Ethnicity, young people and 'othering.' 'It's like we don't exist': transitions from school to nowhere

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Abstract

People aged 16-19 not in education, employment or training form the cohort of the Official Government NEET estimate. The official estimate of NEET was published during May 2013 and estimated that there are 33,000 young people in Scotland who are NEET which accounts for 13.3% of the 16-19 population. The estimate for Glasgow reported 3,460 young people aged 16-19 not in education, employment or training representing 11.4% of the 16-19 year old population in Glasgow in 2013 (Scottish Government, 2013). This paper aims to explore the experiences of ethnic minority young people growing up in urban areas in the West of Scotland via community led youth work projects that aim to reengage young people categorised as NEET (Not in Employment Education or Training). By looking at their varied and complex biographies it will address young people's experiences and perceptions of their communities and their transitions from education to the workplace. Getting lost in the transition from education to work is one of the key risks of social exclusion for young people which may lead to subsequent involvement in anti-social behaviour and crime (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Yates & Payne, 2006; Finlay et al, 2010). The study is undertaken in a youth work organisation in an inner city ward in Glasgow. The preliminary study explores conversations with four young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds who discuss their transitions from school. Hayward et al (2008, p. 18) found that the people from the same ethnic minority groups (Afro Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) which are highlighted by Smeaton et al, 2010), are identified as failing to go onto positive destinations. This indicates that there is a link that these young people who are disadvantaged at school, do not go onto the prescribed pathways, defined as positive by the state, of education, employment or training once they leave school.

Introduction

In Scotland, the core components of Curriculum for Excellence (2004), More Choices, More Chances (2006) and Getting It Right for Every Child policies (GIRFEC, 2008), focus on the need for inter-agency approaches to improve outcomes for young people. The need to create positive partnerships between teachers and youth workers is seen as crucial in the drive towards enabling young people to reach their full potential as Sweeney the Chief Executive of Youthlink Scotland says in the report 'Bridging the Gap'.

Figures taken from a PowerPoint presentation by Baird and Collins, 2010 for Glasgow City Council, highlights need for provision.

65,000 school pupils; of which:

- 2,050 are 'looked after' – 20% of national total
- 10,898 (16.7%) are recorded as having 'additional support needs'
- 2,180 (3.3%) have refugee or asylum seeker status
- 8,425 (12.9%) have English as additional language
- 9,670 (14.8%) belong to BME groups
- Lower attainment levels – S4 88% achieving English and Maths at level 3 or better (nationally the figure is 92%)
- Negative Destinations 16% (835) – (14.3% nationally)

Hayward et al (2008, p. 18) found that the people from the same ethnic minority groups (Afro Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) are identified as failing to go onto positive destinations.

> Parts of our schools system can match the best anywhere in the world but overall our school system is not world class. It systematically fails certain groups of children: children from poor backgrounds, looked after children, children excluded from school, children from certain ethnic groups

This indicates that there is a link that these young people who are disadvantaged at school, do not go onto positive pathways once they leave school.

Literature around the areas ethnicity, culture and othering was explored. There is extensive literature available which looks at young people from ethnic minority backgrounds and their experiences in secondary schools (Rhamie et al, 2012), which document the various authors and areas of research from examining the South Asian pupil experiences by Bhatti (1999), relationships with parents (Cork, 2005; Crozier, 2001), racism with Maylor et al (2009), whereas Rollock (2007), Rhamie (2007), discuss the awareness of low teacher expectations for Afro Caribbean groups, to the different levels of sanctions meted on minority ethnic pupils in comparison to White pupils, leading to some minority groups suffering higher levels of exclusion (Bhopal & Myers, 2008; DfES, 2006; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000), and the impact of the socio-economic factors (Rhamie & Hallam, 2002).

Netto et al (2011) discuss ethnicity, poverty and educational attainment in Scotland, where they conclude it is complex and needs to be looked into in much more detail.

This led to the three research questions formulated below to explore the gaps in the literature I had read.

1. To what extent and in what ways do the young people perceive their culture and ethnicity impacting on their educational attainment and ability to reach their full potential?
2. How do young people negotiate the stepping from one setting to another/one culture to another? Such as school/home/street/community
3. How successful is community education as an alternative method of re-engaging disaffected youth back into education, employment or training?

