Introduction:

> *"I was doing Health and Social Care Level 1 last year and then I was going to do Level 2 but I did not get the right GCSEs. So I thought that this course did GCSEs but it didn't…they do Functional Skills…so it was a bit of a thing for me. I don't know….I'm a little bit on and off about the course, really. It's distressing having to do a Level 1 S2S course! It's hard because I could have gone on to Level 2 but now I have to be here for an extra year. I don't want to waste a year here on this course. My English is like a D and my Maths like a F. But I don't understand why I cannot do my GCSE Maths if I don't get a D? I don't understand that! No, the tutors did not explain why I cannot do it. I would have thought that if you did not get the right GCSEs you can re-take them whatever they are? I didn't know it had to be a certain grade for me to be able to re-take them….I need to take my GCSEs but I don't know where to re-take them"*? (Interview with Zette - Field notes November 2014)

Zette is a black student who previously studied a Level 1 Health and Social Care course. Her hope was to progress on to the next Level 2 Health and Social Care course with the view to study social work once she completed her vocational education at college. However, Zette's trajectory within the education system took a diversion when she discovered a key obstacle: she did not have the right GCSEs. She therefore could not progress to do the next Level 2 course and was strongly advised to enrol on S2S with the belief that she could boost her grades. Once enrolled on S2S, Zette expected to do maths and English GCSE classes as part of S2S provision. However, she soon discovered that sheer ambition to do GCSE classes in pursuit of higher academic grades was not enough; she had to contend with structural constraints.

What's more, though marketing brochures advertised that GCSE provision could be accessed alongside S2S, Zette experienced further restrictions. She discovered that GCSE provision was heavily regulated within college. Both organisational and government policies regulated the re-taking of GCSEs, and stipulated that only students with D-grades in English and or maths could gain access to GCSE classes. Thus, despite her stated goal to re-sit the F-grade in GCSE maths, Zette could not access GCSE maths provision to improve upon her academic grade. To exacerbate the situation, Zette encountered a further obstruction in the educational practice of the S2S course team: they judged her unsuitable to cope with GCSE-related course demands, regardless of whether she met the D-grade entry requirement for English

GCSE classes. Consequently, Zette was enrolled on Functional Skills maths and English, missing a fundamental opportunity to do GCSEs, a key requirement nowadays for access to higher levels of study or training within the setting.

Zette's concluding remark sets the premise for this article: There is the evident need to re-take GCSEs so she could attain higher academic grades with the hope to access higher levels of further study and a subsequent career in social work. However, despite these aspirations and stated need for higher GCSE grades, Zette learnt an important lesson: she was denied access and GCSE provision was firmly placed out of reach. As a consequence, Zette was completely stuck with low GCSE grades at this particular college.

This paper is based on a case study whereby research was conducted at a FE College in East Anglia with 26 S2S students from the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 cohorts. They were observed in classrooms and participated in interviews and focus groups. Skills to Succeed (S2S) students and their educational experiences are under-investigated. There are previous yet limited academic studies on similar students on Level 1 and employability courses. For those students, previous research indicates dire outcomes (Atkins 2009; Wolf 2011; Simmons and Thompson 2011). Nonetheless, though useful, these studies were conducted pre-RPA when students were under no 'duty' to participate in post-compulsory education. Very little is therefore known about the current state of affairs regarding current Level 1 learners: their trajectory, educational experiences and progression outcomes; or indeed if RPA has made any difference to the students' academic and economic prospects.

RPA mandates English youth to participate in post-16 education, employment or training. However, how does this particular college accommodate youth that were so-called disaffected learners and previously NEET? The aim was to investigate the educational experiences of these student participants to discover their trajectory and the extent to which they could access various provisions that facilitate higher academic and employment outcomes as per RPA discourse.

S2S students and RPA legislation

The students from both cohorts X (observed in academic year 2013-2014) and Y (observed in 2014-2015) represented a wide range of young people from various backgrounds, interests and abilities. The student data highlighted that S2S students were not a homogenous group. They had various trajectories whereby a few students came straight from school, whilst many joined the S2S course as a result of referrals from the NEET intervention team. The academic profile highlighted a mixture of academic ability, with the majority of the students having no or lower GCSE grades in contrast with the substantial minority that have a number of GCSEs in several subjects within the A-D category. Student records indicated that several students have learning difficulties and or mental health problems, whilst others apparently have not. Some had complex social welfare needs whilst several others had a stable home life. Student attendance was low with nearly half of the student group absent from lessons during classroom observations.

