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"Educated or Warehoused?" The Educational Experiences of Former NEET and So-called Disengaged Youth in a Further Education (FE) College in England

ABSTRACT

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 prevocational course? Empirical research was conducted at a large general further education (FE) college in South East England, named The Site with seven 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, focus group discussions and document analysis. Key findings problematize education and highlighted complications for marginalised youth that participated in the study. Far from being a straightforward experience for former NEET and disadvantaged youth to gain knowledge and skills whilst at college, conversely, these Level 1 pre-vocational students faced multiple barriers that challenged student efforts to access essential provision in an attempt to improve on previous academic failure. Research findings revealed 'warehousing' appeared to be the main purpose of education for these particular students in this study. Distinctly different to stereotypical ideas, these particular students wanted to learn. In a profound way, empirical research highlighted how stringent academic conditions were powerfully used to demarcate access and predetermined which types of youth were permitted on higher levels of study programmes and apprenticeship. This study adopts a social justice framework and therefore advocated for numerous structural and pedagogical changes. Amongst others, the recommendation was made for an overhaul in government and organisational policies on GCSE provision. This study also calls for a sharpened political focus, inviting academic and government debate for a critical re-think and revamp of re-engagement provision - so it is fit for purpose for disadvantaged students.

Keywords: *Raising of Participation Age (RPA), Further Education (FE), NEET (not in education, employment or training), Neo-liberalism; Level 1 Pre-vocational Course, Warehousing, marginalization, GCSEs, Human Capital.*

Carlene Cornish
Department of Sociology,
University of Essex,
Wivenhoe Park, Colchester,
Essex, England.

I. Introduction

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 enrolled on a Level 1 prevocational course? Moreover, to what extent can they reap benefits when re-engaged in further education, as echoed in RPA discourse?

This paper draws on key empirical findings that problematize education. It brings into focus the strong political emphasis on raising education credentials as a means to develop a skilled, qualified workforce in England (DfES, July 2012), but also highlighted its profound effect and complications for marginalised youth that participated in the study. Far from being a straightforward experience for former NEET and disadvantaged youth to gain knowledge and skills whilst at college, conversely empirical data illustrated that unlike neoliberalist assumption, Level 1 pre-vocational students on this particular employability course faced multiple barriers that challenged student efforts to access essential provision in an attempt to improve on previous academic failure. Contrary to RPA rhetoric, this study challenged notions of 'up skilling' and 'equal access and opportunity', revealing gatekeeping, warehousing and maginalisation from essential and mainstream provision. At its core functions, a credentialist nature appeared to be inherent to this particular college system - this, despite marginalised students' efforts to re-engage and develop human capital.

Empirical findings hence appear to dispel political ideology: the study shows that re-engagement in education for these particular students rarely resulted in quality tuition and the right type of qualifications needed to progress within the setting. In a profound way, empirical research highlighted how stringent academic conditions were powerfully used to demarcate access and predetermined which types of youth were permitted on higher levels of study programmes and apprenticeship. This study adopts a social justice framework and therefore advocated for numerous structural and pedagogical changes. Amongst others, the recommendation was made for an overhaul in government and organisational policies on GCSE provision. This study also calls for a sharpened political focus, inviting academic and government debate for a critical re-think and revamp of re-engagement provision - so it is fit for purpose for marginalised youth.

With this in mind, I will begin by returning to my initial research questions in order to tie together the empirical findings that formed the basis for central and original arguments highlighted in this study.

Key Research Questions

What are the educational experiences and trajectory of Level 1 pre-vocational students engaged in a particular employability course?

How do government, organisational policies and staff practices influence student access and types of educational and training provision made available, and therefore what are its implications for these particular students?

How is the curriculum delivered and to what extent does it facilitate RPA purported goals for enhanced academic and employment outcomes?

Ultimately, what are the actual student outcomes for these students and how does this compare with RPA logic?

II. Empirical Research Methodology

Empirical research was conducted at a large general further education (FE) college in the South East of England, named The Site 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.

