
Education, Skills and Social Justice in a Polarising World

Between Technical Elites and Welfare Vocationalism

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Chapter 6

Welfare vocationalism

Preparing for service and caring occupations

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Welfare vocationalism

Preparing for service and caring occupations

In this chapter we introduce and develop the original concept of ‘welfare vocationalism’, drawing on evidence from our recent research projects. Here, our terminology captures a certain irony. In one sense, the young people we discuss in this chapter are preparing to be providers of the welfare services that have sustained the social fabric during the post-war period. The job roles for which they are being prepared achieved a certain recognition during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the critical work of carers and other ‘key workers’ was shown by their role in the emergency. However, as Wren (2013) points, non-tradable services cannot give rise to the same profits as those in tradable sectors such as financial services and so are unlikely to be highly rewarded, whether provided in public sectors or privately. Consequently, the educational experiences of these young people also bear comparison with the welfare services offered in the United States: a state-provided minimum purposely inferior to those available on market terms. These students may not be the recipients of minimal cash benefits or food stamps, but their educational experiences – and their intended occupational paths – can suggest some equivalence. We draw on our data to explore how recent policy developments have impacted on these issues, with particular reference to specific groups of young people – women, those from the lowest social classes, and those with the poorest educational experiences – who evidence suggests are more likely to engage with poorer quality further education programmes. Such programmes largely direct young people into service and caring occupations which are characterised by low pay and precarity, rather than the opportunities for ‘secure work’ to which the young people aspire, and as such may be argued to prepare them for futures characterised by ‘churn’ (Simmons and Thompson 2011; MacDonald and Marsh 2005) and welfare dependency (Atkins 2009) rather than the high pay, high skill work which forms part of policy narratives.

These programmes, which we designate welfare vocationalism, include broad vocational education at its lowest levels, but also some higher-level programmes preparing young working class people – predominantly young women – for employment in routinized and gendered occupations characterised by emotional labour, such as, for example, programmes in childcare

and hairdressing. Thus, the concept describes specific forms of vocational education which can be traced back to the New Vocationalism of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Echoed by contemporary narratives around T Levels, government rhetoric at the time was positive, but the reforms were subject to criticism from the academic community, similarly to recent critiques of existing policy (e.g., Young and Hordern 2020).

Contemporary policy narratives around high skill and ‘technical’ vocational programmes utilise rhetoric around high pay, high skilled work ‘opportunities’ which they claim result from engagement with such programmes (DfE/DBIS 2013; DfE 2016, 2021) yet largely exclude those young people who engage with lower level and lower quality vocational programmes, and also fail to acknowledge the precarity and low pay associated with service and caring occupations. In short, policy narratives – particularly in relation to T Levels – make no differentiation between the career opportunities available to, for example, a young man engaging with *Building Services Engineering for Construction* (available from September 2021) or a young woman undertaking a T Level in *Education and Childcare* (available from September 2020) or *Hair, Beauty and Aesthetics* (start date September 2023). And yet these are significant. Data shows that there is a national shortage of people with technical, construction, and engineering skills (IET 2019; Edgar 2019) implying that the career opportunities for those with a level 3 credential in these areas should be plentiful. In contrast, Childcare, as highlighted during the COVID pandemic, is an under-valued occupational area, where many workers are low-skilled. It is possible to work in the sector with a level 2 credential in Childcare and Education, and Simon et al. reported in 2016 that only 13% of all childcare workers were educated to degree level or above, in comparison to 33% across all other sectors. The sector has no clearly articulated career ladder (see Cache 2021 online) or meaningful financial compensation. In respect of pay, Simon et al. also noted that gross annual earnings in childcare was £10,324, perhaps reflecting the fact that many workers are part-time, as well as low-paid. Other female-dominated occupations, such as care work and hairdressing, are similarly structured with associated limitations in terms of career development and low pay: in 2021, a beautician or hairdresser can expect to earn the national living wage (provided they are over 25; minimum wage if under 25), whilst a nursery assistant working full time for the NHS, which has traditionally better pay and conditions than the private sector, would begin on £18,002 per annum (Agenda for Change 2021).

