Pride and Prospects: Developing a socially just level 1 curriculum to enable more positive school to work transitions

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About Liz Atkins

Liz has worked at universities in the UK and Australia. Her research interests are focussed on schools to work transitions through vocational education and the ways in which these are mediated by social class. She is currently working on a project around the level 1 curriculum which is funded by Rothschild and based at Guernsey College. Her new book (with Vicky Duckworth) Research Methods for Social Justice and Equity in Education is now available through Bloomsbury. The book offers researchers a full understanding of key concepts, showing how they can be used a means to develop practical strategies for undertaking research that makes a difference to the lives of marginalised and disadvantaged learners.

Publication information

Abstract

This paper reports on an ongoing project, being conducted in Guernsey, which is evaluating the medium term impact of a new curriculum model designed to enable more successful, and less precarious transitions to work for young people undertaking broad vocational education at level 1. Careers Education and Guidance (CEG) forms a central plank of the curriculum, in response to earlier research (Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2009; Atkins et al, 2015) suggesting that young people undertaking programmes at this level have aspirations similar to their higher achieving peers, but lack the support, and cultural and social capital to realise those aspirations. The paper highlights the particular challenges faced by these young people, of whom 33% became NEET in 2015/16 (Guernsey College data), with particular reference to their career aspirations and the ways in which these are supported by the college. The paper positions the study as research *for* social justice, rather than *socially just research* (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019*)*, but draws on theoretical concepts of social justice to inform the conduct of the study (e.g. Lincoln and Denzin, 2013). Theoretically, it draws on, amongst others, the work of Bourdieu (e.g.1990) Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), Hodkinson *et al* (1996) and Hodkinson (e.g. 1996; 1998; 2008).

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Introduction

Level 1 students are a group who are perceived, in both policy and educational terms, as problematic: research investigating this group of young people indicates that they are socially excluded and have negative previous educational experience Atkins, 2009). Characterised as problematic in policy and wider discourses, their educational positioning means that are able only to access low status, low value, vocational programmes, from which between 30% and 50% become NEET, whilst those who do progress into employment predominantly move into low-pay, low-skill, and insecure work (Atkins, 2009; 2010; 2017). Despite this, there is evidence to suggest that the young people have 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).

The exclusionary characteristics exhibited by these young people are wide ranging: almost all come from the lowest socio-economic groups; many have been excluded from school, and have diagnosed (and undiagnosed) disabilities and learning difficulties. Race and gender are significant in their exclusionary impact amongst this group, highlighting the importance of considering the impact of intersectionality in the context of individual lives. In addition, in terms of both the level and type of qualification the young people are pursuing, level 1 vocational programmes have no academic or vocational credibility and form the bottom rung of the post-16 educational hierarchy. This results in students being ambivalently positioned educationally, with some providers placing level 1 programmes as part of a SEND offer, and others as part of their mainstream provision.

Despite the fact that a majority of level 1 students have had negative school experiences, and have exhibited disaffection in the classroom, the level 1 curriculum is largely classroom based, and vocationally orientated only in very broad terms across eight subject areas. Assessment is predominantly written and outcomes based, and despite the vocational orientation of the programmes it is unusual for students at this level to undertake work

experience: instead, the expectation is that they will progress to level 2 and beyond in the same, or a related, occupational area. In addition, such programmes offer little or no careers education, despite evidence which suggests that students at this level have similar aspirations to their higher attaining peers, but lack the knowledge and cultural capital to navigate successful transitions into their imagined futures (Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2009). Traditionally these students have also been largely invisible in policy terms. Level 1 students appeared only by implication in the 2003 White Paper which describes a full level 2 qualification as representing 'the foundation skills for employability' (DfES, 2003: 63). However, in more recent years their profile has been raised amongst policy-makers. This interest in low-attaining youth can be traced back to the Wolf Review of 2011. Informed by research conducted in the early 2000's, Wolf (2011: 70) observed that level 1 programmes 'do not appear to have any positive outcomes whatsoever in terms of earnings and career progression'. This finding was accepted in the government response (DfE, 2011), and policy initiatives since then – some tied to SEND policy, and some to the move towards 'technical' education (DfE, 2012; 2019) – have raised the profile of this group.