The study is undertaken in a youth work organisation in an inner city ward in Glasgow. The preliminary study explores conversations with four young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds who discuss their transitions from school to finding a positive destination. The fast changing demographic landscapes of schools where numerous communities lead interconnecting lives are prime sites for discovering the ways in which pupils from different ethnic and social backgrounds co-exist and negotiate new spaces where their identities are formed, questioned and challenged (Bhopal & Myers, 2008)

A snap shot of the young people gathered through participant observations:

> The two females, Muslim, Pakistani Scottish, both wore headscarves, and were dressed simply in long skirts and tops, both were neighbours who lived in the same block of sandstone flats in an inner city ward. Zarine was more outspoken, Fozia was quieter, more thoughtful and more colourfully dressed. Body language was quite defensive and stiff and unsure when we first met, but at the end of the session they were sharing their dreams and aspirations quite happily as if they had known me for years. They both went to the same primary and secondary school. The secondary school was outwith Glasgow City Council. It was perceived as a better school and as other family members had gone there, they had to go as well.

> The two males, Muslim, Pakistani Scottish, both wore tracksuit bottoms and t shirts, Ali was more quietly spoken than Ibby and needed to be prompted a few times to contribute to the interview. Ibby was quite vocal and did get quite emotional at some points as did Ali, but I sometimes felt that Ali just copied what Ibby said to look 'cool' and a little worried about saying the wrong thing and didn't want to lose street cred. They were typical sixteen year olds, a little cocky, a little unsure. At times I felt they told me what it was I wanted to hear, rather than the truth, even if it was mundane. They both came from the same ward and had friends in common, although they attended different primary and secondary schools to each other.

Methodology, Methods and Design

A qualitative case study approach was utilised. There are many definitions for qualitative case study. Merriam (1988)'s definition is: 'Qualitative case study can be defined as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit. Case studies are particularistic, descriptive and heuristic, and rely heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources.'

Semi-Structured Paired interviews (Fielding, 1995; Mason, 2002; May, 2001; Patton, 2002) were conducted. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer generally has a framework of themes to be explored. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer sets up a general structure by deciding in advance the ground to be covered and the main questions to be asked. Semi-structured interviewing is a very flexible technique for small-scale research. It is not suitable for studies involving large numbers of people, but is most helpful in mini-studies and case studies (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Participant Observations (Jorgenson, 1989; Cohen et al, 2009) was also a feature of the research design. Cohen et al (2011) declare that observation is a powerful tool that allows for researchers to gain insight, but stress that it is best done in tandem with other methods of data collection to ensure reliability. However, Koshy (2010) does warn that being observed may cause the behaviour of the people being observed to be affected and there is a temptation to pass over details that have been observed if they don't fit into the pre-prepared checklist of what to observe in the first place.

The interviews focused on gathering data from six main areas: *education; home and family; after school activities; ethnicity and culture; access to information and services and future plans and aspirations.*

A social capital lens was used to discuss the findings, where Putnam (1995, p. 67) defines it as 'features of social organisation such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'. The interview schedule also created the template used to disseminate the raw data to see if any patterns emerged and if the main study was feasible. Due to small sample the data was colour coded and a thematic analysis was carried out the interview schedule, which were then used to answer the three research questions which had emerged through the literature review.

To what extent and in what ways do the young people perceive their culture and ethnicity impacting on their educational attainment and ability to reach their full potential?

This section addresses how the young people perceived themselves within their schools and communities and how they are affected within their communities. It explores their biographies in terms of their communities and transitions from education and emphasises the young people feeling situated on the margins as a result of how they believe the formal structures of the community perceived and treated them. This went onto shape their future expectations to be fatalistic. Putnam (1993) postulates a person's interactions and perceptions of their lived experiences influence their belief systems, motivations and expectations which in turn affects how they believe they will be treated within and by their communities.

> co-operation, trust and reciprocity depend on norms built over time, and on a network of interdependent cooperative arrangements that makes it costly for a person to exploit the reciprocity principle, by taking but not returning (Putnam, 1993, p. 169).

