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Pride and Prospects: The Impact of the Implementation of a More Socially Just Vocational Curriculum at Lower Levels

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Abstract

Evidence shows that the level 1 (L1)¹ curriculum is impoverished, with minimal exchange value in the labour market (Keep & James, 2012; Wolf, 2011), & that lower-attaining youth experience significant social & educational exclusion, lacking access to valorised capitals (Atkins, 2017), issues which are contrary to notions of social justice. Curriculum changes in response to policy initiatives addressing these issues have not been research-based or rigorously evaluated. This paper reports the impact of a new L1 curriculum model designed to confer greater social & cultural capital & awareness of the world of work. Key results include improved retention, especially amongst the most socially excluded students, with a much smaller proportion becoming NEET (7/39 (18%) of the cohort, compared to >30% in previous years) & positive employment outcomes, including progression to apprenticeships. We conclude that in addition to positive educational outcomes, the young people have accrued significant personal & social benefits from engaging with the programme in its revised form, and that the curriculum offers a model with potential to be adapted to local need and implemented nationally. Final outcomes of this study will be reported in 2020.

Keywords

curriculum; social capital; cultural capital; NEET

1 Introduction

Whilst the number of young people engaging with higher level vocational education is rising across Europe (CEDEFOP, 2018), there remains an imperative across all nations to cater for lower-attaining young people, who might previously have accessed low-pay, low-skill, routinised occupations which are now in decline across Europe as a whole, limiting the

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¹ Level 1 programmes are positioned at the lowest mainstream point in post-16 education in the UK, and represent the expected attainment level of the average 14 year old. Ambivalently positioned, some education providers include them as part of a Special Needs offer.

opportunities available to this group of young people (CEDEFOP, 2018; Keep & James, 2012, see also Billett et al., 2010). Typically, these young people exhibit characteristics of significant social & educational exclusion, and lack access to valorised capitals: most also have negative previous educational experience (Atkins, 2009). Despite this, there is evidence to suggest that these young people have occupational aspirations broadly similar to those of higher-achieving peers, but lack the support, knowledge and cultural capital to pursue those aspirations, so they are, effectively, unrealistic (see Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2009, 2010, 2017).

This has not been acknowledged by policy makers however, and lower-attaining youth are commonly conceptualised in policy as having low aspirations, are problematized as being ‘disaffected’ and ‘disengaged’ (e.g. Atkins, 2017; Billett et al., 2010) and have few options but to engage with a limited range of low-level vocational programmes. In the UK, research has found that the vocational curriculum at its lowest levels is impoverished, with minimal exchange value in the labour market (Keep & James, 2012; Wolf, 2011). Recent curriculum changes in response to policy initiatives which attempt to address these issues in the UK have not been research-based or rigorously evaluated.

This paper reports on an ongoing project evaluating the medium term impact of a new curriculum model designed to address some of these issues, which offers important insights for researchers internationally who are concerned with these issues. The project is being conducted in a further education college in Guernsey, an independent Crown Dependency, which does not form part of the United Kingdom. However, its post-16 education is modelled on the English system, although it is subject to different and more flexible funding arrangements and there is no inspection body. This gives the college autonomy to develop the curriculum according to local need.

2 Method, methodology and theoretical framework

This project utilised a participatory, action-research model of curriculum development. All students enrolled on Level 1 at Guernsey College in the academic year 2017/18 (n=39) participated in this aspect of the programme which drew on a broad range of student activities, staff evaluation and internal college data. A smaller sub-sample (n=12) consented to longitudinal follow-up (two interviews in each academic year) over the academic years 2018/2019 and 2019/2020 to establish the extent to which their transitions into the work-place were sustainable and supported their career aims. This sample reflected an equal gender balance and represented each of the four vocational areas offered at level 1 (vocational studies, incorporating health and social care and childcare; IT; construction; and art and design). Individual case studies of each young person were developed using a multiple case-study design (Yin, 2003) which allowed comparisons to be made between, and identify commonalities amongst the individual cases, whilst also generating over-arching themes which may be relatable to other contexts.

We position this study as research for social justice, rather than socially just research (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019), but have drawn on theoretical concepts of social justice to inform the conduct of the study (e.g. Lincoln & Denzin, 2013). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Derby, and the research design was consistent both with BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018) and the notions of respect inherent in concepts of social justice. The most significant ethical issue has been effective anonymization of young people who are easily identifiable in a small community. For this reason, identifying characteristics are not mentioned, and all student participants are referred to in gender neutral terms.