Welfare vocationalism and the ‘industrial’ experience

Key to contemporary narratives is the workplace (or ‘industry’) experience, which, as discussed in Chapter 5, can offer valuable work experiences and networking opportunities for those forming the new technical elites. It is worth noting that policy makers use the term ‘industry’ – with its implications around manufacturing, skill and higher levels of pay – to describe preparation not only

for these occupations, but also for those we designate welfare vocationalism. Thus, the policy messages imply comparability between different occupational areas, irrespective of often significant differences in work-experience and later job opportunities. In particular, welfare vocationalism engenders far more limited learning experiences in the workplace which are heavily focussed on socialising young people into particular forms of vocational habitus, rather than in developing specific 'high-level' skills.

Contemporary policy in relation to industrial or work placements implies that their introduction marks a significant development in vocational learning, and indeed, in the quality of vocational programmes following criticisms in official reports (Wolf 2011; Independent Panel on Technical Education 2016). To make this argument is to demonstrate a collective loss of policy memory, or possibly a lack of policy awareness of the nature of vocational learning, where students have historically undertaken work experience across a wide range of occupational areas. Indeed, work placement experience is a requirement of the professional bodies for many occupational areas. Childcare, which already requires longer periods in the workplace than are stipulated by T Level requirements, is a prime example. Here, time in the workplace is conceptualised as learning to interact with service users and to acquire the personal attributes of workers in these occupations. It should be noted that emphasis is placed on behaviours and values in terms of notions of personal attributes. The socialisation of these groups appears a key premise of the expectations and rationale offered by policymakers for recent reforms (Wolf 2011; Richard 2012; Independent Panel on Technical Education 2016), despite extensive critiques of processes of socialisation dating back to the 'new vocationalism' initiatives of the 1980s when educational researchers began to distinguish between traditional vocational job *preparation* and new initiatives ostensibly aimed at achieving job '*readiness*'.

New Vocationalism programmes included, for example, Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) Youth Training Scheme (YTS), Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), and the Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE). TVEI and CPVE are particularly noteworthy in relation to contemporary policy and debates. In 1985, Brockington, White and Pring (1985, 35) outlined the then draft proposals for the CPVE. The programme was to have a common core, use experiential learning methods and have a vocationally relevant, skills-based curriculum. The aim of the programme was to equip young people with the *basic* skills, knowledge and *attitudes* they would need in adult life. Writing in 1989, Gleeson found these to be common features with the BTEC foundation and TVEI programmes. More than a generation later, within broader discourses of inclusion, opportunity and aspiration (e.g., see DfES 2003, 18; DfES 2006, 4; DfE 2012, 2016), policy-makers continue to articulate work-placement as an 'opportunity' for young people to acquire occupationally specific, 'high-level' skills, as well as employability skills and work-specific behaviours. Indeed, the statement of intent in the Post-16 Skills Plan was to produce a technical route which would

‘prepare individuals for skilled employment in occupations which require both a substantial body of technical knowledge and a set of practical skills valued by industry’ (2016, 17). In tension with this, guidance and curricula continue to emphasise the socialisation aspects of the new programmes. Indeed, current guidance on T Levels emphasises ‘work-readiness’ and includes an extended section for students entitled *Professional Behaviour and Attitudes You Need to Demonstrate in the Workplace* but lacks any meaningful guidance on occupational skills acquisition, which is limited to the somewhat vague:

During their placement students will be expected to draw on both their core and specialist knowledge, skills, and behaviours they have learnt in the classroom and apply them in the workplace setting, through relevant occupationally specific tasks and activities.

(Education and Skills Funding Agency 2021)

Our study found that whilst placement providers for Welfare Vocationalism programmes were happy to make room for ‘an extra pair of hands’, the placements effectively socialised the students into particular forms of behaviour expected in the work-place rather than supporting them to acquire specific occupational skills which cannot be taught in a college setting. This implies that, despite policy intent, little has changed since the early critiques of new vocationalism, particularly for students on low-level or female-dominated vocational programmes. Their vocational experience and qualifications continue to be associated with working-class youth, with particular types of social formation and to lead predominantly into forms of low paid and precarious employment which are often associated with emotional labour (see Vincent and Braun 2010; Colley 2006; Colley et al. 2003; Atkins 2009 for earlier discussions on vocationalism and emotional labour) and which may be argued to offer ‘restrictive’ rather than ‘expansive’ modes of learning (Fuller and Unwin 2004). These class-based forms of socialisation are a key factor in processes of social, cultural, and labour reproduction (e.g., see Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) and illustrate clearly the fact that making relatively minor changes to vocational qualifications will not remedy structural inequalities in society, or address the consequences of de-industrialisation which have impacted profoundly on less advantaged youth across the developed world (Cedefop 2018). We move on to illustrate the ways in which socialisation takes place, drawing on narratives from our recent research study.

