0700

Beyond the boundaries of schooling: young women resisting 'choice' in Year 9

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Background

A long-standing concern for schools and policy makers is that of disengagement among young people, particularly those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).   Reintegrating them into formal learning opportunities has been a key element of both educational and broader social inclusion policies (Select Committee on Education and Employment, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). This has been further reinforced by policies to raise the age of compulsory participation in learning to 18 by 2015 (DCSF,2007), within a context of further significant policy change in the 14-19 sector (Education and Skills Act, 2008; DCFSF, 2009, OECD, 2008), and the push towards 'world class skills' (HMSO, 2006).

Whilst much attention to has been focused on the under-achievement of white working class boys (Willis, 1978; Williamson, 2004), feminists have challenged this narrowed focus to highlight its erasure of young women's experiences (e.g. Francis, 2006; Epstein et al, 1998), especially when social class (Reay, 2009) is also considered. It has already been shown that there is in fact a strong gender differentiation in terms of the time at which young men and women begin to disengage. Attwood & Croll (2006) note that whereas boys are three times more likely to truant than girls in year 7 and twice as likely in year 8, by year 9 girls' levels have overtaken that of boys and this difference increases in year 10 and 11 (Le Riche, 1988). In terms of sociological perspectives, disengagement is most frequently framed as: a symptom of psychological distress; struggling with the academic workload; being under peer pressure to miss school; and being overwhelmed by their home or social circumstances (Reid, 1999). Such framings tend to obscure time itself as a central aspect of young people's transitions. There is a need, then, for research which critically considers the notion of 'time' and futures immanent in Year 9 decision-making, imposed by the micro-management of educational progression (Ecclestone et al, 2009) and the proliferation of educational pathways.

Research Questions

The research will consider resistance to schooling and its established boundaries through an inquiry into educational futures , framed in relation to girls' Year 9 decision making. This has been reified as a boundary between childhood 'freedom' and adult 'responsibility', rather than as a site of more complex transition.

The focus of the research will be an exploration of narrative accounts young women give of their relation to the 'times they live in', as well as the subtle and often unquestioned notions of temporality, timing, and tempo which inform them (Adams, 1995). Also to be considered will be 'possible futures'; and time as resource, something which can be 'taken back', through resisting compulsory education, career 'choices', and dominant models of what it is to be a 'good girl'.

Methods

This will be an ethnographic, (Atkinson et al, 2001) study featuring elements of autoethnography. (Holman Jones, 2008) Fieldwork will be carried out at sites of alternative education in Manchester which will be used to critically consider young women's relation to affective emotional spaces; 'time'; 'progress' and 'futuring'.

Interviews will be conducted with young women identified by schools as having either a problematic relationship to attendance, control or emotional well being; and with significant others including

teachers, Connexions advisers and parents. The research aims to foreground the perspectives of the young women in order to access the 'lucidity of the excluded' (McNay, cited in Adams, 2006, p. 518).

Frame

A Feminist methodology will be used in a bid to get close to, indeed return to, the emotional and affective space young working class women occupy during years 9 and 10. Discourse Analysis (Gee, 1999), Life History and Narrative approaches (Tierney, 2000) will enable focus on voice and language whilst simultaneously locating them within 'the times' as well as lived class and gender relations

The work of Currie et al (2007) on listening to girls will be drawn upon to highlight the discursive structures that constitute girlhood as a legitimate category of selfhood. Whilst acknowledging language's opacity, as opposed the dream of transparent articulation, 'talk' will nevertheless be considered to have the potential to provide access to lives through the way in which subjects negotiate spaces within, often contradictory, discourses. Young women will be considered as 'sensuous beings inhabiting a sensuous world' (Skeggs, 2004: 89) whose accounts will be entered into dialogue with my own experience of resistance and 'stealing time' around the 14+ transition point.

Time, timing, temporality and tempo (Adams, 1995) will be considered within accounts, as will Bourdieu's notion of time as practice: an act of temporalisation, comprising habitus and its accordant adaptation to the field of play (Bourdieu, 1992). In this light, time is both gendered and engendered through social practices of girls and significant others involved in their transitions.

Research findings

This paper makes a contribution to knowledge in exploring the experience of young women, since all too often they are rendered 'invisible' through the focus on young men. In addition, it will make a contribution to understanding the multiplicity of boundaries confronted by young women – spatial, social and temporal – at the end of Key Stage 3.

The paper will consider issues around Y9 as point of transition as this is an under theorised and investigated area, although there has been much focus on 16+ (Ball et al; 2000) & 19+ transitions. The notion of transitions as singular, and connected to 'ending and beginning' will be resisted, rather, transition will be critically reconsidered as affective, plural and repetitious, buckling the arrow of time and blurring the boundary between past present and future.

Discourses of 'choice' within boundaried transitions are central to the Western production of ideas of individuality and, therefore, identity. Choice-making and self-making inform one another but not in a straightforward or linear fashion: futures are affective imaginary spaces, yet they are also often troubled by material conditions not of our own making (Colley, 2007).