
Opportunity and Aspiration, or the Great Deception? The Case of 14-19 Vocational Education

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ABSTRACT The policy discourse around those young people who are the focus of the 14-19 agenda in the United Kingdom is one of negativity which frames them as low achievers with low aspirations. In tension with this deficit model, policy offers these young people 'opportunities' in the form of a vocational education which, according to the rhetoric, will lead to high-skill, high-paid work and a lifetime of opportunities. Drawing on original empirical research, this article contests the assumption that these young people have low aspirations, arguing that constrained by discourses of negativity and lacking the agency for change, their chances of achieving their aspirations are almost non-existent. Further, it suggests that the rhetoric of 'opportunity' is merely smoke and mirrors, a massive deception whereby young people are channelled into the low-pay, low-skill work market in readiness to fulfil economic demands for cheap labour as and when it is needed. It concludes with proposals for change in the 14-19 and post-compulsory education and training systems which could provide a more equitable and effective framework for young people to achieve their hopes and dreams.

Introduction

This article discusses a study conducted in England in the context of a government agenda to reform 14-19 education and, concomitant with that, to raise the esteem in which vocational credentials are held in the United Kingdom. Whilst it is in some respects idiosyncratic, the English post-compulsory education and training (PCET) system bears similarities to post-14 and 16 vocational education in other post-industrialised countries, providing predominantly vocational and skills-based education. Most provision is directed at post-16 students but more limited provision, usually offered in partnership with secondary schools, is available for 14-16-year-olds. As in other countries, those young people undertaking vocational programmes are largely drawn from lower socio-economic groups, often have a history of low achievement in school, and exhibit other characteristics associated with social exclusion.

It is these young people who are the focus of the 14-19 agenda and who have been subject to an extensive range of policy initiatives in recent years. The policy discourse around these young people is one of negativity which, in its use of language such as 'non-academic', 'disaffected' and 'disadvantaged', places them firmly within a deficit model. This model frames these young people as low achievers with low aspirations, routinely dismisses them as non-academic, yet claims to offer opportunities in the form of a vocational education which, according to the rhetoric, will lead to a lifelong nirvana of high-skill, high-paid work, personal satisfaction and opportunity (providing they continue to engage in lifelong learning) and this is something which many young people take on trust.

Drawing on data from a case study exploring the aspirations and learning identities of young people on lower-level vocational programmes, and working within a framework informed by

Marxist and social justice concepts, this article contests the assumption that these young people have low aspirations, arguing that falling within a deficit model, constrained by discourses of negativity, powerless to change a system which militates against them and lacking the agency for change, their chances of achieving those aspirations are almost non-existent.

Montgomery (2008, pp. 85-86) has discussed the way in which 'seemingly benign apparatuses of the state [such as] history textbooks' are violent in their effects as they disseminate and legitimise hegemonic knowledge and 'reproduce fantasies' of nations as exemplars for the world. Whilst Montgomery is discussing the production and reproduction of racism in Canada, his conceptualisations may also be used in the context of vocational education as a means of production and reproduction of social class in the United Kingdom. In the context of the young people discussed in this article, power is located in a government which determines and enacts education policy and which is primarily drawn from the upper echelons of a rigid social class system, in those teachers and managers who implement and mediate policy, and in the power of the rhetoric in policy discourse.

Essentially, policy appears to be benign, if not benevolent, in its attempts to provide an 'education system focused on high standards and much more tailored to the talents and aspirations of individual young people' (Department for Education and Skills, 2005a, p. 6). However, a closer analysis of such policy clearly implicates political and educational structures in the production and reproduction of social class, and thus in the production and reproduction of power. Confronting such power, and questioning this status quo, requires forms of cultural capital which confer understanding of political structures to be vested in agential individuals. For young people who are victims of multiple structural injustices in terms of their social class, race, gender and perceived educational achievement, who are lacking cultural capital, have limited agency and are confined to a low-status, low-value educational route, awareness of political and educational structures and power imbalances is absent. Thus, the young people themselves are powerless, whilst the power of the policy discourse surrounding them comes to dominate their lives in the subtle and often negative ways discussed in this article.