Narratives of learning to work

The participants in this study were located in two unconnected city General FE colleges in England. They were undertaking full time programmes in either Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy or Childcare. The work experience element differed according to occupational area: in Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy

the students had access to a realistic work environment at the college and also gained work experience in the field on short block placements with freelance workers or small employers. In contrast, in childcare students accessed regular work placement in local childcare settings, and their time in college was more heavily focussed on project based and academic pedagogical approaches than on practical work.

Across both groups, it was evident that for a majority of students work-experience was of low quality offering limited opportunities to develop their skills. The range of skills that students were able to use on their placement were contingent on either the priorities of the business or the extent to which students were deemed capable of carrying out skilled work. For example, Lara, a hairdressing student, explained what she learnt on her salon placement:

I've done some work experience when I was on level two; I was just working on the pensioners' day ... they don't actually teach you to actually cope with the work experience, Really, you're just watching, they're not teaching you anything when you're actually inside. You know, like here [in the college realistic work environment] they're teaching you how to do it, and they correct you if you go wrong. With work experience, really, you're just sweeping, and cleaning and you know, washing hair.

It is evident that the low-level tasks of washing hair and cleaning up, albeit necessary, were unlikely to support the necessary skills acquisition for Lara to achieve her qualification. The narrow range of skills offered in some work-placements also concerned the teaching staff and formed a significant theme across our data. For example, Sally, a Beauty Therapy teacher, described how some of the work-based trainees that she taught gained different skills in the workplace to each other. She was concerned that this limited experiences for some:

I've got a student that's doing level two, but the salon she is in is mainly false nails, lashes and tanning [not the full skills offered in the qualification]. So I ask her to practice the skills that she does there when she is in the salon.

The student then required a 'tailored' curriculum to ensure adequate coverage of the skills which she could not practice on work placement, but which were a mandatory part of her qualification. Similarly, many other participants reported practicing a very narrow range of skills or 'jobs which aren't important', such as reception duties or making the tea. Tia (Beauty Therapy student) reported that 'I was in a massage salon ... I did not learn anything, I taught them', whilst Anna (Childcare and Education) reflected on the different settings she had been to for work experience:

I think when they don't push you, they just see you as a student and nothing else, then it makes it seem like you can't do as much. But then if

you go to one and they trust you then you get to learn more ... I think it's just certain practitioners ... like they don't like to give you the chance because they're the trained ones and obviously they want to do it all and you just get to do jobs which aren't important.

Anna's comments highlight the fact that in child-care work-experience learning opportunities were also contingent on the extent to which individual students were trusted by the other practitioners to deal with parents and children. Similar processes were at play in Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy. Sally (Beauty Therapy teacher) explained that while students who were mainly in the workplace gain valuable experiences in dealing with clients, their experience was mediated by the employers' expectations:

I think as long as they go with a good employer and say, we do have to be careful because there is still that ... where an employer will employ but it's literally to clean, make tea, answer the phone, be at reception and you've got to really make sure that the placement is effective and that they're not just using it as cheap labour. That it is a positive thing for the students, so that their learning, and yeah, I do believe that when you're at the bottom, you have got to do a bit of cleaning but that's not just it.

These issues were of concern to the teaching staff, as well as the students, in some cases leading to the withdrawal of placements, although in these cases specific concerns were not detailed. For example, Amy (Childcare and Education student) reported having been withdrawn from her placement, describing 'a really bad nursery' in which she 'wasn't comfortable with how they dealt with things'. Despite acknowledging these negative issues, teaching staff did not clearly articulate what made a 'good' placement. They were in agreement, however, that local (team-level rather than centralised) placement organisation supported better experiences for students. In respect of this, Jade (Hairdressing tutor) considered that centralised placement teams were:

more or less more looking at it from you know, that the salon has got insurance ... They don't necessarily look at it from our [vocational] perspective, as sometimes the salons haven't been quite right [professional].