The majority of all stories told to the researcher were about how they felt they were pushed to the margins and that with some of the young people this caused them to push back or lose faith in more formal structures within the community. These feelings of prejudice and surveillance limited their chances due to their belief that they would not get the same chances as other young people from different areas, whether real or imagined is unknown but this belief system resulted in sometimes fatalistic opinions of their future. This is illustrated in the next couple of quotes where Ibby talks about the

two extremes he faces, where if he is on the street, he is stopped and searched but when he or his family are victims of a crime, they are not worth investigating.

> ….But the police, I'm not keen at all. They're full on racists. You can go on about them, they're full on racists because once we were running just for the fun of it, a few days before bonfire night, they probably thought we had fireworks, searched us, never took us in a corner.. ….. I off course wasn't going to say anything back in case they handcuffed me……. Off course, I ain't going to take their badge number down or something. Its best not to say anything. They can stop you whenever they want.

> …My window has been smashed a few.. a couple of times. Nothing happens.…They take a statement and go away, every single time this happens…..There is a cctv camera right in front of my house. Outside my bit, that is always looking at my house, because it stays in one position, they never check the camera footage. They just don't care.

In line with Putnam (1993), Narayan-Parker (1999) discusses the conditions under which young people are surrounded will partly determine how they will learn to co-operate in society and with institutions. A strong theme that emerged from the interviews was that due to the fatalistic belief systems that were fostered they had limited their trajectories due to either perceived or lived experiences which had shaped how they viewed the world and limited their motivation for trying due to a belief it would get them nowhere. This affected how they would operate within their community and limited the opportunity to create bonding capital with members of the community. Bonding capital is typically used to explain how people open up their networks, create new contacts and can get onto positive pathways in education, employment and training and within their communities.

There are certain young people in communities such as the Roma community which in spite of public policy discourse around citizenship, the actuality is one in which Traveller children continue to be viewed as outsiders. Due to this positioning, they do not enjoy the same rights as other children and they are not regarded as full citizens in the school environment. Bhopal (2010) will argue that even though schools implement inclusive measures for Gypsy and Traveller pupils, this alone does not encourage positive attitudes or change attitudes towards them. She feels that in some cases such practices work to emphasise the difference and outsider status of these groups which leads to them gaining more awareness of the inequality and marginalisation in the wider community. This can be seen in the way that the young women withdrew from mainstream interaction with other pupils, rejecting them before they were rejected as illustrated by the following quotes.

> Zarine: They all thought they were big people, because they're from Paisley and Pennilee or whatever, Rosshall, I don't know what those areas are called, but they thought because they were from those areas, they owned [the school]. So they had a big say in it, in our classes.

> Fozia going onto say:

> If we did socialise with them, we would be different people. If you get me. They talk about all these things and we would just feel uncomfortable with all that stuff.
>
> Ibby: They [the school] don't treat us like the Scottish White people, they like give them more chances, more ideas, they give more support to them. They see us one time and that's us left. The other people, they will see them every 2 or 3 weeks, they give them more chances than us lot.

Zarine, Fozia and Ibby echo feelings of frustration at how they believe they have been treated within formalised structures, such as schools. They perceive they will be treated differently within the wider White Scottish society as a result of their ethnic and cultural background. Both sets of interviewees discussed different scenarios of where they felt people were prejudiced to them primarily because of visible indicators such as: ethnicity, and religion but not so much as the area they came from. The feeling that being a young male or female from an area which had a high ethnic minority Muslim population meant there was focused concentration and surveillance of them wherever they went. They all said that the racial abuse and Islamophobic comments became more public, more offensive and increased in volume, every time an incident was reported of an attack or event. These feelings of negativity, they reported, arose from more formal and traditional structures within the community, that there was a general view that young people of their 'type' and the 'types' of areas were viewed negatively and subjective to more corrective measures as a result of these visible indicators: ethnicity, religion and in the case of the young women, the wearing of the headscarf as a visible artefact of their faith.