Consideration of policy discourse leads to a number of questions. What are 'high' and 'low' aspirations? What is 'non-academic'? Why, every year, are nearly half of all young people characterised in this way? What is, or is not, an 'opportunity'? It may be argued that notions of opportunity form part of a deception, much of which is premised on the presentation of selective information as part of careers education and guidance (CEG) and information, advice and guidance (IAG). This deception facilitates the channelling of young people from lower socio-economic groups into the low-pay, low-skill work market in readiness to fulfil government demands for cheap labour as and when it is needed, and thus is in concert with the production and reproduction of labour and social class.

Policy Context

English government policy surrounding the 14-19 agenda has consistently used a discourse around opportunity, whilst placing the young people themselves firmly within a deficit model associated with discourses such as socially excluded, disaffected, disadvantaged, non-academic and having low aspirations. Related policy using a similar deficit model – this time around a need to professionalise the sector and initiated in the Department for Education and Skills paper *Equipping Our Teachers for the Future* (Department for Education and Skills Standards Unit, 2004) – has simultaneously been played out with the further education (FE) teachers who are responsible for the delivery of the vocational curriculum.

Whilst the 14-19 agenda purports to be directed at all young people, it is evident that certain groups, particularly those such as low-achieving young people and those from lower socio-economic groups – and these young people are often one and the same – will be directed towards a lower-value vocational route within a 'divided and divisive' (Tomlinson, 1997, pp. 1, 17) education system, which 'differentially prepares some young people for [university] and others for work' (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005, p. 263), and in which 'higher education [is linked with] high aspirations' (Watts & Bridges, 2006, p. 267). This differentiation of young people by social class and

ability is indicative of a school system which is comprehensive in name only, but which, in reality, is highly stratified in terms of both perceived academic ability and, more particularly, social class.

Considerable work has explored the so-called vocational/academic divide, but this is a relatively crude way to explore the inequalities across an education system where, within either the 'academic' or 'vocational' sector, multiple layers of hierarchy exist related to credential type and subject. Markedly different levels of societal esteem are placed on these different subjects and credentials and, consequently, on the young people who pursue them. These hierarchies and societal values are largely unacknowledged, always highly significant in the life chances and opportunities they engender, and inevitably result in those young people who undertake lower-level vocational programmes falling at the wrong side of the 'sharp divide between valuable and non-valuable people and locales' (Castells, 2000, p. 165).

Within the field of vocational education, myriad subtle hierarchies exist between different subjects, between National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs; occupational credentials normally undertaken on a work-based/day-release basis) and broad vocational credentials (mainly school- or college-based and usually involving a work placement element), and between different levels of credentials. At the bottom of these hierarchies and the 'economy of student worth' (Ball et al, 1998, p. 171) are the learners who form the focus of this article: those enrolled on broad vocational programmes (such as the new Diploma and the Business and Technical Certificate [BTEC] qualifications) at Levels 1 and 2 post-16.

These are young people who do not meet the government benchmark of five GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) at grades A*–C or the equivalent by the age of 16+ and who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to move on to an occupational (NVQ) route, leaving broad vocational programmes in the FE system as their only option. These credentials are offered at Level 1 (expected level of attainment by age 14), Level 2 (expected level of attainment at post-16) and Level 3 (expected level of post-18 attainment), and the level and type of qualification pursued are dependent on precursor qualifications and levels of achievement. Whilst there are significant issues around class, gender and opportunity for those who, at 16+, progress to Level 3 vocational programmes in the FE sector, the challenges facing those entering Level 1 and 2 programmes are much greater, not least because of the much extended transition they face and the far more limited exchange value of lower-level credentials. Further, lower-level programmes in general, and Level 1 programmes in particular, have been excluded from much academic and policy discourse. My concern in this discussion, as with other work (see, for example, Atkins, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009), is to address some of these inequalities.

Young People

This article draws on data derived from a wider case study of young people on Level 1 FE programmes. Data from two groups of students enrolled at the same institution informs this article. Pseudonyms are used here for all participants. A participative, multimethod approach was used which included the use of group interviews, observation, and written and serendipitous data provided by the young people. Both groups were undertaking one-year Level 1 programmes, one in Information Technology (IT) and the second in Health and Social Care. From the IT group, of eight students interviewed, four hoped to work as computer programmers or IT specialists; one to follow his grandfather into the Royal Air Force; one to work in sales; one to work as a fitness instructor; and one to work as a receptionist. The last two are particularly noteworthy. Emma, the only female in the group, wanted to be a fitness instructor and had applied to do leisure and tourism. The course was undersubscribed and she was directed to IT by advice and guidance staff at the college. Emma left before the end of the first term. Samir, who aspired to work as a receptionist, had been educated in special schools as a consequence of severe physical disability which confined him to a wheelchair. He believed that his enjoyment in meeting new people ideally fitted him for this type of work.

