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**From Marginal Learning to Marginal Employment? The real impact of 'learning'  
employability skills**

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**Biography**

Dr Liz Atkins is a lecturer in education at the University of Huddersfield. Her research interests concern in/equalities in education, vocational education and the policy context of post-compulsory education with particular focus on young people undertaking low level vocational programmes. This article draws on research exploring issues of inequality and social justice in the context of the lives of young people undertaking low-level vocational education programmes, and on *Practical matters: what young people think about vocational education in England* (2010) , a research project conducted with colleagues from Nottingham Trent University on behalf of the City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development.

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**Abstract**

This paper explores notions of 'employability' in the context of the experiences of those young people who leave the English education system at 16+ with few or no academic credentials. The paper contests the conflation of 'employability skills' with 'inclusion' in policy discourse, arguing that the real impact of such programmes is to inculcate attitudes and behaviours consistent with low pay, low skill work in already marginalised young people. It draws on empirical evidence from two studies which suggest that what young people really want are real, practical skills which are directly transferable to the world of work and which would fulfil the promise of high pay, high skill work in a knowledge economy. The paper concludes that in a world where many young people are increasingly marginalised in terms of both education and employment, only an education which provides the skills the young people aspire to, and which has real exchange value in the labour market place can confer any real advantage to them. Current approaches to employability skills education, far from achieving this, are little more than an exercise in social control resulting in new forms of class and labour (re)production as already marginalised young people are socialised into particular forms of casual and low pay, low skill employment.

## **Introduction**

The global escalation in youth unemployment since the financial crisis of 2008 has been matched by ever more precarious forms of employment for those young people who do have some sort of a job. This has generated new forms of exclusion as young, middle class graduates as well as working class young people with limited credentials find themselves competing for a constantly diminishing pool of uncertain job 'opportunities'. Thus, it has had particularly devastating consequences for those young people who leave school at 16 with very low levels of attainment according to national benchmarks. Most of these young people are drawn from working class backgrounds, a significant proportion are alienated from education and many experience other exclusionary characteristics. Many of these young people drift between various forms of participation, sometimes becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), sometimes participating in low level programmes intended to enhance 'employability' and 'skills' and sometimes in uncertain, low pay, low skill employment, often in the informal economy.

Internationally, government responses to youth unemployment have some similarities, and many are predicated on the assumption that all young people can engage in and progress from low level and often poor quality forms of education. For example, common initiatives have included different forms of Alternative Education, which can be found in New Zealand (Nairn and Higgins 2011 p.180), the United States (Jeong-Hee and Taylor (2008) and Australia (Riele, 2007) amongst others. Watts and Bridges (2006 p.267) identify raising aspirations, normally associated with entry to higher education, as a common policy initiative, as do Kenway and Hickey-Moody (2011p.151), who cite examples from policy in both Australia and the UK. Also common to most Western governments has been an increasing emphasis on employability, seen in the Lisbon Strategy (2000–2010) and more recently in the Europe 2020 strategy. A consistent characteristic of policy on employability has been to conflate the (vague and ill-defined) notion of 'employability' with those of 'inclusion' and 'social justice'.

In the UK policies promoting employability have led to a proliferation of employability skills programmes, despite the content and outcomes of such programmes being inconsistent with policy rhetoric suggesting that they effectively prepare young people for participation in the knowledge economy and in direct tension with concepts of both inclusion and social justice. Further, although graduate employability has been subject to considerable scrutiny little critical consideration given to the impact and efficacy of low-level employability programmes directed at NEET and low attaining working class young people.

## **Employability: Policy Discourse and Contemporary Definitions**

Most contemporary interpretations of the term employability draw on a CBI definition from 2007 which, in an echo of *Towards a National Debate* (Callaghan, 1976), suggests that employability skills include a *positive attitude* as well as self-management, team-working, business and customer awareness, problem solving, communication and literacy, application of numeracy, and application of information technology. This draws on an earlier (Conference Board of Canada, 2000) definition of employability skills which includes the 'abilities' to communicate, manage information, use numbers, think & solve problems, be responsible, be adaptable, learn continuously, work safely, work with others, and participate in projects & tasks as well as demonstrate *positive attitudes & behaviours*, (my emphasis).