Also, classroom behaviour was sometimes problematic, with several learners displaying disengaged and challenging behaviour towards fellow students and tutors. On this basis, some of these students ascribed to the conventional stereotypes associated with disengaged youth: they don't want to learn. Characteristically many of the S2S students have been NEET or previously excluded from mainstream education, with no or very few GCSE qualifications. Stereotypical assumptions, often fuelled by political rhetoric and media representations on NEET young people and so-called disaffected learners, have already positioned such youth in a negative way. They are deemed as dysfunctional, viewed as threats to social order (Tomlinson 2011), and being NEET has been construed as an individual circumstance that requires remedy (Simmons and Thompson 2011). The student data showed that though some students fit these stereotypes, others did not, yet they were similarly disadvantaged by stereotypical attitudes and constraining educational practices that challenged their educational journey within the college. This circumstance caused concern and contradicted RPA intent: this policy does not only seek to increase participation in post-16 education, employment or training, but also aim to raise educational qualifications and create a skilled workforce. Thus, RPA legislation provides a flexible educational framework that in theory offers youth the opportunity to attain better academic and economic prospects. Now, it is one thing to be mandated to participate in education or training with the belief that prolonged education has associated economic and academic benefits (Gregg and Tominey 2004; McIntosh 2004). However, it is another thing to discover whether and how these benefits materialise in

practice as per RPA discourse. It is thus necessary to shift attention to the S2S curriculum in order to discover what these students are taught and how the curriculum could facilitate the stated need for higher grades as articulated by most S2S participants.

The S2S curriculum

S2S provision is one of several pre-vocational and work-based learning programmes that have been launched and re-launched with the aim to increase the 'employability' of young people. In other words, these courses aim to develop attitudes, character and personal qualities deem necessary for employment. The S2S curriculum focuses on Functional Skills maths and English, First Aid Training, Level 1 Managing Personal Finances, and a City & Guilds Certificate in Employability and Personal Development. The course content includes career planning, job search, confidence building, health awareness and involvement with many outside agencies such as the youth service and Princes Trust.

However, from the outset of interviewing student participants, there was a difference between what S2S offered and what most of the students expected from the study programme. Other than a minority of students that wanted to work, the majority of the students were seeking additional knowledge beyond the so-called employability skills agenda. The intent to access mainstream vocational courses and apprenticeship provision were echoed when David commented,

> *"My aim is just to get on the catering course here…and get my grades up. From here I want to go on to Level 2 Catering course".*

There were a few students who wanted to do an apprenticeship, as reflected in Lindy's account

> "*…in one sense I then get my grades and then I am boosting all my grades up so that I will be able to do the course that I want to do….Animal Management at N** College".*

The above statements were representative of the majority of the participants that enrolled on the course with the ambition for further study. This created conflict: the modal level of S2S education propagated employability skills and personal development, yet the majority of

students preferred academic support as opposed to the employment agenda, with the reported goal to access further study and training opportunities. This issue revealed a dichotomy within the provision in that the nature and purpose of S2S support primarily focussed on employment and welfare support, in contrast to the strong academic focus that was required for the attainment of higher academic grades. Student records highlighted that several students had complex family circumstances, which perhaps explained why welfare support have become institutionalised as part of S2S provision. The curriculum thus has an in-built pastoral and welfare support system for all students to access when required. However, though in principle welfare support had been timetabled for tutor support after 3pm, classroom observations discovered that pastoral support regularly took precedence and often resulted in tutors transferring 'teaching duties' to LSP's to deal with presenting student mental health or child protection issues. Staff practice thus appeared to prioritise welfare duties and by implication diminished the academic focus within S2S. This issue is no different to previous academic research that found that such practices do not only challenge higher academic outcomes, but it also impacted academic outputs and the extent to which students could progress within institutions. The dangers of an over-emphasis on welfare were highlighted in previous research whereby the highest reported outcomes were an increase in self-esteem and confidence than academic achievements (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009; Atkins 2009). This issue is therefore deeply problematic and perhaps partly explained why the Wolf Review of Vocational Education (2011) reported that many low-level vocational or pre-vocational training programmes provide students with little or no advantage and, in some cases, may result in negative labour market returns.