Theoretically, we have drawn upon work by, amongst others, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) in order to conceptualise the young people’s agency and social positioning, and on work by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) and Hodkinson (e.g. 1996, 1998, 2008) as a means of understanding the young peoples’ transitions and social an educational positioning. We draw

on work by Bloomer (1996, 1997), Carr (1991), Stenhouse (1975), and Kelly (2009) as a theoretical framework for the curriculum development. The project is driven by a shared commitment to social justice. This is a ‘slippery’ term, which can be open to interpretation. For the purpose of this project we understand social justice as being concerned with oppression, inequalities, and hegemony and implying action. This means that it is “a form of politics, as well as a form of critical inquiry, and also a guiding philosophy” (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019, p. 40), an understanding of social justice which draws on ancient and contemporary philosophy, including Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (1997) and Plato’s *Republic* (as cited in Lee, 1955/1987), enlightenment work such as that by Hume (e.g. 1740/2015), and more recently, work by philosophers such as Rawls (1971) and Griffiths (1998, 2003).

3 Method: curriculum developments

“The existing state of educational provision will not do. It does not serve even one of the varied interests which bear upon post-16 education effectively or efficiently. Most importantly, it disenfranchises young people as citizens and as workers through the ‘dependency culture’ which it engenders by its institutional discourse, contributing to the perpetuation of hegemonic relations and the maintenance of a low-skill, low-trust society in the process” (Bloomer, 1996, pp. 161-162).

In developing this curriculum, we adopted Bloomer’s (1996, 1997) critiques of the post-16 curriculum as a starting point. Whilst made a generation ago, they remain relevant to the largely unchanged curriculum model used in the UK and Guernsey post-16. Further, the extensive study which provided the empirical basis for these critiques remains the only work to have explored these issues in significant depth. We have also sought to develop a curriculum which has the facility to empower the young people to make active and critical decisions about their future lives. In doing so, we acknowledge Bloomer’s (1996) argument that empowerment is a term (like democracy and citizenship) that has never been “satisfactorily articulated in curriculum planning” (p. 155) and means different things to ideologues from both the Left and the Right. As educators concerned with social justice, and again drawing on Bloomer we see empowerment as “encouraging young people to exercise their studentship [agency within and over the curriculum] within the context of a ‘moral democracy’” (Bloomer, 1996, p. 156; Carr, 1991, p. 374). Notions of education for studentship are closely related to early philosophical debates around education for citizenship. Whilst as Bloomer argued, Citizenship is another term which “has never been successfully articulated in curriculum planning”, it does have philosophical definitions, including that by Marshall (as cited in Carr, 1991) who refers to citizenship relating to full membership of a community, where all are “equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed”. Achieving these philosophical goals required whole-scale changes in the mind-set of teachers whose only experience of vocational education has been associated with the competency based approach which is now ubiquitous internationally. Rather than a product or qualification outcome, we were seeking to adopt curricula and pedagogical approaches which were “participatory rather than instructional teaching methods in order to cultivate the skills and attitudes which democratic deliberation and participation [as citizens] require” (Carr, 1991, p. 374).

Taking cognisance of these ideas, we adopted a form of “integrated curriculum research” (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 121) which involved the participation of teaching staff, local employers, and students as we sought to apply theory to practice. In terms of the literature we have drawn on here, and the concepts of social justice which have also driven this development, we acknowledge that we have developed a curriculum model which is “overtly value-laden and ideological” (Kelly, 2009, p. 90). However, we would argue that the practice of education is inherently value-laden, and that by adopting this stance we are better positioned to develop approaches which have the potential to enhance the opportunities available to low-attaining youth and promote more positive transitions and improved life chances.

The over-arching aim of the project was to:

Develop, implement and evaluate an evidence based, research informed curriculum for level 1 students which confers cultural capital and meaningful knowledge

To achieve this, the project sought to offer effective Careers Education and Guidance (CEG), clearly articulate with the needs of the local labour market and/or further education, and promote more secure, less precarious transitions from school to work. The revised curriculum (Figure 1) has adopted five key pillars: a project-based approach to core, competency-based, applied vocational qualifications, continuous and embedded CEG, English and maths at levels consistent with each individual's level of attainment, work experience, and a broad range of enrichment activities, which are designed to provide the young people with opportunities, knowledge, and experiences to which they had not previously been exposed.

