

‘Everything is different here ...’: mobilizing capabilities through inclusive education practices and relationships

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There is some ambiguity and contention surrounding the role and potential of education and training measures beyond formal schooling. While labour market integration is generally the assumption underlining such projects and programmes, there is clearly another significant side to those measures that target educationally excluded youth; namely, its broader social inclusion dimension. An important aspect to this dimension is the consideration as to how social inclusion is articulated at a policy intervention level. This paper argues the importance of individual relationships, meaningful interactions and ‘everyday allegiances’ for authentic educational inclusion. Such social practices operate in ways to support the capabilities and personal resources required to compensate for the psychically and biographically damaging effects experienced through the institution of schooling. This paper details the contours of inclusive social practices and relationships surrounding a ‘second chance’ education and training intervention in Ireland known as Youthreach, which, it can be argued, bears some resemblances to what might be categorized as ‘positive welfare’.

Introduction

In a recent contribution to the study of barriers to labour market participation in rural areas, Hodge *et al.* (2002, p. 471) threw down a challenging gauntlet for contemporary social inclusion policy:

The concentration of disadvantage amongst a minority of the local population and the decreasing significance of space as a barrier to the majority indicate the need for policy to become more specifically focused on the particular requirements of individuals within particular contexts. Thus the attention of policy should be turned to extending individual capabilities.

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Against the backdrop of deep societal processes, characterized in terms of 'individualization' and 'institutional dependency' (Beck, 1992), the present paper is concerned with how a focus on extending 'individual capabilities' for inclusion requires certain social practices and relations to be performed within social policy interventions. A focus on 'individual capabilities' need not be a contentious one, despite its connotations of 'responsibilization' (Wyn & Dwyer, 1999) or as a 'weak' version of social inclusion (Viet-Wilson, 1998). A policy concern for raising 'individual capabilities' remains important, although this has been problematized by 'moralistic' discourses, mostly from the conservative right, which have come to occupy the main spaces in social policy formulations and debates (Deacon & Mann, 1999).¹ This paper details the contours of inclusive social practices and relationships surrounding a 'second chance' education and training intervention in Ireland known as Youthreach, which, it can be argued, bears some resemblances to what Giddens (1994) describes as 'positive welfare'. It is envisaged that honing in on the micro interactions and processes of engagement between agents of policy and young people will help to accentuate the importance of individual relationships, meaningful interactions and 'everyday allegiances' (Giddens, 1994, p. 187) for educational inclusion. Such social practices operate in ways to support what I term actors' 'knowledgeability resources', i.e. those personal resources required to compensate for the psychically and biographically damaging effects experienced through the institution of schooling.

There is some ambiguity and contention surrounding the role and potential of education and training beyond mainstream provision. While labour market integration is generally the assumption underlying such programmes, there is clearly another significant side to such measures that target educationally excluded youth, which encompasses a broader social inclusion dimension. An important aspect to this dimension is the consideration as to *how* social inclusion is articulated at a policy intervention level. A more general point from this paper suggests that, in order to activate educational inclusion for the most vulnerable, support for interventions that respond to the 'individualized' needs and capabilities of young people is critical for the realization of authentic social inclusion policy. Recognizing the obvious sociological significance of wider systemic inequalities and the key institutional, policy processes of exclusion inherent within the educational system particularly (e.g. Lynch, 1989, 1999; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Macrae *et al.*, 2003), vulnerable youth or those alienated from mainstream educational provision need supportive institutional structures that recognize the psychosocial processes of exclusion and inclusion and which treat young people as reflexive, agentic and capable actors. We are concerned with how 'welfare practices both help to craft and resonate with the inner world of the emotions' (Lewis, 2004, p. 6) in positive ways. To support this assertion, it is important to ask: how might we characterize 'inclusion' at the interface between personal lives and social policy interventions? This paper documents biographical research among (mostly) early school leavers to demonstrate *how* educational inclusion is practised, mediated and rendered meaningful for them, paying particular attention to the emotionality necessary for inclusion.

The paper is structured as follows. First, some general contextual comments are made about the ambiguous and political nature of further education and training, as captured in a disparate array of terminology. It appears that non-school based education and training appears to have broadly negative connotations, in that it tends to be viewed as a 'weak' form of social inclusion (Viet-Wilson, 1998). While accepting this, we must also draw attention, as this paper intends, to those efforts that go some ways towards meeting an important dimension of social exclusion: disempowerment at an individual level (Vleminckx & Berghman, 2001, p. 43), as manifested in psychosocial terms. To reassert the potential of second chance educational initiatives in mobilizing young people's inclusion, the second part of the paper provides case study evidence from one such educational policy intervention in Ireland. It documents the meaning of this institution in the lives of vulnerable young people and demonstrates the psychosocial and relational processes through which 'inclusion' is relationally activated. The paper is based on detailed, qualitative research with fourteen participants of the Youthreach programme, all of whom experienced marginalization from mainstream education, through early school exit or poor participation within school.

