Choosers or losers?
Progression from school to Lifelong Learning in the UK

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Abstract – *This paper discusses the relationship between secondary schools and lifelong learning as provided by Further Education (FE) colleges in the UK. It argues that this relationship is often problematic, both as a result of prevailing market ideology and of historically-grounded discourses about the relative status of the two sectors. The paper questions the notion that learners transferring to FE at 16 are exercising a real 'choice'; but also draws attention to evidence that significant numbers of them nevertheless find FE a more engaging and rewarding experience than school.*

Abstract – *Questo articolo esamina la relazione tra scuola secondaria e lifelong learning, prevista dagli istituti di Further Education (FE) del Regno Unito. Si tratta di un rapporto che si configura spesso come problematico, sia per il prevalere dell'ideologia del mercato, sia per i fondamenti storici inerenti lo status dei due ambiti. Poiché gli studenti entrano nel sistema FE a 16 anni, ci si chiede se essi stiano esercitando una vera e propria 'scelta', ma si richiama anche l'attenzione sull'evidenza che, tuttavia, un numero significativo di essi la considerano un'esperienza più coinvolgente e gratificante di quella scolastica.*

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1. Introduction

The relationship between secondary schooling and the Lifelong Learning sector in the UK is a complex one, as this paper will argue. Added to these complexities is the current question of how we should refer to the post-compulsory, vocational sector, the term 'Lifelong Learning' having become inextricably associated with the education and training policies of the Labour government between 1997 and 2010, largely as a result of the

establishment, in 2005, of the organisation known as Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK). This was a sector skills council whose role was to regulate the professional development of teachers and trainers in the post-compulsory sector. The dissolution of this council by the present government, and the resulting uncertainty over the future of teacher training for the sector, further emphasised by the publication of the Lingfield Review (2012), have contributed to a discourse in which the phrase 'lifelong learning' is now seen as politicised, representing discarded policies and subsequent failings within the sector. As a result, an earlier, apolitical terminology, including Further Education (FE); Further Education and Training (FET); and Vocational Education and Training (VET) is coming back into use. Colleges of Further Education are currently the main providers of vocational education and represent the interface between compulsory schooling and lifelong learning. It is therefore on that aspect of the sector that this paper will focus its argument.

Learners' progression from school to FE carries with it a weight of historical implications, both social and political. The rigidly hierarchical structures and prejudices of the nineteenth century have cast a long shadow over the UK education and training system. This is still apparent in the assumptions about status, value and class which attach to learners who take the vocational rather than the 'academic' route post-16. Moreover, the introduction by the Thatcher administration in the 1990s of a quasi-market in educational provision further complicated the relationship between post-16 provision in schools on the one hand and FE colleges on the other, undermining the concept of learners' 'choice' about progression (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000). The current relationship between schools and lifelong learning in the form of FE, therefore, is dominated by issues of competition and status. This paper will focus on the consequences of this, in terms of its impact on learners and teachers in the sector.

2. Competition: the impact of market ideology

The introduction in the UK of *The Further and Higher Education Act* of 1992 radically changed the funding, governance and operations of FE Colleges, removing them from Local Authority control and transforming them into corporate bodies, responsible for managing their own budgets and funded on a performance-related basis. This transformation in operation and status became known as *Incorporation*, and had far-reaching consequences for the sector's relationship with schools. Schools themselves were now allowed, under the same Act, to introduce elements of vocational education into their post-16 curriculum. With its provision no longer under the strategic control of local government, and its funding no longer guaranteed,

the FE sector found itself in a position where colleges were obliged to compete for students not only with one another but also with schools in their local area. The policy of introducing market forces into educational provision was driven by an ideological claim that competition would lead to higher standards of provision and the closure of poorly performing schools and colleges. What it did not highlight were the repercussions such a market would have on students' freedom of choice over their route for progression at the age of 16.

3. Competition and notions of 'Choice'

The options for school-leavers aged 16 in the UK, as elsewhere in Europe, are limited. Most must remain in some sort of education or training for a further two years. The notion of 'choice' at 16, however, has become a problematical one, since it is usually the decision of the schools, rather than of the students themselves, as to who will be allowed to stay on for further study and who will be refused that option. Inevitably, such decisions are based on students' attainment and ability, since the success of schools' performance is measured by these criteria. It is in schools' interest, therefore, to retain their most able students up to the age of 18, and to encourage lower achievers to leave at the age of 16 and continue their education or training in the lifelong learning sector. Thus there is a strong argument that the imperatives of market competition in education and training compromise the impartiality of the progression advice which schools are required to provide in the form of information, advice and guidance (IAG), to students considering their progression options towards the end of their compulsory schooling (Fuller and Macfadyen, 2012).

