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**Level 1 Vocational Learning: Predestination Disguised as
Opportunity?**

Paper Presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual
Conference
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**Level 1 Vocational Learning: Predestination Disguised as
Opportunity?**

Abstract

UK policy perception of young people undertaking low level (1 and 2) vocational programmes in Colleges of Further Education tends to characterise them within a deficit model of social exclusion, 'disaffection' and 'disengagement' (Colley, 2003:169). They are the focus of multiple initiatives in the context of the 14-19 agenda as attempts are made to solve a perceived problem by providing routes through a range of vocational 'opportunities' which will allegedly enable them to engage with the 'knowledge' society (Bathmaker, 2005). This paper attempts to problematise the notion of opportunity, arguing that the rhetoric of opportunity which permeates Government documents is merely a deception perpetrated on those young people whose positioning in education and society prevents them from questioning it.

The paper discusses the 'little stories' (Griffiths, 2003:81) of Emma, Leonardo, Paris, Rea and Amir, five young people who participated in a recent empirical study exploring the lives and transitions of level 1 students. Whilst acknowledging that the young people discussed in this paper are a small sample, their stories are typical of the 31 young people who participated in the study, and are also reflective of both the exclusionary characteristics experienced by the wider group and of their hopes, dreams and aspirations for the future.

The paper uses their stories to illustrate the significant limitations of the 'opportunities' offered to young people, arguing that in many cases these are limited to an extended transition, moving from one low level vocational programme to the next. It finds that, whilst apparently 'buying in' to lifelong learning and notions of a knowledge society, the young people are rejecting such 'opportunities,' together with their perceived civic responsibility of engaging in lifelong learning, as they draw on whatever capital they have available to them in an attempt to make the transition from education to the world of work. Four of the young people in this study were, or had been, engaged in employment concurrent with their level 1 programme. Whilst this could all be described as low pay, low skill employment some, such as working with children, carried significant responsibility. Three of these young people made a decision to move from education into the world of work at or before the end of their level 1 programme. The paper argues that in context of a low level vocational programme a decision to move into low pay, low skill employment might be regarded as a rational choice since it exchanges immediate financial capital, albeit at a low level, for a vague, insubstantial promise of something better at the end of a much extended transition. **This is acknowledged in 2006 white paper**

The paper goes on to conclude that these young people, despite the high aspirations reflected in their stories, 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. Instead, they are predestined to be engaged in low level, 'busy' activities rather than learning in preparation for low pay, low skill employment. Finally, the paper raises questions about the morality of a Government education policy which creates and perpetuates institutional and societal structures and barriers which effectively deny opportunity to so many young people.

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ABSTRACT DID NOT READILY ADDRESS METHOD OR THEORETICAL

FRAME (Bourdieu/Social Justice say what this is)

Literature/theoretical framework — look at opportunity

stuff/predestination stuff highlight tension. Social justice??

Bourdieu?

Perhaps we should follow up 5 years later — considerable research suggests that there is an improved financial outcome between a level and degree — perhaps we should explore the financial value of L1, L2 and L3 voc quals in comparison to none at all....

Introduction

There is a significant tension between the likely outcomes of undertaking a vocational 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 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 study exploring the aspirations and learning identities of level 1 vocational students. 32 students and 12 staff from 3 student groups in 2 colleges participated in the study which employed an inclusive methodological approach in an attempt to demonstrate value and respect for the young people (see Atkins, 2005). This was supported by a variety of data gathering methods including interviews, observation, limited documentary evidence, paper based data (e.g. personal profiles) from the students and serendipitous data. Emerging themes from the data were discussed with and validated by the young participants.

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Whilst using only a small number of the original sample, the case studies which are presented in this paper are representative of all those young people who participated in the study. The young people profiled here were all pursuing nationally recognised GNVQ foundation (level 1) awards, 2 in Information Technology (IT) and 2 in Health and Social Care (HSC).

Vocational Education and Training

Vocational Programmes such as Foundation GNVQ and the BTEC First Certificate which has replaced it 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; Finn 1984, 1985; Dale 1985). This saw the introduction of initiatives such as CPVE and TVEI, both of which had broad similarities to more contemporary successor programmes which have been also been subject to similar criticism, much of it focussed on the content and structure of such programmes, which are perceived to be providing a preparation for low pay, low skill, class specific occupations. Level 1 courses such as the foundation GNVQ referred to in this paper cover a limited range of information and are assessed against standardised and nationally approved criteria. Content has tended to emphasise 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 (Usher and Edwards, 1994:106; Helsby et al 1998:63; Bathmaker, 2001:85).