Paradoxically, however, the policy interest in low-attaining youth has taken place simultaneously with crippling funding cuts to the further education sector, where most level 1 provision is located. Further, many of the new initiatives (such as the foundation year, supported internships, and traineeships) are themselves problematic. Supported internships and traineeships form the central thrust of policy for low attaining young people and those with SEN. They are, perhaps, most notable for talking more about who is *ex*cluded by policy (those deemed 'not suitable', those without formal statements, the most disengaged) than who *is* included. Significantly, the group perceived by many to be the most challenging (for which read problematic) – the most disengaged young people who do not hold a statement of SEN – fall outside the provisions of both these initiatives, raising important questions about the Government's broader commitment to developing a more inclusive society. Further, the existing insufficiency of apprenticeships, together with the significant difficulties that have been noted in engaging employers with Foundation Learning (NFER, 2010) does not provide an optimistic context for either traineeships or supported internships, both of which involve young people who need extensive support from colleagues and employers if they are to have any chance of making a successful transition to the workplace. The impact of this is that the only educational option for the most marginalised low-attaining youth, remains the type of level 1 programme which the government accepted was inadequate in 2011. Ongoing research into the VET curriculum continues to make note of the way in which broad vocational programmes at lower levels limit young people's potential for agency and

still fail to confer any meaningful cultural capital (Atkins, 2013; 2017; Avis and Atkins, 2016) promoting only 'impoverished forms of employability' (Simmons, 2009:137) which do not offer access to valuable skills and knowledge (e.g. see Bathmaker, 2013; Ecclestone, 2011; Keep, 2009). Thus, contrary to the notions of social justice which traditionally underpin education, these programmes continue to have the minimal – or negative – exchange value in the labour market first reported almost a decade ago (Keep and James, 2010, see also 2012). This failure of policy was acknowledged by the House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility (2016), which also called for further policy change. However, despite this call for policy change, and the plethora of earlier initiatives, there remains a paucity of empirical evidence to support the idea of what a 'good' level 1 curriculum might look like.

This paper reports on a project, now in its third year, conducted at Guernsey College and funded by Rothschild and co., which has sought to draw on a range of robust theoretical and empirical work to develop a different and more socially just form of curriculum for level 1 students. The curriculum has been subject to ongoing evaluation and development using an Action Research approach. Further, 25% of the original cohort are being followed up for two years post-completion, to help establish the extent to which the programme is supporting more effective transitions into the local labour market.

Theoretical framework, method and methodology

This project utilises a social justice theoretical framework. In terms of the distinctions drawn by Atkins and Duckworth (2019), the project might most accurately be termed research *for* social justice, rather than socially just research, given that the student participants could not be involved in the original curriculum development (as they were not at that time known to the college) although they were able to contribute to the evaluative data which has subsequently led to revised iterations of the programme in 2018/2019 and for 2019/2020. Also in relation to social justice, the project is concerned with the multiple oppressions to which these young people are subject, and involves action in terms of the development of a curriculum designed to address some of those inequities. In this respect, it fulfils definitions of social justice where social justice refers to particular social and human values about equity and the way in which they are enacted. In the context of this project, social justice is concerned with oppression, inequalities, and hegemony and implies *action*. This means that it is 'a form of politics, as well as a form of critical inquiry, and also a guiding philosophy' (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019:40). This understanding of social justice draws on ancient and contemporary philosophy, including Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* and Plato's *Republic*, 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). This paper also utilises

Hodkinson et al's (1997) theory of Careership to understand the trajectories of the young participants, and draws on Kelly (2009); Stenhouse (1975) and Dewey (1916/2011) in respect of curriculum theory, together with concepts of valuable knowledge (e.g. Bathmaker, 2013; Ecclestone, 2011; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009/2019) as well as Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of social and cultural capital.

Together, these works provided a theoretical underpinning for the curriculum. In practical terms, local employers were invited to contribute ideas for the curriculum, and the college level 1 team, drawing upon both theoretical understandings and practical advice from employers, spent 2016/2017 developing the curriculum, which was implemented in September 2017. 39 students enrolled, all of whom participated in the new curriculum and its ongoing evaluation. A significant proportion of the group were being supported by the Youth Commission (a Guernsey public service which supports marginalised youth) and this sub-group was separately monitored by the Youth Commission. Data were shared with the college, with the consent of the young people and consistent with Guernsey legislation on data protection (Bailiwick of Guernsey, 2018). A sub-sample of 12 students were selected (by invitation, then by gender and subject area to ensure this sample was broadly representative). This group of 12 are being tracked bi-annually until 2020 to monitor their medium term outcomes. Monitoring involves interviews with the young people, and their employers or tutors to provide an overview of the extent to which their trajectories reflect a transition to secure and sustainable career paths.

