

# The Impossible Dreams of an Invisible Cohort

A case study exploring the hopes, aspirations and learning identities of three groups of level 1 students in two English General Further Education Colleges

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# Acronyms

ACVE	Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education
BTEC	Business and Technical Certificate
CACHE	Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education
CPVE	Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education
DES	Department of Education and Science
DFES	Department for Education and Skills
DIDA	Diploma in Digital Applications
E2E	Entry to Employment
EBD	Emotionally and Behaviourally Disturbed
EMA	Educational Maintenance Allowance
FE	Further Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
HE	Higher Education
HND	Higher National Diploma
HSC	Health and Social Care
IT	Information Technology
LDD	Learning Difficulties and Disabilities
LEA	Local Education Authority
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSCN	Learning and Skills Council North*
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NRI	Northern Research Institute*
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
OCN	Open College Network
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PCE	Post Compulsory Education
PCET	Post Compulsory Education and Training
PSE	Personal and Social Education
TVEI	Technical and Vocational Education Initiative
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VGCSE	Vocational General Certificate of Secondary Education
YOP	Youth Opportunities Programme
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

\* *Indicates Pseudonym*

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**We first crush people to the earth, and then claim  
the right of trampling on them forever, because  
they are prostrate**

Lydia Maria Child 1833

# Abstract

This study explores the aspirations and learning identities of three groups of Level 1 students in the English Further Education (FE) system. This group have historically been neglected in terms of academic study and research, but despite this have been heavily problematised as 'disengaged' or 'disaffected' and are regarded as being of low value within both the education system and wider society where value and status are associated predominantly with academic credentials and their associated economic capacity.

As part of an attempt to address this issue of low value, the study was conducted within a social justice theoretical framework using a case study approach which was developed over time to facilitate an inclusive research methodology which demonstrated value and respect for the student participants. A range of methods was used, including group interviews, classroom observation and the collection of 'incidental' data such as coursework contributed by students.

The study found that despite expressing a verbal 'buy in' to learning, for these students learning identities formed only a small, and often relatively unimportant, part of overall identity formation. Their aspirations were high but, constrained by societal structures, and unaware of the educational pathways and credentials necessary to achieve their occupational ambitions most used their agency to develop identities and acquire economic capital outside the field of education. It concludes that these are key factors in the fact that most of these young people drift into low skill, low paid employment, maintaining a status quo in terms of social class structures.

Finally, it rejects the current credentialist pedagogical model arguing that such an approach devalues and diminishes young people who do not achieve government benchmark targets, and proposes further debate and research leading to the implementation of a socially just pedagogical model which provides real, rather than imaginary, opportunities.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## **Introduction**

This study explores the aspirations and learning identities of three small groups of level 1 learners. Two of these groups were undertaking General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) foundation awards, and one a locally designed level 1 course. At the time the study was undertaken the GNVQ foundation was the only full time level 1 credential which was available nationally post -16. It was available in 8 vocational subjects but was due to be withdrawn from 2006 and replaced with BTEC 'successor' credentials. Some organisations, including one involved in this study had already rejected the GNVQ foundation in favour of locally designed programmes accredited through the Open College Network (OCN).

Level 1 students are a neglected group. Significant numbers of young people enrol on level 1 programmes, yet little empirical research has been undertaken into any aspect of their post-16 experience and they are largely invisible in terms of government policy. Despite this, they are a heavily problematised group, particularly in the context of post-16 education where they are largely regarded within a deficit model of 'disaffected', 'disadvantaged' and 'low ability'. They are undertaking programmes which are of limited value other than in terms of providing a 'progression' route to a higher level vocational programme. The study explores how these factors impact on the learning identities and aspirations of these young people, and also considers what it means to be a level 1 student in England within a policy context which emphasises the importance of increasingly higher levels of credential.

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the study in order to create a clear context for the reading of subsequent chapters. It provides a



justification and outlines the research questions and aims of the study, contextualising them within a consideration of how my interest in this subject arose. For the purpose of clarity, definitions of the key terms used within the study are also considered in this chapter.

### **Finding the Focus**

The GNVQ foundation (level 1) was introduced in 1993, a year after the launch of the Intermediate (level 2) and Advanced (level 3) levels. Their introduction arose from the white paper *Education and Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (DES 1991) and they were part of a strategy to increase participation and achievement in post-compulsory education and training (Bathmaker 2001: 83).

Foundation GNVQ formed the lowest of the three levels of GNVQ awards and was positioned at the bottom end of the English National Qualifications Framework (NQF) where level 1 is equivalent to grades D-G at GCSE and thus designed to meet the needs of those who have 'failed' at GCSE. Although lower level credentials do appear on the framework, these are designed for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. Level 1 is the lowest point on the mainstream hierarchy but even so, within some institutions, the positioning of GNVQ foundation has been ambivalent: Bathmaker (2001) found that it was regarded as mainstream in some institutions, and as special needs provision in others. This is significant given that most of the young people who enrol for such programmes have been educated in mainstream schools and entered for GCSE at 16+.

The positioning of level 1 qualifications in a context of academic v. vocational qualifications, and at the bottom of a national hierarchy of credentials suggests that they have a low status and are of little value. This perception is reinforced when considered in the context of the skills agenda arising from the DfES publication *21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills: Realising*



*Our Potential Individuals, Employers, Nation* which states that level 2 qualifications are the 'minimum for employability' (2003b:13) a belief reinforced in the most recent white paper (DfES 2006:4).

The introduction of the Advanced GNVQ reignited the longstanding parity of esteem debate which was concerned with the fact that class divisions based on what was considered 'fit' for people from different strata of society remain firmly entrenched within the education system (Woodward, 2002: 3; McCulloch, 1994:60). These issues are reflected in the different value placed on academic and vocational curricula, and the social and class differences between those young people following an 'academic' route and those following a 'vocational' route such as GNVQ.

Another factor which may have influenced the relative level of esteem for vocational qualifications is that they have traditionally been delivered within colleges of further education; often regarded as the Cinderella of the education system (Gleeson, 1996:84), a fact recognised in the Foster Review of further education which stated that 'FE colleges have a low profile on the national stage and a relatively poor image'(2005:5).

Further, as Tomlinson (1997:10) has pointed out, post-16 education is a highly stratified and hierarchical system in which successful, high status institutions can 'choose' high ability students, whilst others are forced to enrol the less desirable, unsuccessful learners who are 'firmly steered' towards vocational education. In this context of unsuccessful learners undertaking vocational programmes in institutions with a 'poor image' it is perhaps inevitable that the institutions, the learners and the vocational courses they undertake should come to be regarded as low status.

My personal interest in this area has developed over a number of years, and relates to my experience as a further education lecturer during which time I worked extensively with foundation GNVQ students. It was apparent that these young people presented challenges on a number of

levels. Their behaviour in the classroom could be directly challenging, and many had difficulties in conforming to GNVQ and institutional requirements. They were problematised within the organisation and wider society as the 'disaffected' products of failing schools and many did not want to be in education but had little real choice in the context of an economic climate which provided little in the way of work for unskilled 16 year olds, and in which state benefits were no longer available for unemployed 16-18 year old young people. In recent years, as part of government attempts to increase participation in post-16 education financial incentives to attend college have been provided. However, these raise fundamental questions about young peoples' motivation for engaging in learning, and whether this is driven by a desire to learn or by economics. The perceived need to raise aspirations (Connexions, 2003; DfES, 2002) raised the question: 'do young people on level 1 courses really have low aspirations? Or are their aspirations unachievable given their limited agency and the structural barriers facing them?'

Few staff within the FE college at which I worked were keen to teach foundation students, preferring to concentrate on higher level learners who were perceived to be less demanding and to provide the lecturer with more satisfaction and greater recognition within the institutional academic hierarchy. Students on higher level programmes tended to be disparaging about foundation students. Together with wider societal perceptions, this seemed to suggest that within the hierarchy of low status vocational programmes in low status institutions a clear 'pecking order' existed and that foundation students were right at the bottom. Effectively, they were perceived within the institution, and beyond it, to be the least valuable learners, perhaps reflecting the 'sharp divide between valuable and non-valuable people and locales' described by Castells (2000:165). This situation led me to question how it felt to be a less valuable student, and in what ways it might be possible to demonstrate value for them.



A further difficulty with foundation students was poor retention, perceived by the Senior Management Team to reflect incompetence on the part of the staff teaching the group. In fact, it was apparent to all those involved with these students on a day to day basis that they were constrained by factors and circumstances beyond the experience of any of us and that those students who remained on their programme, or 'hung on', a notion described by Macrae et al (1997: 502) as having a 'tenuous hold on the learning society', and achieved, inevitably did so against considerable odds which were not present in the case of level 3 learners or even most level 2 learners. These constraints were invariably individual reflections of multiple oppressions arising from structural forces in education and wider society and again give rise to a number of questions, in this case how great is commitment to learning amongst level 1 learners and what factors influence this? How great a commitment is possible in the context of the other aspects of their lives? And what happens to those level 1 learners who withdraw from their programme? I have sought answers to these questions, but found little published empirical evidence despite there being a wealth of opinion, supposition and anecdotal evidence surrounding these issues. Ultimately, a wish to explore these concerns in a more structured way, together with a personal commitment to social justice and the value of the individual gave rise to this study.

### **Justification for the Study**

There is limited published research considering the needs and experiences of foundation (level 1) students. Whilst considerable research has been conducted into the broader GNVQ qualification, the focus of that research has tended to be around the parity of esteem debate. Thus, the foundation GNVQ has remained largely excluded from much of the official discourse about GNVQ (Bathmaker, 2001:86) and only three previous studies (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Ball et al, 2000;

Bathmaker, 2001) make specific reference to GNVQ foundation students; however, all these studies focussed on a broader group and only limited numbers of foundation level students were involved in the research. The increasing number of college based, college designed and locally accredited programmes is not addressed at all. Students at this level are also largely excluded from policy documents, appearing only in deficit terms, as those who do not hold a level 2 qualification, the governments stated minimum for employability (DfES 2003b). Further, there is also evidence to suggest that the curriculum currently available at level 1 is inadequate (LSCN 2005:22; Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2003; 2004).

Vocational further education students are drawn predominantly from the lower socio-economic groups (Colley et al 2003:479) thus level 1 students experience the multiple difficulties associated with economic disadvantage in addition to those disadvantages imposed by their perceived under-achievement in terms of academic credentials. The multiple disadvantage and institutional and societal barriers experienced by these young people, and discussed within this thesis, are contrary to notions of social justice and mean that the students on such programmes have few opportunities and limited life chances. Further, this problem is widespread: in 2002/03, in excess of 175,000 young people were enrolled on level 1 programmes in England and of these, 14,600 were enrolled on GNVQ foundation programmes alone (LSC 2004).

Undertaking this research has provided an opportunity to explore the aspirations and emerging learning identities of these young people within the context of their experiences on a level 1 (foundation) programme and to consider the nature of the opportunities arising from a level 1 vocational programme within the context of a system which promotes lifelong learning as a means to economic success. It also provides an empirical basis from which to inform the debate about the dominant

credentialist pedagogical model currently used in England, around which level 1 programmes are constructed and which has been criticised as socially unjust (Lingard, 2005) and as judging 50% of young people to have 'failed' halfway through the 14-19 phase (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2003:21).

### **Aims and Structure of the Study**

This study seeks to answer four key research questions:

- What does it mean to engage in post-16 learning as a foundation (level 1) student?
- How do foundation (level 1) students construct their learning identities?
- What factors influence or constrain the development of those identities?
- What aspirations for the future do foundation (level 1) students hold?

In addressing these questions it also seeks to meet the following aims:

- To explore the learning identities of a small group of GNVQ foundation (level 1) students
- To gain insight into the hopes and aspirations of a small group of GNVQ foundation (level 1) students
- To undertake an inclusive research process informed by a social justice perspective.

The study was conducted using a case study approach, and contextualised within a social justice theoretical framework. Reflecting my concern that level 1 students were perceived as less valuable than others, the research process was designed to be participative as a means of demonstrating value and respect for the young people who were



involved with it. Empirical work has been supported by an extensive range of literature, discussing aspects of the study and concepts used within it such as value for and of the individual, and theories of structure and agency. Data are presented using a narrative approach to emphasise the often difficult realities of the lives of the young participants in the research:

### **Definition of Terms**

“When I use a word’ Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean neither more nor less’” (Carroll 1994:123). Humpty Dumpty’s conversation in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* was at best less than straightforward and often confused. In the same way many of the terms used in this study are confusing and some, particularly those relating to vocational education, have been open to a number of interpretations. As a result, some terms can only be fully understood in relation to each other or the context in which they are used. In order to address this, and to minimise any confusion in the reading of this thesis, I give here my own working definition of the most common terms used. For further clarity and the sake of brevity, a glossary of additional terms and acronyms is included at the beginning of this thesis.

The term ‘vocational’ has been used in a variety of contexts over an extended period: what all definitions of the term share in common is that they bear some relationship to an occupation. Original definitions were the most specific, relating to ‘a calling’ and normally used in reference to occupations within the Church such as Priest or Religious<sup>1</sup>, and subsequently to occupations such as teaching and nursing. Later definitions widened the concept. Dewey (1916:307) referred to ‘a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person because of the consequences they accomplish, and also useful to

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<sup>1</sup> Religious is a generic term referring to both men and women who are bound by monastic vows

his associates', whilst the Oxford English Dictionary currently defines 'vocational' as 'a strong feeling of suitability for a particular career or occupation' (2003:1294). In terms of education, the term has been used more widely to refer to aspects of the curriculum that do not fall within the category of liberal or academic. For the purpose of this study, I will define vocational subjects as those which require some degree of applied knowledge and understanding and have a technical (applied) and/or occupational emphasis. The terms liberal and academic will be used interchangeably, and may be taken to refer to a traditional, theoretical curriculum including the core subjects of English, maths and science. The term 'parity of esteem' also has a long history. For the purpose of this study I will use the term to mean a position where vocational and academic qualifications receive equitable recognition and are divorced from existing associations and relationships with social class status.

Learning identities have also been discussed at length elsewhere (e.g. Ball et al 2000, Bathmaker 2001). In this study, learning identity is taken to mean that part of a young person's self which relates to their education, achievement and engagement with learning. This is discussed in terms of perceived and actual commitment to 'the course' and to learning, and in relation to other aspects of each young person's developing identity, such as gendered and social identities. Aspiration is used to describe the young peoples' career ambitions and their lifestyle ambitions. These are considered separately and are referred to as career aspirations and lifestyle aspirations.

The term transition is used to describe the once brief, now often extended period between completing compulsory education and entering the world of work. The young participants in the study are normally referred to as young people, but occasionally, mainly to avoid repetition, as students since this also accurately describes them. The terms used to describe the groups of participants in chapters 5, 6 and 7 (Foundation

and Level 1) reflect the descriptors used by the young people themselves as well as the programme they had enrolled on. Two groups were undertaking a GNVQ Foundation programme (level 1 within the National Qualifications Framework) and one group a locally designed programme with multiple small accreditations referred to within the institution as 'level 1'. Given that a foundation GNVQ is a level 1 course, there are points in this thesis where the term level 1 is used in a wider context to refer to all college based level 1 vocational provision, irrespective of whether the organisation offers a nationally or locally recognised credential. However, for the purpose of this thesis, unless made explicit in the text, the term level 1 excludes National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at level 1, since they are occupational and work based and thus not considered in the context of this study which relates specifically to full-time college based level 1 vocational provision. Where the term foundation is used, this relates specifically to the GNVQ Foundation programmes accredited by Edexcel and, at the time of writing, the only full time college based programme available nationally at level 1 post-16.

It has been argued that 'Language is not powerful in and of itself, but it becomes powerful when it is used in particular ways, or by particular groups and institutions' (Webb et al 2002:95), and this has a particular relevance to foundation (level 1) students, who are 'othered' by forms of discourse which are overwhelmingly negative, including the use of terminology such as disaffected, disadvantaged, disruptive or low achievers. The use of discourse of this nature is discussed later in this thesis, as is the nature of language such as opportunities, qualifications, lifelong learning and employability whose meaning, particularly in the context of government policy, is often contrary to the experience and lives of level 1 students.



**Summary**

This chapter has justified this research in terms of the paucity of existing empirical evidence relating to this significant group of young learners. It has outlined the basis of my own interest in this area in order to locate the study within a value-based as well as an academic context and has raised a number of questions about the positioning and problematisation of level 1 students. For the purpose of clarification, this chapter has also considered and provided a working definition of key terms used in the writing of this thesis. The issues raised in this chapter will be developed later in this thesis. Chapter 2 is presented in two sub-sections. In the first section it considers the literature relevant to the study, moving from the historical and policy context of pre-vocational education to the development of GNVQ foundation, exploring, as it does so, the relationship between vocational education and social inequality. The second section considers the positioning of GNVQ Foundation (level 1) students within a contemporary social and political context.

Chapter 3 provides a theoretical framework for the study, informed by contemporary academic literature in the field of social justice and by philosophic and religious texts. The chapter explores the concept of social justice with particular reference to inequalities in post-compulsory education in England and in the context of a belief in the equal value of each individual.

Chapter 4 outlines the methods and methodology used in the study which it does in two sub-sections. It begins with an overview of the methods used, discussing how they were informed by a group of level 1 students. The chapter moves on in section two to discuss the methodology, which was intended to be collaborative in nature, and the issues and tensions which arose from this.

Chapter 5 has four subsections. It begins with a context of the two institutions involved in the study, and moves on to present the data from the study which is done in narrative form. Three groups of students from the two institutions participated, and each of these is represented in an individual narrative.

Chapter 6 discusses the 'little stories' (Griffiths, 2003:81) of the earlier narratives. It explores the dichotomy between these stories and the reality of the young peoples' present lives and likely futures as they attempt to use their agency to negotiate transitions and develop identities within the context of oppressive systemic and embodied structures. Finally, chapter 7 seeks to draw clear conclusions from the study and to make recommendations for structural and pedagogical changes which could provide a more equitable and socially just context for the education of level 1 learners in a post-compulsory context.



# Chapter 2: History, Policy and Practice: The Positioning of Level 1 Students

## 2.1 A Historical and Political Context

### Introduction

This chapter is presented in two sub-sections. The first section considers the historical and contemporary policy context in relation to level 1 vocational students, discussing how concerns about social inequality and parity of esteem led to the new vocationalism of the 1980s, specifically the pre-vocational programmes such as the Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) and the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) and subsequently to the development of programmes such as GNVQ foundation. Section two explores the relationship between vocational education and social inequality, highlighting how the stratification of the education system creates a hierarchy of students and reinforces existing social inequalities. It goes on to illustrate how successive policy initiatives have failed to address fundamental issues of equity within what Tomlinson (1997:1/17) describes as a 'divided and divisive' system of post-16 education, and also considers the exclusion of level 1 students from wider debate and from government policy, suggesting that this reflects a perception of level 1 students as being of potentially low economic value, and consequently of low social value.

### Historical Context

It has been suggested that the present post-16 system in this country offers tri-partite 'pathways' arising from the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16 – 19 year olds* (1996). Following this, a range of government policies were published (e.g. DfES 2002; DfES 2003a), all of which had the stated aim of redressing the issue of parity of esteem, and of improving vocational education and raising its status in order to meet the economic demands created by changing employment patterns.

Despite these intentions, the outcomes of both the 1991 White Paper (DES 1991), and the Dearing Report (1996) were in fact a reinforcement of the status-quo in terms of Advanced level qualifications, and failed to address the issues surrounding intermediate and foundation level credentials. These papers formalised the triple-track qualifications system which offered the academic 'gold standard' A Levels, the GNVQ and newly established NVQ as routes into training and employment and which remains largely unchanged today, except for the replacement of GNVQ with similar credentials re-named 'Certificate' and 'Diploma'.

McCulloch, (1995:128) has described this system as the 'new tripartite' and it may indeed be seen to echo the ancient Platonic concept of gold, silver and copper (Lee, 1955) with the employment, salary and thus the life opportunities which result from following the different routes being widely different. Tomlinson (1997:4) speculated that this triple track was considered acceptable as it accords with the 40/30/30 society envisaged by Galbraith (1992) and Hutton (1995). She goes on to argue that 'The three-track system currently becoming embedded is leading to a situation where young people are not educated to be equal citizens in the society or even members of the same economy' (Ibid:17). Therefore, if there is evidence that particular influences are 'channelling' young people into routes which are perceived to be appropriate to that young person's anticipated role in life, particularly if those routes are regarded as of lower value or offer less in the way of later opportunities then this would represent a clear re-inforcement of tripartism in English education, and increase the levels of disadvantage already experienced by young people on low level vocational courses. This issue is one of increasing importance within a social and economic context which places a clear focus on the high skills economy (DfES 2003b) and a concomitant high value on learning and credentials. This has been reflected in the recent (Johnson, 2007) announcement of the government's intention to raise

the school leaving age to 18 and in the ongoing expectation that all citizens will engage in lifelong learning.

The English tradition has its roots in the influential and successful public schools of the nineteenth century, which emphasised, amongst other things, the value of the classical, liberal curriculum. This curriculum, which emphasised the study of classical literature and languages, was deeply rooted in the Platonic concept of education for leadership (McCulloch, 1991: 10/11) and became institutionalised within the state education system through the 1868 Public Schools Act and later, the 1902 Education Act which established mass secondary education. It was the Norwood report (1943), however, that was used as the basis for the 1944 Education Act, and this established a tripartite system based on the Platonic ideal which was founded on the premise that Grammar, Technical and Modern schools would be established in each borough. These would provide different types of education, ostensibly related to the needs and abilities of each child. However, few technical schools were ever opened, resulting in the mass of children receiving a secondary modern education and a minority receiving a grammar school education. This system created clear structural inequalities which reinforced class and social differences, largely denying educational opportunity to children from the lower social classes (McCulloch, 1998:1). The liberal curriculum was necessary to gain entry to higher education and the professions and A levels, introduced in 1957, became the 'passport' by which this happened. The differences within the education system reflected and reinforced the differing values placed on occupational roles within society. Within this context, it was, perhaps, inevitable that the liberal 'academic' curriculum, providing as it did a passport to university and the professions, should come to be regarded as superior to the vocational curriculum followed in the modern and technical schools, which led, at best, to a craft apprenticeship, but for all too many young people, to unskilled, low status employment.



Thus, this division in terms of curriculum and access to the Grammar schools served to reinforce the divisions between the affluent middle classes who were in a position to access the liberal curriculum and the Grammar schools, and the working classes who were not. The tensions between the vocational and academic curriculum and their relationship to class was noted as early as 1868 by the Taunton Commission and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Whitehead (1929:74) argued that 'the antithesis between a technical and a liberal education is fallacious'. Many government initiatives since have sought to address this issue of parity of esteem between different types of qualification (e.g. Board of Education 1938; DES 1991, DfES 2003a, 2005). However, given the comment in the 2005 white paper that 'Vocational education and training for young people have low credibility and status in this country' (DfES 2005:17) it seems that within each new initiative there are simply multiple echoes of a failed past. None of these earlier initiatives has succeeded in addressing the fundamental issue of social inequality, which, given that most vocational programmes are taken by the *less* equal, may be argued to be indivisible from the parity of esteem debate.

### **New Vocationalism**

Progressive educational reforms, ostensibly intended to address problems of inequality, were pursued from the 1970s to the early 1980s and were increasingly criticised as being forms of 'new vocationalism' (e.g. Cohen, 1984; Finn, 1984; 1985; Dale, 1985). The term 'new vocationalism' evolved within a context of mass youth unemployment as educational researchers began to distinguish between traditional vocational job *preparation* and new initiatives ostensibly aimed at achieving job '*readiness*'. These initiatives came to be criticised as being 'narrow and divisive' (McCulloch 1987:32) forms of preparation for unemployment, rather than preparation for meaningful work (Bates et al 1984) and included programmes such as the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) Youth Training Scheme (YTS), Technical and

Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), and the Certificate In Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE). Despite criticism from the academic community, government rhetoric was much more positive.

Sikes and Taylor (1987:60) highlighted conflicting views of the TVEI initiative, these being the official government discourse promoting it as a 'liberating reform' and a more critical perception which viewed the initiative as 'an invidious attempt to re-introduce the iniquities of occupational and even socio-cultural segregation'. David Young, the principal architect of the TVEI initiative, regarded it as the major part of the answer to youth unemployment (Pring, 1995:63) and defended it in terms of being a technical curriculum for young people who liked 'doing as well as learning' (Edwards 1997:19) perhaps inadvertently reinforcing this view of a divisive education system, whilst Weston et al (1995 cited Brooks 1998:14) suggested that for 'low attainers' the TVEI initiative had a positive impact in terms of attitudes towards and participation in, post 16 education. It is possible to argue that such comments reinforce divisions between vocational and academic education, in terms of both the implicit acknowledgement that different types of young people are suited to different types of education and also in the context of the negative discourse used to describe the young people undertaking vocational programmes, thus generating a deficit model for the 'low-attaining' young people 'suited' to vocational education.

The impetus for the original initiatives may be traced back to the social and economic imperatives highlighted in Callaghan's Ruskin Speech of 1976. This landmark speech not only marks the date at which the so-called 'New Vocationalism' policies originated, but also the point at which economic policy first became the 'driver' for education policy. Millman and Weiner (1987:167) have argued that the introduction of new vocationalist initiatives was premised on the belief that schools and education were partly responsible for the failure of so many young



people to find employment, something which is reflected in the fact that TVEI was created by the Department for Industry, rather than the Department of Education and Science (DES). It may also be observed in the emergence of a centralised control over education and training in which the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) exerted considerable influence over the colleges via YTS, and over schools via TVEI (Gleeson 1987:4). Such centralised control continued beyond the demise of the MSC and may now be seen in the context of the national curriculum for schools and in the influence of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) over the curriculum offer in colleges and other post-16 providers. Whilst none of the early initiatives survives in its original form, many subsequent initiatives had their origins in the new vocationalism of the 1980s and 1990s. These include General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) Business and Technical Certificate (BTEC) qualifications, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and more recently, vocational GCSEs (VGCSEs). It may also be argued that the proposed Specialised (vocational) Diplomas (DfES 2006) are also merely successors to these early initiatives.

Within this context the GNVQ foundation may be regarded as a successor to the pre-vocational initiatives of TVEI and CPVE. 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. Although usually placed within the context of a vocational section or department, and considered to be part of the broader vocational curriculum, in terms of both its aim and content, the GNVQ Foundation (and those level 1 vocational programmes which are evolving to replace it) have more in common with their pre-

vocational predecessors than with the increasingly 'academicalised' AVCE and BTEC National programmes. These higher level awards have followed an increasingly academic route, particularly since the advent of curriculum 2000, in an attempt to achieve, and to demonstrate, parity with the A level curriculum. However, the parity of esteem debate is of little relevance to level 1 programmes which lie at the bottom of an educational hierarchy at a point where no 'academic' alternative is available. The issues in this context relate to the nature of the curriculum, the type of work that it is preparing young people for, and the relationship between this type of programme and social class. It may be argued that such programmes follow a narrow, occupationally based curriculum which socialises young people to certain types of occupation and reinforces existing social class divisions.

Current level 1 courses (including both broad vocational programmes such as GNVQ and occupational programmes such as NVQ) cover a limited range of information and are assessed against standardised and nationally approved criteria. Content has tended to emphasise what Unwin has described as the 'routine and practical' (1990:196), as well as skills such as adaptability and reliability, perceived to be necessary in young people to enable them to 'buy in' to, and become successful in, a new, post-Fordist workplace order (Usher and Edwards, 1994:106; Helsby et al 1998:63; Bathmaker, 2001:85). Further, the contemporary vocational curriculum is offered predominantly within the FE sector and has been argued to be class specific and accessed largely by young people from lower socio economic groups (Colley et al 2003:479; Macrae et al 1997:92) despite there being evidence to show that students are very much aware that the choices made within the three track system carry 'different messages about desirability and exchange value within the labour market' (Tomlinson, 1997:10; Macrae et al 1997:89).

Further criticisms of the new vocational programmes and their successors have been made in the context of the aims of the programmes, regarded by many commentators to be preparing young people for a particular role in the workplace. Clarke and Willis (1984:3) argued that the perception that young people need to be inculcated not only with the skills, but also with the right *attitudes* for work had its origins in Callaghan's Great Debate about education. They also discuss how this perception was justified in the context of the mass youth unemployment of the time. Moore (1984:66) extended this argument, pointing out that there was an associated view that those young people who required inculcation with the right attitudes and skills for work belonged to a particular category of non-academic low achievers, thus assuming a deficit model for these young people. Programmes such as CPVE and latterly GNVQ inculcated social disciplines such as team-work, attendance and punctuality (Cohen, 1984:105; Chitty, 1991b:104) and thus prepared the young people for specific, low pay, low skill occupations (Ainley, 1991:103; Helsby et al, 1998:74; Bathmaker, 2001). This pre-ordained positioning within the labour market thus becomes a determinant of future life chances and contributes to the replication of social class in future generations.

### **Policy Failings**

The White Paper *14-19 Opportunity and Excellence* (DfES, 2003a) proposed a number of significant changes affecting 14-19 education. These included the proposed expansion of vocationally orientated GCSEs and the introduction a statutory 'work and enterprise' component to the 14-19 curriculum. Despite an expansion in vocational GCSE subjects anecdotal evidence suggests that uptake of these has been highest amongst low-achieving and disengaged young people. Whilst there is a clear value in attempting to re-engage young people through work-related learning there are some unfortunate effects concomitant with this strategy. Firstly, it has resulted in a perception of VGCSEs as lacking in



rigour and being suitable only for those who are less valued as learners – the low achieving and the disaffected. Secondly, this inevitably reinforces the lack of parity of esteem between the 'academic' or traditional liberal subjects within the curriculum and the vocational subjects. OFSTED (2003:5), recognising this issue, have suggested that parity is more likely to be achieved where significant numbers of young people across the ability range are engaged in vocational learning rather than only those who are disaffected or have academic difficulties.

It has also been argued that there is evidence of resistance to new qualifications within schools, particularly those qualifications that have a vocational emphasis (Holland et al, 2003:5). If such attitudes are apparent towards vocational education as a whole, the ultimate consequence is likely to be that lower level vocational programmes will be perceived as suitable for those problematised within a deficit model as low ability, disengaged and disaffected and that such young people will be perceived as suitable only for low level vocational programmes, effectively extending the deficit model to include the educational programme as well as the young person undertaking it.

Parallel with the implementation of the 2003 White Paper (DfES, 2003) were the deliberations of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform, chaired by Mike Tomlinson. In 2002, following widespread concern about examination standards arising from discrepancies in A level marking, the debate about qualifications broadened and came to involve the more popular sections of the media, rather than being confined to the academic press. This led to pressure on government, and eventually, the resignation of the education secretary, Estelle Morris, and the dismissal of the head of QCA. Part of the Government response to this was the establishment of the Working Group whose remit was to 'develop proposals for major reform of the curriculum and qualifications in

England for young people aged approximately 14-19' (Working Group on 14-19 Reform, 2003:01)

The final report, published in 2004, endorsed a baccalaureate system broadly similar to that proposed by Hodgson and Spours (2003). The Committee's proposals suggested creating a qualifications system from entry level to level three within an overarching Diploma. Whilst this was designed in such a way as to facilitate movement between different tracks or pathways, it was criticised both for retaining a broad 'triple-track' approach which encompassed academic, vocational and occupational study and for proposing the abolition of A level and GCSE credentials. Much of this criticism again appeared in the popular media and despite widespread support in the education sector the proposals were rejected by a Labour government which was facing a third general election. Instead, the government responded with a much watered down version in the 2005 White Paper *14-19 Education and Skills*, which retained A levels and GCSEs and was thus more acceptable to voters.

Whilst it may have been acceptable to voters, the impact of the policy on young people who do not achieve level 2 by the age of 16 may not be entirely positive. At the time of writing, the 2005 paper remains at the early implementation stage and although it identifies the intention to remove the expectation of achievement of level 2 at 16 (DfES 2005:46) this remains acknowledged as a minimum expectation with entry and level 1 qualifications described as 'steps on the way' (DfES 2005:6). This approach fails to acknowledge or address a number of issues. Level 1 qualifications are likely to remain lacking in value where there is a clear expectation that level 2 is a baseline level of achievement and young people who have achieved such qualifications will also be perceived to lack value in an economic context. The notion of failure will not go away for these young people. Further, the difficulties associated with an extended transition, particularly for young people in difficult



circumstances are not addressed. It seems likely that many young people, rather than continuing in what they may well perceive to be a fruitless attempt to gain level 2 credentials, will leave education and either enter low pay, low skill employment or become part of the Not in Employment Education or Training (NEET) population. Thus, a possible unintended outcome of this policy may well be an increase in the NEET population. Further initiatives, such as personalised learning, (DfES 2006) are also likely to impact significantly on this group of young people though it seems unlikely that any of them will adequately address the fundamental issues of social inequality in the English education system. Concerns about the policy direction of 14-19 education and the 'unprecedented amount of policy initiatives' were raised in the 2006 report of the Nuffield Review (Hayward et al 2006:4) which also argued that 'partial reforms, together with the weaknesses of organisational arrangements, may be unable to address pressing issues of social division and inefficiencies in 14-19 provision'. It may be argued that such social divisions and inefficiencies, disproportionately affect and disadvantage those young people who currently undertake level 1 vocational Programmes Post-16 and that despite the plethora of government policies, far from going away, this issue is coming back to haunt us even more.

## **2.2 Level 1 (Foundation) Students: An Invisible Cohort**

The previous section of this chapter considered the historical and contemporary policy context in relation to level 1 vocational students. This second section explores what it means to be a level 1 (Foundation) student at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century within a social and educational context which emphasises the importance and value of engaging with lifelong learning. Reflecting the paucity of literature in this area, this part of the chapter refers primarily to GNVQ Foundation, currently the only long (i.e. over a full academic year) level 1 programme available nationally, other than a limited number of

employment based NVQs. It explores how the students on this programme are viewed by the institutions at which they study, policy makers and wider society, suggesting that they are perceived as being of potentially low economic value, and consequently low social value. Further, it considers the likely consequences for young people of undertaking a low level, low value vocational programme and suggests that these are likely to involve a lifetime of casualised, low pay, low skill drudgery.

### **Excluded from Debate**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, post compulsory education in England has undergone major upheavals over the past 30 years, and increasingly vocal demands have been made for the development of a system which offers both parity of esteem across academic and vocational qualifications and equality of opportunity to all learners. This rhetoric has co-existed with a policy context which has become increasingly driven by economic imperatives.

Debates around parity of esteem have tended to focus on the divide between A levels and their vocational equivalents at level 3, and education policy has increasingly emphasised the perceived need to increase the skill and educational levels of workers (DfES 2002; DfES 2003a; DfES 2003b). Together, these phenomena have served to create a situation where the focus of policy and debate has been confined to those learners functioning at level 2 (GCSE equivalent) and above, although significant investment in basic skills in recent years has begun to address some of the needs of more mature learners functioning at lower educational levels and who have few or no academic credentials. Largely excluded from such policy and debate have been those young people progressing from compulsory education to foundation GNVQ (level 1) programmes in a post-compulsory setting.



Level 1 qualifications such as Foundation GNVQ may be found towards the bottom end of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF recognises English and Welsh credentials within a framework which allocates, in principle at least, notional equivalence between qualifications from Entry to Doctoral level. Level 1 is defined within the framework as 'the ability to apply learning with guidance or supervision' (QCA), and is offered largely within Colleges of Further Education during the post-compulsory phase of education and within a limited number of schools during the 14-16 phase.

In 2002 the Green Paper, *14-19 Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DfES 2002:12) referred to the need to 'promote parity of esteem between vocational and academic programmes of study' as part of its proposal to reform the 14-19 phase and introduce what was then termed a 'matriculation diploma'. Since then, the phrase has disappeared from policy documents, to be replaced by commitments to 'a much stronger vocational offer' (DfES 2003a:13), increased work based learning in schools, the development of the Modern Apprenticeship system, the introduction of vocational programmes with 'occupational relevance' and the development of the Foundation Degree (DfES 2003b). Despite this plethora of initiatives, the 2005 White Paper still recognises that vocational education and training have low status and little credibility in England (DfES 2005:17).

Within this poorly regarded vocational system, Level 1 students remain invisible, victims of a lack of esteem and significant structural barriers at a number of different levels. These include the lack of choice and opportunity arising from the limited range of vocational programmes available at level 1 (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004:17). The only alternative to the vocational programmes available would be to spend a further two years on GCSE programmes – repeating an experience at which the young person is already perceived to have 'failed'. Other

barriers include the ambivalent positioning of Foundation programmes, sometimes located as a mainstream programme, and sometimes as special needs provision, and the fact that whatever their achievement at level 1, the reality as most young people and their tutors see it is that only advanced programmes have any currency outside College (Bathmaker 2002). Further, there is the commitment required to a very extended progression - to achieve a Higher Education credential a Foundation student would have to 'progress' through 4 years of Further Education, and a further 2 years of Higher Education to achieve a Foundation Degree or 3/4 years to achieve a Bachelors degree.

In addition to these issues, the Foundation programme has also received little critical examination, despite its proposed withdrawal from 2005/2006. One possible reason for this may be the relatively small numbers of young people to have been registered for the award during its lifetime (Raggatt and Williams 1999:16) together with the traditionally low achievement rates associated with GNVQ qualifications. Success rates on Foundation GNVQ Programmes stood at 83% in 2001/2002. However, this figure refers to completers, and effectively discounts the young people who withdraw during the programme. When the figures are adjusted to reflect this, the success rate for 2001/2002 was only 62% in the context of a national retention rate of 77% (LSC 2002).