Similarly, Kate (Beauty Therapy tutor) reported that:

there was one salon that the manager had to go and do a visit herself, because she didn't want to send a student there – I think it was a bit of a 'fake salon'.

Whilst Marlene (Childcare and Education tutor) highlighted the value of placement organisation at programme level, and the importance of personal professional relationships, saying that:

We don't use central services to organise our placements we've always done that [and] we've got a really good rapport with a lot of the placements in the area, I've been doing it for a number of years, and we know, we know the people in the settings, and they're really keen to have some of our learners.

It is worth noting that whilst the tutors were keen to emphasise the ways in which they managed 'good' placement experiences for their students, they were also concerned that not all students had a positive experience (for example, Kate's comment about the 'fake salon'). However, positive experiences were largely associated with self-reporting by the student and appeared to be largely concerned with opportunities to develop behaviours and attitudes, as much as practicing routine (as opposed to 'high level') occupational skills. No clear criteria, other than insurance records, were articulated by tutors to explain how they judged placements to be 'good', 'bad', or indeed, indifferent, implying that decisions are potentially made by internal imperatives (such as access to sufficient placements in a specific geographical location). More importantly, no tutors articulated how – if at all – student work-experience supported or articulated with the curriculum. This is significant, because although work-experience has formed a significant part of many vocational programmes over an extended period and is intended to provide an authentic experience of the workplace, it lacks a meaningful curriculum in terms of any differentiation between which knowledge and skills might reasonably be acquired in a college setting, whether classroom or workshop, and what might *only* be acquired in a 'real-world' work setting.

Government rhetoric, emphasising those skills gained in the 'real world', implies that engagement with Industry (or work) experience is likely to make an individual more 'employable' and may, indeed, lead directly to employment (DfE 2019d). However, despite the fact that our sample groups were selected for their close comparability to T levels (programmes with existing work experience, similar pedagogic approaches and assessment, and in institutions chosen to deliver T levels from 2020), the students who participated in this study did not, on the whole, gain employment as a direct consequence of their work experience. Indeed, data suggested that consistent with earlier research (e.g., Bathmaker 2001; Atkins 2009; Atkins and Misselke 2019), many of the young people had no clearly articulated 'pathway' to their chosen career, and were unclear about what, if any, careers guidance had been given either in college or work-placement.

Bethany, a hairdressing student, exemplified this in the following exchange:

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything the college can do to help support you in finding a job?

BETHANY: I think they gave us information on how to get a job, but I am not sure?

In tension with the lack of clarity about pathways, many of the young women expressed high aspirations. Notably, a number of beauty therapy and

hairdressing students aspired to work ‘on cruises’, whilst others spoke of ‘owning my own salon’. Despite articulating these aspirations, many were struggling to find employment in their chosen field and were making pragmatic decisions about available opportunities, rather than pursuing their aspirations. Thus, some had gained employment, albeit on low-pay and often part-time or time-limited contracts in nurseries or salons, reflecting the precarious nature of employment in these fields. Indeed, partly in response to these issues, the majority of Childcare and Education students had opted to progress to Higher Vocational Education, rather than into employment. A very small number had, however, undertaken their work experience placement in a setting in which they were already formally employed on a part-time basis. Lara, a Beauty Therapy student exemplified this reporting that:

I am already working in a spa so I just did [work-experience] there and I will carry on working with them after I have finished.

The employment outcomes for these young women, despite policy rhetoric, are consistent with Hodkinson’s argument that ‘career styles relate to positions and fields as well as to dispositions, even for the most strategic’ (Hodkinson 2008, drawing on Ball et al. 2002 and Bimrose et al. 2005). The acceptance of part-time work in a spa, for example, rather seeking to work on cruise ships, implies that Lara has made a pragmatically rational decision to take the opportunity available to her. The broad lack of awareness around career pathways, and the willingness to settle for ‘second-best’, identified in this sample group is also indicative of particular social and educational positioning which limits access to valorised capitals and thus constrains both choices and opportunities (Atkins 2017).

