**Addressing in/equalities: A re-imagined curriculum for low-attaining youth**

**Purpose**

This paper reports on a project re-imagining of a level 1[[1]](#footnote-2) English-model broad vocational curriculum for low-attaining youth. The project, funded by Rothschild, has sought to develop a knowledge rich and engaging curriculum, which is more consistent with notions of social justice than contemporary low-level vocational curricula.

**Design/methodology/approach**

The project utilised a participatory, action-research model of curriculum development informed by a theoretical framework drawing on concepts of social justice.

**Findings**

The findings suggest that a broad, project-based curriculum, supported with a wide range of extra-curricular activities (enrichment) is effective in supporting secure and sustainable transitions into further education and/or meaningful employment for low attaining young people.

**Originality**

This paper extends understandings about curricula approaches in low-level vocational education. There is a paucity of research into the curriculum at the lowest mainstream levels. Students engaging with education at that level are similarly under-researched. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

**Keywords**

Curriculum; low-attaining, transitions, further education, enrichment, social justice

**Introduction**

Similarly to other curricula internationally, the model of education for low-attaining youth in England is vocational in orientation, and narrow and instrumental in ethos with a focus on ‘busy work’. Despite this, research into the vocational curriculum at its lowest levels – and how that could, or should, be conceptualised - is notable only by its absence. In addition, there is a paucity of research related to low-attaining students post-16 more broadly. However, evidence does demonstrate that across industrialised nations these young people tend only to have access to limited, poor quality, educational ‘opportunities’ (Atkins, 2010) which are inconsistent with positive transitions into the workplace. Further, the students accessing these programmes face multiple challenges and are characterised by a wide range of exclusionary characteristics, including Race, class, disability and gender as well as negative previous educational experiences (Atkins, 2009). Far from being structured to address these difficulties, contemporary vocational qualifications at this level have minimal or negative exchange value in the labour market (Keep, 2009) and are only weakly vocational, with an emphasis on social disciplines (Cohen, 1984, p. 105; Chitty, 1991, p. 104) rather than valuable knowledge (see Bathmaker, 2013; Ecclestone, 2011; Wheelahan 2016).

This paper describes a project re-imagining a level 1 English-model broad vocational curriculum for low-attaining youth. The project sought to address some of these ‘wicked problems’ by working within ethical and theoretical frameworks informed by concepts of social justice in order to develop a research-informed curriculum which could be applied across different post-16 contexts and which:

* Conferred cultural capital and meaningful knowledge
* Offered meaningful and effective Careers Education and Guidance
* Clearly articulated with the needs of the local labour market and/or further education
* Offered work experience
* Promoted more secure, less precarious transitions from school to work
* Communicated value/respect of Level 1 students

This paper describes how this was conceptualised in practice, reporting on the positive outcomes of the project and emphasising the narratives of three participants who are broadly reflective of the wider group of students. It discusses the ethical imperatives for a ‘fit-for-purpose’ curriculum at this level and concludes with the implications this has for policy and practice in this area.

The study was conducted in Guernsey, which forms part of the Bailiwick of Guernsey, a UK Crown Dependency, with its own parliament and legislature. It has a population of around 63,000 served by a single further education college and a number of school sixth forms. The college utilises the English model of further education, with some differences in funding and regulation which facilitated the innovations described here. Thus, debates around the English model of Vocational Education and Training (VET) informed the project discussed in this paper.

**The English Model**

The contemporary vocational curriculum in England is offered predominantly within the Further Education (FE) or college sector to young people aged 16-19 who progress based on their outcomes in the national General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams at age 16+. The sector is idiosyncratic internationally, although there are some parallels with the Australian system, and it has been widely argued to be class specific and accessed largely by young people from lower socio-economic groups (e.g. see Colley *et al.,* 2003, p. 479;Macrae *et al.,* 1997, p. 92).