Education and training beyond school: contentious terrain

The inability of the general mainstream education arena to create substantive linkages between youth and labour markets prompted many governments throughout the latter part of the twentieth century to seek solutions, in the form of institutional provisions with such titles as 'post-compulsory education and training', 'vocational education and training', 'new vocationalism', 'further education and training', 'Active Labour Market Policies' or 'lifelong learning' (e.g. Pollard *et al.*, 1988; Coles, 1995; Walther & Stauber, 1999; Te Riele & Crump, 2002). Vocationalism, in its various educational and training guises throughout the decades (Coles, 1995), has been invoked as key to offsetting the worst effects of youth unemployment and the restructuring of labour markets generally. Given the vulnerabilities and exclusions generated through key institutions of individualization, of which education is primary (Baethge, 1989), and the debate surrounding education for individual self-development or as serving the needs of the economy (Finch, 1984), we can legitimately question the implications this poses for how contemporary social inclusion policy is practised.

Within European Union policy documents, discourses of 'hard times' and 'competition' are fused in terms of academic humanism (lifelong learning as 'stimulating') and workplace meritocracy (for individuals to get on, as well as promoting nationally efficient economies, one needs skills and qualifications). Within the lexicon of policy makers, the notion of 'lifelong learning', according to Walther & Stauber (1999), tends to be treated within the literature as part of the 'democratization of learning' or, alternatively, as part of the discourse of human capital which sees it as raising the efficiency levels of education and training. This debate is an ongoing one and has been waged with considerable intensity in many countries where 'new vocationalism' is strong (Coles, 1995; Te Riele & Crump, 2002).² In the UK, it is argued that the vocationalism which emerged from a liberal education agenda — with its philosophical

concern for wider educational programmes to reflect student needs rather than the needs of industry — has given way, in its contemporary form, to the anti-humanist agenda of economic liberalism in New Right discourse (Moore & Hickox, 1999) and features prominently and controversially in New Deal policy in the UK (Fergusson, 2002; Percy-Smith & Weil, 2003). Several authors have been somewhat sceptical and pessimistic about the impact of further education and training schemes in countering the deeply embedded systemic problems associated with social exclusion (Jones & Wallace, 1990; Furlong, 1992; Furlong & Biggart, 1999; Fergusson, 2002). Many of the education/training, lifelong learning programmes, it is argued, are shaped within the context of politico-economic discourses and policies that intensify rather than alleviate social exclusion, often displaying an underlying discourse of ‘neo-Durkheimian hegemony’ in its primary concern for economic insertion as social integration (Levitas, 1996, 1998). Post compulsory education is often perceived as occupying the ‘margins’ of welfare, being targeted at those deemed low-achieving or ‘difficult’ (Te Riele & Crump, 2002).

In recognition of the justifiable criticisms surrounding ‘weak’ versions of inclusion that many schemes and programmes represent, there is a growing body of policy research, however, which concerns itself with advancing the more humanist, personal aspects of welfare policy. Such work acknowledges the importance of reframing welfare policy in ways that activate the personal and relational resources of the most vulnerable and socially excluded (Titterton, 1992; Coles, 1995; Deacon & Mann, 1999; Williams & Popay, 1999; Schoon & Bynner, 2003; Steinert & Pilgram, 2003). If social policy is to respond to the ‘differentiated vulnerabilities’ (Titterton, 1992) and diverse biographies within contemporary society, then there is particular need for recognizing the contribution of positive welfare interventions which practice a new form of politics, described loosely as ‘positive welfare’ (Giddens, 1994). The following quote captures the meaning of this in the context of the present study:

A politics of second chances would not, of course, neglect the material conditions which might allow individuals to negotiate changes in their life circumstances. It is at least equally important, however, to seek to develop means whereby damaged identities can be healed and a strong sense of self-respect developed.

(Giddens, 1994, p. 187)

Wessels & Miedema (2003) suggest that what is important is to understand *situations* of social exclusion and how these are activated through the breakdown of belonging, trust and accessibility to resources, at the individual, social (neighbourhood, group or network) and societal levels. This calls for welfare as a form of resources management, which recognizes the power of support structures to enable actors to access those resources for coping with the difficulties of social exclusion (Pelikan *et al.*, 2003). The importance of institutions within this type of welfare paradigm is underscored by Wessels & Miedema (2003, p. 66) who argue that:

Any understanding of inclusion/exclusion involves considering the relationship between specific actors and institutions in the distribution of certain resources, which involves understanding the ways in which institutions gain meaning culturally by actors in specific situations.

