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**Visions, Dreams and Reality: the limited possibilities for  
post-16 level 1 Students**

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## **Visions, Dreams and Reality: the limited possibilities for post-16 level 1 students**

### **Introduction**

This paper discusses the findings of a study exploring the aspirations and learning identities of 3 groups of level 1 students in 2 English Further Education (FE) colleges. It gives a brief description of the methodology employed and an overview of each of the three groups. It then summarises the findings from the data, to provide a context for the discussion which considers the key themes arising from the study. Drawing on the data and on relevant literature, the paper goes on to explore the positioning of these young people in the context of class and gender stereotypes, their aspirations and developing identities.

### **Methodology**

32 students from 3 groups in 2 colleges participated in total (see figure 1). A case study approach was used, and this was designed to be as inclusive of the young participants as possible in order to demonstrate value and respect for them. Most data was drawn from the young participants, although 12 staff from across the three groups were interviewed. A variety of methods was used to gather data 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. Further detail on the research process may be found in Atkins (2005).

<b>College</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Female Students</b>	<b>Male students</b>
St. Dunstan's	GNVQ Foundation IT	Emma	Samir; Wayne; Al; Pete; Naz; Amir; Abdul
St. Dunstan's	GNVQ Foundation HSC	Paris; Jennifer; Keira; Brady; Kate; Angelina; Jade; Alice; Rea; Britney; Cameron;	

		Kelly; Rukhsana	
Woodlands	Level 1	Leah; Jordan; Catherine; Gabby; Honey; Natalie	Max; Leonardo; Richard; Hamish; Mohammed

Figure 1

### **Group Profiles**

The three groups of students were drawn from St. Dunstan's College in Townsville in the North of England and Woodlands College in Midport, a city in the English Midlands. Two of the groups were enrolled at St. Dunstan's, and one group at Woodlands. Both groups at St. Dunstan's were pursuing nationally recognised GNVQ foundation (level 1) awards, one group in Information Technology (IT) and the other in Health and Social Care (HSC). At Woodlands College a new level 1 programme had been introduced in response to staff concerns about the existing curriculum available for level 1 learners. This programme, known as the 'level 1' consisted of multiple small accreditations. The emphasis was on literacy, numeracy and personal and social education, but one day a week was spent working towards level 1 NVQ units. These could be taken in four different vocational subjects during the year in which this study took place.

### **GNVQ IT Group, St. Dunstan's College, Townsville**

This group of young people enjoyed attending college and had high hopes for their future in a digital world. These hopes had a dreamlike quality. The students imagined the affluence associated with some parts of the IT industry, and a celebrity lifestyle that they hoped such an income could sustain. They believed that the 'good' qualification they would achieve – a GNVQ Foundation IT award – would provide the basis for such a career. Knowledge about career pathways, credentials and the potential length of transition was limited to one student (Abdul) who had observed closely his cousins' transitions through higher education. However, despite an expressed commitment to learning and achieving credentials three of the eight students who participated left education

and only one of these achieved the foundation award. Four –only half the group - progressed to level 2, with one student (Samir) remaining to complete the foundation award over a second year. The expressed commitment to learning also conflicted with the importance of leisure activity in the lives of these young people. Further, it was apparent that the effort which was invested in leisure in terms of both the leisure activity itself and in acquiring the money to finance it far outweighed that invested in learning although the students seemed unaware of this and believed they were ‘working hard’ – they saw no dissonance between their investment in leisure and their visions of an affluent digital future.

### **GNVQ Foundation Health and Social Care Group – St. Dunstan’s College**

The young women in this group rejected gender stereotypical female roles, yet were all engaged in preparing for caring job roles and most had caring and domestic responsibilities within the home.

They demonstrated many conflicts in their hopes and aspirations for the future. All reported high aspirations which could be divided into lifestyle and occupational aspirations. The lifestyle aspirations had a heavy celebrity influence, and were primarily hopes of sudden transformation which would result in celebrity status, and perhaps more importantly, the affluence associated with such status. In terms of occupational aspiration, the minimum transition any student could expect was three years (for nursery nursing), and in some cases this rose to as much as seven years (for nursing, teaching and midwifery). However, none had any idea of the pathways and credentials necessary to achieve their aspirations, nor of the length of transition they could expect and, like the young people in Bathmaker’s (2001) study, they showed no inclination to investigate this.

