

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Atkins, Liz (2012) Social control in practice: the impact of learning employability skills. In: Discourse, Power and Resistance, 2-4 April 2012, Plymouth.

URL:

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/22058/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE



UniversityLibrary

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

Social control in practice: the impact of learning employability skills

Paper Presented at Discourse, Power and Resistance Conference

Tuesday, April 3 2012

Correspondence

Dr. Liz Atkins

University of Huddersfield

School of Education and Professional Studies

Queensgate

Huddersfield

HD1 3DH

Email: L.atkins@hud.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper explores notions of 'employability' in further education, a concept which is at the basis of much government policy associated with marginalised learners. Drawing on earlier empirical work by Atkins (2009) Atkins et al (2010) and Simmons and Thompson (2011) and working within a framework informed by Marxist concepts of Power and Control, the paper problematises the term employability, arguing that in policy terms it is ill-defined yet associated with a positive rhetoric about high pay, skill work which is in tension with the prospects of the marginalised group of students at whom it is directed. Despite the rhetoric, most employability programmes are far removed from the 'genuine work experience' advocated by Wolf (2011:130). They offer little in the way of conceptual knowledge or exchange value, but are resonant with earlier concerns about the structure of vocational PCET programmes as producing users who are socialised to work, rather than as citizens (Tarrant, 2001). As such, the paper argues that employability programmes are little more than an exercise in social control which is productive of false hope that engagement with them will offer a route into high pay, high skill employment with the prospect of financial and career security. The paper concludes that this hope obscures the reality that such programmes at best may lead to low, pay, low skill work and at worst, form another stage in the 'churn' of young people who are NEET. The impact of such programmes is unlikely, therefore, to be one of progression to high pay, high skill careers, but rather to be one of class and labour (re) production as students are socialised into particular forms of casual and low pay, low skill employment.

Introduction

Employability skills programmes in the learning and skills sector in England have proliferated in recent years, apparently in direct correlation with the contraction of the labour market. However, despite their proliferation, and despite the scrutiny to which graduate employability has been subjected, there has been little critical consideration given to the low-level employability programmes directed at mostly NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) working class young people which are in tension with policy rhetoric suggesting that they effectively prepare young people for participation in the knowledge economy.

Notions of employability permeated the discourse and post-16 policy of the 1997-2010 Labour government and this emphasis has continued under the present Coalition government. Mcquaid and Lindsay (2005:201) argue that the term 'employability' has originated at least a century ago, but 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: 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.

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, 1984:66), a perception which has remained unchanged in skills and education policy (e.g. see BIS, 2010:33 for a recent example). Early programmes such as GNVQ and CPVE inculcated specific social disciplines (Cohen, 1984:105; Chitty, 1991b:104) also found in contemporary employability programmes including team work, attendance and

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

punctuality. This approach to education has been argued to prepare young people to undertake specific low pay, low skill occupations (Ainley, 1991:103; Helsby et al 1998:74), in 'sinister' (Tarrant, 2001:371) 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: 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: 18) and with similar, more recent Coalition rhetoric (e.g. see BIS, 2010: 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, 2008:183) 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 (uncritical and ill-defined) skills and attributes and which rhetoric suggests can somehow be embedded in the individual by participation in low level employability skills programmes.

Young Peoples' Perceptions

Although employability policy is heavily focussed on marginalised groups, particularly NEET young people, and despite the debates around the value and efficacy of this, there is a lack of credible research which explores the outcomes of such programmes in terms of the relative benefits to those who undertake them. There is, however, considerable evidence that similar low level qualifications, such as those derived from foundation learning programmes and the broad vocational programmes associated with employability 'skills', lack any 'real world' currency (Wolf, 2011: 93). Further to this, research conducted by MacDonald and Marsh (2005:99) 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. Similarly, in a study by Atkins (2009), young people on a generic level 1 programme, which included all the features found in employability programmes, expressed concern about the lack of credibility that the programme had

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

outside their institution. This lack of credibility was reflected in one student's 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' (Atkins, 2009:99).