The English model of education is predicated on a Platonic model of different types of education for different types of child (McCulloch, 1991; 1998). Reflecting this, the English post-16 education system offers the tri-partite routes of ‘A’ Levels (considered ‘gold standard’ qualifications and required for University entry), occupational routes, including apprenticeships, (of varying quality) and so-called ‘broad vocational routes’ which, at level 3 (A level ‘equivalent’) may lead to occupational training or to some, generally poorer quality, higher education programmes. However, there is a further division. Those young people not equipped to study at level 3 will opt for broad vocational programmes at lower levels. Level 2 programmes are considered equivalent to GCSE, and Level 1, the lowest *mainstream* level, broadly equates to the standard of attainment expected of the average 14-year-old. Both level 1 and level 2 programmes normally last for one academic year, and level 3 programmes for two academic years. Around 10% of the cohort in England ‘progress’ from school to level 1 programmes annually. These young people are predominantly white British, and around two-thirds are male, with in excess of 20% subsequently becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) (Sezen, 2019). The numbers becoming NEET are significant, but this is hardly surprising, given that evidence consistently demonstrates that the level 1 curriculum is impoverished, with minimal exchange value in the labour market (Wolf, 2011; Keep & James, 2010; 2012).

This impoverished curriculum is classroom based, and only ‘weakly vocational’, retaining much in common with its antecedent credentials, such as the Certificate in Pre-vocational education (CPVE) and Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) which first emerged during the ‘new vocationalism’ of the 1980’s as part of wider policy initiatives intended to address the issue of mass youth unemployment. These early initiatives were distinguished by educational researchers as aimed at achieving job *readiness,* rather than providing traditional job *preparation*, and came to be criticised as being ‘narrow and divisive’ (McCulloch 1987, p. 32) forms of preparation for unemployment, rather than preparation for meaningful work (Bates *et al*., 1984), arguments which have persisted in relation to successor credentials, particularly those offered at level 1. More recently, academics have also raised concerns that vocational education, particularly at its lowest levels, denies access to the ‘structuring principles of disciplinary knowledge’ (Wheelahan, 2007, p. 637; see also 2016), and as such, to ‘powerful’ knowledge more broadly (Ecclestone, 2011). Similar arguments have been made in relation to the contemporary neo-liberal concepts of skill utilised in VET which have been variously described as ‘atomised’ (Wheelahan, 2016, p. 180), narrow, and instrumental (Powell and McGrath, 2019; Atkins and Tummons, 2017).

Such critiques have also, over an extended period, noted the way in which young people accessing these programmes are subject to forms of socialisation associated with low pay, low skill work, such as team-work, attendance and punctuality (Cohen, 1984, p. 105; Chitty, 1991, p. 104, Atkins, 2009, p. 18, Tomlinson, 2013, p. 69; Esmond and Atkins, 2020, p. 247. These forms of socialisation are very different to those more advantaged youth experience (Esmond and Atkins, 2022), and make a significant contribution to the very different outcomes (and future possibilities) observable amongst young people of different social classes who have completed their transitions into the labour market.

**Low-attaining youth**

Broadly speaking, those young people described as low-attaining share a number of characteristics in addition to their limited levels of school attainment (which are not necessarily indicative of individual academic ability). Predominantly working class (Colley, 2006), most report a poor educational experience pre-16 and significant personal and social difficulties (Ainley and Bailey 1997, pp. 79/80; Atkins, 2009) and are constrained in their educational options by a broad range of factors including issues around social, economic and educational exclusion (Ball *et al*., 2000). Low attaining young people are positioned at the bottom of an educational hierarchy which places greatest value on those perceived to be ‘academic’ and with the potential to make less problematic transitions via higher education into sustainable, professional roles with meaningful career prospects. In contrast, and contrary notions of social justice, a significant proportion of young people who leave school to engage with ‘welfare vocationalism’ (Esmond and Atkins, 2022) become NEET, whilst those who do progress into employment predominantly move into the low-pay, low-skill, and insecure work which offers few career prospects. Further, until relatively recently, these young people have been largely invisible in both policy and research terms across international boundaries. However, a small body of work concerned with young people at this level is now emerging, and policy-makers have begun to acknowledge the imperative to cater for their specific needs.