These significant levels of non-achievement, both in terms of failure to complete the programme or to achieve on completion are reflected in research carried out by Ball et al (2000) in their study of a cohort of young people from a North London Comprehensive as well as by Bathmaker (2001). Bathmaker interviewed 7 Foundation students towards the end of their programme, and found that they reported largely positive experiences. However, these were the young people who had, perhaps for the first time in their lives, experienced success and this



may have been an influencing factor in their perceptions of the programme. Those who had withdrawn may have had a different perspective. In a longitudinal study Ball et al identified 9 students from a total of 59 (15%) who entered Foundation GNVQ programmes, and a further two who entered NVQ level one programmes. Two years later, two of those who entered GNVQ could not be contacted, and of the remaining seven the outcomes for four were discussed. One had become a mother, one had progressed through Intermediate to GNVQ Advanced, one was unemployed and one was considering doing A levels and entering Higher Education in Australia. All were defined as having factors in their lives which might lead to social, educational and/or economic exclusion. Whilst this research is based on very small samples, it consistently suggests that very few young people entering the post compulsory sector at level 1 will fulfil the policy rhetoric about individual responsibility, lifelong learning and opportunities for all and progress through the system, ultimately to level 3 or beyond.

### **Excluded by Policy**

The reality of the lives of these young people reflects an English education policy which, over the past 20 years, has resulted in an increasingly credentialist and divisive system of secondary and tertiary education. According to government policy rhetoric, the emphasis on higher level skills (and thus qualifications) will mean that ‘...we will develop an inclusive society that promotes employability for all’ (DfES 2003b:18). Employability in this context is defined by the holding of level 2 credentials, but the still higher value placed on level 3 and Higher Education credentials is also evident in current policy documents as well as in the targets arising from them, such as 90% of 22 year olds to achieve minimum level 3 by 2010, together with 50% participation in HE by 2010. (DfES 2003a; DfES 2003b). The Skills Strategy (DfES 2003b) makes no specific mention of level one qualifications, other than in terms of individuals who do not hold level 2. This increasingly skills driven

agenda places a clear value (whether high or low) on individuals according to their perceived economic potential, which rises with each 'level' of educational attainment. This creates a situation where young people undertaking a GNVQ foundation programme are effectively working towards a qualification which is unrecognised by Government and society at large and which carries no economic value.

The lack of value placed on level 1 qualifications is also evident in outcomes at 16, where young people achieving five 'good' GCSEs (defined as grades A\*-C) have attained level 2. However, those young people achieving at grades D-G, even where the grade achieved represents significant personal achievement, have attained level one by default – that is by failing to achieve level two. The attribution of 'failure' to almost half the young people who take GCSE examinations each year was recognised by the Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004a:17) who proposed a new post 14 structure which clearly identified a need for recognition of achievement at all levels as part of a broader inclusiveness agenda. However, it could be argued that the inclusiveness agenda subscribed to by the 14-19 Working Group also acted to reinforce the concept of Level 1 students as a problematised group by acknowledging level 2 achievement as being consistent with the concept of employability and the ability to contribute to society.

The Working Group proposed a new qualifications structure which was intended to address these difficulties, but inherent within that structure was the assumption that the student would be capable of progressing, would wish to progress through the levels proposed and would have the necessary economic, social and emotional support to do so, an assumption or expectation also found in current policy documents (DfES 2003a:17; 2003b:127; 2005:6). The Group also recognised the need to improve the curriculum at lower levels, having identified '...an absence of consistently high quality level one programmes and qualifications'



(Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004:17), an added barrier to any young person wishing to progress to a level 1 option post-16.

Despite the limited range of level 1 qualifications, the Green Paper '14-19 Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards' (2002) proposed that all 6 unit GNVQ qualifications should be withdrawn and replaced by applied GCSEs (previously Vocational GCSEs or VGCSEs), with a Foundation qualification being equivalent to D-G grade. Whilst students undertaking the Foundation programme may be subject to the types of inequity outlined above, which will constrain all aspects of their future life, the qualification has two significant advantages over the GCSE. Firstly, it is perceived as easier to achieve and to offer a route to intermediate qualifications by the students (Bathmaker 2001, Ball et. al 2000), and secondly it offers a level 1 credential by achievement rather than failure, a significant factor in terms of young people's self-esteem and self confidence, as well as their motivation to continue in education. Representations from Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) professionals resulted in a policy compromise on this issue, and the White Paper decreed that both 6 unit GNVQ and Applied GCSE should continue to operate until 'suitable alternatives' (to GNVQ) were available. (DfES 2003a:25)

The successor qualifications to the 6 unit GNVQs are the new BTEC Introductory Certificates and Diplomas, accredited at level 1. Level 2 BTEC programmes (First Diplomas) have been offered post 16 for many years, but will be less suitable for schools than the Intermediate as they carry a significant mandatory work placement requirement which could constrain the core curriculum. Schools are therefore more likely to offer the applied GCSE programmes, with the concomitant risk for young people of achieving level 1 by default as they fail level 2. Post 16 the withdrawal of the programmes is unlikely to lead to the increase in high quality level one programmes and qualifications identified as necessary

by the Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004a:17) as the BTEC programmes will merely form a replacement, rather than an extension of the range of programmes currently on offer.

Hence, whilst the rhetoric of current post-16 education policy espouses 'opportunity for all' this in fact conflicts with many of the outcomes of that policy. In terms of young people on Foundation programmes, the outcomes are largely negative, and in no way reflect the emphasis on 'opportunity'. These young people are consigned to the lowest level 'vocational' programmes, which have little social, educational or economic recognition and are deemed to be 'low ability' or 'low attainers'. Significant structural, social and economic barriers stand in the way of further educational progression. Associated with the low esteem placed on the occupations and life opportunities they may be able to access, this can only result in the creation of a cohort of young people who are perceived as 'non-valuable' by government, wider society, and themselves.

Tomlinson links these divisive policies with the continued reproduction of a class structure which results in the exclusion of those who do not have access to a 'good' education, reflected in the type of credentials they achieve, and which allows more privileged social groups to 'maximise reproduction of their own advantages' (2001:261). . Indeed, Castells, (2000:165/167) argues that such divisions result in the 'territorial confinement of systematically worthless populations, disconnected from networks of valuable functions and people' a 'fourth world' of the socially excluded, who he argues are found in both the developed and the developing worlds. Corbett (1997):174 notes that the conflation of 'good citizenship' with a job, a home and social skills 'effectively dismisses a whole section of young people who have left school under-qualified' and Coffield (1999:484) argues that the different value placed on different levels of credential creates an 'educational apartheid'. In relation to the



young people in this study, such a situation can only be compounded by the lack of critical examination of level 1 students, which means that they are as invisible to academics as to policy makers, and that much of the policy which impacts heavily on them is based on perceived wisdom or assumption rather than current, credible research.

### **Education or Socialisation to Casual Employment?**

Raggatt and Williams (1999:142) have suggested that the re-naming of the GNVQ awards in 1993 as Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced was significant in the marketing of the level three programme as an A level equivalent and therefore an alternative route to Higher Education. Prior to this, the awards were known as level one, level two and level three. This change raised the profile and perception of the Advanced programme. It did not, however, result in an increased esteem for intermediate and foundation programmes. Bathmaker (2002) reported that both students and lecturers recognised that only Advanced GNVQ had any real exchange value outside the college, and Bloomer and Hodgkinson (1997) found that students used GNVQ as a gradual progression to get them 'back on track' and eventually to university, inferring that the GNVQ route provided a progression ultimately to Higher Education (after achieving Advanced level) rather than entry to the world of work.

There has been a policy assumption that young people can progress through the levels, but this assumes that the ability, willingness and support networks exist for every young person, together with an ultimate aim to progress to Higher Education. Such a perspective also assumes equal potential in all young people in all areas of their life, thus creating a dissonance with philosophies of diversity and with the sociological argument that educational achievement is related to social class reproduction (Tomlinson, 2001). In making such an assumption, policy also denies any intrinsic value in education for its own sake at foundation

level and in the value of increased self esteem or self confidence, or other non-pecuniary benefits which might arise from undertaking such a programme (Preston and Hammond, 2003).

Such a policy also renders the needs and aspirations of Foundation students 'invisible' within the wider policy and education agenda, as they undertake vocational programmes which have no explicit place in current educational policy and will not accrue them any esteemed credentials but which Chitty (1991b:104) has suggested may be seen to inculcate the attitudes needed for low skill, low paid work such as punctuality, attendance, time-keeping and discipline. This would enable them at best, to enter the low skilled, service sector employment regarded by Bathmaker (2001) as the most likely occupational destination for Foundation GNVQ students. The likelihood of vocational students on lower level programmes entering this type of employment was first raised prior to the introduction of GNVQ when Ainley (1991:103) argued that vocational education is used as a cover for creating a mass of casual workers, low-paid and semi-skilled to be used as demand dictates. Ecclestone (2002:17/19) whilst writing within a different political context, considered that employers poor record of investment in education and training may form part of a rational strategy linked to low prices, monopolisation and low wages – not all employers, she suggests, want or need highly skilled workers leading to a situation where, far from being the idealised opportunities portrayed by a post-Fordist, high skills rhetoric, the reality of the jobs market facing many post-16 learners is one of unemployment, or low skilled, temporary work with low status training as an alternative to Further or Higher Education.

Concerns also surround the social consequences of the broader structure of the Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) sector, and from aspects of the post-16 curriculum. Tarrant (2001) raised concerns about the structure of vocational PCET arguing that it produces 'a user



socialised to work, rather than a citizen'. Whilst Tarrant's concerns relate to wider society, and the ability of all to participate in a democracy, they have resonance with other concerns about the use of vocationalism as a form of social control, and ways in which the structure of GNVQ programmes generally, and their forms of assessment, may contribute to this. Hargreaves (1989:137) considers that assessment and monitoring procedures have the potential for extreme forms of social surveillance, in which reviews form an 'almost unending process of repeated and regulated assessment' and suppress 'deviant' conduct even before it arises' and Ecclestone (2002) has argued that differentiation may act as a form of social control as it means that the teacher places a lower expectation on some students than on others.

### **Ambivalent Definitions and Negative Discourse**

McCulloch (1998:4), whilst writing more generally about education considered fit for 'the mass of the population' highlights the negative descriptors used to define 'the mass' of young people, from the 'working class' used in Victorian Debates to terminology such as 'average and less than average' or 'less able' used in contemporary writing and government documents. Similar types of discourse (low attainers, lacking the minimum basic and employability skills) may be found in current government education policy documents (2003a:9; 2003b:24) and are subsequently reflected in the implementation of those policies. Corbett (1999) has discussed the consequences of labelling young people in this way and has argued that:

What is significant for the children concerned is that, unless they are highly resilient, they are likely to absorb these negative images of themselves and take on the roles of passive victim or social outsider

(Corbett 1999:181)



Therefore, it may be argued that the discourse relating to these students influences perceptions of them both as individuals and as a cohort, and that this influence is strongly negative.

Despite the range of descriptors outlined above, Foundation students form a group which is difficult to define clearly. The cohort is defined as mainstream in some colleges, but placed within Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD) provision in others. In other colleges the programme holds a more ambivalent position where it is technically mainstream, but where the students enrolled on the programme are identified as having additional learning needs, facilitating the funding to provide smaller groups and a higher staff:student ratio, broadly comparable to those found in LDD provision. Bathmaker also highlighted the 'ambivalent positioning of GNVQ Foundation' – at Midlands College, where she undertook her case study, it was placed within the special needs stream, but had moved backwards and forwards from mainstream a number of times. Wolf (2002:220), in a study of Level 2 students refers to the *intermediate* qualification as being taken by 'the weakest post GCSE candidates', implying that anything below intermediate would be special needs provision.

The definition of Special Needs, or Learning Difficulties and Disabilities provision is much clearer, being based on a formal statement of Special Educational Need which is attached to young people who have received their statutory education within special needs provision. Likewise, those students enrolled on level 2 programmes are more clearly defined, having status both within national government education targets outlined in the Opportunity and Excellence White Paper (DfES, 2003a) and the Skills Agenda (DfES 2003b). Level one provision is more ambivalent, although there is a clear, if unspoken, hierarchy of programmes at this level. At GCSE, a D grade might almost have been a C, and gives a little credibility, particularly in maths and English. A G grade is almost

unclassified, and therefore many young people are unwilling to 'own' such a grade. NVQ provision at level 1 provides an opportunity to gain the basic skills needed for a particular type of employment – hair dressing for example – and therefore constitutes a basic 'training' from which the young person can progress to a level 2 qualification, thus fulfilling the requirements of the Government's skills agenda. E2E provision, at the other end of the level 1 spectrum, provides for socially and educationally excluded young people with a wide range of learning and other special needs, such as Emotional and Behavioural Difficulty (EBD) statement, medical problems, history of school exclusion or criminal activity or other social need or difficulty. Those students undertaking foundation GNVQ fall between these groups, in the middle of this spectrum though including elements of each, and are, therefore, more difficult to define as a group.

The characteristics that foundation students have in common include the fact that by virtue of being on a foundation programme they have low levels of academic credentials in terms of GCSE results, and that most report a poor educational experience pre-16 and significant personal and social difficulties (Ainley and Bailey 1997:79/80). Ball et al (2000) suggest that these young people are constrained in their options by a broad range of factors including issues around social, economic and educational exclusion as well as by the limited educational opportunities available at level 1 post-16 (14-19 Reform Group 2004; Bathmaker 2002). Further research is necessary in order to generate a greater understanding of the lives and identities of level 1 students and to contribute to a broader recognition of the existence and needs of this group of young people.

### **Summary**

The first part of this chapter has reviewed the historical and political context surrounding the development of vocational education in an

attempt to contextualise the current position of level 1 programmes within the post 16 sector. It has also reviewed the positioning of GNVQ Foundation (Level 1) students within the post-16 market place. The existing literature suggests that they are low-status students undertaking low status programmes which have ambivalent positioning within the post-16 sector and offer little prospect of achieving more than low pay, low skill employment. Thus, the positioning of Level 1 students may be identified as being at the 'bottom' end of an already divisive post 16 system, in which young peoples' choices are largely determined by social class and where those undertaking vocational programmes are socialised into particular types of employment. Despite such obvious inequalities within the post-16 system, and a multiplicity of government initiatives ostensibly designed to address them, it suggests that each of these initiatives has failed and that the social and moral challenges posed by social and educational divisions remain. It seems almost inconceivable that such issues should persist at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and nearly 150 years after the Taunton Commission (1868) first noted the relationship between social class and vocational and liberal education.



## Chapter 3 – Social Justice: A Theoretical and Practical Framework for Action

### **Introduction**

The theoretical framework for this study is reflected in one of the aims of the study, that being to undertake an inclusive research process informed by a social justice perspective. In order to clarify that perspective, this chapter explores the concept of social justice in the context of the study and discusses my own understanding of social justice. It is informed by contemporary academic literature as well as by philosophic and religious texts, and by my personal values and beliefs. The concept of justice is an ancient value from which that of social justice is derived. Hence, it is not a fixed entity, nor something which lends itself readily to definition. The early sections of this chapter consider broader and historical meanings and understandings before the chapter moves on to discuss my personal interpretation of the concept, to demonstrate the way in which the concept has been used as a theoretical and practical basis for this thesis. The chapter discusses alternative interpretations of the term social justice, exploring the concept with particular reference to inequalities in the post compulsory education system in this country and in the context of a belief in the equal value of each individual.

### **Social Justice: Some Meanings and Interpretations**

The notion of social justice, despite an ancestry of thousands of years, remains fragmented and open to debate amongst many 'different voices' (Griffiths 2003:45). Indeed, it has been variously described as 'a family of ideas' and an 'abstract universal' (Minogue 1998: 253) and as an 'older moral tradition' by MacIntyre (1981:234) who has also discussed 'rival traditions' (p.235) to illustrate the conflicting perceptions of the nature of social justice. It is a confused notion which has many different

interpretations and meanings, and in this section I explore some of the origins, interpretations and definitions of social justice prior to considering them in the context of equality and inequality in education.

A 'traditional' view of justice (MacIntyre, 1981:234) is derived from the morality of the early Greek philosophers and ancient Judeo-Christian texts. The Greek philosophers, notably Plato and Aristotle, were amongst the first to debate the notion of justice. There are also early Biblical references to the notion of justice which are initially related to morality and to the concept of 'righteousness' (eg Amos 5:24). The concept of social justice is also evident in the New Testament, which introduces an interpretation of the notion of reciprocity and desert: 'If any would not work, neither should he eat' (2 Thessalonians 3:10). It is perceived as a form of morality in some early philosophic writings: Cephalus, in Plato's Republic (1955:3) offers an interpretation in terms of his understanding of justice as 'telling the truth and paying one's debts' whilst Socrates successfully demonstrates that the just man is happier than the unjust, and also argues for a dialogic approach to the concept of justice. A dialogic, or debated approach or interpretation, has also been advocated by others. Griffiths (2003) advocates a dialogic approach to the development of social justice, whilst MacIntyre (1981:236) argued that dialogue and negotiation were fundamental to justice in the absence of a shared set of moral first principles in society. Whilst there may be an absence of shared moral principles, a moral concept of justice is a widely held tradition which is largely shared between Aristotelian philosophers and Christianity (MacIntyre, *ibid*: 235/236). Despite this general agreement that justice has a moral basis, different definitions and interpretations of the term have been evident from the earliest times. This diversity of understanding is eloquently described by MacIntyre (1981:235) in his statement 'Rival conceptions of justice [which are] formed by and informing the life of rival groups'. Thus, history offers insights into the origins of the contemporary lack of clarity in terms of

defining the term 'social justice' and illustrates that this concept is highly complex, meaning many different things to many different people.

One aspect of social justice is the concept of the 'common good' which is found in both Aristotelian philosophy and Christian teaching, though yet again, there are differing interpretations. Aristotle argues that 'the greatest good ... is justice, in other words, the common interest' (Aristotle *Politics* III, II. 1282b 15). Hume (1740:318) argued that "[I]t was therefore a concern for our own, and the public interest, which made us establish the laws of justice" and MacIntyre has discussed the relationship of this philosophic morality to that of Christianity at some length (1981:154/168). The notion is given prominence in John Paul II's Catechism of the Catholic Church (undated: 421) which argues that 'the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and their vocation' are essential to achieving social justice, an interpretation derived from the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). The teaching is also founded on a belief that all people are created equal and should be enabled to achieve their potential as human beings. This requires the development, by society and the individual, of 'gifts' or 'talents'. Therefore, there is a responsibility on the part of society to ensure that the conditions exist to enable this to happen. This belief recognises and values diversity, but is opposed to inequalities associated with the exclusion of people, or a lower value being placed upon them, based on difference. If one group, such as students on foundation courses, are oppressed or denied opportunity in any way, then this becomes a 'sinful inequality' (John Paul II, undated: 424).

MacIntyre (1981:227/232) discusses the concepts of reciprocity and desert in terms of the distribution of material wealth and the extent to which a person can 'earn' or 'deserve' such goods and the extent to which that material wealth could or should be re-distributed amongst the



'needy'. He also rehearses a number of arguments about why people are affluent or needy relative to the rest of society. The arguments around reciprocity have been considered by many writers (for example see St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians; Hume 1740: III ii 2:318; Minogue 1998:258); Rawls (1999:301/308), whilst not addressing reciprocity directly, debates the concept of 'fairness', with which some parallels may be drawn.

The notion of reciprocity is also evident in current government education policy (eg DfES 2003b), where educational opportunities, such as skill based level 2 programmes, are made available to people in return for the increased economic contribution they will make as a result of having particular skills or credentials. It is most apparent in the rights and responsibilities agenda of New Labour's 'Third Way'. In the education arena this has resulted in a perception that individuals require 'motivating' to return to, or to stay in, education, and that this 'motivation' is positive in that it 'enables' individuals to participate. This participation occurs within a provision which is based on economic need and is preparing people for an economic role (DfES 2006). Within this context, education has been provided in return for economic contribution, rather than providing opportunities for individuals to undertake learning for less mechanistic reasons such as the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Debates about reciprocity will persist. However, in terms of government policy such a philosophy appears to be fundamentally flawed in that it is not only based on elements of coercion but assumes a similar starting point, range and level of opportunity, potential and motivation for each individual to undertake lifelong learning and make the required economic contribution.

### **Human Value and Level 1 Students**

Consideration of the human value of each individual, and of notions of equality and inequality are fundamental to perspectives on social justice.

In the context of level 1 courses, marketed as offering 'opportunities' it may be argued that the students' learning identities and aspirations are inextricably linked with the (unequal) opportunities that are available to them. Currently, society places a different value on different individuals according to the characteristics which make them individual. These characteristics reflect the societal and embodied structures which serve to constrain young peoples' agency. In this way, structures such as class, race, gender, disability as well as perceptions such as potential economic value all become criteria used to 'judge' a person's worth. This notion of value or worth may be extended to the vocational programmes undertaken by many young people. Such programmes are often held in lower esteem by the educational establishment (Wallace, 2001) and this low esteem reflects both the social value that society ascribes to the related occupation, as well as education and economic policy which places differing values on different types of education and occupation. This view is supported by Robinson's study (1997:35), which found that 'there is no parity of esteem in the labour market'. He bases his arguments on findings from his research, which suggest that an individual with an academic qualification (eg A Level) commands an income equivalent to that of another individual with a vocational qualification which is notionally one level higher (eg NVQ level 4).

This notion of individual value being dependent on individual wealth or achievement is widespread, and can be found in both philosophical and religious literature. Hume, writing in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century argued that 'Nothing has a greater tendency to give us an esteem for any person, than his power and riches; or a contempt, than his poverty and meanness:' (Hume 1740/2000:231 2.2.5); a failure to address this was noted in the documents arising from Vatican II (held in 1962) which stated that: '...the basic equality of all must receive increasingly greater recognition' (Abbot and Gallagher, 1966:227). In 1981 MacIntyre was arguing for the treatment of others based on uniform, impersonal

standards (1981:179) and more recently, Griffiths, in the second of her three principles for social justice argues that 'each individual is valuable and [should be] acknowledged as such by wider society' (1998:12/13). However, despite these longstanding arguments, both wider society and the education system remain divided and inequitable with very different opportunities – or lack of them – available to young people based largely on social status, highlighting Bourdieu's (2000:214/215) argument that 'Those who talk of equality of opportunity forget that social games...are not 'fair games''.

Bourdieu's theories on structure and agency, habitus and field and capital, all of which relate to his primary concern of inequality within society provide a useful framework for understanding the injustices imposed by social, educational and political structures on Foundation level students. They also provide the opportunity to develop an understanding which avoids 'a polarised explanation focused either on social structures or individual free choice' (Hodkinson 1998:100). This understanding provides a basis from which to consider ways of challenging and addressing those inequities.

Bourdieu defines the field as 'a configuration of relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon the occupants, agents or institutions' (1992: 72/73) and uses the analogy of sport to explain the meaning of the concept, describing the 'feel for the game' that enables a footballer to anticipate what might happen next, and the different ways in which the game is controlled and structured. Likewise, he argues that individuals are 'born into' social fields and learn the 'symbolic capital' of that field – unwritten rules, cultural beliefs and practices, language – necessary to survive and succeed in that field. Grenfell and James (1998:20) identify education as a field consisting of interconnecting, identifiable relations. Within this field, vocational and academic education may be regarded as sub-fields.



It has been argued that vocational education is class specific (Colley et al 2003) and the debate around parity of esteem for vocational education illustrates the low status of vocational programmes in comparison to academic programmes (e.g. McCulloch 1998; Wallace 2001). Thus there are clear power differentials between these subfields, where vocational education is regarded as inferior, and even within that field clear hierarchies exist, for example between different academic levels. Thus, within these hierarchies, in terms of both level and type of qualification, GNVQ level 1 vocational programmes have no academic or vocational credibility and form the bottom rung of the post-16 educational hierarchy. As the young people on these low level programmes make the transition to a higher level of further education or into the world of work each new setting or organisation to which they progress will have its own unwritten code of behaviour, manners and linguistics. Success in that field will depend partly on the individual's ability to absorb and unconsciously comply with those codes, and on their habitus, in the context of the value placed on a particular field.

Bourdieu uses notions of habitus and field to explain those of structure and agency. In terms of Bourdieu's theory, structure relates to social structures i.e. any external environment that is seen to be set apart from, or controlling and influencing, the actions of agents (Taylor et al 1995:11). Examples of such structures would be social class, the family, education and the state; however, the concept may also be used to consider embodied structures engendered by characteristics such as race, disability and gender which can determine and reproduce how people think and behave, that is, they are 'constitutive of, rather than determined by, social structures' (Reay 1998:61). Ways in which individuals think and behave may also be explained by the concept of habitus, which relates to their primary knowledge of their life and situation and to their 'inheritance of the accumulated experiences of their antecedents' (Robbins, 1998:35). Agency may be defined as the ability

that agents have to control their own actions or destiny within those structures and as such, the concept is related to choice and subjective motivation. Thus, the field 'orients choices' (Bourdieu 1990:66), but individual agency will determine which of those choices are made and this will in turn be influenced by the habitus of the individual, their motivation and values as, in the case of level 1 students, they 'struggle to make the world a different place' (Reay, 2004: 437).

For level 1 students, individual agency is heavily restricted by the structures of the state, society and the education system. In terms of the state, they are constrained by government policy, both economic and educational, which 'orients choice' by determining the vocational nature of the limited curriculum available to them (Working Group on 14-19 Reform, 2003; 2004). External structures such as the education system and societal attitudes mean that those programmes are held in very low esteem and do not provide a clear route or preparation for employment. In terms of society, the young people inhabit a field pre-determined by social class and local culture or habitus, as well as embodied structures such as disability, gender and race which result in less access to cultural capital (Reay, 1998:56). Thus, in respect of developing learning identities and negotiating successful transitions to the world of work, these young people are constrained by multiple barriers and however well motivated, or determined to 'transform the habitus' (Bourdieu, 1980c/1993a:87) the options available to them are very limited. Their learning programmes will not provide an occupational qualification. Thus it can be argued that low level vocational programmes are preparing students only for low pay low skill work (Bathmaker, 2001) and the educational progression routes are no less restrictive as those available to them lead entirely to vocationalised programmes and achieving a craft or professional qualification will mean an extended transition period which will require determination, motivation, financial capital and parental interest and support.



This situation, in which young people are denied access to resources, treated as inferior, and limited in their aspiration and social mobility (Webb et al 2002:25) may be perceived as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977:67), in that the students misrecognise that symbolic violence and perceive their situation to be 'the natural order of things' (Webb et. al 2002:25).

### **Deficit Models and Dependence**

In addition to embodied and societal structural forces constraining the agency of level 1 students, there are other subtle inequalities which also impact on their ability to exercise their agency. Such young people are perceived within a deficit model such as those described by Major (1990:23) and Colley (2003:4) in the context of policy and provision for socially excluded young people. A discourse of fragility, using terms such as 'disadvantaged', 'disaffected' and 'low achieving' is used to describe this group of learners who are then perceived to need 'support' to overcome these difficulties. Thus, within colleges of further education there exists a whole range of support services to address students' perceived needs, whether these are educational, behavioural, social or emotional.

Minogue (1998:258) has argued that a person defined in terms of need must necessarily be construed within a deficit model and is thus unable to participate in 'reciprocal human transactions'. He goes on to argue that this is recognised by Social Justice theorists and obscured by the use of the concept of 'right' which is then extended to universal right. This, he suggests, reduces the whole population to a form of dependence on the state. Thus, he concludes, 'rights are a Greek gift' because they are, in fact, 'an instrument of subjection'.

These are important arguments within the broader social justice framework. Specifically in terms of education however, there are



correlations between Minogue's concept of dependence on the state, and Ecclestone's (2004:133) notion of an emerging therapeutic culture in education. She discusses the societal move from a state of general optimism, in which people are seen to have potential for agency, to one of the 'diminished self' in which educational 'failure' is perceived to endow a form of emotional trauma or need, rather than being regarded socially and politically as 'outcomes of an education system that uses assessment to rank and segregate people for unequal opportunities'. Such a state of diminished self may be reflective of a wider social move towards a therapeutic culture which seeks to exercise social control by 'cultivating a sense of vulnerability, powerlessness and dependence' (Furedi 2004:203).

Furedi goes on to suggest that this 'diminished self' would be less able to exercise the 'citizens' powers of practical reason and thought in forming, revising and rationally pursuing their conception of the good' and hence would be less likely to achieve a more just society (Ibid: 203/4). Such citizens would also be less able to engage in the dialogical process which Griffiths (2003) argues is essential within a society which claims to be working towards a state of social justice and which Rawls (1999) assumes all have the capacity to engage in, ultimately leading to an even more inequitable state of society. Minogue (1998:265) has argued that only a 'completely de-moralised and therapeutic conception of human life' can arise from treating people as creatures with needs to be managed and foresees a perception that life should be nothing more than a series of pleasant experiences. He uses this to argue against the concept of social justice which he regards as 'a reactionary project for a managed society'. However, Ecclestone perceives arguments for social justice to be a constructive response to the effects of this therapeutic ethos arguing that 'Demoralised humanism is therefore one of the most pressing problems facing educators and policy makers committed to social justice and the transforming potential of education' (2004:133).

### **A Personal Vision and Interpretation**

My own vision of Social Justice is of a societal structure which facilitates each individual to achieve their potential in each area of their life. This may be regarded as an unattainable romantic or utopian vision but none the less, if we make an argument for equity, then this must be the ultimate aim no matter how romantic or unattainable that may appear. Such a societal structure could encompass areas such as health, or leisure activity, but for the purpose of this study is considered with particular reference to work and education. Within these contexts, all young people would be able to access a critical and democratic curriculum which prepared them for lives as active citizens, able to make critical contributions in the workplace, rather than socialising them into particular types of job role within a highly stratified and hierarchical society and jobs market. Such a position would necessarily be underpinned by an equal respect for each individual arising from their status as a person, which recognises and values fundamental differences in terms of interest, aptitude and ambition but which is not associated with any material, intellectual or other perceived benefits and advantages.

This vision arises from both the ongoing reading and developing understanding I have of social justice as a theoretical concept, and also from the experiences and beliefs which inform my positionality in respect of this study outlined briefly here and discussed in more detail in chapter 4. They include my personal experience of a stigmatised disability, which led others (especially teachers) to perceive me as 'less able' and resulted in a negative school experience, and my previous career as a psychiatric nurse, which emphasised the importance of valuing others and being non-judgemental, and which also demonstrated clearly the effects of unequal opportunities within a health arena. My teaching experience in further education reinforced the understandings which I developed as a



nurse, and enabled me to observe inequality and its effects from an educational perspective. Finally, my beliefs are informed by my Catholic faith. Fundamental to the teaching of the faith is the belief that all people are created equal and should be valued and respected as equals. Whilst a synthesis of these experiences and beliefs, clarified by the reading and writing undertaken for this study, have resulted in a somewhat jaundiced view of the world, they have also informed my beliefs that each person is an individual to be respected and valued, that the excessive social and economic differences found in our society are immoral and should be addressed. Part of addressing these issues must be to explore and identify the inequalities faced by young people such as those on level 1 vocational programmes, and ultimately, to consider ways of challenging them.

The dilemma arising from this vision is that, because of the nature of society and its structures, and the flaws inherent within the human race, it is never likely to be realised. Like the notion of radical democracy (Zournazi, 2002), a form of politics that recognizes diversity, and invites participation from a variety of social spaces in an ongoing process of democratization, it is something to be struggled towards, rather than something which is attainable, but provides a hope of something better. However, this does not make that vision any less valid, since it provides a moral philosophy emphasising the value of and respect for others which forms a basis for dialogue around injustice, and a framework from which I can challenge inequality and debate the best means for addressing it. It may be argued that inherent in subscription to any philosophy, moral or otherwise, is the implication and requirement that any personal actions should be reflective of these values and beliefs. Thus I would argue that a social justice philosophy imposes a moral imperative to act in accordance with the expressed values of that philosophy. This imperative to respond is emphasised by Griffiths (2003:55) in her statement that 'Social Justice is a **verb**' (original



emphasis) and by Walker (see Griffiths 2003:125) who also emphasises the active in her argument that 'Only through doing justice can we make justice'.

In terms of the issues raised in this thesis, this would be twofold: a particular stance taken in my own research practice and writing, particularly in terms of my response to participants in the study, and the imperative that places upon me to acknowledge and explore inequality, and to challenge situations, systems and structures which appear to me to promote inequality and thus to conflict with the values of social justice. Thus, in translating these ideas to practical terms, the methodology for this thesis evolved. A key aspect of the methodological approach was to demonstrate value and respect for the young people who participated. This involved attempting to use a collaborative approach which facilitated the young peoples' involvement in all aspects of the study from planning to data interpretation (discussed in detail in later chapters). Also fundamental to this was to attempt to represent their 'little stories' (Griffiths 2003:81), or voices, with integrity. I termed this approach 'researching with, not on'.

### **Researching 'With' Not 'On'**

The wish to research 'with' and not 'on' arose from moral and ethical concerns about social justice, and more technical concerns about the validity of empirical research in which the interpretation of data is exclusively that of the researcher but is represented as the 'truth' about a particular group. The power in the researcher/participant relationship is inevitably with the researcher, who often inhabits a very different social and political context to that of the participants and in turn this can increase the oppression of the participants through specific gendered or class based interpretations of the research process and data. This is particularly the case where other participants in the research are from

traditionally oppressed groups, such as women, those with disabilities or people from specific ethnic groups with a history of oppression.

It may be argued that Level 1 students form a group which experiences oppression at many levels. Despite living within a 'democracy' these young people are stigmatized, and structurally and institutionally oppressed in terms of their social class, gender, racial group, perceived academic ability determined by level of credential, by caring responsibilities, by social perception and in some cases by disability. Thus, each young person who agreed to participate in this research reflected an individual, but multi-faceted case of multiple oppressions which resulted in many cases in exclusion from mainstream society. This exclusion is reinforced by a government policy which promotes credentialism whilst failing to recognise any value in a level one credential, thus devaluing the holder of that credential, and which also utilises a deficit model of social exclusion described by Colley (2003:169), as attributing only perceived negative qualities to people who are categorised in this way.

Therefore, to research 'with' and not 'on' formed part of a response to this problem of the politics of power and the degree of exclusion and discrimination experienced by level 1 students. Fine (1994) has argued that intellectuals carry a responsibility to engage with struggles for democracy and justice whilst Griffiths (1998:114/115) outlines different forms of collaborative relationship (i.e. researching with, not on), of 'joint theorizing and action' within the context of the power of agency and argues that such relationships are a means for developing empowerment, voice and ultimately social justice. The participatory approach developed in this research has been, in part, an attempt to respond to these arguments. This involved a re-thinking of the relationship with the participants in the research, and consideration of ways in which a more collaborative and empowering relationship could



be engendered, such as developing the more dialogical process advocated by Gitlin and Russell (1994:184).

### **Power and Control**

Consideration of the power relations in this study is necessary both in the context of the social justice and other values which underpin it, and in the context of the ethical issues appertaining to research of this nature. Griffiths (1998:57) has stated that meanings and interpretations are developed in social groups which are themselves structured by socio-political power relations. She goes on to argue that since knowledge depends on human interpretation and values, research methods need to take account of the unequal power of different social groups. Level 1 students form a particular group who are significantly marginalised and thus less powerful than others. It would be inexcusable to conduct research which purported to make any explanations in terms of such a group, and to do that without attempting to redress issues of power. Such an activity would objectify the researched and fail to demonstrate the respect inherent in recognising them as individuals; further, such an approach would be contrary to the concerns of social justice with structural inequity. Using collaborative research methods formed part of my response to these concerns.

However, whilst as Nixon et al (2003:94) acknowledge that 'collaboration is...ethically desirable', collaboration in itself does not address issues of social justice, human value or power relations, the consideration of these issues is of fundamental importance – does a study pay lip service to the notions of dialogue, equality and collaboration or does it try to find a means to negotiate the issues arising from the research with the participants in the context of an equal relationship? Does it acknowledge any difficulties arising from this?



Within this study, attempts have been made to engender a collaborative and dialogical approach throughout, and these attempts are discussed in this thesis. Some of those attempts have been more successful than others and at some points it has been necessary to recognise that, despite my attempts at collaboration and dialogue, I remained in control of the process. Therefore, it is necessary to address the notion of paying lip service to collaboration, and to consider whether the power relations between the group and myself were in fact influenced by the methodological approach used. In doing this, it is important to take cognisance of the particular characteristics of the group. Previous studies which have discussed research of this nature have done so in the context of research with adults, in some cases professionals (Griffiths, 1998) and in others adults who could be argued to have a strong intrinsic motivation for participating in the study (Johnston 2000).

The young people who participated in this study may be seen to be more powerless and the victims of greater structural injustice than those mentioned above. Firstly, they are not yet defined as 'adults' and are still in the vulnerable position of negotiating their transition from school to the world of work. Secondly, they are victims of multiple structural injustices in terms of their social class, race, gender and perceived educational achievement and each of these factors means that their horizons for action are significantly more limited than those of other social groups. Thus, the power imbalance between the students and myself was significantly greater than it would have been had their tutors, for example, been the main focus of the study and therefore significantly more difficult to address. In enabling their voices to be heard in a public arena, and in ensuring that those voices were mediated primarily by themselves, I feel that this contributed to redressing the imbalance of power, although I am forced to acknowledge that despite my best efforts much of the power and control remained with me. However, Lincoln and Guba (2000:175) have suggested that 'Control is a means...of redressing

power imbalances such that those who were previously marginalised now achieve voice' and go on to suggest that it can be used as a means of empowerment and advocacy.

A further consideration in terms of collaboration, is that the focus of the study was always on engaging with the young people who were the key participants. In doing this, a lesser degree of engagement may have been engendered with the other (professional) participants, who were certainly less involved in activities related to the research process than the young people. However, as a group, they were certainly more powerful and had far greater horizons for action than the students, and unlike the young students they could not possibly be described as marginalised. Finally, whilst it is necessary to acknowledge different degrees of power and control between the researcher and all the researched it is also worth noting that 'You can only marginalise the marginalised' (Stronach 2004).

### **Summary**

This chapter has attempted to 'unpick' the often conflicting and confused notions of social justice and from that to outline my own understanding of the meaning of the term. This is contextualised in terms of my own positionality in respect of this study, and also outlines the active nature of my understanding of social justice. In doing this the chapter has attempted to illustrate the frameworks – theoretical, practical, moral and philosophical – which inform that understanding. Ultimately, I hope that by contributing to a wider debate, my work may form part of an attempt to make a contribution to the development of a fairer and more equitable system of post compulsory education for all young people.



