculcate particular (working class) young people, not only with the right skills, but with the right attitudes for work (e.g. see Clarke and Willis 1984, p.3). Moore (1984, p.66) also argued that, associated with this was a generally held policy view that those young people who required inculcation with the right attitudes and skills for work belonged to a particular category of non-academic low achievers thus assuming a deficit model for these young people. Despite multiple government initiatives over the intervening four decades variously intended to raise standards, promote competitiveness and enhance economic strength in the global economy, vocational education in England is still widely perceived, both within and beyond government, as being of poor quality and low value (Keep, 2005:547/548), as well as being specifically for particular (working class, low attaining) groups of young people. This group of young people are widely regarded by policy makers as having low aspirations, and this has been perceived to be a cause of low attainment for well over a decade (e.g. see Connexions, 2003; DfES, 2002) despite evidence that most young people, including those who might be characterized as marginalised, have high aspirations (e.g. see Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2009). What the research by Bathmaker, and by Atkins, amongst others does demonstrate, is that the most marginalised young people do not have a clear understanding of the pathways they need to access their idealised careers, an issue which is not addressed in policy, but which is raised again in data from this study.

Methodology

This primarily qualitative study formed part of a broader, international project conducted in South Africa and the Netherlands as well as in England. Consequently, the methodology was designed in conjunction with the funding body and international colleagues to facilitate application across different contexts and education systems. A group of fifteen young people from each of four sites (n= 60) participated in video-recorded focus group interviews. One in-depth, individual interview was also held at each site. The interviews had two purposes: to explore some of the issues arising from the focus groups in greater depth, and to provide a means of triangulation. These methods were the primary sources of data. Data arising from the interviews and focus groups were subject to SPSS analysis. Interview and focus group data were also subject to a thematic qualitative analysis.

The analysis was conducted within the context of a Bourdieusian theoretical framework drawing on notions of structure and agency, field and habitus (e.g. see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992a: 72-73; Bourdieu, 1990:66) as well as on the extensive body of literature exploring vocational education and school to work transitions for young people. Data were gathered from two schools and two further education colleges (FE). English FE colleges offer vocational education and training to individuals from 16+, and are similarly structured to Australian TAFEs. The study involved young people in two age groups (14-16 and 18-20). These were determined by the funding body in order to facilitate comparison between the three international projects. In the English study this involved working with young people in Year 10 undertaking school based broad vocational programs at level 2, and in colleges, with those in their first (aged 16) year or final year (aged 18+) of both broad vocational and occupational programs. The programs included broad vocational awards in subjects such as Business or Media, designed to provide access to further training or education, and occupational awards (National Vocational Qualifications, or NVQs) in areas such as Beauty Therapy and Engineering, designed to provide pathways to employment. The broad vocational awards are known as BTECs, originally an acronym for the long defunct Business and Technical Certificate, but now the brand name for a wide range of English vocational qualifications. These students were on level 2 or 3 programs, and a majority had progressed from level 1 or 2 programs within the institution. The institutions were geographically spread across England and encompassed urban, inner-city and rural locations thus also allowing comparison between different social and cultural contexts both locally and internationally. The authors were both then employed at the same English university, and access to each participant institution was negotiated via that university's extensive Teacher Training networks. Fifteen students were recruited from each site. They were invited to participate by school and college managers, after being identified as meeting the age and program requirements for the study. A £5 book token was offered to each student as an incentive to participate. Gender was balanced with an approximate 50:50 ratio across the sample, although the gender specificity of vocational programs was apparent amongst college students in particular. For example, all those students on Beauty and Childcare programs were female, and those undertaking Engineering were exclusively male. In terms of social characteristics, both schools recruited students from areas of significant disadvantage. School 1 is located in a very rural small market town. It is some distance from the closest large town and serves a predominantly white population from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds. The school is a high achieving institution and unusually, has a state boarding facility. It offers