Despite the policy acknowledgement of the need to cater for this group of young people, in England and Wales interventions are problematic. At the lowest ‘Foundation’ level, learning does not articulate with occupational routes and has been argued to ‘ghettoise’ the lowest level learners (Pring *et al*., 2009, p. 123). Other interventions have taken the form of providing ‘progression pathways’ through vocational education (e.g. via so-called ‘transition years’), an approach predicated on the policy assumption that all young people can make untroubled ‘ladder-like’ transitions into the workplace. This assumption neglects to consider notions of ‘exhausted learner identity’ (Ball *et al*., 2000, p. 135), perhaps associated with a pragmatic acceptance that horizons for action (Hodkinson *et al*., 1996) are limited, or indeed the economic imperatives which face many working-class young people and their families, meaning that a job -any job – will help to ameliorate immediate financial problems.

Further, in policy terms internationally, low-attaining young people are conceived, not in terms of the challenges facing them (and their potential to overcome these) but within deficit models associated with ‘youth as a problem’ (Billett *et al*., 2010), ‘disaffection’ (Atkins, 2009) and ‘vulnerability’ (Ecclestone, 2004; Cornish, 2019). In particular, discourses of need and vulnerability have been utilised in recent times to justify (often low-quality) educational routes and progression pathways as a means of ‘supporting’ young people ‘not yet ready for apprenticeships’ or work (DfE, 2012; 2013). Despite these negative characterisations – and in tension with much policy discourse - evidence demonstrates that these young people have broadly similar aspirations to their more privileged and higher-attaining peers but lack the knowledge and cultural capital to pursue those aspirations, meaning that they are, effectively, unrealistic (see Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2009; 2010; 2017). Further, whilst many do report parental or wider family support, it is worth noting that research has found significant social class polarisations in terms of the nature of the interventions made arising from the parents’ own experience of education (Ball *et al.,* 1999, see also Atkins, 2009). Thus, it is evident that, for the lowest -attaining young people, multiple forms of inequality intersect to create inequitable conditions in which they engage with vocational education and subsequently navigate ‘extended … fractured, precarious and/or troubled’ transitions into the labour market (Atkins, 2017, p. 641).

**The Guernsey Project: Method and Methodology**

The project utilised a participatory, action-research model of curriculum development: initial developments were informed by the research literature, anecdotal evidence, and input from local employers. Later stages were informed by the student participants and internal college data. Whilst acknowledging the limitations of this process whilst working with low-attaining youth (see Pahl, Pool *et al.,* 2011) the researchers sought to include the young people in programme development as well as data generation. As such, the study also acknowledged the primacy of practitioners in this particular context (Orr and Bennett, 2009). Reflecting the ‘messiness’ of qualitative research, unplanned data collection took place where opportunities arose and this ‘serendipitous data’ (Atkins, 2009, Atkins and Duckworth, 2019) informed analysis and ongoing development of the project.

All students enrolled on Level 1 programmes at Guernsey College in the academic year 2017/18 (n=39) participated in the programme evaluation and development which drew on a broad range of student activities, including learning activities, staff evaluation and internal college data. A smaller sub-sample (n=12)consented to longitudinal follow-up (initially two interviews in each academic year, from 2019, due to COVID, one interview in each academic year) between 2018 and 2021 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). Two of these participants withdrew in 2017 leaving a sub-sample of ten. Students enrolling on the programme in subsequent years have also been followed up, but this paper focusses on three of the original cohort, whose stories are broadly typical of the wider group. The study was positioned as research for social justice, rather than socially just research (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019), but drew on theoretical concepts of social justice to inform its conduct (e.g. Lincoln and Denzin, 2013). Whilst routine ethical approvals were gained, the project has been conducted as a collective moral and ethical endeavour on the part of all those involved, with the aim of developing a curriculum – and outcomes for the young people - which were more consistent with notions of social justice.