Despite their recognition that their low-level qualifications carried minimal exchange value, all the young people in this study (conducted across two institutions) emphasised the importance of getting 'good' qualifications as a pre-cursor to getting a 'good' job (2009:60). In the context of these aspirations 'good jobs' were conflated with 'permanent' and 'secure' employment (ibid:80) and 'good' qualifications were those such as GNVQ, which had national branding and were perceived to have a value beyond the institution. The young people 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 perceived that they would confer the skills necessary to work in a particular type of employment. This group, which included participants from all mainstream levels in Further Education, also aspired to have 'secure jobs' but it was apparent that their understandings of possible career paths varied in sophistication according to level and type of programme as well as subject area. The students (mainly those from more affluent and educated backgrounds) on those level 3 programmes with greater 'academic' content (e.g business studies) offered more sophisticated interpretations of the notion of 'career' as well as having considerable clarity about their personal career orientations (2010:31). In contrast, those (largely working class) young people on lower level, practical programmes such as construction and childcare made less sophisticated interpretations. Perhaps unsurprisingly given their Social Class and potential Labour Market positioning, and like the young people in the 2009 study, this group was also the most concerned with 'security', something they conflated with 'good money' implying that working class young people on lower level programmes – particularly where these have minimal social or exchange value, as in VET, Functional Skills and Employability programmes - are more likely to aspire to 'security' around the notion of a 'job for life' , in cognisance of the uncertainties associated with low pay, low skill work, their class-specific 'opportunities' thus also 'determining the level of occupational aspiration' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:184).

It is 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' many of 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

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

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 entry level 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 1990:184): 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 employability programmes they recognise have little value, in an act which may be seen as being complicit with their own domination (Bourdieu 1989a:12 cited Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:24).

Employability: Policy Discourse and Definitions

Most contemporary interpretations of the term employability draw on a CBI definition from 2007 which, in an echo of *Towards a National Debate*, 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: 111), something which would be influenced not only by an individual's skills, but by work

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

availability in the labour market and by the individuals perception of what work is 'right' for them (Bates, 1993:14). 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 education 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 (2011:30) 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: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 2006:4) 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 (2005: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, 2011:24) again conflates 'employability' with vocational skills (BIS, 2010:33) and further re-inforces the 'narrow

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

and restrictive role based upon particular interpretations of skill and employability' assigned to Further Education in recent years (Simmons, 2010:364).

Problematizing Employability

Despite this plethora of policy and rhetoric, the concept of employability, particularly in relation to young people who are NEET and those undertaking further (rather than higher) education, remains 'a slippery notion' (Simmons and Thompson, 2011:29) and appears to have 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, learning and skills employability programmes, unlike their graduate counterparts, are formally credentialised only at very low levels, lacking in conceptual content, confer little in terms of cultural capital, have a negligible 'social value' (Bourdieu 1990:132) and promote only 'impoverished forms of employability' (Simmons, 2009:137).

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 (2011:130). 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: 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 of instrumental definitions emphasising 'narrow, impoverished notions of skill and employability' (Simmons 2010: 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 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: 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, 2011:21; Atkins, 2010:255; 2009:137/138). 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: 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

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

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 in a contracting labour market 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 (2005:111/112) which is now the future for many working class youth. Further, it assumes that all NEET young people are functioning at very low levels, contrary to research evidence suggesting that this is a complex area, heavily mediated by age and gender, and that many young people classified as NEET have relatively high levels of credential (Simmons and Thompson 2011). 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, 2009:20 cited Keep and James, 2010:28; Ecclestone, 2002: 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, 2005:110). 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, 2000:68). 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.