It is clear that the channelling of these young women into work which is insecure, poorly regarded, and badly remunerated is contrary to notions of social justice, and bears a direct relationship not only to social class, but also to broader gender inequalities in society and forms of embodied and ‘gendered habitus’ (Reay 1998, 61). Such inequalities are implicit in motivating many young people to engage with classed and gendered occupations, such as those described as ‘a job which is right for me’ nearly four decades ago (Bates 1984). They provide further evidence of the way in which, despite multiple policy interventions, structural inequalities leading to cultural and social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: Bourdieu 1990; see also Avis 2007, 2016) persist at all levels of society. In doing so, these structural issues act to the ongoing disadvantage of those whose habitus and social positioning denies them access to the forms of capital taken for granted by their more advantaged peers, and which are critical in providing access to different and differentiated opportunities in both education and the labour market.

Despite the apparent differences in occupational training and aspiration, data from all the young women we interviewed supports Colley’s (2006) notion of

the development of a *vocational habitus* which is both classed and gendered, and associated with the way in which these students learn to ‘labour with feeling’ as they acquire skills in managing both their own emotions and those of the children they care for. For example, Lara (Childcare) noted that:

Being at the nursery helped me, because if I’m struggling to tell another child off, instead of getting it wrong ... I can observe the actual practitioner telling them off.

Elaborating on this, she goes on to say that:

... communication, how important it is. Confidentiality as well that is a massive point. I didn’t realise how important it was before I started. And also, just how to be a good practitioner while still caring for children and taking them on as your own kind a thing. Because they are your responsibility while they’re in care.

These examples illustrate the way in which Lara is demonstrating the gendered behaviours associated with being a ‘good’ childcare worker, whilst also referring to her ‘caring self’ (Skeggs 1997, 59) in what Vincent and Braun describe as a ‘redemptive discourse’ (2010, 205). Skeggs argues that the caring self is not an academic self, and that this enables young women to ‘invert the status values’ which are differentially applied to the academic and the practical, thus generating themselves greater credibility by being ‘good’ at practical aspects of the programme in a context where they often have histories of relatively low attainment (or ‘failure’) at academic subjects in school. This was exemplified by LilyAnne, another childcare student, who reported that her programme was

... alright, I think it’s great for especially people like me who prefer to be somewhere where you can learn and *do* stuff. Because I personally find like classrooms a bit boring, and because of that ... I just feel like you’re writing the same all the time. My tutors who have worked in nurseries, they’ve got their own experience, but it’s different [like] when *you* are in a workplace.

Discussion

The experience of work, and preparation for it, associated with Welfare Vocationalism has significant implications in terms of the way the young women are socialised, the constraints they experience associated with class and gender, their future emotional labour and the significance of these issues in terms of social (in)justice. We have argued elsewhere in this book that those young people from higher class fractions are more likely to benefit from the recent policy developments around Higher Vocational Education, including T

levels. Perhaps more importantly, it seems likely that the new programmes will prove unable to do this for those young people engaged with Welfare Vocationalism, and that their already classed and gendered pathways will remain subject to significant disadvantage as they attempt to negotiate their transitions from school into the ‘good’, i.e., secure and sustainable, work that most aspire to (Atkins 2009). These are young people, who, in terms of social justice, are already subject to multiple forms of disadvantage.

