
Future workers, 'levelling up' and a 'skills revolution'?

Hannah Walters explains how current conversations around vocational education don't tell the whole story.

Over the last decade or so, vocational education has been under the microscope. Notably, the 2011 Wolf Report, which reviewed vocational education provision in England, generated scores of headlines on its publication for its claims that, as the BBC put it at the time, 'hundreds of thousands of young people are doing vocational courses which do not lead to university or a job'. Wolf was especially critical of the lack of labour market value attached to many courses, along with failures to promote core skills and qualifications in English and maths (an issue tackled in the report's Recommendation 9). Alive and well for the last ten years, these debates continue today. The current government is quick to generate and propagate buzzwords and catchy phrases like 'skills revolution' and 'levelling up', with vocational education finding itself at the centre of many of these conversations.

But while the so-called 'real world value' will always be an important part of the puzzle when it comes to evaluating education, the reduction of vocational education to its simplest economic or skills-based parts serves to gloss over the very things which make it unique. At its best, so much of the vocational educational experience is rooted not only in the formal accrual of skills, but in its less tangible aspects; it provides informal support for young people, especially working-class young people; it encourages engagement with interests which lie beyond standard school curricula; it fosters dynamic and practical learning environments; and it allows for a degree of choice and autonomy for young people who have spent most of their educational lives subject to strict rules and overlapping modes of social control. While I am not suggesting vocational education is either perfect or uniform in its delivery of these benefits - and there remain many issues to be tackled across the sector - these are some of the characteristics of vocational education I witnessed during my research with working-class young women and girls on beauty courses, the results of which led me to conclude that judging

vocational education purely by its ability to produce future workers does not tell the whole story.

The ideas at the crux of these 'levelling up' and 'skills revolution' conversations are nothing new. They belong to a long history of understanding young people as little more than the sum of their latent potentials. Today, young people are overwhelmingly constructed in terms of their future lives. Will they turn out to be successful, productive and securely employed members of society? Will they accrue a sufficiently valuable skillset to avoid becoming a drain on the state or a worrying NEET statistic? Will their education prepare them for a late capitalist world in economic and environmental flux? Will this accrual of education and skills mean they might one day be able to help solve big issues we as a society are facing in the future? Though common to debates around young people and education in general, these questions and associated anxieties are especially sharp when it comes to vocational education, as it exists as a mode of education closely associated with the skills base (and skills shortages) of the nation and its future. Given its working-class status (especially when compared to university), these questions speak to broader anxieties around working-class young people. So often pathologised as lazy, antisocial and/or irresponsible, the accrual of useful, industry-facing skills soothes some of these concerns; a neoliberal logic which suggests hard work and self-development are key to solving an array of society's woes.

When I first began my own research into vocational education, I shared some similar concerns. I expected to 'uncover' the ways in which class- and gender-based disadvantages and oppressions were reproduced via the beauty courses I observed, an ongoing and intergenerational violence sanctioned by the state and executed through formal educational pathways. Aspects of this remain true: the vast majority of beauty students are women and girls, beauty education is undervalued, and beauty practitioners are underpaid.

But from spending time in vocational learning spaces, I found beauty education to be so much more than these narratives suggest: a space of solidarity, support, creativity and joy. Some of the participants who took part in my study described their time on beauty courses in terms of 'warmth', 'friendship', and even 'love'. It was a space where being a working-class girl was allowed. Indeed, the identities and cultural products of these overlapping gender and class positions were celebrated, rather than tightly controlled in schools or mocked and ridiculed as is so often the case in our wider culture (including by the Prime Minister).

The staff who worked in the colleges where I conducted my research were central to what made beauty learning spaces valuable for the working-class girls who studied there, and they frequently worked far beyond the remit of their official roles or the curriculum. They talked to students about their home lives and personal issues, providing support and direction in navigating difficult times. I heard reports of students with precarious home lives getting their clothes washed by the staff on a Monday morning following a weekend of sleeping on friends' couches. Students would come to college having not eaten. Some would have had no electricity for a few days as the meter ran out. Others were simply negotiating the peaks and troughs of life, and would seek and receive support and advice from beauty lecturers on everything from boyfriend trouble to financial difficulties. This kind of pastoral support happens throughout our education systems (and is often overlooked or under-appreciated) but the demographics of the beauty learning space mean challenges arising for this cohort are likely to be more acute, and occur in higher numbers.

Alongside this important pastoral work, I also observed students being encouraged to be imaginative and enjoy the learning experience. Their artistic instincts were nurtured, and students were supported to take pride in their work and abilities. Classrooms and practice salons were fun, dynamic and creative; pop music would often be playing on the college's classroom computer speakers, and conversations around culture, politics and personal lives would intermingle with discussions of nail art and epidermis anatomy. Staff emphasised the importance of mutual respect and empathy over punishment and control in how they dealt with challenges arising in the classroom. This dramatically contrasts with the approach of the current chair of the Government's Social Mobility Commission, Katharine Birbalsingh, who promotes strict rules and discipline as key to educational success. (I recently wrote a blog about this, which you can read at my Mapping Girlhood Blog.) It's important to note that all this takes place in a vocational and further education landscape of chronic underfunding. As the Institute of Fiscal Studies noted in their 2019 report, funding for further education has fallen in real terms over the last decade, and there

exists 'a historical pattern where further education and sixth forms receive relatively low spending increases when overall spending goes up, and some of the largest cuts when spending goes down' (p64).

In a nutshell, what I found in my research was that vocational education can provide an array of benefits to working-class students which go beyond the economic and future-worker narratives we see elsewhere. It doesn't just provide what Paulo Freire and bell hooks refer to as the 'banking system of education' - whereby students are seen as passive consumers of information, memorising and regurgitating it as a means to succeed; it's so much more than this. This is an interesting finding in itself, and one that unpicks some of the broad-brush criticisms often levelled at vocational education. But in my work, what really stood out about vocational education was how different it was from school. While there were some exceptions, the overwhelming view of participants was that school represented a negative experience. Many said they 'hated' school, constructing beauty education not as a specific aspiration in itself, but rather as simply a way to escape; leaving school was the goal, and beauty education was a means of achieving it. One participant, whose lyrical way of expressing herself eventually became the title of my PhD thesis, described entering beauty education as being able to 'breathe, finally'.

For me, it's stories like these that are missing from the way we talk about vocational education, and the cold instrumentalism of judging vocational education purely by the rigid criteria of economics and skill accrual speaks to a narrowing of education and its purpose to little more than securing paid employment at the end of the road; standards more likely to be levelled at working-class young people's education than at their middle-class peers. In turn, this underscores pernicious narratives surrounding working-class young people which construct them as potential problems to be solved, and prevent us from understanding beauty education - and vocational education more broadly - as an intrinsically meaningful and valuable mode of post-16 education. This is not to say that the economic and employability value of vocational courses is not relevant - it's important to keep these in mind, and reconcile them with how vocational education is organised, funded, promoted, marketed and taught (as well as the values we as a society place upon these kinds of jobs and careers). Rather, what I'm arguing is that by solely focusing on these aspects, we fail to understand vocational education for what it truly is, in its own terms, and through a lens which recognises the vast complexity of contemporary young people's educational lives.

