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'I can do anything I put my mind to': constructing the life-course through incidents and personal agency of young people with precarious lives.

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Research Questions

In this paper we will analyse experiences of young people who have lived precarious lives and how they have managed to enter Further Education and continue to learn. In particular we will examine a number of key features that have arisen from the data including individual resilience, significant others and external mechanisms of support. In terms of the first of these, we will examine the individual resilience, self-efficacy and agency which are involved in overcoming adverse situations that the students have faced. The second feature, we are examining are supportive relationships and the role of significant others have played. Thirdly, we examine the structures that have had negative and positive effects on their lives and which finally enable them to re-enter into a learning environment. Fourthly, in addition, we will reflect on how their stories influence their decisions on whether to be engaged or not in the school and the local community.

Methods

The accounts which will be presented in this paper are taken from interviews that took place in England and Denmark in Further Education colleges within the ESRC LLAKES centre Inequalities research project that explore more broadly the impact of inequalities on active citizenship and social cohesion in lower, upper and higher education. The young people were asked in their interviews about their previous experiences of inequalities and learning.

Discourse analysis will be used to find patterns in the text that help to illuminate the individual characteristics and social mechanisms which have facilitated the fact they are continuing to learn.

Frame

The literature that will be used will be interdisciplinary. It will combine social psychological literature in terms of the concepts of resilience (Rutter 1990) and self-efficacy (Bandura 1995) and sociological literature to conceptualise inequalities in terms of cultural and economic inequalities (Frazer 2000). In addition, we will use Evans (2002) and further life course and transitions literature to understand young people's biographies and the interrelationship between the individual and the social. In particular we will utilise Evan's concept of 'bounded agency' which she uses to explain the young people's negotiation between individual empowerment and system constraints.

Research findings

The responses from the young people were to describe life histories of multiple disadvantages including the traumas of sexual abuse, death of parents, parents who are addicts, dysfunctional parents, mental health difficulties, negative experiences of previous education and poverty. However, these stories equally describe how these young people manage to negotiate these experiences and despite all find a path way into a further education college. The results will be discussed in terms of how to inform education policy and practice for those young people at risk.

References

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