***"Keep them students busy": 'Warehoused' or taught skills to achieve?***

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My research interest focuses on education policy and provision for socially excluded youth within the FE sector. I have both local and international academic and professional experience in social work, criminology and higher education. Teaching qualifications include PGCE, MSET - QTLS, and Fellowship status with the HEA. Currently I am a lecturer in HE, and also a registered HCPC social worker.

### *"Keep them students busy": 'Warehoused' or taught skills to achieve?*

RPA (Raising of Participation Age) legislation re-positioned all youth in England to participate in post-16 education and training, the ultimate aim to develop 'human capital', i.e. skills, abilities and knowledge (Foucault 2008). However, how does RPA play out in practice with previously NEET and so-called disengaged youth engaged on a Level 1 pre-vocational course? Empirical research was conducted at a large general further education (FE) college in the South East of England, named *The Hollies* with seven course tutors and twenty six students from the 2013-14 and 2014-15 cohorts. Adopting a case study approach, multiple methods of data collection were used, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews focussed group discussions and document analysis. Key findings revealed 'warehousing' appeared to be the main purpose of education for the students in this study. Distinctly different to stereotypical ideas, these particular students wanted to learn. Hence, participants were critical and subsequently raised objections over what they believed appeared to be lowered quality and standards of education on the course. Whilst student conduct was observably loud and disruptive, it arguably overshadowed concerns over pedagogical activities and teaching practices that created negative classroom conditions which consolidated stereotypical beliefs that with these students, there was a reluctance to learn – in effect, legitimising warehousing practice. This study brings into focus a counter discourse: admittedly, in current policy there is an anxiety about NEETs who will be dependent on benefits, yet somehow, structurally, the system is producing the kind of provision reflected on this course at *The Hollies* inasmuch as it actually does the opposite of what it is supposed to do - creating and consolidating NEET identities rather than providing conditions in which new learner identities can emerge, thrive and be of benefit to the individuals themselves and (to use the neoliberal line of reasoning) to the 'economy'.

**Keywords**: Level 1; warehousing; pre-vocational course; employability; Raising of Participation Age (RPA); further education (FE); NEET (not in education, employment or training)

**Introductory context**

In the UK, higher levels of educational attainment and skills training have been portrayed as essential for successful competition in the neoliberalist, knowledge economy (Tomlinson 2013). This imperative can be recognised in RPA (Raising of Participation Age) legislation that positioned all youth in England to participate in post-16 education and training, the ultimate aim to develop 'human capital', i.e. skills, abilities and knowledge (Foucault 2008). However, how does RPA play out in practice with previously NEET (not in education, employment or training) and so-called disengaged youth? Youth at risk of exclusion along with those not in education, employment and training (NEET), have provoked social and economic concerns, particularly in the UK (Maguire 2013; Simmons et al 2011; 2014; Allen and Ainley 2010; 2013). Political rhetoric suggests NEET youth and those at risk of social exclusion were becoming poorly educated and unproductive members in society; in short, they conceivably threatened democracy (DfE 2014). Accordingly, public policy directed focus on youths who were about to leave full time education at the minimum age of 16.

The Level 1 pre-vocational course is one of several policy initiatives directly aimed to connect NEET young people with work. It is a free, structured study programme available to all, including those with low or no school leaving qualifications. It sets out to provide a highly supportive environment to students, particularly those at risk of becoming NEET or having previous experience of educational failure. Official rhetoric around this particular course promotes the idea that enrolment on the course enables 'disadvantaged' youth to gain qualifications, build confidence and develop key employability skills necessary to find and sustain employment (DCSF 2009). In some respect, the course thus represents a starting point for some, perhaps a second or third chance for others needing qualifications.

Although it is recognized that the acquisition of skills and qualifications develop human capital and are beneficial (Nudzor 2010), there is evidence in academic literature that called attention to a stratified education system (Holmer Nadesan 2002; Lareau 2003; Pongratz, 2011; Kaščák and Pupala, 2010; 2011) that inherently influenced types of education provision and curricula design. Background research indicates that courses for NEET young people often lacked in quality (Simmons et al 2011; Atkins 2010), the

curriculum itself restricting space and time for tutors to effectively develop literacy education within the Foundation Learning initiative (Smith and Wright 2015). Ethnographic research on of Entry to Employment (E2E) suggest that the positioning of E2E constructs a type of learner, largely working-class youth, as the 'other' (Simmons et al 2011), illustrating how discourses of disengagement and non-academic disposition add to the marginalisation of such youth within mainstream education, legitimising such exclusion as meeting individual needs and preferences (Thompson 2011). Atkins (2009) similarly highlighted that empirical data challenges common assumptions that NEET youth have low aspirations, and rather highlights the complexities of their lives as they try to make the transition from school to work. Structural inequalities consequently played a role, impacting the extent to which students could gain access to types of education and qualifications to further develop human capital. However, in light of the latest RPA reform, have matters improved: fundamentally, what are the most recent educational experiences of NEET youth when re-engaged in further education study?