Despite this lack of awareness about career pathways, the students did indicate a commitment to education and to attending college in order to

achieve their ambitions. However, they also talked about leaving college to find employment and address the imperative to earn money. Both Rea and Alice for example, whilst expressing a desire to go to university and prepare for professional roles indicated that they might leave college at the end of the year 'to get some money behind me'. Further, despite an overt rejection of stereotypical female roles by most of the group, all were involved in rehearsing domesticity to a greater or lesser extent. For most, this involved caring and domestic activity within the home, and for the few who did not have significant responsibilities in this area, it consisted of dreams of a future with a home and children. Clearly, for this group, education was taking place within a context of conflicting and confused hopes and ambitions heavily influenced by social and familial constraints.

### **Level 1 Group Woodlands College**

The Level 1 group at Woodlands College had all originally applied for different courses, with the exception of two students with special needs who had 'progressed' to the programme. Despite the best efforts of the teaching team, those young people who were categorized as 'mainstream' students regarded the course as a form of serving time, in which their futures were on hold until they were able to move on to a different course which they perceived to be more relevant to their interests and aspirations.

However, it was apparent from the interviews and observations conducted with this group that whilst they perceived themselves to be 'serving time' on their level 1 course, they were also using the opportunity to rehearse essential social skills. Perhaps more significantly, they were using the friendship networks developed in college, and the time spent there, in the development not of a learning identity – something which is, possibly, 'on hold' until they progressed to a programme of their choice - but in the development of a social identity,

which appears to be a fundamental aspect of their overall identity formation.

### **Culture and Class**

The students fell into two main cultural groups. Three quarters (24/32) were white working class with family backgrounds in the ex-mining communities of the Midlands and Yorkshire. A smaller number (7/32), but nevertheless almost a quarter, were the children of immigrants to the United Kingdom. Six of these young people came from Muslim families, a majority of whom originated from Pakistan. All the students involved in the study came from lower socio-economic groups.

Traditionally, the white working class mining communities of Yorkshire and the Midlands were split on heavily gender stereotyped lines. Men went down the pit and did heavy manual work for which academic preparation was considered unnecessary. Women married young and engaged in domesticity and child rearing, usually within a short distance of their own parental home. Such cultural practices in themselves tend to reproduce the status quo by reinforcing 'belief in the prevailing system of classification by making it appear grounded in reality' (Bourdieu 1990: 71) and have been argued by Reay (1998:61) to be 'constitutive of rather than determined by, social structures'. These traditional values and practices persist in the ex-mining communities today and were highlighted by Jaskaren, a lecturer at Woodlands College. He contrasted white communities with minority ethnic families:

On parents evening, we got mostly Black & Asian parents – this shows how much support is given.

The other thing people should look at is general culture in the working class. If my son did better than me I would be proud but I have been to meetings in mining communities where if the son is doing better than dad he

doesn't like it. Mining communities used to have a job for life and this engendered the attitude ' I don't need to study' – this attitude still prevails in the third generation. If someone does better the community doesn't want to know.

(Jaskaren, Lecturer Woodlands College)

This comment also illustrates the differing value placed on education by different social and ethnic groups and it demonstrates the way in which the prevailing paternalistic culture of the former mining communities maintains a status quo in terms of family hierarchy and consequently class status. Father/son relationships which discourage education in this way suggest that it is not only young women who are constrained by local cultural and gendered practices and beliefs which are regarded as natural and normal by the community.