Consistent with the social justice framework for the project, ethical approval was gained from the University, participant and parent/carer consent was obtained, and protocols based on the BERA ethical guidance (2018) followed. The most significant ethical challenge, in a small island community, was effective anonymization of a small group of well-known individuals. To that end, gender-neutral pseudonyms were adopted and some identifying characteristics changed or omitted. A future paper addressing these issues is planned for 2020.

The key aim of the project was to *develop and implement an evidence based, research informed curriculum for level 1 students*. Secondary aims related to that over-arching statement, and described the intention, through the new curriculum, to provide programmes which:

- Confer cultural capital and meaningful knowledge

- Offer meaningful and effective Careers Education and Guidance

- Clearly articulate with the needs of the local labour market and/or further education

- Offer work experience

- Promote more secure, less precarious transitions from school to work

- Have application across different FE and LLL settings

- Communicate value for Level 1 students

- Improve outcomes in comparison to local and national benchmarks

Research Context

Guernsey College operates in a context which supports curriculum innovation. The Bailiwick of Guernsey is a self-governing UK Crown dependency with a population of about 60,000. This has particular implications for this project. The college operates as any general FE college in England or Wales would, with a broadly similar demographic of students, albeit often in smaller numbers. It offers a range of vocational programmes, for which it uses UK Awarding Bodies and credentials, such as BTEC and City and Guilds. It is not, however, incorporated, and funding is direct under similar arrangements to those in England and Wales prior to incorporation. This is significant, as it allowed students leaving college without a level 1 credential to move into sustainable employment to count as a 'success'. In addition, the college is not subject to Ofsted inspection (although it references the framework in its quality improvement plan). The implication of this was that the level 1 team did not feel constrained by perceived external expectations: they could simply develop something they felt would be in the best interests of their students.

In 2017, 39 students – a relatively large cohort – enrolled on level 1 provision at Guernsey College. This encompassed four broad areas: construction (including engineering and 'tasters' of a wide range of trades); Vocational Studies (Health and Social Care and Childcare); Art and Design, and IT. Reflecting the social, emotional and educational challenges faced by level 1 students, 11 of 39 were being supported by the Youth Commission at the time of enrolment for a wide range of challenges which included issues such as being subject to domestic violence, being a Looked After child, self-harming, contact with youth justice services, and contact with CAMHs or social services. Other young people in the cohort reported problems such as anxiety, lacking self-confidence, or having no-one to talk to, but were not at that time receiving formal support. In addition, 2 students had been out of school for several years prior to enrolling at college, others had a long history of poor attendance, and one was making a third attempt at level 1 after withdrawing on two previous occasions. All came from low socio-economic (working class) backgrounds.

These characteristics are significant in terms of the young peoples' aspirations and potential career trajectories. It may be argued that level 1 students 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 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, 1980; 1993:87) the options available to them are often very limited. Despite having aspirations similar to those of their higher attaining peers (the young people in this study aspired to work in a variety of roles including teaching, carpentry, IT technical work, nursing, and Early Years) acquiring the levels of expertise required for such roles demands a prolonged skills development and extended transition which involves moving beyond a familiar habitus (Bourdieu 1990:52/53) to the unknown, where cultural capital can be 'stretched beyond its limits' (Ball et al 1999:212). Thus, notions of habitus could be seen to be deterministic in relation to level 1 students; however, Bourdieu himself argued that his theory was not deterministic (1977, see also Maton, 2008), and Hodkinson, who drew heavily on Bourdieu's theories in his work on Careership argued that, far from being deterministic, habitus offers an opportunity to develop understandings of transitions which avoid 'a polarised explanation focused either on social structures or individual free choice' (1998:100). In the context of this project, it was important to acknowledge the constraints placed on the student participants by their low educational attainment, and the extent to which they faced significant challenges associated with social and educational exclusion. Constraints such as these, related to habitus and position in the field, and significantly influencing their career dispositions, limited the students' horizons, and access to valorised capitals, placing significant barriers in the way of them realising their idealised careers (see Hodkinson, 2008, drawing on Ball *et al*, 2002 and Bimrose *et al*, 2005). Facilitating more successful transitions thus became a key aim of the revised curriculum, measurable in quantitative terms by a reduction in the numbers becoming NEET (33% in 2015 according to Guernsey College internal data) and in qualitative terms through the data generated from interviews with young people, their employers, and tutors. An effective and individual CEG offer, tailored to the needs of level 1 students, forms a key plank of the revised curriculum.