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. Clarke and Willis (1984:3) argued that the perception that young people need to be inculcated not only with the skills, but also with the right *attitudes* for work had its origins in Callaghan's Great Debate about education. They also discuss how this perception was justified in the context

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of the mass youth unemployment of the time. Moore (1984:66) extended this argument, pointing out that there was an associated 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. Programmes such as CPVE and latterly GNVQ inculcated social disciplines such as team-work, attendance and punctuality (Cohen, 1984:105; Chitty, 1991b:104) and thus prepared the young people for specific, low pay, low skill occupations (Ainley, 1991:103; Helsby et al, 1998:74; Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins 2005). Others (Colley et al 2003:479; Macrae et al 1997:92) have argued that the contemporary vocational curriculum which is offered predominantly within the FE sector is class specific and accessed largely by young people from lower socio economic groups. This pre-ordained positioning within the labour market thus becomes a determinant of future life chances and contributes to the replication of social class in future generations.

The Rhetoric of 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 (Major 1990:23; Colley 2003:27/28 REFS) 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, potential 'opportunities' are heavily circumscribed by economic policy and market forces. ~~in~~ addition Crucially, they are all also vocational in content, ostensibly to address skills shortages within 'the powerhouse of a high skills economy' (DfES 2006:1). Further, the paper makes no attempt to hide where choice and control really lies:

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As we give learners more control over their own learning experience we need to ensure they are making choices *only* between valuable options which meet employers' skills requirements (DfES 2006:41 my emphasis)

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A range of papers identifies level 2 credentials as being the minimum for employability (e.g. DfES 2003; 2006; DIUS/DCFS 2008). The 2003 paper created an invisible group of learners – those undertaking level 1 programmes who were only referred to in terms of not having achieved level 2. The 2006 paper however, proposes the introduction of a Framework for Achievement (FfA) (2006: 43) incorporating a new foundation learning tier, to be introduced from 2013. This continues to assume, however, that young people will progress through the proposed ‘coherent progression routes’ to ‘level 2 and beyond’ (DfES 2006 20/45), ~~level 2 being defined as the ‘minimum platform for employment’ (DfES 2006: 29) thus~~ failing to acknowledge the impact of exclusionary characteristics and the constraints on individual agency of many of the young people working at Entry or level 1.

~~Further, the paper makes no attempt to hide where choice and control really lies:~~

~~As we give learners more control over their own learning experience we need to ensure they are making choices *only* between valuable options which meet employers’ skills requirements (DfES 2006: 41 my emphasis)~~

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Yet despite this, when, as is inevitable, 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) for failing to meet their perceived civic responsibility of engaging with lifelong learning. ~~Most recently this may be seen in the requirement to participate to be introduced from 2013, with the expectation that credentials gained will be carried forward to ongoing, lifelong learning (dcfs 2008: 39/40)~~

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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 circumstances for any of these young people would have been better had the requirement to participate or undertake only employment with training which is proposed from 2013 (DfES 2007:8; DCFS 2008:39/40) already been the case.

Paris – A Case Study

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 GNVQ Foundation Health and Social Care 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.

Paris 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 also 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 at the end of the programme. Subsequently, she failed her GNVQ and although her destination was unknown to the college, her friends suggested that she continued with her employment at the food processing factory.

Alice – A Case Study

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Alice was 16 and enrolled on a GNVQ foundation Health and Social Care 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 foundation 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 foundation 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 GNVQ foundation 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 foundation award, it will not provide access to employment in Health or Social Care, 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 – A Case Study

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Emma was the only female student on the GNVQ IT Foundation 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 foundation 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 as to 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 the GNVQ programme.

Amir – A Case Study

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 GNVQ foundation 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 grade 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.