## Empirical research on a Level 1 pre-vocational course at *The Hollies* (FE College)

Empirical research was conducted at a large general further education (FE) college in the South East of England, named *The Hollies* with seven course tutors and twenty six students from the 2013-14 and 2014-15 cohorts. A case study approach was used, drawing on multiple methods of data collection: including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews focussed group discussions and document analysis. Participants were sampled 'purposively', using criterion sampling as the chosen sampling strategy as it enabled predominant focus on participants that have direct involvement with this particular course. Students self-selected to participate in the study and all course tutors agreed to be interviewed. Over the two academic years, classroom observations were conducted with one class per year and their tutor that volunteered; the required ethical consent was granted from relevant parties. A focus group discussion was held with students from both cohorts who volunteered to participate, with the aim to capture a group response on the research issues.

The main campus is situated in one of the larger towns, recruiting students from surrounding deprived communities – although the town itself is largely affluent. With the geographical location of the main campus being situated near the main railway station and town centre area, the site was therefore chosen based on the assumption that it would facilitate greater representation and therefore attract Level 1 pre-vocational students that have a wider range of demographic and diverse characteristics. At the time of conducting the study, this particular student population was predominantly white, female, a substantial minority reportedly either having special educational needs, health problems or a disability.

Course provision was located in a green, temporary prefabricated building on the outskirts of a large FE college. Known as Q-block, the building is primarily used to deliver programmes for non-traditional students, i.e. NEET young people, disabled students, ESOL (English for speakers of other languages), Access to HE and Adult learners on Welfare to Work programmes. The surrounding environment entails the car park, bike shed and smoking area. This particular Level 1 pre-vocational course and similar Foundation learning programmes seem separate from the operations of this large institution.

A large car park separates Q block from the rest of the buildings - mainstream provision on the opposite ends delivering a range of vocational courses and apprenticeship training. It is also furthest from the Higher Education building, the college gates and security guards. This particular course appear to have low social positioning within *The Hollies:* the spatial location of the course provision symbolically representative of a metaphorical divide between pre-vocational study for 'non-traditional' students and mainstream vocational education aimed at 'traditional' students. The course and students arguably segregated from wider college.

Drawing on my empirical data, main research findings highlighted varying ways how institutional practices and ideological assumptions contributed to processes that occasioned differential access to specific sets of knowledge and skills within *The Hollies*. Key empirical data discovered that 'warehousing' (Ainley 2016) appeared to be the main purpose of education for this particular students in this study.

**'Warehousing' on this particular Level 1 pre-vocational course**

From the outset, it is important here to mention that by no means did course tutors appear to adopt a casual attitude to work practices. In fact, lessons were prepared and tutors were rarely absent from work. Nonetheless, when interviewed about their practice, tutors disclosed their predominant teaching aim was to 'keep students busy'. Reflecting on her teaching practice, Hope reported:

*"Uhmm .... just getting them to keep busy, do any kind of work....getting them to keep quiet when you are talking...We have to rely on someone like the Prince's Trust and EYS to move them on and keep them busy. They might come back to Level 2 and keep them busy or something else before they start something else full time in next September..."* (Interview with course tutor, Hope, July 2014).

According to Hope, her central teaching aim was to keep students occupied, getting them to do 'any kind of work'. Although this idea of students being industrious resonates with broader educational aims around citizenship, noticeably, on this occasion the industrial call to 'keep busy' involved students engaged in classroom activities that appeared to lack academic focus and relevance. In this respect, the delivery of the course curriculum appeared to lack purpose, challenging the extent to which the course could facilitate grade achievement and the development of employability skills.

Hope's account further suggested that this notion 'of keeping students busy' involved the support of external agencies that provide similar provision. However, whether these agencies adhere to a similar practice, is uncertain. Nonetheless, broadly speaking, Hope's dialogue suggested an unfocussed educational trajectory: these particular students were moved from one course to another, the inherent purpose to 'keep them (students) busy'.

Furthermore, mundane tasks and self-directed learning prevailed. This was revealed when Hope stated,

*"Now I have developed packs with thorough instruction sheets and computer links. Those that want to work, I gave them the booklet and they have the LSP to help. I ask them to put their headphones in and they can go on the computer and actually achieve...For me, it is about crowd control with the others, really…."*
(Interview with course tutor, Hope, July 2014).