a broad curriculum including a range of vocational options. The young people who participated in this study were undertaking a BTEC Diploma in Creative and Media. School 2 is located on the outskirts of a small town but within close distance of large conurbations. It has been designated as a High Performing Specialist School and has recently been awarded a second specialism in vocational studies. In socio-economic terms, the school serves a population of young people from a range of backgrounds, and similarly to College 1, business and cultural investment in the area supports the development of a wide range of service industries. Both colleges drew students from broad geographical areas. College 1 was located in an inner city area with a high immigrant community, which was reflected in the profiles of the students who had many different ethnic backgrounds. College 2 was in a part of the country which suffers from amongst the highest levels of social disadvantage in the United Kingdom (UK). The student intake, reflected in our participants, is predominantly white, working class and drawn from both inner city and urban areas as well as from declining coastal communities, all with high levels of poverty. The field work for the study was conducted at the time of the General Election and the analysis also contextualised the findings in terms of the Coalition response to the Wolf Review of Vocational Education (2011). Participation was voluntary, and parental consent obtained for young people under the age of 18. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University Ethics Committee.

Serendipity and Contingent Events

The data suggest that the college students (18 -20 year age range) had arrived on their programs more by serendipity and contingent events than by making apparently rational career choices and pursuing linear trajectories supported by coherent and consistent careers guidance. Typical responses were, as Kate reported, ‘I was told that I had failed loads of courses and that Beauty was for me, and I was, like, are you sure.’ Steven ‘I hated school, this was the only place I could come’. Other young people had chosen BTEC awards based on their national General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) 16+ examinations results. These are graded A*-G, with A*-C constituting a pass. Most schools have minimum requirements (generally five GCSEs at grades A*-B/C in specific subjects) for students to remain and progress to Advanced level (A level) programs which lead to academic examinations at 18+, and determine eligibility for university entry. A small number had withdrawn from A level programs. David’s story was interesting. After leaving school at sixteen he had gone to work at Woolworths and was made redundant when the company went

into liquidation. He took his sister to an open day at College 1 and a tutor started talking to him about programs available. He enrolled on the spot on a computer program. Until this point he had been unaware that somebody his age (21 years) could do a college program as he believed that colleges were for people up to the age of nineteen. In contrast, Freddy had enrolled on an Engineering program after being rejected for an apprenticeship at a well-known car manufacturer. He re-applied and was rejected for a second time at the end of his first year. He subsequently applied a local university with a strong Engineering profile and was accepted to do Civil Engineering. This series of events, ultimately leading to higher education, may have offered Freddy a wider range of career options than would have been available had he been accepted for the apprenticeship.

Amongst younger students (in the 14 -16 year age range) similar evidence of the influence of contingent events in their lives was apparent. For example, Harry had been guided onto a BTEC route by his school and was pursuing a number of options including two BTEC awards in Business and Drama as well as core curriculum subjects of English, Maths and Science. This reflected the wider experience of young people in schools, many of whom had been firmly guided into a vocational route at their point of decision making regarding future career options. Harry reported that teachers were helpful at the point of subject choice because ‘they also they know how well we are doing in each subject [but they are] a little bit biased and want you to pick their courses [programs]’. The combination of subjects that he eventually took meant that he was unable to take Religious Education, which he wanted to pursue, at GCSE level and so was left with a range of more limited choices supporting earlier work by Atkins, (2010), which argued that young people make choices that are not their own.