The key characteristics that both the Asian and white working class cultural groups had in common were socio economic status and a strong adherence to traditional gender roles. Class was reflected not only in lifestyle and parental occupation, but very much by the type and nature of the programmes the students were following. Colley et al (2003: 479) have argued that courses in FE are both highly gender stereotyped and populated mainly by students from working class backgrounds. Further, at level 1 only vocational options are available and vocational programmes have been widely criticised for socialising students into particular job roles (Helsby et al 1998; Bathmaker, 2001) and tend to be regarded as of lower status than academic programmes (Bloomer 1996: 145/148; Edwards et al 1997: 1). Gleeson (1996: 100) has argued that they are 'typically uncritical' and do not address important issues of inequality and social justice, yet for the young people in this study, a level 1 vocational programme at their nearest college was their only option. They were unable to stay at school (and most would not have



wished to do so) as they did not have the pre-requisite credentials to study at a higher level. Further, and as a result of policy implemented by a government intent on credentialising the whole workforce, they were denied access to benefits but paid to stay in education. Thus, a decision to go to the local college and take a level 1 vocational course could hardly be considered to be a choice or even the 'pragmatically rational process' described by Hodkinson (1998: 103). It was more a case of Hobson's choice. Employment opportunities for unskilled 16 year olds with low level or no credentials are limited, and vocational training options normally require some evidence of credential even at level 1. In addition, work based training for many occupations (for example plumbing and childcare) is available only at level 2 and above, effectively excluding those young people who do not meet the entry criteria in terms of precursor credentials such as GCSE.

The full extent of these constraints on the choices available to young people with low level or no GCSE passes becomes apparent if consideration is given to the institutions which do offer level 1 programmes, and the variety of options which are available. These constraints influence both the institution attended and the course undertaken. In the case of the Woodlands students, the city is dominated by one large college on multiple sites. The level 1 provision is concentrated at a site on a main arterial route two miles from the city centre, and seven miles from the nearest alternative college provision. Similarly, St. Dunstan's is located at the centre of Townsville, some distance from the nearest alternative provision. Both are readily accessible by public transport. St. Dunstan's offers a limited range of GNVQ Foundation programmes, and during the year in which this study took place Woodlands College was in the process of discontinuing GNVQ Foundation with the strategic aim of enrolling all level 1 students on the college's own programme. Ultimately, serendipity determines which college is the closest or the easiest to access, the type and content of

programme on offer there is determined by Senior Management Team (SMT) policy, and the nature of guidance or allocation to programme is equally open to chance, often determined by factors such as number of enrolments.

Thus, in terms of socio-economic status and lack of credentials, these young people are structurally positioned, perhaps inevitably, to make a transition to low level, low status further education programmes. The range of such programmes is limited, and like all Vocational FE programmes, heavily gendered (Colley et al 2003: 479). In this way societal structures determine not only that a young person will undertake a low level vocational programme but also the nature of that programme. Hence the HSC group was exclusively female, and the IT group, with one exception, was exclusively male. Further, it may be argued that such programmes prepare young people for specific occupations (Ainley 1991: 103; Bathmaker 2001) and that this is achieved by instilling behaviours such as attendance and punctuality (Cohen 1984: 105; Chitty, 1991b: 104) rather than by education in a wider and more democratic sense, such as the education for studentship described by Bloomer (1996; 1997). The 'learning activities' pursued are 'busy work' – useful for filling time whilst such behaviours are instilled, and able to produce an individual 'socialised to work' (Tarrant, 2001) but of little value in terms of learning and education.

Despite this, the government claims to be promoting choice and control over educational options for all young people, failing to acknowledge either the structural constraints which prevent real choice or the hidden agenda of the need for low skill low pay workers discussed by Ecclestone (2002: 17/19). The economic drivers for education policy are expressed in terms of an idealised post-Fordist rhetoric:

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 and therefore help them succeed and progress

(DfES 2006: 41)

Not only does such rhetoric fail to acknowledge key societal (and economic) issues, but also reinforces existing inequalities in society, since in the context of such an approach:

Economic needs are placed within a dominant position and the satisfaction of other societal requirements is dependent on the success of the economy. Such definitions of economic need represent the interests of dominant social groupings, namely those of capital, men and white people, and are presented as universal and taken for granted.