Tutor narratives made a distinction between students, those considered reluctant to learn, and the substantial minority that presented as motivated and engaged in coursework. Customarily, self-directed learning activities were provided to facilitate independent learning, particularly in moments that required tutor involvement in welfare or behavioural issues. The problem here lies in the fact that although some tutors differentiated and made self-study possible, independent learning provision in general, appeared to lack in academic rigour. This factor was evident: in the one-page, one answer worksheets or cross word puzzles that were meant to stretch for the duration of the lesson; students were stationed at computers to engage in interactive maths or English quizzes, but quite often, during classroom observations, they were caught going on Facebook and YouTube. They wore headphones, but whether students were listening to teaching instructions on interactive learning websites, or their song list, was questionable; several students were on mobile phones or Facebook. The need to 'keep students busy' therefore seemed imperative; although it did not necessarily meant classroom activities were always reflective of higher standards of teaching and learning.

In this milieu, self-directed learning predominated, because the tutor was occupied – they were engaged in what was described as 'crowd control' to deal with challenging behaviour. Or, very often engaged in pastoral discussions on a 1-1 basis with a student in the classroom or outside in the corridor. So, in short, those with less personal problems seemed inhibited by the problems of others in the classroom.

Paradoxically, although course tutors' teaching aim was to '*keep students busy, with any kind of work',* it appears that this sense of 'keeping busy' also extended to the tutors themselves: they too were kept busy, 'doing crowd control' in response to student issues - observation data capturing repeated, ongoing student conflict and welfare issues. The

cumulative effect of warehousing: further revealed in educational processes and practices that emerged from empirical data, outlined below.

*(i) Short college days and too many breaks*

Ordinarily, any course design allocates guided learning hours whereby tutors are expected to deliver the curriculum within a set time frame; students are therefore expected to comply with timetabled hours. It is within this framework, tutors would be expected to deliver planned lessons and also arrange for extra activities to accommodate conceivably more academically able students. Without speculating whether this was the case on this particular course, the following student focus group data revealed:

> **Leah**: *What I don't mind about college is when you've done all your work you can go home.*

> **David**: *And sometimes they are more flexible hours, to be fair it's not like school. Say if it's like 10 o'clock break, 1 o'clock lunch, 2 o'clock. But here it's just like bam bam bam bam lunch break break. You get so many breaks its great I love it. And you get to leave earlier as well.*

Both students claimed that the college day on this course seemed shorter; comparatively a school day seemed longer. Noticeably, the numerous, unscheduled breaks and the fact that students were allowed to leave earlier than timetabled hours, most likely had some bearing on these two students' perception. Classroom observations confirmed that contrary to the structured 3 hour teaching slots in the morning and afternoon, with a break at 10.30 and 2.30, the delivery of the curriculum was unstructured. Other than the customary scheduled break at 10.30am for students to have breakfast for instance, time spent in class was shortened by late starts (9.30am as opposed to 9am), further impacted during outbreaks of student conflict or episodes of welfare incidents. The resultant effect gave rise to several intermittent, unscheduled breaks, whereby teaching was delivered in short chunks, often in a haphazard way, whilst students were allowed plenty of leisure time away from classroom learning.

Furthermore, students like Leah could leave early, with no requirement to work beyond the day's lesson activities. 'Warehousing', in this context overlooked the potential for extension activities that could increase student knowledge beyond timetabled events. The reasons why extension activities were not made available were unexplored. However, noticeably, 'knowledge' seemed compartmentalised and restricted – bound by time, space and learning activity. Students subsequently were permitted to leave college earlier when they finished earlier than scheduled events; consequently classroom activities were arguably completed quicker than anticipated. The college day was thus undoubtedly shorter for student participants.

### (ii) 'Unnecessary' tasks being set

Students identified a further issue: reportedly, unnecessary tasks were set, revealed when Ellie explained,

> "*As in they'll probably just tell you to do some work that you don't really need to do, maybe just do research on that. You don't need it at all they just give you something random to do…That's boring really. It is really boring…*".

Noticeably, Ellie highlighted that when students were given additional work, the quality of lesson activities reportedly lacked academic purpose. Activities such as research (on the computer), were perceived as something that 'you didn't really need to do'. Ellie noticed - although she did not state the tutor's intention was to 'keep her busy' – that fundamentally these exercises did not seem to produce 'useful knowledge'. For Ellie, classroom tasks seemed random, and therefore did not appear to be 'meaningful'. Hence, the task was arguably construed as timewasting. What was certain, Ellie's appraisal of 'unnecessary tasks' were also judged as 'boring'; suggesting stronger intellectual stimulation was required.