Furthermore, not only was there an issue about the modal delivery and focus of S2S provision, student participants were also critical of the curriculum content. On this, Adam reported

> *"I find it (S2S) 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".*

Adam criticised the type of work that was set in the classroom and complained about the reported low intellectual level of provision. Hence his claim "*I find it a laugh! It's all jokes'.*

He therefore clearly did not find the work to be academically stimulating. What's more, he was keen for me to observe the reason for his assertion and showed me set pieces of work so I could ascertain the reason for his claim, hence the '*look what we are doing'*. Adam did not only highlight concerns over low quality provision, but he also drew attention to the collective identity of S2S students and made the argument that they were given English work deemed not of high academic standard.

To exacerbate the situation, Adam specifically stated that he wanted to '*learn proper English and maths'*. Though many S2S students did not question or criticise the curriculum content, several students similarly reflected Adam and Zette's critical attitude and reported need to access knowledge beyond what is on offer on the course. These students wanted access to 'real' educational opportunities that could yield higher academic grades. However, why this need for higher GCSEs?

The Gatekeeping Function of GCSE grades

To develop a further understanding for the need to attain higher GCSE grades, consider Zette's subsequent statement,

> "*I was doing Health and Social Care Level 1 last year and then I was going to do Level 2 but I did not get the right GCSES…. It's hard because I could have gone on to Level 2 but now I have to be here for an extra year"*.

Importantly, Zette experienced the supposed meritocratic policies within the education system that legitimated the need for higher GCSE grades to gain access to higher levels of educational opportunities. One could argue that educational policies such as the White Paper, *Importance of Teaching 2010* have been instrumental in that it introduced the requirement for higher of GCSEs, with the stated aim to raise academic standards and qualification levels amongst post-16 youth. Such policy initiatives thus established this notion of the academic ideal, reflected in the required 5 A* - C GCSE grades including maths and English. By implication, students that are academic would benefit from such a mandate. However, conversely students who fell short of this academic ideal might experience challenges within the education system. Take the case of Zette, she reportedly hoped to study the Level 2 course in the Health and Social Care department. However, though she achieved the Level 1 Health and Social Care qualification, this achievement did not appear to count. Instead,

access to the next level course was regulated by the entry requirement that was set at 4 GCSEs (grades A*-E), including maths and English. Thus, previous achievements other than GCSEs appeared to be over-looked. In this, the academic ideal operated within structural constraints, challenging the extent to which students could access vocational and training courses on mainstream provision. Most S2S students were therefore confined to pre-foundation/ pre-vocational learning.

It is important to note that the strong emphasis on higher GCSE grades was not only a requirement on mainstream vocational provision. Instead, my study discovered that the demand for higher academic grades was similarly revealed in the entry requirements for apprenticeship provision, reflected in the 4 - 5 A* - C GCSE with at least a D-grade in maths and English. Thus, the demand for academic competence and qualifications featured as a major requirement to access industry-related training. This strong preference for academic grades, as a consequence meant that the majority of the S2S participants could not apply to do apprenticeship training and were limited to the classroom. The minority of students that could apply were further disadvantaged when they discovered that apprenticeship provision was subjected to stringent criteria. Space was limited and given the high entry requirements, at this college Level 1 S2S students were competing with BTEC Level 3 and degree students for access to apprenticeship. The academic conditions were tough: recruitment policies were strict, space was limited, classroom sizes were capped and students were required to find their own employers who would offer an apprenticeship position. On apprenticeship, Kyle stated,

> ***K:*** *I'd like to do an Apprenticeship but it's not as easy as that, there is obviously a lot of people going for it too and there's not enough spaces. I think there should be more apprenticeships because if you look on the website there's not actually that much.*

Kyle was aware that it was difficult to get an apprenticeship. He also made reference to the fact that apprenticeship provision was limited, a circumstance that reflected broader national trends that outlined the fundamental scarcity of apprenticeship provision for 16-18 year olds (Mirza-Davies 2014). Within this context, GCSE grades have become an important yardstick to govern access and determine which types of students were permitted access to apprenticeship and the labour market. A culmination of factors has therefore contributed to the reality that S2S students had diminished opportunity to access the employment sector. Thus, instead of the option to undertake apprenticeship provision, S2S students were restricted to classroom-based education and work simulation initiatives within college.

