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Crossing the boundaries in order to improve life chances: A case study of a mentoring programme in the UK

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1 Introduction

Adult Education (AE) can act as a vehicle to support transitions and cross boundaries, from school to higher education, further training or to work. Research has shown that this is particularly true in the case of young adults in vulnerable positions of disadvantaged background between the ages of 16-24 who are at a vital stage of decision making at the age of 18 (Kersh & Toiviainen, 2017). This age group experiences a double ‘crossing’; one is the transition to higher education, further training or work, the other is moving into adulthood.

In this paper we aim to highlight the extent to which mentoring programme has been effective for engaging and re-engaging vulnerable young adults, and facilitating their social and economic inclusion, and active citizenship.

2 Theoretical framework

In this paper the concept of boundary crossing is employed to provide a better understanding of the ways young adults move between different contexts, settings and spaces. This concept has been often discussed in the literature in relation to vocational education and training, to illuminate instances of learning through boundary crossing within and between the contexts of education and work (Guile, 2010; Bakker et al; 2011; Edwards, 2011; Evans et al, 2006; Tuomi-Grohn and Engestrom, 2003). However, there is limited research on the configurations of boundary crossing in the context of adult education, specifically in relation to the work with young adults in vulnerable positions. In this paper we argue that this concept provides a useful theoretical lens to explore how young adults navigate their spaces and contexts in order to improve their life chances and facilitate their career and personal development.

Boundaries have often been perceived as spaces with potential for learning (Harris and Ramos, 2012; Edwards, 2011; Kersh et al. 2012). Crossing the boundaries across a range of spaces at school, such as physical, virtual or informal, enables learners to navigate these spaces while learning and using their skills within their environments. Research suggests (Kersh, 2015; Evans et al, 2006) that engaging in learning and applying skills not only within, but across a variety of contexts and spaces, enables learners to develop new knowledge to make an informed decision about their future.

The interplay between learning, career-related/professional opportunities and personal spaces has been characterised by their somewhat blurred boundaries, where boundaries and spaces are multifaceted and multi-dimensional (Kersh, 2015). Research suggests that



engaging in learning and applying skills not only within, but across, a variety of contexts involves recontextualisation of skills and knowledge across these contexts (Kersh, 2015).

In this paper we support Edwards (2011) argument that boundary spaces emerge when the resources from different practices are brought together to expand the interpretation, perception and understanding of different situations. The interplay between learning experiences and other spaces (e.g. the college, work experience and higher education taster events) enhances learning opportunities and offers ideas for positive destinations of young adults thus enabling them to take a more active role in society e.g. through employment, further studies and supporting their local communities. (Kersh and Toiviainen, 2017).

Individuals' personal and learning spaces enhance their purposeful motivation, creativity and social practices, as they acquire, use and apply a range of skills across different contexts, within the boundaries of constantly changing contemporary spaces (Kohlegger et al., 2013).

Crossing boundaries and transferring knowledge and skills across a range of contexts presupposes these skills and knowledge to be adapted, deployed and recontextualised used in the new settings.

3 Methodology

In order to illustrate the ways that young adults apply their knowledge, skills and experiences in a range of settings, this paper draws on a Horizon 2020 project 'Adult education as a means to active participatory citizenship' (EduMAP2016-2019) carried out by the international consortium. The project that involved the partnership and cooperation of six European countries, and one non-EU partner, aimed to advance understanding and further develop both the current and future impact of adult education on learning for active participatory citizenship in Europe and beyond. The EduMap methodological approach was based on undertaking both desk and empirical research, carried out through dedicated work packages. Overall, the empirical study was carried out by 8 partner institutions, involving researching 40 adult education programmes across 19 EU countries and Turkey.

This paper will focus on one case undertaken in the UK (Scotland). The case study is a mentoring programme targeting young people who have experienced care and are attending mainstream secondary schooling. Data has been gathered through interviewing stakeholders.

The case was researched between October 2017 and December 2017. It has been identified as an example of good practice (GP) (from Scotland) on the basis of desk research and subsequent email/telephone contacts with gatekeepers and key policy actors associated within this GP. This GP represents an example of informal learning, particular focusing on care experienced young people as a particular vulnerable group. Preliminary research was done prior to data collection through undertaking contextual analysis (October-November 2017). Twenty three interviews have been conducted via face-to-face and telephone interview on a one-to-one and in focus group setting. Access was negotiated through key gatekeepers and policy actors. Data were collected from the following respondents:

- Five mentors (four male and one female), interviewed individually by telephone
- Two head teachers in schools where the programme is running, interviewed individually by telephone (female)
- Two teachers who act as school links, interviewed face to face in pairs
- One coordinator and the project director, interviewed face to face in pairs (female)
- The charity lead (male)

- Eleven learners (6 male, 5 female), through three face to face focus groups

All interviews were conducted in English, using audio recording. The case study data were analysed through thematic analysis employing NVivo qualitative software package.