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

A Paradox: employed but unemployable

Clearly, these issues should be matters of grave concern. However, although 'rotten jobs' and the reasons for them are subject to extensive critique (e.g. see Keep and James, 2010) which resonates with Marcuse's early (1964:25) argument that the 'veil' of technological advances had created forms of labour which were '... exhausting, stupefying, inhuman slavery [resulting in the] isolation of the workers from each other' and merely concealed the ongoing re-production of inequalities and 'enslavement' (Ibid: 31). Similar notions of inequality informed the 1980s critiques of VET programmes as being part of a strategy for socialising the young into low pay low skill work; despite this, contemporary employability programmes in the learning and skills sector have not been subject to such extensive examination. This is despite the fact that socialisation to work and attitudinal change are key explicit aims of such programmes rather than, as with the VET programmes, part of a hidden curriculum. Rather, these programmes have become 'taken-for-granted' as part of a broad societal and educational 'buy-in' to government rhetoric. This reflects the power of discourse – that over time, the deficit model of marginalised youth in the persona of non-academic, unemployed and unmotivated has become accepted as a 'norm' in which the young people concerned are 'othered' and seen in one of two ways. Firstly, they can be perceived as failing to take advantage of the 'opportunities' offered to them, thus blaming the victim for their own situation whilst effectively excluding any other possible explanations (Clarke and Willis 1984:3). Alternatively, they can be othered as 'disadvantaged' and in need of 'support', lacking qualifications and by extension, intelligence; in this context, through acts of 'transfigured' domination (Bourdieu 1990:126) 'support' is conferred through the provision of 'skills training' on low level employability programmes.

Evidence from a small scale survey of trainee teachers, all specialising in employability skills, supports this analysis. Emerging data indicate that their practice is informed by perceptions of need, disadvantage and support consistent with Coalition discourse around employability and underachievement as well as with Ecclestone's (2004) concept of a therapeutic education, which she argues is contrary to social justice (Ecclestone, 2004:133) as it engenders dependency, rather than empowering individuals. The teachers' focus on a perceived need for emotional support and soft skills is also indicative of the 'diminished images of human potential' (Ecclestone, 2007:455) which permeate employability skills discourse and curricula. These trainee teachers expressed an explicit 'buy in' to a deficit model of employability which identifies a personal lack or failing on the part of the young people. Examples of this were definitions of employability programmes offered by the participants as 'provid[ing] learners with relevant absent

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

skills' and meeting the 'skills gap in an individual's knowledge' by providing the 'relevant skills ... needed to achieve employability'.

Participants clearly perceived their students as marginalised but tended to conflate that marginalisation with skills deficit rather than with any other exclusionary characteristics, and regarded their own role as being to 'correct' or improve that deficit. These responses raised questions around teachers understandings of social justice issues, something which may well be related to the current technicist approach to Initial Teacher Education. It is also reflective of the power of a government discourse around employability skills and vocational education, which, for at least 30 years, in parallel with its criticisms of skills education and those providing it (e.g. see Leitch, 2006; Foster, 2005) has associated high levels of vocational skill with security of employment and high levels of economic return. This relationship was cited by these trainees as justification for employability skills programmes which will help young people 'understand how employment works [and] what employers are looking for' and may also be a factor in the lack of resistance to these programmes on the part of the young people who undertake them.

The notion of a 'skills deficit' expressed by these trainee teachers permeates official discourse and is mediated in terms of a suggestion that, in future, labour markets will demand 'high levels of flexibility' and that 'individuals will need to continually adapt and change to the constantly shifting demands of the workplace' Simmons (2010 :373). This demand is inconsistent with both a perception that necessary skills can be conferred by a short and low level employability skills programme and with a contracting labour market in which, contrary to employability skills rhetoric, many skilled workers find themselves redundant. It is, however, wholly consistent with Brown et al's (2003:122) argument that their definition of employability acknowledges the possibility that an individual can be employable but not in employment, a contention supported by research conducted by Simmons and Thompson (2011:85) and by Keep and James (2010:23). Research amongst young people functioning below level 2 and thus, according to the discourse of successive skills policies (e.g. DfES 2003b:13; DfES 2006:4), lacking the skills for employability found that at least a third of those participating in the study were currently engaged in some form of paid employment, whilst others (all female) were engaged in unpaid care-work within their extended families (Atkins, 2009) activities which might be argued to confer knowledge and skills which carried some exchange value in the labour market, unlike the level 1 vocational qualifications the young people were pursuing. These data demonstrate the paradox that it is possible to be unemployable in policy terms but to be engaged in paid employment. They also reflect that fact that, contrary to