(Avis 1996:81)

This subordination of the education system to the economic system where the education system exists as a structure for the reproduction of class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:178/179) suggests that current government economic policy is also performing a class reproduction function by determining through policy and funding mechanisms the type and nature of programmes that are available. The lack of choice and opportunity that directs young people to low status vocational courses which prepare them for certain types of occupation suggest that the state is, perhaps unwittingly, complicit in the reproduction of social class in that the education structures and systems serve to fulfil its economic need for low pay low skill workers, rather than being, as it claims 'an engine of social justice and equality of opportunity' (DfES 2006: 1e)

## **Gendered Roles and Domesticity**

Socio-economic structures and those of the education system are not alone in denying opportunity to these young people. Adherence to traditional gender roles, or 'gendered habitus' (Reay 1998: 61) in which both young men and young women appeared to view the gender divisions as natural and universal also formed a major part of the young peoples' dispositions and identities. Thus, the male students in the St. Dunstan's IT group envisaged futures where they would 'look after' a wife or girlfriend and, indeed, a family. The female students, whilst notionally rejecting domesticity as an option for the future, were all engaged in domestic activity at some level and a significant number undertook often onerous caring responsibilities in addition to their college course. This was most evident in the students in the HSC group at St. Dunstan's. Colley et al (2003) have argued that vocational learning is a process of becoming and that 'predispositions related to gender, family background and specific locations within the working class are necessary ... for effective learning'. Further, they suggest that the dispositions of individuals on care programmes are shaped by the female stereotype of caring for others.

However, there was a tension between the HSC students' caring identities (demonstrated in their choice of programme and in their individual caring roles) and in their expressed rejection of fulfilling a 'wife and mother' female stereotype, similar to that described by Hodkinson et al (1996: 117/119) who found that, despite entering gender stereotyped occupations, young women made little reference to marriage and domesticity when describing their future plans and suggested that they were disinterested in marriage and domesticity after observing the impact of this on older sisters. Consistent with this, only three of thirteen students in the HSC group (Brady, Paris and Jennifer) included children in their imagined future and of these only Jennifer thought that the child(ren)'s father might form part of this future. Significantly, these

students had no major domestic or caring responsibility within the home, unlike those of their peers who rejected domesticity as a possible future. Another student, Catherine (Level 1 Woodlands) envisaged an eventual domestic future, although in her case it was not what she aspired to but rather an acceptance of a somewhat unpalatable inevitability.

### **Fantasy Futures**

All the young people in this study, irrespective of gender or ethnicity, demonstrated a fascination with celebrity culture, and a conviction that one day they would experience a sudden transformation which would lead to a celebrity lifestyle. The preoccupation with a celebrity lifestyle formed a significant aspect of the young peoples' leisure activity in terms of their interest in popular culture and the lifestyle of celebrities such as the Beckhams. As well as engaging with media reports on individual celebrities they also watched a range of popular competition programmes on television in which the winner received significant cash rewards and instant fame such as 'Big Brother' or 'Pop Idol'. This was reflected most strongly in their aspiration to achieve an affluent lifestyle, but also in that when making their own choice of pseudonym during the fieldwork for the study, almost all chose the names of 'well known' celebrities drawn largely from the fields of sport, film, television or fashion. Ball et al (1999:214) have discussed the concept of fantasy futures, a belief in sudden transformation, that one day they will waken up rich and famous (for example by appearing on Big Brother or winning the lottery), and this phenomenon has also been identified in a study of NEET (not in education, employment or training) young people in Wales (TES 2006). Some young people did, however, acknowledge the likelihood of a more mundane future. For example, Catherine (Level 1, Woodlands) wanted to be a dress designer but recognised that she was more likely to 'have babies and work in a clothes shop' whilst Al (IT, St. Dunstan's) wanted to be an IT consultant in America, but followed this up by saying somewhat wistfully 'I can dream it'.