For most of those who are not advised or selected to stay on at school, the main progression route is into colleges of FE. This means that learners may find themselves on a vocational programme without in any real sense having made the choice to be there (Fuller and Macfadyen, 2012). Such a route and its trajectory may not coincide with what they consider to be their needs or aspirations (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Wallace, 2002); and this in turn can lead to lack of motivation and engagement on their part, since they feel no personal investment in the direction their education has taken (Wallace, 2010). Recent research in FE colleges suggests that such disengagement is often the underlying factor in non-compliant or disruptive behaviour (for example, Spenceley, 2007; Wallace, 2012) among 16-19 year olds in FE; and particularly among those on lower level courses. One consequence of this is the perpetuation of the discourse that presents 16-19 provision in FE colleges as second-best, and school sixth forms as the prestigious route of choice. Demotivated 16 year-olds are directed into FE be-

cause of the way that sector is perceived; and their resulting disengagement or non-compliant behaviour then serves to reinforce the sector's image (Baird et al, 2012). This can be described as a *mutual damnation model* (Wallace, 2007), perpetuating a discourse which has its origins in British social history.

4. The historical legacy

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries educational provision in the UK was closely linked in the national perception to notions about social class. For the ruling classes 'education' had nothing to do with preparation for work but was solely concerned with acquiring culture. A curriculum designed to equip the learner to earn a living was considered inappropriate for the offspring of the higher social classes; and to undertake any form of education that could be described as 'useful' in this respect would be to compromise their social standing. The elite grammar schools took their name from the teaching of Greek and Latin grammar. Subjects such as science were still being largely excluded from their curriculum even as late as the second half of the nineteenth century, as the Report of the Clarendon Commission (1864) pointed out at the time. The Report went on to argue, however, that the maintenance of classical Greek and Latin as the core element of an English education '*far outweighs the error of having clung to these studies too exclusively*' (quoted in Maclure 1986, p. 89). Four years later, the Report of the Taunton Commission (1868) set out a hierarchical ranking of educational needs according to social class. It presents a taxonomy in which there are three grades of parents who desire their children to be educated. The first are those who want their children to continue in school up to and beyond the age of eighteen with a curriculum of Latin and Greek. These parents: *'have nothing to look to but education to keep their sons on a high social scale. And they would not wish to have what might be more readily converted into money if in any degree it tends to let their children sink in the social scale'* (Report of the Taunton Commission, quoted in Maclure, 1986, p. 93).

Here we see questions of value, status and social standing attaching to a liberal, as opposed to an instrumental curriculum. Parents described by the report as 'second grade' would keep their children in education until the age of sixteen and wish them to study Latin, but also a range of subjects useful for the world of business. This would include mathematics, natural science and perhaps a foreign language; little that we today would term 'vocational'. Below them on the social scale were 'third grade' parents, who would keep their children in education to the age of fourteen to study a curriculum of reading, writing and arithmetic – key skills for employment

in those days as they are still today (Maclure, 1986). Below these three grades, and uncategorized by the Report, were the majority of the population; the poor and the underclass whose children would be unlikely to receive much if any formal education beyond an elementary level. These 'grades' bring to mind Plato's allegory of the three metals, where citizens are rigidly categorized according to their status and role. And they demonstrate clearly two key components of a discourse about education, status and value still prevalent today in the UK. Firstly, there is the notion that curriculum subjects increase in status the further removed they are from association with vocational training or *usefulness*; and secondly, there is the idea that prestige attaches to a lengthy education in school, and that conclusions about social status may be drawn from the age to which an individual continues their schooling. Thus the status of today's students who leave school at 16 for an instrumental and competence-based curriculum in the lifelong learning sector, is still largely predicated on a set of unexamined nineteenth century notions about worth and social standing.