Hillage and Pollard (1998) developed a definition which, whilst it acknowledged the 'crucial' importance of labour market conditions, emphasised the responsibility of the *individual* to gain and maintain employment and to find new employment if required, in a report which related to those at the *lower* end of the jobs market, a factor which may be significant in the differing approaches to 'employability' taken with those positioned at the lower end of the labour market, and those who have the benefit of Higher Education credentials. A broader definition, developed by Brown et al (2003) proposes a concept of employability which comprises an absolute dimension (an individual's skills) and a relative dimension (where job-seekers stand in relation to each other) as well as a subjective dimension relating to the socialisation and social identity of the individual. Thus, they argue, a more helpful definition of employability would be 'the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment' (Brown et al 2003 p.111), something which would be influenced not only by an individual's skills, but by work availability in the labour market and by the individuals perception of what work is 'right' for them (Bates, 1993 p.14). This interpretation of employability raises a key question about contemporary employability programmes in the learning and skills sector. Given that, in relation to other job-seekers, NEET young people and those who have very low levels of attainment stand at the bottom of an unequal and highly stratified hierarchy, to what extent do the generic and low-level 'skills' conferred by such programmes alter that positioning ?

Despite a lack of credible research to provide constructive answers to this and other questions, 'employability' has formed a major plank of government policy for nearly two decades: it's centrality to the key strategic direction of the then Department for Education and Employment under New Labour was made explicit in Hillage and Pollard's (1998) report and, utilising similar instrumental definitions of employability, the influential 2003 Skills Strategy White Paper began by conflating skills with 'employability

for life' (p.11) as a key response to perceived global economic demands. These definitions chime with more recent Coalition policy, which utilises a deficit model associated with disadvantage and poor education to justify its approach to 'employability' in the context of a discourse which both justifies, and, as Simmons and Thompson (2011 p.30) have argued, glamourises the increasingly insecure nature of employment.

The post-fordist rhetoric in the Skills Strategy White Paper about the high skill, high pay opportunities associated with globalisation were however, in stark contradiction to the definition of Employability in the same paper. New Labour (DfES 2003b p.13) defined 'the minimum for employability' as the holding of level 2 credentials, something which was contextualised within a discourse of inclusion and re-inforced in a later White Paper (DfES 2006 p.4) and through the data reporting of the then funding body for Further Education (FE), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), in terms of numbers achieving the 'level 2 Attainment threshold' as well as by Foster's (DfES 2005 p.vii) call for FE colleges, which form a significant proportion of the learning and skills sector, to have 'a core focus on skills and employability'. In response to this, 'personal' and 'thinking and learning' skills were made explicit in the 2005 White Paper, which also stated that such skills were *fundamental to improving young people's employability* contextualising them within the over-arching legislative framework that followed the Every Child Matters (2004) green paper. This focus on low-grade skills as a pathway to 'employability' became the key function of a diminished and increasingly instrumental FE sector under New Labour. The position has not altered as a consequence of more recent Coalition policy which promises to 'improve learner outcomes and employability' (BIS, 2011 p.24) again conflates 'employability' with vocational skills and credentials (BIS, 2010 p.33), further re-inforcing the 'narrow and restrictive role based upon particular interpretations of skill and employability' assigned to Further Education in recent years (Simmons, 2010 p.364).

### **Employability and Vocational Education**

Although contemporary definitions draw on recent, instrumental interpretations of employability, Mcquaid and Lindsay (2005 p.201) have suggested that the use of the concept in terms of labour market outcomes can be dated to the 1970s and the focus on the need for 'individual' and 'transferable' skills to the 1980s. These changing definitions may, in part be responsible for the consistent failure of policy in this area to 'move beyond broad conceptions of skill and define those necessary to capably undertake a range of jobs' (Keep and James, 2010 p.14). The perceived need for individuals – particularly those who might be described as marginalised - to have a generic set of 'skills' was made explicit in the CBI's 1989 call for a 'skills revolution' which, it was

argued, would result in an increase in the provision of 'employability skills' across all education sectors. In the UK it may be argued to have been given particular prominence by Callaghan's 1976 speech *Towards a National Debate*, in which he argued that schools were failing to equip young people with the basic skills and *attitudes* necessary for the world of work, a perception which was justified in the context of the mass youth unemployment of the time and which resonates through the new vocationalism of the 1980s, the GNVQs of the 1990s and the Diplomas and BTECs of the 2000s as well as with the content of contemporary employability programmes and training.