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

policy and public perception, most young people who are NEET are not also 'long term' unemployed but move between various forms of participation (Simmons and Thompson 2011:175). The 'churn' or cycle of low pay, no pay, between low level training courses and low pay, low skill employment means that many of these young people have, in fact, experienced periods of employment, often in different contexts albeit in 'rotten jobs'. Having been employed, this then begs the question why these young people need to be 'prepared' to enter the labour market by participation in 'employability skills' programmes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be argued that there is evidence to suggest that, far from being educated in any meaningful way, working class young people on employability skills courses available in the learning and skills sector are 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, which utilises 'therapeutic' approaches to forms of education designed to change the identity of the individual, merely offer 'a diminished curriculum for diminished individuals' (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009:164) which serves only to reproduce the status quo in terms of societal and labour market (in)equalities.

In contrast with this, the discourse around employability is 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, 2010:1). 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 transformation it promises, 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 unemployed 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 drudgery 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

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

quo and thus 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: 13).

References

- Ainley, P. (1991) 'Education for Work' in C. Chitty, (Ed.) *Changing the Future* London: The Tufnell Press
- Atkins, L. (2009) *Invisible Students, Impossible Dreams: experiencing vocational education 14-19*. Stoke-on Trent: Trentham Books
- Atkins, L, Flint, K. And Oldfield, B (2010) *Practical matters: what young people think about vocational education in England* London: City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development
- Atkins, Liz (2010) Opportunity and Aspiration, or the Great Deception? The Case of 14-19 Vocational Education *Power and Education* Volume 2 Number 3
- Ball, S.J.; Maguire, M. and Macrae, S. (2000) *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16 New Youth, New Economies in the Global City* London: Routledge/Falmer
- Bates, I. A job which is right for me: social class, gender and individualization in Bates, I. and Riseborough, G. (1993) (Eds) *Youth and Inequality* Buckingham: Open University Press
- Bathmaker, A-M (2001) 'It's a Perfect Education': Lifelong Learning and the Experience of Foundation-level GNVQ Students' in *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* Vol. 53, No. 1 pp 81-100
- Bourdieu, P. (1990) *The Logic of Practice* Cambridge: Polity Press
- Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J-C. (1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture 2nd Edition* London: Sage
- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* Cambridge: Polity Press
- Brown, P., A. Hesketh, and S. Williams. 2003. Employability in a Knowledge-driven Economy. *Journal of Education and Work* 16, no.2: 107-126.
- Callaghan, J. (1976) *Towards a National Debate* speech given at Ruskin College, Oxford October 18 1976 available at <http://education.guardian.co.uk/thegreatdebate/story/0,,574645,00.html> accessed 07/03/2012
- Chitty, C. (1991b) 'Towards New Definitions of Vocationalism' in Chitty, C (ed) *Post-16 Education Studies in Access and Achievement* London: Kogan Page
- City and Guilds (2012) *Employability and Personal Development Qualifications* ONLINE available at: <http://www.cityandguilds.com/61583.html> accessed 27 March 2012
- Clarke, J. and Willis, P. (1984) 'Introduction' in I. Bates et al *Schooling for the Dole the New Vocationalism* London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd
- Cohen, P. (1984) 'Against the New Vocationalism' in I. Bates et al *Schooling for the Dole the New Vocationalism* London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Confederation of British Industry (1989) *Towards a skills revolution - a youth charter* (CBI, London)
- Confederation of British Industry (2007) *Time well spent: Embedding employability in work experience*, Confederation of British Industry
- Conference Board of Canada (May 2000) *Employability Skills 2000+*, May 2000
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (1 December 2011) *New Challenges, New Chances Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan: Building a World Class Skills System* London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (1 December 2011) *New Challenges, New Chances Skills investment statement 2011-2014: investing in a world class skills system* London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2010) *Skills for Sustainable Growth Strategy Document* London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
- Department for Education and Skills (2003a) *14-19 Opportunity and Excellence* London: The Stationery Office
- Department for Education and Skills (2005a) *14-19 Education and Skills* Annesley: DfES Publications
- Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Realising the Potential: a review of the future role of Further Education Colleges (Foster Review)* Annesley: DfES Publications
- Department for Education and Skills (2006) *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* Norwich: The Stationary Office
- Department for Industry, Universities and Skills (2008) *Higher Education at Work: High Skills, High Value* ONLINE at: <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/migrated-consultations/higher%20education%20at%20work%20%20high%20skills%20high%20value%20consultation%20document.pdf> (29 March 2012)
- Ecclestone, Kathryn and Hayes, Dennis (2009) *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*. London: Routledge
- Ecclestone, Kathryn (2007) Resisting images of the 'diminished self': the implications of emotional well-being and emotional engagement in education policy, *Journal of Education Policy* 22 (4) 455-470
- Ecclestone, K. (2004) Learning or Therapy? The Demoralisation of Education, *British Journal of Educational Studies*. 52 (2) 112-137
- Ecclestone, Kathryn (2002) *Learning Autonomy in Post-16 Education The Politics and Practice of Formative Assessment*. London: Routledge/Falmer