Whilst the level 1 students in this study acknowledged that their futures were likely to be more mundane, they did not appear to see any dissonance between their likely future employment and their lifestyle aspirations. Paris (GNVQ HSC; St. Dunstan's) for example, wanted to be a midwife, but envisaged herself living in 'a mansion' in North Yorkshire. Leonardo (Level 1: Woodlands) expected to become a self-made multi-millionaire. Although his plans for achieving this were somewhat vague, and certainly inconsistent with his occupational ambition to become a refrigeration technician, they were not apparently unrealistic to those who were interviewed with him. This inability to detach an occupational aspiration from a fantasy lifestyle seems to suggest that the young people perceive their occupational ambitions to be as likely or unlikely as winning the lottery.

However, having such dreams, whether of fantasy futures or even fantasy occupations may be necessary to enable the young person to accept the reality of 'here and now' and to enable them to rationalise pragmatic responses to imperatives such as the need for money. Thus, it is alright to accept a low paid job because there is always the possibility of a return to education or sudden transformation and the mundane reality of the drudgery of unskilled work is only temporary within the context of such a rationalisation. This was evident in the fact that none of those students in employment at the time of interview enjoyed their jobs – they regarded them as purely instrumental in providing the money necessary to support themselves, largely in terms of their leisure activities. A perception that low pay low skill work would only be temporary was also apparent in the interviews with Alice and Rea (HSC St. Dunstan's) both of whom aspired to go to university but were considering leaving at the end of the year to 'get some money behind me'. Both anticipated a return to education at some unspecified point in the future.

### **'Buying In' to Learning?**

At interview all the young people on GNVQ programmes expressed a clear verbal commitment to 'doing the course' and to the concept of lifelong learning. All anticipated progressing through an extended transition to a professional or technical role, suggesting that their apparent commitment may have been the instrumental motivation based on a form of credentialism promoted by educators and policymakers described by Ecclestone (2002:20). Commitment to the programme itself was less apparent in level 1 students, but nonetheless, these students also expressed a commitment to the rhetoric of lifelong learning. However, for all those students who participated in the study, this was inconsistent with the other data.

In terms of what the young people said, a picture was created of each individual industriously using the level 1 or foundation programme to build up to the future. Each young person expressed a clear perception that commitment to education, working hard and achieving 'good' credentials was important. This was expressed in a number of ways. For example, Wayne (IT St. Dunstan's) explained how important good attendance was to success, which he defined in monetary terms:

'I have just got to keep coming to college and keep coming till the years have gone past because I've got three brothers who did the same and they earn about £8 an hour now.'

whilst Rea (HSC St. Dunstan's) described giving up work to concentrate on the course:

'I did have a Saturday job but it didn't go that well, I used to have a Saturday job but it didn't work out, because you haven't got time for studying. It didn't work that well because when I went to college at first I used to get tired and that with all the work'.

Jade (HSC St. Dunstan's), like Wayne, compared herself with her siblings, in this case to emphasize how credentials might give her a better future:

- Jade            My mum's wanting me to be go into a job where it's qualified and there's plenty of money behind it cos she wants me to do good like my sisters I've got three sisters older than me and they've turned out to be just mums, they've got nowhere in college and nowt like that and I just want to prove to me mum that I want, I can get qualified and get far.
- EJA            Right and what do your sisters all do?
- Jade            One of my sister's whose a care assistant our Jemma, she like helps out on odd occasion she's got a baby and there's my older sister whose got three kids she don't do nowt and our Becky don't do nowt either.

These young people all believed that they were working hard in pursuit of their goals, and expressed confidence that with continued commitment they could achieve their occupational ambitions yet my observations and data from staff interviews indicated that they spent most of their time 'doing leisure' rather than 'doing work'. This contradiction between personal rhetoric and reality was interesting. Most of the young people interviewed were confident and articulate (at least in terms of their ability to discuss dreams and leisure, though less so in terms of discussing their education) and did not appear to be expressing the lifelong learning rhetoric in the sense that they believed these were the answers I expected, but rather in the sense that this was their reality, at least at that moment in time. Possibly then, their apparent buy in to the lifelong learning rhetoric formed, at least in part, a recognition of the societal value placed on credentials and occupations and reflected an attempt to move beyond the dispositions they brought from past learning programmes (Ecclestone 2002: 144) and to be valued within a hierarchy of lifelong learning.