4 Case study: motivating through mentoring

Within the case study we consider the different elements of the mentoring programme as learning spaces. These include individual mentoring by an external laid person, taster sessions (vocational areas, work environment, higher and further education) for young people and designated supporting school staff. These separate elements work in conjunction and offer support to young people in different ways. We argue that the case study represents multiple boundary crossings through which young people learn about possible future destinations. Our data suggest that crossing boundaries enables them to make informed decision and at the same time helps to develop vital transferable and employability skills which facilitate their economic and social participation in the society. The paper aims to reflect on the project's findings, and stimulate a further discussion on issues related to the role of adult education in facilitating the inclusion and engagement of young adults in vulnerable situations.

The programme was initiated and set up by a charity and now is fully supported by the local authority. The case targets mainly young people (14-19) who have experienced care. However, this programme is also offered to those whom the schools consider vulnerable, disadvantaged or show adult deficit at home which impacts on their ability to get the best out of education and the best out of their school experience. This is a school-based informal education programme and learners are identified and approached through their school. Consequently, information about the programme is provided by the charity staff directly or mediated through designated school staff. The charity pays much attention to information provision to vulnerable young adult (VYA) learners prior to the start of the programme and have designed strategies to capture VYA's interests. VYA learners receive information directly by meeting charity or school staff.

The findings from this case indicate that crossing boundaries between the different elements of the programme and over-time has been a vital aspect of offering equal educational and developmental opportunities for young adults

4.1 Mentoring and taster sessions: navigating the balance between aspirations and opportunities

Mentoring is a vital element to support young adults to navigate and negotiate the balance between their interests and opportunities. Each young adult has a dedicated mentor who meets them every fortnight over at least one year. This regular and sustained support enables young people to connect their experiences acquired from the different learning spaces.

Mentoring offers young people individual support by a lay person and through this, young adults develop knowledge and skills, and gain personal experiences. Mentoring offers personalised learning space for each individual young person and this learning space is enhanced by the taster sessions.

Well I guess I had a meeting with my support worker and one of the [UK_GPI] workers. So we sat down and like they explained the programme to me and explained like the kind of help that they offer the young people and what their kind of aim is, like the whole [UK_GPI] thing, like the motivation, the commitment, the resilience, because that's what [UK_GPI] stands for. And I don't know, I just felt like, at that point in my life as well like I really just

needed someone that was going to be there to like care about just me. [Extract from Learner interview]

Mentoring offers VYA a scaffolding through which they initially developed a trusted relationship and some vital life skills, such as resilience, self-esteem and commitment. Young people were given the opportunity to navigate their journey over time with their mentors according to their individual needs. Each young person needed a different time frame in order to make the next steps; to build on and further develop their already existing skills. These are the very skills that they then will have to recontextualise and able to use during their time in the secondary school and also throughout their lives. Mentoring also aimed to help young adults to discover their talent, support them in recognising it, and further guide them to make a plan and an informed decision about their future. The mentors have vital role in this process.

Taster sessions work in tandem with mentoring. They are offered to young adults on the basis of their individual interests. These may include visits to a higher education institute or engagement in a half a day work experience. There is a pool of taster sessions available to choose from. However, the charity regularly investigating other local potential opportunities. Young people are offered 3-4 taster sessions per year according to their interest. Through these approaches young people are encouraged to overcome their personal barriers and, to identify, sign up and attend these taster sessions. They are using the skills that they have developed during one-to-one mentoring sessions, such as motivation and commitment. This is one example how they use cross boundaries and use their skills in different settings.

The charity and the secondary schools have offered a number of other opportunities for the VYA on the programme to use their skills in different settings, perhaps unconsciously offering them crossing boundaries. Young people had the opportunity to meet each other and share experiences from different schools, some were asked to talk during external events to adult audiences (business people, policy makers) about their experience. All these additional opportunities offered crossing boundaries and reinforced VYAs' skills, such as resilience, communication skills and self-confidence, needed for social and economic integration and to become an active citizen.

5 Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated how mentoring helps young people to cross boundaries between different learning spaces, extending them beyond physical spaces. We argue that, in the context of this case, mentoring is the key ingredient for young people enabling them to recontextualise their experiences and make sense of their personal environment. This individual support allows young people to reflect on different learning spaces they experience within the programme, specifically through collecting and integrating different elements of the programme, thus facilitating their learning and career opportunities in new contexts. Crossing boundaries presupposes recontextualising their skills and experiences in new environments. In addition, our findings suggest that young adults' dispositions and agency facilitate the way they engage in crossing boundaries through constructing and negotiating both the affordances and challenges of new environments and settings.

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