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The failure to 'progress' and access 'opportunities' is not confined to those young people profiled here. 32 young people participated in the original study, 21 of whom were undertaking GNVQ Foundation programmes. Of

~~these 21, although 16 achieved the award, broadly consistent with LSC Benchmarking Data (2005) only 9 planned to progress to a level 2 programme, figures consistent with those discussed by Ball et al (200x) in respect of 9 GNVQ foundation 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 high grades (Merit) in their level 1 programme and 4 who had passed the award in addition to those who had failed or withdrawn.~~

~~This suggests this nationally, around 50% are not taking up progression ‘opportunities’ irrespective of Government incentives such as free tuition and Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). 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 progression does take place, the only options are for progression to another level of vocational programme, and not only do these tend to be regarded as of lower status than academic programmes (Bloomer, 1996: 145/148; Edwards, 1997: 1) but they are highly gender stereotyped and populated mainly by students from working class backgrounds (Colley et al 2003: 479) and have been widely criticised for socialising students into particular job roles (Bathmaker, 2001):~~

~~For Paris, Amir, Alice and Emma, the field of post 16 education in which they were operating orientated their choices (Bourdieu 1990: 66), but individual agency determined which of those 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).~~

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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 2003; 2004). 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, 1980c/1993a:87) the options available to them are very limited. Their learning programmes did not provide an occupational qualification and acquiring such a credential will mean an extended transition period which will require determination, motivation, financial capital and parental interest and support.

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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).

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The failure to 'progress' and access 'opportunities' is not confined to Emma, Alice and Paris. 32 young people participated in the original study, 21 of whom were undertaking GNVQ Foundation programmes. Of these 21,

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although 16 achieved the award, broadly consistent with LSC Benchmarking Data (2005) only 9 planned to progress to a level 2 programme, figures consistent with those discussed by Ball et al (2000) in respect of 9 GNVO foundation 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 high grades (Merit) in their level 1 programme 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). 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 vocational programme, and not only do these tend to be regarded as of lower status than academic programmes (Bloomer 1996:145/148; Edwards et al 1997:1) but they are highly gender stereotyped and populated mainly by students from working class backgrounds (Colley et al 2003:479) and have been widely criticised for socialising students into particular job roles (Bathmaker 2001). Thus the post-16 education system exists as a structure for the reproduction of class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:178/179).

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Capital, Structure and Agency

~~An inability of parents to generate cultural capital for their children was evident for all the young people profiled here. None had parents with educational achievement beyond level 2. Thus, their parents 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). This is reinforced by the structure of the post-16 education system, which by directing significant numbers of young people from such backgrounds onto vocational programmes preparing them for particular types of occupation, exists as a structure for the reproduction of class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:178/179).~~

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~~The aspects of Habitus were multi-layered with the complexities of the different exclusionary characteristics exhibited by this small group — such as race, gender, low achievement and social class — as well as individual constraints and circumstances such as, for Emma, the fact that she was on the 'wrong' course. However, the most significant imperative for Paris and Alice was the need to generate financial capital: given her full time working hours this was also an imperative for Emma. In terms of Amir, the one young person to 'progress' to level 2 it is significant that his working hours were flexible and within the family, and that he had no domestic or other responsibilities. Emma worked full time, Paris for 25 hours a week and Alice had significant domestic responsibilities in addition to her part time job. Amir also anticipated being the breadwinner for a wife and family in the future, and took this responsibility seriously.~~

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Opportunity – The Great Deception

The commitment to learning expressed by these young people was grounded in a desire to achieve 'good' qualifications and a belief that they were indeed working towards a 'good' qualification, 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

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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, associated with whether to remain on programme or leave, whether to work or not, whether to continue on to level 2 or to seek employment. It was apparent, however, that the young people were in fact 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 which were '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. In fact, as is illustrated in this study, these young people are opportunity-less, but are sold the rhetoric of a post-Fordist dream. This is not merely rhetoric, it is the basis of a massive immorality, a great deception which is perpetrated on young people. They are prepared for and directed to low level vocational courses which by any definition are of limited value, 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.

Further, programmes such as GNVQ foundation are offered to young people as 'opportunities' but in fact teach the skills necessary for low pay, low skill work such as punctuality and conformity and the reality is that the only 'opportunity' available to a student holding a GNVQ foundation credential is progression to a -a GNVQ Intermediate level 2 vocational programme – they hold no credibility beyond the institution (Bathmaker 2001). Thus, at a fundamental level we are deceiving and manipulating the young people enrolled on such programmes by offering a mirage of impossible dreams, of

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non-existent opportunities and by giving the impression that they are readily achievable, rather like large sums of money on television games shows. The reality, of course, is that the systems, structures and practices serve only to keep each individual in their predestined 'place' in society rather than providing the 'opportunities' which form the focus of so many government papers.