What's more, student data revealed that the demand for higher GCSE grades consequently resulted in students having to undertake a longer period of study given that they did not have the 'right' GCSEs. On this, Zette reported

> *"It's distressing having to do a Level 1 S2S course! It's hard because I could have gone on to Level 2 but now I have to be here for an extra year".*

Zette claimed that she was required to do an 'extra year'. This issue have been similarly echoed amongst several students that had to accept an extended study period to achieve their goals. Though the students in the focus group mainly recognised the benefits associated with a prolonged study period, they had several reservations too. Conceivably, Elsa stated,

> ***"****Yeah I would like to go onto second year and do my GCSE's as next year I'll need to get GCSE grades to get into the next course. But I'll have to think about the fact that the government makes us all pay. As soon as you're 19 you have to pay (for adult provision)*".

The issue here is not the reluctance to undertake extended periods of study, because the student reportedly had aspirations to engage in further study. However, she referenced financial constraints that could hinder any prospective study post-18 years. This student thus identified the structural constraints and escalation of costs linked with 19+ provision. The issue of financial hurdles were further echoed in the focus group discussion, when Kyle stated,

> ***"****It's quite a lot of money. It's like thousands".*
>
> ***DAVID: "****Yeah it's a load of money to go to college and stuff…I'm not being funny but it's a bit unfair that they want us to go to college until we're 18 but then as soon as we hit 19 they won't pay for it. It's making us redundant really because we've got to go to college and then if we do one more year and we turn 19 in the third year then we have to pay for it. How is that fair on us?*

Evidently, the students were aware that GCSEs were necessary to permit access to further and higher levels of study within college. To attain their educational goals, these students acknowledged they have to commit to a longer study period beyond the compulsory age. Nonetheless, they recognised that funding restrictions and organisational policies challenged

the extent to which their academic goals could be achieved. In so doing, higher levels of further study with the opportunity to attain higher academic grades were made difficult and essentially placed out of reach for most student participants.

The Operations of GCSE Gatekeeping in Practice

The previous section focussed on key institutional policies and political systems that facilitated the gatekeeping function of GCSEs and the consequent struggle for S2S students to access higher levels of study. However, it is necessary to discover how these processes operate within practice. Therefore, the main findings focussed on key practices at this particular college that governed and regulated student access to educational and training provision.

As previously mentioned, access to GCSE provision was heavily regulated and controlled through government and organisational practices. College policy mandates that students with a D-grade in GCSE maths and or English are the only ones permitted to enrol on GCSE courses. Not only is this institutional policy, but the DfE post-16 funding policy reflected in the '*Crossing the Line: Improving success rates among students retaking English and maths GCSEs*'(Aug 2015), required learners with GCSE grade D in English or maths to re-sit, alongside their other studies. These students therefore have a second opportunity to improve on the D-grade in maths and or English. However, in contrast, if student grades are lower, which is commonly the case with S2S students, this chance to re-take GCSEs does not exist for many students at this college. Instead, 'pathways' have been designed for students to undertake Functional Skills to develop literacy and numeracy skills designed as "stepping-stone" qualifications to GCSE. Zette voiced her frustration about the lack of opportunity to do GCSE classes and stated,

> *"I don't want to waste a year here on this course. My English is like a D and my Maths like a F. But I don't understand why I cannot do my GCSE Maths if I don't get a D? I don't understand that! No, the tutors did not explain why I cannot do it. I would have thought that if you did not get the right GCSEs you can re-take them whatever they are? I didn't know it had to be a certain grade for me to be able to re-take them….I need to take my GCSEs but I don't know where to re-take them"*?