It is apparent that those young people engaging with welfare vocationalism at its lowest levels, are already socially and economically excluded, and most have a negative previous educational experience which has often included educational exclusion. Many are, or have previously been, in receipt of different forms of statutory social support. Given the low levels of attainment associated with negative educational experience, and the extended period of time necessary to achieve higher level vocational credentials (often 4 to 5 years), many opt to leave college with a lower-level credential and progress into what is predominantly into low-pay, low-skill and insecure work. Significant numbers subsequently become NEET or begin to ‘churn’ between periods of welfare dependency, periods of insecure employment, and, in some cases, periodic engagement with low-value education. Despite this, evidence from our study suggests that these young people have aspirations which are broadly similar to those of higher achieving peers, but that they lack the support, knowledge and cultural capital to pursue those aspirations, which are thus effectively unrealistic, supporting earlier work by, amongst others, Bathmaker 2001 and Atkins 2009; 2010; 2017. Further, the programmes at lower levels have been subject to extensive criticism over time. In addition to the critiques alluded to earlier in this chapter, Wolf noted in relation to levels 1 and 2 that ‘researchers consistently find them to be associated with low and negative returns’ (2011, 32). Similarly, and of particular relevance during the economic upheavals caused by COVID-19, Keep (2020) as part of a broader argument, has stated that in times of limited employment, credentials can provide a ‘way in’ at the expense of those with lower-level qualifications implying that the precarious and badly paid work these young women have traditionally engaged in is likely to become even more precarious, and more difficult to obtain, as unemployment rises consequent to the Pandemic. Keep’s argument is of particular concern, given that research indicates that young people generally, across the globe, have been most significantly impacted by the pandemic in terms of job and education losses (ILO 2020; Avis et al. 2021). As noted earlier in this chapter, very low returns still accrue from low-level and female dominate vocational education, a decade after Wolf (2011) raised both this issue and broader concerns about the poor quality of lower-level qualifications. Similarly, Ecclestone (2011, 91) has criticised the ‘diminished forms of pedagogy and knowledge’ offered by lower level (as well as lower status and lower value) vocational programmes. The students engaged with such programmes – and by extension, the programmes

themselves – have traditionally been regarded within a deficit model associated with marginalisation and social/educational exclusion. Ecclestone (2004, 2007) has argued that such models have denied these young people agency and as such, are contrary to social justice.

Her argument is significant in relation to this book: her thesis refers to ‘groups and individuals depicted as marginalised and vulnerable’ (2004, 123, 124; see also 2007), who are congruent with those young people engaged on low-level vocational programmes. We would argue that such groups might also be extended to include mainly young women who might be engaging with higher level vocational education, but who have similar social class positioning to many of those on lower-level programmes, a factor which is significant in its relationship to career- decision making, the way in which young people perceive and construct their careers and the pathways and trajectories taken by them.

Thus, our argument includes those who are female, working-class and engaging with vocational programmes leading to traditionally female-dominated, service sector occupations. Our data here was drawn specifically from those preparing to enter employment in childcare, hairdressing and beauty therapy, and it was apparent that irrespective of occupational area, all the young women (there were no male students in any of these sample groups) were drawn from broadly similar social class backgrounds, and exhibited exclusionary characteristics associated with, for example, race, poverty and low-attainment as well as with social class and gender. Significantly, these commonalities were not found in our data derived from those young, mainly male participants who were engaged with elite and technical forms of vocational education. Also, in stark contrast to the young men, the young women in this study were engaging with forms of socialisation which prepared them for very different employment and ‘professional’ contexts. The young male ‘elites’ were ‘being socialised into what might be described as a ‘professional habitus’ associated with greater access to valorised capitals’ (Esmond and Atkins 2020, 247) in a context which also had social dimensions. At variation with this, the young women were engaging with socialisation processes of ‘becoming’ in order to embody notions of ‘respectable’ femininity within a context of ‘professionalism’ dictated by “state-imposed accountability and performance indicators” (Vincent and Braun 2011, 776; see also Colley 2006; Colley et al. 2003; Skeggs 1997; Bates 1984). Despite the absence of young men engaging with welfare vocationalism in our sample, it is worth noting that not only young women are constrained not only by the socialisation processes associated with becoming a ‘good’ beauty therapist, or child-care worker, for example. Whilst very few young men engage with these highly gendered occupations, as Vincent and Braun have also noted, in relation to their research in the Early Years sector:

It is worth noting that although the appearance of the three male students was also policed – they commented that they knew they could not, for

instance, wear low-slung trousers – the interaction of class, gender and respectability has an additional dimension for the male students, and they all spoke of their concern of possible associations between male early years workers, homosexuality, and even paedophilia. Such homophobic stereotypes mark one way in which men are excluded from the ECEC workforce.

(Ibid, 780)

More than a decade ago, Avis (2007) argued that until work-based learning was aligned with forms of pedagogy which were connected with social relations and moved beyond the workplace, then the potential of learning at work would be unrealised, and it would continue to be a form of ‘learning to labour’ (pp. 61, 62). Our data implies that the emerging technical elites are experiencing some of the social connectedness Avis called for, but that those engaged with welfare vocationalism continue to learn to labour through processes which differ little from those Willis (1977) described in his seminal work.