**The Guernsey Project: Curriculum Development**

The Guernsey project team sought to address some of the ‘wicked problems’ associated with low attainment by working within ethical and theoretical frameworks informed by concepts of social justice. This approach facilitated reflexive consideration of all interventions as the team attempted to simultaneously address some of the deficiencies of the level 1 curriculum and mitigate some of the structural disadvantages and challenges faced by the young people enrolling on the programme. There was limited research to draw on. As noted earlier, students at this mainstream level have been largely absent from academic debate, which has tended to focus on issues around progression and parity of esteem with the academic curriculum. Further, curriculum changes made in response to policy initiatives have not been research-based or rigorously evaluated, with the historic exception of the CPVE Pilot Study, evaluated in 1984/1985 (FEU, 1985). Thus, rather than being research-*based,* the project was necessarily research-*informed*, drawing on work by Stenhouse (1975) for guidance.

The curriculum sought to address some of the constraints faced by the young people as a result of their limited access to the valorised capitals argued by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) to be significant in orienting educational choices and decision-making processes amongst young people. This was to be addressed through a broad range of Enrichment, or extra-curricular activities, including opportunities which might be ‘taken-for-granted’ by more affluent and advantaged young people. Whilst there is a paucity of research on enrichment, the limited existing work (e.g. see FEFC, 1996, LSIS 2010) implies that such activities can facilitate access to cultural and social capitals, although, in a cautionary note, Bathmaker *at al*., (2013) found that amongst higher education students, those identified as working class were less able to generate and mobilise capitals than their middle-class peers. In addition, the curriculum development was informed by Bloomer’s (1997) notions of ‘studentship’ as well as Dewey’s earlier arguments about education enabling democratic participation in society (1916/2011, p. 56) and sought to respond to critiques that the concept of knowledge adopted within the vocational curriculum is not only of limited exchange value (Keep, 2009), but ill-defined, unclear (Bathmaker 2013) and ‘diminished’ (Ecclestone 2011, see also Avis and Atkins, 2017).

Informed by these critiques, the curriculum model that was developed was ‘overtly value-laden and ideological’ (Kelly, 2009, p. 90). In practical terms, it adopted five key pillars:

* a project-based approach to core, competency-based, applied vocational qualifications
* continuous and embedded Careers Education and Guidance (CEG)
* English and maths at levels consistent with each individual’s level of attainment
* work experience
* a broad range of enrichment activities designed to provide the young people with opportunities, knowledge, and experiences they had not previously been exposed to, but which formed part of ‘everyday life’ for their more advantaged peers.

Project-based learning was adopted, not only in response to concerns about the value of the knowledge conferred by contemporary competency-based approaches, but also in response to teachers’ perceptions that students rapidly became disengaged and bored with such curricula. Further, project-based learning is a pedagogical approach which has been found to be consistent with the effective development of work-related skills (Gessler and Howe, 2015) and a key aim of this project was to support secure and sustainable transitions into the workplace.

As English and maths are widely regarded by employers as essential skills in the workplace these were regarded as essential components of a revised curriculum: however, few students entering post-16 education at level 1 have managed to achieve GCSE grade 4 (pass) in these subjects. Resits of these core qualifications have been mandated by government in England since 2012 as a condition of funding for vocational qualifications. However, the Guernsey States (government) takes a different approach to funding and this regulation is not applied. This meant that it was possible to design the programme to include English and maths at each student’s level of attainment. In practice, this meant that some were working towards GCSE re-sits, whilst others were working towards Entry Level credentials designed for students with special needs. Importantly, in all cases, the credentials were seen as attainable by the young people.