This statement significantly echoed student apprehension and highlighted that the GCSE policy essentially bars those students with lower grades from re-sitting and improving GCSE grades. Though Zette identified the need for higher GCSE grades, ironically she found she had to search for a different educational establishment that would allow the opportunity to access GCSE provision. The GCSE policy meant that access to maths provision was denied at this particular college and Zette could therefore not improve on the F-grade in maths.

On the contrary, Zette had the opportunity to improve on the D-grade in English. However, this case example revealed another key research finding: though some Level 1 S2S students met the GCSE policy requirements, the S2S course team hindered access to GCSE classes and instead steered them towards Functional Skills. To understand the logic behind this practice, Nina, the Faculty Manager of S2S provision and Foundation Learning, explained,

> *"So those who do GCSEs have joined a cross-college class…the students still need that higher level of support. Some of them area getting a little lost in those classes, because the classes are bigger than our group sizes. So if someone has got their D-grade and we have done our thorough diagnostic assessment and where we have determined for example that English is going to be too much or Maths is going to be too much at GCSE, we've done the Level 2 Functional Skills instead, but they can progress in English beyond that".*

Though Nina confirmed that some S2S students were granted the opportunity to do GCSE maths and or English, what is of interest though, is how she viewed these students: they were 'othered' and construed as requiring a higher level of support than what is on offer on the GCSE provision. It was speculated that these students could 'get a little lost' and 'classes are bigger' than what they were accustomed. The GCSE-classroom environment was therefore considered not to be conducive to the needs of S2S students. These stated considerations therefore appeared to justify why S2S tutors did not automatically enrol S2S students on GCSE courses despite them meeting the D-grade GCSE requirements. It was found that the course team used the national BKSB Functional Skills Diagnostic Assessment (English and maths) not only to track Functional Skills Standards from Entry Level 1 to Level 2 in order to identify skill gaps and direct the learner to the appropriate resources (BKSB 2016). Instead, these practitioners also used the results of the diagnostic assessments to make a judgement on a student's academic ability to cope with GCSEs despite the fact that the assessment was not

necessary in the first place: these students have a D-grade and therefore in principle should be enrolled to sit GCSE classes. However, this is not the case for these students.

It could therefore be argued that BKBS assessments have become a key strategy to legitimise student restrictions on GCSE enrolment, institutionalising Functional Skills on S2S provision. The student database on GCSE enrolment for all S2S students at the three different campuses revealed that 7 out of 46 students (15 per cent) were doing either GCSE maths or English. None of the students in the study were enrolled on GCSEs, even though the students' grade profile indicated that Lindy, Zette, Adam and David met the GCSE requirements either in maths and or English. Instead, all student participants, alongside most fellow S2S students, were enrolled on Functional Skills English and maths. Thus, taking into consideration the Wolf review (2011) there appears to be very minimal change. My research findings confirmed that Functional Skills has prominence on S2S provision, construed as the main form of alternative provision for so-called disengaged learners. So, with this in mind, I therefore concur with Simmons and Thompson (2011) argument: though at the time of writing they referred to their study on E2E provision, they plausibly theorised that it is both sad and ironic that the study programme designed to help some of the most disadvantaged young people to find work, in some ways, arguably contributed to their continued exclusion given its restrictive curriculum and lower level of intellectual framework.

Discussion

On the basis of key findings, without a doubt S2S students find themselves in a competitive college environment that arguably institutionalises a system of success and failure. Stringent academic conditions and a high GCSE tariff bring them in direct competition with better qualified young people. In this context, those with no or lower GCSEs were particularly disadvantaged in the competition for educational credentials and access to desirable resources. There are various approaches to the study of stratification and inequality within the education system. To better explain and conceptualise these student experiences, this data will be positioned within Bourdieu's (1974, 1986, 1990) theoretical framework.