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 separated 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 Site: 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.

Key Findings and Issues for Consideration

It is important to note that given the inter-related and complex nature of emerging issues, I could not produce an academic text that reflected a linear response to each research question. Also, it was difficult to cover everything, however, I rather wish to draw out and weave together some central issues which emerged as key findings and gave rise to the original contributions of this study.

Gatekeeping Function of GCSEs

Noticeably, key research findings problematize education and highlighted complications for marginalised youth that participated in the study. Contrary to contemporary discourses, the majority of the students that participated in my study held aspirations and voiced an evident need to re-take GCSEs. However, as extensively detailed in one of my previous publications on the gatekeeping function of GCSEs, several student narratives highlighted a fundamental issue - GCSE provision was firmly placed out of reach for students with low or no prior GCSE qualifications; scope to improve upon previous low academic results in reality was diminished (Cornish, 2017a). This particular issue was echoed in several student narratives, illustrated when Zette 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 echoed student apprehension and highlighted that the GCSE policy essentially bars those students with lower grades from re-sitting and improving GCSE grades. 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' (Porter, 2015), required learners with GCSE grade D in English or maths to re-sit, alongside their other studies. In a nutshell, if student grades are lower, which is commonly the case with these particular learners, the opportunity to re-take GCSEs does not exist at this particular college. Thus, 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. Hence, the education system appeared to reproduce the further marginalisation of youth already on the margins of society. In the present milieu - participants discovered they were stuck with their existing low grades.

'Warehousing' or Taught Skills to Achieve?

The situation exacerbated that instead of being taught actual 'skills to achieve', students appeared to be warehoused. The predominant teaching aim was to 'keep students busy', getting them to do 'any kind of work'. Reflecting on her teaching practice, one of the tutors - 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.

Distinctly different to stereotypical ideas, overall research findings discovered that most participants wanted to learn. Low quality provision was noted and carried criticisms 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. 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' (Cornish, 2017b).

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.

What are the Progression Outcomes for these Learners?

My particular study showed that for pre-vocational students at this specific college, engagement in education rarely resulted in improved academic and employment outcomes. Of significance, destination data indicated discrepancy between students' aspirations and actual progression outcomes. Instead of moving on, data illustrated most students were repeating a similar, lower-end employability programme. Only one student from both cohorts moved upwards on to a Level 2 programme, whilst a few students made sideways progression onto Level 1 vocational courses. Other than the substantial minority that were able to progress on to a Level 1 vocational course or some form of employment, it certainly could not be overlooked that 75 per cent of students that participated in the study were recorded NEET despite having completed the course and acquiring the qualification.

Empirical data thus indicated that participants were rarely given opportunity to progress and advance on to mainstream provision; instead, the majority of students repeated a similar version of the course. Although a prolonged period of education could be viewed as constructive for former NEETs on the basis that the attainment of any type of qualification could be deemed an improvement upon previous academic failure, the problem lies in the fact that the majority of research participants wanted to move on from pre-vocational provision and access mainstream vocational education. Student participants reportedly viewed re-engagement provision as part of a bigger goal to make up for 'lost ground'. Hence, other than the substantial minority that sought apprenticeships or employment, the majority of students pinned their hopes on the qualification to pave the way to vocational courses.

However, a range of emerging factors hindered progression ideals: notably, the Level 1 pre-vocational qualification did not guarantee straightforward transition; neither did it appear to hold academic significance within this particular college. Structural constraints, operational practices and stigma influentially challenged progression outcomes, firmly placing relatively 'realistic' aspirational goals out of reach for student participants. Herein, the Level 1 qualification did not guarantee straightforward transition, questioning the extent to which the qualification held academic relevance within this particular college. On this basis, tension appeared to exist between RPA rhetoric and actual educational opportunities available to participants, despite student efforts to navigate transitions within the setting. Hence the central argument, that the course and current college system essentially reproduced NEET identities, instead of finding a possible resolution.