### (iii) The role of Learning Support Practitioners (LSPs)

Furthermore, a practice that seemed regular was the use and sometimes over-involvement of LSPs in formal teaching duties. Hope indicated that regular LSP duties involved assisting diagnosed students with dyslexia or learning difficulties in the classroom. However, LSP duties were often extended to replace tutors during welfare incidents. This was revealed when Aggy, another tutor stated,

*"Well yeah because they're all turning round and looking what's going on aren't they? We're not meant to leave an LSP in the room on their own, but you have no choice. So I usually remove the student outside and say 'Look come into my office we'll talk over it...'"* (Interview with course Tutor, Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

In this circumstance, the reported need to privately discuss and support students with welfare problems, largely contributed to a situation whereby the LSP was given responsibility to 'baby sit' the class. The fact that the tutor felt the need to prioritise pastoral over teaching duties, brought into focus the idea that tutors reportedly encounter complex student issues of a sensitive nature, which warrant the suspension of classroom teaching and justified the need to leave the LSP in charge with teaching-related duties.

Consequently, in the tutor's absence, the LSP was expected to supervise and in part, ensure students comply with the tutor's instructions. Whether the class would pay attention, or whether the LSP was qualified or authorised to manage the classroom on his or her own, seemed irrelevant. The aim was that students be 'kept busy' in the tutor's absence, engaging in mundane activities, explained when Aggy stated,

*"Well fortunately the LSP's there, and so I maybe say 'Get your portfolios out, get some sticky notes in where your gaps are, we'll start teaching when I get back'. But, yeah a nightmare... And that could take half an hour before I start teaching"* (Interview with Tutor: Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

Classroom observations confirmed student checklist activities that enabled students to read through their work and put labels in if there was missing pieces of course work or something they did not understand. This practice was customary and considered relevant, particularly when the tutor was absent from the class. The expectation that students would be disciplined enough to carry out the task, seemed naïve on the tutor's part. During such moments, I observed a few students only would carry out and complete the task, a task that did not last long enough – students were left with nothing else to do for the duration of the lesson.

Furthermore, the majority of the students engaged in raucous behaviour - some left class unofficially on a smoke break; others were on mobile phones or singing tunes. All this time, the LSP tried to cajole students to do some work, without much success, partly as she was outnumbered. Excessive classroom talk and noise ensued.

Though it sometimes was only 30 minutes, occasionally more, the time period seemed to stretch much longer, with very little work being carried out. The odd student might periodically be industrious, but most were engaged in social conversations and leisurely activities. Instead of academic learning, leisure time prevailed. In such a milieu, students were arguably 'baby sat' or warehoused.

### (iv) Low quality provision- 'not stretching and pushing learners'

a) Tutor explanation

A further form of warehousing was revealed when Kirsten, another tutor stated,

> *"I think Ofsted picked up on it.., one of the main things was attendance, and how far we were stretching and pushing the learners. And a lot of the reason why the attendance was so bad and we don't stretch them was so we could keep them in the class and keep bums on seats as one would say. If you push them too far they'll want to go. If you are in conflict with them because of their attendance, then they will go. So there's a lot of that and that tension was picked up in Ofsted"* (Interview with Tutor: Kirsten - Field notes: June 2015).

Two key issues emerged from this narrative: firstly, it draws attention to Ofsted's regulatory role in relation to course provision. Ofsted's 2014 College inspection report did indeed identify concerns over lack of academic rigour and low student attendance on the course. Kirsten conceptualised that low attendance and lack of academic rigour were reportedly two themes that were inter-connected – the thinking that if lessons were made too difficult, students might not attend class. Thus, Kirsten seems to suggest that the decision 'not to stretch' students academically, was deemed a deliberate attempt to maintain student attendance. However, this statement contradicted observations which found that student attendance was routinely low, despite the fact that students were not 'academically stretched'.

Secondly, evidently Kirsten's reference to *'keep bums on seats'* signalled critical awareness of funding implications associated with student retention. Her narrative highlighted pressure to *'have bums on seats',* arguably using this reported imperative as an excuse responsible for not *'stretching and pushing learners'.* This suggests how performance-driven culture within the setting has contributed to reduced standards of teaching and education on the course. If so, it plays an important part in producing conditions that contributes to warehousing: it is likely the college recruits these particular students with limited expectations of what they can achieve; likewise the course delivering low level, portfolio and worksheet orientated learning experiences. Ultimately, the college strives to keep the students on its books as that is how it draws funding. In this, the key transaction is financial: it is between the college and the funding body. Arguably, the student and their needs are largely irrelevant, in some way, an inconvenience that tutors have to 'manage' in time and space, in order to win funding for the college.