The following section unravels the cultural meanings among participants of a programme that initially started out with specific vocational considerations in mind. It details the manner in which interventions must be experienced and appreciated by young people in order to assume the humanist, personally resonant end of welfare policy. A brief overview of the national and local dimensions of the programme is first presented.

From vocational needs to welfare concern: the case of Youthreach in Ireland

The Youthreach Programme, which operates throughout Ireland, owes its origins to the 1983 European Council Resolution on Vocational Training Policy, otherwise known as the 'Social Guarantee' (Boldt, 1997; Kiely, 1999). The case presented here is a rural project, located in a remote village in the West of Ireland but with a broad rural catchment area (population below 10 000). The project was established sixteen years ago with an intake of sixteen participants, all males between 15 and 17 years of age, from small-scale farming backgrounds. Today, the centre has become well embedded locally (with employers and in terms of recognition generally) and has a current capacity of 45 participants at any one time and a full-time staff of three, which includes the female coordinator and two male tutors, and several part-time tutors. The coordinator has been in her position since the beginning while the two tutors began work soon after, around 1990.

At that time when it first appeared, there was particular concern about youth unemployment and building the skill base of those whose backgrounds were oriented towards vocational skills. While the initial years had a strong presence of young men, from manual, farming backgrounds and with a strong work ethic, in more recent times participants are regarded as quite diverse in their motivation, commitment and general participation. Before unprecedented rural economic restructuring throughout the 1990s, the original type of participant is described by the coordinator as follows:

They just wanted to be in the woodwork or metalwork room and that is what they wanted to do, they wanted to be making gates and they wanted to be fixing trailers, they were very much that kind. If they were late in the morning, it was because there would be a cow calving or they would take a week off to do the turf, this kind of stuff. There is absolutely nothing like that today at all.

The main vocational modules that continue to be offered are woodwork, metalwork, engineering, arts and crafts and in recent years, Information Technology. Those young people entering the FETAC Foundation level are typically aged 15 and 16 years.³ There is an induction period during which time they sample all modules and decide which core vocational ones they wish to continue. This group is offered compulsory modules in Information Technology (IT), personal development, maths and English, as well as one-to-one supports in literacy and numeracy. They have a choice of four additional modules in order to attain a certificate: typically, woodwork, metalwork, engineering, art/design, aquaculture. Depending on the participants' interests, modules can be adapted and oriented towards the learner. The centre offers the progression to FETAC-NCVA (National Council for Vocational Awards) levels

1 and 2.⁴ Youthreach also provides the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, which includes subjects normally taught in schools in addition to labour market preparation courses: Maths, Irish, English, Social Education, Vocational Preparation and Guidance (including work experience), a choice of two 'specialisms' (IT, Graphic and Construction Studies, Childcare and Community care, Engineering) and non-examination 'electives' (art and drama). Work experience of ten days duration within the year is advised and adopted by the centre within the Foundation and LCA routes. Within the LCA, assessment is part continuous assessment, part attendance and part examination.

Interviews with the core staff suggest that a greater proportion of young people compared with earlier years appear to be attracted to the programme by virtue of the financial gains to be made through the training allowance, while a growing number are engaging in illicit use of 'soft drugs', such as cannabis. The coordinator and tutors see these youth as having the least motivation and the poorest prospects for advancement. This seems to be a predominantly male dimension. The gender profile is currently almost evenly divided between males and females, while in recent years the age profile has shifted towards an older group, from 17 years onwards, sometimes involving youth in their early twenties. While Youthreach was the only training provision for 15–18 year olds, there was an unstated level of flexibility for participation of those outside the official target age, due in part to the limited training options in such a remote area.

Overview of the study and cases

The following discussion is based on biographical research with fourteen participants, evenly divided in gender terms. Most of the interviewees were interviewed twice over a two year period, between 2002 and 2004, building on previous fieldwork carried out by the author between 1999 and 2001 as part of an international policy research programme (McGrath, 2001, 2002; Dax & Machold, 2003; Jentsch & Shucksmith, 2004; Shucksmith, 2004). The first thing that can be said about the majority of participants is the disillusionment and disconnection they have experienced, albeit in varying degrees, with the mainstream educational system. Most of the young people left school early, sometimes without basic qualifications, and a small number completed school but without marketable credentials. The participants' lives vary little in terms of the contextual factors impinging on them: most come from unskilled or semi-skilled manual backgrounds with some farming activity taking place — two are from lower professional backgrounds; most are from small to medium sized families, where the size of sibship is three or less (ten had no more than three brothers and sisters); the majority have relative stability in terms of intact families — four were from non-intact family backgrounds where their parents had separated or divorced and one is from a lone parent background; and all were born and reared in the area, with the exception of four who came to the area either in childhood or during early teenage years. The age range was 15 to 24 years, and the average age was 19 years.