The young people discussed how they see themselves as outside the margins of their communities, they continually referred back to experiences of how they believed they were stereotyped and perceived as trouble or not worth the effort due to their ethnicity and culture which made them highly visible in their schools. .As discussed by Putnam (1993) they would interact with others by putting on a false front or bravado typically within formalised structures or with authority figures. Often this front would get the young people in trouble as Ibby discusses how he would get suspended for being perceived as insolent but in his eyes the laughing and smiling was a defence mechanism that allowed him to hide from these negative encounters with a particular teacher.

> Ibby: our RE teacher is one of them. Whenever he can, he brings Christianity into it. I was smiling, literally smiling. He said 'why are you smiling? This is a Christian school' and that was pure like – huh? At one time I was actually laughing and he said' This is a religious school, you can't laugh in the RE corridor' and he told me to 'get to' and I got suspended.

> Ali: ….One of my friends got accused of doing something he didn't do and it was actually the other boys that were like white. And we got into trouble without any reason and I didn't like that.

The boys perceived being a visible minority ethnic placed a higher emphasis on them being noticed and punished with wrong doing than the indigenous White Scottish student population.

These findings corresponded with Bottrell's (2007) where he discussed the pathways that young people take which are not traditional. When marginalised youth reject or are ejected, mainstream options were limited and constraining and many young people opted for the more rewarding and supportive terrain of the margins, their resistances may at times re-inscribed barriers to conventional success. However, these actions also indicate resilience in the claim to places in the margins, as centre, in the network, and in claiming affiliations on their terms, according to their values and recognition of people and on the basis of their self-knowledge and not as defined in restricting ways by others. The young people formed their own networks which provided positive social interactions but these networks were very small and limited to either family or friends. The young people's biographies highlighted how over a period of their youth they believed they became outcasts within their schools, sometimes of their own choosing, as the young women illustrated by not wanting to socialise with the other students as they had nothing in common: not being allowed to sit in class with your friends, being over policed, treated differently to other children in school, stereotyped due to their colour, religion or clothes.

> Zarine: I did not feel fitted in at all
> Fozia: I didn't feel comfortable. There were more…
> Zarine: Because they all knew each other, like even if they didn't know each other, obviously they were all white people, that used to go to parties and everything and then back to school, so they used to talk about it. I just used to feel uncomfortable sitting there by myself. I didn't get on with them……

The lack of social mixing in school populations has been recorded in other studies (Crozier, 2001) and it further highlights some of the issues and power dynamics that are faced within multi-ethnic classrooms between majority and minority pupils (Leeman & Radstake, 2007) as cited in Rhamie et al (2012).

How do young people negotiate the stepping from one setting to another/one culture to another? Such as school/home/street/community?

When talking about their primary schools, all four young people spoke fondly of their time at primary school, (it was as if they were transported back to an era of when the world was a safer and kinder place, and the effect of talking about this period of their lives, transformed them all back into displaying a happier and more relaxed body language, relaxed shoulders, happy and smiling faces). Golden time was discussed with great gusto!

As they entered secondary school, they began to realise they were treated differently. The female participants felt this keenly as they said it was the point one of them started disengaging as she felt she was invisible and inconsequential. Upon leaving school, although they were given some opportunities on training programmes, the lack of

employment availability made them feel they didn't have the skills or knowledge to increase their economic capital.

As we discussed relationships - They were very comfortable with their families and close friends. They all felt due to growing up in their neighbourhoods, everyone knew each other and this helped create long term ties and collaborates evidence by Cave (2007) that bonding capital helps regulate societal norms between similar groups. This also helped regulate behaviour as being seen with the wrong people or doing something 'not quite right' was quickly reported back to family so it could be nipped in the bud. The only times the young people felt uncomfortable in their home environment was when there were incidences of terrorist attacks or heinous acts carried out in the name of Islam, for example the murder of army personnel, Lee Rigby in Woolwich (May, 2013), or when they encountered people who were under the influence of drink or drugs.

Also living near football grounds left the young women open to racist/ Islamophobic abuse. They counteracted this by not going out or organising other things to do which did not involve them being in the area.