Work experience has been identified as critical in supporting effective school to work transitions for lower attaining youth (Wolf, 2011, see also Defeyter *et al.,* 2017). Young people undertook short placements in a voluntary capacity contributing to initiatives in their local community, and in later iterations of the programme, were placed in more typical work-placements with supportive employers, after periods of preparation for both student and employer. CEG also formed a central plank of the new curriculum. In the first iteration of the new programme an initial assessment was conducted which, consistent with earlier research (Bloomer, 1996; Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2009; Atkins and Flint, 2015), demonstrated that the young people lacked basic knowledge about their intended career path and had no role models to turn to. Drawing on notions of careership and career-decision -making, the approach to Careers Education sought to acknowledge that ‘career decisions can only be understood in terms of the life histories of those who make them, wherein identity has evolved through interaction with significant others and with the culture in which the subject has lived and is living’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 33). Recognising the cultural and social constraints which characterised the lives of the young people, the approach to CEG was closely linked to the work experience element of the programme. In addition, it also included individually tailored, and work-related sessions, as well as project-based learning in which students investigated potential career paths, exploring employment opportunities and training requirements.

The impact of this approach reflected some ‘changing dispositions to learning’ (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000) as well as increased knowledge of the pathways into particular careers. Comments from students during a round on interviews in 2017 demonstrated greater positivity about learning, and future educational possibilities. For example, Rowan, then hoping to work in childcare, observed that ‘you need like your NVQ in childcare, you need … at least maths and English level 2’, whilst Dallas noted that ‘I need my level 3 diploma…as well as maths and English [to be an IT technician]’ and Hero 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’.

Significantly, a wide range of Enrichment activities were offered, in some cases tailored to the vocational area the young people were enrolled in, and in others related to personal interests or community activities. For example, in relation to vocational work, Gupta (Imperial College London and part of NASA Mars Science mission) visited the college and gave a talk on coding *Curiosity* the Mars Science Laboratory rover. In college the students subsequently worked on some coding, an activity related to their vocational qualification, but not forming part of the assessment requirements. Enrichment supporting personal interests and ‘fun’ activities included, for example, a family fun-day and trips to the cinema. Whilst apparently frivolous, from a social justice perspective it is important to note the extent of constraint in career decision making amongst young people for whom such activities are not a part of daily life. How is it possible for a young person who has never been to the cinema to conceive of career possibilities in entertainment or the media? Community based activities included working with schools, and homes for the elderly. However, the most notable activity was the *Liberate* event. *Liberate* is the Guernsey equivalent of Pride, and two students – both regarded as particularly vulnerable and challenged for different reasons – asked to do some awareness-raising in support of the day. The event was so successful that it was reported on local television and won an award for Best Educational Initiative.

**Narratives of the young participants**

Guernsey has a small population, and individuals within the community are readily recognisable. For this reason, participants reported here have gender-neutral pseudonyms, and potentially identifying characteristics are either changed or not disclosed. Illustrative of the social and educational difficulties faced by low-attaining young people, of the 39 in cohort 1, eleven young people received support from the Youth Commission (statutory youth service), and three from social workers, six had experienced family break-up, and of these, two did not live with their birth families (one of whom had been ejected from the family home on the basis of their sexuality). Six had experienced or witnessed domestic violence, three were closely related to someone ‘in trouble’ with the police or were themselves involved with the criminal justice system. Sadly, and reflecting the prevalence of mental health difficulties amongst these young people, seven said they felt they had no-one to talk to, three had self-harmed, and eight identified themselves as suffering from anxiety. Two had such significant mental health difficulties that they were being supported by the Guernsey Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Also reflecting the degree of exclusion and difficulty faced by these young people, many faced multiple challenges: thus, the numbers here add up to considerably more than the original 39. None of the students enrolled was without significant problems. These challenges are largely structural, associated with poverty, social class, and educational and other forms of exclusion. Despite this, they are used by policy-makers and others to frame a deficit model of low-attaining youth, which largely rejects structural issues but characterises individuals as problematic. Yet those issues– elicited in stories about individual lives – are significant and merit the illumination that can only emerge from storytelling. In relation to this, Vicars (2018, p. 199, citing Sikes, 2006) highlights the importance of ‘the stories that people tell of and off their lives’ and the complexities that these can reveal. Such complexities can usefully highlight forms of social in/justice and systemic failures in ways that other forms of investigation cannot. Within this project such stories informed programme development, and it is possible to argue that such stories should also inform policy thinking.

