Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0351

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'Possible Selves' in Practice: how Further Education students conceptualise Higher Education

Rita Hordosy[1, 2], Steven Jones[2], Jenna Mittelmeier[2], Tee McCaldin[2], Aunam Quyoum[3]

[1]University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom [2]University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom [3]University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom

Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract: Higher Education researchers have for some time struggled to agree upon a theoretical lens through which inequitable access to university can be helpfully viewed. Following Harrison (2018), this paper takes the notion of 'Possible Selves' (Markus and Nurius 1986) to explore how young people negotiate their perceived options and express their educational dispositions and anxieties. Our case study involves in-depth interviews with learners and staff at metropolitan Further Education colleges in the North of England from which access to university is limited. We find that the 'Possible Selves' model captures many of the tensions faced by young people, drawing particular attention to policy implications and noting that many ostensible 'possibilities' remain structurally constrained. We also argue that the 'Possible Selves' model is receptive to further refinement to accommodate how emerging versions of the 'self' are constructed and influenced by family, school and other external stakeholders.

Paper: Introduction

The 'Possible Selves' model has its roots in psychology literature (Markus and Nurius 1986) and offers a way to explore how futures are imagined through reported 'like-to-be' and 'like-to-avoid' versions of the self, as Harrison (2018) explains. Potentially, it offers a theoretical underpinning for interventions that seek to widen access to university, allowing researchers and practitioners to move on from discredited discourses of raised aspirations (Harrison and Waller 2018, Lumb 2019). In this paper, we use the 'possible selves' lens to profile young people attending Further Education colleges in a Northern city in England. Progress to Higher Education from such colleges is regarded as sub-optimal by staff, and anecdotal evidence suggests that transitional difficulties arise because students perceive themselves to 'stand out' rather than 'fit in' – to borrow Reay et al.'s (2010) terms – within more elite education contexts. Originality lies both in the questions being addressed (why young people on some routes remain more likely to self-exclude from Higher Education) and the theoretical lens through which they are critically answered (which 'possible selves' emerge during key decision-

making moments).

Context

'Possible Selves' are represented by Markus and Nurius (1986) as a bridge between the present and the future. In this regard, students' possible futures are influenced by both desirability (i.e. what they want for their future) and realism (i.e. existing constraints within their sociocultural environment). Across the realm of potential futures, students may envision desirable possibilities ('like-to-be' selves) or undesirable possibilities ('like-to-avoid' selves), as Harrison (2018) describes. Within this framework, it becomes necessary to recognise students' multiple perspectives, the means by which they are acquired, and the role that higher education plays in leveraging access to the kinds of futures imagined (Henderson 2019). This project's methodologies draw upon the urgent need to illuminate and understand students' voices and perspectives.

In the UK, the progression from different types of secondary institutions to higher education has been the focus of research for several decades. For instance, Ball et al. (1999) explored how young people negotiate the emergent diverse market of post-16 provision and inequalities in higher education access, while Archer and Hutchings (2000) looked at the reasons behind non-participation. More recently, McCaig described a 'retreat' from widening participation and Reay (2017) located access policy within the context of societal inequality. In this changing context of secondary provision, information, advice and guidance (IAG) has become crucial to support learners in navigating the complexity of potential options. For example, independent career guidance has become a statutory requirement for all young people in England. However, recent research suggested that the 2010 move to provide careers education at the school, rather than at the local authority level, impacted negatively on the provision of expert careers education (Acquah et al. 2017). Further, Moote and Archer (2018) raise equity issues based on school resources and warn of a potential bias deriving from guidance with a narrow focus on subject and institutional choices.

Empirical research has also explored different factors in young people's decisions on progression to higher education, with questions continuing to be raised about whether tertiary qualifications are necessary for all desired careers of young people (Atkins 2017). Further, subject and qualification choices have been shown to facilitate (or limit) access to universities in general (Baker 2019), and higher tariff institutions in particular (Boliver 2013), with Abrahams (2018) pointing to the inequalities in subject options available at different institutional types. This is, of course, after controlling for background; ample evidence has shown that institutional and subject choices, as well as attainment at secondary level, are highly stratified based on socio-economic characteristics (Boliver 2013, Reay 2017, Crawford et al. 2017).

Data

The project team were commissioned to investigate the progression of Further Education College (FEC) students to university by a collaborative network which works with schools, universities and colleges to help people access higher education as part of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme. We were asked to probe learner attitudes and intentions towards higher education, to understand more about the provision of IAG, and to review structural and logistical barriers. We aimed to conduct 20 in-depth interviews with young people, and a further 8-10 interviews with FEC-based staff involved with delivering IAG provisions, in order to learn more about how and when

decisions are reached about university participation, and what kind of personal dispositions are drawn upon in that process. Both research reported nationally (UCAS 2017) and anecdotal evidence from local practitioners suggests that FEC learners were less likely to envision higher education as part of their future compared to other learners.

Outline of Findings

We conclude that the 'Possible Selves' model is an instructive and appropriate thinking tool for approaching questions around access to university for young people from lower participation backgrounds. Like Harrison (2018), we find that it also offers a rich lens for critiquing policy. In particular, our research shows how 'selves' are normalised by external factors. The young people that we profiled absorbed messages from multiple directions, internalising other stakeholders' perceptions of their future. Thus, we argue that emerging expressions of 'like-to-be' and 'like-to-avoid' are often mediated through outside stakeholders and structures. Indeed, asking young people aged 16-18 about their 'possible selves' reveals a complex web of pressures, constraints and guidance (see also Erikson 2019). Many of the ways in which students have been conditioned to think emerge during interviews, but it is arguably too late to gain a sense of what is really wanted and not wanted. We therefore draw a distinction between 'true possible selves' vs 'conditioned possible selves', arguing that the former becomes difficult to identify for those denied structural facilitation.

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