# Chapter 4: Methods and Methodology

## 4.1 Methods

### Introduction

This chapter is divided into two subsections. The first of these considers the methods used, outlining the methods used to gather data, and then contextualising them within an outline of the evolution of this participative case study. The second half of the chapter explains the methodological approaches adopted in this study and gives consideration to factors influencing that approach, such as my own positionality in relation to the study. Consideration of such issues and of the theoretical structure underpinning the study provided a framework to guide the data gathering (Stake, 1995:53) and subsequent interpretation of the data. The methodology is also considered in the context of the conceptual framework within which the study has been located.

In terms of method, it is important that those chosen should be fit for purpose. As well as this consideration, two significant factors influenced the choice of research methods. Firstly, the nature of the research questions and issues such as time and accessibility, and secondly the imperative to evolve an inclusive research process which demonstrated respect for the participant group and their needs and preferences consistent with the social justice framework for the study. This second imperative for example, determined that all students, with only one exception, were interviewed in small groups, rather than individually. A multi-method approach using five different techniques was planned. These were semi-structured interviews, conducted with both students and professionals, classroom observation, written data provided by the young people and some limited documentary evidence. Further serendipitous data arising from the collaborative nature of the research



process was volunteered by students and also contributed to the final analysis.

### **The Research Process – Structure and Sequence**

The research process took place over a period of one academic year during 2004/2005, beginning in September 2004 with negotiation of access to the two institutions who participated. Known as St. Dunstan's College and Woodlands College both were English General Further Education Colleges serving broadly similar populations. Detailed profiles of the organisations may be found in Chapter 5. Four groups of students participated in the study, two from each institution. From St. Dunstan's the groups were a Foundation GNVQ IT (Information Technology) group and a Foundation GNVQ HSC (Health and Social Care) group. From Woodlands College a Foundation GNVQ IT group and a Level 1 group undertaking an internally designed programme participated. Selection of these groups was, to a great extent, dictated by serendipity. In each case, the Principal of the College was approached by letter and put my request to relevant heads of department. Those with an interest in the study – all of whom had responsibility for significant numbers of level 1 students – agreed to be contacted. In the case of both institutions, I received contact details by letter, and subsequently approached the departmental heads direct. In a cascade mechanism, the Heads of Department introduced me to the relevant course tutors and programme co-ordinators. All subsequent contact was with these staff members who, in addition to agreeing to be interviewed and observed in their classrooms, provided a range of documentary evidence at different times during the academic year.

The first contact with students was with the GNVQ IT students from Woodlands College. The purpose of this meeting was to identify issues which would later be explored at interview. This process, and the rationale for it, is discussed later in this chapter. It was not possible to

commence interviews until after both this initial activity and a meeting with each group to discuss the study and its ethical framework (see Appendix 3). As a consequence of this, the first interviews were conducted in December, just before Christmas (see figure 1). Modular exams took place at St. Dunstan's College during January, preventing any visits, and the staff at Woodlands College requested that I suspended visits for a two month period before, during and after an OfSTED inspection in January. These events dictated that it would be early March before further data was gathered.

<i>Institution</i> <i>Group</i>	<b>St. Dunstan's</b>		<b>Woodlands</b>		<b>Total Numbers</b>	<b>Timescale 2004/2005</b>
	<b>GNVQ IT</b>	<b>GNVQ HSC</b>	<b>Level 1</b>	<b>GNVQ IT</b>		
	No. Participating	No. Participating	No. Participating	No. Participating		
<b>Activity</b>						
Commenced negotiations for access						September
Access Granted						October - November
Met with Heads of Department	1	1	1		3	October-December
Met with Programme Staff	3	3	4	2	12	December - February
Collection of Documentary Evidence	<i>(attendance, achievement, student records)</i>					November - June
Ethical Framework	12	13	11	16	52	Nov - March
Initial activity to determine focus for interviews				16	16	November
Personal Profiles	8	13	11	0	32	March
Students interviewed	6+7 Inc. 4 follow up interviews	12	6	4	31 plus 4 follow-up interviews	December-March
Tutors Interviewed	3	3	4	2	12	March-April
Observations	1	1	1	0	3	March-May
Future expectations	8	12	11	0	30	May-June
Serendipitous data	4 PowerPoint presentations	Viewed 7 student portfolios - data not retained.	0	1 draft website	1 draft web site + 4 PowerPoint presentations	March-June
Emerging Themes	11	12	11	0		May-June

**Figure 1** Research Activities and Timescale



Return visits to both institutions were made immediately before and after the Easter holiday (which occurred in early April) and during this time staff and students were interviewed from all four groups. Some students chose not to be interviewed but to participate in other data gathering activities. In total, 32 young people contributed data and 16 participated in the initial activity to establish a focus for the interview questions. 31 young people were interviewed in total. Four of the students from the St. Dunstan's GNVQ IT group interviewed in March had also previously been interviewed in December. Follow up interviews provided an opportunity to establish whether any of their views had changed as they approached the end of the programme, and to ensure that the interview data from this group correlated with that of students from other groups who had been interviewed during March. It was possible that conducting the interviews at widely differing times during the academic year might generate different results influenced, for example, by students relative levels of motivation at different times during the year. Interview transcripts were checked and annotated by participants at the visit subsequent to the one during which they were interviewed. 12 tutors were also interviewed (6 from each institution) and 3 classroom observations were carried out. These included one observation each of the two St. Dunstan's groups and one observation of the Woodlands Level 1 group. The classroom observations were conducted during the period March to May, and for reasons of efficiency took place on the same dates as visits to interview students or staff.

During the visits to conduct interviews in March I was also given time to talk to whole groups about the study and to collect some paper based data. This was done using the medium of 'Personal Profile handouts' (see Appendix 1) which the young people completed to give information about themselves and what was important to them. The collection of



serendipitous data, all of which was student work, was ongoing, and was collected as it was offered by the young people.

An initial analysis of the data was undertaken during April, and this provided the basis for an emerging themes handout (Appendix 2) which was used during final visits in May and June. The purpose of this was to ask the young people to comment on my initial analysis of the data and the emerging themes that I had identified. It was also at this point that a debate emerged between the students and myself about anonymity, as I discussed with each group how the data would be written up in the thesis. Both these issues are discussed at some length later in this chapter.

Also during May and June, in order to triangulate data from the interviews, and to generate data from those young people who had not been interviewed, the young people were asked to participate in a final, paper based activity around their future expectations which involved answering three questions:

- What will you be doing in September?
- What will you be doing in 10 years time?
- Do you know any one who is already doing this?

This activity had the advantage of being undertaken when more concrete decisions had been taken about the following academic year and was successful in generating considerable data. This final meeting also provided an opportunity to wish the young people well and thank them for their contribution to the study.

A comprehensive analysis of the data was begun during the summer. I had hoped to collect four comparable sets of data from each group. However, following the hiatus caused by the inspection at Woodlands

College it proved increasingly difficult to arrange visits to the GNVQ IT group there. In addition, significant numbers of students withdrew. As a consequence, the data gathered was very limited, provided few opportunities for comparison with the other groups and was possibly not representative. Therefore, with regret, I made the decision to exclude the student data or this group from the final analysis. Records of interviews with the two staff members were retained, as both also taught on the level 1 programme and had alluded to this during their interviews.

### **Case Study**

This research has used a case study approach in order to explore the aspirations and learning identities of three groups of post-16 level 1 (foundation) students. The purpose of the study has been to investigate a particular population, in this case level 1 further education students, and it has been conducted at two sites studying three discrete groups, thus fulfilling Stake's criteria for collective case study (2000:437). However, also fundamental to the study was the imperative to conduct it in a way which was inclusive and which demonstrated value and respect for the student participants – the population who were the focus of the study. Also key to the study was the need to situate it within a particular context which considered cultural, educational, economic and social factors such as class, gender, race and educational 'achievement'. These considerations guided the design of the study and dictated a participatory approach which provided a mechanism for demonstrating value for the participants as well as an opportunity to 'demystify the research process and empower the participants' (Johnston 2000:77). This approach also provided a situated context in terms of cultural and other factors from which conclusions could be drawn about the student population who participated in the study.

The study offered the opportunity to gain insight into the lives and experiences of a group in relation to whom little empirical work has been



undertaken. Therefore, what is known about this group is, at best, correlated from other research, and at worst based on assumption and supposition. The increased understanding of those lives and experiences may result in a number of benefits such as the opportunity to contribute to the existing debate about the dominant pedagogical model currently in use in England and thus to inform future policy which Figueroa (2000:92) has argued should be one of the main functions of educational research. Using this approach may also contribute to the future development of theory where other, similar, case studies are conducted. In order to ensure that this might be possible, I have attempted to ensure that the methodological design and implementation is rigorous, data is gathered and presented honestly and with integrity.

In addition to gaining insight into the lives of level 1 students a case study approach was chosen as it also provided the flexibility to use a range of methods based on reflection and adapted according to the wishes of the group as the process evolved, something which may not have been possible using an alternative approach. The intention behind the study was to interpret the lived experiences of a particular group: thus, the study was a consideration of a singularity, rather than a large sample and a survey was inappropriate. The research methods traditionally associated with surveys, such as written questionnaires, would also have been inappropriate for use with these young people, many of whom had limited functional literacy skills. Another alternative methodology could have been action research. However, I was conducting the research as an outsider and the study did not include any planned intervention – its purpose being simply to investigate a population in partnership with that population. However, by generating understanding of level 1 students it is possible that this study could support future action research such as looking at alternative pedagogic practices.



## **Interviews**

A number of considerations determined the use of interview as a key data collection method. Firstly, the nature of the research questions which indicated that the methods used should be sufficiently flexible to allow adaptation to elicit a variety of data from a diverse group of individuals. Secondly, it was necessary to consider the nature of the student participant group. I anticipated that they might have difficulty with, or resistance to, a paper based method such as questionnaire and that such an issue could ultimately impoverish the data. I elected to use informal, semi structured interviews for similar reasons in that it was necessary for the interviews to be sufficiently flexible to adapt to individual responses - I anticipated that the students might not articulate well and that individuals may need different degrees of prompting. However, these fears proved to be mainly unfounded, and most students made a voluble and articulate contribution, illustrating that I, too, had taken a 'diminished' view of this group of young people.

Having established that the use of interview was most appropriate, other questions arose: would a group or individual approach to the interviews be better? How could this process be adapted to maximise the involvement of the student participants and to give them some control over how it evolved, and was designed and managed? Precisely how should the questions within the schedule be framed, and what should they include or exclude to facilitate a clearer response to the research questions?

In terms of using a group or individual approach, a number of writers have discussed the relative advantages and disadvantages of group interviews - (e.g. Wellington 2000:80/81; Fontana and Frey 2000:652 and Denscombe 1998:114/115), and it is clear that the issues around this approach are very different to those which should be considered in the context of individual interviews. Whilst considering the debate

around the relative advantages and disadvantages of different interview techniques pragmatic, theoretical and value based concerns all arose. In the context of this study, it was important to establish a collaborative working relationship with all the participants, and I was anxious to minimise any constraints arising from perceived or actual power dynamics. Madriz (2000:838) has suggested that 'In the context of individual interviews, there is the potential to reproduce the power relationships between the researcher and the participants'. This argument is well supported by her earlier reference to the words of a young Dominican woman who participated in a focus group with Madriz in 1995: " I'd rather talk this way, with a group of women... when I am alone with an interviewer I feel intimidated, scared' (ibid:835). Whilst this makes a strong case for the use of groups, such approaches can be problematic, particularly in terms of interference with individual expression or domination of the group by one individual and it is clearly important whatever interviewing technique is chosen to be aware of the implications, pitfalls and problems associated with its use (Fontana and Frey 2000:652). Taking this into account, ultimately, I considered that it would be necessary to offer students a choice between participating in a group or individual interview whilst bearing in mind the potential risks and advantages of both in order to ensure that they were empowered to take some control of the process and that any potential inhibition related to power dynamics or an unfamiliar social situation could be minimised. This approach also demonstrated respect for individuals and placed a clear and explicit value on their opinion.

Those students who agreed to participate were enrolled at two different further education colleges each geographically distant from the other. For the purpose of this study, these are known as St. Dunstan's College, in Townsville, and Woodlands College in Midport. The young people from both sites were interviewed in small friendship groups, with one exception, a Health and Social Care student from St. Dunstan's College



who chose to be interviewed individually. All participants were interviewed at least once, with the exception of one student from St. Dunstan's College and five from Woodlands College who did not wish to be interviewed, but who later 'opted in' to some written activities. The interviews, which were tape recorded and later transcribed, were carried out during the course of the academic year, and a number of factors influenced when they could take place. One of the colleges, for example, had an OFSTED inspection during the year, and was unwilling for me to visit in the weeks preceding the inspection. As a result of this, students were interviewed at different times during the year, something which might have influenced their responses. Therefore, those students who were interviewed very early in the academic year were re-interviewed towards the end of their programme, to confirm the validity of data and identify any bias which might have arisen as a result of the timing of the interviews.

Following the interviews, each participant was given two copies of their transcript, one to keep and one to annotate. Most students chose to do this in the groups in which they had been interviewed. They made only minor amendments, such as to the names of the schools they had attended – no student wished to change content in terms of their opinions or other data they had given, or indeed to amplify it. Whilst this may indicate satisfaction with the integrity of the data they had contributed, it is more likely to have been a reflection of the fact that the students could not imagine any eventuality which would lead them to alter their responses, thus leading them to place very little relative value on an activity perceived by them to be repetitive and unnecessary.

Interviews were conducted with professionals as well as students, and the interview schedule was informed by that developed with and for the students as well as by the research questions. The schedule focussed on the professionals' perception of level 1 students and perceived issues



around their commitment to learning and their aspirations. It was also necessary to recognise that each professional had different values and experiences, and that the interview schedule should be sufficiently flexible to facilitate participants to contribute in a way they felt was appropriate. Therefore, as with the students, a semi structured approach was used; however, different considerations applied to the conduct of the interviews. The professionals were being asked to give perception and opinion, about a group who formed a major part of their employment responsibility, and thus confidentiality, in so far as that could be achieved, was critical. Timing was a more pragmatic factor – it was necessary to schedule the interviews during individual administration time. Therefore, these interviews were conducted individually, in recognition of a different type of situation requiring a differing type of interview (Fontana and Frey 2000:667) and as with the student interviews all, except one where extraneous noise prevented this, were taped and transcribed. The interview which was not taped was recorded by note taking during the interview, supplemented by contemporaneous notes. Following the interviews, each participant later received a copy of the transcription to validate, annotate or amend as they saw fit.

In considering the development of the questions for the interview schedule, I was aware that identifying important aspects of living and learning would be best informed with a perspective from the young people themselves. Therefore, it followed that on this basis, and in the interests of developing a dialogical, participative research, some of the young people involved in the study should be involved in the development of the interview schedule, at least in terms of determining its content. In addition to the moral and ethical reasons for this participation, methodologically it ensured that the investigation was grounded in the reality of the participants' lives. A group from Woodlands College was approached to participate in the development of the schedule. This was a pragmatic decision, as access to St. Dunstan's

college was still under negotiation, and there was a limited time frame, dictated by the academic year, in which to develop the interview schedule and conduct the research. The development process is outlined below.

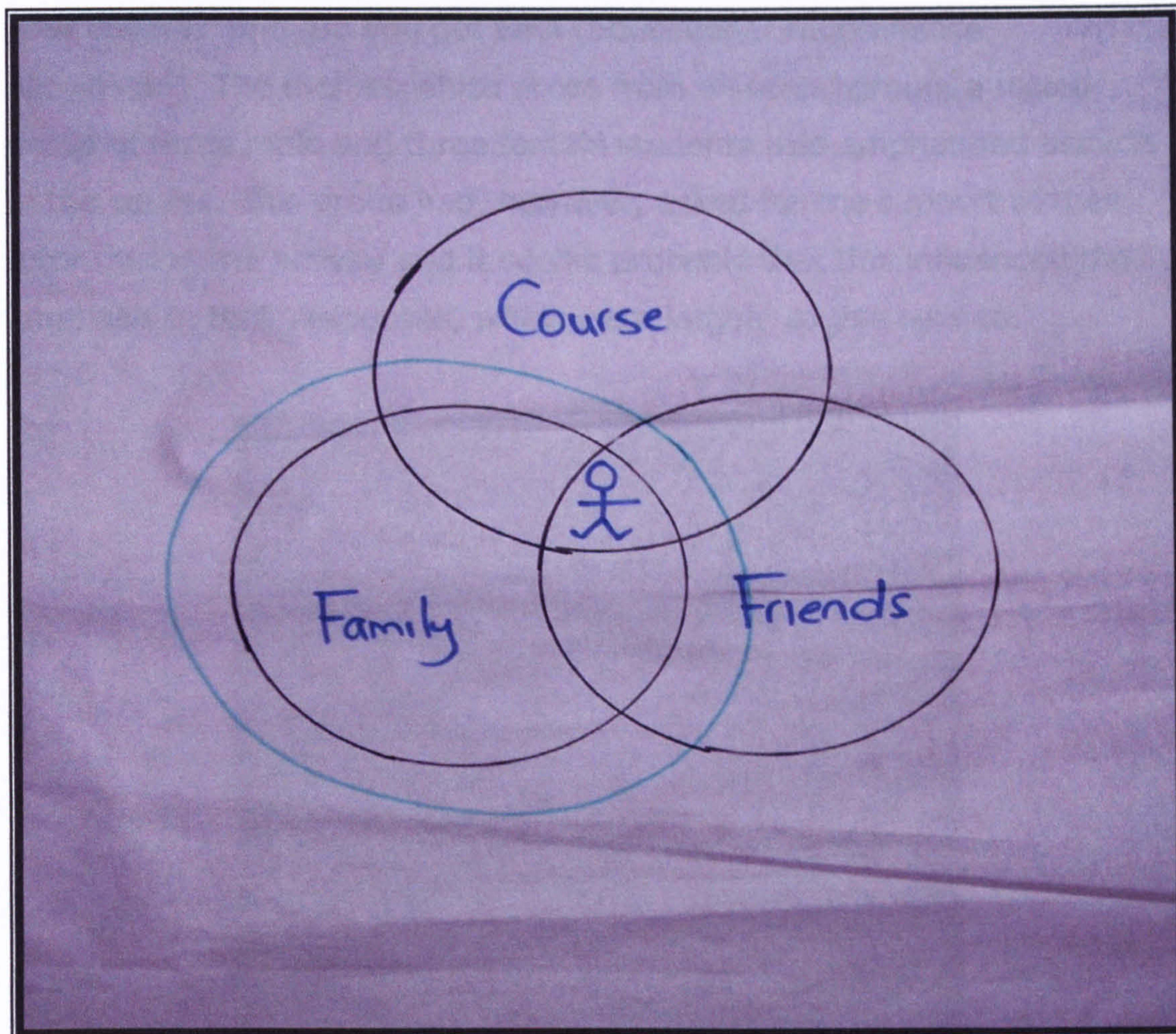
### **Early Participation**

My purpose in involving the participants in the development of the methodology was twofold, and reflected both technical and moral and ethical concerns. Firstly, the inclusion of participants in all stages of the research would enhance the validity of the research by providing a form of triangulation but secondly, and more importantly, the inclusion of the young people in the research process would contribute to addressing some of the issues I was concerned about in respect of this group, most specifically the lack of value placed on these young people and their lack of recognition within society. Such an approach would actively reflect the social justice conceptual framework used and would give the participants in the study the opportunity to voice their own opinions, thoughts and aspirations within a public arena.

In exploring issues around aspiration and learning identity, the starting point was to consider what was important to these students and which aspects of their lives should be explored. These questions were put to a group of mixed gender, mixed race GNVQ Foundation students who had recently begun their programme. In order to stimulate a response, the students were shown a pre – prepared flip chart showing a diagram based on the model of 'arenas of action and centres of choice' described by Ball et al (2000:148). This model describes the different aspects of a young person's life and provides a framework for understanding the transition experiences of young people as they seek to negotiate the different arenas. Using this as a starting point, it was explained to the group that all these parts of their life would be important to them, but sometimes one part might be more or less important – for example, if



there was friction at home, or someone was ill, this area might assume greater importance. To illustrate this, the circle surrounding 'family' was extended during the explanation (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2** Arenas of Action, Centres of Choice (Source: Ball et al 2000)

The group was then subdivided into small friendship groups. Using flip chart, a medium with which they were familiar, the group was asked to identify the most important factors in their lives.

Perhaps reflecting differing priorities or possibly differing understanding or interpretation of the task, there was a difference in emphasis in the themes which arose from the students' work. Despite this, they all



ascribed importance to broadly similar areas. The themes which arose from the first group placed greatest emphasis on money and the course that they were enrolled on and generated questions which were related largely to the course itself and to financial issues, such as 'Do you like your course?' and 'Do you get EMA (Educational Maintenance Allowance<sup>2</sup>)'. The themes which arose from a second group, a mixed group of three male and three female students also emphasised aspects of the course. This group had, however, asked for the support of their tutor during the activity and it seems probable that this influenced the emphasis in their responses, which were largely course related.



**Figure 3** Student Response to Ball et al's Model

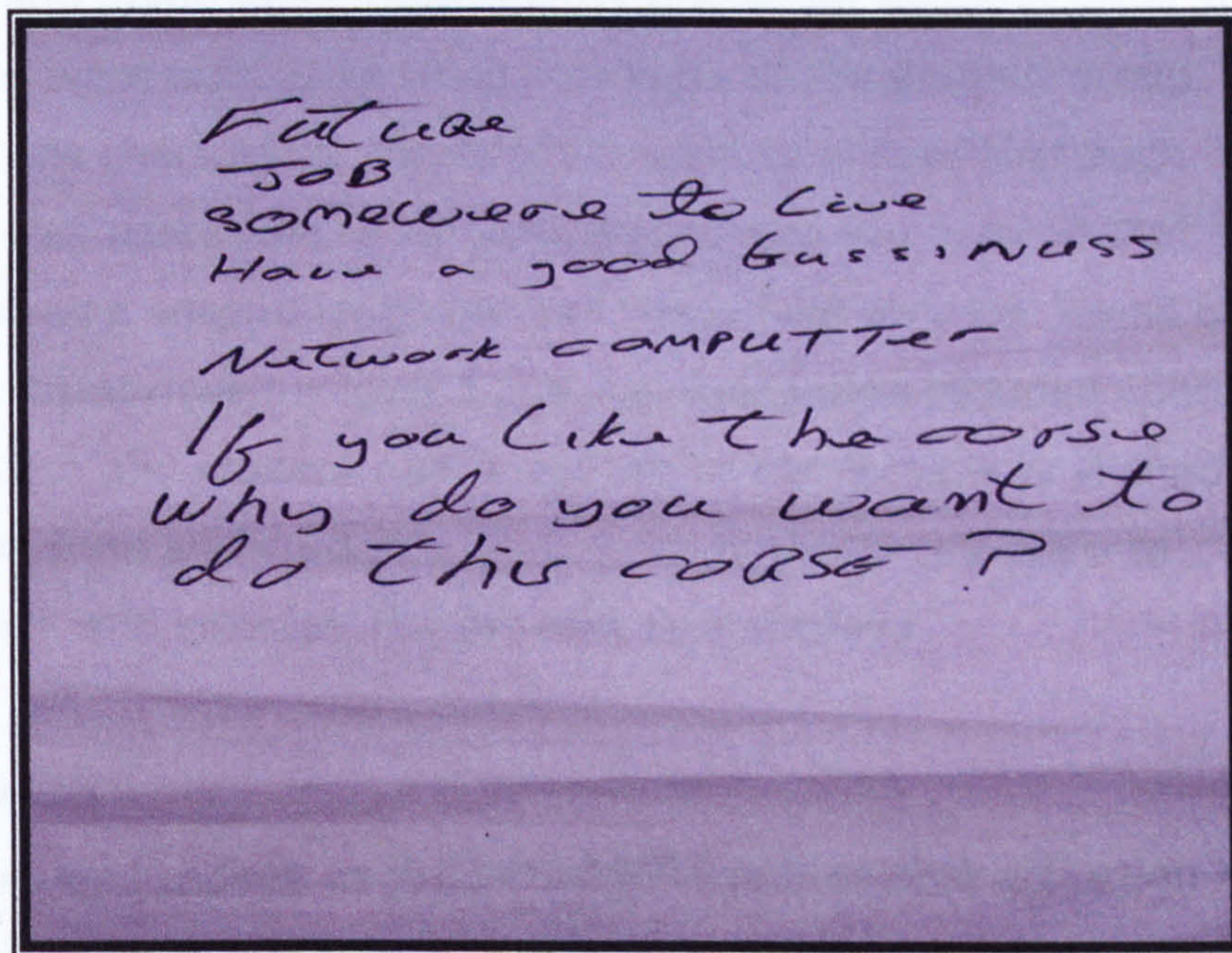
Amongst the third group, consisting of three female and one male student the activity engendered considerable debate and was most productive in terms of ideas and outcomes (fig. 3). These young people

<sup>2</sup>EMA is a means tested allowance of up to £30 per week, payable to young people between 16-19 in full time education. Payment depends on regular attendance.



had a wider range of important issues to share which seemed to suggest a greater concern with the family and leisure activities (Ball et al 2000: 148) rather than the course, although this did feature in their responses possibly reflecting a response influenced by gender roles.

Finally, a group of three male British Asian students gave responses which reflected that their greatest concern was with the future and eventual employment (see fig. 4); the emphasis on the course was in terms of how this might help to facilitate them achieving their ambitions, which were heavily influenced by the perceived success of extended family members. This seemed to suggest that this group had clearer aspirations (to own or run a good business) than their peers. It was evident from this early activity that there were significant gender and racial differences in the identification of what was 'important' which would need further exploration at the data analysis stage.



**Figure 4** Student Response to Ball et al's Model

The questions and ideas arising from each point on each flip chart were compared, and most appeared on more than one occasion. All were used



to generate the questions used in the interview schedule, together with two additional questions relating to GCSE grades and parental support which were included to facilitate exploration of possible reasons for low achievement at school and to assess the level of support available to the young people participating in the research.

Once the interview schedule had been completed, an initial meeting was held with each of the student groups to discuss the research. The explanations given were supplemented by an A4 handout which explained the purpose of the research, how the students might participate, and the ethical framework for the research. Handouts, a medium with which the students were familiar, were used throughout the process to summarise information given verbally and to act as a point of reference for the students. These were all produced on a single side of A4 paper, and made use of illustrations and white space in order to ensure they were accessible to all members of the student group. Language was checked for readability, again to ensure that each document was accessible to all participants, bearing in mind that some had English as a second language and many had very low levels of functional literacy (below level 1). All handouts also included contact details in case any student had questions or concerns they wished to raise at any time and students were encouraged to use them to comment on, and criticise, the process as it evolved.

### **Observation**

Observation was chosen as the secondary form of data collection in order to establish whether behaviour, thoughts and ideas expressed in a less formal setting reflected those expressed by the students during the interview process. Despite the time investment associated with undertaking observation (Yin 2003:86) it provided the potential to gain a considerable amount of data with minimal interference to the young people and their tutors. It also provided the opportunity to record casual

comments and events which might have had a bearing on the study, something which Griffiths (1998:40) has argued is one of the strengths of observation.

The observations took place in the classroom and were conducted using a participant approach within the spectrum of observation proposed by Wellington (2000:93) and recorded using a stream of consciousness or 'open-ended narrative' method (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2000:674). This approach was informed by both the research questions and the students' work identifying areas of importance in their lives. I was constrained in what would be possible in terms of observation by the fact that the students already knew me and would expect some degree of interaction. The level of participation varied, however, as it was dictated largely by the tutor on each occasion. During the first session the tutor was only prepared to allow me to sit and take notes, on the second there was some interaction with both students and tutor, and during the final observation, with the Health and Social Care group, the tutor and students, aware that I had previously taught this subject, asked for my contribution to the lesson. The variations in the extent of participation may be argued to reflect the impossibility of replicating specific sets of circumstances in ethnographic research and highlighted the necessity to be conscious of the way in which different relationships and perceptions of the process might influence the outcomes.

I had considered more structured approaches to the recording of data such as the formal observations and protocols discussed by Yin (2003:92) but I felt that a very structured approach may lead me to pre-judge what was important if and when any observation schedule was developed. In order to avoid this and to ensure that the opportunities for gathering useful data were maximised, a more informal, largely unstructured approach was used. Within this, the observation was focussed by noting specifically two aspects of behaviour which related



broadly to the research questions. These were evidence of engagement with study and anything relating to the students' lives outside their college course. This broad coverage was principally because I did not want to 'miss' any potentially useful data, but also addressed the issue of selectivity, identified by Yin (2003:86) as a weakness of observation.

In order to address Vidich and Lyman's (2000:39) argument that observations are mediated by a framework of cultural meanings and symbols arising from the observer's own life history the young people who participated in the observations were given the opportunity to read and comment on the notes that were taken, as well as contributing their own opinions about what was happening in the class. This 'elicitation of feedback' is a technique which has traditionally been considered to add to the objectivity and reliability of observation data (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2000:676). As with the interviews however, no changes were made to my notes or interpretations and this was the same for all groups, even where, with the Health and Social Care group, most of my notes recorded leisure related activity whilst the students separately, identified that they had been 'working hard'. It seems likely that perhaps this form of double checking was an activity in which they were uninterested (they had already checked their interview transcripts) and on which they placed little value, possibly associated with a lack of understanding of the implications of participation in a research process. A second consideration is the use of language in my observation notes, essentially written for myself, as 'fairly accurate renditions of what I see, hear, feel ...and so on' (Richardson, 2000: 941) thus the language used was more sophisticated than that in the documents I prepared for the students and some at least may have had some difficulty understanding them. Therefore, this leaves this aspect of the study open to criticism in that I could have considered more creative ways of enabling the young people to participate more fully with this aspect of the research process.

However, reproducing my notes in a less sophisticated form could have been argued to mediate them further. I might have asked a student to make contemporaneous notes but this was not feasible in the context of levels of literacy. A more realistic option might have been to hold a discussion around what they thought happened and what I might have observed at the end of the session or at a later date to use as a comparison to my own notes. Despite this difficulty, the observation data ultimately formed part of a broader collection of data. The young people did engage with a review of the initial analysis of that data and confirmed my early interpretation of it, suggesting some extent of agreement in terms of the observation records and their interpretation.

### **Additional Data**

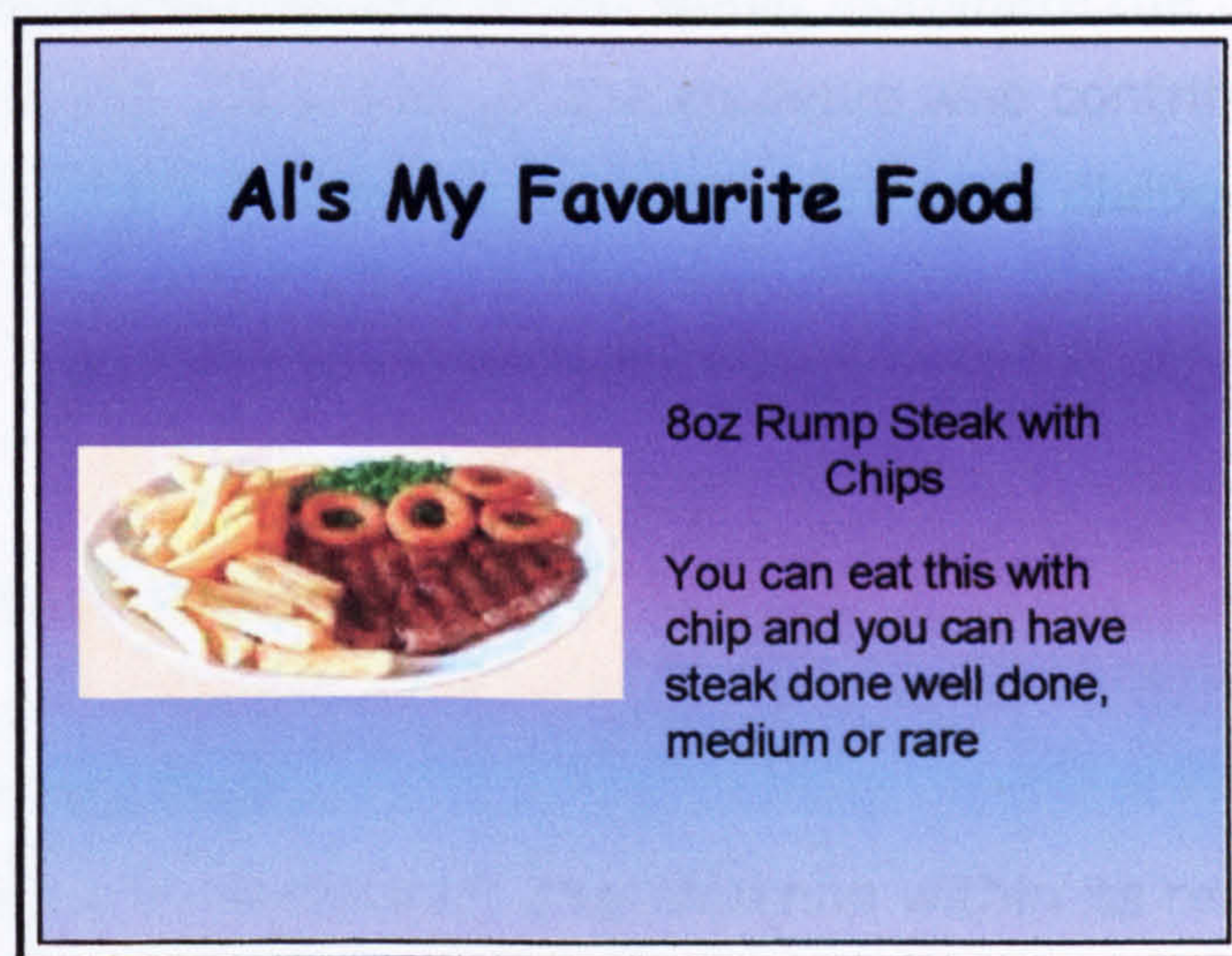
A range of additional data sources were used to support that derived from the interviews and observations. This included some written data provided by the young people as 'personal profiles' (see appendix 1) – self descriptors to help determine what aspects of their identity were most important to them. For ease of administration and conscious of the barriers which might be imposed by the use of a traditional questionnaire, these were developed to resemble an interactive handout, something with which all the young people were familiar.

Some limited documentary evidence was requested from the colleges relating to attendance, achievement and intended destination. Additional documentary evidence was provided by some tutors including disciplinary records and other information about individual students but was disregarded as not being relevant to the research questions. Hodder (2000:703) argues that material evidence is of particular importance in 'providing insight into components of lived experience'. In terms of this study, the documentary evidence is limited and provides a very partial and patchy picture of the two participant groups. It does, however, provide some additional evidence to support and amplify the voices of



the participants, particularly in terms of whether, at the end of their programmes, their destination suggested that they were continuing to pursue their original career aim.

Serendipitous data was also used. At the beginning of the study I did not know what this might be, but was aware that I may be offered material which might contribute to the data by the young people and considered that this must be used in order to facilitate an inclusive process which demonstrated a value for their contribution. As anticipated, much serendipitous material was offered. These data included material such as work which the students wished to share (e.g. see figure 5), particularly where this was electronic and could be emailed to me. On one occasion, this included the draft pages for a website asking for my comments. Ultimately, this involvement has not only enriched the process in terms of human relationship and experience, but has enhanced the research in terms of the wealth of data which has ultimately been generated.



**Figure 5** Serendipitous Data: Sample Slide from Al's PowerPoint Presentation



## 4.2 Methodology

The first part of this chapter has considered the methods used in this study, and it has outlined some of the strategies used to develop a participative and inclusive research process. It has done this in terms of each method used, and has contextualised the approach within a social justice framework. Finally it has discussed some of the challenges associated with implementing an inclusive methodology with this group of young people. The purpose of the following part of the chapter is to explain the methodological approaches adopted in this study and to give consideration to factors influencing that approach, such as my own positionality in relation to the study. This section also considers the methodology in the context of the conceptual framework within which the study has been located: in this study, this involved developing a participative 'organic' approach to the research. In order to facilitate this, a case study approach was used, as this provided the flexibility to use a range of data gathering methods which would illuminate the 'lived experiences' (Janesick 2000:395) of the students who contributed to this study and the flexibility to develop the methodology in dialogue with those groups.

### Case Study

Case study has been defined as:

'an empirical enquiry that:

- a) investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context when
- b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident

(Yin 1994:13)

Whilst all case studies share some common features, for example each case being a 'study of the particular' (Stake, 2000:438/439; Wellington, 2000:90),



In which an attempt is made to illuminate a particular institution, situation or phenomenon, within its real - life context using a range of primarily qualitative approaches to data gathering, it is recognised that they are also very diverse. Despite this diversity, some writers on case study have identified a number of different 'categories' of study. There is some variation in the definitions of these categories according to the positionality of the author and whether they tend towards a more interpretative or positivist view of case study research. In addition, as Bassey (1999:64) warns, categorisation can be dangerous, since much overlapping occurs.

Stake, writing in 1995, described intrinsic and instrumental case studies, in which the intrinsic study is undertaken because a particular case is of interest in itself, and the instrumental study is undertaken in order to develop understanding of a specific issue or area of interest. In 2000, this idea was developed to encompass collective case study, where the researcher jointly studies a number of cases in order to investigate a phenomenon or population (2000:437). Bassey describes theory seeking (exploratory) & theory testing (explanatory) studies, as well as story telling and picture drawing case study in which 'analytical accounts are given of educational events, situations and processes aimed at illuminating theory' (1999:62). Other academics have proposed yet different categories. Yin has described exploratory, descriptive and explanatory case study (1981a, 1981b), Bogdan and Biklen (1982) outlined three major categories: historical, organisational -observational and life history, whilst Stenhouse (1985) proposed historical and ethnographic case study. Some writers have proposed the concept of situatedness. Kincheloe and McLaren (2000:288) argue that, as all interpretation is culturally and historically situated, the researcher must consider how the objects of interpretation are situated by time or place. Stake (1995:40/46) discusses this concept in some depth and offers a definition, that 'meaning is largely drawn from the case's unique circumstances' (1995:173). In later work (2000:445) he highlights the importance of reflection in making sense of meanings within the case.