Of the 12 students in the Health and Social Care group, all of whom were female, seven wanted to do nursery nursing and one each to do midwifery, nursing, teaching and social work. One student had no aspirations for the future, apart from maintaining her friendships, and this young woman, Keira, was the sole, unsupported carer for a terminally ill parent.

None of the young people in either group had parents or role models employed in the occupation they aspired to and none had parents educated above FE Level 2. Where parental occupation was known, it was low skilled and class- and gender-specific. All were confident that their qualifications would help them to achieve their aspirations and, like the young people in Bathmaker's (2001) study, conflated 'good' qualifications with 'good' jobs, so emphasising the advantages they believed would accrue from attending college. In doing so, these young people – all of whom came from working-class backgrounds – typified Macrae et al's (1997) typology of 'hanging in' in the face of multiple political, social and economic barriers to education. Six individuals – Paris, Naz, Wayne, Angelina, Kate and Samir – are discussed in the context of this article.

This rehearsal of government rhetoric, and the hope that they would achieve ambitions to work in skilled, technical and, in some cases, professional roles which fall within the scope of the 'high-skill economy' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b, 2006; Leitch, 2006), seemed to be indicative of high, rather than low, aspirations, and contests government assertions which conflate low achievement with low aspiration. All except one of the occupations (receptionist) identified required credentials at minimum Level 3. The achievement of a minimum Level 3 credential by 70% of 19-year-olds by 2020 has been identified by the government as a key long-term target of the 14-19 reforms.

Discourses of Inequality

The rhetoric of opportunity and aspiration found in policy documents is in tension with the realities facing young people in a post-industrialised society. The language in which young people on vocational programmes are variously situated and their relationship to and with government rhetoric reflects a number of subtle and bitter ironies when considered in the context of the reality of their lives, the structures that constrain them and the limitations on their potential for agency. This discourse both forms and reflects part of the antagonistic relations in education and social formation (Avis, 2007, pp. 175-176) which impact powerfully and unequally on the lives of young people, and which need addressing in a broader, more socially just, political and societal sense.

In this context, I take social justice to refer to a position in which individuals are valued as human beings, denoting a form of equality between policy makers and the subjects of that policy (Watts, 2006, p. 309), rather than according to their perceived level of economic or educational worth. This position is consistent with the arguments made by Hume (2000, p. 231, 2.2.5) and Kant, whose discussion of morality was contextualised within the 'absolute worth of the human being' (Kant, 2002, p. 57), respect for whom he argued to be 'absolutely obligatory' (Kant, 2006, p. 108), and, more recently, with arguments by MacIntyre (1981, p. 179) and Griffiths (1998, pp. 12-13).

Despite their overuse in government documents, terms such as 'aspiration' and 'opportunity' are not defined or problematised. Aspiration, for example, is normally expressed in terms of raising aspirations, despite evidence that, irrespective of social background, young people have clearly articulated aspirations (Watts & Bridges, 2006, p. 283) but do not know how to achieve them and are not given appropriate guidance within the current system (Bathmaker, 2001, p. 95). Aspiration is also associated with particular types of credentials, particularly those achieved in higher education (HE). The corollary of this is that vocational credentials and those at lower levels then assume a deficit model of 'low aspiration', forming part of the broader deficit discourses within which young people undertaking vocational programmes are situated. Indeed, as Watts (2006, p. 311) has argued, a socially just society would find a means of recognising aspirations which do not involve HE. This is of particular importance for young people such as those discussed in this article, for whom progression to HE is highly unlikely, despite aspiring to technical and professional careers.