For example, Hero, one student on the programme, had been thrown out of the family home for reasons associated with the expression of his/her sexuality. An aunt offered Hero a home but had children of her own. This meant that Hero slept (badly) on a sofa as no bed was available. It is difficult to see how any young person, lacking a bed to sleep in, can conform to the academic and behavioural expectations of an educational institution, and illuminates the reasons for Hero’s poor school attainment. In college, however, knowing this made it possible for the team to acknowledge, rather than punish, Hero’s challenges and the behaviours that arose from them. Similar in/justices may be observed in the following narratives of three of Hero’s peers. These narratives also illustrate the way in which the programme has supported these young people into secure and sustainable employment, helping, in a small way, to mitigate some of the challenges and inequities they have faced in their lives.

***Rowan***

Rowan had a history of special education and school exclusion due to behavioural issues dating back to the primary phase of education. S/he described her/himself as ‘struggl[ing] with anxiety a little bit’, was very dependent on her mother for support, and was identified as being at high risk of withdrawal at the beginning of the level 1 programme. Rowan completed successfully, albeit with additional support, and progressed to level 2 childcare. Now able to conform to college requirements more easily, Rowan successfully completed level 2, albeit again with additional support. The following September, Rowan enrolled on a level 3 childcare programme, but after three weeks ‘I was just getting a little bit stressed out, so I ended up leaving’. This was followed by a move into employment, working for a major international retailer ‘in the baby department’. Rowan has remained in full-time employment with the same employer since that time. Asked in 2021 what had changed in his/her life since beginning the level 1 programme, Rowan noted that:

‘going into work and being independent has changed, I mean, I was independent before but now I have to be even more independent – I have to find my way into work- I normally get the bus, sometimes I get a lift and obviously making more friends at work and having my own money is really good, because I can do what I want to do with my money and not asking Mum for money’.

S/he has also continued part-time study at college, achieving level 2 English and Level 1 maths in 2021:

‘And then I’ve got level 2 English, so that's all done now. So that's the highest I can achieve in English. I don't know if I want to do my level 2 maths yet. I get quite nervous about doing maths but working in retail has helped me. I can do more mental maths in my head rather than using a calculator.

At this interview, Rowan reported that s/he aspires to remain with his/her current employer, and to ‘be the best customer advisor and do all my elearning so I can give customers as much information as I know’. S/he would like to progress to a more senior role at some point in the future, but, looking forward a few years is ‘hoping still to be at [retailer] and hoping to have more money so I can put some down on a little flat or maybe live with my [partner] and just obviously sort of being around my family and having support’

***Storm***

Storm had learning difficulties and had progressed to the level 1 programme from special education provision. Storm enrolled on the Construction provision, which had been re-designed to offer project-based ‘tasters’ of different trades, and initially aspired to a career in engineering. Storm required additional learning support on the level 1 programme, but successfully achieved the vocational qualification. His/her work experience took place in the ‘walled garden’, which was a Victorian garden, fallen into disrepair and being re-developed with community volunteer support. Albeit unrelated to his/her original ambition, Storm enjoyed the work experience, continued to volunteer there and decided to seek employment in horticulture. S/he applied successfully for an apprenticeship with an organisation supported by the Guernsey States. Alex, Storm’s apprenticeship supervisor was asked about her/his preparedness for work, and responded that ‘when s/he came here, s/he had, you know, pretty good knowledge of gardening and growing. So I was quite surprised by that [and] s/he’s learned a lot … I thought s/he were absolutely well-prepared’ (interview, 26/06/2019). Since beginning this in 2018, Storm has successfully completed the apprenticeship at levels 1 and 2, has progressed into permanent employment with the same employer and in 2021 was ‘enjoying work’ there.