These definitions overlap in some cases and differ considerably in others; they are also open to interpretation by individuals. Acknowledging this, and that 'categorization is a dangerous game [because] some educational case studies will not fit the categorization either because they overlap too many categories or seem to stand outside them' (Bassey 1999:64) I have not attempted to categorize this study. However, it seeks to explore a particular case and to present the findings using a narrative approach in order to illuminate the circumstances of that case and possibly to relate them to other, similar studies.

### **The Case Study Debate**

The three main problems associated with a case study approach are generalizability, validity and sampling (Wellington, 2000:97). Whilst failure to address these issues adequately may be argued to render the research valueless, care taken in the methodological structure and analysis of the research, and reflexivity on the part of the researcher should facilitate the completion of a research project which will stand up to critical analysis. Generalizability occurs where the data in a study is used to make propositions about what may happen in certain contexts or circumstances, based on what actually happened in a specific case. Wellington (2000:97), Bassey (1999:34/35), Bell (1999:13), Denscombe (1998:40) and Anderson (1990:163) all raise the issue of generalizability in case study research. All agree, however, that this can be addressed, Wellington suggesting that if not immediately generalizable, the case study may be used as the basis for further research. He has also (ibid: 100) suggested that where it is not possible to generalize from a case study, people are often able to relate to it. Bassey (1981:85) argued that relatability is more important than generalizability, and later (1999:52/53) proposed the concept of 'fuzzy generalizability' that is, general statements with 'in built uncertainty' which address the many variables in educational research but also contribute to the generation of theory.



The issues of sampling and of external validity, or generalizability, are closely related and sample size may, in some cases, leave the study open to question if generalisations are drawn from it. However, Bassey (1999:47) points out that case study is not a search for statistical generalisation drawn from a random sample of a large population but a study in which sufficient data are collected to facilitate the researcher to explore and interpret significant aspects of a case. In the case of this study, it has been possible to draw conclusions based on three (admittedly small) groups, across two institutions. The total sample size of 32 students was greater than either of those in previous similar studies (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Ball et. al, 2000; Bathmaker, 2001) and facilitated the gathering of significant data related to the research questions. Much of the design, data gathering and interpretation of the data has been shared with the participants in a form of participatory evaluation (Griffiths, 1998:35/43; Stake, 2000:450). The findings suggest that there are commonalities across subject groups and institutions in the aspiration and learning identities of level one students. These findings show some correlation with those in the studies cited above and therefore, could be considered reliable if not generalizable.

External validity, or generalizability, is discussed above. Internal validity is an equally hotly contested concept relating to the honesty, credibility, auditability and authenticity of the data. Stake (2000:443) acknowledges the need for validity in case study research and suggests that it should be considered separately for different aspects of the research. He proposes triangulation as the most effective method of achieving this, arguing that this also serves to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen. In this study, two key methods (observation and interviews with the young participants) yielded apparently conflicting information. However, it was possible to clarify meaning by considering all the data gathered from all sources including interviews with lecturers, documentary evidence and serendipitous data and the final interpretation of this is discussed in chapters 5, 6 and 7. A multiple method approach such as this is also supported by

Denzin and Lincoln (2000:5) who suggest that it reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question.

A further strategy used in this study, both for moral and methodological reasons, was a form of methodological triangulation advocated by Wellington (2000:24/25) in which the participants effectively checked that my interpretation of the data accurately reflected their views and attitudes, and involved them being given the opportunity to review, criticise and amend my interpretation of the data. Undoubtedly, all the issues surrounding the use of a case study approach require careful consideration: it is also worth considering Bassey's warning that '...case study is difficult' (1999:44). However, despite the acknowledged difficulties of undertaking case study research, it has many strengths, providing an opportunity to gain 'rich' or 'thick' data and to illuminate a phenomenon or population.

### **Boundaries of the Case Study**

Placing the study within a conceptual framework should also help to determine the extent to which it should be limited. A conceptual basis can give a structure to the study, and arises from an understanding of the issues involved - conceptualising the object of the study. The conceptual framework for this study is derived from the theories of social justice discussed in chapter 3 which have informed both the planning and the conduct of this study. In addition to a conceptual framework, the study demanded that I also had a clear conceptual understanding of the nature of case study, and what it entails. This has been discussed by a number of authorities. For example, Bassey has proposed a conceptual reconstruction of the case study, arguing that it is 'a prime strategy for developing educational theory which illuminates educational policy and enhances educational practice' (1999:57) and Stake (2000:448) considers that bounding the case and conceptualising the object of study are amongst the major conceptual responsibilities of the researcher a position which is also supported by Anderson (1990:61).



In this study, the approach and methods were dictated by the aims and objectives of the study, the research questions and the conceptual framework all of which demanded a flexible approach which could provide the necessary data whilst also lending itself to a collaborative and dialogic approach. The social boundaries were initially clear as two fixed groups, defined by enrolment on a specified programme during one academic year (2004/2005), were intended to participate from two institutions. Course Tutors also participated as did other key teaching staff, determined by those having a significant teaching input (6 hours plus per week) with the group in question. The choice of groups arose partly through serendipity; letters outlining the research and requesting access were initially sent to four colleges; two colleges declined to be involved, but the Principals of those who agreed to participate referred me to the Heads of Department who had expressed most interest in the study and who managed an area with significant GNVQ Foundation provision.

At Woodlands College the organisation was in the process of transition from a GNVQ Foundation provision to one of their own 'pic'n'mix' level 1 programme, and the Head of Department asked that the level 1 group should be included in the study. Whilst this influenced the original, planned boundaries of the study, it also provided an opportunity for comparison between groups. Therefore, two groups of GNVQ foundation students from St. Dunstan's college participated, and from Woodlands College one group of GNVQ foundation students and one group of Level 1 students. Unfortunately, by the point in the year at which it was possible to visit and conduct the initial interviews, only four students from the GNVQ group were available to participate and two of these – recent immigrants from South America whose credentials did not readily match the English system – were not typical foundation students in terms of their level of education. Therefore, with great reluctance, I decided to

abandon the data from this group rather than attempt to draw possibly unreliable conclusions based on such a small group.

Within those groups who participated throughout the study, no pre-determined boundaries existed. Students were given the opportunity to participate, and self selected. At the beginning of the study I was clear that any young person who expressed an interest in participating should be enabled to do so – to have used a pre-determined group size, and refused some students the opportunity to participate would have effectively placed differing levels of value on different individuals. In the event, only six students refused to participate at the interview stage. Later in the study, all chose to participate in the observation and data analysis.

The boundaries of a case study are also determined by what constitutes data and how it is collected. At the inception of this study, having elected to use a case study approach with a multiple methods of enquiry, I had to consider which methods to use. These included semi-structured interviews with the students, interviews with staff, some documentary evidence such as attendance, retention and achievement data and classroom observation. This range of methods was determined by 'fitness for purpose' and pragmatism – what could realistically be undertaken in the time available. However, fundamental to this study has been the aim to involve the young people as much as possible – to research with, not on; therefore, it was necessary to acknowledge early in the process that some 'unexpected' data may arise as a result of participation by one or more students and that if this occurred, for ethical reasons associated with the value of the individual and achieving a dialogical process, that this should, if possible, form part of the final analysis.



## **Data Analysis**

Analysis, or 'the separation of something into its component parts' (Denscombe 1998:239) is a critical activity which should provide a credible response to the questions posed within the study. It was essential, therefore, that I conducted this in a systematic and structured way which recognised issues such as bias or threats to the validity of the study, in order to develop a rigorous and credible argument. Further, I also had to acknowledge that I would influence both the methodology and the results of the research. The researcher and research are an integral part of the world they are investigating and as such, cannot offer an impartial view of a world of which they are a part (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:234; Denscombe 1998:240; Wellington, 2000:42). There are bound to be some variations in individual perception of events, unless we enter the dangerous territory of the concept of absolute reality. Thus, I had to be aware that as an individual, I could never be truly objective, since each individual brings different experiences and perceptions to bear on each aspect of the research, as on life itself, and so could interpret it in different ways. This is particularly evident where observational data gathering techniques are used, since no two people are likely to construe another's behaviour in exactly the same terms. The concept of different interpretations of the same event was formally proposed in Kelly's Theory of Personal Constructs, whose Individuality Corollary states that: 'persons differ from each other in their construction of events' (1955 cited in Bannister and Fransella, 1986:10). These concerns were addressed by my own attempts to be reflexive during each phase of the study, including the analysis, and by the involvement of students in the analysis.

Such concerns with researcher influence and perception are also relevant to the use and interpretation of voice, discussed elsewhere in this thesis. It is also worth noting that participants' voices are already mediated when they come to interview (Lewin 1991, cited Olesen 2000:231).

These concerns are further complicated by the fact that many of those with 'quieter, less powerful voices' including level 1 Further Education students, are significantly 'Othered' by academics and society at large. Fine et al (2000:117) have argued that 'we potentially walk into the field with constructions of the 'other' however seemingly benevolent and benign' and inevitably this must influence our perceptions and interpretations. In the case of these students, the representation of them tends to form two opposing personas. The first of these is the passive, needy victim of circumstance, a therapeutic perception argued by Ecclestone (2004) to diminish the self and erode individual autonomy. The second is the disaffected, disruptive, uneducable youth, reflected in the type of discourse argued by Colley (2003:28) to pathologise those at risk of social exclusion. Both representations refer to groups rather than individuals, so denying individuality, significantly problematising these young people and creating challenges in representing them as themselves, rather than others. Therefore, it must be acknowledged in advance of any analysis that the responses given by the young people and the interpretation of those responses may be subject to a form of mediation by virtue of 'Other' persona. Acknowledgement of my own positionality, the use of multiple methods and the participation of the young people in the data analysis all reflect an attempt to address these issues and to present an 'honest' interpretation of the data in this study, which will stand up to critical examination.

The involvement of the young people in the data analysis took place during my final visit to each group. The purpose this visit was to share my interpretation of the emerging issues from the data with the students, and for them to evaluate this. The emerging themes had been summarised on a final handout, again making use of pictorial representation, white space and clear, unambiguous language. Two copies of the handout were given to each participant – one to keep, and one to comment on. In order to encourage the students to use some



form of analysis, they were asked to say whether they thought each statement was true or false, and why they thought each statement was true or false. The responses to this were variable. Some students wrote copiously, providing considerable, rich, data, others made brief (sometimes unclear) annotations and some simply identified true or false (see appendix 2). In addition, some gave verbal feedback, recorded as brief notes. Yin (2003:99) has suggested that this approach, in which the participants effectively checked that my interpretation accurately reflected their views and attitudes, is a form of methodological triangulation. However, I would argue that the instrumental value of this checking process as a form of triangulation was much less than its moral and ethical value, in that although the young people were able to make only a limited contribution in terms of analysis, the process provided a further mechanism for demonstrating respect and value for them. Further, as Schwandt argues, such an approach also provides a basis for greater insight into the feelings and views of the participants, something which aided my own interpretation of the data:

Conceiving of the activity of interpretation in terms of an ontological condition (i.e. as a fundamental grounds of our being-in -the-world) rather than as a methodological device is what puts the inquirer on the same plane of understanding, so to speak, as those he or she inquires into  
Schwandt 1998:229

Finally, in terms of the practicalities of the analysis, all interview notes and audio records made in the course of this study were transcribed, as were observation records. These were sorted and categorised manually to identify themes and correlations. Some categories were determined by the sample; for example, male and female, Woodlands College and St. Dunstan's College and others by placing the data in the context of the research questions and themes explored in the literature. Yet more categories arose from the identification of recurrent 'themes' apparent in the data. As described above, these were checked for accuracy of

interpretation with the young people participating in the study. I never planned to use a computer based analysis tool; I have attempted to do this in the past but found it unhelpful, and the continued reading of the data helps me in my interpretation of it and in the way I subsequently develop a discussion based on that interpretation.

### **Adopting a Reflexive Approach, Acknowledging Positionality**

In order to achieve a more participative and dialogical approach, such as that described above, I have attempted to question my own assumptions and behaviour at each point in the process, in order to achieve a degree of 'reflexivity, or 'introspection and self-examination' (Wellington, 2000:200). This has also involved a consideration of my own positionality and how that may influence the design of the study, the collection and interpretation of data and relationships with other participants in the research, an approach which cannot be disentangled from undertaking research which is moral and ethical. Sikes and Goodson (2003:48) suggest the use of interior reflexivity, arguing that this is a better 'anchor for moral practice' than any external guidelines and I have used this approach whilst undertaking this study in that I have attempted to understand and clarify the relationship between my own values, assumptions and experiences and my research practice.

I have also taken note of Grenfell and James's argument (2004:507) that radically reflexive research methodology 'has the capacity to found a critically effective discourse'. My own research practice is discussed at intervals throughout this thesis, but more particularly in chapter 4, as I attempt to develop a moral and ethical approach to the study. Griffiths (1998:96/97) also advocates that the researcher demonstrates reflexivity about their own position and interests, and reflexivity about their own understanding and values arguing that this approach is designed to emphasise to researchers the need to take responsibility for their own practices. However, she does sound a note of caution in her



suggestion that researchers need clarity about what types of responsibility they are, in fact, able to exercise, either as an individual or a group, pointing out that 'No-one is responsible for everything'.

### **Positionality**

In terms of this study, I acknowledge a commitment to students stigmatised by perceived 'failure' and ironically, a commitment to education, though perhaps a different model of education, as the means to address this. This commitment is rooted in my own impoverished early educational experiences and subsequent lack of achievement. Most significantly, my belief in the intrinsic value of each individual, and thus my commitment to the concept of social justice, arise from three major influences on my life: personal experience of a stigmatised disability, my Catholic faith and my first career as a psychiatric nurse all of which taught me not to judge but to accept each individual and value them as such.

The stigmatised disability is epilepsy, still perceived by some to denote madness or intellectual incapacity. This resulted in a degree of social exclusion, as few young people wanted to be associated with someone as prone to such strange and unpredictable episodes as I was, and also contributed to my educational difficulties partly due to absence and partly due to teachers' (occasionally punitive) responses to the condition. Thus, at 16+ I spectacularly underachieved gaining three unclassified 'O' levels and subsequently undertook a vocational post 16 programme at a local further education college. Despite these challenges, and a reluctance on the part of over 30 schools of nursing to accept someone with epilepsy for nurse training, I eventually became a psychiatric nurse, determined not to judge others in the way I perceived myself to have been judged and employed in a context where those I worked amongst endured far more extensive stigmatisation and exclusion than anything I had experienced. Consideration of the possible impact of these values and experiences on the study is also essential, and could include issues such as over- empathy with the group leading me to over-

interpret what was said (or not said) thus creating a risk of bias.

In addition to these influences, my faith teaches that all are born equal, should be respected as such at all life stages and that I have a personal responsibility to recognise and address inequality. The values and beliefs arising from this background eventually went with me when I left nursing to work in further education and subsequently came to inform my professional life and research practice. I hope that this acknowledgement of my positionality will enable the reader to make more informed judgements about their interpretation of the research, and determine whether this corresponds with my own. Wellington (2000:99) has argued that this is particularly important in case study research where 'a large part of the onus rests on the reader...the 'value' or truth of case study research is a function of the reader as much as of the researcher'

Whilst confronting the issues arising from my own values and experiences, and implementing strategies to address them, such as the inclusion of the young participants in the interpretation of their data I also have to accept that acknowledgement of positionality does not in itself denote a reflexive approach. Griffiths (1998:143) warns against 'intellectual tourism' or using the announcement of a position for purely cosmetic purposes without being open to having perspectives challenged. The degree of reflexivity and relative openness to the data can, perhaps, only be judged by the reader, as there are obvious difficulties in objectively assessing the extent of one's own reflexivity and readiness to have one's perspectives challenged.

Additionally, acknowledging one's own commitments or position in terms of a research study may not be sufficient if that commitment is such that it is likely to overcome any attempt to establish validity and reliability within the study, as Douglas (1976:99) has graphically observed 'one should have feelings but not passionate and well-entrenched commitments. It's one thing for a non - customer to study massage parlours. It's another for a nun to study them.' I have certainly attempted to ensure that this study can demonstrate rigour,



reliability and validity, but the extent to which my values and experiences impact on that and form 'passionate and well-entrenched commitments' will, perhaps, ultimately be judged by the reader.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Undertaking this study involved considering and planning for, possible anticipated ethical issues which might arise during the study. These involved the notion of informed consent when working with a group of level 1 16+ students, issues around the young peoples' voice and my mediation and interpretation of that voice, and confidentiality. No unanticipated ethical issues arose, although attempting to make a situated ethical response to one particular issue, discussed below, did prove to be difficult as I attempted to ensure that 'Ethical considerations [did] outweigh all others' (Wellington, 2000:54). The need to consider the potential ethical issues at all times and in all aspects of the research process and the human relationships encompassed within that process is also identified by Denzin and Lincoln (2000:19). This section outlines the ethical framework for this study, and describes how that framework was applied in practice.

Before beginning this research, four colleges were approached to participate in a letter to the Principal of the organisation. This letter outlined the methodological and ethical framework for the study, its aims and objectives, and gave assurances regarding the anonymity and confidentiality of organisations and individuals, and confirmed that all data would be treated with sensitivity. Further, assurance was given that every attempt would be made to ensure that consent to participate was fully informed. Two organisations declined to participate, and two provided an introduction to those Heads of Department who had expressed an interest and had responsibility for significant numbers of GNVQ Foundation students. Subsequently, individual meetings were held with these managers which facilitated me to give more detail about the

research, and potential ethical issues, and to outline how I proposed to address this with student participants.

Recognising that some of the concepts I proposed to address would be abstract and possibly difficult for some young people to comprehend, I discussed the research with them in a classroom situation in the presence of a tutor with whom they were familiar. My explanations about the study, and ethical issues arising from it, was supported by a handout (see appendix 3), designed to be accessible to the students in terms of language and presentation, and to provide a point of reference and contact details. The young people were then given the opportunity to ask for clarification, and time to decide whether or not they wanted to participate. This approach provided a basis on which to develop a situated and reflexive approach to ethical issues as they arose during the study.

The first ethical issue to arise was that of informed consent. Christians (2000:139) has argued that meaningful application of informed consent 'generates ongoing disputes', whilst Fine et al (2000:107/128) pose the question 'Inform(ing) and Consent: who's informed and who's consenting?' and raise issues about the validity of informed consent. Within this study it has been necessary to consider the ethical implications of requesting 'informed' consent from an audience, consisting largely of student participants who will be unaware of the human relationship issues arising from ethnographic studies, and who will, by definition therefore, be giving consent but not informed consent. Whilst this may satisfy some ethical guidelines, in terms of conducting educational research as moral practice Sikes and Goodson (2003:48) have suggested that 'this view reduces moral concerns to the procedural: a convenient form of methodological reductionism'. This issue has been addressed by taking a situated, reflexive approach, whilst bearing in mind that 'taking account of my own position does not change reality'



(Patai 1994:67). At a practical level, this has involved keeping participants involved and informed throughout, using both verbal and written forms of communication, and attempting to establish an ongoing dialogue with participants through the medium of email as well as face to face on my visits to them. However, I remain concerned that the consent given was not truly 'informed', although I also remain convinced that I used every strategy available to me to try and ensure that it was. This does not absolve me of responsibility but leaves me with an ongoing debate about the ethics of consent. Would it have been more or less ethical to discontinue the study in acknowledgement of this dilemma? More ethical possibly, in not exploiting a lack of understanding, but also possibly less ethical in denying these young people the opportunity to speak for themselves.

The engagement with participants throughout the study, in which they contributed to the development of the research process and to the interpretation of the data, also enabled a dialogue about the criteria for what could become public knowledge. This was necessarily limited in terms of the young peoples' understanding of these issues, but the dialogue was critical in demonstrating respect for them as well as promoting their involvement and enabling their voices to be heard. This involved long discussions about the nature, rights and wrongs of anonymisation and confidentiality, necessary because all researchers taking data from persons should do so in ways which recognise those persons' initial ownership of the data and which respect them as fellow human beings who are entitled to dignity and privacy (Bassegy, 1999:74).

It may be argued that creating opportunities for participants to interpret and analyse data demonstrates respect for the people involved, and avoids conducting research which might be criticised as 'exploitative' or unethical. However, how to make 'voices heard without exploiting or distorting those voices is [a] vexatious question' (Olesen 2000:231). The

control of the interpretation and selection of the data to be used lies largely with the person conducting the research and as such is open to misinterpretation in a variety of ways. Fine (1992b) has discussed different ways in which the participants' voices may be misused. These include the use of individuals' data to reflect groups, making assumptions that voices are free of power relations, and failing to acknowledge the researchers own position in relation to the voices. She develops these arguments further (1994:19) in her discussion on ventriloquism, in which she considers the implications of the researcher exerting control over the data by electing to use extracts which underpin her own values and perspectives. A further consideration is that of the interpretation of data and its relationship to 'truth'. Any work seeking to construct knowledge about the identity of young people, and to understand how they perceive reality, inevitably involves extensive interpretation of the contributions made by participants in the research.

In any act of interpretation , however impartial the writer aspires to be, the person writing the text has a stronger voice than those contributing to it (Simons, 2000:40) and, whilst the text may be written with integrity, reality or truth can only ever reflect the perception of the individual. Indeed, Usher (2000:27) has argued that 'all claims to truth are self-interested, partial and specific'. These debates highlight some of the ethical and philosophical dilemmas raised by the use of the voices of others, including the tension between the need to 'listen to quiet, less powerful voices' (Griffiths, 1998:96) and to reflect those voices in such a way as to retain the original integrity and meaning of the words. Griffiths (1998:127) also considered the issues around the use of voice and proposed an analysis of the concept of voice, arguing that exploitation of the researched can be avoided by using such an analysis as a framework for understanding what is and what is not exploitative. Using this analysis supported a reflexive approach and provided a framework to support an appropriate and ethical response to issues as they arose.



In fact, the most significant problem in the representation of voice, and the selection of data to be used was anonymisation of the participants. Those students who agreed to participate were happy to give information, and to contribute to all parts of the process, including giving (often critical) opinions on my initial interpretation of the data. However, almost without exception the young people were very reluctant to be anonymised, despite having disclosed intimate details about their lives. These covered a wide range of highly sensitive issues such as a history of care, criminal activity, pregnancy and medical problems. Interestingly, all the disclosures were made almost ordinary in the context of the language and lack of emotion used during each disclosure, perhaps reflecting the significant complexities of life faced by these young people on a daily basis. Therefore, the dialogue that evolved became less about what I, as the researcher could use, but more about me explaining the necessity for anonymising the participants and their institutions and explaining the potential consequences of making some of this information public. This conflicted with the students' wish to be recognised for their contribution: recognition was perceived to be others beyond the group knowing both that they had participated and what they had contributed. Ultimately, it became necessary to deny the young people the voice that they might have chosen, and which seemed to be related to notions of fame and celebrity, in order to give them a more public voice which could contribute to the debate on level 1 provision and the lives of students who access it. This choice, however, was mine and was made in the context of the demands of a research project and from a different value base and illustrates the way in which, despite my intention to collaborate with the participants, the ultimate control over the study was mine alone, highlighting questions of empowerment and the 'extent to which power can be "bestowed" upon people through the medium of education or research' (Johnston 2000:78/79)

The compromise reached with the young people was that they should choose their own pseudonym. The response to this was interesting, and a clear gender difference was reflected. Some male students found the process amusing, and offered 'joke' names, most of which were related to aspects of perceived masculinity, such as sexual prowess, possibly in an attempt to shock. Others, like a majority of the female students chose the names of contemporary 'celebrities' and there was a relationship between these choices, which appeared rooted in notions of wealth, fame and celebrity, and the aspirations expressed by the students during interview. Again imposing my own values on the young people and the study, I opted not to use those names which I felt were gratuitously offensive.

Keira, a Health and Social Care student from St. Dunstan's College posed a major ethical dilemma which required an immediate and situated response. Prior to the interview, the class tutor had informed me that Keira had carer responsibilities for her mother, but that the college was unaware of the nature or extent of these responsibilities – Keira would not discuss her home situation. She was interviewed with three friends and throughout the interview process sat holding hands with one of these friends. She spoke quietly and in monosyllables in response to questions, and was much less forthcoming than her peers, who were all very keen to contribute. When asked what her family thought about her course Keira became visibly anxious, and did not respond. Another group member, Brady, reported that Keira's mum was disabled and 'she can't talk to her about it'. Subsequently, whenever discussion with the group referred to family in any way Keira began to cry and was comforted by her friends. I suggested discontinuing the interview, but both she and her friends refused. The group had recently completed a unit on their learning programme covering confidentiality in care settings. Despite this, and my own explanations about confidentiality they retained an imperfect understanding of the term, the other students suggesting that



Keira disclosed her circumstances to me, and reassuring her that 'all this is confidential and she won't say anything to anyone, ever'.

Inevitably, this created two significant dilemmas for me. Should I carry on as requested by Keira and her friends, or discontinue the interview in view of her distress? Should I disclose that distress (and any of Keira's confidences) to the tutor, in view of her apparently significant home difficulties, and breach the trust and understanding of the group? What was the right course of action in terms of valuing the individual? Ultimately, I made a decision to carry on, despite Keira's distress, because she and her friends were adamant that this should happen. I did, however, suggest that she talked these issues through with her tutor. In doing so, I was uncomfortably aware that I had crossed the line between 'researcher' and 'pastoral support', but felt that such a response was both necessary and appropriate given Keira's level of distress and vulnerability. Fortunately, this problem was resolved after the interview, when, supported by her friends Keira asked to talk to her tutor and disclosed the extent of her responsibilities, which involved being the sole carer for a severely disabled, bed-ridden mother. The day before, her mother had been admitted to the local hospice for respite care. As a result of this disclosure, Keira was provided with ongoing support by the college support team.

### **Communication: Some Methodological Challenges**

Communication with the participant group formed the most challenging methodological issue of the research. It was necessary to explain the research process to the students in clear and unambiguous terms, using language with which they were familiar; this meant providing verbal clarity whilst ensuring there was no loss of meaning in my own communication. Ultimately, for example, this meant describing research as 'finding out'. The unsophisticated language used in the explanation was necessary to engage these young people and facilitate them to have

sufficient understanding of a somewhat abstract process to contribute to it in a meaningful way.

Verbally, the students use of less sophisticated language provided great clarity of meaning on almost all occasions, unobscured by rhetoric, as they contributed their views on life, educational credentials and the transition from education to work. Fine (1994:20), discussing her work on low-income adolescents in America reported that they gave 'vivid' accounts and were readily critical of society and the education system. This suggests a comparatively high level of verbal ability and social awareness, similar to that expressed by the level 1 and foundation students in this study.

Occasionally, however, young people did find themselves 'lost for words' as they struggled to express a feeling or opinion in written form, particularly when they were asked to review my early impressions of the data and to make comments on this. This interpretation was presented as a handout, with each theme summarised into a short sentence, and space to comment in writing beneath. Jennifer, a Woodlands student who had made an articulate and critical contribution in her interview, wrote 'They are all true but I don't know why I think this'. This was surprising given her verbal contributions (she knew exactly why she 'thought things'!) and may have reflected a low level of functional literacy, something which was evident across each of the groups who participated. Wellington and Cole (2004:103) noted similar difficulties in their research, reporting that they had to support articulate young people to complete questionnaires when it became apparent that they had difficulty with the written word. The difficulties experienced by the participants' in this study may have had implications for the eventual interpretation of the data, which might have been better shared verbally. It may be argued that the voice of the students' was ultimately diminished by their difficulty in using this medium, and that they may



have been able to give a richer, and more detailed interpretation had this part of the research process been carried out verbally, perhaps in small groups in the same way the interviews had been conducted.

### **Summary**

The second part of this chapter has outlined the methodological approach used in this study, and has discussed some of the methodological and ethical challenges arising from the use of a collaborative methodology with young level 1 students. It demonstrates that whilst the process did succeed in demonstrating value and respect for the young participants, and in enabling them to contribute to the research process, this contribution was inevitably limited by their lack of previous experience of any type of research. Ultimately, that I have to acknowledge that amongst others, issues of mediation, interpretation and writing will make mine the loudest voice. I hope that despite this, those of the young people can still be heard.

## Chapter 5: Narratives of a Difficult Present, Hopes for a Different Future

This chapter is presented in four sub-sections. The first of these addresses the social and institutional contexts of the institutions which participated in the study, and the following three present the data arising from the study as a narrative of each student group who participated.

### **5.1 Woodlands and St. Dunstan's Colleges: The Social and Institutional Contexts**

#### **Introduction**

Two colleges participated in this study: Woodlands College in Midport in the Midlands and St. Dunstan's College in Townsville in the North of England. This chapter begins with an outline of the similarities between them in terms of their social and economic context and the student population they serve and describes their different approaches to level one provision, also highlighting the limitations of the curriculum on offer to young people at this level. It goes on to present the data in terms of individual narratives related to each of the three groups who participated. Visions of a Digital Future relates to the young people undertaking a GNVQ foundation IT course at St. Dunstan's College. Rehearsing Domesticity describes the lives of the young women undertaking GNVQ foundation Health and Social Care at the same college, and Serving Time narrates the stories of the young people undertaking a locally designed level 1 course at Woodlands College. Although the chapter reports on each of the three groups separately, it considers similar issues with each group, and this is reflected in the sub-headings used within the chapter. These reflect the difficulties experienced by these young people in many areas of their lives, and the hopes that they have for a different kind of future. In order to give context to each narrative, all begin with a brief profile of the student



group concerned and all conclude with a brief summary of the key themes arising from the data.

### **Social and Institutional Context: St. Dunstan's College**

St. Dunstan's College is a large General Further Education college. It has two campuses which are several miles apart. This research was undertaken at the 'main' site, which is located in the centre of Townsville, an industrial town in northern England. Educational achievement and raising aspiration in young people is a major concern in the local area. The borough experiences significant social disadvantage according to the government's Indices of Multiple Deprivation with a ranking of 63 out of 354 local authorities in which number 1 is the most deprived (Office for National Statistics). Achievement rates at GCSE are below the national average. In 2004 46% of young people in the LEA achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C compared to a national average of 53.7%. Aspiration has been identified as a cause for concern and progression to Higher Education is poor. Research undertaken at a sub-regional level in 2003 indicated that 12% of young people were disengaged and not in education, employment or training (Connexions, 2003:7). Attainment at key stage 3 as well as key stage 4 is below the national average, despite being the highest in the sub-region and improving, and in terms of progression to Higher Education only 63% of the relevant cohort in schools and 48% in colleges progressed in 2002. It should be noted that this statistic masks wide variations between schools and colleges (Townsville Learning Partnership, 2003:8). Further evidence confirms concerns about aspiration across the sub-region. Although working with very small samples and therefore to be viewed with caution, research conducted by Northern Research Institute in a neighbouring town found that the disengaged young people they interviewed anticipated undertaking similar occupations to family members, and that these were largely low status, low paid and unskilled occupations (NRI 2003:4).

These issues have their roots in the sudden and massive industrial decline which hit the town during the 1980's. Prior to this, a majority of young men entered employment in the mines, steelworks or their servicing industries. There was also full employment for young women, although job roles were split on strictly gender lines, a situation which is still evident in labour market participation analyses (Objective One, undated:133). Between 1981 and 1995 this security vanished, as employment fell by 90% in the mining industry and by 24% in the manufacturing industries, (Townsville Economic Partnership 1999:9) coinciding with a sub-regional fall of 20% in all jobs (Objective One undated:16). There was little tradition of higher education in the town, although historically it had some well respected grammar schools, and unusually for a town of some 250,000 people, three further education colleges and one Sixth Form College. The Further Education Colleges were originally founded to support the mining industry whilst the Sixth Form College derives from a medieval Grammar School Foundation.

Education partnership work within the borough has involved the learning partnership, education and training providers, the LEA and local universities, focussing on the development of alternative, mainly vocational post-14 routes which are related to local economic needs and are perceived to be more likely to engage young people. This has been driven by the local Area Wide Inspection Action Plan, and government policy as expressed in the Green Paper (DFES, 2002). Simultaneously, European money has supported regeneration in the town and industries based on 'new' technologies are now developing. St. Dunstan's College has worked closely with schools, other providers and local employers to provided relevant training for young people wishing to enter these occupational areas and in some areas is able to provide 'pathways' from level 1 to HND. A cornerstone of level 1 provision, in which high levels of retention and achievement were identified as a key strength during the college's last inspection (OFSTED 2001) is the GNVQ foundation



programme. Two GNVQ foundation groups in IT and Health and Social Care participated in this research.

### **Social and Institutional Context: Woodlands College**

Woodlands College is a large General Further Education College sited on multiple campuses across Midport, a City in the English Midlands. According to government indices of multiple deprivation (Office for National Statistics) the city has one of the highest levels of social deprivation in England with an overall rank of 9 out of 354 local authorities, following the decline of its industrial base during the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Thus, the levels and extent of disadvantage amongst its student population are higher than those in Townsville. Although increasing regeneration is now evident, this is less advanced than that in Townsville. The educational achievement of school leavers in the City is well below the national average. In 2003, only 37% of year 11 students gained five or more GCSE grades at A\* - C, compared with 53% nationally and 11% of young leave school without any qualifications, the highest percentage in England. Participation in post-16 education is well below the national average and a large proportion of young people enter employment without training (OFSTED 2005). As a result of this situation, approximately 45% of enrolments at Woodlands College are to level 1 programmes, and concerns about the value of the curriculum offer at this level has led the college to develop its own level 1 provision based on some vocational education supported by basic skills and short courses, each of which is individually accredited. The vocational qualification offered is an NVQ level 1 and students work towards this on one day per week. The remainder of their time in college is focussed on basic skills and Personal and Social Education (PSE). During 2004/5, when the fieldwork for this research took place, the programme was in a period of transition as the college moved from an offer consisting primarily of GNVQ foundation to its new level one provision. As a result, one group who participated in this research were undertaking a GNVQ

foundation programme, and the second group were following the Woodlands College in-house programme. In addition to the development of a broader offer at level 1, the college has established a wide range of partnerships with organisations such as community learning providers, charities, social services and the probation service to try to address issues of low achievement and extend opportunities for learning. The increased level 1 provision forms part of the College response to educational and social inclusion and was identified as 'outstanding' during the organisation's recent OFSTED inspection (OFSTED 2005).

### **Differences and Similarities – the Problematisation of Level 1 Students**

Whilst there are significant differences between the two organisations there are also marked similarities. Both colleges, though geographically distant from one another, are in areas which suffered significantly from the industrial decline of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century and both serve broadly similar student groups. Each organisation has made a different response to the perceived 'problems' of level 1 students (and here it should be noted that few young people will have a choice of institution, given geographical constraints and the fact that few 6<sup>th</sup> forms offer significant level 1 provision). St. Dunstan's College has concentrated on offering a broad range of foundation GNVQ qualifications, with clear progression routes within each vocational area. Woodlands College has developed a generic level 1 programme, located within a separate department, from which students progress to level 2 courses across the college. However, the range of Foundation GNVQ awards is limited, and whilst there were plans to extend it, the level 1 provision at Woodlands College offered just four vocational options in the year the study took place.

A further similarity between the two colleges is that Level 1 students are problematised within both organisations, in the sense that they are, collectively or individually, problems to be solved. This problematising is



evident institutionally and at departmental and individual lecturer level, sometimes overt, but more often covert in terms of the discourse used and the expectations of the young people, and can be seen to reflect policy approaches and public and media perceptions. For example, staff overtly discuss 'progression', thus reinforcing government assumptions about straightforward transitions and lifelong learning, whilst covertly acknowledging that for many this is an unlikely option.

The problematisation of the students did not appear to be recognised by the tutors who participated in the study, all of whom were enthusiastic and expressed deep commitment to a student group whom they perceived to be significantly disadvantaged. This was especially the case where problematising co-existed within a strong nurturing ethos, and the nurturing approach was perceived to be the best approach to resolving the student's difficulties. The nurturing approach reflected gender differences (it was much more evident in two groups with a predominantly female staff group), but was most apparent in the Health and Social Care group, perhaps also influenced by the professional backgrounds of the lecturers on the programme.

## **5.2 Visions of a Digital Future: GNVQ IT Group, St. Dunstan's College, Townsville**

This narrative, visions of a digital future, reports on the GNVQ foundation (Information Technology) group at St. Dunstan's College. These young people, despite undertaking a programme which taught basic computer operating skills (e.g. use of the internet and PowerPoint), envisaged affluent futures where that affluence would be generated by high status employment within the digital economy.

### **Group Profile**

The GNVQ Foundation group studying Information Technology at St. Dunstan's College, Townsville consisted of 12 students, of whom eight participated in this study. The students were aged between 16 and 20

and all came from more disadvantaged areas of Townsville. Seven of the participating students were male, and only one, Emma, was female. Emma withdrew from the programme at the end of term one. Four students, Naz, Amir, Abdul and Samir described their ethnicity as Pakistani or Asian, and four - Al, Wayne, Pete and Emma - described their ethnicity as English or British. This is not reflective of the ethnic mix in the borough as a whole where, in 2001, 2.2% of the population was recorded as Asian (Office for National Statistics 2006). Educational achievement in the town in 2004 (the year most of this group took GCSEs) was below the national average, with 46% achieving 5 GCSEs at A\*-C grade in comparison with 53.7% nationally (DfES 2004).