Similarly to aspiration, the term 'opportunity' is considerably overused in policy documents, where it is always closely related to vocational education. The rhetoric presents an idealised image of high-pay, high-skill work which is available to all who engage with lifelong learning. For example, the most recent White Paper makes 26 separate references to 'opportunity', including the somewhat optimistic statement that, with the introduction of the Diploma, 'aspiration and

opportunity in this country will have been transformed for ever' (Department for Education and Skills, 2005a, p. 49). There are several fundamental problems with this. First, it associates opportunity with forms of education and training which have been shown to have more limited exchange in the jobs market than academic credentials which are notionally of the same level (Robinson, 1997, p. 35), something which is not acknowledged in either policy or IAG. Thus, the whole notion of opportunity becomes premised on a deception, despite policy attempts to claim the moral high ground with statements such as: 'the need to offer every young person the opportunity to become educated and skilled is not only an economic imperative, but a moral one' (Department for Education and Skills, 2005a, p. 17).

This deception may be attributed to a number of policy assumptions, beliefs and misconceptions. Key amongst these is the belief that social justice and a competitive economy can be the twin ends of the same means (Department for Education and Skills, 2005a, p. 10). Therefore, the provision of 'opportunities' which are perceived to contribute to the economy automatically assumes that this provision will achieve social justice, yet does not take account of the realities of individuals' lives and experiences, or of the occupational chances and economic returns associated with those opportunities. These assumptions around economic prosperity and social justice, together with the belief that better marketing of education and training can impact on progression and achievement (Keep, 2009, p. 43), result in the presentation of selective information which promotes vocational education as part of a high-skill, high-pay success story. Ultimately, these forms of marketing and policy rhetoric lead to a position where participation is seen as an imperative, and other choices – such as entry to low-pay, low-skill work – are placed firmly within a deficit model. Such a position fails to acknowledge either that low-pay, low-skill work is the natural outcome for many of these programmes anyway, or that the freedom to choose participation must also include the freedom to reject it (Watts & Bridges, 2006, p. 273).

Further, using heavy marketing, 'opportunities' – which are heavily classed and gendered in content and in the occupational areas they are notionally linked to – are sold to specific classed groups of young people, an action which contributes to the ongoing reproduction of inequality, class and labour power. Such notions of opportunity are closely linked to the policy beliefs around the value of progression and engagement, both of which fail to recognise or acknowledge the particular difficulties associated with length of transition for those young people entering at the bottom end of this particular educational hierarchy.

What this means is that for these young people, two forms of constraint are at play. First, there is the absence of appropriate IAG, which leads to misconceptions about the programmes they are channelled into and the opportunities that might arise from them; and second, there are the constraints placed on these young people by educational structures and policy. Recognition of this is absent in a policy rhetoric which fails to acknowledge the real difficulty for these young people, which is how to move from their current educational and societal positioning to the place they dream of being, a transition to the unknown, where, however well motivated or determined to 'transform the habitus' (Bourdieu, 1980; 1993, p. 87), cultural capital would be 'stretched beyond its limits' (Ball et al, 1999, p. 212). Thus, the reality for individuals is that, constrained by classed and gendered dispositions and expectations and placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of the education system, there is no opportunity to move anywhere other than onto the next low-status vocational course or into low-skill, low-pay employment.

Other inequalities arise from the discourse of negativity surrounding vocational learners, which makes use of language such as 'non-academic' and 'low-achieving'. 'Non-academic' tends to be used as a euphemism for vocational, despite its own negative connotations. However, like other language used to describe young people on vocational education programmes and the programmes themselves, it is conflated with non-achieving and with low aspirations. The assumption that young people who do not meet government benchmarks in terms of GCSE grades A*–C all have low aspirations or are of low academic ability homogenises individuals and fails to recognise them as having value as citizens and human beings; rather, it perceives them as problems to be solved. It is particularly significant that this deficit model is closely associated with young people from specific class backgrounds, who are largely located in the PCET sector and in schools which are perceived to be 'lower-achieving' in the context of government league tables.

This significance may be observed in the failure of policy discourse to acknowledge the economic need for a 'pool' of casualised, low-pay, low-skill workers to be called upon when the need arises – as Ecclestone (2002, pp. 17-19) suggests, not all employers want or need highly skilled workers. Thus, the idealised opportunities portrayed by a post-Fordist high-skills rhetoric form another facet of the deception visited on young people, when the reality of the jobs market facing post-16 learners in the current economic climate is one of unemployment, or low-skilled temporary work with low-status training as an alternative to FE or HE.