It was also apparent that where young people had made career choices these reflected the cultural capital that individuals had at their disposal; in particular the data suggest a strong familial influence. Across the focus groups and interviews familial influence appeared nine times as the main source of guidance. For example, David (Computing Level 2), aspired to work for the police in their forensic IT department and he had been influenced by his uncle in this who worked for the police and was familiar with that particular department. David also acknowledged that he might not achieve this aspiration and subsequently discussed the possibility of lower paid, lower skilled work, such as ‘mending computers’ or ‘working in a computer shop’. Harry, a younger student from School 2, had been born into a musical family. He described himself as a musician, suggesting this was a key aspect of his identity,

and he aspired to go a ‘musical university’ and to be a successful musician. However, he acknowledged that ‘it’s hard to be the best at what you do in music’ and that this might mean that an alternative career plan would be pragmatic. Harry’s alternative career plan was to do ‘Business’ (although he was not specific at what level he planned to study) and subsequently to go in to ‘banking’. Also reflecting the way on the way these young people draw on cultural capital and familial role models, Claire aspired to ‘do something in health’. It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that she followed advice from her mother, a nurse, to do Health and Social Care before progressing to a career in the health arena.

The foregoing narratives serve to illuminate the obvious dislocation between extant forms of careers guidance, and the realities of the students’ own worlds, in which their ‘horizons for action’ are both constrained and enabled by external opportunities and personal subjective perceptions (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson 1996:3) which, in turn, were obviously intimately connected with their local communities and families. In contrast to these realities, dominant forms of careers guidance, reflecting government 14-19 policy, are predicated on the assumption that individuals are able to make rational and informed choices on the basis of abstract, or even concrete examples, which are often outside their own lives – a model of ‘technical rationality’ (Hodkinson *et al* 1996:120). Data from this study, in concert with earlier research in this field such as that by Hodkinson *et al.*, (1996) and including, for example, later work by Hodkinson (2004) reaffirm such dislocation and suggest that policy strategy does not reflect sufficiently the lived experiences of young people in an increasingly globalised world.

A majority of the young people were knowledgeable about careers guidance services, and most had had contact with the Connexions service (then the national career guidance service in England). A total of five students directly referred to the ‘connections’ service as well as talking to teachers (n = 6) and families (n = 3). Support from Connexions was largely confined to the completion on-line guidance programs available in schools and colleges and three year action plans which were completed at school. Data also suggested that young people sourced their guidance from families, friends and teachers rather than the Connexions service, and that they had used this service when directed to do so, mainly around the transition point of 16+. This factor has implications for the structure and organisation of careers services and raises questions about whether those young people who ‘drop out’ of

their programs have greater or lesser degrees of contact with the careers services than those who remain on their program.

Career Notions and Aspirations

All the young people who participated in this study had clear hopes and aspirations for their futures. Students' understandings of their possible career paths varied in sophistication, with clear differences, not only between age group and level of program, but also between subject areas. It was apparent that those young people following programs such as Business and Engineering which might be regarded as having a more significant 'academic' content, were able to make more conceptually complex interpretations of the term career and had greater personal clarity in terms of their career orientation. In contrast those young people on programs that were more practical, and included less 'academic' content, made less conceptually complex interpretations, and this was true across all levels of study. This suggested that the constraints associated with systemic and embodied structures of state, society and the education system, which restrict individual agency and serve to reproduce inequality (Avis, 2007:167) were compounded for the students on lower level and more practical programs by their limited understandings of career and possible future options, something which was, perhaps, also a reflection of their social class positioning. Constrained by gender as well as class, but with high hopes for their future, many of the young people on higher level programs had post-Fordist perceptions of the labour market which associated high pay, high skills careers (rather than work) with their vocational qualifications. At lower levels their perceptions were also clearly associated with concepts of secure employment or 'jobs for life', describing class-specific 'opportunities' which also determined 'the level of occupational aspiration' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:184), but which were at best optimistic and at worst unrealistic in the context of contemporary high structural youth unemployment rates in England to which Wolf (2011:25) has drawn attention.

For example, Kate, a level 2 Childcare student wanted 'a good lifestyle so I don't struggle and enjoy what I do'. Daniel, a fifteen year old school A level student and the only one in his group following a Construction program, considered that a career involved 'getting qualified in Woodwork and having a secure job', whilst Josh, a student at School 2, thought that a career was 'a job you do for a long term and earns a lot of money'. Similarly, Zoey, age 16, on a level 2 Childcare and Education program considered that a career is 'something you want to do and get paid for' whilst Becka, who had spent three years doing Beauty Therapy

(she was now approaching the end of the first year of a level 3 program, having begun at level 1), stated that a career was ‘choosing what you want to do and doing that job for the rest of your life’ emphasising the notion of a job for life. All anticipated remaining in the occupational areas associated with their vocational program, despite evidence to suggest that most, especially those at lower levels, will end up working in a different field (Wolf, 2011:37).

