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'I want an education': two case studies of working-class ambition and ambivalence in further and higher education

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Background

The last two decades or so have seen a huge increase in provision and participation within the Further and Higher Education (F.H.E) sectors in the U.K., with the Higher Education (H.E) sector reaching mass participation levels by the early 1990s. Current policy for F.H.E is premised upon the New Labour government's twin aims of economic growth and social inclusion. Thus, while the government has promoted overall expansion of the post-16 sectors, it has placed particular emphasis upon widening the social base of the F.H.E sectors (especially the H.E sector) and in attempting to transform vocational education in order to produce a world-class skilled workforce. To this end, curricular reforms within both sectors (the planned introduction of work-related diplomas and the development of vocational 'A' levels prior to that within a 14-19 F.E framework; the establishment of work-related Foundation Degrees within the H.E sector) have been viewed as a means to both stimulate demand among traditionally under-represented groups and to raise skills levels.

Despite the aims for inclusivity, however, both the F.E and H.E sectors remain highly stratified by social class. F.E colleges remain ghettoised as working-class institutions with all the attendant sense of inferiority which that brings. Similarly, participation in H.E remains powerfully influenced by social class of origin. It is clear, therefore, that the FHE sector in the U.K is characterised by a considerable degree of hierarchisation which, in turn, is linked to class differentiation and disadvantage.

Research Questions

In the context of such an uneven and unequal institutional landscape, the aim of this paper is to consider the educational experiences and ambitions of two young working-class women within full-time vocational further education in the U.K. The paper examines the students' motivations for pursuing their further education course and their aspirations in relation to higher education and to work. The author considers the development of the young women's educational identities, and the influence of their relations with family members, peers and College lecturers upon those identities. A specific focus of the paper is to analyse the students' accounts in the light of governmental aims to expand provision within the post-16 sector in general, and to widen the social base of the higher education sector in particular.

Methods

The studies of the two young women are derived from a wider investigation into student post-16 educational experiences and decision-making, based on a sample of students and staff of an AVCE (Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education) in Travel and Tourism at a large Further and Higher Education (F.H.E) college in the West Midlands of England. The aim of the wider study was to evaluate the relationships between the structural categories of 'race', class and gender, and student perceptions and decision-making with regard to work, education and training.

The investigation adopted a mixed-methods case study approach involving:

- questionnaire survey of a sample of 72 first and second year students;
- three focus group interviews with second year students;
- eleven individual interviews and one double interview with second year students;
- nine individual interviews with members of the AVCE teaching staff.

Just over 80% of both the questionnaire sample, and the wider AVCE cohort from which it was drawn, was female. Slightly over 60% of students, again from both the questionnaire sample and the wider cohort, described themselves as 'White British', with the majority of the remainder being, in both cases, of 'Asian or Asian British Indian' origin (14%), and 'Black or Black British Caribbean' origin (9%). The great majority of the students, within both the sample and the wider cohort, could be classified broadly as working-class, with parents working in semi-skilled service employment or manual work. The qualitative samples, who were selected on a random stratified sample basis, were limited to second year students since it was felt that they might be most actively considering their post-AVCE futures.

The data presented within this present paper is derived from in-depth individual interviews with two female students: 'NP' (a 'Black or Black British Caribbean student) and 'LD' (a 'White British' student), both aged 17 and from the second year of the AVCE at the time of the research study. The students were chosen for analysis within this paper as it was felt that their stories exemplify the ambitions, but also the struggles, that many working-class young people will face within F.H.E. It was also found their accounts reflect the general experiences of the participants in the focus groups and individual interviews and, thus, by developing the stories of these two students, it would be possible to discuss issues broadly common to the sample as a whole.

Frame

As a means to analyse the educational identities of the two students, the paper has applied the conceptual tools of Bourdieu-habitus, capital and field-and also the work of theorists of class who have been influenced by these concepts. This form of 'culturalist' class analysis aims to move beyond a purely economic conception of class to consider how it is constantly made and re-made through cultural processes which give differential value to different classes. The power of this approach lies in its capacity to derive meaning from the seemingly inconsequential practices of everyday life. Thus, within the paper the author considers how the young women's use of meritocratic and credentialist discourses is rooted both in their working-class *present* and also reflects a desire to achieve a 'respectable' middle-class *future*.

Research findings

It is argued that, although the students' stories offer a positive account of determination and ambition, they also reveal ambivalences and struggles that reflect the nature of the barriers that working-class students can encounter within post-16 education and which challenge the meritocratic assumptions of the Widening Participation agenda. It is further argued that the discourse of success through educational credentials which the young women employ reflects a wider discursive and ideological environment within post-16 education which is premised upon contradictory aims for social inclusion and economic competitiveness.