Structure, Agency and Horizons for Action

Bourdieu consistently contended that the 'objective probabilities' of particular trajectories are largely determined by social class (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990), and this was the most significant mediating factor in the experiences of the young people in this study. Growing up in a former coalfield at the start of the twenty-first century, their horizons for action (Hodkinson et al, 1996) were heavily influenced by a particular local social and economic landscape (Ball et al, 2000, p. 8), which included high rates of poverty, worklessness and long-term sickness in the predominantly working-class community from which they came. Their choices already orientated as a consequence of their position in the field of this particular community (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66), their potential for agency was further constrained not only by a broad range of factors including societal and embodied structures and characteristics such as class, gender, race and disability, which also influenced subjective perceptions about the suitability of particular careers (Hodkinson et al, 1996, p. 3), but also by the limited number of Level 1 courses (see Working Group on 14-19 Reform, 2003) and the non-availability of academic routes. None of these young people had achieved sufficiently high grades to enter school sixth forms or resit their GCSEs in their FE college.

Also limiting their horizons for action were the lack of appropriate careers guidance, the potential length of transition to achieve their aspirations, and economic support issues – only two students were supported by their parents, most were in receipt of benefits, and the others relied on a combination of part-time work and/or Educational Maintenance Allowance, which is discontinued at the age of 18. For young people entering Level 1 courses post-16, only Level 2 will have been achieved by 18, meaning that they would then have to find the means to support themselves for a further two years if they were to achieve Level 3.

These constraints have two outcomes. First, they eventually lead many young people to exert their limited agency by withdrawing from FE to move into low-pay, low-skill employment; and second, contingent on this withdrawal from education, they also revise down their original career aspirations, so that intended nurses become carers and dreams of being a computer whiz-kid become the reality of working at PC World (a UK IT and technology chain store) – perhaps inevitable outcomes given the particular social and economic circumstances of the town, and the additional factors limiting their horizons for action.

Despite the social and economic constraints they lived under, all the young people who participated in this study expressed the intention of pursuing and achieving 'good' qualifications. This intention was fuelled by a belief that 'good' qualifications would give them 'good' jobs and better 'opportunities' in the brighter, better future promised by post-Fordist rhetoric. For example, Paris's reason for enrolling on a Level 1 Health and Social Care course was that, 'I enjoy looking after children and I just thought I'd take it a bit further to be a midwife', whilst Wayne (who left the course to go to an unknown destination) was firm in his belief that, 'I have just got to keep coming to college and keep coming 'til the years have gone past because I've got three brothers who did the same and they earn about £8 an hour now'. Similarly, Samir believed that the course led to 'a very good qualification'.

Despite their aspirations, and apparent buy-in to policy rhetoric, the young peoples' horizons for action were severely constrained by the factors discussed earlier in this article, and their 'choices' limited to decisions around whether to remain on the programme or leave, whether or not to work alongside the programme, and whether to continue onto Level 2 or to utilise their limited cultural capital in a search for employment. Thus, the choices they made were not their own, but were pragmatic and rational decisions 'influenced by the complexities of the relations of

force within a particular field' (Hodkinson, 1998, p. 103) and which were 'heavily circumscribed by class' (Bloomer, 1996, p. 148).

Ultimately, for most young people entering low-level vocational programmes, individual agency is so heavily restricted by the systemic and embodied structures of state, society and the education system, which serve to reproduce inequality (Avis, 2007, p. 167), that the movement beyond a familiar habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 52-53) needed to make an alternative future becomes all but impossible. Significant amongst these structures is government education policy and its focus on opportunity.

Opportunity and Aspiration: smoke and mirrors

'Opportunity' has formed a major plank of 14-19 policy over the past decade (see, for example, Department for Education and Skills, 2002, 2003a, 2005a, b). However, the 'opportunities' alluded to in government rhetoric are heavily circumscribed by economic policy and market forces, rather than being influenced by educational need or benefit – a reflection of the subordination of the education system to the economic system, where it merely exists as a structure for the reproduction of class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, pp. 178-179; see also Avis, 1996, p. 81).