The curriculum

The key aim of the project was to develop and implement an evidence based, research informed and democratic curriculum for level 1 students which conferred valorised capitals and valuable knowledge. It may be argued that all approaches to the curriculum are value-laden and associated with particular forms of ideology (Kelly, 2009).

Kelly identifies three types of curriculum, arguing that the objectives based curriculum approach (which underpins the vocational curriculum) is, like the content approach, inconsistent with the 'underlying principles of a democratic society' and 'inhibits the attainment of education for all' (2009: 86). The outcomes based vocational curriculum has been extensively critiqued since the new vocationalism saw the introduction of TVEI and CPVE some forty years ago, with researchers making arguments that outcomes based vocational education prepares young people for specific low skill occupations (Ainley 1991:103; Bathmaker 2001) and that this is achieved by instilling behaviours such as attendance and punctuality (Cohen 1984:105; Chitty, 1991:104). This approach contrasts starkly with Kelly's (2009: 89) notion of a 'curriculum as process and development' which he argues cannot be value-neutral. This approach then, was more consistent with the team values of social justice, and also offered the possibility of developing a more democratic form of education, such as the education for studentship described by Bloomer (1996; 1997). Thus a model was designed which included a level 1 vocational qualification, English and maths up to level 2 according to individual need, tailored CEG, work-placement, and enrichment activities. These five aspects of the curriculum are all delivered as project-based, work-related learning, and will involve greater integration of English and maths with the core curriculum in future iterations of the programme. A paper elaborating this model, and outlining its theoretical and empirical basis is forthcoming (Atkins and Misselke, 2019). Another key aspect of the curriculum and its evaluation was the contribution of the students, and the way in which, consistent with the social justice approach, it communicated respect for them throughout; for example, many of the enrichment activities were suggested by the students. Input from local employers meant that the curriculum also had greater articulation with the needs of the local labour market as well as providing a broader basis for progression to a range of further education programmes. Other notable characteristics of the programme include meaningful and effective CEG, and work experience for all students. In order to support personalised CEG, elaborated initial assessments were completed by all 39 learners. These generated data related to the student's career aspirations and their reasons for coming to college as well as their current level of attainment in relation to English and maths.

Projects undertaken by the students differed according to vocational area. For example, construction and engineering students stripped down a go-kart, re-built it from scratch, and then took it to a karting track where they had the opportunity to drive it. This project supported the core curriculum, was work-related, and generated an enrichment activity when students went out to drive the kart they had built. IT students did some project based work

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on coding stimulated by an enrichment activity, in this case a presentation from Sanjeev Gupta about his work on the Mars Science Laboratory rover, Curiosity. Vocational studies students organised a Christmas Community Craft event involving elderly clients from a local day centre and children from a local pre-school. Students, children and elders participated in a range of craft activities with refreshments also provided by the students. Work-placement was varied, and not necessarily related to the student's vocational area, but designed to support the development of transferable skills for future employment. For example, a long-term project to regenerate a Victorian walled garden in St Peter Port had been looking for volunteers. This became a work placement for a number of students (some, but not all of whom were undertaking units in horticulture) and provided an opportunity to develop team working skills and to communicate with other workers and members of the public. An example of work experience directly related to occupational area was Hobby Club, where vocational studies students planned and ran an after school club for children at a local primary school. Local charities, as well as employers, also offered work experience opportunities. Significantly, students undertook work placement in small groups, and were supported throughout by tutors and work-place mentors.