All the same, it became apparent that Kirsten appears to overlook the fact that external accountability pressures were similar for colleagues teaching at schools, further education colleges and universities. What's more, other education provisions seemed able to deliver higher standards of teaching and education, despite the target-driven culture operating within educational institutions.

  b)  *What the students say*

Low quality provision was noted and carried criticisms also from students. Adam reported,

> *"I find it (the course) a laugh. Being honest with you…look, look at the type of work we are learning… adjectives and verbs. Yes, look…I find it all a laugh! It is jokes! Look what we are doing. I want to learn proper English and maths…you know what I mean? Not this stuff...this is a waste of time".*

In a profound way, this narrative reveals a student's appraisal of the type of education being made available when engaging in this particular course. For students like Adam, re-engagement in education was fundamental; he needed to improve on previous

academic failure. Indeed, maths and English were taught in lessons. However, the standard and quality of provision were called into question - Adam mocked the provision and 'found it a laugh'. The point here, in Adam's appraisal, the type of education made available appeared to lack academic rigour. He found it 'a waste of time' – his time. Here, the possible influences of broader rhetoric and negative stereotypes of these particular students cannot be overlooked.

Moreover, access to what was considered 'real and meaningful' education seemed restricted. Empirical data highlighted how the education system and broader socio-political mechanisms facilitated symbolic violence - a key notion introduced by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). Symbolic violence arguably operates on this course and within *The Hollies*, legitimised in policies and practices considered useful and 'supportive', but which from the perspective of the student are seen as constraining. Adam wanted to be taught 'skills to achieve' - hence his stated desire to learn 'proper' English and maths. By implication, he wanted a 'different form of knowledge'. Classroom knowledge made available in lessons thus did not appear to meet this particular student's expectations. Raising objections, Adam seemed determined to make visible the type of education on offer to him and others in the classroom. Hence his claim, '*look, look at the type of work we are learning'.* Classroom provision was found lacking – at present, the type of education construed as '*jokes*'.

Furthermore, several students highlighted 'slow pace' of learning, as a further complication. Some wanted a faster academic pace, revealed during focus group discussions when Ellie explained,

> "*It means sometimes the ones which work ahead they have to kind of slow down to wait on the students who have work that's missing and all that.*

However, on the other hand, other students could not cope with the pace, echoed when Leah stated

*"But you also have to think in this course that there are loads of people with different abilities. Some can't be writing as fast as others, some may need more help than others".*

While the 'slow pace' learning might be due to low academic needs of some students on the course, however, conversely it could also be a result of ineffective teaching and lesson planning - where so-called 'more able' students are concerned; it was hard to make this distinction.

**Critical Discussion**

Participation in post-16 education nowadays is deemed necessary – in light of RPA legislation, but also on the basis that student data articulated a stated need to improve on previous academic failure. Re-engagement provision thus appeared fundamental, and yet, once Level 1 pre-vocational learners from this particular course enrolled, my research findings suggested complications – amongst others, the course provision did not appear to provide useful education for student participants studying at *The Hollies*. Students on this particular Level 1 pre-vocational course found themselves in a very competitive college environment that institutionalises a system of success and failure.

Contrary to RPA discourse, empirical data suggests a policy disconnect; provoking critical thought over the real purpose behind the government's mandate for participation in post-16 education and training, and the extent to which these particular students fit in with rhetoric on the knowledge economy. An analysis of my data suggests a complex interplay between broader structural factors, inherent assumptions and underlying ideologies that impact on the type of education made available to them. Accordingly, three key themes emerged: influences of institutional and departmental factors, the role of underlying stereotypical assumptions and conceptualisations of these particular student participants and lastly, structural factors and contradictions in a neo-liberalist knowledge economy.

*Departmental and Institutional factors*

In order to conceptualise the practice of warehousing students, the influences of departmental and institutional factors cannot be overlooked. Fundamentally it shapes

educational provision and teaching practices, directly influencing the delivery of the course curriculum and student experiences within the broader setting.

Empirical data underscores contrasting ways in which course tutors and students conceptualised and appraised the type of provision on offer. From the tutor's position, they drew close attention to regulatory systems, blaming a prevailing performance-driven culture for reduced teaching and education standards. Rather than adopting a critical focus on their own work practices, instead, blame seemed projected: classroom issues and student behaviour were perceived as complex, warranting an over-involvement of LSPs in classroom teaching. The ultimate teaching aim to 'keep students busy with any kind of work', was construed as necessary.