Inevitably, one outcome of this is that significant numbers of young people progress to low level further education programmes. One of the group, Samir, was not enrolled on the GNVQ foundation but was doing part of the programme as 'infill' from the pre-level one provision. He had been educated in special schools, and had a physical disability which necessitated use of a wheelchair. Samir was present for all the data gathering activities and participated in them enthusiastically.

The group was taught by three key staff members: Nick, the programme coordinator, and Neil and Sara, both of whom lectured on the programme. All three lecturers were interviewed as part of this study.

The students were asked to describe their families' occupational and educational backgrounds, and the results are summarised in figure 6. Sibling gender is given where this was provided by the student. In other cases, the young people referred to 'brothers and sisters'.



<b>Student</b>	<b>Mother's Occupational Background</b>	<b>Father's Occupational Background</b>	<b>Siblings' Occupational/Educational Background</b>
Samir	House cleaning	Unemployed	1. 'married off' - Housewife 2. 'at home' (?Unemployed) sister 3. School child (brother) 4. School child (brother)
Wayne	Cleaner with local MBC	1 <sup>st</sup> Aid Trainer (step-father; father deceased)	1. Plasterer (brother) 2. Joiner (brother) 3. Mechanic (brother)
Al	Not Known	Not Known	1. School child (sister)
Pete	Deceased	Not in contact	1. Occupation unknown (brother) 2. School child, in care 3. School child, in care 4. School child, in care 5. School child, in care 6. School child, in care
Naz	Phlebotomist	Bricklayer	1. Leeds University - Music (sister) 2. Leeds University - Psychology (sister)
Amir	Housewife	Shop assistant	1. School child 2. School child 3. Schoolchild
Abdul	Housewife	Not Known	1. School child 2. School child 3. Schoolchild 4. Cousins have degrees
Emma	Cleaner	Not in contact	1. Cleaner (sister) 2. Packer (brother)

**Figure 6** – Occupational and Educational Backgrounds of IT Students' Parents' and Siblings

The data in figure 6 is represented in the way it was described by each student. It was apparent that all employed parents were in low-paid, working class specific occupations. This was also the case for most siblings, although Naz had two sisters who were both at university, and Abdul reported having 'cousins with degrees'. In addition to the class

specificity evident in parental occupations, it was also apparent that where the mothers were engaged in paid employment, their occupations were all also gender typical, as were those of the siblings who were in paid employment. This strongly gendered pattern extended to the programme which the students were undertaking. Only one female student was enrolled during the year in which this study was conducted, reflecting a phenomenon which is also present in technology based occupations where 93% of the employees are male (Office for National Statistics, 2002).

### **Imagined Futures**

The GNVQ IT students at St. Dunstan's College were asked 'what sort of job would you like to do in the future?' in order to identify their occupational aspirations. In order to determine whether or not they had role models who could encourage their aspirations, they were also asked whether they knew anyone who was already employed in a similar role. The data gathered showed that these young people had imagined futures in two related areas – occupational aspirations and lifestyle aspirations. However, rather than lifestyle and occupation being complementary, there were significant tensions between the two.

The occupational aspirations of the group varied, but all emphasised the importance of getting a 'good' job, and only Abdul was not able to be specific about the type of job role he aspired to (see figure 7).



<b>Student</b>	<b>Occupational Aspiration</b>	<b>Do you know anyone doing what you aspire to?</b>
Samir	Receptionist	No
Wayne	Salesman	No
Al	IT specialist	No
Pete	RAF Ground Crew	Grandfather ex-RAF
Naz	Computer Programmer	Cousin
Amir	Computer Programmer	No
Abdul	Something with computers	No
Emma	Fitness Instructor	No

**Figure 7** – IT Students' Occupational Aspiration and Potential Role Model

Of eight students, only two had a relative, friend or acquaintance already employed in a related area and four of the group had occupational aspirations with, at best, a tenuous link to an IT credential. There was a further conflict between the occupational aspirations expressed by the students and their lifestyle aspirations, and the difference between these was so significant as to be incongruous. The type of lifestyle aspirations the students expressed fell in the realms of fantasy – acknowledged by Al who aspired to be 'an IT specialist – in America or Japan'. He hoped that the lifestyle which would accompany this would include 'a big mansion in America, tons of girls' but a brief note of reality crept in when he added 'I don't think it's going to come true – I can dream it'.

The tutors' perceptions of the students' futures were framed exclusively within the context of a pursuit of higher and higher rungs of an IT based educational ladder. Generally, the tutors regarded the course as the beginning of a progression route, and considered that its value was as the 'foundation' of an educational ladder which would provide a wider

range of career opportunities although they acknowledged that in excess of 20% of the intake probably would not 'progress'. Despite this, the tutors were unaware of the destinations of the students although Nick speculated that 'some move onto other areas, try something else, or some maybe do get jobs' and Neil considered that '...a natural route for them or a more natural route is to go from the foundation onto the intermediate and then higher really. But I think foundation's like ... it's not a kindergarten that's the wrong thing but it's like it's preparing them for the next one. That's why I think it's called a foundation'.

For the students, the future consisted of lifestyle and occupational ambitions, and an educational route to achieving this seemed to be incidental to most of the group. For some, particularly the four students from the Pakistani community, marriage and a family formed a significant aspect of their (more pragmatic) expectations for the future. The other four students in the group came from white British backgrounds. This group of students had strong roots in the local former steelwork, former mining working class community and included Emma, the only female member of the class. Emma had modest aspirations in terms of the rest of the group in that she hoped to work in a Gym and to own her own home. Despite the modest nature of her aspirations, and her belief that completing the GNVQ Foundation IT and later a Leisure and Tourism Intermediate GNVQ would enable her to achieve them, Emma withdrew at the end of the first term.

Wayne was the only white British student to include a future family as part of his imagined future. For Wayne, in contrast to the Asian students, this seemed to be a hope rather than an expectation. 'I'll be living with my girlfriend and probably having a baby and getting married and stuff like that'. He expected to be 'Dressed up smartly and walking about't streets hoping that people will buy stuff off you because you're that good a salesman'. His ambition to be a salesman conflicted with his lifestyle



ambitions, which in themselves held elements of contradiction. He anticipated '[looking after] the baby and my girlfriend as well... [living] somewhere where it's hot all the time. Where it's beautiful but not like a foreign place'.

Living abroad was a common ambition amongst the wider group and most of those who expressed this ambition hoped to live somewhere exotic, with the exception of Naz who intended to move to Germany. He was unable to give a clear reason for this, but expected to 'marry a German wife' and thought that once in Germany he would 'be a computer programmer'. He thought that he might have to go to university for two years before he could be a computer programmer but expected that he would find the transition to university and the experience there 'easy'. In terms of university, only Abdul, who had several cousins with degrees, recognised that it would take 'a very long time' to achieve a university education given a starting point of GNVQ foundation. Samir also mentioned university, in a rather wistful acknowledgement that this would not be part of his own transition: 'I know I can't go to university (because) they have exams, very long exams. After their exams they can do anything they want to'.

Considered in terms of Ball et al's 'arenas of action, centres of choice' (2000:148), at interview all these young people expressed a significant investment in their education, though other comments they made contradicted this. They demonstrated a more significant investment in their leisure and social life; in addition, those students from Asian backgrounds showed a heavy investment in their cultural and family life. Each of the male Asian students negotiated effectively between these arenas, with little evidence of the dissonance experienced between social and cultural/domestic identities by one young female 'Britasian' in Ball et al's study (2000:37). However, the young Asian men in this study did express a degree of fatalism in terms of their future domestic

arrangements. Whilst Amir, who wanted to 'be a computer programmer' described a possible transition which would lead to 'a good job that I will stick with' he anticipated that once he had achieved this, he would 'get married, and live in a bigger town, not boring Townsville'. Amir's expectations did include a transition and employment before marriage, but for Samir, facing the added difficulty of physical disability, the prospect of employment was almost secondary:

'We tried to get me married off but it hasn't worked yet. [I will probably have] a job – I would like to work in an office answering phones, messages for anybody, working on computer ... bringing up a good family that can look after me, go to Pakistan'. For Samir, being 'looked after' by a future wife and family figured highly in his hopes for the future.

For all the young people in this group, the lifestyle ambitions they expressed were incongruent with their occupational aspirations. Indeed, rather than imagined futures their lifestyle aspirations might better be described as fantasy futures. These fantasies encompassed living in mansions, living abroad in exotic (and slightly less exotic) locations, apparently unlimited material wealth and (for the male students) the admiration and attention of many young women. This celebrity lifestyle, whilst unattainable for these young people, is one to which they are heavily exposed through the media, particularly in terms of the coverage of individual sports and popular music personalities such as David and Victoria Beckham.

Although none of the occupational ambitions they expressed would support such a lifestyle, most would provide a regular income at national average levels or above and might be described as 'working class career jobs' (Ashton and Field 1976 cited Hodkinson et al 1996:7). However, for this group of young people such ambitions may be as unattainable as the fantasy lifestyle. A significant contributor to this is the fact that none of the students had a clear idea of the credentials or education or work



related routes necessary to access their chosen occupation. Al, for example, wanted 'high standard' qualifications in programming or engineering. He believed that this would take 'at least a few years' but was unsure how long or what type of qualification he needed. Likewise, Amir said 'I think I will [need further qualifications]' but was also unable to be specific about the nature of those qualifications, or how long it might take to achieve them.

### **Hanging In**

Of the eight students who participated in this study, five were successful in achieving a GNVQ foundation award. One (Emma) withdrew and a second (Naz) completed the course but failed to achieve the qualification (see figure 8).

<b>Name</b>	<b>Final Grade/Outcome</b>	<b>Destination</b>
Samir	Infill – no grade	Foundation GNVQ IT
Wayne	Pass	Unknown
Al	Merit	DIDA
Pete	Pass	DIDA
Naz	Unclassified	Not Known
Amir	Pass	DIDA
Abdul	Pass	DIDA
Emma	Withdrawn	Not known

**Figure 8 – GNVQ IT Students' destinations**

The college had no record as to the destination of either Naz or Emma, but neither had the skills or credentials necessary to work in their chosen occupation and it is possible that they have continued to work in the low pay low skill occupations they were pursuing concurrently with the GNVQ programme. For Emma this was work as a cleaner and for Naz labouring

for his father. Wayne did achieve his award, but left at the end of the year, again leaving no indication of his future destination. With a notion of the role of a salesman seemingly rooted in the mid-twentieth century his occupational ambition also seems likely to remain unfulfilled. Samir, who had done part of the programme without assessment as a broader special needs provision, intended to progress to the foundation programme and the remaining four students all intended to progress to the Diploma in Digital Applications (DIDA) a new level 2 programme in IT. Neil (tutor) talked at length about the nature of the difficulties some of these students brought with them. He ascribed much of the 'drop out' as being due to such pressures, and felt that he had particular empathy with such students:

I think some don't pass this course for reasons outside colleges sort of ...there's nothing we can do about it they have problems at home and they go missing. You know, not missing from home - they just don't turn up to college and their own personal life sort of affects whether they pass or not. It's not through the lack of trying I think, because they are going through 16-18 year olds and all the hormones and the personal life and other pressures. I think that affects it and then you get the ones who just... they just sort of disappear you just don't see them and they could be doing whatever, what they've got to do to survive I guess. Whether they've been kicked out, whether they've got their own place or whether there are other things they've got to deal with in life which I can relate to because I left home at 19. I don't think its people put a big thing on passing you know, you've got to get every student to pass but there are things beyond our control that you just can't... you just can't plan for; you can't do anything about.

Neil GNVQ foundation IT Tutor, St. Dunstan's



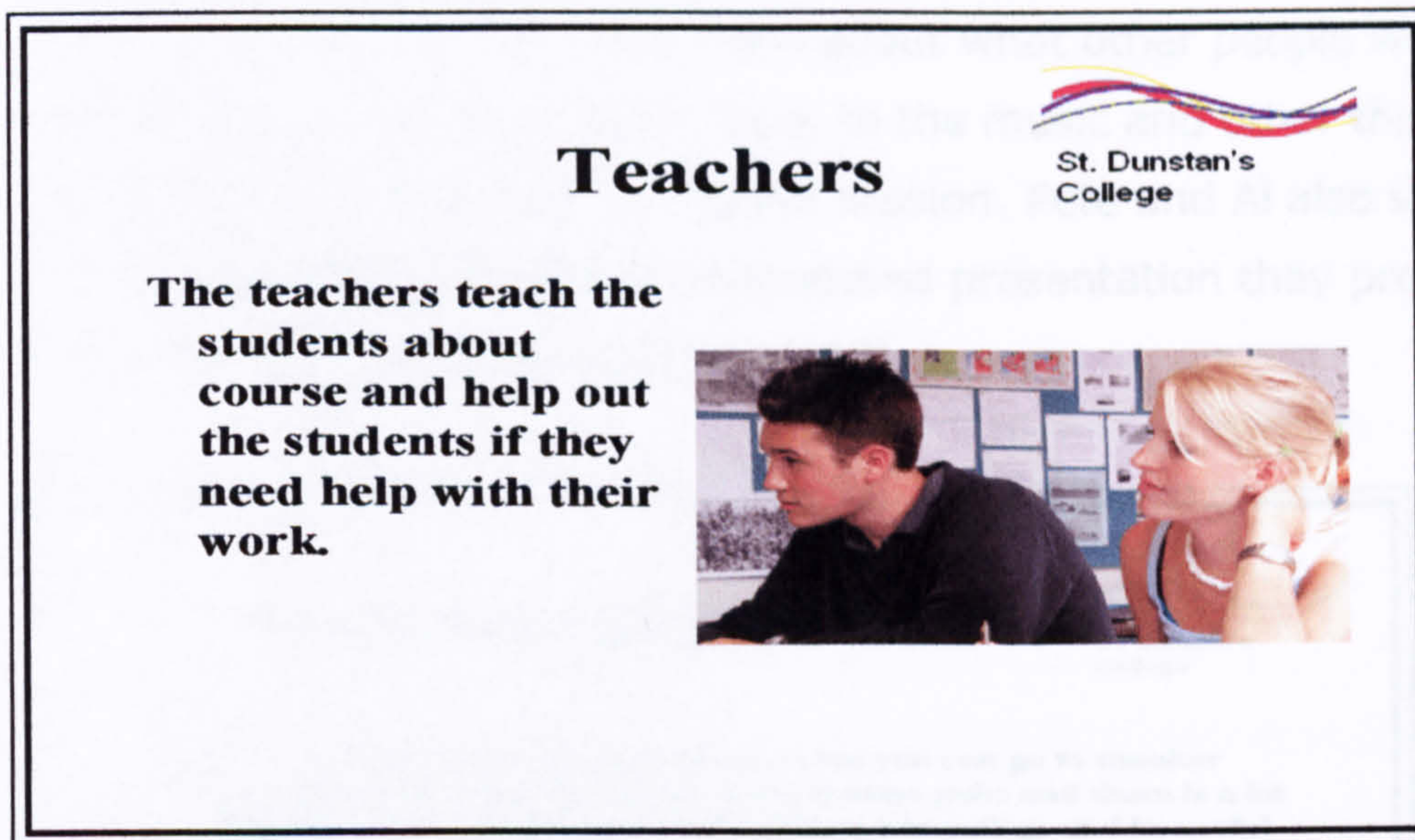
Despite Neil's insight into the complexities of the lives of his students, like Nick, he regarded the real value of the award as being an opportunity to work towards level 2, the government's minimum for employability. This view suggests that these tutors had 'bought in' to the government rhetoric of the learning society, in which ever higher levels of credential are necessary to succeed in the labour market (Bathmaker 2005). However, whilst subscribing to the belief that level 1 programmes provided an opportunity to progress to level 2, Sara, another tutor on the programme, had some particularly strong feelings about the programme, which she felt failed to meet students' expectations. She believed that students expected practical activities (such as surfing the net and producing power point presentations) and were unaware that IT programmes at all levels have high business studies and management content. This was confirmed by Abdul who said that he 'like[d] doing presentations – they are exciting. We have finished all the boring stuff now'.

### **College: a Better Education?**

The achievement of qualifications was not the only value the students placed on the programme. Naz said that 'It's about being treated with respect and no uniform' and Pete, who had struggled at school, valued the support he received from the tutors:

'I love it me, I think it's brilliant. I like how the lessons are handled because they explain better, they actually run over it different ways what you actually have to do on the course so it's more easier to understand'. This acknowledgement of the need for support, which is at variance with the students' perception of themselves as adults, was also evident in some of the presentations (see figure 9):



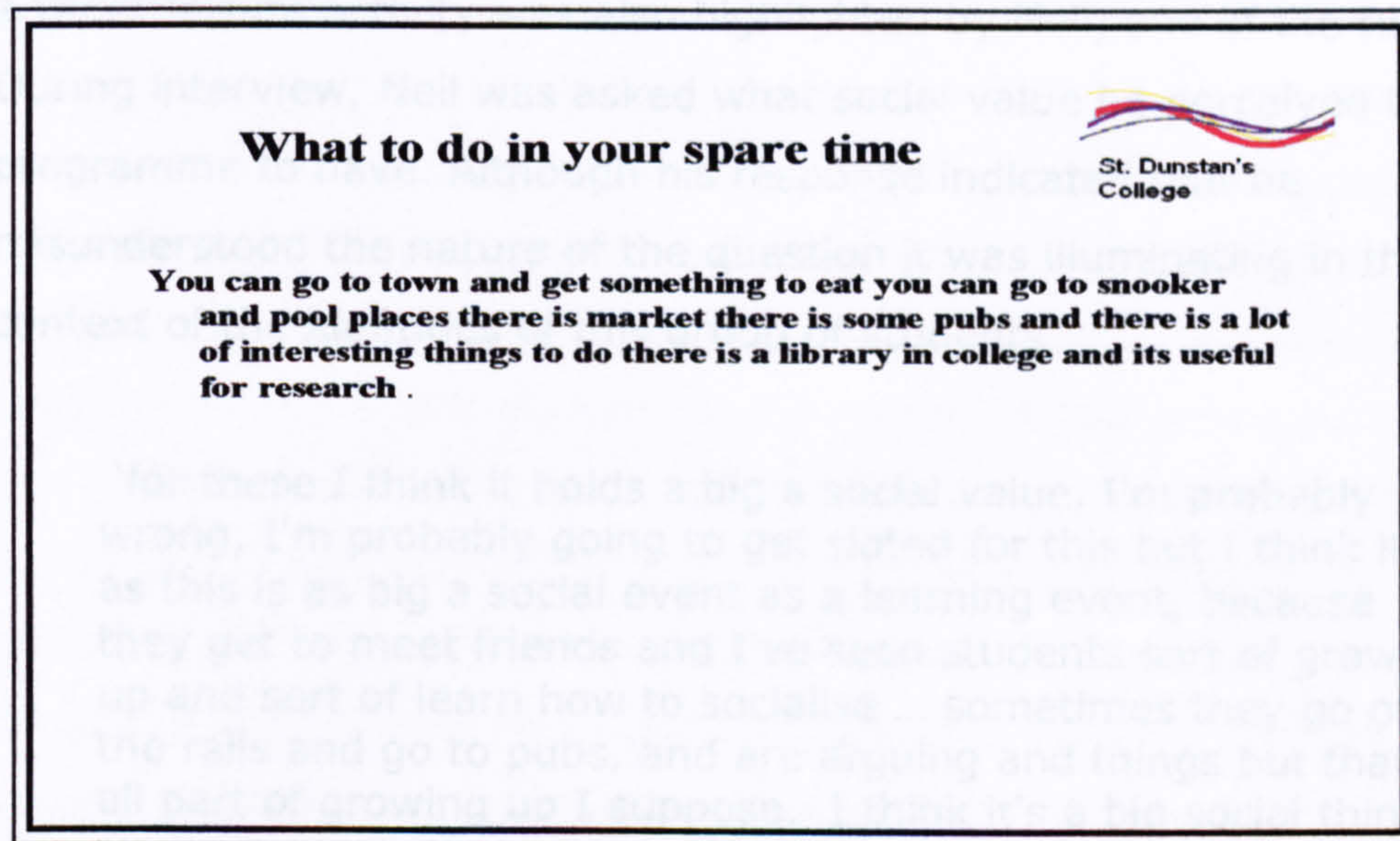


**Figure 9** Slide 6/20 Pete and Al's presentation

The students' perceptions of college were that it was better than going to school, and there was a general perception amongst the students, evident in their interview data, that they were working hard. However, other data arising from the classroom observation and interviews with staff, as well as the students' own presentations, indicated that other things may be happening here, and that attending college formed an extension of their leisure activity. This was evident in discussions they had in the classroom during lessons when much of the 'chat' was focussed on the discussion of various leisure activities with friends in the group. Being able (or 'allowed') to talk was important to them. Wayne preferred college because 'Teachers let you have free time to talk to each other if you do your work so it's not like school' and Samir agreed saying that 'It is better than school – you can talk and work at the same time'. During my observation of this group (03.03.05), they were keen to show off the work they were doing, but also chatted at length amongst themselves, and most of the focus of this was around their leisure activities. Pete talked at length about his new boots, as well as about how much he had drunk the previous night whilst Samir's



conversation ranged from questions about what other people were doing, to what they might do at lunch time, to the music and other things he had found on the internet during the session. Pete and Al also succeeded in including leisure activity in an assessed presentation they produced about the GNVQ programme (figure 10).



**Figure 10** Slide 7/20 Pete and Al's presentation

The attendance and motivation levels observed in the classroom seemed to contradict some of the reports given by the students during their interviews, in which, with only one exception, they had enthused about the programme and emphasised their commitment to attend and get a 'good' qualification. Wayne, for example, stated in interview that 'I'm attending every day. I've probably missed one or two days in the whole of the time I've been here' but this statement was inconsistent with Nick's assessment of Wayne's attendance as 'poor'. The students' perception was that they were working hard, and this was reflected in their keenness to show me the presentations they were working on. This dichotomy between the students belief that they were working 'hard' and



other available evidence was also noted by Bathmaker (2005) and is explored further later in this thesis.

The tendency for students to regard their learning programme as part of a wider leisure activity was also highlighted by Neil, one of the tutors. During interview, Neil was asked what social value he perceived the programme to have. Although his response indicated that he misunderstood the nature of the question it was illuminating in the context of the identities of this group of students

'for these I think it holds a big a social value, I'm probably wrong, I'm probably going to get slated for this but I think it's as this is as big a social event as a learning event, because they get to meet friends and I've seen students sort of grow up and sort of learn how to socialise ... sometimes they go off the rails and go to pubs, and are arguing and things but that's all part of growing up I suppose. I think it's a big social thing'  
Neil (Tutor, Foundation GNVQ IT)

### **Choosing a 'Good' Qualification?**

Most of the IT students had arrived on the course by serendipity, rather than as part of a planned transition. Wayne had previously spent a year on another course at the same college 'I went to East Building close to North Building in Townsville and I did a Key Skills Building Year or something'. Pete had also progressed from other programmes 'Well, I was in college the past two years doing Next Step (pre level 1 programme) and engineering just to boost my grades up'. Emma had also progressed from 'another course'. She had wanted to do leisure and tourism but the programme failed to recruit and she was offered a place to do IT. Emma was vague about the other course and her existing credentials. She thought she might have two GCSEs, but could not recall either grades or subjects. Wayne was equally vague regarding his GCSE grades – he thought he had 'got a pass in every one' but '*I don't know whether I did good or bad* but I think I got a pass in every one' (my emphasis). Other students were similarly vague about their existing



credentials. Al reported having done a GNVQ in Applied IT for which he thought he had received a 'high grade' though he was unable to be specific. He had done this and 'the engineering course' after achieving what he described as 'poor' GCSE grades. He and Pete, with whom he was interviewed, clarified this as 'Es and Fs really'.

Despite the almost accidental nature of their transitions, the students regarded the programme as a route to a 'good' qualification both in its own right and as a pathway to higher level credentials. Al believed the programme was about 'starting at the bottom, working your way up and get the best qualification in IT' whilst Samir said that: 'You'll probably get a very good qualification if you can turn up at a certain time and in a certain place that you need to be in then you will get a very good qualification'. and Pete reported that: 'Grandad says "you will go far if you have some great qualifications behind you"'.

In stark contrast to the optimism expressed by the students, the teaching team regarded the qualification as having little economic value and Nick suggested that the real value of the foundation award was as an educational stepping stone:

They're not [likely to gain employment as a result of holding a foundation credential] if you think the job they're gonna get from having a foundation or not having a foundation is not that different but I mean we've got kids now on National Diploma, on Level 3 who started with us on foundation, so we've got kids on HNDs who started on intermediate so it's giving them a bit of confidence and not everything can be judged on figures

Nick (Programme Co-ordinator, Foundation GNVQ IT)

This is consistent with Bathmaker's (2001) finding that foundation programmes were considered to hold little credence outside the college but were valued as a progression route to Intermediate GNVQ (level 2).

### **Having Fun, Hanging Around**

For the IT group, the most important thing in life was leisure and 'having fun'. Many of the group used the term 'hanging around with friends' to describe their activities. For this predominantly male group, the key activities they engaged in during leisure time were sport, computer or alcohol related, and this was common across the two cultural groups represented. However, whilst those students from the local white ethnic community engaged in these activities with friends, those from the Pakistani ethnic community engaged in such activities with both friends and their extended family, usually relatives described as cousins.

Wayne, who enjoyed fishing at a competitive level, had recently won £500 in addition to a number of silver cups. He was exceptional in this however, in that no other student participated in a leisure activity which held the possibility of financial reward. Therefore, for Wayne and for other students, most leisure activity was funded by part time employment or benefits (see figure 11).



<b>Student</b>	<b>Existing Financial support/employment</b>
Samir	Benefits
Wayne	P/T Shop Assistant
Al	P/T Kitchen Porter/EMA
Pete	Child Benefit
Naz	P/T Labourer
Amir	P/T Shop assistant
Abdul	Parental support
Emma	Cleaner

**Figure 11** – Sources of financial support for GNVQ IT students

Only one student (Abdul) reported being exclusively dependent on his parents, and whilst none of the types of employment the students engaged in might be described as anything more than low skill, low pay work, some falling within the black economy, their employment did provide these young people with a tenuous hold on the world of work and the possibility of future employment. Naz and Amir both worked with their fathers, a familial link which could prove useful in the future. Emma's job as a cleaner was both full time and permanent and Al, whilst at the time of interview working as a kitchen porter on a casual basis, was awaiting an interview for a job as a checkout operator at his local Tesco store.

The importance of money and its relationship to leisure was highlighted by Wayne, who described his part time job in a local shop for cash in hand as 'just a little job to get me money for the weekend so I can do what I like, a few sports, have a drink, whatever?'. Samir, Al, Pete, Naz and Amir all highlighted 'hanging around with friends' as an important part of their leisure activity and most of the group identified group activities as being fundamental to their leisure time. Hanging around

seemed to mean being with other young people, accepted as part of that group and being engaged in conversation with others. This did not necessarily need to be associated with any other activity, and was regarded as having significance in its own right.

Many of the group activities these young people engaged in were sports related – football, rugby, cricket and basketball all figured highly. Others were related to the consumption of alcohol and their comments suggested that these young people, despite most being under 18, and irrespective of ethnicity or religion, were engaged in a heavy drinking culture. Both Naz and Amir identified 'going for a drink' as important, whereas others participated in activities which might involve the use of alcohol. Abdul, for example, spent time regularly at his local snooker hall with his friends. Other evidence of students engaging with a drinking culture was provided by their presentations and discussions during class activities. Pete, who at interview identified a range of apparently innocuous and often solitary activities: 'Play on the play – station, go on computer. Sometimes I go swimming or go out with my mates – half the time I am with my mates. I enjoy rock music and sci-fi space programmes. I collect Warhammer'<sup>3</sup> discussed his heavy drinking at length in class and produced a presentation on 'My favourite food' which comprised a series of slides listing a vast range of alcoholic drinks.

Samir, whose leisure, like his education, was constrained by his physical limitations, spent much of his leisure time engaged in solitary activities but looked forward to Saturdays:

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<sup>3</sup> Warhammer is a strategy game involving the collection and decoration of small figures which are then used to act out battles in a similar way to old fashioned toy soldiers



For me, me and my mates meet up. We sometimes go [to the pub] for a drink, we all like the same. We sometimes go to McDonalds; we have a really good time. At home I play on play station or watch telly. A lot of time is spent playing on the play station or watching telly but on Saturday I meet up with my mates and have a good time. I do whatever they do. I **really** do whatever they do.

(Samir IT)

Samir demonstrated more characteristics associated with social exclusion than any other member of this group (special education, lack of credentials, ethnicity, disability, poverty and class), perhaps placing him at the bottom of a societal stratification which constitutes layers of inclusion and not just a distinction between inclusion and exclusion (Bathmaker, 2005). His final, reiterated sentence seemed to reflect a quiet desperation – an attempt to keep ‘hanging in’ through participation in leisure as much as education so as to be the same as everyone else.

### **Summary**

This group of young people enjoyed attending college and had high hopes for their future in a digital world. These hopes had a dreamlike quality. The students imagined the affluence associated with some parts of the IT industry, and a celebrity lifestyle that they hoped such an income could sustain. They believed that the ‘good’ qualification they would achieve – a GNVQ Foundation IT award – would provide the basis for such a career. Knowledge about career pathways, credentials and the potential length of transition was limited to Abdul who had clearly observed closely his cousins’ transitions through higher education. However, despite an expressed commitment to learning and achieving credentials three of the eight students who participated left education and only one of these achieved the foundation award. Four –only half the group - progressed to level 2, with Samir remaining to complete the

foundation award. The expressed commitment to learning also conflicted with the importance of leisure activity in the lives of these young people. Further, it was apparent that the effort which was invested in leisure in terms of both the leisure activity itself and in acquiring the money to finance it far outweighed that invested in learning although the students seemed unaware of this and believed they were 'working hard' – they saw no dissonance between their investment in leisure and their visions of an affluent digital future.

### **5.3 Rehearsing Domesticity: GNVQ Foundation Health and Social Care Group – St. Dunstan's College**

This narrative, 'rehearsing domesticity', reports on the GNVQ foundation (Health and Social Care) group at St. Dunstan's College. These young women rejected gender stereotypical female roles, yet were all engaged in preparing for caring job roles and most had caring and domestic responsibilities within the home.

#### **Group Profile**

The Health and Social Care Foundation GNVQ group at St. Dunstan's College (hereafter the HSC group) consisted of thirteen, all female, students. One, Rukhsana, did not wish to be interviewed but contributed to other aspects of data collection and analysis. For this reason, she appears on information tables in this section. Rukhsana was the only minority ethnic student in this group, and came from a Pakistani family. She tended to be isolated within the group. This appeared to be due rather to her extreme shyness and poor attendance than to any overt racial tensions amongst the students. However, her poor attendance was ascribed by the course tutor to her family's cultural expectation that she should care for younger siblings. The other twelve students were all from families who had spent generations in the local working class communities where, before the industrial decline of the 1980s, most people had found employment in the steel and mining industries.



Unemployment is high in this area, poverty widespread and achievement low. Consistent with this, parental occupation as reported by the students was confined to low pay, low skill occupations, and none reported having parents, siblings or extended family members with education beyond level 2, the equivalent to GCSE (see figure 12).

<b>Student</b>	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Siblings</b>
Paris	Factory worker	Fundraiser (unpaid)	1. Unknown
Jennifer	'Mum works everywhere'	Shelf stacking	1. Sister - Mecca Bingo Hall 2. Sister - Mecca Bingo Hall 3. Brother - Army
Keira	Disabled	No contact	No siblings
Brady	Not known	Fork lift truck driver - supervisory role	1. Sister - Cleaner 2. Brother in law - shop assistant
Kate	Unemployed	Unemployed	Older siblings, gender not reported 1. Sister - McDonalds others not known
Angelina	Housewife	Builder	1. Sister - Schoolchild
Jade	Cleaner	Care Assistant	1. Brother - Working 2. Brother- School child with special needs 3. Sister - School child
Alice	Care Assistant	Disabled	1. Sister - Non-working Mother 2. Sister - Non-working Mother 3. Sister - Non-working Mother 4. 5 Younger siblings, gender not reported
Rea	Cleaner	P/T Computer Repairs	1. Sister - School child 2. Sister - School child
Britney	Shop Worker	Postman & Doorman	1. Sister - Shop Assistant (Jewellers) 2. Sister - Shop Assistant (Boots) 3. Sister - schoolchild
Cameron	Cares for dad	'Ill'	1. Sister - Asda 2. Brother- School child 3. Brother - School child
Kelly	Working	Working	1. Sister - School child
Rukhsana	Not Interviewed	Not interviewed	Not interviewed

**Figure 12** – Occupational and Educational backgrounds of HSC Students parents' and siblings



8 of 13 mothers were known to be in employment although three students (Kelly, Jennifer and Brady) did not know what their mother's occupation was. Where occupation was reported, it tended to follow strong gender divisions, reflecting traditional roles in the local community. Two mothers were employed as cleaners, one as a shop assistant and one as a care assistant. One mother worked in a food processing factory but the nature of her job role was unclear to her daughter (Paris). Cameron's mother was an unpaid carer. In addition to strongly gendered occupational backgrounds, 3 of the parents of students in this group were reported as disabled and a further 3 were working as paid or unpaid carers, possible influences on their daughters, who had enrolled on a HSC programme. Another parent was employed as an unpaid charity fundraiser, an occupation which might also be seen to have an - albeit nebulous - link with caring, perhaps in terms of giving and the altruistic nature of the role.

Of those siblings whose gender was reported, a significant majority were female (16 of 21). Although the gender of all siblings was not reported (two students had unspecified 'brothers and sisters') the focus of most students' responses was on female, rather than male siblings. The exception to this was Jade who wrote in her individual profile that 'I love looking after my special needs little brother'. However, whilst her comment referred to a brother, its emphasis appeared to be less on gender and more on caring and domesticity. This focus on gender and caring is interesting given the marked gender divisions in the programme the group were enrolled on, and the fact that they were drawn from a community which still adheres to very traditional gender roles.

Eleven of the twelve students interviewed aspired to gender stereotypical, caring jobs (see figure 13). Seven hoped to work in childcare and two as a nurse or midwife. One student hoped to become a social worker and Jade, influenced by her experience with her 'special

needs little brother' aspired to be a special needs teacher. The exception was Keira. Already the sole full time carer for a terminally ill mother, she could see no future beyond fulfilling this role.

### **Imagined Futures**

At interview, the young people were asked to identify their aspirations, and in order to ascertain whether they had any role models, whether they knew anyone who was already employed in the same role. Their responses are illustrated in figure 13. Only two of the group could be said to have a role model of any description. Rea, who hoped to pursue a career in childcare, had previously worked at Wacky Warehouse<sup>4</sup> where other staff who held recognised childcare qualifications had encouraged her ambitions. Alice hoped to be a nurse, and whilst she did not know anyone already working as a nurse, her mother was a care assistant in a nursing home, providing a possible link to potential role models.

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<sup>4</sup> Wacky Warehouse – a national chain of indoor adventure play areas for small children



<b>Student</b>	<b>Occupational Aspiration</b>	<b>Do you know anyone doing this job now?</b>
Paris	Midwifery, then to teach midwifery	No
Jennifer	Nursery Nursing, then to teach Nursery Nursing	No
Keira	No aspiration	No
Brady	Nursery Nursing, then to teach Nursery Nursing	Yes
Kate	Catering or working in a Nursery	Catering - sister works at McDonalds
Angelina	Nursery Nurse	N/A
Jade	Special Needs Teacher	No but younger sibling has special needs
Alice	Nursing	Mother a Care Assistant
Rea	Childcare	Yes – I used to work at Wacky Warehouse
Britney	Childcare (secure job)	Not childcare – sisters in 'secure jobs'
Cameron	Childcare	No
Naomi	Social Work	No
Rukhsana	Not Interviewed	Not Interviewed

**Figure 13** – Students' Occupational Aspiration and Potential Role Model

There were some tensions between the occupational aspirations of the group and the lifestyle aspirations that some of them also expressed. Where lifestyle aspirations were included, they all involved an expectation of future wealth and affluence. For Paris this was 'a mansion in North Yorkshire, a Porsche' and for Brady to 'own my own house in London' whilst Naomi aspired to 'own my own house in London' and Kate, who had never travelled overseas, hoped to be working abroad.

This preoccupation with a wealthy lifestyle extended to the students' leisure activity in terms of their interest in popular culture and the lifestyle of celebrities such as the Beckhams. The group also watched a

range of popular competitive television programmes in which the winner received significant cash rewards and/or instant fame such as 'Big Brother', 'Pop Idol', 'who wants to be a millionaire?' and 'I'm a celebrity get me out of here'. This was strongly reflected in the group's choice of pseudonyms for this study, all of whom were well known characters in television programmes, pop stars, models or Hollywood actresses.

This group expressed superficially pragmatic career related expectations (see figure 13); for example, Alice wanted to 'go to university and be a nurse'; Jade to 'be a teacher' and Rea to 'go to university'. However, only two of the students were acquainted with anyone already working in the role to which she aspired. None of the others had the benefit of a mentor or role model to support them to achieve their career aim. There was a further dissonance between these ambitions and the students' other ideas for the future. Both Rea and Alice, whilst expressing a desire to go to university and prepare for professional roles also indicated that they might leave college at the end of the foundation course to 'get some money behind me'.

Early in the year all these young women indicated that they had bought into credentialism as a route to success and expressed commitment to obtaining 'good' jobs requiring 'qualifications'. Despite this, none of the group had any notion of the career path or credentials they would need to pursue to achieve their expressed career aspiration and, like the young people in Bathmaker's (2001) study, they showed no inclination to investigate this. Jade, who wanted to be a special needs teacher, was typical of this:



- EJA OK. So Jade, you want to be a special needs teacher. Do you know how long it will take you to get there?
- Jade Roughly about 3 -4 years.
- EJA And what would you have to do to become a special needs teacher?
- Jade Erm ... a course on childcare probably, and something higher up the special needs thing.
- EJA And something higher up the special needs thing. Right. Would you need to go to university or anything like that?
- Jade I don't think so.