Capital

Bourdieu (1974) introduces this concept of 'cultural capital' that higher-class families possess, to argue its significance within the education system. According to Bourdieu, students from higher-class homes benefit from the emphasis on cultural capital, which enables them to gain higher educational credentials than their counterparts and therefore legitimates the resultant dominant positions. In contrast, the education system makes it very difficult for students from lower-class background to achieve success within the setting. To accentuate, Bourdieu makes reference to the embodied practices, possession of institutional markers such as educational qualifications and ownership of objectified goods which are passed on in the home environment and are not equally distributed among different classes (Bourdieu 1986). Though useful, it is recognised that a Bourdieusian theory has its limitations in terms of what can be analysed effectively, together with the lack of clarity as to exactly which of the resources associated with higher-class homes constitute cultural capital and how these resources are converted into educational credentials (Sullivan 2001). However, albeit the case, it could be argued that the concept of cultural capital is important enough to understand its significance within the scope of my research findings: the argument that lower-class pupils, i.e. S2S student participants appeared to be really disadvantaged in the competition for educational credentials, the effect of this competition giving the appearance of legitimate and meritocratic processes, with foreseeable negative consequences for most of the student participants at this particular college.

Bourdieu's theory (1986) highlights the significance of educational credentials as a means of cultural capital. In the context of my study, the data illustrated how educational credentials were portrayed as important and often used as a key explanation why educational opportunities were closed off to those with no or low GCSEs. At this particular college, alternative qualifications appeared to have little significance whilst higher GCSEs, particularly in academic subjects gained elevated status. It could therefore be argued that at this particular college, GCSEs have become capital, the much-required academic tariff to gain access to higher levels of study or training. With this in mind, using Bourdieu's theory (1986) on capital, it is important to note that he thinks of capital as a social relation of power that stratifies, differentiates and establishes some degree of social closure - notions of inclusion and exclusion between individuals and groups. Hence, based on my findings, arguably GCSEs embodied 'social relation of power', evident in the various difficulties and challenges most S2S student participants faced when seeking to accrue GCSE capital with the

aim to enhance their academic grades. Importantly, the data drew attention to the embodied policies and practices in which GCSE capital was used within the setting to construct an intellectual divide, segregating those with low GCSEs from those deemed more academic and credible to gain access to valued provision within the setting. By implication, a range of educational opportunities were closed off and access was therefore denied to those with no or low GCSEs, placing higher levels of vocational courses, apprenticeship training and the opportunity to re-take GCSEs out of reach for most S2S student participants.

Social Closure

The above argument of 'closed off educational opportunities', required a shift in focus on this broader notion of social closure. Within Bourdieu's above definition of capital, he makes reference to the idea that capital can generate some degree of social closure, a notion that provoked further thought and critique. Based on my findings, I would partly agree with Bourdieu's argument on 'degrees of social closure', which perhaps described the circumstance of a handful of S2S students that were enrolled in GCSEs classes; they therefore could at least gain access to GCSE provision that could potentially lead to progression onto apprenticeship or vocational courses albeit limited to lower level courses at this college. However, it is at this point I would deviate from Bourdieu's argument as this idea of 'degree of social closure' could not effectively be applied to the students that participated in my study. Why? Because the data showed that for these S2S participants, the metaphorical gates to essential GCSE provision were shut. There was absolute social closure to GCSE provision, thus jeopardising prospective progression onto further study or training at this particular college. There was no doubt that the students in the study were situated in a complex educational field that challenged the extent to which those that did not have the 'right GCSEs', could improve on their GCSE grade profile and perhaps gain access to essential provision.

Thus, to develop further thinking beyond Bourdieu's idea of social closure, arguably Weber's (1978) theory on social closure importantly helps to understand how the educational practice of tutors and the significance of group membership, play a role in clarifying the differentials in opportunities which could result in individuals from a particular social group to be either included or excluded as a means of access to desirable social benefits (Collins 1979). According to Weber (1978) social closure functions through the process of exclusion (not letting outsiders in) and inclusion, the notion that those with shared norms, values, and status