On the other hand, empirical data demonstrated these particular students have agency – they did not present as passive recipients of what resembled warehousing education. Instead, they were critical and observant, routinely vocalising expectations and concerns. Although a substantial minority of students engaged in lesson activities, these moments of engagement were brief and intermittent. Even so, in general, most students customarily engaged in raucous classroom behaviour, several also 'voting with their feet' – giving rise to low attendance in class. Noticeably, although students in general did not appear concerned over short college days, however, they were critical of the type of education provided once in lessons. Classroom activities did not appear meaningful, instead were construed as boring, random and timewasting.

Classroom events offer a snapshot and appeared indicative of a broader issue: although this particular Level 1 pre-vocational course offers so-called disengaged and NEET youth another chance to re-engage in further education, empirical data however revealed that once in college, a different type of education and training provision was on offer. These particular students seemed marginalised - access to vital and 'meaningful' provision seemed restricted: GCSE provision heavily regulated and a high academic tariff strictly controlled progression on to mainstream vocational education and apprenticeship training. Principally, these particular Level 1 pre-vocational students were subjected to notions of marginalisation and social exclusion, whilst trying to re-engage in further education. The structural influence of this particular Level 1 pre-vocational course appears to be one that labels the student and then attempts to arrest any potential progression in terms of their learning. To that extent then, the course at the

Hollies appears to replicate, reify and also consolidate a negative learning identity for these students. They are drilled into being disengaged and disaffected.

To take the analysis a step further, *The Hollies* appears to produce NEET identities. In a profound way, my empirical data highlighted institutional and departmental factors that contributed to the warehousing of Level 1 pre-vocational students, but also illustrated varying ways in which these negative learning identities are actively constructed by a combination of factors, including the tutor's attitude, 'management' strategies, and broader socio-economic political factors.    Other than the course's lower social positioning within the college environment, the setting in itself (indirectly influenced by broader government policies) erected tough academic conditions that made it difficult for Level 1 pre-vocational students to be socially mobile within the setting. Facing minimal prospects of accruing GCSE capital or possibilities to progress onto mainstream vocational education. Instead, these particular students were 'held'- movement was restricted and alternative provision made virtually inaccessible. Whether unintentional or not, the course team itself engaged in social exclusionary practices, fuelled by lowered standards of teaching practices. Other than institutional factors and educational processes, why would this particular social group be 'othered' within the education setting?

*Influences of stereotypical ideology regarding NEET youth*

It is necessary to take into consideration that Level 1 pre-vocational students were formerly categorised as NEET and 'at-risk' youth. Other than stigma attached to this label, background research indicated education and social policy tend to conceptualise NEET youth as deficient (Jones 2011), a 'problem' group seen to be lacking in skills and aspiration (Skeggs 2009). Perhaps this rhetoric could represent a proportion of NEET youth, underscoring an underlying common belief that they were reluctant to learn. However, based on my empirical evidence, many student participants challenged conventional assumptions: several articulating the need for access to 'proper' education in order to enhance grade achievement.

However, there appears to be complications – empirical data suggested that on a policy and practitioner level, educational expectations for marginalised youth seemed lowered. On a policy level, the course curriculum was designed to re-engage youth with

employment, and although such provision could hold purported benefits, inherently, the generic assumption is made that youth on the Level 1 pre-vocational course would mainly seek assistance to find low-skilled employment. Other than the fact that this particular Level 1 pre-vocational course provision at *The Hollies* offered no work placement opportunity*,* a recurring issue that emerged from student data indicated that they were no different from others enrolled on mainstream provision – they too articulated the need for higher academic grades. The point made here, several students enrolled on the course did not necessarily want low-skilled, employment training provision. Most of the students reported what appeared to be more than what the curriculum made available; they reportedly wanted stronger academic focus and increased access to GCSE provision. Whether the tutors were suitably trained and qualified to deliver such courses, was a different matter yet worth considering.

In a profound way, empirical data highlighted that whether course tutors were aware or not, but they too had lowered expectations of their students. This appeared to influence how students were perceived, which also affected a range of tutor decisions, including choices about teaching material. For instance, empirical data revealed that course tutors arguably held diminished expectations of their students' academic competence: reportedly it was claimed students might not be able to cope with challenging academic conditions, despite the fact that a substantial minority of students for example already met eligibility criteria for GCSE courses. In this particular chapter, tutors also provided classroom activities that lacked academic rigour and purpose. Not satisfied, students became critical and reportedly wanted access to 'real education'.