At the time of the new vocationalism the explicit inculcation of particular attitudes in young people was largely associated with the young unemployed on vocational programmes and led to a perception that those who required the development of such attitudes belonged to a particular category of non-academic low achievers (Moore, 1984 p.66), a perception which has remained unchanged in skills and education policy (e.g. see BIS, 2010 p.33 for a recent example). Early programmes such as GNVQ and CPVE inculcated specific social disciplines (Cohen, 1984 p.105; Chitty, 1991b p.104) also found in contemporary employability programmes including team work, attendance and punctuality. This approach to education has been argued to prepare young people to undertake specific low pay, low skill occupations (Ainley, 1991 p.103; Helsby et al 1998 p.74), in 'sinister' (Tarrant, 2001 p.371) forms of socialisation which may also be argued to form an attack on the social identity of the individual, given the explicit nature of the changes in attitudes and behaviour they seek to achieve and which ultimately result in a 'pre-ordained positioning' in the labour market rather than facilitating young people to develop a 'critical understanding of the nature of work' (Bathmaker, 2001 p. 90).

Labour market positioning which leads young people towards the 'opportunities' of casualised, low pay, low skill work, interspersed with periods of unemployment is in conflict with both the New Labour rhetoric which promised 'an inclusive society that promotes employability for all' (DfES 2003b p.18) and with similar, more recent Coalition rhetoric (e.g. see BIS, 2010 p. 33/34) which also conflates 'employability' with inclusion amid promises of high pay high skill work in the global economy. This positioning does, however, clearly demonstrate that these forms of discourse are highly effective as 'instrument[s] of domination' (Schubert, 2008 p.183) by attributing blame to the individual for the position in which they find themselves and diverting attention and critical consideration from government responsibility for macro-economic policy. These forms of discourse also reflect the deficit model utilised by policy makers to describe those who are perceived to lack particular skills and attributes and which rhetoric

suggests can somehow be embedded in the individual by participation in low level vocational and employability skills programmes.

### **Research Context: Young Peoples' Perceptions**

This section draws on interview data from two studies. The first of these explored the aspirations and learning identities of young people on level 1 post-16 programmes (Atkins, 2009): 32 young people from 2 institutions were interviewed for this study. The second, conducted on behalf of the City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD), explored the views of young people of their vocational education programmes (Atkins et al, 2010). Partial data, drawn from young people studying at level 1, has been used from this second study which involved 48 young people from four institutions undertaking vocational programmes pre and post-16 and from level 1 to level 3. The young people from both studies shared a number of characteristics. All could be described as working class, and most had very low levels of attainment. A significant proportion was participating in some form of paid employment, and others had previously done so. In excess of 10% had been educated pre-16 in special schools and others had formal statements of special educational need. All those interviewed post-16 expressed a sense of alienation from education associated with negative school experiences. In addition to social class and low attainment, most of the young people demonstrated a range of other exclusionary characteristics, including, but not confined to, disability, gender and race.

Despite being engaged in education at the time this study was conducted, many of the young people expressed concern about the lack of credibility that their programme had outside their institution. Leonardo, a student on a generic level 1 programme which shared many features with contemporary UK employability programmes reflected this lack of credibility in his comment that 'I will use [the level 1 qualification] any way I can use it, I will use it, but I'm not sure *where* I can use it'. Leonardo's concerns are consistent research conducted by MacDonald and Marsh (2005 p.99) which suggests that many young people who undertake employability programmes, often as a condition of receiving benefits, feel an element of pointlessness and hopelessness about the reality of what these programmes can offer in terms of access to the labour market and the 'secure' employment they are seeking. There was a dissonance between the recognition that their qualifications had little exchange value, and the young peoples' aspirations. Most hoped to enter professional or technical roles, such as teaching. Students from both studies had very limited understandings of their potential career paths. For example, Jade, a student who participated in the earlier study, aspired to be a 'special needs teacher' but, typically, had little notion of how to achieve this:



- LA Jade, you want to be a special needs teacher. Do you know how long it will take you to get there?
- Jade Roughly about 3 -4 years.
- LA And what would you have to do to become a special needs teacher?
- Jade Erm ... a course on childcare probably, and something higher up the special needs thing.
- LA Would you need to go to university or anything like that?
- Jade I don't think so.