These disparities in the way young people are differentially socialised into different occupations, are reflective of subtle class fractional differences in which young people from the lowest class fractions are significantly more constrained in their decision making and have less potential for agency than their more advantaged peers (Atkins 2017; see also Reubzaet et al. 2011, 21). They also provide evidence of the way in which social class and gender intersect in ways that mean young women continue to be constrained by gendered forms of habitus into engaging with particular forms of emotional labour (Bates 1984; Skeggs 1997; Colley 2006) in a form of exploitation which Odih (2007) has argued is central to capitalist accumulation. Clearly, these issues and (in)equalities are significant in terms of social justice, and the actions needed to develop a vocational education system – and an educational system more broadly – which offers greater equity and whose structures are less complicit in acts of symbolic violence leading to class (and labour) reproduction.

We outlined our understanding of social justice, and its relationship with vocational education, in earlier chapters, and that understanding is particularly important in respect of the way in which less advantaged students are socially and educationally positioned. Despite a multitude of policies enacted over some 40 years by governments of different ideological stances, how to make provision for more marginalised and disadvantaged students remains a ‘wicked problem’. Broadly speaking, this group of young people has variously been characterised as a ‘problem’ or a ‘resource’ depending on the extent of their engagement with vocational education (Billet et al. 2010) by governments globally as they have pursued capitalist economic policies driven by philosophies of human capital. Perspectives have differed, but outcomes remain the same. For example, in the early 2000s Ecclestone (2004, 2007) critiqued the policy initiatives of New Labour which were designed to address social concerns around in/exclusion, participation, and

achievement. These included, for example, Aim Higher, Excellence in Cities and Curriculum 2000. Central to these was the notion that ‘failure’ was associated with different forms of ‘vulnerability’ which required ‘support’. Ecclestone argued that policy notions of vulnerability were contrary to social justice and had three key impacts:

- A belief amongst students and teachers that those regarded as marginalised or disaffected are unable to cope without support.
- A shift in focus to individual feelings about inequality, from one concerned with structural (in)equalities.
- The lowering of aspirations involving ‘struggle, risk, or challenge’ (Ecclestone 2004, 123).

Ecclestone was writing during the New Labour years, when a plethora of policy initiatives on post-16 education and training were enacted. Whilst contemporary initiatives, deriving from a right-wing government, are associated with ‘knowledge’ (e.g., see DfE 2016; Bathmaker 2013) and the ‘quality’ of education (e.g., Wolf 2011; DfE 2011) the experience of the student at the chalk-face, the worth of their credentials and their likely life-outcomes, as demonstrated in our study and earlier work (Esmond and Atkins 2020; Atkins 2009) remain largely unchanged, implying the action of structural forces which are unresponsive to tinkering with the Vocational Education system.

Central to the problem are policy beliefs that every student has the desire and ability to ‘progress’. We would argue that this has resulted in policy frameworks which are heavily focussed on progression to further education – for example, the ‘tailored and flexible’ transition year (DfE 2016, 28) intended to support progression to traineeships and subsequently apprenticeships, and the T level Transition Programme, designed to offer ‘further support to address barriers to accessing a T Level – due to prior attainment, pastoral issues or personal development needs’ – rather than on the development of vocational programmes with greater ‘social connectedness’ (Avis 2007) across all levels and all occupational areas.

Policy notions of progression are associated with concepts of planned and ‘ladder-like’ trajectories (Hodkinson et al. 1996) from school into the labour market, and are predicated on the belief that all young people, irrespective of social class, gender, or other characteristics, are able to mediate their transitions effectively and that they have the ‘dispositions, subjectivities and attitudes that are associated with the capacity to be good navigators through new economies’ (Wyn 2005, 218). Such beliefs deny the possibility that transitions might be ‘variously extended, fractured, difficult, troubled and/or precarious’ and emphasise negative characterisations of youth (such as non-academic, or disaffected), thus problematising the individual rather than the system (Atkins 2017).

Atkins goes on to argue that the

unchanging tenor of policy discourse over time, not to mention the failure of governments to secure social justice and a high functioning economy would seem to suggest that youth is either a problem beyond the resources of generations of policymakers, or that the self-same policy makers are suffering from a global failure of ‘policy memory’ (Higham and Yeomans 2007) at the highest levels or possibly seeking to divert attention from any critical consideration of a VET system which obscures the existence of systemic and structural hegemonies confining young people to an allotted place in life, constraining their individual agency and replicating social class and other social inequities.