Of significance, empirical data further discovered evident tension and mismatch of expectations: Level 1 pre-vocational student participants also held expectations, but theirs differed from official agencies. Distinctly different to stereotypical ideas, these particular students wanted to learn. Hence, participants were critical and subsequently raised objections over what they believed appeared to be lowered quality and standards of education on the course. What they found, was that the Level 1 pre-vocational course provision at *The Hollies* was conducted in what appeared to be a chaotic, unstructured teaching and learning environment. This particular issue seemed no different to that reflected in Atkins's (2009) study with similar learners: these students reportedly

engaged in activities that were rarely educational (Atkins 2009). Educational experiences for these students thus could not be called education in any meaningful sense (Atkins 2009); a viewpoint similarly reflected in my empirical findings too. The type of education presently made available didn't appear to match student expectations.

Fundamentally, the semblance of chaos and disruptive classroom conditions, to some degree arguably perpetuated and reinforced negative stereotypes of these particular students. While student classroom conduct was observably loud and disruptive, it arguably overshadowed concerns around pedagogical activities and teaching practices. It is likely, that in an important way, these work practices considerably produced negative outcomes: it generated negative classroom conditions and inherently influenced disruptive student behaviour. Hence, consolidating a stereotypical belief that with these particular students there was a reluctance to learn; also, it legitimised warehousing practice on the Level 1 pre-vocational course.

*Structural factors, neo-liberalism and the knowledge economy*

In accordance with neo-liberalist discourse, youth were encouraged to develop human capital - investing in education, constantly learning new skills (Tomlinson 2013). Speculatively, such rhetoric could be relevant for many students engaged on relatively 'good' study programmes. However, in contrast, my data illustrates how re-engaging in a Level 1 pre-vocational course rarely resulted in the 'constant learning of new skills' – low quality provision amongst other issues, countered such possibilities. It is questionable how much 'real' learning could occur in a chaotic milieu whereby lesson material was judged to be of low standard. These empirical findings were no different to previous studies on marginalised youth discovered that low-level provision was usually the type of education made available for such youth - hardly providing opportunity for improved social and economic positioning (Simmons et al 2011; Atkins 2010; 2013; Wolf 2011). Thus, although participation and engagement in education has potential social and economic gains, for student participants on a Level 1 pre-vocational course, these benefits seem diminished.

Opportunities to acquire symbolic mastery (the ability to think abstractly), conferred by the education system via the curriculum and pedagogy, were diminished, excluding

working-class children from developing required cognitive qualities that could promote greater outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). In short, access restricted to higher-status modes of knowledge (Simmons et al 2011). Consequently, studies found that the type of provision made available to these particular students at *The Hollies* prepared them for the most routine, low-paid areas in contemporary social labour sector (Simmons et al 2011). These explanations underscored class-based inequalities and diminished scope for these particular students to develop human capital within this particular education setting.

In light of concerns over low quality provision, Maguire (2013:65-66) described such provision '*little more than* warehousing', a claim that reflected this notion of warehousing in my study - the regularity of chaos, commotions and conflict in the classroom, arguably challenged the extent to which students felt any 'real' or meaningful education was provided on the course; not helped by an over-involvement of LSPs to substitute teaching duties. Indeed, some students tried to learn, but given the informal, disruptive and chaotic teaching and learning conditions, intentions to learn became complicated.


Key scholars such as Simmons et al (2011) and Ainley (1991) fundamentally questioned the role of education, drawing attention to the fact that the education system in itself contributed to structurally unequal academic and employment opportunities. As such, Simmons et al (2011) claimed that low-level provision, reflected in the curriculum itself contributed to the socialisation of many of these youth for a life of low-paid, insecure work in the social labour sector. Likewise, Ainley (1991) claimed that low level provision served as a cover for creating a mass surplus of labour in the form of casual, low-paid and semi-skilled workers. Overtones in these theorisations, brought to mind the concept 'reserve army of labour' - a 'wider pool of workers in need of employment'. The problem here however lies in the fact that nowadays there is already a continued over-supply of well-qualified workers (MacDonald 2011; Simmons et al 2011; 2014; Allen and Ainley 2010; Ainley 2016; Avis and Atkins 2017), but instead of occupying high-skilled employment as suggested in rhetoric, instead, they were working in low skilled, 'elementary occupations', such as such as kitchen/ catering assistants and waiters/ waitresses (Office for National Statistics 2014; Ainley 2016). In this respect, qualifications did not guarantee access to high-skilled employment. What's

more, notably, participants engaged in low-level provision, were consequently in direct competition with higher qualified youth for access to scarce employment opportunities and the labour market. Student prospects of securing a job, was further reduced in the current milieu.