***Celyn***

Celyn enrolled on L1 construction in 2017. S/he had attempted different level 1 programmes in two previous years but had ‘dropped out’ on both occasions. Celyn had lacked motivation, and was unable to focus on coursework, consistent with a previous history of very poor attendance at school. Celyn also had a history of displaying disruptive behaviour whilst in college, making him/her a challenging student to support. On the ‘new’ programme in 2017/18 Celyn engaged with the project-based approach, and the course tutor described a significant change in attitude and behaviour: “S/he has a great attitude to learning and although [reserved] gets on with all members of the group and wants to learn and impress others.” Celyn was similarly positive, describing tutors as ‘helping’ with for example, issues of motivation. Based on a tutor recommendation, Celyn moved to a plumbing apprenticeship after successful completion of the level 1 programme. Celyn described being ‘very proud’ of having progressed to the apprenticeship in 2017, and despite earlier problems at school and college, Celyn’s employer noted that s/he was ‘very confident when s/he’s doing the job’ but less confident about ‘speaking to someone about what’s [happening] with that job’. Importantly, the employer went on to observe that he believes communication is not a ‘skill’ that can be learned: ‘… people, you know, they’re not *born* with it. They either can talk to people that they don’t know, or they can’t’ (24/06/19). Despite this challenge, Celyn successfully completed both level 1 and level 2 plumbing, subsequently moving to a larger employer in 2021 where s/he is approaching the end of a level 3 apprenticeship, and reflecting on achievements since 2017, noted with pride that ‘ … I’m in my third year, I’m living on my own, got my own flat’, and that in the future, s/he anticipated being ‘high up in my company, or alternatively, self-employed’

**Low Attainment and Social Justice**

It is apparent from these, and other narratives, that the young people have made largely successful transitions into the world of work, and that these have been sustained over time. Indeed, teaching staff believe some students with high degree of challenges who remained on programme – such as Hero, Rowan and Celyn - would have withdrawn in previous years. Completion of the programme has also facilitated progression to further education as well as to apprenticeships and employment. At least one student has progressed to higher education.In particular, the data has implied that a broad range of enrichment activities and a move away from a CBT orientated curriculum has offered significant benefit to the students in terms of making successful and sustainable transitions. It is, however, worth noting that the young people in this study received considerable personal guidance from tutors to enable them to acquire and mobilise new forms of capital which would support those transitions. Consistent with Bathmaker *et al.,*’s (2015) findings, these working-class young people did not have a habitus which facilitated the internalised acquisition of capitals, but the extent to which the ability to do this was, or can be ‘taught’ within the constraints of an examined curriculum remains a subject for further research.

The individual benefits accruing from this small project have broader implications for social justice and in terms of the ethical issues associated with a contemporary curriculum which lacks ‘fitness for purpose’. Instead of promoting equity and opportunity, the curriculum serves onlyto further marginalise those young people who are already amongst the most marginalised in a ‘divided and divisive’ education system (Tomlinson, 1997, see also 2005). Thus, the development of a ‘fit for purpose’ curriculum at level 1 might be argued to be ‘ethical work’ (Sikes 2017, p238) which responds to a moral imperative to work for a more equitable education system which is more consistent with notions of social – and epistemic – justice. In making this argument, I consider ‘justice’ in the context of it’s broader meaning, drawn from the ancient Greek, in which the subtleties of its interpretation imply, amongst other things, morality and ‘right conduct’ (Lee in Plato, 1955).

It is possible to argue that the societal and educational positioning of low-attaining young people reflects the ‘sharp divide between valuable and non-valuable people and locales’ described by Castells (2000, p. 165, see also Atkins, 2009, p. 4). Further, that conceptions which differentiate people according to perceived educational or economic worth are immoral, and contrary to notions of the common good inherent in theories of social justice. This argument accrues from the fact that, in this context, not only is the individual denied the opportunities associated with fair distribution of resources and full participation in a democracy, but the community is denied the potential benefits of that individual’s full contribution.