Bathmaker (2001: 90) found that some young people remained on programme out of a vague belief in a possible future pay off which 'they expressed as a repeated claim that qualifications will get them jobs'. For those in a position to progress to higher level programmes, as most reported intending to do, there are some grounds for this belief in that even relatively low status programmes and credentials can buy a degree of economic capital. Colley (2006: 25) in her study of CACHE Diploma Childcare students argued that part of the role of Vocational Education and Training (VET) is to allow young women with particular emotional resources to develop and refine them and ultimately, to exchange them for a form of economic capital albeit for very low wages, or for more cultural capital but on vocational courses in low status institutions. This argument could be extrapolated to other vocational students on other programmes, and may well be the case for those students who achieve at level 1 and are able to progress to level 2 programmes and ultimately into employment. However, the same cannot be said for those who fail, withdraw or choose not to continue to level 2 and this group forms by far the greatest proportion of level 1 students. Instead, it could be argued that they are making pragmatic decisions such as those described by Hodgkinson (1996: 125) and exercising agency constructively in the sense that they are recognising the constraints and limitations they live within and using their limited cultural capital as a basis for gaining whatever economic capital they are in a position to secure. Emma (IT St. Dunstan's) for example, was working as a cleaner at a local supermarket when she withdrew from the programme. Emma's mother, a cleaner at the same supermarket had obtained the job for her. Paris (HSC St. Dunstan's) failed her GNVQ and although her destination was unknown to the college, she was working at the time as a packer at a local food processing factory and it seems likely that she continued with this employment, which like Emma's job, had been obtained for her by her mother who also worked there. It could be argued that these young people are simply making the best of the circumstances in which they

find themselves, and this may mean using existing capital in the form of family connections to obtain low paid, low skill work which will generate an immediate economic return however limited, rather than hoping that a vague and distant future will provide credentials necessary to get the job (and economic return) that they aspire to.

The value of credentials should not be underestimated. Riseborough (1993:57) has argued that 'Grades are cultural capital passports into higher education and work' and cites Becker et al's (1968) argument that grades form a currency which supports the economy of campus life. Reay and William (1999) found that young children viewed the SAT assessment process as a definitive statement about the sort of learner they are. Similarly, foundation students seem to construct success through the achievement of credentials, or 'good' qualifications, which are conflated with the ability to get 'good' jobs.

This was a perception apparently shared by many parents. A significant number (21/32) of students reported parental support as a factor in coming to college. Mothers had a far higher profile than fathers in the context of this support, and this was consistent for both male and female students. In all but one case, support was associated with parents' aspirations for their offspring to achieve 'good' qualifications and 'good' jobs. Good appeared to be defined in deficit terms, in that it reflected achieving something rather than nothing where nothing referred to unemployment and parenthood.

However, the type of intervention made was largely abstract, being confined to a general emotional (but rarely financial) support for the young person to undertake a post 16 programme, combined with a somewhat vague desire for them to 'do well'. These interventions, well-meaning but lacking in purpose, were consistent with those described by Ball et al (1999:217) who suggest that although all social groups report

parental support, there are significant social class polarisations in terms of the nature of the interventions made arising from the parents' own experience of education. Reay (1998:60) argues that mothers have a more significant role in providing such educational guidance and support and identifies seven aspects of cultural capital which are significant in home-school relationships, including educational background, knowledge and credentials and material resources. None of the mothers (or indeed fathers) of the young people in this study was reliably reported as having educational credentials beyond level 2. Most had limited material resources, and in view of their own educational background were likely to have limited educational knowledge or resources. Thus, these mothers do 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. This notion of educational inheritance (Ball et al 1999) is significant in terms of these students where most aspired to a graduate or senior technician level career, but none had any parents with education beyond level 2 and only four participants had any siblings with a university education. Of these four, two students, Hamish (Level 1 Woodlands) and Richard (Level 1 Woodlands) had both been educated in special schools and had medical diagnosis of learning disability and so may not have been representative of the wider group.