Drawing attention to rising levels of unemployment and job insecurity, Guy Standing (2011) argued neo-liberal capitalism played a fundamental role in producing an uncertain, precarious state in contemporary labour markets. Rather than 'a reserve army' that particularly referred to the established working class, he conceptualised the rise of the Precariat, referencing a wider scope of individuals beyond social class divisions affected by the precarious nature of the employment sector. However, adopting a specific focus on Level 1 pre-vocational students, Simmons et al (2014) offered a plausible conceptualisation in light of their research on similar learners: their theorisation described the situation with previously NEET young people in the education system, as the modern 'reserve army of labour, inasmuch as they were steered between various forms of engagement or on the margins of the labour market; no doubt finding themselves in precarious situations or part of the precariat (Furlong et al 2012; MacDonald, 2011). The point made here, students on a Level 1 pre-vocational course similarly experienced notions of uncertainty and marginalisation associated with the Precariat, but given the high academic tariff predominating in education institutions, it is questionable whether engagement in this form of education could be construed as a great investment that will automatically lead to rewarding jobs – rhetoric echoed in the knowledge economy. Instead, the purported benefits of engagement in a prolonged period of post-16 education and training for them, could not guarantee positive benefits of RPA outcomes.

Nevertheless, it deserves comment that my empirical data brings into focus a counter discourse: admittedly, in current policy there is an anxiety about NEETs who will be dependent on benefits and never be able to find work, yet somehow, structurally, the system is producing the kind of provision reflected on this particular Level 1 pre-vocational course at *The Hollies* inasmuch as it actually does the opposite of what it is supposed to do - creating and consolidating NEET identities rather than providing the

conditions in which new learner identities can emerge, thrive and be of benefit to the individuals themselves and (to use the neoliberal line of reasoning) to the 'economy'.


**Conclusion**

This particular study gave prominence to discourses of social exclusion and inequality operating within one specific further education setting. In particular illustrating that although former NEET youth seek to re-engage, operative systems and underlying ideologies within the education sector induced processes that further alienate marginalised youth. Hence, questioning the extent to which many students on a Level 1 pre-vocational course could benefit from the 'language of opportunity' denoted in neoliberalist, RPA rhetoric.

The course provision had low social positioning and was on the periphery of college operations. The situation not helped that instead of being taught actual 'skills to achieve', students appeared to be warehoused/ held. Empirical data highlighted varying ways in which structural factors, institutional practices and ideological assumptions influenced the type of provision made available for these particular students, complicating the extent to which students could develop human capital within the setting.  And although student participants wanted access to significantly different forms of education and training, aspirational goals were restricted - *The Hollies* was a competitive college space that employed stringent academic conditions, and therefore occasioned differential access to specific sets of knowledge and skills. For now, in its current state, it is questionable whether these particular students were indeed taught 'skills to achieve' within this particular setting. Instead, based on the strong notions of marginalisation and social exclusion experienced by Level 1 pre-vocational students within *The Hollies*, I agreed that ultimately employability programmes facilitated 'pre-ordained positioning', helping students find and learn their place in the knowledge economy (Atkins 2013:34).

Education can be a catalyst for better social integration, inclusion and social change. However, in order to promote better outcomes for student participants at *The Hollies*, educational practitioners and managers have to recognise varying policy and institutional systems, mechanisms and work practices that produce dimensions of

inequality and exclusion which 'shut-down' opportunities for marginalised youth within the setting. Government policies should therefore critically reflect and introduce more inclusive pathways that offer greater social inclusion but also actual equivalent status within the national qualification framework. Adopting a broader focus, it has to be recognised on policy level that customarily student participants do not fit 'nicely' into pre-existing, rigid structures embedded within institutions; instead, the notion of conflict, tension and chaos encapsulate the often non-standard academic backgrounds associated with most learners from this particular Level 1 pre-vocational course. However, this knowledge within itself should not become a pathological tool to stereotype, label and 'water-down' provision, but instead 'open up' and instigate 'better' dialogue between management, tutors and students. The ultimate aims, to essentially broaden access, enhance teaching and learning standards, whilst providing the 'right' forms of student support.

To improve student outcomes, students could benefit from a stronger academic focus on this particular Level 1 pre-vocational course. As such, course tutors require intensive, ongoing teacher training: central to this, a commitment to engage in transformative education, critical pedagogy and a critical focus on own work practices. On an institutional level, so-called 'Grade 1' lecturers and most experienced, highly qualified staff within the setting ought to also have direct involvement and assist with teaching duties on the course – the aim to share good practice and offer peer support. In conclusion, greater student voice and close collaboration between these particular students, tutors and senior managers can play an important role to lobby for social change, challenging the academic divide and therefore make equal access to essential provision available to all students within the setting.

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