16/04/2015 15:28:39

Liz Atkins

DRAFT PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

Edexcel,(2012) *Easy-to-assemble BTEC qualifications that stack up to job success and career development*

ONLINE at: http://www.edexcel.com/quals/PublishingImages/qualification_hero/WorkSkills/index.html

accessed 17 March 2012

Department for Education and Skills (2003) *Every Child Matters: Presented to Parliament by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury by Command of Her Majesty, September 2003*, Cm 5860, London: Stationery Office

Further Education Unit (1979) *A Basis for Choice* London: FEU

Helsby, G.; Knight, P. and Saunders M. (1998) 'Preparing Students for the New Work Order: the case of Advanced General National Vocational Qualifications' *British Educational Research Journal* Volume 24 no. 1 pp 63-78

Hillage J, Pollard E. (1998) *Research Report RR85*, Department for Education and Employment, November 1998 ONLINE at: <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs/summary.php?id=emplblty> accessed 23 March 2012

Keep, Ewart and James, Susan (2010) *What Incentives to Learn at the Bottom End of the Labour Market? SKOPE Research Paper No. 94* July 2010 University of Cardiff/University of Oxford: ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance

Kelly, Anthony(2001)'The evolution of key skills: towards a tawney paradigm', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*,53:1,21 — 36

Leitch, S. (2006) *Leitch Review of Skills Prosperity for all in the Global Economy – World Class Skills* Norwich: HMSO

MacDonald and Marsh (2005) *Disconnected Youth? Growing Up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan

Marcuse, Herbert (1964) *One Dimensional Man* London: Routledge

McQuaid, R.W. and Lindsay, C. (2005) 'The concept of employability', *Urban Studies* Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 197-219.

Moore, R. (1984) 'Schooling and the World of Work' in I. Bates et al *Schooling for the Dole* Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

Schubert, J. Daniel (2008) *Suffering/Symbolic Violence in Michael Grenfell* (ed, 2008) *Pierre Bourdieu Key Concepts* Durham: Acumen Publishing Ltd

Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2011) *NEET young people and training for work learning on the margins* Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books

Simmons, Robin (2010): Globalisation, neo-liberalism and vocational learning: the case of English further education colleges, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 15:4, 363-376

Simmons, Robin (2009) 'Entry to employment: discourses of inclusion and employability in work-based learning for young people', *Journal of Education and Work*, 22: 2, 137 — 151

Tarrant J. (2001) 'The Ethics of Post-compulsory Education and Training in a Democracy' in *Journal of Further and Higher Education* Vol. 25, No. 3 pp. 369-378

Wolf, Alison (2011) *Review of Vocational Education - The Wolf Report* ONLINE at:

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00031-2011> accessed March 12 2012