### **Working Hard at Doing Leisure**

The students' conviction that they were 'working hard' conflicted both with published research (Bathmaker 2005:89) and other empirical data arising from the study yet it was apparent that the students were not 'inventing' this – their insistence that they work hard was consistent across all groups. Part of this phenomenon may be explained by perception, but this is, perhaps, too simplistic and narrow a reasoning to explain it all. Part of this seems to be a need to conform, perhaps as a result of the socialisation effect of GNVQ which provides what Cohen has

termed 'the inculcation of social discipline' (1984: 105) as part of a preparation for a pre-ordained position in the labour force (Helsby et al 1998: 74). The students are clear about what holds a value educationally – attendance, motivation and effort (Bathmaker 2005: 89) and part of the process of 'hanging in' seems to be a need for the young people to perceive themselves to be conforming to this (and thereby demonstrating their value as members of a learning society), despite the fact that they behaved 'as if education happens by a process of osmosis' (Macrae et al 1997: 505). The alternative would be to acknowledge the likelihood of becoming an 'outsider' to education with all the associated disadvantages. Whilst they might not be able to analyse the effects of social exclusion arising from non-participation in education and subsequent employment in low pay low skill work, they may well recognise that such a process would lead to a loss of their imagined future.

It is also worth noting that there were three different ways of interpreting the classroom activity referred to above. The young people believed they were working hard, the staff considered that they lacked concentration whereas my own interpretation was that the students were using the time as an opportunity to negotiate arenas and identities mainly associated with leisure activity. It is apparent that young people experience considerable tension in negotiating between different arenas as they try to reconcile the demands of social lives which are 'pivotal elements of their identities and are equal to, if not more important than, their educational selves' (Ball et al 2000: 59), of college and learning towards which they have a somewhat ambivalent attitude and work or domesticity, both regarded as generally unpleasant necessities. The leisure activity which I observed in the classroom was focussed on discussions related to social and leisure activities the young people were planning or had recently participated in. For the HSC students at least, this provided the opportunity to rehearse the communication skills which

are fundamental to work in the HSC sector; this was particularly apparent when they utilised those skills to provide mutual emotional support, a feature of group relationships which was absent from both the level 1 and IT groups. Most of this group claimed to 'love college' but the focus of this again was less concerned with the course and more with maintaining friendships within the group.

Leisure also provided the imperative to work since the social activities the young people engaged in were all expensive. Communication with friends made the use of a mobile phone essential and the make and model were significant in conferring status. Even 'hanging around' with friends entailed meeting in town and shopping, or going to a pub or someone's home and drinking alcohol. Alcohol use was consistent across both genders and all cultural and religious groups. Drinking alcohol provided the opportunity to 'socialise with friends' in the evenings, and often at lunch break when many students, in defiance of college regulations, spent time in the nearest pub. Other activities such as dance and sport also entailed a significant financial outlay. However, leisure activity provided a form of light relief, something to look forward to in lives that were perceived by the young people to consist largely of the mundane and boring – college, work and domesticity.

Ball et al (2000: 68) have discussed the 'choice biographies' emerging amongst more affluent adolescents in which the traditional connectedness from school to college to work has been broken, but where work, leisure and study are 'balanced' and 'flexible' in order to generate more cultural capital and facilitating the presentation of the transition in a positive light (for example, as a 'good' gap year). The high priority placed by the young people in this study on social lives and leisure indicates that these priorities are common across social class boundaries although the young people in this study do not have the same material and cultural resources to create a positive choice

biography as do their middle class peers, and this limits their both their ability to participate in education and to consume as members of society. Despite this, their willingness to invest significant emotional and financial resources into their social lives is indicative not only of the importance they place upon it but also of the fact that these young people too are constructing different biographies, in which their social life forms the most important aspect of their identity, to the extent that learning identities may be abandoned in order to generate the economic capital necessary to pursue social activity. This is also consistent with Unwin and Wellington's findings that young people are increasingly seeking out alternatives to full time education (2001:51) and may provide a further explanation for the significant number of students on level 1 programmes who fail to achieve or who do not progress within education.