Such taxonomies persisted well into the twentieth century, informing, for example, the Education Act of 1944 which introduced selection at the age of 11 for one of three types of secondary schooling - grammar, modern or technical schools -according to what were judged to be pupils' needs and aptitudes. Grammar schools with their academic curriculum provided for those children who performed best in the selection test. The curriculum of the technical schools, on the other hand, emphasised technical or science-based subjects; and the secondary modern schools offered practical subjects such as woodwork or sewing, alongside reading, writing and arithmetic. Schooling for those pupils ended at the age of fifteen. There are clear parallels here with the three categories of provision described in the Taunton Report almost a century earlier; and although claims were made that the three types of schooling would be of equal status, the '11-plus' examination, as it came to be known, was recognised as an indicator of success or failure. The reward for success was a place at grammar school and the possibility of university and entry to the professions; while 'failure' led to a secondary modern education which was viewed primarily as a preparation for the world of labour. While this system did enable some degree of social mobility, it was nevertheless underpinned by those same nineteenth century discourses about work, class and culture.

The same can be said for the youth training schemes which were introduced into the lifelong learning sector in the later part of the twentieth century (DES 1981), referred to by critics as '*training without jobs'* (Finn, 1987), and presented as an initiative to provide school leavers with the skills that employers were looking for in their employees. Implicit in this discourse was the idea that youth unemployment was caused by a lack of

skills amongst school leavers (rather than by, for example, a wider economic and political set of circumstances) This *deficit model* of young people in the sector served to further compound the notion that FE provision was aimed at low achievers with low aspirations.

5. Teachers' perspective

We have seen how historical and political discourses about education, class and status, together with the undermining by market forces of student choice at 16, afford us some insight into the underlying causes of some students' disengagement or disruptive behaviour in the lifelong learning sector's colleges of FE. The explanations put forward by successive governments, (for example, DFES, 2006) tend to be based instead on a deficit model of the students or of the teachers (Clow, 2001; Wallace, 2002; Jephcote and Salisbury, 2009) only capable of being resolved through interventions such as teacher training (Woodcock & Vialle, 2010). However, research suggests that teachers themselves offer another set of explanations, based on their professional experience and their interactions with their students (for example, Spenceley, 2007; Wallace, 2012); explanations which include factors such as social deprivation; the degree to which parents are generally supportive of college rules or of teachers' attempts to inculcate good manners and safe practices; and the degree to which teachers themselves appear cheerful and well-motivated, and have a higher sense of teacher self-efficacy (Woodcock, 2011). Teachers also report finding pragmatic solutions to students' lack of motivation which have been found to engage students at least in the short term. These include not setting students a task unless: they have the ability to do it; they can see some point in doing it; they can take some pride in doing it; doing it fits their image of who they are (Wallace, 2012).

While it has been argued that this pragmatic approach may serve the immediate needs of both teachers and students more effectively than the external imposition of standards for teacher training (Braun, 2012), it can do little in the long term to address the underlying causes of student disaffection outlined in this paper.

6. The experience of learners

Despite all that has been said, however, there is evidence that some young students report finding in FE a more productive and mutually respectful teacher-learner relationship than they experienced at school, and one which provides them with the confidence they have lacked to engage with learning (Fuller and Macfayden, 2012). Peart (2012) suggests further

that specific groups such as young Black males, who claim to have felt themselves disadvantaged or alienated by their experience of compulsory schooling, report finding the culture of FE a more relaxed and inclusive learning environment and become motivated to engage and achieve success in their studies as a consequence. Of course, this raises the question of the extent to which the decision to leave school for FE was an active choice made by these students, and whether there is a correlation between such genuine exercise of choice and subsequent engagement and achievement.

7. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to disentangle some of the complexities of the school-lifelong learning sector relationship in the UK, arguing that it is a relationship full of contradictions. On the one hand, there are deeply entrenched notions about the low status of FE as a progression route from school; on the other there are the claims of policy-makers, based on a discourse of deficit, that the current consequences of such notions can be resolved by surface measures designed to 'improve' teachers' ability to raise student motivation and performance. Moreover, it seems that teachers may have more faith in their own pragmatic strategy-building to motivate and support students than in the imposition of such national teaching 'standards'. We see contradictions apparent, too, in the discourse about students making a 'choice' at 16, when in fact the power to choose, in a competitive quasi-market, lies mainly with the schools.

However, in the claims of some individual students and student groups that their experience of FE is a more positive and productive one than their experience of compulsory schooling, we have what we might term a positive contradiction, and one which may repay further investigation and research. Meanwhile, the current uncertainty over the naming of the sector, combined with the possibility that the imposition of national teaching 'standards' will no longer be presented as a emollient for all its ills, may present opportunities to challenge the discourses of low status and failure which still haunt lifelong learning in the UK.

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