(Atkins 2017, 649)

This argument remains pertinent at the time of writing, particularly in light of the impacts of COVID-19. Rhetoric remains blind to both ‘skills polarisation’ (Avis 2007, 60) and to the proliferation of precarious work and rise of the gig economy amongst young people (DfE 2021c and see MacDonald and Giartzoglou (2019); Montgomery and Baglioni (2020) for extended discussions on this issue) or to the fact that the service sector – where most students engaged with welfare vocationalism are destined – involves work which, as COVID has demonstrated, is also lacking in security and offers very limited financial returns, often below the living wage. Thus, the contemporary policy approach, in common with that of previous decades, not only continues to fail to address structural inequalities, but remains complicit in the reproduction of different forms of educational and social inequity. It is no coincidence that Welfare Vocationalism is associated with occupational areas which are heavily classed, gendered, and racialised. It is also worth emphasising that, despite multiple policy initiatives around Careers Education and Guidance, notably the introduction of the Gatsby Benchmarks (Holman 2014; Hanson and Neary 2020) our data shows that the young people we interviewed in 2019 had as little understanding of potential career paths and opportunities as those interviewed in earlier research (Bathmaker 2001; Atkins 2009; 2017). Those studies, as well as ongoing research (Atkins and Misselke 2019; Atkins et al. forthcoming) also provide evidence of the pragmatically rational decision making originally described by Hodkinson et al. (1996) leading to young people reconciling themselves to occupational paths which offer much less potential for career development than their original aspirations, such as becoming a care assistant rather than nurse, or working in a computer shop rather than as a forensic IT expert.

Conclusion

The data presented in this chapter demonstrate that school to work transitions mediated by different forms of Welfare Vocationalism are significantly

influenced by the quality of work-experiences, but more importantly, by the forms of socialisation which take place in both the work-place and the learning environment. However, these appear to be differentiated with female-dominated childcare and hair/beauty being socialised into specific forms of vocational habitus (Colley 2006) associated with emotional labour in contrast to the male-dominated elites discussed in Chapter 5, who are more likely to develop what might be described as a ‘professional habitus’ associated with greater access to valorised capitals. The outcomes of these forms of socialisation for the working-class young women who engage with these programmes are not the high-flying careers they aspire to (many of the Beauty Therapy students, for example, hoped to work on cruise ships, and hairdressers to own their own salon): they are, in many cases, not even sustainable careers but part-time, short-term and precarious forms of labour. It is evident that in many cases, welfare vocationalism, in common with predecessor credentials over the past four decades, continues to prepare young people mainly for low-level roles in the workforce and does not indicate the levels of generalised knowledge that are often required for progression: further, the work-experience element of the programmes remains constructed as a means of learning to labour, rather than as a meaningful form of skill and knowledge acquisition which is rooted in the notions of social connectedness described by Avis (2007) or those of an ‘education for studentship’ (Bloomer 1996, 1997) which might have both social and political dimensions.

There are notable class fractional similarities and differences amongst and between those we characterise as technical elites, and those who engage with what we characterise as welfare vocationalism. This is in addition to the very different forms of socialisation we have observed across male-dominated programmes which might be described as ‘technical’ and those female-dominated programmes which might be termed ‘vocational’. Together, these issues are indicative of the way in which the vocational education system, as part of broader educational structures, is complicit in social and educational reproduction to the greater disadvantage of those who are already marginalised, in this case, those engaging with lower-value vocational programmes. Further, we would argue that this will persist until policy makers move from the initiatives concerned with ‘what business wants’ pursued over an extended period (e.g., DfES 2003; DfE 2016, 2021). Instead, policy makers should be concerned with developing research-informed educational experiences at lower levels which are valuable in their own right and not as a potential progression route, and broader opportunities for those (mainly female) youth who are engaged with higher level, but narrowly defined, programmes as preparation for work in the service sector. We look forward to the ongoing debates arising from the pandemic about the societal value of key workers such as those involved in childcare and will observe with interest the extent to which this influences career opportunities and pay for those in the sector.

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