Broadly common understandings of social justice, and the common good, are shared by the ancient philosophers, the Abrahamic Religions (see, for example, Proverbs, 31:9 in the Torah, Qu’ran, 947, Sunan al-Kubra, 19049, St Augustine of Hippo) and secular writers. Within these writings, notions of the common good emphasise social responsibility, fair distribution of resources and the wider ‘good’ of the community. For example, Aristotle argues that ‘the greatest good … is justice, in other words, the common interest’ (Aristotle Politics III, II. 1282b 15), David Hume (1740, p. 318) that “[I]t’was therefore a concern for our own, and the public interest, which made us establish the laws of justice”, and in I Corinthians 12:7, St Paul writes that ‘to each is given the manifestation of the [Holy] Spirit for the common good’. In more contemporary work, Rawls (1999, pp. 301/308) debates the concept of ‘fairness’ and Griffiths (2003, p. 54) argues that the common interest includes ‘*both* the good of each and the good of all’ (my emphasis). Emphasising the moral implications of the situation, the ‘excessive social and economic disparity’ faced by low-attaining youth, is described as ‘sinful’ within the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2000, p. 470, para 1938).

Despite these ideas being widely debated, and inherent in social, religious, and academic work, there remains an inertia on the part of policy-makers to address the issues surrounding low attaining young people in a meaningful way which respects them as individuals and acknowledges the structures constraining them. This means that, their positioning and potential outcomes have remained unchanged since I first highlighted these issues in 2005, which is:

‘…not just an expression of the unequal representation of the different classes in [vocational education] … rather it is a theoretical construction providing one of the most powerful principles of explanation of these inequalities …’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 156).

Such a position demands that all concerned with young people and their futures take action to address such inequalities as ‘a first step to ethical transformational change’ (Sikes, 2017 p. 239, quoting Mills, 1970).

**Conclusion**

The development – and outcomes – of the re-imagined curriculum have significant implications for policy, practice, and research. This study illustrates the ways in which, contrary to popular policy discourses, low-attaining young people can engage more fully with, and contribute to, their communities. All those young people whose narratives appear in this paper had been subject to othering and characterized in the deficit terms described above. Engaging with the re-imagined curriculum in Guernsey did not fundamentally change the young people, but it did change the conditions in which they made their transitions into the labour market, by facilitating them to acquire and mobilise new forms of capital. Policy makers may wish to take note that the model developed in Guernsey (see Atkins *et al.,* forthcoming, 2022) is readily adaptable to different contexts, but, in England at least, wider implementation would be constrained by contemporary funding models.

Despite this, there are implications for practice which could be considered despite the funding model constraints. The delivery of the core curriculum via a project-based approach, rather than from a unit-based approach has proved to be more engaging and to provide greater opportunities to explore tangential or incidental topics, thus offering a more coherent and systematic knowledge base. Extra-curricular activities can be costly, and work-placements challenging to find, but social enterprises in Guernsey proved to be valuable – and supportive – providers of both.

Finally, in terms of implications for research, the outcomes of this small study demand further investigation of similar models, with similar students, in different contexts.

In conclusion**, t**he re-imagined curriculum now established at Guernsey College cannot claim to be perfect. However, in generating opportunities for the young people who engage with it to acquire and mobilise greater degrees of capital, it can be argued to be meeting its core aims of supporting secure and sustainable transitions into the workplace through the development of a curriculum whose principles are more consistent with notions of social justice. As such, the curriculum can be argued to be a significant step forward towards a more socially just curriculum which supports quality education for all.

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1. Level 1 equates to the lowest mainstream level of education in England at post-16. For purpose of comparison, it is one level below the expected level of attainment in the national GCSE exams, taken at 16+ and consistent with what is expected of the ‘average’ 13/14 year old. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)