often stick together with the aim to maintain their advantage in society and deny access to rewards and other desirable resources to those on the outside. Though Weber's theory has been critiqued for it's non-structuralist conception of class, his idea of class definition by market opportunities, life-chances, and symbolic rewards notably underscored processes that result in social closure (Parkin 1979). Weber's theoretical explanation importantly distinguishes between the contrasting experiences of individuals and the significance of group membership to yield benefits. It thus highlights how those who possess the shared credentials seem to benefit at the expense of the rest who want access to desirable resources, but found they were disqualified. This theory also sharply brings into focus the clear divide: those on the 'inside' and those considered 'outsiders', an issue that emerged from research data. Though it is acknowledged that S2S student participants were not a homogenous group, the data makes reference to the overall collective experiences of these students and how they appeared to be dispositioned as 'the other'; the students themselves made references to this notion of 'us' and 'them' in sections of the student data. Not only were they 'othered', but these students appeared to be further marginalised when it was discovered that the forms of capital most S2S students possessed, in fact, have progressively been devalued. At this particular college, GCSEs were used in a complex way that facilitated social exclusion and social inequality amongst student participants.

Social Inequality

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that most of these student participants were predominantly white, from low-income backgrounds, many had no or few, low GCSEs. As described in Bourdieu's theory, my data showed that categorically, these students encountered various academic barriers that hindered scope to improve academic grades. Generally, research suggests that aspirations tend to be lower amongst working-class students, partly based on the argument that middle- and upper-class students would have greater economic and cultural capital, which encourages more ambitious occupational goals (Archer and Yamashita 2003; Patton and Creed 2007). However, in my study, most of the students communicated the need for better qualifications and reported aspirations for further study, training or employment. Nonetheless, despite these student aspirations, the complexities inherent within the education system should not be underestimated: structural inequalities deeply permeated the real chances available to these students within the education system. Bourdieu's theory on 'field' thus indicated how numerous social and institutional arenas work together to allow individuals to express and reproduce dispositions.

Thus, Bourdieu conceptualises that a 'field' constitutes a "struggle to accumulate more forms of capital or convert one form into another more valued form", (Swartz 2013,59). There was no doubt that most of the students in the study experienced difficulty when seeking to accrue and enhance their GCSE capital. However, Bourdieu's argument that 'fields' can be and normally are arenas of struggle, the place of exchange where different capitals are exchanged - one for another in pursuit of more valued forms of capital (Swartz, 2013) triggered scepticism. For the students in my study, this 'place of exchange' was a complicated and restrictive arena, one that left very minimal if any scope for student agency to actively accrue GCSE capital or even exchange one capital for another. Take for example this issue with Functional Skills; in the study the students discovered that in practice, this qualification did not have equivalent GCSE status. The stetting thus did not appear to allow for an exchange of capital. Instead of an exchange of capital, the student participants accrued a further penalty and thus had to commit to a longer period of study to pursue higher academic grades. Thus, Bourdieu's idea of an 'exchange' could not aptly reflect this very complex and restrictive trajectory of S2S participants. Key to this restriction is the S2S provision: the students find themselves on a study programme that constrains student opportunities that allow for the pursuit of higher academic grades, in this context, GCSE capital. Work-based learning has been prioritized as the alternative to knowledge-based education. Thus, though it might not intend to do so, arguably S2S provision is infused by exclusionary discourses and practices.

Conclusion

Returning to the initial focus on RPA legislation, evidently there is contradiction: principally RPA promotes participation and the opportunity for post-16 youth to attain higher educational qualifications. However, in practice, the data highlighted that S2S participants experienced constrained participation and exclusion to essential provision. Students reported the need and struggle to accrue the required GCSE capital so as to advance to higher levels of study or training, contrary to RPA discourse. Thus, it appears that educational choices are severely restricted for young people with insufficient school leaving qualifications, specifically for those who want to pursue higher-status academic or vocational courses (Bathmaker 2005; Atkins 2008). There is no doubt that the data mostly supported Bourdieu's argument that the education system makes it very difficult for students from lower class background to achieve success within the setting. However, Bourdieu's argument requires adaptation to aptly reflect the S2S participants' experiences: the argument that the current college system makes it very difficult for S2S participants and similar students with poor

grades to accrue the necessary GCSE capital and achieve the type of academic success the students valued - one that could yield better opportunities tailored to their individual academic and employment goals. For now, these types of students are expected to participate and attend college, engaging in a restrictive provision that not only required longer periods of study, but there is also great ambiguity as to whether these goals would in fact be accomplished in the current climate.

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