These perceptions were in sharp contrast to those of students on advanced programs and those which might be described as more ‘academic’ than practical. For example Joe, a level 3 BTEC Business student explained that career mean ‘a long term commitment in a specialist area, and having the right skills and knowledge within that area, and progressing up the ladder’. From this career he anticipated achieving ‘financial [rewards] and being able to climb the business ladder, maybe into middle management and higher’. A majority of his peers, all on the same program, perceived graduate status to be essential to establishing a good career: Ali, a second year Business student was typical of this, stating that having done the BTEC meant that he ‘could go straight into jobs, but I’m looking forward to Uni and doing International Business’. The aspirations of those young people on the lower level programs conflate ‘good qualifications’ with ‘good jobs’ and ‘good money’ and as such they are consistent with those expressed by an earlier generation of young people on vocational programs (Atkins, 2009:146). However, they are inconsistent with the outcomes of low level VET programs in terms of the limited or negative exchange value in the education and labour markets (Keep, 2009:40; Wolf, 2011:32) conferred by such programs. Further, the young people’s hopes and aspirations reflect a buy in to government rhetoric about the positive value of vocational education which is dissonant with their acknowledgement that vocational qualifications are generally held in lower esteem than academic credentials, a view expressed by young people from all settings, age-groups and type and level of program.

Whilst the scope of this study did not encompass social class specifically it was apparent that the young people who participated represented a broad cross section of ‘working class’ youth and that most aspired to occupations which were both class and gender specific. As Bates (1993:73) and later Colley (2006) have argued, gendered and class fractional positionings play a critical role as young people ‘learn to labour’ through the medium of vocational education and training. The data from this study seem to imply that

class fractional locations as well as embodied and gendered habitus are influencing aspirations, choice of vocational area and the young person's likelihood of succeeding in that area in terms of the way they are able to engage with hidden curricula and the social practices of learning (Colley, 2006:15) associated with it. Whilst tentative, and requiring further research, these findings have significant implications for young people undertaking vocational programs. They suggest that those young people whose class fractional locations provide access to more limited cultural capital are less likely to engage with more 'academic' vocational programs and more likely to engage with occupationally related programs such as Construction, Childcare and Beauty Therapy. Significantly, both learning programs and the workforce in these areas are class and gender specific, and opportunities for progression and development are severely limited. This argument would be consistent with Bourdieu's (1990:66) argument that whilst the global field in which these young people operate 'orients' their choices their *individual* choices are significantly influenced by individual habitus, motivation and values as well as with Hodkinson *et al*'s (1996:140) argument that choices are made, and their horizons limited, in the context of a socially and culturally derived habitus. By extension, it also implies that those young people on more 'practical' occupationally related programs such as Construction and Beauty Therapy, as well as those on the lowest level programs, are more severely constrained by aspects of gender and social class positioning and are thus likely to have more limited potential for agency and fewer opportunities than their peers on more 'academic' and advanced level programs.