Kate's response was equally, if not more confused:

- EJA What sort of job with children would you like?
- Kate Class Assistant, a nanny something like that.
- EJA OK. Do you know what sort of qualifications you need for that?
- Kate Yes.
- EJA What do you need?
- Kate I can't remember.

Despite this, she was confident that in the future, she would have a 'secure job' working with children.

Although unclear about possible pathways, the students seemed to view the foundation programme as a route to other programmes which would ultimately enable them to fulfil their aspirations. This notion of the foundation programme as a pathway was also apparent in the staff interviews which focussed on the foundation award as a route to other programmes and to specific occupations. John, the Programme Co-ordinator, considered that the programme:

...certainly prepares those who are capable for a higher level of education which is very good [and in addition to progressing to level 2] some students have actually gone on and gone to work in residential care homes, nursing homes and have actually gone onto the NVQ route after obtaining that level, but obviously their practical skills have to be achieved as well.

Later, placing his faith in the new partnership agreement between St. Dunstan's and a local NHS trust he suggested that

They may not achieve their aspirations of being fully registered Staff within that sphere of employment. They may well obtain a lower level of employment within that and they have some background skills as well which could be utilised.

John Programme Co-ordinator GNVQ Foundation HSC

This comment appears to suggest that the programme is effectively preparing students for lower level 'caring' jobs as a substitute for their original aspirations. However, for most of this group, who aspired to work with children, caring jobs within the local NHS trust would be unlikely to involve caring for children, and would be more likely to involve caring for the elderly, disabled or other vulnerable groups.

Sue, a subject tutor on the programme, also viewed the programme as a pathway to higher level programmes: 'I think they are preparing for a job (but) I think they need another course of study'. Jim, the support assistant, took a more critical view. He believed that the foundation did provide a qualification but also that it 'massages the unemployment figures'. He had strong views about the programme as a whole and considered vocational FE programmes to be no different to the secondary modern education available in his youth when 'you had A, B, C and D streams. A did science and D did gardening'. Within this framework, vocational education in FE was clearly related to secondary modern education, and foundation programmes – the lowest level of vocational education – to the gardening 'D' stream.



### Choosing a 'Good' Qualification?

In terms of making choices, the students on the HSC programme had all chosen the subject, rather than the level of their programme and regarded it as a route to the career of their choice. Angelina had chosen the programme 'So we could get some more experience so I can go into childcare' and this was endorsed by Jade, Paris and Brady who had come on the programme for similar reasons. Cameron was the only student to mention credentials, and this was in terms of her lack of them, rather than in terms of the relative worth of the GNVQ. She reported that 'I did it because I'm working my way up to actually working with children. I started here because I didn't get very good grades at school'. Other students qualified their reasons for choosing the programme with statements such as 'doing my qualifications' (Jade) and 'because I didn't get right good [grades] in my GCSEs' (Alice). Such statements appeared to reflect a commitment to continuing to study although other data, discussed later, conflicts with this. However, these views could be attributed to the young people echoing the lifelong learning rhetoric they hear from the teaching staff and the institution, which in turn are influenced by government rhetoric and policy, and by local and media interpretations of these.

Amongst the staff, both Sue and John considered that the new Educational Maintenance Allowance<sup>5</sup> (EMA) was a significant factor in students' decision to enrol on the programme although Sue also believed that 'Some of them maybe want another chance because they have not achieved at school'. However, whilst many of the students identified coming to college as an opportunity to gain credentials and achieve their aspirations, none of them identified financial reasons as significant in *coming* to college- none reported enrolling on a programme in order to claim EMA for example - although some suggested that financial

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<sup>5</sup> EMA – a means tested allowance of up to £30 weekly payable to 16-18 year olds in full time education and training and dependent on attendance and engagement with the programme.

difficulties might lead them to *leave* college in order to find full time employment.

A number of students reported parental support as a factor in coming to college. In all but one case, this was associated with parents' aspirations for their offspring to achieve 'good' qualifications and 'good' jobs. However, the Foundation GNVQ is not recognised as an acceptable credential within the Care industry, where government regulation stipulates that the minimum qualification is an NVQ level 2. Employment within the sector is also limited to over eighteens, so for these students, aged 17 at the end of their programme, the only option within their chosen field was to progress to the BTEC First Diploma in Care/Health for which the minimum entry requirement was a Merit at Foundation level. In fact, only five of the thirteen students were expected to achieve this by the end of the programme and two others were borderline pass/merit (see figure 13). This was a source of some concern to John:

The concern that I have is with the basic pass grade students where they go from there, because quite often I just get the feeling that there is the possibility they may just get lost and go out into employment.

John (Programme Co-ordinator GNVQ Foundation HSC)

A simple analysis of the progression data for this group as shown in figure 14 illustrates the probable accuracy of John's comments.



Student	Final Predicted Grade	Planned Destination
Paris	Unclassified	Employment
Jennifer	Merit	BTEC First Diploma - Health
Keira	Pass	Undecided
Brady	Merit	Leaving Destination unknown
Kate	Pass	Catering
Angelina	Distinction	BTEC First Diploma - Health
Jade	Pass	Undecided
Alice	Pass/Merit	Undecided
Rea	Pass	Undecided
Britney	Distinction	BTEC First Diploma - Health
Cameron	Distinction	Cache Certificate (Child care)
Kelly	Pass/Merit	Undecided
Rukhsana	Unclassified	Leaving Destination Unknown

**Figure 14** – Predicted Grades and Planned Destinations HSC GNVQ Foundation

Six students were expecting to achieve a pass. Of these, five gave their planned destination as 'undecided' (highlighted in yellow). One (highlighted lilac) is to move to a different vocational area with lower entry requirements. The option for the other four is to do the same, or to seek unskilled employment. Five achieved Merit or above (highlighted turquoise), and of these, four intended to progress to level 2



programmes. One intended to leave, destination unknown. Two were unclassified (highlighted green) and of these Paris intended to take up full time work outside the care sector, whilst Rukhsana had no plans for the future.

### **Hanging In**

The group as a whole expressed a 'buy – in' to the credentialist society and lifelong learning, and part of this was their perception, individually and as a group, that they were 'working hard'. Angelina had given up a Saturday job, ostensibly to concentrate on course work:

I did have a Saturday job but it didn't go that well, I used to have a Saturday job but it didn't work out, because you haven't got time for studying. **It didn't work that well because when I went to college at first I used to get tired and that with all the work.** (My emphasis)  
Angelina (HSC)

Paris and Brady also highlighted this tension between work and college:

Paris Er yes [I work] and it's really hard especially when you're 16. You are there, well I'm there every single day until Friday and that's my last day, Good Friday. And I work five hours every day, non-stop. It gets to you sometimes you feel like it's hard work, you're choosing college or work or...

Brady Not going with your mates

Paris It's so you're like "I wanna go and see my mates" but you can't because you are in work or you're in college, I still see my friends in college because I'm with them everyday but if I want to spend some time with them at night, I can't because I'm working. So I find it hard.

It was clear that the group perceived time in college in similar terms to the way they perceived time at work – as a necessary occupation which



prevented them from participating in the social activities they enjoyed. There was an emphasis on the amount of time this took, despite the fact that all full time FE courses are currently delivered over only 16 hours, or three working days and Paris clearly differentiated between seeing her friends at college and seeing them in the evening. She seemed to regard both as forms of social activity and saw no conflict between this, the overt educational purpose of the college course and the fact that she had expressed a commitment to continue learning and pursuing a career in midwifery. However, the demands of merely attending the programme for 16 hours a week, together with the 25 hours she worked must have been significant and she was far from unique in having to work alongside her college course.

A key pressure highlighted in the interviews with the students was financial difficulties, whether due to a need to contribute to the family income or to support leisure activities which were often expensive. Paris worked because she was required to support herself and Alice was obliged to make a financial contribution because her mother was 'on the minimum wage'. Financial pressures created other difficulties for Alice as well: her domestic responsibilities arose largely from the fact that her mother worked 12-14 hours at a stretch to maximise the family income and, as the eldest daughter, she was expected to fulfil her mother's domestic role in her absence.

### **Domesticity**

Whilst not forming part of their imagined futures, family, home and domesticity were key features of life for five of the young women in the HSC group and significant in the lives of others. Kate and Keira both cared for a disabled mother, Rukhsana for younger siblings and Alice also had a disabled parent – a father with diabetes and an associated heart complaint - and cared for five younger siblings whilst her mother worked. Jade cared for a younger brother who had 'special needs'.

Domesticity was also a key feature of the individual profiles that this group produced, the descriptors applied to themselves emphasised qualities associated with caring – for example, Jennifer, Jade, Cameron and Naomi all liked children and/or babysitting. Brady described herself as 'Kind to children, kind and friendly' whilst Angelina said about herself 'I am kind, caring, polite, good manners. I like children'. In addition to these characteristics, seven members of the group mentioned close family members as part of their individual profile.

However, there was a tension between the HSC students' caring identities, demonstrated in their choice of programme and in their individual caring roles, and in their expressed rejection of fulfilling 'wife and mother' female roles. Only three of thirteen students (Brady, Paris and Jennifer) included children in their imagined future and of these only Jennifer thought that the child(ren's) father might form part of this future. Even she seemed to express pessimism about this, or possibly about the nature of any future relationship:

Jennifer	I'd like a proper boyfriend to do it for me
EJA	What's a proper boyfriend?
Jennifer	Somebody that won't hurt you, somebody who won't push you int't ground

None of the three young women who talked about the possibility of having children had caring responsibilities, so their view of motherhood may have been somewhat 'rose tinted'. The impact of marriage and domesticity on older sisters appeared to be a factor in the rejection of that option by other members of the HSC group. Kate's facial expression and tone of voice (see emphasis) communicated her negativity far more effectively than her words during the following exchange:



- EJA Right, did any of them [siblings] go to college or ...
- Kate My sister Kim did.
- EJA Do you know what she did?
- Kate I think she were doing the same as me, she wanted to work with children until she got pregnant.
- EJA Oh right and now she's got her own.
- Kate **Yeah. Three of them.** (Kate's own emphasis)

Alice also placed a low value on the role of mother as opposed to gaining credentials:

My mum's wanting me to be... go into a job where it's qualified and there's plenty of money behind it 'cos she wants me to do good. Like my sisters, I've got three sisters older than me and they've turned out to be just mums. They've got no-where in college and nowt like that and I just want to prove to me mum that I want... I can do it and get far.

Alice (HSC)

Alice's responses were somewhat ambivalent. Her rejection of motherhood and domesticity was consistent with her apparent buy in to credentialism and lifelong learning, expressed as an aspiration to 'go to university and be a nurse'. It was possibly less consistent with her view at the end of the programme that she would probably leave college to 'get some money behind me' before returning to education at a later, unspecified, date.

### **College: a Better Education?**

The importance of college to the HSC group focussed around two things – one being leisure and social activity, and the second being a perception of being valued. The perception of being valued seemed to bear a relationship to the nurturing ethos evident amongst the staff team. Angelina and Jade enjoyed 'doing work and project work' and felt the course was 'a lot better than school'. However, they placed the greatest value on the fact that 'You get treated more like adults and things like

that'. Jennifer felt that the tutors were more like friends than teachers: 'Right, I think it's tutors me, tutors give you a lot of help a lot of guidance so they're your friends what are in college, your new friends what you've made in college'.

The relationship between students and staff was promoted by the nurturing ethos of the pastoral care for the group. Sue (HSC Tutor), an ex-nurse, described her own approach to the group explaining that it exemplified the way she tried to make them feel valued:

I think I need to know them as people, and they bring an awful lot of their issues and problems with them and I need to be aware of that, sharing a lot, they come in and they are talking about clothes and what they bought somebody and they are showing me. I think I have to show an interest in that before I can move on with a lesson.... Naomi does dancing, and sort of what they've done, what's on television, even the work when they are cutting and sticking bits in I'll have a look, because they want to share that with me, and I am pleased to help.

Sue (HSC Tutor)

Whilst Sue's comments were intended to illustrate the way in which she demonstrated value for her students, they were also illuminating in terms of demonstrating the type of discussion that students participate in during class time which primarily related to leisure and social activity (talking about clothes, what they bought, dancing, what is on television) rather than learning activity (cutting and sticking). John, the course leader and also an ex-nurse, took a similar approach and believed that demonstrating respect for the students engendered respect from them for others:



It (foundation HSC) does teach interpersonal skills and that's not just dealing with each other and respecting each other and valuing each others special gifts but also those of the tutors that they work with. It's a fairly informal structure unless something goes seriously wrong in the class and the students refer to us as by our first names for example, not Mr or Mrs and we try to impress on the students that they are now in adult education and try and treat them and ensure the students behave as such.

John (Programme Co-ordinator Foundation GNVQ HSC)

This was significant as much of the activity in which I observed the students participating during the classroom observation involved 'socialising', inherent in which was the rehearsal of interpersonal skills such as the use of mobile phones, sharing of treats such as sweets, and the comforting of Rea by her friends when she became distressed by a dispute between Kate and Jade.

Some of the activity observed, and the responses from the staff, indicated a strong nurturing ethos, which could possibly be ascribed to staff backgrounds in that all members of the HSC team had originally trained in the caring professions, predominantly in nursing. As a nurse, Sue perceived and fulfilled an extra dimension to her pastoral role, in that she had begun to take responsibility for students' health issues: 'Certainly being a nurse, if they find a lump or bump I need to see it, and tell them they need to see some one else sometimes, sometimes just a little word and I'll calm them down'.

Similarly, John described the type of student 'issue' he was required to deal with, although he emphasised social and emotional difficulties rather than health issues, and did not provide health advice in the way his colleague did :

In my experience we have had students who are the total carer for the family where the student has to deliver 24hr care with very little support at home and then come into the college, some students have part time jobs which obviously impinges, some students have sexual health issues, we have some students who come from disruptive families with broken family backgrounds but they honestly do believe that they can achieve and I think that's the prime concern that they see or may see something at the end of that whether its realistic or not is to be evident I suppose.

John (Programme Co-ordinator Foundation GNVQ HSC)

The students' own belief in their ability to achieve was also very apparent in their interviews. They had no doubt that they would achieve their aspirations. John, however, makes a note of caution about achievement, suggesting that despite self belief the barriers related to the social and emotional difficulties he cites may be insurmountable.

### **Having Fun, Hanging Around**

Whilst the students expressed a verbal commitment to studying when asked at interview, other data highlighted the importance of social and leisure activity to them. This was particularly evident during the classroom observation of this group (23 May 2005), when the students were observed to be engaged in a multitude of activities mostly unrelated to any aspect of their learning programme during 'learning' time. The whole group participated in writing a birthday card for a friend, whilst Keira gave out sweets and other students engaged in general discussion. Some of this was related to a texted conversation Alice was engaging in with a friend, and to the photograph her friend had sent her. At one point Alice telephoned Rea, who was sitting next to her. Kate was discussing an impending shopping trip to buy a top. Following the observation of the group, I asked them to complete a sheet showing a 5 scale point grid to identify how hard they felt they had worked during the session. This arose from my observation of them engaging in activity which was largely social rather than learning related. The results of this



are shown in figure 15 – only one student acknowledged that she had been chatting to her friends and had not really worked very hard at all. Clearly, the students' perception of 'hard work' was very different to mine.

Put a tick in the box which describes how hard you have worked today. 1 = not very hard at all and 5 = very hard indeed

1	2	3	4	5
	✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓

**Figure 15** – HSC Students' Own Assessment of Their Engagement With Learning

In terms of the importance placed on learning activity, it is perhaps significant that, in the individual profiles, where students were unprompted, only 3 mentioned liking college. However, all included social activity with friends as part of their profile. For example, 'I like... going (out) with friends and boyfriend'. (Jennifer); 'I like dancing, going out with friends' (Kate) and 'I like hanging around with friends, listening to music and going to the pictures' (Britney).

This type of engagement in social activity was evident in every aspect of the data for this group and ultimately, learning appeared to be required to 'fit in' to this imperative. Those students who were more heavily engaged in domestic activity were largely locked in to domesticity and denied the opportunity to develop alternative identities outside the female caring role. Alice, for example regarded her 'lifestyle' as 'different' to that of her friends and Keira had one evening a week respite from caring for her mother. She spent this at Jennifer's house, where she 'looked after' the small children of two of Jennifer's relatives. Other than

caring for her mother, Keira's only aspiration for the future was 'to be (friends) with these three' (Paris, Jennifer and Brady).

Angelina and Jade, who had fewer domestic responsibilities, passed their leisure time in 'Swimming, cinema, sports, hanging around with our mates, all stuff like that'. Asked to define 'hanging around' they described it as '...just socialising, going skating, catching up on gossip, stuff like that' whilst Kate, who 'hung around' with both her boyfriend and with her female friendship group considered it to be '...around erm like in town and something like that and walking around with some of my mates'.

Inevitably, many of these social and leisure activities potentially involved a significant financial cost. Whilst many of the activities the students engaged in had a cost attached to them (e.g cinema, ice skating) Brady summed up the greatest leisure cost when she described her hobbies as 'Swimming going to cinema, shopping – it's my favourite thing, shopping'. She was not unusual in this – shopping was a key social activity for many of this group. However, only three students were employed and funded their leisure activities independently. Eight students received EMA and used this to fund their leisure activity. Three students (Rea, Britney and Cameron) were not in receipt of EMA . They suggested that this was due to the complexities of claiming the benefit, rather than because their family income was above the EMA threshold. However, this meant that all three were dependent on their parents, who provided 'pocket money' to fund leisure and social activity (figure 16).



<b>Student</b>	<b>Existing Financial Support</b>
Paris	P/T Factory work
Jennifer	EMA
Keira	EMA
Brady	EMA
Kate	EMA and work on Ice cream van
Angelina	EMA (had previously worked at newsagents)
Jade	EMA (had previously worked in clothes shop)
Alice	EMA and working at Fish and Chip shop
Rea	Dependent on parents (had previously worked at Wacky Warehouse).
Britney	Dependent on parents
Cameron	Dependent on parents
Naomi	EMA
Rukhsana	Not Interviewed

**Figure 16** Sources of financial support for HSC students

Whilst expensive, the activities the group engaged in were undertaken for 'fun' and were largely unstructured. Only Naomi was engaged in a structured leisure activity, dancing, and to 'carry on with my dancing career' formed one of her options for future employment, one which, moreover, was supported by her parents who saw it as an alternative to HSC.

My dad says that if I don't like you know succeed with this course then they'd like me to - you know do - I can't even say it - cho...[choreography] ... I done near enough all my exams I've got four or five more left for my teachers exams so...

Naomi (HSC)

Although Naomi has the possibility of developing her leisure activity into something more concrete, for the others it is their source of pleasure and

enjoyment in a world where they are struggling to achieve a credential which has minimal recognition, and facing either an extended transition (which will impact on their ability to finance their leisure activity, particularly once EMA is withdrawn at the age of 19) or a move into the drudgery of low pay low skill employment. It is perhaps unsurprising that in these circumstances so much time and effort is invested in leisure, and so much importance attributed to it.

### **Summary**

This group demonstrated many conflicts in their hopes and aspirations for the future. All reported high aspirations which could be divided into lifestyle and occupational aspirations. The lifestyle aspirations had a heavy celebrity influence, and were primarily hopes of sudden transformation which would result in celebrity status, and perhaps more importantly, the affluence associated with such status. In terms of occupational aspiration, the minimum transition any student could expect was three years (for nursery nursing), and in some cases this rose to as much as seven years (for nursing, teaching and midwifery). However, none had any idea of the pathways and credentials necessary to achieve their aspirations, nor of the length of transition they could expect. John, the programme co-ordinator, questioned how 'realistic' their aspirations were, suggesting that they may eventually find employment in low level caring roles rather than in the professional capacity they aspired to.

The students indicated a commitment to education and to attending college in order to achieve their ambitions, but also talked about leaving college to find employment and address the imperative to earn money. Further, despite an overt rejection of stereotypical female roles by most of the group, all were involved in rehearsing domesticity to a greater or lesser extent. For most, this involved caring and domestic activity within the home, and for the few who did not have significant responsibilities in this area, it consisted of dreams of a future with a home and children.



Clearly, for this group, education was taking place within a context of conflicting and confused hopes and ambitions heavily influenced by social and familial constraints.

#### **5.4 Serving Time: Woodlands College Level 1 Group**

The Level 1 group at Woodlands College had originally applied for different courses, with the exception of two students with special needs who had 'progressed' to the programme. Despite the best efforts of the teaching team, those young people who were categorized as 'mainstream' students regarded the course as a form of serving time, in which their futures were on hold until they were able to move on to a different course which they perceived to be more relevant to their interests and aspirations.

#### **Group Profile**

The level 1 group at Woodlands College consisted of eleven students. Five were male and six female and they came from varied ethnic backgrounds which were representative of the local community. Only 6 of these students (Max, Leonardo, Catherine, Richard, Hamish and Mohammed) consented to be interviewed, though the others contributed enthusiastically to other aspects of data collection. For this reason, they are included in this discussion. All the young people in the group had had difficult previous educational experiences which included permanent exclusion, special needs education and severe disruption associated with having refugee status. They were all enrolled on what was known as 'the level 1 programme'. The level 1 programme was a new initiative by the college to try and address perceived failures in GNVQ foundation. It focussed on basic literacy and numeracy, offering in addition a small number of vocational options one day a week and multiple small credentials. It was taught by a specialist level 1 team which included Janet, the Head of Department for Foundation Studies and Pat the

Programme Manager. Four other tutors, Gabby, Paul, Will and Jaskaren also contributed to the programme.

All the young people in the group came from areas of significant disadvantage. Where parental occupation was described by the students, they referred to working class job roles with the exception of Leonardo whose mother worked as a counsellor. However, these results may not be an accurate reflection of the group as a whole since parental occupation was reported at interview, and only 50% of the group participated in this (see figure 17). Further, in four cases (Max, Catherine, Hamish and Mohammed) the occupation of at least one parent was unknown.



<b>Student</b>	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Siblings</b>
Max	Check out Manager at Tesco	N/K	1. Home Help 2. Unemployed 3. Not Known 4. Not Known 5. Not Known 6. Not Known 7. Not Known
Leonardo	Counsellor	Ex-Youth worker (step-father)	1. University educated. Working with children with ADHD. 2. College – Music technology
Catherine	Supervisor	Self-employed – capacity not known	No siblings
Richard	Part/time cleaner	Unemployed	1. School child 2. School child Half –siblings 1. Manager 2. University educated civil servant
Hamish	N/K	Works at Boots	1. Sociology Degree at Derby University
Mohammed	N/K – refugee living with extended family. Some enrolled at college.		
Leah	Not interviewed – data unavailable		
Jordan	Not interviewed – data unavailable		
Gabby	Not interviewed – data unavailable		
Honey	Not interviewed – data unavailable		
Natalie	Not interviewed – data unavailable		

**Figure 17** - Occupational and Educational Backgrounds of Level 1 Students' Parents and Siblings

Three of the five students identified siblings with professional backgrounds and/or university level education. In one case (Richard) these were older, half brothers and sisters. Mohammed reported that some of his family who were living in England had enrolled at college; immigrants from Somalia, all were engaged in 'learning English'.

Mohammed had a complicated background and was the subject of more oppressions than other members of the group. A recent refugee, English was his second language and somewhat imperfect. In addition to this, he had epilepsy. Epilepsy is a heavily stigmatised medical condition, and in addition to this stigma, Mohammed reported that his condition caused him 'understanding problems'. Despite these difficulties, he was the only student in this group who aspired to a professional career (see figure 18), possibly reflecting different expectations or social status in his homeland. He hoped to be an accountant, confiding that he was 'good at maths'. Indeed, at the end of the year his highest level achievement was an Open College Network (OCN) numeracy certificate, but since this was at level 1 this suggested that he faced a much extended transition in order to achieve his aspiration.

### **Imagined Futures**

All except one of the career aspirations expressed by the students showed heavily gendered patterns. Only Natalie described a future which was not gendered in terms of either occupation or lifestyle. She hoped to own a rum bar in Jamaica, and made no allusion to domesticity in the data she contributed. The remaining five female students all made allusions to domesticity. Three (Catherine, Jordan and Gabby) all identified children and a home as part of their imagined future, and a fourth, Leah, hoped to work as a children's club leader. Further, whilst Honey did not describe children as part of her imagined future, she did expect to be living 'in a big house, two cats, two dogs' implying some notion of a domestic future.



<b>Student</b>	<b>Occupational Aspiration</b>	<b>Do you know anyone already doing this?</b>
Natalie	Own a rum bar in Jamaica	No
Max	Plumber/painter and decorator (apprenticeship)	No
Leah	Childrens' club leader	No
Jordan	Have children, buy a car, buy a house	Step-aunt bought her house
Gabby	Model with family	No
Honey	Big house	No
Leonardo	To own my own business	No
Catherine	Fashion Designer (Maybe I'll have babies and work in a clothes shop)	No
Richard	Computer technician	No
Hamish	DJ on radio	No
Mohammed	Accountant	No

**Figure 18** Occupational Aspirations and Potential Role Models for Level 1 Students

Some students contributed information about themselves which contained an element of confusion in terms of the nature of the aspirations expressed. Two of the group (Honey and Jordan) identified lifestyle aspirations rather than occupational aspirations and there was a lifestyle element to some of the occupational aspirations expressed by other students. In most cases this was of a celebrity nature but even where this was not the case, it related to achieving a particular level of material affluence, as in Honey's ambition to 'own a big house'. Other students anticipated even greater levels of affluence. Natalie, for example, stated that:

I am going to emigrate to Jamaica, have my own Jamaican rum bar, own my own yacht ... I don't know anyone else who's doing it.

(Natalie; Level 1)

Natalie's family originated from Jamaica and she had spent several holidays there, possibly influencing her ambition. Where students expressed celebrity lifestyle aspirations these were readily accepted by other members of the group and appeared to be regarded as possible or even probable realities. This is well illustrated in the following exchange which took place between Leonardo and Catherine:

- Leonardo            I want to be a multimillionaire, in fact I don't want to be, I'm going to be a multimillionaire...  
                          I'm going to be owning my own gym, my own boxing gym as well, my own CD stores, [I'll have] a big supermarket full of CDs.
- Catherine            Like HMV?
- Leonardo            Yes, like HMV.
- Catherine            Or Virgin
- Leonardo            Yes, one of them.

Max's lifestyle aspirations related to 'living in the Playboy mansion' and again were readily accepted by the other students with whom he was interviewed, despite being inconsistent with his expressed occupational ambition of gaining an apprenticeship. Hamish aspired to be a 'DJ on the radio' although he did have a secondary ambition to be a baker 'Morrison's, Asda's, Tesco – somewhere like that'. Gabby aspired to be a model, and could see no dissonance between this and her other aspiration which was to have a family. Jordan was more pragmatic, but still aspired to a particular level of affluence when she identified her aspirations as to 'have children, buy a car and buy a house'. Occasionally, however, a note of rather wistful pragmatism did creep in



as when Catherine talked about being a fashion designer, but recognised that her reality was more likely to be having babies and working in a clothes shop.

Despite the existence of some role models in terms of siblings who had achieved in Higher Education and were employed in professional capacities, none of the young people aspired to significantly higher levels of education except Mohammed, who ironically was singularly lacking in such a role model, at least in the UK. In terms of the occupations the group aspired to none had an existing role model already engaged in that occupation and their notions of how they might achieve their ambitions were often vague. Catherine expressed the greatest clarity when she reported that it would take 'about five years' to make her transition through further education in order to access a fashion design course in higher education. Despite this, she was unaware of the credentials she might need or the possible routes she could take to achieve her ambition. Mohammed and Leonardo were both far less clear. Talking about his possible educational progression Mohammed suggested that:

actually, I think it will be about probably two years after that it will.. if I will be able to pass that one that is when I'll go to university, to see how it's going to be there  
(Mohammed level 1)

Leonardo considered that 'doing my [level 2] business course' would provide a sufficient basis to develop the business empire he dreamed of.

The young peoples' confidence in their ability to achieve their aspirations was not shared by the staff who taught them. Will questioned the value of level 1 courses highlighting the low progression rates and envisaging a far less rosy future:

I am very sceptical about the social and economic value, and I question what we are actually doing. We should not just be baby sitting, but in fact the programmes we offer do not tackle the underlying problems. We are not equipping them for the things we should be – preparing them for employment for example... I think they move into low paid jobs, benefit claimancy, crime and this is because we are not meeting their needs.

(Will, lecturer, level 1 and GNVQ foundation)

Will's concern about low levels of progression to other programmes and the outcomes for those who withdrew was shared by Jaskaren who reported that 'this year 50% have fallen by the wayside'. Both the lecturers who expressed these concerns worked across a range of programmes. In contrast, those who worked exclusively on the new level 1 programme were overwhelmingly positive about the opportunities they considered it offered and focussed on this in their responses rather than addressing what might be perceived as more political questions. Typical responses described enrichment activities provided by external speakers 'because these students come from culturally impoverished backgrounds' and the opportunity to undertake research projects as part of a tutorial programme (Janet, Head of Department). Ultimately, Janet regarded the programme as a progression route to level 2 although this was not always the case. There was, reported Pat and Gabby, a 'link group for those who don't achieve L1 during their first year. Where this happens, perhaps for social or confidence reasons, students will have the opportunity to stay on for a further year'. The fact that this possibility is regarded as an 'opportunity' implies that the student has made an informed choice to extend their transition at level 1 by a further year. Whilst this may be the case, interview comments made by the students and discussed below seem to suggest that they had little real choice in enrolling on the level 1 programme. This being the case, it is open to question whether an additional year at level 1 could be defined as 'choice' or 'opportunity', particularly given the lack of occupational or



educational credibility associated with the qualifications achieved by students during their time on the programme.

### **'Choosing' a Good Qualification?**

None of the students on the level 1 course had originally applied for that programme. Most had applied for level 2 programmes but were unable to meet the entry criteria and had been directed to level 1. Those progressing from special needs provision had also been directed to the programme. Richard, a student who had previously spent a year on an Entry level provision, reported that '...the head of the entry course, Elaine, told me about this course and how you could really get your maths and English...'. Leonardo was undertaking the Art and Design option at level 1 and this was very different to his original choice of programme, a level 2 engineering programme. He did not appear to have made an informed choice about his enrolment on the level 1 programme, explaining that:

[I came on to level 1]'cos I couldn't get onto the course that I wanted to get onto... it was engineering, refrigeration and reconditioning. [I came on to level 1] because I didn't know what else to do.

(Leonardo Level 1)

Leonardo was not alone in being on a very different programme to the one he had hoped to pursue. Max thought he had enrolled to retake his GCSEs, and did not realise that he was on the level 1 course which was, he said ' just where they put me on'.

Despite not having chosen the level 1 course, all members of the group demonstrated some degree of 'buy in' to lifelong learning in that they expressed recognition of the instrumental value of accumulating credentials of progressively higher value. Reflecting this, their reasons for intending to complete the course were also instrumental and related

exclusively to the credential value rather than the course content. Asked what they wanted to achieve from the course the students' responses created a sense that they regarded the programme not as an opportunity to learn, but as a form of 'time served' before they could move on to the programme of their choice. Max wanted to gain 'qualifications' from the level 1 course, a response which was confirmed by Leonardo. Rob, Richard and Mohammed all intended to use the credential as a basis for progression. Catherine hoped to 'go onto another one [course]' and Max to 'try and get an apprenticeship'. He intended this to be in painting and decorating or plumbing, despite the fact that he was undertaking the catering option on the level 1 course. All the students anticipated progressing to programmes within the same college, perhaps demonstrating some recognition of the lack of credibility the level 1 programme had outside the institution. This lack of credibility was also reflected in Leonardo's statement that '[I will use the level 1 qualification] any way I can use it, I will use it, but I'm not sure *where* I can use it'.

These views were expressed by students who enrolled during the first year of the level 1 course. During that time the programme had a very high withdrawal rate, a fact highlighted by Jaskaren, one of the lecturers:

50% of the intake have fallen by the wayside [this year] due to misbehaviour or non attendance. The level 1 Group [College Management Group] is to look into why they don't attend.

(Jaskaren, Lecturer, level 1)

It is possible that such high withdrawal rates may be related to the lack of real choice and control during the transition to level 1; alternatively they may also be related to the high degree of ambivalence about the programme which was expressed by the students. The level 1



programme was considered to be better than school, and support from the lecturers was emphasised here. However, in terms of the course content and the credential it would generate, students expressed generally negative views and were explicit in placing a low value on the programme. Two students (Leonardo and Catherine) reported that these views were shared by their parents. Leonardo was also frustrated with the bureaucracy involved in eventually enrolling on the programme. He had wanted to enrol on a different programme which was at level 2 and which he regarded as 'better' than the level 1 programme.

This is what happened right. I went for the test and everything and they said they'd get back to me (tape unclear) days came I rang up to see if I were on the course or not and they said they'd lost my details, so I went in for my test again came back and I were... you have to ... they still didn't get back to me so I kept having to phone up and eventually they sent me a letter saying I didn't get on the course. So they need to talk to you more.

(Leonardo, Level 1)

Leonardo's comments seem to suggest that he was treated by the college as being unimportant – a reflection perhaps of the general low level of value placed on level 1 students. His frustration at the lack of communication from the college, combined with his failure to gain admission to the refrigeration programme, was compounded by his mother's belief that he was incorrectly placed on a level 1 programme:

Well, my mum thinks it's a waste of time to be honest, a waste of time. I didn't get really bad GCSEs but she thinks that I shouldn't be on this course because I am going backwards instead of forwards.

Leonardo said that he had gained Ds and one C at GCSE, and that his mother considered that he should be doing 'something harder'. Catherine's comments suggested that her mother not only took a negative view of the programme but also regarded it as a form of

punishment or negative reinforcement: 'My mum says it's my own fault I'm on this course – I shouldn't have messed around at school'.

The low value placed on the programme by the students was consistent with concerns raised by Janet about marketing the programme, although her comments did imply an informed choice on the part of young people who had not achieved at school:

Marketing the programme presents particular issues, as the programme is essentially a provision for those who have 'failed' and head teachers/schools like to talk about 'success'. This is a particular issue given the overall results in (this city) at GCSE. Students applying for GCSE re-sits need a minimum of 3xD grades, so this provision appeals to those with lower grades.

(Janet, Head of Department Foundation Studies)

All the young people who participated in this study achieved a range of OCN credentials at the end of the academic year in which the study took place. Most were achieved at level 1, but Rob and Mohammed achieved the lower level Entry 2 and Entry 3 respectively in literacy. Of the six students who were interviewed, Catherine, Leonardo and Richard all progressed to GNVQ Intermediate or BTEC first Diploma (level 2) provision in a subject of their choice. Mohammed progressed to the pre-GCSE provision whilst Max and Rob both left college, moving to unknown destinations.

### **Hanging In**

The students in this group expressed some 'buy in' to credentialism, mainly expressed as disappointment that they were doing level 1 rather than the subject specific level 2 programme most had applied for and in their intention to progress to level 2 the following year. This was well illustrated in Leonardo's comment that he enrolled on level 1 because 'I didn't know what else to do'. Although Pat (programme co-ordinator) and



Gabby (lecturer) reported that 'the majority have part time work' only two of the six interviewed were in employment. None reported having any domestic responsibility, although the gender split may be significant here – Catherine was the only female interviewed and may not have been representative of the rest of the group. It was apparent, however, that all the young people in this group had troubled educational biographies which are discussed below.

Catherine had been excluded for disruptive behaviour and believed that 'the teachers had got it in for me'. Max left school half way through year 9 for reasons that he was not prepared to disclose. Neither achieved any GCSEs. Leonardo had attended school, but had not achieved at a level which would facilitate access to his preferred programme (engineering, refrigeration and reconditioning). Hamish and Richard both had special educational needs and had been educated in the special schools system. Both had done pre-level one programmes at college prior to enrolling on this programme. Mohammed was a refugee, with an unsettled past and disrupted education. English was his second language.

These backgrounds were typical of the group as a whole. Gabby and Pat described the average level 1 student as:

16, white; 50:50 gender, inner city who have failed with the education system. They have either been through and failed or not been in at all. The majority are from lone parent families and they experience a variety of economic and social deprivation. Some have had brushes with the law.

(Pat, programme co-ordinator and Gabby, lecturer, level 1)

The problems arising at school were also identified by Jaskaren, who considered that such difficulties had their origins in problems at school, and a failure on the part of the schools to address those difficulties:

L1 students mostly had problems at school - schools do not have time to explore or investigate problems and they fell by wayside. Most do not have GCSE.

(Jaskaren, Lecturer, level 1)

When observed (May 2005) the students were seen to be conforming to the requirements of the course in that they were making some attempt to complete work that had been set – filling in gapped handouts for example. For much of the time, however, their activity in the classroom related to leisure pursuits in the sense that much time was spent 'chatting' and conversation tended to be around leisure activities, something which was common to all students in this ethnically mixed group.

### **College: a Better Education?**

The group on the level 1 programme expressed a high level of ambivalence about their course. At interview they were critical of much of the course content, and this did seem to bear a relationship to the fact that they were doing something quite different to the programme they had originally applied for. In respect of the content the group complained that it was 'boring'. However, this criticism appeared to relate to individual units of study. Mohammed, for example, found the unit on sexual health 'boring' but considered that business studies was 'very interesting'. Leonardo had not enjoyed European studies: 'when we were doing about, like, history I was quite interested in that but after that I thought it was boring'. There was a common consensus however about the 'learning outcome records':



- Catherine No the only boring thing is sometimes when you have to fill in all those stupid sheets.
- Max Yeah. Learning outcomes sheets and stuff like this
- Leonardo Yeah, Yeah
- Max Then you have to tick, like did you enjoy this lesson? Was it boring? Did you find the work hard or easy? and then write a comment about the lesson.

Learning outcome records were completed after every session and normally involved each student completing a pre-formatted A4 sheet which provided evidence of learning activity and was then placed in a portfolio to generate evidence for OCN qualifications. It was also a time consuming activity, normally taking the last 15 minutes of each session and the students' resistance to the activity mirrored that reported in CPVE students a generation earlier (Green, 1991:190).