Despite a recognition that their low-level qualifications carried minimal exchange value, all the young people in this study emphasised the importance of getting 'good' qualifications as a pre-cursor to getting a 'good' job. In the context of these aspirations 'good jobs' were conflated with 'permanent' and 'secure' employment (ibid p.80) and 'good' qualifications were those such as GNVQ and BTEC, which had national branding and were perceived to have a value beyond the institution. The young people on lower level, practical programmes such as construction and childcare in a later study (Atkins *et al*, 2010) whilst recognising the academic/vocational divide and its implications in terms of inequalities, had chosen their programmes because they believed that they would confer the skills necessary to work in a particular type of employment. This was eloquently expressed by Ellie, a pre-16 Media Studies student, who believed that:

'we will get jobs more easily than people with A Levels and stuff, because we will already know how to do lots of things like use a video [camera] that they [employers] will have to teach people with A Levels'.

Like those young people in the earlier study, this group also aspired to have 'secure jobs' but it was apparent that their understandings of possible career paths, and, indeed, the notion of 'career' were lacking in sophistication (2010 p.131). For example, Zoe (level 1 childcare) described a career as 'something you want to do and get paid for', whilst Daniel, who was doing a vocational construction award pre-16, wanted to '[get] qualified in woodwork and have a secure job'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their Social Class and potential Labour Market positioning, the young people from both studies were most concerned with 'security', something they conflated with 'good money' and 'qualifications'. Lewis, a participant in the later study

wanted to 'achieve a lot of money'. Similarly, Alice, (a participant in the earlier study) reported that: 'My mum's wanting me to be... go into a job where it's qualified and there's plenty of money behind it'. To Alice, the qualifications and money were at least as important, if not more so, than the nature of a future job.

These data make some key points. The aspirations of the young people cannot be achieved by participation on low level vocational programmes and certainly not by participation in generic employability skills programmes similar to that Leonardo was undertaking. This is because young people are concerned with acquiring real skills which have real exchange value in the labour market place and which will allow them to participate in the forms of employment promised in neo-liberal rhetoric associated with the knowledge society. The forms of high pay, high skill employment promised in policy discourse are also associated with notions of 'security' and a 'job for life', key concerns of the young people in both studies and reflecting a recognition of the uncertainties associated with low pay, low skill work. The data also demonstrate that the young people, contrary to contemporary policy discourses, have high aspirations but lack the knowledge and cultural capital to navigate the transitions required to achieve them, a point I have made previously (Atkins, 2010 p.260). This is despite rhetoric which promotes the idea that young people can be or do anything providing they engage with the 'opportunities' provided for them (Higgins et al 2010 p.23; Atkins, 2010 p.262; Atkins, 2009 p.147). However, as Higgins et al also point out 'exhortations to hard work, and the unproblematic equation of qualifications with labour market power, do not provide a sufficiently nuanced strategy to enable school-leavers to manage career pathways effectively'.

It is also clear that the aspirations of these young people are in stark contrast to the notions of graduate employability employed in other policy areas which are contextualised around 'career planning', a notion which implies very different life and economic returns to those of the 'secure jobs' that the working class young people in these studies aspired to. Such diverse perceptions of career and employability raise the question why the same government should utilise two such different perceptions of 'employability' for young people, in an apparently arbitrary division made according to social class and perceived academic and economic potential, if not to maintain a convenient status quo. Participation in the low level employability and related programmes offered in the learning and skills sector imply an embodied recognition on the part of working class young people that they have been unequally prepared for an unequal jobs market in which those from more elite social classes will have access to the best jobs (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 p.184): contextualised within a global recession the uncertain hope for 'secure' employment amongst working class young people may be

a factor in their lack of resistance to undertaking programmes they recognise have little value, in an act which may be seen as being complicit with their own domination (Bourdieu 1989a p.12 cited Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 p.24).