Significantly, the educational opportunities alluded to are all also vocational in content. Whilst the ostensible reason for this is to provide skills for the 'powerhouse of a high skills economy' (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, p. 1), the impact of such policy is to constrain many young people by directing them onto low-level vocational programmes. Once directed onto a narrow vocational path, young people are automatically denied the opportunities available to those who pursue a subject-based (academic) route – two different pathways with diverse and unequal outcomes in terms of future life and work. Further, in the case of broad vocational courses such as the Diploma, no occupational 'skill' is conferred, although such programmes do foster a process of 'habituation to the vocational culture' (Colley, 2006, p. 17) and in doing so teach the skills – such as conformity and punctuality – necessary for low-pay, low-skill work.

It may be argued, therefore, that notions of opportunity for young people on low-level vocational programmes generate an illusory but appealing image of skilled, technical and professional work, entirely unrelated to the low-pay, low-skill drudgery which is much more likely to become their reality. This illusion is achieved, at least in part, through the marketing of a particular image of vocational education which sells the associated ideas of opportunity and high-skill, highly paid work. Despite such marketing and rhetoric, it has been argued (Bathmaker, 2001, p. 96) that the exchange value of low-level vocational programmes is limited to a 'stepping stone to the next level' of credential. More recent work (Keep, 2009, p. 40) has criticised the marketing of education and training, and questioned the policy belief that effectively marketed, 'demand-led' education and training, together with improved IAG, will increase participation and achievement, and argues that the 'selling' of education and training is bound to fail if people 'have any inkling' (Keep, 2009, p. 40) that low-level vocational qualifications deliver only the very limited gains of low-pay, low-skill work with few or no opportunities for progression.

Although the young people in this study all expressed a 'buy-in' to vocational education and, to a large extent, rehearsed the rhetoric around opportunity and high-pay, high-skill work, one withdrew during the programme, two were unclassified and 10 of the remaining 17 were undecided or did not intend to progress to Level 2 but planned to leave. According to one student, Angelina, the decision to leave was due to an imperative to 'get some money behind me', reflecting financial concerns which loomed large for many of these young people. These decisions to exert agency in withdrawing from education and seeking employment are, perhaps, indicative of the fact that at least some of these young people had 'an inkling' that their course had minimal exchange value in the employment market and had decided to exchange the vague promise of something better at the end of a much extended transition for immediate economic return, albeit low pay and low skill.

Thus, the idea of high-skill work is, for many, simply a dream in a labour market where the 'power of exchange' (Smith et al, 2008, p. 16) conferred by a low-level vocational programme is negligible or non-existent. These young people had conflated good qualifications with good jobs, but left with a credential which offered no exchange value and placed them in a subordinate

position in the labour market. An alternative 'choice' – to exchange the credential for more cultural capital – by following the 'coherent progression routes' to 'level 2 and beyond' (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, p. 35; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 20) not only leads to a much extended transition but, as Colley (2006, p. 25) has argued, for these young people, is available only on vocational courses and at relatively low-status institutions.

Dreams and Aspirations

Despite this, the government continues to market vocational education as 'opportunities', a policy which is apparently blind to the impact of exclusionary characteristics and constraints on the individual agency of many young people working at or below Level 2, and, synchronously with this, refers to the need to raise aspirations. In the 2009 Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) paper *Quality, Choice and Aspiration*, which forms part of the overarching children's plan, the word 'aspiration' is preceded by the words 'low', 'raise' or 'raising' on all but three occasions, and the six principles of impartial careers guidance, intended to form the basis for a 'high-quality' and 'excellent' service, include 'raises aspirations' as the fourth principle.

This suggests that all IAG policy is predicated on a policy assumption that all or most young people have 'low' aspirations or, alternatively, that those with 'high' aspirations will not be in need of IAG services. It also fails to acknowledge that some young people may have 'different aspirations' associated with lifestyle choices (Watts & Bridges, 2006, pp. 267-268). Despite aspirations being a key focus of the DCSF paper, the term is defined only vaguely, as it is used in the same context as enabling young people to 'reach their potential'. Whether this refers to developing their potential for agency or, more likely, their potential to achieve a Diploma is not made clear.