Implications for Policy and Educational Practice

In light of my empirical findings, it could be argued that since the Wolf Review 2011, there appeared to be minimal changes and improvements on lower level provision for these particular students at this College. In a profound way, empirical research revealed how stringent academic conditions were powerfully used to demarcate access and predetermined which types of youth were permitted on higher levels of study programmes and apprenticeship. Admittedly, it was necessary to be cautious not to make generalisations from a study this size. However, it may be that some parts of the findings resonate with other educators and researchers in the field and with this in mind, the following recommendations are made:

Policy Implications

Government policy should ensure all young people, regardless of a history of low achievement, should have access to GCSE provision. Recognition should be given that the schooling environment perhaps did not suit, or the fact that students might now be ready and interested to gain qualifications. These reasons aside, they should be given a 'second chance' opportunity to engage in 'real' and 'meaningful' education within a highly supportive academic environment. This policy recommendation required a critical re-think and overhaul of government policy, and in effect, organisational policy on GCSE provision. Presently, relatively realistic goals to gain and improve upon low GCSEs seemed unrealistic in the current college environment. By implication, access to low level vocational courses and apprenticeships were considered almost unrealistic aspirational goals for these youth. Hence, in an attempt to 'level the playing field', it was recommended that GCSE provision be accessible for all youth within the education sector.

Currently pre-vocational students on these courses appeared 'hidden' and absent from government debate and political focus. This study calls for a sharpened political focus and consequently invited political debate with the view to policy reform on re-engagement provision. This policy should regulate the need for quality improvements and raised academic standards that provide 'real' and 'meaningful' education for students on the course. Government policy to demonstrate commitment through increased government funding, spearheaded for specialist staff recruitment, training and development, and additional resources needed so staff could consolidate or re-set aspirational goals and consequently deliver quality education and training.

Implications for Educational Practice

Firstly, it is recommended that the organisation adopts a more inclusive agenda, re-positioning 'lower ranking' courses with the aim to re-integrate provisions into mainstream operations. For this to occur, several organisational changes are required: the first issue was to deal with the academic divide revealed in space and locations - hereby, it is recommended that all courses should be delivered in buildings that are in the same geographical space. If this is not possible at all times, for colleges to ensure that a diverse mixture of students from all levels of FE study programmes be situated within these buildings.

Secondly, the study calls for an overhaul of the institution's GCSE policy, recommending that organisational policy widens access and allows all students to access this provision, regardless of prior attainment. Moreover, the inclusive ethos to extend to apprenticeship provision and access to mainstream provision too. This policy change also includes organisational mandate that once Level 1

pre-vocational students 'successfully' attained the qualification, this should naturally result in a place on a vocational or training course in mainstream provision. At the moment, students rarely progressed despite having gained the Level 1 pre-vocational qualification. In so doing, policy regulation would negate institutional barriers and address concerns over student progression.

It is recommended that the organisation actively develop a culture of raised academic expectations of pre-vocational and lower level students. Staff attitudes and work practices should reflect this raised level of commitment. Organisational policy should therefore mandate that any labelling, stereotypical ideologies, judgmental language, and low standards of practice be challenged and efficiently dealt with in the setting. The organisational ambition to drive up standards should consequently embody the requirement that tutors have greater student expectations which involves setting challenging goals; practice ideals driven not to keep students busy 'just for the sake of it', but for lessons to have academic purpose and relevance with a mutually agreed learning goal.