Parity of Esteem and the Value of Vocational Education

All the young participants were enthusiastic about their programs and positive about the opportunities or capital they perceived the programs would generate. In some cases, such as Ali and others on his level 3 Business program, the vocational program had already generated capital in terms of University offers. Many, like Oliver, acknowledged that societal perceptions of vocational education meant that a lower value was placed on vocational programs in comparison to academic programs. Oliver illustrated this in his comment that 'it means a bit more, A levels mean more, people take more notice of it'. Similarly, Freddy (age 17, BTEC National level 3 in Manufacturing and Engineering) acknowledged negative societal perceptions of vocational education. He was unusual amongst his peers as other members of his family, including a twin brother, had taken an academic educational route. Freddy reported that '*No-one in the family's ever taken a different route to A level*'. He had opted for a BTEC after applying for, and failing to get, an elite apprenticeship with a

multinational engineering company. He had reapplied at the end of his first year and been rejected again. However, Freddy had just been accepted to do Mechanical Engineering at Loughborough University. The University required him to do a Foundation year before beginning the degree program. Despite the requirement that he should do a Foundation year, which he did not question, Freddy valued the practical skills he had learned on his program, comparing himself with his twin brother: 'My brother thinks I'm thick, taking the easy route, but he never declines my help' and '[My twin has] done three A levels; PE, Business and Resistant Materials. His project [for Resistant Materials], all the practical side of it, all the engineering of things inside his project, I did it all. He doesn't have that skill, and college gives you a wide range of skills'. His perception that 'additional' and useful skills are conferred by vocational education seemed inconsistent with the higher education institution requirement for an extended transition into a degree in the same subject area. Similarly dissonant was his acknowledgement that his vocational program was held in generally lower esteem than his twin's A level program. His use of the word 'thick' in association with his position as a vocational student was echoed by other participants, such as Chloe, an Art student who considered that 'people feel we are doing these courses because we're thick'. The acknowledgement that vocational qualifications had lower societal esteem was consistent across all participants, irrespective of age, institution or level of education. Whilst this was in tension with their enthusiasm for their programs, and with the oft-stated belief that a vocational qualification would confer unspecified advantages in the labour market, it was reflective of a consistent policy failure to address issues of esteem for vocational education in England.

Conclusion

The outcomes of this study highlight three key issues. Firstly, young people place significant value on their vocational program, believing that it will be readily exchangeable in the labour or higher education market, despite also acknowledging a general lack of societal esteem for their programs. Secondly, the transitions of the young people were reflective of the impact of serendipity and contingent events, as well as clearly illustrating the impact of social class positioning in terms of educational and occupational life chances. Finally, there are significant differences in young people's understandings of the concept of career determined by the type and level of program they are undertaking. These issues all offer lessons for policy makers.

Firstly, although it was evident that even those at higher levels were unable to fully articulate what they perceived to be the affordances and limitations of their vocational education program, responses to questions around the concept of career were clearly delineated by level and *type* of program. In addition, it was apparent that the young people drew on conceptions and understandings which appeared to relate to specific, class based understandings of particular occupations and types of occupation (as, for example, in the concept of a ‘job for life’ as opposed to the concept of ‘climbing the ladder’, both alluded to in our data). Interestingly, although cultural heritage was not specifically considered as part of this study, it was evident that amongst the young people undertaking higher level Business programs a majority were from cultural or ethnic minority groups, whereas amongst those young people on more ‘practical’ programs at the same level (such as Beauty Therapy), an overwhelming majority apparently hailed from the local dominant white working class cultural group. It is possible to hypothesise that there are specific cultural as well as class fraction differences between young people, based on the different types of program in which they were engaged and the occupations to which they lead. Such differences may potentially influence or inform young people’s perceptions of career and the career implications of the program they were pursuing, in terms of their culturally embodied perception of the types of program and occupation which have particular value to themselves and their community. Although the scope of this study did not allow for such conclusions to be drawn, it is an area which warrants further investigation, since it has clear implications for Careers Education and Guidance and for policy formation in this area.