The selling of a notion of opportunity is also achieved through a particular approach to the official advice given by the IAG counsellors who promote vocational education and who, as Stanton (2008, p. 60) has argued, do not give the whole picture. Stanton injects humour into his argument, illustrating it by suggesting what IAG counsellors might say if bound by similar rules and legislation as independent financial advisors. In this case, an official statement such as 'the new 14-19 Diplomas are employer endorsed' would become 'but this does not ensure that they will give priority to applicants with Diplomas, and on their past record most are unlikely to' if IAG were truly learner-centred (Stanton, 2008, p. 60).

Stanton makes a serious point. Too many young people are sold an image of vocational opportunity which is inconsistent with the reality – they are given no inkling of its exchange value in education or the workplace. In addition, many more are directed onto vocational programmes based on superficial or transient inclinations towards particular activities or occupations. Many of the young women in this study, for example, had not known what they wanted to do post-16, and had been directed to Health and Social Care by IAG services because they liked babysitting or visiting elderly relatives, neither of which is a strong indicator of suitability for a career in care. Further, they were, with one exception, unaware that a Health and Social Care broad vocational credential has carried no occupational exchange value in the field of care since the Care Standards Act (2000) required all care workers to hold appropriate NVQ credentials.

Of equal concern, despite all having received some CEG, none of the young people in this study – whose aspirations included jobs such as nursery nursing, nursing, teaching and technical careers in IT – had any idea of how to achieve their aspirations. Most had only the haziest concept of university. Naz thought he would have to go to university for two years to become a computer programmer, and Kate gave a not untypical response to questions about her more modest career hopes:

Liz Atkins: What sort of job with children would you like?

Kate: Class assistant, a nanny, something like that.

Liz Atkins: OK. Do you know what sort of qualifications you need for that?

Kate: Yes.

Liz Atkins: What do you need?

Kate: I can't remember.

This lack of knowledge about how to achieve aspirations suggests that where policy is predicated on the assumption that aspiration is low, it misses the point, which is that young people need to be supported to generate the cultural capital which will enable them to achieve their aspirations and develop their understandings of the world. This may not be helped by particular forms of discourse and pedagogy in use in FE which also serve to reinforce the illusion of opportunity and form a more subtle aspect of the marketing of vocational education, particularly at lower levels. The pedagogic approach used with these young people, whose previous experience of education has often been negative (Coffield et al, 2007, p. 724), has been criticised for relying heavily on approaches and interventions such as building self-esteem (for example, Ecclestone, 2004, 2007; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008) and engaging in 'busy work', rather than focusing on generating more cultural capital.

Such approaches, however well intentioned, encourage the belief amongst young people that they can do anything and, in doing so, particularly in the absence of honest and informative IAG, limit their potential for agency and encourage them to rehearse unrealistic aspirations without questioning how they might achieve those aspirations. In turn, this results in a form of dependency on the teaching staff whose pedagogy promotes those beliefs. In a state of dependence, and lacking the tools to achieve their aspirations, the young people, rather than the forces constraining them, become the focus of policy attention. This is consistent with Ecclestone's (2004, p. 118) argument that the presentation of failure as emotionally damaging leads to a belief that disaffected and marginalised individuals are unable to cope without support and creates a shift of attention from structural inequalities in education to a focus on people's feelings about it, and to lower aspirations where these are challenging or risky. Therefore, a focus on unrealistic aspirations and a failure to generate cultural capital comes to form yet another of the societal structures which serve to keep these young people in their allotted place in society and maintain a status quo (for a more extended discussion of this point, see Atkins, 2009, ch. 11).

I move on to make some proposals for changes which might help young people like Paris, Naz, Wayne, Angelina, Kate and Samir to realise their potential for agency as they 'struggle to make the world a different place' (Reay, 2004, p. 437).

Proposals for Changes

The discussion in this article raises a number of implications for policy, practice and social justice. This section makes tentative proposals for broad and related changes in policy and practice in vocational education across the 14-19 sector. These proposals are intended to contribute to a wider debate on vocational education.

Most urgently, there is a need for a radical change in the discourse used in policy documents and subsequently rehearsed by practitioners in the sector. Consideration must be given to the power of language and, in particular, to the way in which particular descriptors such as 'disaffected', 'disengaged' and 'non-academic' have come to be pejorative terms used in the context of a deficit model of youth. Colley (2003, p. 169) has argued that such changes would be more likely to occur if society – and government – accepted social exclusion as something that society inflicts on the disadvantaged rather than as a set of characteristics it attributes to them. Such an approach could provide the basis for a move from a position in which blame is attributed to young people for perceived shortcomings to a more socially just position in which there is a greater recognition of the part societal structures and hegemony play in the dispositions and experiences of young people, and more understanding of the way in which these structures articulate with the 'ongoing (re)production of labour power' (Avis, 2007, p. 176).

