

# **‘It must be a fluke’ – the self-perceptions of learners entering a college of further and higher education**

*Jo Finch*

*University of East London, UK (formerly of Havering College of Further and Higher Education, UK)*

## **Introduction**

‘The Four Cities Research’ (Cooke et al., 2007; Raphael Reed et al., 2007a, 2007b; Gates et al., 2007; Kay et al., 2007) as it has come to be known, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), explored the reasons why young people did not participate in higher education (HE) in four constituencies in England.

In May 2008, HEFCE proposed funding a further round of qualitative research in other geographical locations with low participation rates in HE, with a focus on how HE engagement could be facilitated and maintained as well as considering the development of transferable models of practice. One of these areas included the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The research was led by the University of East London and also included research carried out at Barking College and Havering College of Further and Higher Education.

This paper discusses the research that was carried out at Havering College (Finch, forthcoming) and considers some of the themes that emerged from young people’s narratives about their identity as ‘learners’. One of the themes to emerge from the research was students’ less than positive response to their GSCE results. A powerful dynamic emerged, whereby the young people were negative about the area in which they resided, negative about their previous schools and their academic performance, and labelled themselves as learners in negative ways. A paradox emerged whereby despite achieving good GSCE results, enjoying and thriving in the college environment and planning to go to university, the negative pathologising remained powerfully evident in their stories and narratives. The paper considers the reasons for this lack of confidence and considers the implications for Havering College as well as wider policy developments. The paper begins with a brief account of the methodological issues.

## **Methodology and methods**

The research was qualitative in design. Twenty young people on a variety of level three courses at Havering College were interviewed. Of the interviewees, eleven were currently on a range of BTEC National Diploma courses, five were on various AS and A2 level programmes, three were currently on CACHE (an awarding body for qualifications in childcare) diplomas in Childcare and Education, and one was on an Access course. Adherence to appropriate ethical practices in respect of undertaking research was influential in the process and this

was additionally important given the author's position within the college. All names used are pseudonyms. The young people were asked to discuss their experiences of living in the borough, their experiences of school, the decision-making process at age sixteen and future educational and career aspirations and goals.

## **GSCE results**

Of the twenty young people interviewed, seventeen comfortably met the government target of gaining five A to C GSCE grades. Most of the students gained around ten GSCEs, often within the A to C range. Students involuntarily spoke of doing 'OK' but of not achieving ten or more A star grades. As none of the sample group had achieved such grades, there was a general sense of under-achievement. Kaz felt that he had 'under-performed' in his GSCEs. Andrew described his GSCE results as 'poor' and James said, 'I did alright'. A frequently used term was '...did OK', often coupled with 'nothing special'.

Only a small minority of students were surprised at their results and felt that they had done better than anticipated. Emily, for example, described being 'amazed' by her results, claimed it was 'luck' and said, 'it must be a fluke'. By her own admission Emily had rarely attended school, yet achieved nine GSCEs, all grade Cs. When challenged about her negative perception of her academic abilities, Emily vociferously and repeatedly rejected the suggestion that to gain those results, having rarely attended school, she must be quite clever. Instead she described herself as 'naughty', 'challenging' and provocative both at school and on her current course of study at Havering College.

Saskia was also surprised by her good GSCE results and indeed was the only student to say that they were pleased with their GSCE results. She stated that she wanted to go back to her former school and:

...stick my fingers up at my teachers who thought I would never achieve, never get anywhere.... I want to prove them wrong. When I got my results I was really happy, wanted to go and say, in your face...felt that no teacher thought I could do it.

It was interesting to note that literature around how young people perceive their GSCE grades seemed to be limited, if non-existent. There also seems to be an associated issue concerning how 'success' at GSCE is constructed, namely success is often seen as achieving ten or more A star grades. This is perhaps reinforced with the media and the somehow generally held view that standards are slipping and exams are getting easier. Linked to the issue of the reticent response to GSCE grades is how the young people constructed themselves as 'learners'.

