

How former NEETs are restricted and excluded

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Raising the participation age (RPA) reform principally positioned the education sector to re-engage youth who are NEET (not in education, training or employment) and lacking in educational qualifications; the inherent policy assumption is that a prolonged period in education or training would give marginalised youth another chance to attain higher academic grades and improved employment prospects. In official discourse they are positioned as 'hardest to reach' (Department for Education and Skills, 2004), a substantial proportion of NEETs having left school with low GCSE grades or no school-leaving qualifications at a crucial stage in their lives (Tomlinson, 2013). Ideally, re-engagement in education could promise better academic and employment outcomes for youth seeking to improve on previous academic failure. However, the situation is complex because wider academic research has found that in practice, for example, further study did not guarantee access to high-skilled occupations as suggested in rhetoric (Office for National Statistics, 2014; Ainley, 2016). Hence, moving beyond taken-for-granted notions, actual research was required into the educational experiences of marginalised youth in order to ascertain whether the re-engagement course and college provision were able to facilitate the purported benefits of RPA.

Empirical study

For this purpose, the study undertakes a contemporary focus on a re-engagement provision

designed for 16-18 year old former NEETs and those at risk of social exclusion, in order to discover whether they are able to benefit from doing the RPA *Level 1 Achieving Skills* course. Empirical research was accordingly conducted at a large general further education 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

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 revealed that, once in college, a different type of education and training provision was on offer.

1. Warehousing

Drawing on my empirical data, the study primarily found that the main purpose of the education on offer entailed 'warehousing', a form of provision that has lowered standards and the quality of education. Classroom activities did not appear meaningful; reportedly most participants considered lessons to

be boring, random and timewasting. Distinctly different from stereotypical ideas, most of the participants said they wanted to learn and improve on previous academic failure. Although the students did not appear concerned over the short college days (due to a lack of extension activities being set), they were, however, critical of the type of education provided once in lessons. While student classroom conduct was observably loud and disruptive, it arguably overshadowed concerns around pedagogical activities and teaching practices that equally contributed to the semblance of chaotic classrooms.

2. Hierarchical education structure and operations

For from being a straightforward experience for most former NEET and disadvantaged youth, whereby it could be assumed that they perhaps may have the freedom to access provision to improve on previous academic failure, in a profound way empirical data illustrated the opposite for most participants: various educational mechanisms and processes within the college setting gave rise to inequality and exclusion from essential and desirable provision. These particular students appeared to be marginalised. Access to vital and 'meaningful' provision was restricted. For example, GCSE entry was heavily regulated and a high academic tariff strictly controlled progression onto mainstream vocational education and apprenticeship training (Cornish, 2017a). This situation presented concerns, because most participants considered re-engagement provision to be a 'second chance' opportunity, whilst for others it was a 'last chance saloon' (Allen and Ainley, 2010). Either way, these particular Level 1 students notably occupied a low social position within the broader educational structure and discovered that educational choices for those with insufficient qualifications were limited. The situation was further complicated given that the Level 1 qualification appears to have low academic value within this particular competitive college setting. Principally, former NEET participants were subjected to marginalisation and social exclusion whilst trying to re-engage in a further education setting (Cornish, 2017b).

3. Opportunities to acquire knowledge 'shut down'

Overall the research highlights the educational problems and complications faced by most of the marginalised young people in the study. The Site is

a very competitive college environment that prioritises GCSEs. Hence those with low or no school-leaving qualifications are in direct competition with better qualified young people for access to a limited amount of desirable provision. Consequently these students were excluded from a range of educational opportunities, with higher levels of vocational courses, apprenticeship training and opportunities to retake GCSEs out of reach (Cornish, 2017). A combination of stringent academic entry conditions with government and institutional policies and practices hindered most participants' capacity to pursue higher status academic knowledge or vocational courses which might lead to worthwhile credentials and/or financial rewards. In this way, opportunities to acquire the symbolic mastery and capacity for abstract thought normally conferred by the education system via its curriculum and pedagogy were restricted in this setting, thereby excluding these - mainly working-class - students from developing the cognitive capacities that could generate better outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron, [1977] 1990). In short, access to higher status modes of knowledge (Simmons and Thompson 2011) was denied them.

It can be argued, therefore, that these particular students at The Site were being prepared for the most routine, low-paid areas of present-day employment, and, as previous research (see Simmons and Thompson, 2011) has shown, such a practice reinforces existing class-based inequalities.

Critical discussion

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 Site, practitioners and managers would have to recognise how policy, institutional systems, work practices and other mechanisms shut down opportunities for marginalised young people in this setting (Cornish 2018).

Furthermore, government policies should critically reflect and introduce more inclusive pathways that offer greater social inclusion but also actual equivalent status within the national qualification framework. Recognition should be given on policy level that student participants do not customarily fit 'nicely' into pre-existing, rigid structures embedded within institutions; instead, the notions of conflict, tension and chaos encapsulate the often non-standard academic backgrounds associated with most learners from this particular Level 1 pre-vocational course (Cornish, 2018). Yet even so, such knowledge should not serve as a pathological tool to stereotype, label and 'water-down' provision, but

should 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. However, 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 Site appears to replicate, reify and also consolidate a negative learning identity for these students. They are drilled into being disengaged and disaffected (Cornish, 2018).

It is therefore argued that tutors on these particular courses could benefit from intensive, ongoing teacher training: central to this, a commitment to engage in transformative education, critical pedagogy and a critical focus on their 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 being to share good practice and offer peer support. Also, greater student voice and close collaboration between these particular students, tutors and senior managers can play an important role in lobbying for social change, challenging the academic divide and therefore making essential provision available to all students within the setting.

Conclusion

In an important way, the study affirms existing research, but also provides a counter discourse revealed in emerging data: it argues that the way the Level 1 Achieving Skills course was structured and delivered at The Site contributed to multiple barriers which diminished choice, further reproducing inequality and exclusion for most marginalised youth despite student engagement in post-16 education; hence highlighting the paradox that former NEET youth can still be excluded from essential and desirable provision whilst trying to participate in a so-called inclusive RPA educational framework. The study recognises that, apart from broader structural and institutional factors, likewise the tutors' work practices (whether they are conscious of this or not) arguably acted in synergy with the college system to produce various mechanisms of disqualification which, at different levels, appeared to prevent most participants from accessing and consequently accruing academic credentials of academic worth within the setting.

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