Students have been involved in a range of enrichment opportunities, some involving local and national initiatives, and others deriving from curriculum activity as well as activities requested by the students themselves, such as group trips to the local cinema – many of this cohort had not previously had the opportunity to go to the cinema. Forest school was run weekly by a teacher trained in forest pedagogy, and this targeted the most vulnerable and challenging students. An initiative arising from the students was an awareness raising campaign for Liberate (similar to Pride). Primarily organised by two vocational students, this initiative led to a report on the local BBC channel and an award for the college for Best Educational Initiative. Residential visits now also form part of the broader curriculum. During year 1 of the project this involved a camping trip to Herm. This was challenging for the young people, none of whom had previously left the island, but ultimately rewarding and successful in building 'soft' skills such as self-confidence and team-work skills. Students are now also offered the opportunity to undertake short courses valued by employers, which included food hygiene, first aid, and health and safety, as well as sessions offered by the youth commission designed to develop 'soft' skills around self-care, decision-making, and emotional-wellbeing. All students also work towards level 2 English and maths, mirroring policy on the UK mainland. English and maths were delivered discretely, but using similar project based approaches, and emphasising the relationship of each subject to work contexts. Significantly, several interviewees highlighted the importance of achieving

credentials in English and maths, implying an increasing awareness amongst young people about the potential exchange value of these qualifications in the labour market. For example, one student who aspires to be an IT technician correctly identified that a level 3 diploma would be necessary to achieve that, but also ' *my maths thing as well … maths and English. I'm currently at Level 2 English but only Level 1 maths… but since I came to college I'm doing really well'* whilst an aspirant child-care worker (Rowan), talking about the qualifications required referred to NVQ in childcare and 'you need at least maths and English level 2'.

Careers Education and Guidance

In addition to determining each students' level of attainment in English and maths, the initial assessment they completed included some work on career aspirations. Consistent with earlier research (Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2009) most students lacked knowledge about their intended career path. 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*

- *I know what skills I will need to have to do the job I want.*

None indicated that they were *'extremely confident'* in these areas. CEG was already embedded at the college, and had always formed part of the offer to level 1 students. In order to develop this to meet the specific needs of level 1 learners, early in their programme all completed a progression pathway study unit with a focus on careers. This 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 work was then displayed in visual form, acting as a reminder and source of ongoing information to students. Other initiatives in this area included visits to and from work-places, where the focus was on job roles, what they involved, and as the pathways into them, as well as individual guidance sessions. Follow-up interviews with students at the end of their programme were indicative of a much higher level of awareness regarding their idealised careers, indicating 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. For example, Rowan, who hoped to work in Early Years stated that 'you need like your NVQ in childcare, you need … at least maths and English level 2' whilst Dallas recognised a need for 'my level 3 diploma…as well as maths and English [to be an IT technician]', and Hero, who aspired to work at a more senior level in

Early Years 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'.

Impacts and Conclusion

The introduction of the revised curriculum, and the emphasis on CEG and work-relatedness has, to date, produced some positive outcomes. It is clear that the young people now have much clearer understandings of the pathways and credentials necessary to enter the career of their choice. In relation to engagement with learning, routine programme evaluation data suggests that the young people are much more positively engaged with project-based learning than comparable cohorts were with the previous, outcomes driven curriculum. Interviews and internal college data suggest that some particularly vulnerable students (examples include one with behavioural difficulties who had failed to complete level 1 on two previous occasions, and another who was involved with drugs, alcohol and risky sexual behaviours) have remained on programme, where they would previously have been expected to withdraw. Further, these extremely vulnerable students have had very positive progression outcomes. For example, of those highlighted above, one is now doing well nine months into an apprenticeship, and the other has almost completed a level 2 programme, whilst holding down part time employment. This implies that as well as positive educational outcomes, the students have accrued significant personal and social benefits from engaging with the programme in its revised form, which will promote more stable and secure transitions, and ultimately improve their life chances.

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. Figure 1 shows outcomes for those students who withdrew, and figure 2 for those who completed.

Figure 1

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

Figure 2

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 (see figure 6). These data demonstrate much improved outcomes for this cohort in comparison to students on earlier iterations of the level 1 (33% NEET in 2015).

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative data generated by this project provide strong empirical evidence to support the argument that the curriculum at level 1 needs to be broader, more practical, and to offer opportunities for work-related activities as well as offering experiences which support the development of social and cultural capital. However, there are cost implications associated with the implementation of such a curriculum which would generate significant barriers in mainland contexts where funding cuts have led to the withdrawal of many programmes and an increasingly narrow curriculum. If policy makers' concerns with the level 1 curriculum, and those students who engage with it, is sincere, then consideration should be given to the findings of this project. This would require policy makers and politicians to 'walk the walk' as well as 'talk the talk' in terms of social justice, and evidence their preparedness to implement and fully fund a more appropriate curriculum for some of our most marginalised young people.

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