## **Perception of self as a learner**

A minority of the young people interviewed labelled themselves as clever although often the discourse was contradictory. These students described having to hide their 'cleverness'

and felt that this made them different to their peers. Rob and Kaz felt that they could not ask questions in class for fear of irritating both students and teachers alike. However, this positive view of their abilities was not maintained in the discourse and they began to give themselves other labels. A number of students referred to themselves as 'lazy' and as needing to be 'pushed'. Their complaints around their schooling often centred on the fact that teachers did not 'push' students and that their needs were ignored as they were not 'clever enough' to be part of Gifted and Talented programmes, were not naughty enough to have interventions and were quiet and undemanding. This meant that they were overlooked in class, and lacked the confidence and ability to assert their educational needs in school.

Despite the good GSCE grades achieved, only two students reported being part of Gifted and Talented programmes and the students were very negative about the value of the programmes. Fola, for example, had expectations that being labelled as Gifted and Talented would mean that she would have the opportunity to attend extension classes, although none were on offer. James felt that such schemes at his school were 'tokenistic and pretty pointless'. In the context of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham it was interesting to note that, in 2008, the *London Evening Standard* reported that the borough had the lowest percentage of primary and secondary school children classed as Gifted and Talented in London (4.7 per cent) (Hayes, 2008).

A number of students referred to themselves as the stupid son or daughter in the family or the naughty one. They referred to their 'clever' older and younger siblings. This seems to be a very powerful dynamic in how young people perceive their academic abilities, and indeed the impact of sibling relationships on the self are noted within the psychodynamic literature (Coles, 2003; Morley, 2006; Silverstone, 2006). Linked to the issue of learner identity and the perception of one's academic abilities were the vivid descriptions offered of Barking and Dagenham.

## **Living in the borough**

All the young people interviewed were negative about the borough in terms of its facilities, environment, the perceived level of crimes, the British National Party (BNP) presence and poor schools. A pathologising discourse emerged about 'other' people who lived in the borough and, whilst they were not consciously aware of it, this 'othering' seemed to have impacted on the self-esteem of the young people. 'Othering' in this context refers to the process by which people construct their own identity (Weis, 1995) as well the process of identifying those that are different from oneself, which reproduces and perpetuates positions of subordination or domination (Johnson et al., 2004). The image painted of a typical Barking and Dagenham resident was that they were usually unemployed (or, if working, had jobs with poor prospects), were teenage parents, were involved in crime, alcohol and drug abuse, were badly behaved at school, had low aspirations, and were hostile towards education. Deborah stated that she would be reluctant to inform people that she came from Barking and Dagenham because:

People would look down on you. Everyone thinks it's a bad area.

Rob, for example, was particularly scathing about 'others' in Barking and Dagenham. He recounts an incident at school:

One time I said to this kid, proper picking on me...and I went, just because I am smart and I am proud to be smart, I mean I want to get a good job and all that, and you are just bastards who are completely jealous and fucking stupid.

Sarah described the borough as a 'shit hole' and felt that the people who lived in the borough 'made it a shit hole'. Maria and Carla spoke of the hostility in the borough. Maria said:

When you walk up the Heathway...you feel like...you're scared to look at people in case they're going to attack you.

However, the 'othering' and negativity about the area also provided an impetus for a significant number of students to work hard at college and consider university. University was seen as a way out of the borough. There seemed to be an unacknowledged fear that if you stayed in the borough, you might up end 'like the other people there'. At times, this fear was reinforced by parents; for example, Jane said that her dad's expectations of her were to get a good education and job so that she did not:

...end up like other people in Barking and Dagenham.

This 'othering' was powerful and the young people were at pains to stress that they were not like these 'other' young people. Yet, somehow, the negativity still pervaded their sense of self. 'Othering' also emerged in accounts of perceived cultural differences around the value of education. For example, Kaz felt that the white working class population did not value education or see it as relevant. Three students from West African backgrounds felt that education was highly valued in their communities, alongside stricter parenting styles and familial norms and expectations around participation in higher education. As second generation immigrants, these students were aware of the need to be more educated than their white counterparts because of the inequalities caused by racism.