### **Problematizing Employability**

Despite a plethora of policy and rhetoric, the concept of employability remains 'a slippery notion' (Simmons and Thompson, 2011 p.29). It is particularly apparent that it has very different meanings in the two contrasting arenas in which it is used. Policy discourse on Graduate 'employability' emphasises gaining 'real' experience of work by undertaking work-related degree programmes and gaining post-graduate qualifications: there is an emphasis on the individual 'selling' their high level skills and having the social skills to function in high status corporate environments (e.g. see DIUS, 2008). The acquisition of these skills – or capital – is through academic study at an advanced level. In contrast, low level learning and skills employability programmes are lacking in conceptual content, confer little in terms of cultural capital, have a negligible 'social value' (Bourdieu 1990 p.132) and promote only 'impoverished forms of employability' (Simmons, 2009 p.137). None of this is consistent with the policy discourse of inclusion, nor can it offer the real skills and real jobs the young people in these studies aspired to.

Further, a key aspect of graduate 'employability' is the opportunity to undertake work experience, largely as extended work placements or internships. In contrast, those programmes offered to NEET young people offer only 'work experience' of very short duration: for example, one programme (City and Guilds, 2011) requires 15 *hours* work 'experience' to meet the requirements for an 'employability' credential, an experience which falls far short of the 'real work experience' called for by Wolf (2011 p.130) and which cannot begin to confer the real skills sought by the young people in these studies. Similarly, work experience on low level broad vocational programmes is at best very limited and at worst non-existent. This qualitatively differential approach prepares those young people on low level programmes in the learning and skills sector to enter a different part of an unequal hierarchy in which they are subject to forms of domination and symbolic violence in the context of both the programme they undertake and the broader unequal education structures these programmes are part of. These processes, which are integral to the structure and conditions of reproduction of the existing social order, ensure 'the production of compliant habitus' (Bourdieu 1990 p. 129/130) preparing young people effectively for a cycle of low pay, no pay in which they accept both casual, low skilled work and periodic unemployment as facts of life.

### **Employability Skills Curricula**

Analysis of contemporary employability curricula reveals that the content is more reflective 'narrow, impoverished notions of skill and employability' (Simmons 2010 p.373) than of broader understandings which encompass issues such as local availability of work and personal and social identity. In an echo of the policy discourse, they also place the student within a deficit model associated with the perceived absence of certain behaviours and attitudes and similarly to policy discourse, this may be construed as an assault on the identity, or self, of the individual undertaking such programmes. For example, the Employability and Personal Development programmes offered by one UK national awarding body are advertised as 'qualifications that help you develop key personal skills, qualities and *attitudes* required by employers as well as to help you progress in education' (City and Guilds 2011, online, my emphasis) whilst a second advertises their credentials as offering the 'ABC of employability – *Attitude, Behaviour, Communication*' (Edexcel, 2012 online, my emphasis). Thus, the employability skills curricula makes explicit that much of the 'learning' is associated with socialisation into the workplace as well as including what have been variously termed key, core, common, basic and functional skills, with 'key' skills changing and evolving over time driven by whatever is considered key for employability at that point (Kelly, 2001 p.33).

Over time, key skills and employability skills have been closely associated both with the vocational curriculum and marginalised learners, particularly those experiencing specific exclusionary characteristics such as unemployment or in terms of low achievement of 16+ credentials. The vocational curriculum itself is also closely associated with marginalised learners and it is widely recognised that low level VET programmes have very limited exchange value in both the labour and the educational market place (Wolf, 2011 p.21; Atkins, 2010 p.255; 2009 p.137/138). Young people undertaking employability programmes will pursue courses whose generic content may be argued to be of even less value than that of low level vocational courses and which will do nothing to change or ameliorate their social and economic positioning. The 'employability' curriculum will offer them, in addition to some (very) limited work experience, activities such as CV writing, interview and communication skills, approaches criticised by MacDonald and Marsh (2005 p.109) as largely ineffective and which once formed part of the 'preparation for work' within the heavily criticised, low level broad vocational courses such as foundation GNVQ. Now however, these activities have been disconnected even from the busy work of low level vocational programmes to form 'stand alone' courses. Advertised as offering the skills all employers demand but lacking any real contextualisation to the world of work they create forms of dissonance for the young people who undertake them: whilst recognising the 'pointless' nature of these programmes, the young people still have the (false) hope that perhaps the promises of