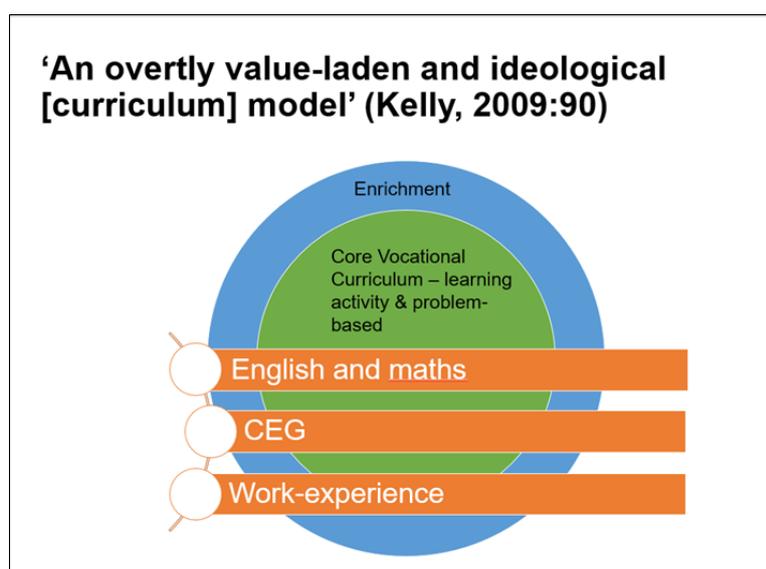


Figure 1 Revised curriculum

Project-based learning has been adopted in response to teachers' perceptions that students became disengaged and bored with a competency based approach, and is a pedagogical approach which is consistent with the effective development of work-related skills (Gessler & Howe, 2015). English and maths have been included as these are widely regarded by employers as essential skills in the workplace: however, few students at this level manage to achieve the GCSE pass grades currently mandated by the UK government. Work experience has been identified as critical in supporting effective school to work transitions for lower attaining youth (Wolf, 2011) and has been found to be effective in a study recently conducted in England (Defeyter, Graham, Atkins, Harvey-Golding, & Crilley, 2017) which helped to inform the approach taken to work experience in this project. Young people undertook short placements in a voluntary capacity contributing to initiatives in their local community. A wide range of Enrichment activities were offered, in some cases tailored to the vocational area the young people were enrolled in. For example, students undertaking a level 1 in engineering were given an old go-kart. They stripped this down, rebuilt it, and then took it to a local go-kart track for testing. In another example, vocational studies students (working towards careers in care and childcare) planned and implemented an awareness raising day for Liberate, the Guernsey equivalent of Pride. This won the national award for best educational initiative, and was featured on the BBC news. In the case of Liberate, the suggestion for the activity came from the students, reflecting the forms of studentship advocated by Bloomer (1996; 1997).

CEG also forms a central plank of the new curriculum, responding to the critiques alluded to above (Atkins, 2009; Atkins & Flint, 2015; Bathmaker, 2001) suggesting that lower-attaining young people have aspirations similar to their higher-achieving peers, but lack the support, cultural and social capital to realise those aspirations.

4 Results

We consider the results in relation to the different aspects of the curriculum, before reporting on the wider outcomes of the project. In relation to English and maths, the students were all assessed as having very low attainment in these subjects, with many participants functioning at Entry levels (equivalent to Year 6/8). Whilst only a very small number achieved GCSE passes (the UK expected level of attainment at 16+), all demonstrated an improved level of attainment, gaining entry level or level 1 credentials. Perhaps more importantly, by the end of the programme, they were more highly motivated to achieve in these subjects, recognising their significance for career progression, and making comments at interview such as:

[I need] maths, English and Digital Design to work at Digital Greenhouse [a States of Guernsey initiative to promote digital and creative growth] (Phoenix)

‘Actually, you need English. I hope so anyway! To spell!’ (Sage, aspiring Tattoo Artist)

‘I’m currently at L2 English but only L1 maths cos I’m just ... but since I came to college I’m doing really well’ and [to be an IT technician] ‘I need my level 3 diploma...as well as maths and English’ (Dallas)

These quotes also illustrate that at the time of interview (shortly before the programme concluded) the young people had much clearer ideas about their career paths than they had had a few months earlier. At the beginning of the programme each young person completed a short assessment about their aspirations. Many were unclear about their intended career, indicating ‘not sure’ or ‘not very confident’ in relation to statements such as

I know what job I want to do in the future

I know what qualifications I need to do the job I want

None indicated that they were ‘extremely confident’ in these areas. Tailored CEG was delivered using the project based model adopted across the curriculum, facilitating students to investigate their chosen careers, exploring potential employment opportunities and training requirements. This was in addition to existing guidance sessions, and supported by work experience. Follow-up interviews with students at the end of their programme were indicative of a much higher level of awareness regarding their idealised careers, implying that the approach had enjoyed some success. Students demonstrated awareness of the credentials required to enter their chosen occupation, and of the length of time their transition might take. Examples include those quotes from Rowan and Dallas (above) as well as Hero, who aspired to work in Early Years and who noted that ‘I will need level 3 early years [to work in childcare] and it will take me four years, because I’m doing level 2 over 2 years’ (Hero).