Where the young people in the level 1 group expressed positive feelings about attending college, this related not to the programme they were undertaking but to their relationships with members of the staff team and the support that was offered by them. This was illustrated by Rob who said that:

The teachers are really nice ... they help you out and offer you support when you need it, say if you're stuck on a particular maths question or English question and what have you. You stick your hand up and they come and help you. And say you are at school and whatever, you don't get as much support as you do at college, where you get more support and more people are willing to help you and stuff.

(Rob Level 1)

These comments were supported by data generated from the emerging themes handout which was reviewed and commented on by all members of the wider group. All agreed with the two statements:

- Many level 1 students did not like going to school
- Almost all level 1 students prefer going to college rather than school. This seems to be because they feel that they are treated with more respect in college

Although few amplified it, where the comment was amplified, the preference for college rather than school appeared to be related to the relationship with lecturers, which was perceived to be more equal than that with teachers. Rob, for example, writing in response to both the above statements said 'True – they prefer college than school because of how they are treated they are treated differently than school' whilst Max believed that the second statement was true 'because people are treated more equally at college' but sadly, in response to the first of these statements responded 'true because if they like it they would have done well and not be on this course'. Leah commented that: 'I agree with what you have said because I agree I hated school'. Whilst the students were generally positive about their relationships with the staff, there were some negative comments although these related exclusively to the staff response to a littering incident the day before the interviews were conducted. This incident led Leonardo and Catherine to report that 'some teachers are too mardy<sup>6</sup>'.

Similarly to the students, the staff team also all made reference to the importance of relationships, which they considered to be a strength of the programme, and placed this in the context of the group's perceived need for nurturing. The difference between relationships in school and in

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<sup>6</sup> Colloquialism common to the North of England meaning grumpy, miserable



those in college which had been highlighted by the students was also emphasised by Paul:

'I like the relationship between students & tutors. Serious attention has been given to make it different to school and with a fair amount of success. Students do sometimes push it to restore the old balance they are familiar with. The difference between a secondary school teacher and college tutor is that there is more of an equality, as opposed to an authoritarian approach. There is a person centred approach and this facilitates more equality'.

Paul, lecturer level 1

This 'person centred' approach was very evident in each of my visits to the group, when individuals spent often sustained periods of time talking to different members of staff about issues related to their behaviour or social circumstances. This was also highlighted by Gabby and Pat who considered that: 'their needs are different from the other levels – there is more opportunity for pastoral care. It is a different kind of pastoral care'. The group's perceived need for this type of approach was ascribed by most staff to the social circumstances in which the students lived, summed up by Janet as 'some have learning difficulties and disabilities, whilst others have experienced difficulties such as a chaotic family background, permanent exclusion, pregnancy, having caring responsibilities or school phobia'.

However, whilst subscribing to the general nurturing ethos, Jaskaren was more specific about the type of difficulties faced by the students, and highlighted cultural and ethnic factors which concerned him:

'This was something we found at parents evening – the kids come with baggage from their family. On parents evening, we got mostly Black & Asian parents – this shows how much support is given.

The other thing people should look at is general culture in the working class. If my son did better than me I would be proud but I have been to meetings in mining communities where if the son is doing better than dad he doesn't like it. Mining communities used to have a job for life and this engendered the attitude 'I don't need to study' – this attitude still prevails in the third generation. If someone does better the community doesn't want to know. With Asian and Black youth it is mostly peer pressure - they drift into bad habits smoking dope etc.  
(Jaskaren, Lecturer Level 1)

### Having Fun, Hanging Around

The interviews with this group indicated that having sufficient money to pursue leisure and social activities was of fundamental importance to them thus highlighting the importance of social identity in their lives. All the young people were in receipt of EMA or benefits (see figure 19).

Student	Existing Financial support/Employment
Max	Receives EMA Employed to sell 'totally legit' CDs and DVDs at car boot sales
Leonardo	Receives EMA, jobs at McDonalds and on market stall
Catherine	EMA and parental support
Richard	EMA
Hamish	Benefits
Mohammed	Benefits

**Figure 19** Sources of financial support for level 1 Woodlands College students

Catherine also received parental support in the form of pocket money for being 'good' which was withheld if she was 'bad', but did not clarify what being 'good' or 'bad' entailed. Two of the male students, Max and Leonardo, had part time employment which involved both in the unseen,



untaxed, informal economy although Leonardo also worked part time at the local McDonalds. Much of the discussion during the interview with Catherine, Leonardo and Max was around material goods – things they wanted and things they had. Catherine was perceived by the others to be 'flashy' and 'posh', which related to the location of her home being in a less disadvantaged area, the pocket money she received from her parents as a reward for being 'good', and the fact that her family had three cars. The debate between the three became quite heated as Catherine rejected this perception ('one is my Dad's work car and the whole family clubbed together because she wanted one and brought (sic) my Mum a Citroen Saxo') but did highlight the way in which material possessions were regarded as forms of status symbol to be aspired to by the group. Max explained what made Catherine's home area 'posh' when he said that 'It's quiet, there's no kids around and all the houses are big, all good cars in the car parks'. 'Good' cars were defined as 'a Bentley' by Max but Leonardo was more pragmatic: 'Not necessarily, a Ford or something like that. Not a Skoda ... a banger like that'.

The key social activity that all members of this group participated in was shopping – all cited this as a spare time activity or hobby, consistent with the value they placed on material possessions. The other activities the group participated in fell into two broad categories – sporting activities such as boxing, (Leonardo), swimming (Richard) and Football (Mohammed) and more intimate activities such as spending time with friends playing computer games (Max) or 'going round' to a girlfriend's or boyfriend's home (Rob, Catherine and Leonardo). None reported participating in solitary activities, and most of the leisure activities pursued by the group had a significant cost associated with them.

The importance of these activities was also evident during the classroom observation (May 2005) when the students' conversation related almost exclusively to money, leisure, possessions and social activity such as

nights out and holidays. For example, Natalie talked about her holidays in Jamaica, and Catherine described saving up in her 'decorating my bedroom jar'. No discussion was observed to be focussed around learning activities or college work, and attending college appeared to be seen in social terms as, for example, when Rob reported that 'I like spending time with my friends at College' and Mohammed that 'my friends and I usually meet at college'.

### **Summary**

It is apparent from the interviews and observations conducted with this group that whilst in the context of their own perception they were 'serving time' on their level 1 course, they were also using the opportunity to rehearse essential social skills. Perhaps more significantly, they were using the friendship networks developed in college, and the time spent there, in the development not of a learning identity - something which is, possibly, 'on hold' until they progressed to a programme of their choice - but in the development of a social identity, which appears to be a fundamental aspect of their overall identity formation.

### **Hopes for a Different Kind of Future**

These three narratives reflect the difficulties and complexities facing these young people as they make their transition from school to work. They also demonstrate the high occupational aspirations held by the young people, and the tensions between these aspirations, their dreams of affluence and celebrity, and their knowledge of career and educational paths. All the young people interviewed made a consistent verbal commitment to remaining in education, and here again there were tensions, this time between learning and the imperative to generate income, and between learning and leisure identities. Ultimately, all the narratives described a difficult present reality and a hope for a different kind of future.



## Chapter 6: Discussion

### Introduction

The voices of the young people in this study reflect the many layered complexities of their transitions and the dichotomy between the stories they tell and the reality of their present lives and likely futures. Each group is constrained by structures influencing their identities which are beyond their control. In the level 1 group (Woodlands), these might be described as having identities on hold, as they pursue a programme they had not anticipated joining. In the GNVQ IT group (St. Dunstan's) there are constraints arising from racial and cultural stereotypes and aspirations of great affluence. The young women in the HSC group (St. Dunstan's) demonstrate dispositions shaped by female caring stereotypes (Colley et al 2003:471; Clarke 2002: 62/77), aspiring to careers in caring professions but rejecting motherhood and domesticity. This chapter discusses what Griffiths (2003:81) has termed the 'little stories' told by the young people. By this, she refers to the fact that such stories are about particular people in specific contexts. The little stories in this chapter describe the lives of the young people within the context of oppressive systemic and embodied structures and exploring how they use their limited agency to develop identities and negotiate transitions within the constraints imposed by those structures.

### Culture and Class

The students fell into two main cultural groups. Three quarters (24/32) were white working class with family backgrounds in the ex-mining communities of the Midlands and Yorkshire. A smaller number (7/32), but nevertheless almost a quarter, were the children of immigrants to the United Kingdom. Six of these young people came from Muslim families, a majority of whom originated from Pakistan. All the students involved in the study came from lower socio-economic groups.

Traditionally, the white working class mining communities of Yorkshire and the Midlands were split on heavily gender stereotyped lines. Men went down the pit and did heavy manual work for which academic preparation was considered unnecessary. Women married young and engaged in domesticity and child rearing, usually within a short distance of their own parental home. Such cultural practices in themselves tend to reproduce the status quo by reinforcing 'belief in the prevailing system of classification by making it appear grounded in reality' (Bourdieu 1990: 71) and have been argued by Reay (1998:61) to be 'constitutive of rather than determined by, social structures'. These traditional values and practices persist in the ex-mining communities today and were highlighted by Jaskaren, a lecturer at Woodlands College. He contrasted white communities with minority ethnic families:

On parents evening, we got mostly Black & Asian parents – this shows how much support is given.

The other thing people should look at is general culture in the working class. If my son did better than me I would be proud but I have been to meetings in mining communities where if the son is doing better than dad he doesn't like it. Mining communities used to have a job for life and this engendered the attitude 'I don't need to study' – this attitude still prevails in the third generation. If someone does better the community doesn't want to know.

(Jaskaren, Lecturer Woodlands College)

This comment also illustrates the differing value placed on education by different social and ethnic groups and it demonstrates the way in which the prevailing paternalistic culture of the former mining communities maintains a status quo in terms of family hierarchy and consequently class status. Father/son relationships which discourage education in this way suggest that it is not only young women who are constrained by local cultural and gendered practices and beliefs which are regarded as natural and normal by the community.



The key characteristics that both the Asian and white working class cultural groups had in common were socio economic status and a strong adherence to traditional gender roles. Class was reflected not only in lifestyle and parental occupation, but very much by the type and nature of the programmes the students were following. Colley et al (2003:479) have argued that courses in FE are both highly gender stereotyped and populated mainly by students from working class backgrounds. Further, at level 1 only vocational options are available and vocational programmes have been widely criticised for socialising students into particular job roles (Bathmaker, 2001) and tend to be regarded as of lower status than academic programmes (Bloomer, 1996:145/148; Edwards, 1997:1). Gleeson (1996:100) has argued that they are 'typically uncritical' and do not address important issues of inequality and social justice, yet for the young people in this study, a level 1 vocational programme at their nearest college was their only option. They were unable to stay at school (and most would not have wished to do so) as they did not have the pre-requisite credentials to study at a higher level. Further, and as a result of policy implemented by a government intent on credentialising the whole workforce, they were denied access to benefits but paid to stay in education. Thus, a decision to go to the local college and take a level 1 vocational course could hardly be considered to be a choice or even the 'pragmatically rational process' described by Hodgkinson (1998:103). It was more a case of Hobson's choice. Employment opportunities for unskilled 16 year olds with low level or no credentials are limited, and vocational training options normally require some evidence of credential even at level 1. In addition, work based training for many occupations (for example plumbing and childcare) is available only at level 2 and above, effectively excluding those young people who do not meet the entry criteria in terms of precursor credentials such as GCSE.

The full extent of these constraints on the choices available to young people with low level or no GCSE passes becomes apparent if consideration is given to the institutions which do offer level 1 programmes, and the variety of options which are available. These constraints influence both the institution attended and the course undertaken. In the case of the Woodlands students, the city is dominated by one large college on multiple sites. The level 1 provision is concentrated at a site on a main arterial route two miles from the city centre, and seven miles from the nearest alternative college provision. Similarly, St. Dunstan's is located at the centre of Townsville, some distance from the nearest alternative provision. Both are readily accessible by public transport. St. Dunstan's offers a limited range of GNVQ Foundation programmes, and during the year in which this study took place Woodlands College was in the process of discontinuing GNVQ Foundation with the strategic aim of enrolling all level 1 students on the college's own programme. Ultimately, serendipity determines which college is the closest or the easiest to access, the type and content of programme on offer there is determined by SMT policy, and the nature of guidance or allocation to programme is equally open to chance, often determined by factors such as number of enrolments.

Thus, in terms of socio-economic status and lack of credentials, these young people are structurally positioned, perhaps inevitably, to make a transition to low level, low status further education programmes. The range of such programmes is limited, and like all Vocational FE programmes, heavily gendered (Colley et al 2003:479). In this way societal structures determine not only that a young person will undertake a low level vocational programme but also the nature of that programme. Hence the HSC group was exclusively female, and the IT group, apart from Emma's brief time on the course, exclusively male. Further, it may be argued that such programmes prepare young people for specific occupations (Ainley 1991:103; Bathmaker 2001) and that



this is achieved by instilling behaviours such as attendance and punctuality (Cohen 1984:105; Chitty, 1991b:104) rather than by education in a wider and more democratic sense, such as the education for studentship described by Bloomer (1996; 1997). The 'learning activities' pursued are 'busy work' – useful for filling time whilst such behaviours are instilled, and able to produce an individual 'socialised to work' (Tarrant, 2001) but of little value in terms of learning and education.

Despite this, the government claims to be promoting choice and control over educational options for all young people, failing to acknowledge either the structural constraints which prevent real choice or the hidden agenda of the need for low skill low pay workers discussed by Ecclestone (2002:17/19). The economic drivers for education policy are expressed in terms of an idealised post-Fordist rhetoric:

As we give learners more control over their own learning experience we need to ensure they are making choices only between valuable options which meet employers' skills requirements and therefore help them succeed and progress

(DfES 2006: 41)

Not only does such rhetoric fail to acknowledge key societal (and economic) issues, but also reinforces existing inequalities in society, since in the context of such an approach:

Economic needs are placed within a dominant position and the satisfaction of other societal requirements is dependent on the success of the economy. Such definitions of economic need represent the interests of dominant social groupings, namely those of capital, men and white people, and are presented as universal and taken for granted.

(Avis 1996:81)

This subordination of the education system to the economic system where the education system exists as a structure for the reproduction of class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:178/179) suggests that current government economic policy is also performing a class reproduction function by determining through policy and funding mechanisms the type and nature of programmes that are available. The lack of choice and opportunity that directs young people to low status vocational courses which prepare them for certain types of occupation suggest that the state is, perhaps unwittingly, complicit in the reproduction of social class in that the education structures and systems serve to fulfil its economic need for low pay low skill workers, rather than being, as it claims 'an engine of social justice and equality of opportunity' (DfES 2006:1e)

### **Gendered Roles and Domesticity**

Socio-economic structures and those of the education system are not alone in denying opportunity to these young people. Adherence to traditional gender roles, or 'gendered habitus' (Reay 1998: 61) in which both young men and young women appeared to view the gender divisions as natural and universal also formed a major part of the young peoples' dispositions and identities. Thus, the male students in the St. Dunstan's IT group envisaged futures where they would 'look after' a wife or girlfriend and, indeed, a family. The female students, whilst notionally rejecting domesticity as an option for the future, were all engaged in domestic activity at some level and a significant number undertook often onerous caring responsibilities in addition to their college course. This was most evident in the students in the HSC group at St. Dunstan's. Colley et al (2003) have argued that vocational learning is a process of becoming and that 'predispositions related to gender, family background and specific locations within the working class are necessary ... for effective learning'. Further, they suggest that the dispositions of individuals on care programmes are shaped by the female stereotype of caring for others. Such processes were very apparent with the young



women in this group. Caring activity itself was clearly heavily gendered among the young people in this study – references to domesticity in the male dominated IT group related exclusively to future marriage and there was no evidence of caring activity on the part of any male student, rather an inferred expectation of being cared for.

However, there was a tension between the HSC students' caring identities (demonstrated in their choice of programme and in their individual caring roles) and in their expressed rejection of fulfilling a 'wife and mother' female stereotype, similar to that described by Hodgkinson et al (1996:117/119) who found that, despite entering gender stereotyped occupations, young women made little reference to marriage and domesticity when describing their future plans and suggested that they were disinterested in marriage and domesticity after observing the impact of this on older sisters. Consistent with this, only three of thirteen students in the HSC group (Brady, Paris and Jennifer) included children in their imagined future and of these only Jennifer thought that the child(ren)'s father might form part of this future. Significantly, these students had no major domestic or caring responsibility within the home, unlike those of their peers who rejected domesticity as a possible future. Another student, Catherine (Level 1 Woodlands) envisaged an eventual domestic future, although in her case it was not what she aspired to but rather an acceptance of a somewhat unpalatable inevitability.

In addition to issues around gender and social class, other characteristics amongst the young people who participated may have increased their potential for social exclusion and marginalisation. These included characteristics such as ethnicity, disability, caring responsibilities and being in care all of which influenced the context in which they sought to negotiate transitions and develop identities. Of these characteristics, Jaskaren, a lecturer on the level 1 programme at Woodlands, considered ethnicity to be a major influence on educational outcome:

There are also family issues if ... they don't get any support from white families, whereas Black and Asian families try to push them but the culture among Asian Youth is that *not learning is cool*.

(Jaskaren, Lecturer, Woodlands College)

It is apparent from this comment that significant differences in attitudes to education, and the value placed on it, may be found not only across different cultural and ethnic groups, but also within those groups. Further, where there are differences within groups, such as the Asian group highlighted, that this is as a result of generational conflicts in attitudes to education. There are a number of possible explanations for such conflicts which may have arisen as a result of changes within the community, or as a response to wider youth culture and the increasing value placed on leisure activity amongst all young people.

Ethnicity was not mentioned by any other participant in the study although Rukhsana (HSC St. Dunstan's) defined herself as Muslim. It is perhaps significant that Jaskaren, a Sikh of Indian heritage, comes from a minority ethnic background. For Samir (IT St. Dunstan's), a young man who was confined to a wheelchair and had been educated within the special schools system, disability was a defining characteristic. However, whilst such characteristics may have influenced the identities of some young people who participated in the study the two key characteristics influencing the identities of all the participants were gender and class and a significant feature of these was that the gender roles adopted by the young people tended to be consistent with the gender stereotypes prevalent in the working class communities in which they lived. Indeed, it is possible to argue that all other characteristics may have been experienced differently had the young people come from more affluent socio economic groups with access to greater levels of cultural and economic capital.



## **Fantasy Futures**

All the young people in this study, irrespective of gender or ethnicity, demonstrated a fascination with celebrity culture, and a conviction that one day they would experience a sudden transformation which would lead to a celebrity lifestyle. The preoccupation with a celebrity lifestyle formed a significant aspect of the young peoples' leisure activity in terms of their interest in popular culture and the lifestyle of celebrities such as the Beckhams. As well as engaging with media reports on individual celebrities they also watched a range of popular competition programmes on television in which the winner received significant cash rewards and instant fame such as 'Big Brother' or 'Pop Idol'. This was reflected most strongly in their aspiration to achieve an affluent lifestyle, but also in their choice of celebrity pseudonyms for this study: even those names I was unfamiliar with were eventually established to be those of 'well known' celebrities drawn largely from the fields of sport, film, television or fashion. Ball et al (1999:214) have discussed the concept of fantasy futures, a belief in sudden transformation, that one day they will waken up rich and famous (for example by appearing on Big Brother or winning the lottery), and this phenomenon has also been identified in a study of NEET (not in education, employment or training) young people in Wales (TES 2006). Some young people did, however, acknowledge the likelihood of a more mundane future. For example, Catherine (Level 1, Woodlands) wanted to be a dress designer but recognised that she was more likely to 'have babies and work in a clothes shop' whilst Al (IT, St. Dunstan's) wanted to be an IT consultant in America, but followed this up by saying somewhat wistfully 'I can dream it'.

Whilst the level 1 students in this study acknowledged that their futures were likely to be more mundane, they did not appear to see any dissonance between their likely future employment and their lifestyle aspirations. Paris (GNVQ HSC; St. Dunstan's) for example, wanted to be a midwife, but envisaged herself living in 'a mansion' in North Yorkshire.

Leonardo (Level 1: Woodlands) expected to become a self-made multi-millionaire. Although his plans for achieving this were somewhat vague, and certainly inconsistent with his occupational ambition to become a refrigeration technician, they were not apparently unrealistic to those who were interviewed with him. This inability to detach an occupational aspiration from a fantasy lifestyle seems to suggest that the young people perceive their occupational ambitions to be as likely or unlikely as winning the lottery.

However, having such dreams, whether of fantasy futures or even fantasy occupations may be necessary to enable the young person to accept the reality of 'here and now' and to enable them to rationalise pragmatic responses to imperatives such as the need for money. Thus, it is alright to accept a low paid job because there is always the possibility of a return to education or sudden transformation and the mundane reality of the drudgery of unskilled work is only temporary within the context of such a rationalisation. This was evident in the fact that none of those students in employment at the time of interview enjoyed their jobs – they regarded them as purely instrumental in providing the money necessary to support themselves, largely in terms of their leisure activities. A perception that low pay low skill work would only be temporary was also apparent in the interviews with Alice and Rea (HSC St. Dunstan's) both of whom aspired to go to university but were considering leaving at the end of the year to 'get some money behind me'. Both anticipated a return to education at some unspecified point in the future.

There is a further dissonance between the students' occupational aspirations and the nature of the programme they are undertaking. The level 1 programme at Woodlands consists of a 'pic'n'mix' of OCN (Open College Network) units at level 1 or below and a limited choice of level 1 NVQ units from four occupational areas. The programme has no national



recognition and none of the credentials gained by the young people has any occupational credibility. Further, it is a generic programme and perceived by the young people as irrelevant to their chosen career. The GNVQ does have national recognition, despite lacking in esteem. It is a vocationally orientated, unitised programme with an outcome – referenced model of design and delivery but again has little occupational relevance. At this level, the IT programme includes units limited to operating a computer and using different applications whereas those students who aspired to work in the computer industry imagined futures where they would be engaged in more technical work such as that described by Amir (GNVQ IT St. Dunstan's) as 'programming. Programmer and stuff like that. Taking computers apart, taking viruses out and stuff like that'. Clearly, acquiring such a level of expertise would require a prolonged skills development and extended transition which would involve moving beyond a familiar habitus (Bourdieu 1990:52/53) to the unknown, where cultural capital would be 'stretched beyond its limits' (Ball et al 1999:212).

The HSC students are, if anything, in a worse position than the IT students or even those on the Level 1 programme. Despite the GNVQ being founded on a notion of occupational competence (Raggat and Williams 1999:19) the Foundation GNVQ is not recognised as an acceptable credential within the Care industry, where government regulation stipulates that the minimum qualification is an NVQ level 2 (Care Standards Act 2000). Employment within the sector is also limited to over eighteens, so for these students, aged 17 at the end of their programme, the only option within their chosen field was to progress to the BTEC First Diploma in Care/Health, or the CACHE Certificate in childcare. The minimum entry requirement for both programmes was a Merit at Foundation level. In fact, only five of the thirteen students in the HSC group were expected to achieve this by the end of the programme though two others were borderline pass/merit. Therefore the credential

achieved at Pass not only lacked credibility in terms of employment and wider social perception but also failed to facilitate progression even within the college. This is not unusual – anecdotal evidence suggests that similar criteria are applied at many colleges, largely as a result of inspection and funding pressures to ensure that achievement rates remain high. Clearly, this raises the question ‘what happens to those who do not or cannot progress to level 2’? No reliable data was available for this, as the institutions do not ‘follow up’ students. However, John (Programme Coordinator St. Dunstan’s) and Will (lecturer, Woodlands) both suggested that such students drift into low pay, low skill work and possibly also, in Will’s view, to benefit claimancy and crime.

These would seem to be the likely outcomes for those students who withdraw from their programmes or who do not progress. At Woodlands College Jaskaren (lecturer, level 1) reported that: ‘50% of the intake have fallen by the wayside (this year) due to misbehaviour or non attendance. The level 1 [College Management] Group is to look into why they don’t attend’ whilst at St. Dunstan’s Emma, Naz, Wayne, Paris and Rukhsana had difficulties adapting to the GNVQ requirements, and although Wayne did achieve a pass, the others were all unclassified at the end of the programme and moved on to ‘unknown’ destinations. In comparison, Brady (HSC GNVQ St. Dunstan’s) was reported to have been an ‘excellent’ student by her tutor, and had achieved a Merit at the end of her programme but also left college, again to an ‘unknown’ destination. Thus, despite corresponding to Bathmaker’s (2005) description of a ‘good’ GNVQ student, and despite being in a position to engage with the government rhetoric of lifelong learning, she chose not to do so but to negotiate a different kind of transition perhaps recognising that her foundation level credential did not ‘articulate with work entry’ (Slee 1997:187) at least in the field of Health and Social Care. The increasing uncertainty about their future, and the decision by some to pursue different paths to those originally envisaged was also



noted by Davies and Tedder (2003) in their case study of a BTEC National Diploma in Health Studies group. The decision to re-evaluate, and to negotiate a different kind of transition may reflect a pragmatic acceptance that horizons for action (Hodkinson et al 1996) are limited, or to what Ball et al (2001:135) describe as 'exhausted learner identity' perhaps reinforced by a dawning awareness of the likely length of transition to achieve their initial aspiration (seven years each for a degree level occupation such as nursing, teaching or computer science and four for nursery nursing or to achieve a technician level qualification in IT from the point of entry into GNVQ foundation).

Despite being low level, low status programmes with little occupational relevance, each did potentially provide a stepping stone to an extended transition which, if an appropriate route were followed could conceivably result in the young person achieving their occupational aspiration and it is on this basis that so many government policy documents cite 'opportunity'. Similarly to the young people in Bathmaker's (2001) study however, none of the young people I interviewed demonstrated any understanding or knowledge of the educational route and pre-requisite credentials necessary to achieve their aim, nor indeed showed any inclination to investigate this. All indicated an intention to progress to a level 2 programme, even where they were unlikely to meet the entry requirement, perhaps unsurprisingly given the lack of other options available to them. Little, it seems, has changed since Clarke and Willis (1984:4) described the move from school to work as a 'transition to nowhere'.

### **'Buying In' to Learning?**

At interview all the young people on GNVQ programmes expressed a clear verbal commitment to 'doing the course' and to the concept of lifelong learning. All anticipated progressing through an extended transition to a professional or technical role, suggesting that their

apparent commitment may have been the instrumental motivation based on a form of credentialism promoted by educators and policymakers described by Ecclestone (2002:20). Commitment to the programme itself was less apparent in level 1 students, but nonetheless, these students also expressed a commitment to the rhetoric of lifelong learning. However, for all those students who participated in the study, this was inconsistent with the other data.

In terms of what the young people said, a picture was created of each individual industriously using the level 1 or foundation programme to build up to the future. Each young person expressed a clear perception that commitment to education, working hard and achieving 'good' credentials was important. This was expressed in a number of ways. For example, Wayne (IT St. Dunstan's) explained how important good attendance was to success, whilst Rea (HSC St. Dunstan's) described giving up work to concentrate on the course and Jade (HSC St. Dunstan's) outlined her plans for progression and future occupation. They all believed they were working hard, and expressed confidence that with continued commitment they could achieve their occupational ambitions yet my observations and data from staff interviews indicated that they spent most of their time 'doing leisure' rather than 'doing work'. This contradiction between personal rhetoric and reality was interesting. Most of the young people interviewed were confident and articulate (at least in terms of their ability to discuss dreams and leisure, though less so in terms of discussing their education) and did not appear to be expressing the lifelong learning rhetoric in the sense that they believed these were the answers I expected, but rather in the sense that this was their reality, at least at that moment in time. Possibly then, their apparent buy in to the lifelong learning rhetoric formed, at least in part, a recognition of the societal value placed on credentials and occupations and reflected an attempt to move beyond the dispositions



they brought from past learning programmes (Ecclestone 2002:144) and to be valued within a hierarchy of lifelong learning.

Bathmaker (2001:90) found that some young people remained on programme out of a vague belief in a possible future pay off which 'they expressed as a repeated claim that qualifications will get them jobs'. For those in a position to progress to higher level programmes, as most reported intending to do, there are some grounds for this belief in that even relatively low status programmes and credentials can buy a degree of economic capital. Colley (2006:25) in her study of CACHE Diploma Childcare students argued that part of the role of Vocational Education and Training (VET) is to allow young women with particular emotional resources to develop and refine them and ultimately, to exchange them for a form of economic capital albeit for very low wages, or for more cultural capital but on vocational courses in low status institutions. This argument could be extrapolated to other vocational students on other programmes, and may well be the case for those students who achieve at level 1 and are able to progress to level 2 programmes and ultimately into employment. However, the same cannot be said for those who fail, withdraw or choose not to continue to level 2 and this group forms by far the greatest proportion of level 1 students. Instead, it could be argued that they are making pragmatic decisions such as those described by Hodgkinson (1996:125) and exercising agency constructively in the sense that they are recognising the constraints and limitations they live within and using their limited cultural capital as a basis for gaining whatever economic capital they are in a position to secure. Emma (IT St. Dunstan's) for example, was working as a cleaner at a local supermarket when she withdrew from the programme. Emma's mother, a cleaner at the same supermarket, had obtained the job for her. Paris failed her GNVQ and although her destination was unknown to the college, she was working at the time as a packer at a local food processing factory and it seems likely that she continued with this employment, which like Emma's

job, had been obtained for her by her mother who also worked there. It could be argued that these young people are simply making the best of the circumstances in which they find themselves, and this may mean using existing capital in the form of family connections to obtain low paid, low skill work which will generate an immediate economic return however limited, rather than hoping that a vague and distant future will provide credentials necessary to get the job (and economic return) that they aspire to.

The value of credentials should not be underestimated. Riseborough (1993:57) has argued that 'Grades are cultural capital passports into higher education and work' and cites Becker et al's (1968) argument that grades form a currency which supports the economy of campus life. Reay and William (1999) found that young children viewed the SAT assessment process as a definitive statement about the sort of learner they are. Similarly, foundation students seem to construct success through the achievement of credentials, or 'good' qualifications, which are conflated with the ability to get 'good' jobs.

This was a perception apparently shared by many parents. A significant number (21/32) of students reported parental support as a factor in coming to college. In all but one case, this was associated with parents' aspirations for their offspring to achieve 'good' qualifications and 'good' jobs. Good appeared to be defined in deficit terms, in that it reflected achieving something rather than nothing where nothing referred to unemployment and parenthood. The possible exception to this was Jennifer (HSC, St. Dunstan's), who said that her mother wanted her to attend college because 'I were slow at school'. In terms of parental support, mothers had a far higher profile than fathers, and this was consistent for both male and female students.



However, the type of intervention made was largely abstract, being confined to a general emotional (but rarely financial) support for the young person to undertake a post 16 programme, combined with a somewhat vague desire for them to 'do well'. These interventions, well-meaning but lacking in purpose, were consistent with those described by Ball et al (1999:217) who suggest that although all social groups report parental support, there are significant social class polarisations in terms of the nature of the interventions made arising from the parents' own experience of education. Reay (1998:60) argues that mothers have a more significant role in providing such educational guidance and support and identifies seven aspects of cultural capital which are significant in home-school relationships, including educational background, knowledge and credentials and material resources. None of the mothers (or indeed fathers) of the young people in this study was reliably reported as having educational credentials beyond level 2. Most had limited material resources, and in view of their own educational background were likely to have limited educational knowledge or resources. Thus, these mothers do not have the cultural capital to generate academic profits for their children, and social class reproduction becomes more likely as educational experience and achievement is 'inherited' in the form of cultural capital. This notion of educational inheritance (Ball et al 1999) is significant in terms of these students where most aspired to a graduate or senior technician level career, but none had any parents with education beyond level 2 and only four participants had any siblings with a university education. Of these four, two students, Hamish (Level 1 Woodlands) and Richard (Level 1 Woodlands) had both been educated in special schools and had formal diagnoses of learning disability. In the view of their tutors, both had probably reached the limit of their intellectual potential.

### **Working Hard at Doing Leisure**

The students' conviction that they were 'working hard' conflicted both with published research (Bathmaker 2005:89) and other empirical data arising from the study yet it was apparent that the students were not 'inventing' this – their insistence that they work hard was consistent across all groups. Part of this phenomenon may be explained by perception, but this is, perhaps, too simplistic and narrow a reasoning to explain it all. Part of this seems to be a need to conform, perhaps as a result of the socialisation effect of GNVQ which provides what Cohen has termed 'the inculcation of social discipline' (1984:105) as part of a preparation for a pre-ordained position in the labour force (Helsby et al 1998:74). The students are clear about what holds a value educationally – attendance, motivation and effort (Bathmaker 2005:89) and part of the process of 'hanging in' seems to be a need for the young people to perceive themselves to be conforming to this (and thereby demonstrating their value as members of a learning society), despite both the fact that they behaved 'as if education happens by a process of osmosis' (Macrae et al 1997:505) and the very limited educational value of level 1 programmes. The alternative would be to acknowledge the likelihood of becoming an 'outsider' to education with all the associated disadvantages. Whilst they might not be able to analyse the effects of social exclusion arising from non-participation in education and subsequent employment in low pay low skill work, they may well recognise that such a process would lead to a loss of their imagined future.

It is also worth noting that there were three different ways of interpreting the classroom activity referred to above. The young people believed they were working hard, the staff considered that they lacked concentration whereas my own interpretation was that the students were using the time as an opportunity to negotiate arenas and identities mainly associated with leisure activity. It is apparent that young people



experience considerable tension in negotiating between different arenas as they try to reconcile the demands of social lives which are 'pivotal elements of their identities and are equal to, if not more important than, their educational selves' (Ball et al 2000:59), of college and learning towards which they have a somewhat ambivalent attitude and work or domesticity, both regarded as generally unpleasant necessities. The leisure activity which I observed in the classroom was focussed on discussions related to social and leisure activities the young people were planning or had recently participated in. For the HSC students at least, this provided the opportunity to rehearse the communication skills which are fundamental to work in the HSC sector; this was particularly apparent when they utilised those skills to provide mutual emotional support, a feature of group relationships which was absent from both the level 1 and IT groups. Most of this group claimed to 'love college' but the focus of this again was less concerned with the course and more with maintaining friendships within the group.

Leisure also provided the imperative to work since the social activities the young people engaged in were all expensive. Communication with friends made the use of a mobile phone essential and the make and model were significant in conferring status. Even 'hanging around' with friends entailed meeting in town and shopping, or going to a pub or someone's home and drinking alcohol. Alcohol use was consistent across both genders and all cultural and religious groups. Drinking alcohol provided the opportunity to 'socialise with friends' in the evenings, and often at lunch break when many students, in defiance of college regulations, spent time in the nearest pub. Other activities such as dance and sport also entailed a significant financial outlay. However, leisure activity provided a form of light relief, something to look forward to in lives that were perceived by the young people to consist largely of the mundane and boring – college, work and domesticity.

Ball et al (2000:68) have discussed the 'choice biographies' emerging amongst more affluent adolescents in which the traditional connectedness from school to college to work has been broken, but where work, leisure and study are 'balanced' and 'flexible' in order to generate more cultural capital and facilitating the presentation of the transition in a positive light (for example, as a 'good' gap year). The high priority placed by the young people in this study on social lives and leisure indicates that these priorities are common across social class boundaries although the young people in this study do not have the same material and cultural resources to create a positive choice biography as do their middle class peers, and this limits both their ability to participate in education and to consume as members of society. Despite this, their willingness to invest significant emotional and financial resources into their social lives is indicative not only of the importance they place upon it but also of the fact that these young people too are constructing different biographies, in which their social life forms the most important aspect of their identity, to the extent that learning identities may be 'abandoned' in order to generate the economic capital necessary to pursue social activity. This is also consistent with Unwin and Wellington's findings that young people are increasingly seeking out alternatives to full time education (2001:51) and may provide a further explanation for the significant number of students on level 1 programmes who fail to achieve or who do not progress within education.

Whilst many aspects of these social lives were benign, others were less so and concerned behaviour related to sexual activity, the use of illegal drugs and alcohol. Using individual agency in this way leaves the young people open to judgements such as 'disaffected', 'disengaged' or 'socially excluded'. Social lives which involve aspects that may be subject to such pejorative discourse are articulated in a particular way. They provide relief from an otherwise mundane life, in which there are almost no opportunities to change the status quo yet at the same time they provide



an opportunity to challenge or resist that status quo by indulging in behaviour which is at odds with a wider and more readily accepted culture in society.

However, placing the greatest emphasis on their leisure rather than their learning identities and exercising their individual agency in this way will not enable them to engage with the 'system' and negotiate a transition to a professional occupation. Instead, they are more likely to develop a form of agency which provides at least an illusion of independence and overtly rejects state sponsored institutionalised education systems.

Another form of this is disaffected behaviour in the classroom, stigmatised by government and society but reflecting nonetheless a clear rejection of a system about which many young people have few illusions. Thus, Naz (IT St. Dunstan's) stated that he preferred college to school because 'It's about being treated with respect and no uniform' but continued to exert individual agency in his rejection of the conformist GNVQ culture. He attended sporadically, spoke provocatively, used class time to pursue discussions about leisure activities and rarely submitted any work. In doing this he reflected an adolescent sub culture which uses dress, language and behaviour 'consciously at odds' with the official culture of the institution and which works in tandem with the schools' distinction between 'good' and 'bad' students as it reproduces the social relations of the wider world (Webb et al 2002:123/124).