secure and well paid employment implicit in the rhetoric will be fulfilled. The generic curriculum has other significant failings: firstly, and most significantly, it assumes an availability of jobs during a youth employment crisis and fails to acknowledge the local pressures and demands which are significant influences on job prospects and availability. Secondly, it fails to acknowledge the seismic shift from a youth to a secondary labour market characterised by poor working conditions and 'pervasive unemployment and underemployment' (MacDonald and Marsh (2005 p.111/112) which is now the future for many working class young people, particularly those with very poor academic attainment at 16+. This discourse of underachievement effectively justifies and re-inforces a public and policy perception that these young people have homogenous learning and attitudinal deficits and homogenous needs based on uncritical stereotypes of marginalised youth.

Finally, although this remains unacknowledged in policy, there remains a significant demand for workers prepared to undertake 'flexible' low pay low skill work (CBI, 2009 p.20 cited Keep and James, 2010 p.28; Ecclestone, 2002 p. 17/19) and it is highly questionable whether, for much of this work, any qualifications at all are required: it should also be noted that in many cases such employment is found through informal networks rather than through strategies such as application for advertised vacancies or writing and distribution of CVs (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005 p.110). Thus, rather than providing young people with the skills and means to access employment, as suggested by policy discourse, employability skills programmes may be argued to subject them to explicit forms of socialisation associated with low pay, low skill employment in an economic climate where such work is in increasingly short supply. This 'sinister' approach to education, which actively seeks to make changes to the social identity of the individual also diminishes the hopes, expectations and aspirations these young people have for the future. Despite considerable government rhetoric to the contrary, working class young people have broadly similar aspirations as their more affluent middle class peers as they begin their school to work transitions but lack the material and cultural resources to create a positive choice biography (Ball et al, 2000 p.68). Ultimately, therefore, these aspirations become increasingly unrealistic as, with limited potential for agency and cultural capital at their disposal they try to negotiate and re-negotiate transitions in a world in which their place within the social order has been pre-ordained.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it may be argued that there is evidence to suggest that, far from being educated in any meaningful way, the most marginalised working class young people are, through the medium of low level employability skills courses, being socialised into 'flexible' (or insecure and temporary) employment, interspersed with periods of

unemployment, in a cycle of low pay, no pay which benefits only employers in need of a pool of casual workers. This approach, justified through a discourse of inclusion, utilises 'therapeutic' approaches which form 'a diminished curriculum for diminished individuals' (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009 p.164) serving to reproduce the status quo in terms of societal and labour market (in)equalities whilst paradoxically also being used as 'a means for explaining and protecting the status quo' (Graham and Slee 2007 p.277).

The discourse around employability is also explicit about offering a transformative experience which will take the individual from a position of deficit to one in which they will be endowed with the skills necessary to succeed in a high pay, high skill global economy despite evidence that the fundamental causes of 'low pay and rotten jobs' are misdiagnosed and that this particular policy solution is unlikely to be effective (Keep and James, 2010 p.1). Despite evidence that many young people have a realistic understanding of the likely outcome of these programmes, there is a dissonance with their lack of resistance to undertaking them, which seems to be indicative of a false hope that the rhetoric associated with employability programmes will deliver the real skills and real jobs it implies, and which the young people aspire to (Atkins, 2009, Atkins et al 2010) as much as to the degree of power and control exerted by state structures on young people with limited agency and cultural capital.

The exercise of power through both the programmes themselves and the discourse surrounding them may be observed in both the implied meaning and actual impact of a policy which warehouses already marginalised young people on valueless programmes that confer no cultural or economic capital. Instead, the real impact of such programmes is to prepare young people for a lifetime of marginalisation in the form of a low pay, no pay cycle whilst also ensuring that they lack the agency or cultural capital to question the status quo. In this way, the young people contribute to their own domination in the context of a system of educational and labour classification which, in direct tension with its explicit claims, serves only to preserve the power of the elite and to 'naturalise the structures of domination' (Wacquant in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 p.13).

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