Secondly, in terms of transitions, Government education policy in recent years has persisted in utilising models based on the concept of rational, ‘ladder-like’ trajectories, despite it being nearly two decades since Hodkinson (1996:132, 133) utilising an earlier analysis by Strauss (1962) rejected this notion, proposing instead the theory of ‘careership’ which sees development as transformation, based on turning points. However, whilst these concepts effectively encapsulate the messy nature of many career trajectories, notions of careership and transformation also tend to imply positive forms of development. It is apparent from data generated by this study that this may not always be the case. Whilst for those young people on higher level programs the transformation, if unplanned, has been positive (for example, Freddy’s failure to get a place on an apprenticeship program leading to a BTEC and subsequently a planned degree in engineering) for those young people with poorer post-

16 educational outcomes the turning points may have been less positive. For example, although David's enrolment on an IT program after his redundancy seems positive, it was not going to lead to the career path he aspired to. Both these stories, and those of other young people in the study, are heavily reflective of the random nature of chance, serendipity and the limited possibilities of the various forms of participation open to them. They are optimistic about their futures, but, particularly at lower levels, have unrealistic aspirations in terms of the potential educational and labour exchange value of their vocational qualifications. Unsurprisingly, it is also apparent that, for the most marginalised young people - those with poorer educational outcomes, from lower social classes and with less access to cultural capital - trajectories tend to be more uncertain, messier and more broken. Thus, despite their optimism and commitment to their vocational programs, and despite the promises of policy rhetoric, the most marginalised young people remain unequally positioned within an education system which unequally prepares them for particular forms of labour in a jobs market in which those from more elite social classes will have access to the best jobs (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:184).

This implies a need for policy makers to begin taking account of extant 'power practices' (Kögler, 1996) and the hegemonic and normative discourses in which young people are variously positioned in discursive practices over which they have little control. Recent 14-19 policy, structured around models of instrumental or technical rationality (Wright, 2005:9; Hodkinson *et al* 1996:120), mistakenly assumes that all young people have the ability, support and understanding to make an informed rational and unconstrained career choice from an almost infinite range of possibilities. The data from this study disputes this. For example, Liam, from School 2 was the son of a musician and a 'businessman'. He anticipated a future as either a musician or a 'businessman', and aspired to do a degree to help achieve this, whilst Kate, a hairdressing student from College 1, the daughter of non-working parents hoped for a secure job in hairdressing. These cases illustrate the way in which young people are already socially positioned by their circumstances and background to pursue particular routes. These are rarely meaningful choices in the way implied by policy rhetoric, but pragmatic decisions made within limited horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1993; Hodkinson *et al* 1996), illustrative of the ways in which young people are most significantly and contingently constrained by gender, social class, habitus and (lack of) local employment and educational opportunities.

Thirdly, from the dialogues with groups of students from different communities across

England, this study raises significant questions regarding the development of policy in the area of VET. In recent years 14-19 policy has been intended to bring about a position where vocational qualifications have parity with academic credentials. This study demonstrated, however, a paradoxical dichotomy between the high regard the young people had for their programs and the low value they believe is placed on such programs by a society which values a traditional curriculum. This was illustrated in comments such as ‘A levels mean more’ (Liam, School 2) and ‘people think we’re really thick because we’re doing Beauty Therapy (Jane, College 1) in contrast to ‘college gives you a wide range of skills’ (Freddy, College 1). These data suggest that although young people acknowledge a public perception that VET programs are of a lower value, significantly, they do not necessarily *share* this perception, but are optimistic that they will confer the advantages policy makers promise in the labour market. What is not clear from the study are the *reasons* for the views expressed by the young people. Do their apparently positive views of vocational education merely echo the policy rhetoric they have heard mediated by their teachers, parents and the media? Or, alternatively, are such views reflective of specific aspects of habitus and identity in terms of the young people’s perceptions of the relative value of a college education (with its long association with the world of work). The acknowledgement that the societal value placed on vocational education is generally low, and that VET is associated with lower attaining young people may equally reflect rhetoric which is widely used in England and Wales, as well as notions of deficit which have become insidiously embodied in discourse around vocational education internationally. This, as with the other key issues raised by this study, is an area which warrants further investigation. . Only by continuing to develop our understandings of the implications of the way in which school to work transitions are structured, can we begin to move towards a more socially just system in which all young people are able to make less constrained and more informed decisions about their future careers.

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