### **Nurturing and the Needy**

Whilst many of the behaviours of the young people in this study might have been described as 'disaffected', both in the classroom and in their social activity, the perception amongst the staff teaching them was that they were 'needy' students who required a high level of nurturing and support. There was evidence of nurturing at some level in all the groups participating in this study, although it seemed to be most significant as a part of the overall ethos of the staff team in the HSC group. This level of

nurturing could be ascribed to staff backgrounds in that all members of the HSC team had originally trained in the caring professions, predominantly in nursing. The approach could be regarded as part of the 'therapy culture' described by Furedi (2004) in which marginalised and disaffected young people are regarded as vulnerable and in need of support. Strategies to address these perceived problems may include 'support' as part of an educational programme whether integrated formally in the sense of engagement mentoring described by Colley (2003) or informally as part of the staff team or institution ethos. The discourse used by the tutors on this programme emphasised such an ethos. Sue (HSC lecturer; St. Dunstan's) described individual students as 'maturing as a person' and considered that the students' social backgrounds were significant in their perceived disaffection and low achievement:

A student that probably hasn't achieved at school, various reasons, some have the ability but maybe they haven't liked the teacher or the subject, a lot of other pulls on them from studying, personal issues, demands at home, some times not having a stable home, two adults and two children, that sort of background.

Whilst this nurturing approach was clearly intended to support the young people it may, none-the-less be perceived as part of a growing therapeutic ethos within education and society at large in which issues such as perceived failures or disaffection are excused on the basis of a broad range of medicalised terms such as low self esteem, trauma or depression (Slee 1997; Furedi, 2004). This therapeutic ethos has been criticised by Ecclestone (2004) who argues that despite the rhetoric of emancipation and empowerment associated with such approaches they have in fact resulted in a diminishing of the self and erosion of individual autonomy.



## Summary

This chapter has considered the data arising from this study and suggests that as the young people involved attempt to develop identities and negotiate their transitions from school to work, a number of things are happening. They are developing identities in which learning, leisure, work and domesticity are intertwined, but where leisure is of the most fundamental importance. Despite the high priority the young people place on leisure, they recognise the importance of learning at an instrumental level – in the sense that it can provide credentials which in turn can lead to improved job opportunities. There is also a recognition of the societal value placed on learning, and what appears to be a need on the part of the young people to be viewed as 'buying in' to learning, something which, of itself, confers a degree of societal value. Despite this apparent 'buy in' most of the young people reject a system which can only offer them an extended transition on low value courses. Instead, many choose to utilise what limited capital they have in return for low skill, low pay work which can finance their leisure and social activities, which are '...not just sub-cultural practices, they are pivotal elements of their identities and are equal to, if not more important than, their educational selves' (Ball et al 2000:59)

In college, well-meaning attempts by the teaching staff to promote achievement and raise 'self esteem' may be counter-productive. Because teachers work on increasing self esteem it is possible that the young people are rehearsing unreal aspirations rather than concentrating on generating more cultural capital. Unreal aspirations in terms of both career possibilities and lifestyle, combined with a touching conviction that one day, they will experience a sudden transformation which **will** change the status quo, combine to enable these young people to retain some degree of hope in a very uncertain future.

# Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

## Introduction

This chapter seeks to draw clear conclusions from the study and, working within a social justice framework, to make recommendations for structural and pedagogical changes which would provide a more socially just context for the education of level 1 learners. The dichotomy between impossible dreams and the grim reality of a predestined life is the overriding theme emerging from this study. A further, perhaps more subtle but equally powerful theme is the low value placed upon level 1 credentials in terms of their lack of vocational or academic credibility and by extrapolation the low value placed upon those young people who undertake these programmes or achieve the credentials.

In terms of impossible dreams every young person who participated in this study wanted to 'do well' and to get 'good' qualifications and all had high aspirations suggesting some buy in to credentialist rhetoric. Despite this, they engaged in a range of behaviours which conflicted with their expressed hopes and intentions. These included dropping out, engaging in leisure activity in class, generally behaving as though they could learn by osmosis and frequently failing to conform to the GNVQ or level 1 requirements.

However, I conclude that their aspirations are no less valid because of this, rather this tension illustrates all too clearly the way in which the wider education system and more specifically the field of vocational education serve to prepare young people for particular roles in life according to their socio economic status. Despite government policy which is full of rhetoric about equality (DfES 2003b:18; DfES 2006:3) and the low status of vocational education (DfES 2005:17) there has been a marked failure to address these issues of social justice. Further,



at level 1 only a prescriptive and Instrumental curriculum exists which is far removed from the conditions needed to engage with an education for citizenship and studentship such as those described by Esland (1996) and Bloomer (1996; 1997). Level 1 programmes have little occupational relevance and offer only an extended transition with a vague promise of something better. This 'opportunity' is increasingly rejected by young people who regard it as a transition to nowhere and 'choose' instead to utilise their limited agency in a transition to the field of low pay low skill work completing a self fulfilling prophecy which destined them to be prepared for this type of occupation and positioned at a particularly low level within the socio-economic hierarchy.

### **Structure and Agency, Dreams and Reality**

If considered in isolation and at a superficial level the activity in the field of level 1 vocational education looks positive. During the course of this study the students' articulated a commitment to lifelong learning and achieving 'good' qualifications. Without exception, all the groups were taught by highly skilled and committed teachers who wished only to improve the opportunities and life chances available to their students. Yet this is not sufficient. The field of level 1 vocational education cannot be viewed in isolation because it exists within other, larger fields all of which – wider vocational education and post-16 education, the whole field of education, the fields of class and power which surround that – constrain the agency of the young people undertaking level 1 vocational education. Within these broader contexts, what level 1 students are doing and achieving carries little currency and holds no value beyond the immediate field. By extrapolation, the young people on the programme are also perceived to be of little value (Castells, 2000:165) – Othered as having 'failed' at school, as vocational students, low level students and as disaffected and disadvantaged, they are ultimately regarded as the 'embodiment of deficit' (Colley 2003:158). Thus within this field, and with limited existing cultural capital at their disposal, the possibility of

moving beyond the field depends on the young people developing the agency (and capital) to enable them to negotiate the structural forces which appear to be irresistible barriers to movement beyond the immediate field/habitus. Developing these abilities would require them to receive a better education - to be exposed to a different, more political pedagogy, which encouraged them to develop awareness of and to question societal structures. This is not a new concept: Avis (1996) and Bloomer (1996) are amongst those who have highlighted the need for a more political education for citizenship and in the case of young people such as those who participated in this study, the need for significant change is imperative if we are to have any hope of creating a more just education system which provides real opportunities for all young people.

Despite the constraints imposed by class, gender and lack of credentials, the young people in this study were fundamentally no different from any other group. Their hopes and aspirations in terms of career are no different to those of other young people although their attitude to learning is perhaps somewhat more ambivalent. Their prospects of achieving those aspirations are, however, significantly handicapped in terms of the fact that they have no notion of **how** to achieve them. Likewise, their leisure and social identities, fundamental to their biography construction, are strikingly similar to those of their more affluent middle class peers described by Ball et al (2000:69). What sets this group apart is the extent to which they are oppressed by structural forces beyond their control, and the way in which this so often results in a particular use of individual agency - not in the continued pursuit of cultural capital on a level 1 course and through progression to higher level courses, with their promise of improved lifestyle and greater economic capital, but in a pragmatic decision to generate immediate, albeit severely limited, economic capital. Such a situation is an indictment of the education system which has prepared them so well for a role as a low paid, low skilled worker that no other option is possible.



The bitter irony of using agency to obtain employment is that it results in a further stigmatization and othering of these young people as 'dropping out' and failing to engage with education, placing more constraints on their already limited agency as they are problematised still further. Thus, the reality for this group of young people is that their high occupational aspirations are impossible dreams, in the same way that their lifestyle aspirations of fame and affluence are also impossible dreams.

For some, the failure to achieve their occupational aspirations will mean accepting a 'second best' option, for example in employment as a carer in a residential home rather than training as a nurse. For others, it will mean more casual and possibly less secure work, often in the unofficial economy. In either event the gap between their aspirations and likely outcomes in the labour market are clearly highlighted just as they were for an earlier generation of young people in Bates' research (1993:77/78) as is the significantly more mundane nature of the lifestyle that will accrue from the low pay, low skill alternative they eventually pursue.

### **Doing Leisure**

The mundane lifestyle which some young people, in moments of clarity, recognised as inevitable was alleviated for all of them by engagement in social lives and activities. It is apparent that social and leisure activity is the aspect of these young peoples' lives to which they attach the greatest importance. This has also been found in previous research (see Bates 1993:47; Ball et al 2000:66) although the nature of the social life itself continues to change and evolve. Much of the leisure activity the young people participate in is related to contemporary celebrity and materialist culture, such as that promoted by the media as WAGs (Footballers Wives and Girlfriends) culture (Times 31.08.2006) and involves activities such as shopping and participation in sport. Such activity also provides confirmation to them (if any were needed) of the

possibility of sudden transformation, for example through the medium of reality TV shows such as 'Pop Idol'. Their hope in sudden transformation bears a marked similarity to the hopes of the masses of earlier generations who relied on the prospect of eternal life as a reward for the endurance of poverty and hardship in this life. In this more secular society, the lottery and 'Reality TV' appear to have replaced eternal life as the hope for the future.

From a social perspective, leisure activity is key to being part of a group. This was most apparent in the case of Samir who insisted that 'I always do what they do' when talking about participating in leisure activities with his cousins, and in the case of Keira, also a case study in exclusion, who just hoped that in the future, apart from caring for her mother she would still 'be [friends] with these three'. However, apart from group membership and the engagement with celebrity culture, it is also apparent that participation in leisure activities impacts on young people's lives in other, less obvious ways. It is a factor in the construction of gendered identities and the tendency to drift into low pay low skill employment. It was evident that much of the leisure activity the young people participated in was gender stereotyped. For example, many of the sporting activities (eg football, dance and snooker) were clearly gendered and a number of female students, though no male students, spent part of their leisure time rehearsing domesticity in the care of young children.

The financial costs of participation in leisure are significant, and many of the students in this study worked in order to generate the money to support a social life. Whilst this provided them with a tenuous hold on the world of work, it was a hold on a low pay low skill (and not always strictly legal) world of work which was unlikely to generate much in the way of economic return or career opportunities. Despite this, it did provide a temptation to leave college and work to generate immediate



economic capital rather than deferring gratification in the vague hope of a better future at the end of an extended educational transition.

All the activities in which the young people participated involved 'socialising' – talking and communicating with their friends. Great importance was attached to this and it was an activity which extended to all areas of their lives including the classroom. It was apparent that, amongst these young people, leisure identities were most significant in the development of overall identity construction, whilst learning identities formed only a small part of this, and then one which had to 'fit in' with their social identity. In the case of the HSC students, such activity could be argued to have some relevance to the subject taught, as they rehearsed communication skills which are fundamental to workers in the HSC industry. This was recognised to an extent by some HSC tutors, but for other tutors across all groups, such behaviour was generally regarded in deficit terms as a failure to engage or to concentrate. Thus socialising, or engagement in leisure can also come to form part of the deficit model of level 1 students which, together with its role in engagement with low pay low skill work and the reinforcement of gender roles, suggests that the leisure activities which provide such pleasure are actually contributing to the formation of additional structural barriers which effectively prevent these young people from using their agency to move beyond a familiar habitus.

The education system must acknowledge the importance of leisure in the developing identities of all young people, something which reflects the increasing importance of leisure in society as a whole, but which currently is only found in the extra-curricular clubs, holidays and other activities for the students at high achieving schools. Ball et al (2000:146/148) have highlighted the failure of government policy to acknowledge the importance of leisure within its 'utilitarian version' of the contemporary young person, something which is reflected in the

existing level 1 curriculum. Further, the utilitarian concept of the young person, which views individuals purely as economic functionaries, falls either to value the individual or to recognise wider social and cultural needs and changes, something which is completely contrary to the notions of social justice the government claims to espouse.

### **Nurturing and the Needy**

The evidence from this study suggests that within the field of L1 vocational education teaching staff work from a position in which students are considered to have low self esteem as a result of the economic, social and educational difficulties they are perceived to have experienced. This humanistic stand-point, which also problematises level 1 students, demands that teachers work to give 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers 1983;1961) and use humanistic counselling skills in their communications with students. It generates a 'therapeutic' approach and mind-set which is concerned with raising self esteem as a way of resolving social problems and has been widely criticised (Emler 2001; Furedi 2004; Ecclestone 2004). Such an approach was apparent amongst those staff teaching the HSC (St. Dunstan's) group and those teaching the level 1 (Woodlands) group. In both cases, staff were concerned with addressing social problems, raising self esteem and developing social skills something which was reflected in both interviews and classroom observations.

However, one aspect of this is that staff/student relationships are superficially positive and this appears to be a factor in college being perceived as 'better than school' as in Naz's (IT St. Dunstan's) statement that 'it's about being treated with respect'. On its own, however, this is a simplistic explanation and positive relationships are probably the products not only of a nurturing approach considered by learners to confer respect but also to 'changing dispositions to learning' as motivation is influenced by transition (Ecclestone 2002:128/129). A



nurturing approach and the incremental individual achievement of low level academic skills will not, of themselves, offer the tools for young people to achieve their aspirations but rather, excessive nurturing will result in a belief on the part of the young person that they can achieve anything without questioning how they will accomplish it, and in a form of dependence on those teaching staff offering support. The result of this is that challenging aspirations (which might be argued to include any extended transition) are not achieved, and the focus of attention becomes the individual, rather than the structural forces which are constraining them. This is consistent with Ecclestone's (2004:118) argument that presenting failure as emotionally damaging results in a belief that the disaffected and marginalised cannot cope without support, in a shift of attention from inequalities in the structure of the education system to a focus on people's feelings about it and to lower aspirations where these are challenging or risky.

Therapeutic discourse defining young people as needy, disaffected or marginalised uses a deficit model which allows both state and society to problematise them as in need of help, rather than acknowledging the structural inequality within the education system which resulted in them being so labelled in the first place. Those who are labelled early within a deficit model such as disadvantaged, disengaged and disaffected are more likely to receive 'support' from a superficially sympathetic state, and hence increase the sense of reliance and the social acceptability of dependency to the extent of, in some cases, pathologising certain behaviours within a medical discourse (Slee 1997:181). Within such a model, young people are encouraged to see themselves as victims, and thus their agency, as the personal autonomy and motivation to change their situation, is reduced still further. Once young people are stereotyped into a passive, submissive role of this nature, it becomes easier to accept it than to challenge or change it and resist 'the oppression of apparent kindness' (Corbett 1990:3). The acceptance of a

low status victim role rejects the agency of individual accountability and autonomy and the young person fulfils the role of a victim requiring help; consequently there is no basis for respect for that individual (Ecclestone, 2004:128). It may also be argued that this contributes to the lower value placed on these young people in comparison to others who are perceived to be independent, high achieving and lacking in vulnerability.

It has been suggested that such superficial empathy and concern for low status groups can rapidly become moralistic and judgemental, as the disaffected and disadvantaged are portrayed and perceived as 'other' (Ecclestone, 2002:26; Colley, 2003:118) and although some aspects of disaffection may be seen as legitimate resistance on the part of the young person (Colley, 2003:77/101; Corbett, 1990:2) they are more usually associated with a deficit model discourse associated with more negative societal perceptions of 'disaffected' behaviour. Ultimately, society labels these young people as 'disengaged' or 'disaffected' and this form of othering results in the problematisation of the individual and not the system, thus allowing any blame for non-achievement or perceived failure to be attributed to the individual who has 'failed to engage'. This diverts attention from any critical consideration of the system since it obscures the existence of systemic and structural failures which confine people to an allotted place in life, constrain individual agency and replicate social class and other social inequities.

### **Classed and Gendered Inequalities**

Ball et al (2000:145) have argued that new labour market conditions and structures have served to create new class hierarchies, inequalities and exclusions. Such exclusions are still reinforced by the English education system which has historically reproduced class structures and ensures that young people reach the age of 16 with credentials and education appropriate to class specific occupations. Those with lower level credentials and from lower socio-economic groups are largely directed to



Vocational Education and Training (VET) which has been argued by Bates (1993:72) in the 1990s and by Colley et al (2003:491) a decade later to be significant in the replication of classed and gendered inequalities. Such inequalities are highlighted in the data arising from this study in which all the participants were undertaking class specific courses and had parents who had low levels of education and were either economically inactive or employed within class and gender stereotypical occupations.

Ainley (1993:23/24), discussing the conventional distinctions between 'men's work' and 'women's work' in the manufacturing industries, argued that these were being eroded by the contraction of traditional industry and the expansion of the service sector. Despite these observations, and the length of time since they were made, rigid gender divisions were apparent in this group of young people. Those divisions were evident not only in terms of their lifestyles and attitudes but also in the context of the course they had chosen and the occupation they aspired to, all of which were constrained by class and gender thus reflecting Hodgkinson et al's argument (1996:148) that individual schematic views of the type of jobs an individual may or may not do are developed within a class-based and gendered habitus, meaning that 'choices' are constrained by these factors. Such constraints, in addition to those imposed by other exclusionary factors such as disability, ethnicity and the hierarchy of the VET system, which places level 1 students firmly at the bottom, serve to limit agency and restrict opportunities.

Although Bourdieu and Wacquant refuted the argument that habitus is a fate arguing instead that it is an 'open system of dispositions' which is 'durable but not eternal' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:133) it could be argued that for most young people who 'fail' in the English education system and end up on a level 1 course, at the bottom of the educational hierarchy and thus also at the bottom of the 'economy of student worth'

(Ball et al 1998) habitus is indeed a fate. Constrained by classed and gendered dispositions and expectations and placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of the education system these young people have no opportunities to move anywhere other than on to the next low status vocational course or into low skill, low pay employment. In these circumstances, it is unsurprising that they focussed their lives around leisure rather than learning.

Despite the massive inequalities evident amongst all the students who participated in this study, individual young people shine out as examples of injustice and inequity and raise uncomfortable questions about the nature of our society. In a rich and developed country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, should a 16 year old young woman really be acting as the sole full time carer for a terminally ill parent? Would this expectation have arisen had she been male instead of female? Should a young man of 16 be resigned to being 'married off' and 'looked after' on the basis of his physical disability, rather than looking forward to exercising his agency through education and employment? What notions of 'equality' allow young people of only 16 to enter post compulsory education with 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of gender roles they consider to be universal and natural?

This was not a longitudinal study, and some of the young people interviewed may 'hang in' through a much extended transition to achieve their original aspiration but this seems improbable given such circumstances and expectations. What is more likely is that, similarly to the young people described by Colley et al (2003), Ball et al (2000) and Bates (1993) they will revise their plans and negotiate different transitions, with different - and probably lower level - occupational outcomes than those they had originally planned. These are likely to reflect and replicate both their concept of gender roles and the socio-



economic status of their parents thus preserving the existing, inequitable status quo.

### **Credentials – ‘Buying In’ to Learning?**

It was apparent that most young people were on their programme as a result of serendipity rather than choice; those young people who had ‘progressed’ from special needs provision had been directed to particular programmes, whilst those who had applied to college post-GCSE were largely on the programme by default, having failed to meet the entry criteria for their preferred course. For the GNVQ students, this meant that they were studying at a level below that they had hoped for, although most were undertaking programmes in a subject area they had chosen. Where this was not the case, young people had been ‘sold’ alternatives in a different subject area. Emma (St. Dunstan’s), who had wanted to do GNVQ Leisure and Tourism Intermediate for example, ultimately enrolled on GNVQ Foundation IT. The level 1 students had even less choice, being directed to a generic programme with some vocational input in a choice of four areas. In only a very few cases did these reflect the area in which the young person had originally hoped to study.

Despite this, all the young people in this study had what amounted to a desperate desire to achieve a ‘good’ qualification, and for most, this was also a parental aspiration. Both students and their parents conflated ‘good’ qualifications with ‘good’ jobs – perhaps rehearsing the rhetoric of government policy (eg DfES 2003b:18). Despite its lack of currency beyond the institution, the GNVQ does have limited credibility in that GNVQ is a nationally recognised brand. The GNVQ students and their families appeared to equate ‘good’ with ‘recognisable’. The level 1 offered at Woodlands College does not have a similar level of recognition, and was broadly disliked by the students, possibly because it lacked recognition or branding. Where credentials are perceived by young

people to be so critical to future life chances, they need a level of national recognition which in itself confers value on the credential and by extension, on the individual who is undertaking it.

All the young people interviewed perceived A\*-C grades as 'good' GCSEs – once again repeating government rhetoric - although none of them had achieved this number of so-called 'high' grades. Only a small number had achieved one or two 'C' grades. As a result they inferred that they had 'failed' at school (Working Group on 14-19 reform 2003:11) and that they were thus inferior to those who had succeeded.

For any credential to be considered to have even minimal occupational relevance it must be at minimum level 2 (DfES 2003b; DfES 2006:4), leaving the only 'worthwhile' option for these young people as a progression from level 1 to level 2. Yet even this progression up the low status vocational ladder is denied to many young people by the addition of further artificial barriers, such as a requirement to achieve Merit at level 1 in order to meet the entry requirements for level 2. The vocational nature of level 1 programmes also means that access to higher education courses will be more difficult, should any student succeed in completing a much extended transition. Whilst they will achieve a raft of vocational credentials at different levels, they are unlikely to gain the English and Maths GCSEs which are entry requirements for most university programmes. Thus, low level vocational education is being used to accommodate young people to current economic conditions and to meet the demand for a 'new periphery' (Ainley 1993:40) of temporary workers a group forming the bottom, marginalised 30% of our society who are either idle or working for 'poverty wages' (Hutton 1995:14).



### **Opportunity – The Great Deception**

The commitment to learning expressed by these young people was grounded in a desire to achieve 'good' qualifications and a belief that they were indeed working towards a 'good' qualification, reflecting a buy in to the post Fordist rhetoric that credentials will facilitate engagement with the 'opportunities' available in the new economy, and fulfil the promises of a brighter, better future for all based on continual up-skilling and engagement with lifelong learning.

They were undertaking courses that they had 'chosen' and continued to make very significant, albeit limited, 'choices' throughout the programme, associated with whether to remain on programme or leave, whether to work or not, whether to continue on to level 2 or to seek employment. It was apparent, however, that the young people were in fact making choices that were not their own, but were pragmatic decisions 'influenced by the complexities of the relations of force within a particular field' Hodkinson (1998:103) and which were 'heavily circumscribed by class' (Bloomer 1996:148).

Thus, the notion of 'choice' as utilised within policy documents does not exist for these students, since it assumes independent, rational choice made in response to the 'opportunities' available to young people. In fact, as is illustrated in this study, these young people are opportunity-less, but are sold the rhetoric of a post-Fordist dream. This is not merely rhetoric, it is the basis of a massive immorality, a great deception which is perpetrated on young people. They are prepared for and directed to low level vocational courses which by any definition are of limited value, but are encouraged to believe that they are on a 'good' course which will enable them to achieve 'good' qualifications from which they can achieve anything they want.

This immorality is compounded in that we offer 'support' and pseudo-therapeutic interventions which Ecclestone (2004) has argued make the student feel valued and respected, but paradoxically increase their dependency and reduce their autonomy. In doing this, the individual's agency is further constrained and their place in society's hierarchy confirmed. Such support is offered within the context of programmes such as GNVQ foundation which score at a fundamentally low level in terms of preparation for employment and economic or societal value. Further, programmes such as GNVQ foundation are offered to young people as 'opportunities' but in fact teach the skills necessary for low pay, low skill work such as punctuality and conformity and the reality is that the only 'opportunity' available to a student holding a GNVQ foundation credential is progression to a GNVQ Intermediate – they hold no credibility beyond the institution (Bathmaker 2001). Thus, at a fundamental level we are deceiving and manipulating the young people enrolled on such programmes by offering a mirage of impossible dreams, of non-existent opportunities and by giving the impression that they are readily achievable, rather like large sums of money on television games shows. The reality, of course, is that the systems, structures and practices serve only to keep each individual in their allotted 'place' in society. The ultimate immorality is that when, as is inevitable, young people fail to achieve the impossible dream, blame is attributed by the state to the individual (Ainley and Corney 1990:94/95) for failing to meet their perceived civic responsibility of engaging with lifelong learning.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Inevitably, there are a number of limitations to this study. Although larger than previous studies involving level 1 students (Ball et al 2000; Bathmaker 2001) it is still a small scale study, having only 32 student participants, not all of whom participated in the interviews. Thus, it could be argued that the findings are not immediately generalizable. However, they are consistent with those from earlier studies (Ainley and Bailey



1997; Ball et al, 2000; Bathmaker, 2001) indicating a degree of reliability if not generalizability.

The study has taken place within a dynamic context in which policy is constantly changing – for example, GNVQ foundation, at the start of this study the only national general educational credential offered at level 1, no longer exists, meaning that it would not be possible to repeat this study with other students following the same programmes. However, the GNVQ foundation has been replaced by similar level 1 programmes specifically the BTEC Introductory Certificates and Diplomas. Therefore, although this study is not immediately replicable, it could be repeated with young people on similar programmes as the policy context continues to evolve. The dynamic policy context does make the study very specific. However, this should not preclude the drawing of valid conclusions from the study, and exploring these further in future research. As Wolcott (1995:175) has argued 'Each case study is unique, but not so unique that we cannot learn from it and apply its lessons more generally'.

Finally, although I have acknowledged, and attempted to confront, my positionality in terms of this study the conclusion does reflect my own strength of feeling about the impact of inequitable societal and educational structures on young people such as those who participated in this study, something which may leave it open to criticism in terms of bias. However, the study does address important moral as well as educational issues, and I would argue that strength of feeling is perhaps an appropriate response to the circumstances in which the young people participating in this study found themselves.

## **Recommendations**

This thesis has demonstrated the impact of valuing some members of society more highly than others. Further, it has suggested that those

young people undertaking level 1 programmes experience a range of characteristics associated with social exclusion and are in danger of becoming further excluded from a system where raising standards equates to achieving credentials, rather than to providing an educational system which facilitates each individual to achieve their potential and their aspirations. Consequently they are likely to become the victims of greater structural barriers to education, rather than being included, as this exclusion effectively renders them invisible to policy makers, funding bodies, employers and wider society. I hope that the recommendations arising from this study could contribute to moving towards a more equitable system of post 16 education and subsequently, of society. The recommendations are broken down into three sections: implications for policy, practice and research.

### **Implications for Policy**

The longer term policy implications of this study suggest that there should be a fundamental reversal of the government philosophy, followed since the Great Debate, that economic policy should drive education policy. This would involve a rejection of the notion that 'the satisfaction of economic requirements can fulfil other needs' (Avis 1996:81) and would instead focus on the 'notions of social justice, citizenship and difference [which] are central to the construction of alternatives' (Avis 1996:80/81). Such policy would recognise learners at **all** levels and place explicit value on their achievements. This should be done in the context of an overall reduction in policy initiatives in the post-compulsory sector, providing more time for formal evaluation of policy outcomes.

In the short term, and perhaps more realistically, there is a need to revisit the recommendations of the Tomlinson Committee (2004) and the Nuffield Review on 14-19 Education (2006), with specific reference to creating a more coherent and equitable curriculum. Such a curriculum



would recognise achievement at level 1, and would preclude that achievement being as a result of failure at level 2, as is the case with the existing GCSE system. It would provide interconnected pathways, perhaps with some core learning, allowing for progression through academic or vocational routes, or a combination of both. The credentials achieved should have national branding and recognition, something which was an important feature of the GNVQ for those young people in this study who undertook it. Should this lead to the development of new types of qualification, these should not be produced in isolation from one another, but in collaboration across subject specialist areas and involving practitioners from a variety of different contexts, and their development should recognise the importance of part time work and leisure in the lives of young people. Such a curriculum should also have sufficient flexibility to enable individual teachers to influence and develop it according to the needs of their students.

Policy initiatives should be more inclusive and sensitive to the context of level 1 students, and the challenges facing them. This could be addressed not only by revisiting the findings of the Tomlinson report, but in the implementation of a revised funding regime which provided equity of funding across programmes and types of institutions, thus placing a clear value on level 1 learners in colleges of Further Education, and which allowed funding for enrichment activities for level 1 students to be detached from specific outcomes and credentials. This would provide greater flexibility for institutions to provide a broader range of activities and experiences to enhance the existing curriculum and generate greater cultural capital for these young people.

### **Implications for Practice**

The long term implications for practice would involve a repositioning of level 1 programmes and the implementation of a more socially aware pedagogical model in which 'individual and social transformation are

synonymous' (Ecclestone 2004:117) and young people are enabled to develop their capacity for individual agency in order that they can make a contribution both to society and to the deconstruction of structures which militate against social justice. Such a system could also provide the basis for education programmes which 'motivate, inspire and empower' (Ecclestone, 2002:12), recognise achievement and reduce the barriers to progression and move away from existing perceptions of level 1 programmes as remedial or lacking in value, even by those who deliver them (Bathmaker, 2002).

In the short term, despite the constraints of an instrumentalist curriculum, there are still practice based developments which would contribute to addressing some of the issues raised in this thesis. Individual institutions, departments and lecturers should acknowledge the importance of leisure and part time work to young people undertaking level 1 programmes. This acknowledgement could take the form of careful timetabling. A full time FE course is currently only 16 hours per week. Timetabled over three or four days, this could provide a 'space' for young people to undertake part time work. The need to timetable appropriately to meet the needs of young people should also be considered and given greater priority in the context of financial constraints associated with the utilisation of buildings.

College managers should consult with programme teams to determine the types of enrichment provision which would best meet the needs of level 1 students, and where possible, implement their recommendations. In terms of curriculum development, lecturers and programme teams should consider their programme in terms of its implications for leisure, and consider whether any part of the curriculum can be developed to take account of this. In terms of the students in this study, this could mean exploring the potential leisure applications of IT on an IT



programme, or the types of leisure activities appropriate for different client groups on a Health and Social Care programme.

Tutorial sessions could be used as a vehicle to explore the implications of taking up employment, as opposed to those of remaining in education. If sufficient detail such as potential and actual levels of income or length of potential transition were discussed, young people would be in a position to make more informed choices about whether to remain in education or move to employment.

Finally, information about transitions to particular occupations should be readily available within programme areas. The lecturers working in a particular area are likely to be most knowledgeable about potential occupational routes in that area. This information could take the form of tutorial sessions similar to that described above, or research activities in which learners identify an aspiration and then explore possible routes to that occupation, or simply in the form of wall displays showing different possible trajectories and equating specific job roles with likely income. Any of these activities would, hopefully, preclude other young people from being as ignorant of how to achieve their goals as were those in this study.

### **Implications for Research**

The findings of this study suggest that there is an urgent need to bring together existing small scale studies in this area. Much research is completed in isolation creating isolated research, and therefore does not contribute to a wider body of knowledge, yet taken together those studies of level 1 students which have been completed form an important body of knowledge which could and should be used to inform both policy and practice. A primary focus of this work would be to explore and identify more effective means of dissemination. Although many such studies are published, the publication tends to be for a specialist

audience and wider dissemination rarely occurs. This is illustrated in the fact that, by chance, I came across one such study (Ainley and Bailey 1997) in the final week before completion of this thesis, and yet the findings of that study are relatable to those of this study and those by Ball et al (2000) and Bathmaker (2001).

Further work to expand on the findings of this and similar studies should explore the longer term impact of the therapeutic culture in education, particularly on young people on lower level programmes who are likely to be more exposed to it than their more educationally successful peers on higher level programmes. Further work should also consider the impact of gendered and classed stereotypes in educational and employment choices made at 16+ with particular reference to the impact of social class on gendered dispositions.

### **Conclusion**

This study has illuminated the complex lives of 3 groups of level 1 student. One of the aims of the study was to explore the learning identities of level 1 students. It has found that these are at best very fragile, and that other aspects of identity formation are infinitely more important in the transitions of these young people. Leisure activity and social identities are of the most fundamental importance, with aspects such as gender identities, particularly amongst young women acting as domestic apprentices, also being of great importance. Within the great scheme of things, in these lives, learning identities are of minor importance.

It has been demonstrated that all these young people experience a multitude of oppressions in the face of an elitist and class based society. These various oppressions have been discussed and include social class, gender, race, disability and education. Education has been discussed in terms of three key issues; firstly the credentialist nature of the system



as a whole, secondly and more specifically in terms of vocational education and its socialisation of young people to specific forms of employment through the use of 'busy work' – activities which fill time but are of very limited educational value. Finally, the emerging therapeutic culture in the classroom has been considered.

Characteristics such as class, gender and vocational education serve to bind each young person more firmly into their allotted place in society – one where they are unqualified, low paid, low status and unvalued. This study has also highlighted the irony that whilst these young people have the same hopes, dreams and aspirations as their more educationally successful middle class peers they are more constrained by fundamental structural forces and lack the agency and cultural capital to realise their aspirations. There are particular tensions between the participants' high aspirations and their limited knowledge of the education and credentials necessary to achieve those aspirations as well as between their verbal commitment to education and lifelong learning rhetoric and other behaviours which indicated a more ambivalent and instrumental view of education. These tensions are key factors in that most of these young people drift into low skill, low paid employment, failing to fulfil their aspirations but maintaining a status quo in terms of social class structures. With no real choices and limited agency they are more likely to respond to the limited attraction of any employment which provides an immediate economic return than to invest in a low level, low status vocational programme which offers at best a vague and insubstantial promise of something better at the end of a very extended transition.

Unreal hopes of something better than mundane low skill low pay employment and the lifestyle that that can support, rely on sudden, almost miraculous transformations which could place the young person in a position in which they had no financial concerns and would facilitate their engagement with leisure activity whilst simultaneously causing

them to be held in a higher regard by the rest of society – valued more, rather than valued less. Yet within this context current government policy (DfES 2006:1) still claims to be ‘an engine of social justice and equality of opportunity’. Unless, it would appear, you happen to be a level 1 further education student in England, structurally positioned, partly inevitably, to make choices that are not your own and to do low level activities and be ‘busy’ (rather than engaged in learning) as a preparation for low pay low skill employment.

This study suggests that there is a need to acknowledge the structures which contribute to social reproduction in order to consider ways in which a more equitable form of PCE could effectively promote the realisation of agency and autonomy in all young people. This would involve a debate which could only take place alongside societal changes in which society recognised the need to work towards a state of social justice.

Fundamental to this would need to be a societal recognition that individuals must be valued on something more meaningful than their GCSE results and potential economic value and a governmental recognition that honesty and morality should underpin all aspects of policy. Such changes would avoid the great deception called opportunity being perpetrated on future generations of young people. Finally, the outcomes of this study highlight the urgent need for further research in this area to generate a greater understanding of the complexities of the lives and identities of these young people, in order to facilitate a more constructive policy context and to aid the development of a more equal and inclusive post compulsory education system which might enable at least some of these young people to realise their dreams and aspirations.



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*\* Indicates pseudonym used to maintain confidentiality*



# Appendix 1

## Sample Personal Profile

### Research with Foundation Students at Woodlands College of Arts and Technology

It will help my research if you could describe yourself in the boxes below. Your description might include what you look like (e.g. I am 5ft 6" tall and have brown curly hair) or things about you (e.g. I work in Nottingham, I have three children) or things you like doing (e.g. I like going for long walks and listening to music). If there is anything else about you that you think is very important, write that down too.

#### What I look like

5ft 6  
blond blonde hair  
blue eyes

#### Things about me

I love children and socialising  
with friends and I also have 2 brothers  
and a sister  
I love sports and listening to music

#### What I like doing

I love looking after my special  
need little brother Jonathan and  
I also love collage and baby fitting.

*Only if you wish, write your first name on the paper. This will help me to remember everyone. I will not use your first name when I am writing about you - I will use a pseudonym (false name)*



# Appendix 2

[Liz.atkins@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:Liz.atkins@ntu.ac.uk)

May 2005

## Emerging Themes from the Research OR Things I have found out!

Almost all the students I asked wanted to join in the research. I am not sure why this is. *Agree because I wanted to help Liz and thought it will be fun to do.*



Most Level 1 students have high aspirations (dreams and ambitions). They want to do a lot with their lives.

*Agree because everyone nearly wants to have a good job and*

Many level 1 students do not know how to achieve their ambitions. They do not know which courses to do or how long it will take.

*Agree.*

*Most people don't but they could always ask at conferences or teachers / tutors to help them decide*



A lot of level 1 students have a job as well as doing their course.

Some students also have caring responsibilities.

*Agree because people try to earn more money for themselves*

Level 1 students have got a lot to say for themselves. They are very clear about what they want out of life.

*Some students are sure*



*they always change their mind*

Level 1 students are very diverse (different). Although they are all young, they include male and female students, people from different religions, people from different races and they come from different social backgrounds.

*Agree anyone is welcome on the course any sex race or background.*

Many level one students did not like going to school *Some did and some didn't but collage is not like school its better*  
Almost all level 1 students prefer going to college rather than school. This seems to be because they feel that they are treated with more respect in college.



*Agree everyone is treated and respected in the same way*

Please make notes on this sheet to tell me whether you agree with what I think or not. You can also email me at the address at the top of the sheet.

Emerging Themes: student contributions to the analysis



## Appendix 3

### Research with Foundation Students at Townsville College of Arts and Technology

My name is Liz Atkins. I live in Sheffield and work at Nottingham Trent University. I am researching (finding out) about Foundation students.

I am doing the research for my thesis which is part of the work for a qualification called Ed. D. (Doctor of Education). I am doing this at Sheffield University.

I am interested in how home, friends, your hobbies and life generally affect your college course and how coming to college affects other things

I am interested in what you want to do in the future and why you chose this course

I would like to interview you to talk about these things

I will be very grateful if you will help my research by agreeing to be interviewed

I will tape the interview (because I have a very bad memory!)

I can talk to you with a friend if you prefer

You can have a transcript (copy) of everything you say

I will not use your real name in my research - you can choose a pseudonym (false name) if you wish.

I will keep your information confidential (as secret as possible). I will not talk to other people (such as your tutors, friends or family) about what you have said, I will just write about it in my thesis.

You can change your mind about being part of the research

I will answer any questions you have about the research

When I have finished, if you want you can read the research. It will be very long, so I will also do a summary of the things I find out for you. I will do one in the summer (2005) and one when I finish (hopefully in 2006).

If you want to ask me anything about the research you can email me at:

[liz.atkins@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:liz.atkins@ntu.ac.uk)

I will answer as quickly as possible - hopefully on the same or next day.

*Thank you for your help!*

Copy of ethical framework produced for students (original had patterned border)