The young women are older and have been trying unsuccessfully to find work and enrol onto further education courses since leaving school in 2010. This lack of opportunity to create economic capital has caused them to explore alternative pathways and they have found the youth work organisation very useful in developing their capitals by increasing their soft skills through team working and leadership activities. One of the young women uses YouTube tutorials to teach herself how to do different styles of make-up, which is the area she wishes to go and study at college. The other young woman wasn't allowed to pick her subjects of choice at school which has limited her chances of going onto her preferred course of pharmacy, but as she enjoyed maths, she is exploring doing accountancy and getting qualified as an accountant.

The young men, one has dropped out of school, whereas the other has now gone back to do his Higher exams and is hoping to go onto university. Both young men aspire to go onto become self-employed businessmen.

How successful is community education as an alternative method of re-engaging disaffected youth back into education, employment or training?

Coburn (2011) has made observations that youth work acts as a site of capital building, where cultural and social bonds are formed. I found that youth work empowered the young people and helped to address the inequalities that they experienced (Coburn, 2011). In some cases, participating in the local youth organisations provided the young people with opportunities to engage in proactive community participation. The two male participants, had entered a pro youth football league and were very excited as it was the first ethnic minority football group and football scouts were going to be present. All four young people spoke of the benefits of having good relationships with the youth workers. The youth organisation is based on the Islamic ethos of equality and is a voluntary run group by unpaid volunteers who want to invest in the future of the young people in the community.

Despite being alienated from traditional routes into education, employment or training, the young people are exploring alternative pathways to find their own way of gaining the pre- requisites to get onto their preferred route once the opportunity becomes available.

> Fozia: The [youth]workers are really amazing. If you have a problem, they will help you, they will talk to you. We know we've got someone to talk to and go back to. That's what makes it really good as well. Even the little kids are treated equal. We don't get treated like –there is no differentiation between anyone.

The young people reported many benefits from their participation in the projects including opportunities to connect with people they wouldn't normally interact with, and opportunities to develop skills such as confidence in own ability, team working, letter and cv writing, helping others, which enabled them to gain more self- worth. Youth work played an important role in helping the young people develop social capital across social groups and networks, which they used to improve their own lives and those of their communities.The findings were interesting as I expected there would be comparative differences between the genders, even though they were from the same ethnic and cultural community. Both described the areas they came from in terms of history of homily, close knit, the only violence arising when there were terrorist attacks, or when people were drunk, lack of opportunities and closed networks. Both groups were abundant in bonding capital amongst their chosen peers but lacking bridging capital due to preconceptions about how they would be treated by others based on past experiences. Their biographies confirmed that other ways of engaging these young people are required, methods of engagement that build trust, respect, co-operation and reciprocity are required to ensure these young people move back from the margins of their community and grow their social capital (Putnam, 1993).

Discussion

All four of the young research participants reported how they felt they were empowered by the people they were working with in the youth centres. They discussed how the youth workers helped them create bridging capital and opened up possibilities in their minds, for example Ali and Ibby to join a pro youth football league and have the opportunity to be professionally coached. By attending the centre barriers were broken down between members of the community and the young people in attendance and by getting to know people outside their normal social encounters, preconceptions of them and by them were reduced raising reciprocity levels to such an extent that members began volunteering their time to work in the community helping others.

All the above quotes show the similarities rather than differences I originally thought might show up due to the young people attending different schools, where two of the schools can be classed as 'inner city' schools with high ethnic student populations, and the other school being out with the council boundaries and with a high White Scottish student population, having different contexts and socially related factors. It was found in both cases that the young people responded well in gaining direction in their life choices

which benefitted them and the communities they lived in and concurred with Putnam's (1993), and Fukuyama's (1995) argument that trust or social capital determines the performance of a society's institutions. The young people's levels of trust, reciprocity and co-operation were all raised as a result of the relationships they fostered with youth workers. This was highlighted by the difference in the conversations which were fixated upon the negative elements of secondary school and upon the lack of opportunities when leaving school compared to the responses received when the conversation revolved around the youth work organisation, which were tinged with positivity and enthusiasm not just about their future employment prospects but also about relationships they have in the community which opened up what could be deemed previously as closed networks. The type of engagement (sports or team work based) did not make a difference in the outcomes for the young people. What created social capital for these young people was as reported by Coburn's (2011) research: that by other people investing in them and creating connections that fostered social responsibility and cohesion, trust and reciprocity were created.

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