Acknowledgement and understanding by practitioners as well as policy makers of the ironies in the language used and the practice developed through the mediation of that language would support a move towards a more meaningful curriculum, particularly at lower levels. Facilitating these understandings amongst teachers would also require significant policy movement. If young people are to be enabled to generate greater cultural capital and potential for agency, then teachers, too, must have greater potential for agency than is possible within the current context of the instrumental, centralised curriculum they are expected to teach, which emphasises 'busy work' and the development of self-esteem. This could only be achieved by changes to the teacher training

curriculum, itself instrumental and centralised, and a reintroduction of subjects which might help generate the political and social understandings that teachers need to develop more meaningful forms of pedagogy – such as the sociology, philosophy and history of education.

The consideration given to the power of discourse should be extended to the specific use of language, such as ‘choice’ and ‘opportunity’, which, in the interests of truth and morality, should at least be clearly defined and not used to suggest that the outcomes of diverse and divided pathways are likely to be similar, or even that the choices *within* one pathway are directly comparable to another. This should extend from policy discourse to practice in areas such as IAG, and would mean that *honest*, clear and comprehensive careers advice and guidance should be available for all young people that clearly outlines the benefits and disadvantages of each route on offer. For example, honest IAG would make clear that an NVQ in engineering done as part of an apprenticeship carries greater economic currency than one done as a training programme at college or with a training provider; that a Level 2 qualification will generate fewer opportunities than a Level 3 qualification; and that an engineering degree will generate greater economic return and career opportunities than any of the other options, but will take longer to achieve and will involve greater initial cost to the individual. This is particularly important as choices are made earlier (Colley et al, 2008) and those choices can be defining in terms of eventual occupational outcome.

There is another dimension to honest IAG. Stanton (2008, p. 60) has argued that it is a bad sign that the thorny issue of IAG is raised each time a new qualification is launched, suggesting that ‘it may signal that the IAG is meant to “sell” the new product on behalf of the government, rather than offer individuals impartial, honest and accurate advice’. This argument infers the use of selective information for political purposes and action that is in the interests of the policy makers rather than those they claim to serve, something which is, at best, morally questionable and which serves, yet again, to illustrate the imbalance of power between policy makers and the casualties of that policy.

Summary

The reality of vocational opportunities is, then, very different to the smoke and mirrors of the illusion marketed by government. Those who succeed in ‘hanging in’, and find their way to work in the field they wanted to enter, have often had to revise down their aspirations – carers and shop assistants instead of nurses and technicians – whilst those who find themselves unable to continue or to conform to the requirements of lifelong learning ‘opportunities’ withdraw from their courses in an act of agency which places them firmly within the government deficit model of those who do not engage, and results in blame being attributed by the state to the individual (Ainley & Corney, 1990, pp. 94-95) for failing to meet their perceived civic responsibility of engaging with lifelong learning. This is despite those young people having made a rational choice which involves the exchange of immediate financial capital, albeit at a low level, for a vague, insubstantial promise of something better at the end of a much extended transition.

Thus, far from these young people being able to access ‘choices’ and ‘opportunities’ which would lead to a secure future in a high-skill economy, they are structurally positioned – perhaps inevitably – to make choices that are not their own, and to be denied the kind of opportunity which might enable them to achieve their aspirations. These young people are, then, opportunity-less, but are still sold the illusion that they can do or be anything whilst being engaged in low-level ‘busy’ activities (rather than learning) in preparation for low-pay, low-skill employment. Policy approaches of this nature form the basis of a massive immorality, in which young people are offered a fantasy of impossible dreams and non-existent opportunities if only they engage with low-level vocational education within a divided education system which ‘contributes to the reproduction of social inequality’ (Colley, 2006, p. 27). Rethinking policy in these areas is essential if the system is to have any chance of becoming less divided and more socially just, enabling at least some young people to make the world a different place.

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