Original Contributions of the Study

Amongst others, this study made an original contribution to literature on the sociology of education: it identified and unpacked contemporary ways in which the English vocational education system reproduced social class inequalities through its structures, policies and practices. My study produced a counter-narrative that drew attention to policy contradiction and how this particular further education system appeared to be instrumental in producing social exclusion and negative outcomes for marginalised youth that participated in my study. It does this in a number of ways – firstly, my study has demonstrated the dominant ways in which government and organisational policies, institutional structures and educational practices intervene and impact young people's agency, further restricting disadvantaged young people's 'choices' and career pathways. This I have shown through fieldwork data, illustrating varying ways how marginalised youth are further excluded and segregated from essential and mainstream provision that could make a positive difference. In this respect, the study hence makes an original contribution and has shown how this particular organisation has constructed various stringent academic conditions and systems of governance within the setting for a twofold purpose: firstly, to demarcate access to types of education provision and knowledge construction; secondly, it reveals how underlying educational processes and systems were used in a subtle way to regulate which type of student was allowed access to higher levels of study and skilled employment.

III. Limitations of the Study

This research inquiry however, is limited in its particular use of qualitative research methodology. The issue of subjectivity is consequently highlighted. A further limitation was the research design – the study adopted a case study approach. As such, research data could therefore not be representative and generalised to other groups and programmes. Furthermore, the research sample was restricted – it included only young people who were present in a particular class at a time when classroom observations, focus groups and interviews were conducted at this specific FE College. Hence, no claim is made that they are generalisable beyond the groups of young people who participated. Whilst presenting challenges, generalisability was not the intended goal of the study. What I address is the issue of transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) as similar processes might be taking place in other further education colleges in different parts of the country. Hence, by way of thick, rich description and detailed information the study could be assessed for its applicability to similar programmes in other context.

IV. Conclusion

The study reconnects with social justice and called into question the extent to which student participants could genuinely benefit from re-engagement provision on this particular pre-vocational study programme. To a great extent, it may be appropriate to consider Marx's theory of alienation, in as much that students on this particular course seemed marginalised from key provision and appeared to have minimal prospect of self-actualisation. Although the course was specifically designed for previously NEET or socially excluded youth, actual fieldwork mainly discovered adverse outcomes. 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 Site, legitimised in policies and practices considered useful and 'supportive', but which from the perspective of the student are seen as constraining (Cornish, 2017b).

Moreover, access to what was considered 'real and meaningful' education seemed restricted. 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. On a broader scale, such practices arguably facilitate a divide along class, ethnicity and gender lines, with some judged to be 'inside' the system and others 'marginalised', "socially excluded', 'chavified' or 'precaritised'. Hence, in many ways, the situation of NEET young people could be described as a modern reserve army of labour (Simmons et al, 2014), as they seemed 'endlessly interchangeable' and 'churned' between many forms of engagement and on the margins of the labour market (Beck, 2015:494). In effect, the exercise of power through both the actual programme and discourses surrounding them may be recognised in the actual impact as shown in my study - that already marginalised young people, essentially appeared warehoused on low rent employability programmes that rarely offered scope for the development of human capital. In some way, it was also questionable whether engagement in this form of education can lead to rewarding jobs of the type referred to in rhetoric about the knowledge economy. On the contrary, for these students on this course, engagement in a prolonged period of post-16 education and training, far from guaranteeing the benefits claimed for RPA, may actually be diminishing the opportunities it purports to open up (Cornish, 2017c).

Scope for Future Research

Assumptions and stereotypical judgements are generally made about NEET and so-called disengaged youth, exacerbated by mass media representation which usually problematizes them. However, in light of my empirical findings on this particular re-engagement provision at The Site, further research was suggested on a larger scale: to discover whether my empirical findings were atypical of such provision, or are there identical issues experienced on similar provision at different colleges nationwide. I firmly believe that a particular focus on re-engagement provision across England was necessary and fundamental: by its very nature, re-engagement provision could offer a critical moment within the education system whereby it could become that turning point for youth that somehow struggled to reap benefits from the schooling system. That is, if it is delivered correctly and effectively. Further research could inevitably enable closer inspection of re-engagement programmes to identify colleges that deliver 'good' practice, but also those that produce negative student outcomes. Finally, a focus on further research invites academic and government debate for a re-think and possible re-vamp of re-engagement provision – so that it is fit for purpose. Fundamentally, this study essentially calls for a policy reform of re-engagement provision.

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