Whilst many aspects of these social lives were benign, others were less so and concerned behaviour related to sexual activity, the use of illegal drugs and alcohol. Using individual agency in this way leaves the young people open to judgements such as 'disaffected', 'disengaged' or 'socially excluded'. Social lives which involve aspects that may be subject to such pejorative discourse are articulated in a particular way. They provide relief from an otherwise mundane life, in which there are almost no opportunities to change the status quo yet at the same time they provide an opportunity to challenge or resist that status quo by indulging in behaviour which is at odds with a wider and more readily accepted culture in society.

However, whilst placing the greatest emphasis on their leisure rather than their learning identities and exercising their individual agency in this way will not enable them to engage with the 'system' and negotiate a transition to a professional occupation. Instead, they are more likely to develop a form of agency which provides at least an illusion of

independence and overtly rejects state sponsored institutionalised education systems. Another form of this is disaffected behaviour in the classroom, stigmatised by government and society but reflecting nonetheless a clear rejection of a system about which many young people have few illusions. Thus, Naz (IT St. Dunstan's) stated that he preferred college to school because 'It's about being treated with respect and no uniform' but continued to exert individual agency in his rejection of the conformist GNVQ culture. He attended sporadically, spoke provocatively, used class time to pursue discussions about leisure activities and rarely submitted any work. In doing this he reflected an adolescent sub culture which uses dress, language and behaviour 'consciously at odds' with the official culture of the institution and which works in tandem with the schools' distinction between 'good' and 'bad' students as it reproduces the social relations of the wider world (Webb et al 2002: 123/124).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has explored some of the key themes arising from this study and suggests that as the young people involved attempt to develop identities and negotiate their transitions from school to work, a number of things are happening. They are developing identities in which learning, leisure, work and domesticity are intertwined, but where leisure is of the most fundamental importance. Despite the high priority the young people place on leisure, they recognise the importance of learning at an instrumental level – in the sense that it can provide credentials which in turn can lead to improved job opportunities. There is also a recognition of the societal value placed on learning, and what appears to be a need on the part of the young people to be viewed as 'buying in' to learning, something which, of itself, confers a degree of societal value. Despite this apparent 'buy in' most of the young people reject a system which can only offer them an extended transition on low value courses. Instead, many choose to utilise what limited capital they have in return

for low skill, low pay work which can finance their leisure and social activities.

Characteristics such as class, gender and vocational education serve to bind each young person more firmly into their allotted place in society – one where they are unqualified, low paid, low status and unvalued. This paper has also highlighted the irony that whilst these young people have the same hopes, dreams and aspirations as their more educationally successful middle class peers they are more constrained by fundamental structural forces and lack the agency and cultural capital to realise their aspirations. There are particular tensions between the participants' high aspirations and their limited knowledge of the education and credentials necessary to achieve those aspirations as well as between their verbal commitment to education and lifelong learning rhetoric and other behaviours which indicated a more ambivalent and instrumental view of education. These tensions are key factors in that most of these young people drift into low skill, low paid employment, failing to fulfil their aspirations but maintaining a status quo in terms of social class structures. With no real choices and limited agency they are more likely to respond to the limited attraction of any employment which provides an immediate economic return than to invest in a low level, low status vocational programme which offers at best a vague and insubstantial promise of something better at the end of a very extended transition.

Unreal hopes of something better than mundane low skill low pay employment and the lifestyle that that can support, rely on sudden, almost miraculous transformations which could place the young person in a position in which they had no financial concerns and would facilitate their engagement with leisure activity whilst simultaneously causing them to be held in a higher regard by the rest of society – valued more, rather than valued less.



Yet within this context current government policy (DfES 2006: 1) still claims to be 'an engine of social justice and equality of opportunity'. Unless, it would appear, you happen to be a level 1 further education student in England, structurally positioned, partly inevitably, to make choices that are not your own and to do low level activities and be 'busy' (rather than engaged in learning) as a preparation for low pay low skill employment.

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