Similarly positive outcomes were evident from the enrichment activities, which were designed to introduce the young people to activities and experiences they had not previously encountered. For example, the most vulnerable students had the opportunity to participate in Forest school as a means of personal development and acquiring team building skills. Rowan reported that ‘the woods was good. I didn’t like it at the start because obviously I wasn’t used to it but then – now I can light a fire and *I’m quite proud of myself*’ (Rowan, our emphasis).

A significant aspect of the enrichment programme is a residential trip off the island. In year 1 of the project, this was to Herm, a 20 minute ferry ride from Guernsey, but in year 2 of the

project the residential took the form of a PGL trip to the mainland. Leaving the island – even to Herm, generated considerable anxiety amongst some students. Despite this, most made the trip to Herm, and ‘it was a lot of fun!’ (Sage). Sage’s comment is supported by a range of visual data, including photographs and video footage showing the young people participating in a wide range of physical and team building activities. Similar feedback was received from the PGL cohort. In both cases, the students gained opportunities to work together in team building exercises, to develop their communication skills, and to broaden their experiences. Staff concerns about close proximity exacerbating interpersonal difficulties between students were not realised on either trip, perhaps reflecting a ‘softer’ benefit to the activities.

In terms of quantitative outcomes, of the 39 young people who commenced the programme, 30 students successfully completed their level 1, whilst 9 students had withdrawn. No students failed the programme. Table 1 shows outcomes for those students who withdrew, and Table 2 for those who completed.

Table 1 Outcomes for those students who withdrew

| Outcome | No/9 |
|-------------------|------|
| Further Education | 0 |
| Employment | 2 |
| Apprenticeship | 1 |
| Unemployed | 5 |
| Not known | 1 |

Table 2 Outcomes for those students who completed

| Outcome | No/30 |
|-------------------|-------|
| Further Education | 22 |
| Employment | 1 |
| Apprenticeship | 5 |
| Unemployed | 2 |
| Not known | 0 |

If these figures are combined, in percentage terms, 21% (8/39) have a negative outcome (unemployed or unknown) whilst 79% (31/39) have positive outcomes in terms of employment and/or further education. These data demonstrate much improved outcomes for this cohort. It is also worth noting that more recent data, which is still subject to analysis, shows that an additional 2 students are now in secure employment. These quantitative data are supportive of the qualitative outcomes, suggesting that the programme has been successful in supporting the most marginalised and vulnerable students who might previously have been expected to withdraw.

5 Conclusions

Tentatively, the outcomes thus far show improvements – teaching staff believe some students with high degree of challenges who have remained on programme would have withdrawn in previous years. It is apparent from these outcomes that as well as positive educational outcomes, the young people have accrued significant personal and social benefits from engaging with the programme in its revised form. In addition, there have been some very positive employment outcomes, including progression to apprenticeships. Follow up with employers indicates that these students – some of whom have significant social and personal difficulties – continue to

progress well, indicating that their transitions are, so far, stable and secure. We continue to follow up the core sample of twelve of the original cohort in order to monitor their medium term outcomes. This involves twice-yearly interviews with the young people, as well as liaison with others who are involved with them, such as employers, youth workers, education providers and social services. In addition, we are now also monitoring 8 young people from the second cohort. The curriculum itself is constantly monitored and evaluated, with developments taking place in response to the data that emerges from these processes. For example, in 2018/19 this included introducing a recognised volunteering course to promote employability skills, and weekly work experience in preference to ‘block’ work experience. We are currently undertaking a detailed costing comparison between UK funding levels and the actual costs of implementing a programme of this nature. Our initial findings in relation to this imply that the difference in costing is minimal, largely because the college team has drawn on local resources and social enterprises (such as the walled garden) to support the programme. The success of the curricular approach has been such that the College will begin implementing a similar approach for all students from 2019/2020.

In summary, we would suggest that our data strongly supports the adoption of this form of curriculum model for low-attaining students as a means of re-engaging them with education, and generating learning, experiences and capitals that will support more secure and sustainable transitions into the world of work. Achieving this, we would argue, is not merely in the economic interests of governments, but is a move towards a more socially just education system in which young people are enabled to fulfil their capacity for the forms of citizenship described by Marshall (1950) and Carr (1991).

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