The schools in the borough the young people attended were also highly criticised. The phrases 'shit', 'crap' and 'poor' featured strongly in the young peoples' stories of their school experience. Schools were also described as 'falling apart' and 'rubbish'. There appeared to be a collective sense of projective identification (Klein, 1931), manifested in the bodily excreta adjectives applied to the schools, the borough and 'others'. Within the narratives of us and 'others', connections can be made to the notion of 'splitting' (Klein, 1931). By proffering such vivid, negative descriptions of 'others' and the borough, this serves as a way of protecting oneself from the 'shit' or 'the other' although, inevitably, this gives some insight into how these young people might feel about living in, being schooled in or generally coming from the

borough. Additionally, schools were seen as 'not pushing' students and there was a collective sense of malaise and resignation about this state of affairs. Teachers were perceived by the young people 'not to have cared' and to have 'given up'. These discourses contrasted with those of students educated outside of the borough, who felt that they had been 'pushed' and that discipline in their schools was good.

There was, however, a contradictory mix in the interviewees' discourses, between being 'better' or more 'clever' than the 'others' in the borough and a sense of inadequacy and of disappointment with their GCSE grades. The young people interviewed felt that the dominant culture within Barking and Dagenham was one of not valuing education and of limited career goals and aspirations. The young people interviewed, therefore, had some resilience to what they perceived as the dominant culture. It made them 'different' and there was a need to hide being 'clever' to the extent that few of the young people had an identity as 'clever'. It was notable that most of the young people interviewed were potential first generation higher education learners.

## **Experience of Havering College of Further and Higher Education**

Finch (forthcoming) discusses at length the complex but rational and well considered decision-making process the young people followed after completing their GCSEs about what and where to study. The young people interviewed were positive about the college and the sense of the young people as emerging 'adult learners' was positive to note. The emerging adult learner construct appeared to be more positive than their construction of their former selves as 'pupils' or 'school students'. For some students, however, there was an adjustment or transition period where the norms of school were still dominant. Sarah commented that she thought it 'odd' that tutors did not ring her if she failed to turn up for lectures. Katie also found the transition to an adult learning environment challenging initially as 'you have to do it yourself'.

In the discourses that emerged, the young people enjoyed being treated like adults. For them this meant that relationships with tutors were good and were respectful, and students were encouraged to express their views. Calling tutors by their first names was also seen as helpful in breaking down barriers. They also praised the positive and constructive feedback they received from tutors in respect of their academic work as well as support in completing UCAS forms. Kaz, commenting on the constructive feedback he received from his A level tutors, said:

...they congratulate you when you do good work so when you get that from your teachers it's quite a boost; you know you've got some good teachers here.

This was noted by other young people and clearly motivated and encouraged them as learners. It also seems helpful in aiding learners to become more independent, clearly essential for

university. From some of the discourses, the realisation that it was now ultimately up to the young people to succeed was also helpful in developing academic confidence. Simon, for example, compared his poor experiences of school with his current experience of education. He felt that he had under-performed at school and expressed both regret and shame at his performance, not least in that he had 'let my mum down'. Simon enjoyed the programme he was on and the smaller class sizes, was now confident to ask questions of the tutors and was beginning to think about the possibility of going to university. Starting afresh in a new institution, without the labels constructed and reinforced at school (and to some extent at home), was also important to a number of young people as was going to an institution away from the borough and by implication away from the 'others'. This was a point explicitly raised by Maria, who decided to come to Havering College rather than the local college in order to get away from the people in her borough because:

I hate most people in Barking and Dagenham.

The implication for Havering College is perhaps to make explicit the 'good' practice in respect of supporting students who may be less than confident academically. There is also a role in aiding learners to become more independent as well as helping to make the transition from 'school pupil' to 'adult learner'. It also seems essential that college tutors 'know' their learners and have an awareness of their needs, indeed this is explored in the context of higher education students in Finch (2006), as well as having an understanding of the diverse range of students currently enrolled (Finch, 2006).

## **Implications for wider policy**

Ideas concerning cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) seem relevant, not least in how educational establishments operate within the normative discourses of the dominant culture. For the young people interviewed, whilst being part of the dominant culture to some degree, having some level of cultural capital and enough to make a decision to attend college after compulsory schooling sets them apart from the 'others'. The young people felt themselves to be part of a minority culture which, in Barking and Dagenham, was felt to make them different. That they came from Barking and Dagenham may well make them 'different' in other contexts, not least in higher education establishments. There is the danger however that in 'othering' the young people interviewed, we may be pathologising them further (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003).