Conclusion

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 ~~(2002)~~ 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 prospects of~~ the three who withdrew would have had improved life chances and employment prospects had they completed a level 2 programme, the only 'opportunity' offered within the context of post-16 vocational education. This could only really be determined to exploring the longer term outcomes for young people whose transitions involve low level vocational education programmes. However, assuming he is successful on the DIDA programme, Asif~~7~~ will still not have a level of credential commensurate with the occupation he hopes to pursue. He

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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 career. For, as would Alice, Emma and Paris, and even for Alice who passed her award with a Merit grade, the reality is very different to their original aspirations, as they had they elected to progress to level 2.~~

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~~Ultimately, only level 3 programmes do at least provide a possible springboard beyond drudgery and this must be recognised within the rhetoric of government papers. Bit on level 3 – helen’s paper join the bottom, marginalised 30% of our society who are either idle or working for ‘poverty wages’ (Hutton 1995:14).~~

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~~Ultimately/Finally,~~ the rhetoric of opportunity in so many government documents may be regarded as no more than smoke and mirrors obscuring the fact that for most young people, vocational education is indeed part of a pre-destined path leading to low pay low skill employment and social class reproduction.

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~~Thus, low level vocational education is being used to accommodate young people to current economic conditions and to meet the demand for a ‘new periphery’ (Ainley 1993:40) of temporary workers a group forming the bottom, marginalised 30% of our society who are either idle or working for ‘poverty wages’ (Hutton 1995:14).~~

Extra-Bits

There was an acknowledgement from some of the young people that the future would not be as described in their imagined (or fantasy) futures, but something rather more mundane, consisting of the drudgery of a low pay, low skill occupation and the socially excluded lifestyle associated with that. Continuation of 'education' allows them to avoid contemplation or experience of such a reality and to imagine a very different future. This 'imagining' of one future, whilst acknowledging the reality of something altogether less optimistic, was described by Ball et al (2000:113), in their biography of Warren and Daryl as 'lives on two planes' and was a trait which characterised all the young people in the GNVQ IT group as well as most of the others who participated in this study. #

AMIR

Amir is the only young person profiled in this paper who intended to progress to level 2, in his case to the Diploma in Digital Applications (DIDA). Here, the nature of their programme and form of transition is determined by serendipity rather than individual agency, and certainly does not reflect the free choice and opportunities described in government policy (e.g DfES 2003a; DfES 2003b; DfES 2006) or 'pragmatically rational career decisions' in which the future is 'knowable and often known' a notion arising from government policy and heavily criticised by Hodkinson et al (1996:141). It does, however, reflect the belief of the tutors that the best option for Amir is to 'progress' through the different levels of programme available to him, enhancing his credentials and ultimate employability. The DIDA is available at an institution he is familiar with, and which is close to home. Lacking the agency to explore or pursue other opportunities and pathways constructively, Amir has a reality of two options — DIDA or the world of work. Opting for the DIDA programme allows him to 'hang in' (Macrae et al 1997; Bathmaker 2005) and retain a tenuous hold on education.

PARIS

EMMA

ALICE

~~Therapy culture~~

~~This feature of the tutor-student relationship, in which the tutors are perceived to be helping the students, may form part of the 'unwritten alliance' described by Bathmaker (2001:92) in which both staff and students help each other to meet the requirements of the GNVQ system. Thus, the tutors are perceived to be successful in terms of students' achievement and progression, and the students are enabled to 'hang in', gain a credential and possibly to buy in to the notions and discourse around lifelong learning – perhaps becoming acceptors rather than hangers in (Macrae et. al 1997). Superficially, this appears to be a positive situation, however, it has significant implications:~~

~~Whilst such relationships might support those remaining within the system to achieve qualifications, there is an issue around supporting young people to achieve a credential which only they perceive as 'good' or valuable. Further, such a system fails to acknowledge or respond to the needs of those young people who fail to achieve or who withdraw. Ultimately this means that significant numbers of young people are becoming further excluded from society, whilst those who remain 'on course' are being subject to a form of deception which encourages them to regard as valuable a credential which has no currency in the jobs market or as a recognition of academic achievement.~~

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