In terms of the widening participation debates, it seems that young people living in deprived areas can and do have resilience to labelling and pathologising and can resist (by 'othering') negative attitudes towards education. The young people interviewed, despite their criticisms of their schooling, did well and, having made the right choice to attend Havering College, were growing in confidence. That the majority planned to go on to university was very encouraging although for many it was seen as a 'way out' of the borough and its associated

negativity. The needs of such learners may also need consideration both in the college and in higher education institutions. It was striking that most of the young people planned to go on to vocational courses in post-1992 universities.

## Conclusion

This paper raises only a few of the many interesting findings from the research undertaken. It focuses on how learning identities and associated negative impacts on those identities are created by living in a borough with a poor reputation, both locally and nationally. The young people interviewed achieved good GCSE results, yet few seemed to have been on Gifted and Talented programmes or were positive about their school experience. There is a danger that such poor perceptions of the learner self may be carried over into their further and higher education.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Centre for Widening Participation, University of East London, for generously allowing me to use the data gathered in the course of this research to write this paper.

## References

- Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The Forms of Capitalism' in J. G. Richardson (ed.) *The Handbook of Theory and Research for Sociology of Education*, New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. C. (1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, London: Calif.
- Brearly, J. (1991) 'A Psychodynamic Approach to Social Work' in J. Lishman (ed.) *Handbook of Theory for Practice Teachers in Social Work*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Coles, P. (2003) *The Importance of Sibling Relationships in Psychoanalysis*, London: Karnac.
- Cooke, S., Mannion, P. and Warrington, P. with Mackenzie, L. and Soni, S. (2007) *Young Participation in Higher Education (Hodge Hill)*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham.
- Finch, J. (2006) *The Needs and Expectations of Higher Education Learners in a Further Education College*, unpublished report, London: Havering College of Further and Higher Education.
- Finch, J. (forthcoming) *Communities and Widening Participation in Higher Education in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, report to HEFCE*, London: Havering College of Further and Higher Education/University of East London.
- Gates, P., Coward, S. and Byrom, T. (2007) *Young Participation in Higher Education in the Parliamentary Constituency of Nottingham North*, Nottingham: University of Nottingham.
- Hayes, D. (2008) 'University Mentors for Poorer Pupils', *London Evening Standard*, 30 January 2008.
- Johnson, J. L., Boltorff, J. L., Browne, A. J., Grewal, S., Hilton, A. and Clarke, H. (2004) 'Othering and Being Othered in the Context of Health Care Services', *Health Communication* 16, 2: 255-271.
- Kay, H., Walker, A. and Hogg, M. (2007) *Young Participation in Higher Education in the Parliamentary Constituencies of Nottingham North, Bristol South, Sheffield Brightside and Hodge Hill: Sheffield Brightside Strand*, Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University.

*Section One: Diversifying Access*

- Klein, M. (1931) *Love, Guilt and Reparation and other Works*, London: Hogarth Press.
- Leathwood, C. and O'Connell, P. (2003) 'It's a struggle: The Construction of the New Student in Higher Education', *Journal of Education Policy* 18: 597-613.
- Morley, E. (2006) 'The Influence of Sibling Relationships on Couple Choice and Development' in P. Coles (ed.) *Sibling Relationships*, London: Karnac.
- Raphael Reed, L., Gates, P. and Last, K. (2007a) *Young Participation in Higher Education in the Parliamentary Constituencies of Birmingham Hodge Hill, Bristol South, Nottingham North and Sheffield Brightside – Summary Report, Report to HEFCE by the University of the West of England and The School of Education of the University of Nottingham*, Bristol: HEFCE.
- Raphael Reed, L., Croudace, C., Harrison, N., Baxter, L. and Last, K. (2007b) *Young Participation in Higher Education: A Sociocultural Study of Educational Engagement in Bristol South Parliamentary Constituency*, Bristol: University of the West of England.
- Silverstone, J. (2006) 'Siblings' in P. Coles (ed.) *Sibling Relationships*, London: Karnac.
- Weis, L. (1995) 'Identity Formation and the Process of "Othering": Unravelling Sexual Threads', *Educational Foundation* 9, 1: 17-33.