The themes identified in the remainder of this paper are illustrated through the perspectives and experiences of 12 of the participants whose profiles are now briefly outlined:

- Alan, aged 17 years,⁵ is from a more middle class background than most participants. He was expelled from school and spent intermittent periods in school and in work. He is undertaking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme at Youthreach.
- Alex is 18 years of age and also undertaking the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme. He left school early because he was older than other pupils and felt disconnected from his peers. He failed to return to school on finding local employment in the tourism sector.
- Brendan is 15 years of age and left school after three years with a basic qualification known as the Junior certificate. He recounted many behavioural problems in school, being suspended twice.
- Cathy, 20 years of age, left in second year of school without any qualifications. She joined Youthreach and has spent several years undertaking various courses and modules, the most current being the Leaving Certificate Applied.
- Catriona, aged 17 years, is undertaking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme and has ambitions for a career in social work.
- Ciara is 23 years and a single mother. She left school before the final school examination, and spent a period abroad working. Youthreach was contacted as a source of support given her vulnerability and behavioural difficulties.
- David, 18 years of age, experienced difficulties integrating in the local school, having spent most of his education in a more urban based school. He encountered a distinct lack of peer integration at school and was attracted to Youthreach by the possibility of similar qualifications to school and getting paid a training allowance.
- Finbar is 16 years of age and left school in second year of school because of humiliation experienced from his literacy problems. He is from a skilled manual background and joined Youthreach for vocational skills training.
- Pauline is 23 years and completed her Leaving Certificate but not to a level regarded as 'passing' all subjects. She is a single mother and living with her parents. She began Youthreach as part of a young mothers group, which was principally a 'personal development' course.
- Patricia is a single mother aged 24 years. She completed schooling, a secretarial course and worked abroad as a receptionist. Her pregnancy meant she returned home and joined Youthreach to improve her job skills and participate in a young mothers group.
- Paul is aged 20 and completed his Leaving Certificate with sufficient entry to a third level institute. He left school on two occasions mid way through second level school because of job opportunities and his difficult school experiences. He joined Youthreach for specific technical training in computers and business.
- Sharon, aged 21 years, left school before her trial Leaving Certificate examinations. She experienced lack of peer integration at school and joined Youthreach, after experiencing work locally, in order to improve her career prospects in nursing.

Learners' assessments of the programme

We now look at how Youthreach might be considered resourceful to youth in the sense that the interactions and social relationships they encounter help to mobilize young people's 'knowledgeability' about the circumstances of their exclusion and inclusion. Knowledgeability is a key concept within Giddens's (1984, p. 375) theory of structuration and is defined as 'everything which actors know (believe) about the circumstances of their action and that of others, drawn upon in the production and reproduction of that action, including tacit as well as discursively available knowledge'. It is a concept through which we can find a coalescence of psychic experiences permeating: inner confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) as competency and contingency beliefs⁶ and robust self-identity (Giddens, 1991). These are resources that actors can have or experience a lack of. Knowledgeability in the context of one's sense of biography and place in society rests in large part upon the presence of such resources; of which education ought to be a key instrument in harnessing. In order to promote these resources, it is argued here that inclusive education is premised on certain processes and relationships of engagement with young people. The following empirical evidence outlines what matters most to youth as they experience a sense of educational inclusion, namely: styles of communication; freedom to communicate; adult status and equality of position; sense of independence and responsibility; and the learning content. Through these features of the Youthreach programme we can appreciate how the programme resonates with young people whose experience of education has been a largely deficient and damaging one. Such elements imprint greatly in their outlook towards learning and potential labour market inclusion and their perceptions of themselves as renewed learners (knowledgeability resources). In essence, such features enhance individuals' sense of capability about themselves.

Styles of communication: security, inclusion and trust

Analysis of young people's narratives suggests that what unanimously appeals to young people, irrespective of their attraction to the programme on the basis of the training allowance, are the structures of communication between tutors and participants, which can be interpreted as psychosocial processes of group inclusion, fostering relations of trust and promoting a sense of ontological (psychic) security (Giddens, 1984); key elements lacking within the participants' schooling experiences. Such needs are met in the context of the social interactions and relationships encountered with the programme staff. The following discussion demonstrates a consensus among participants in their regard for Youthreach, which can be read as evidence of an 'active culture' of learning (Smyth & Hattam, 2002; also Carrington & Elkins, 2002).

A point of departure with school for the participants is the renewed sense of trust and security they experience in this new learning environment. Such trust and security is a relational experience and the key figure in all participants' narratives is

the coordinator, Anne. For several young women, Anne comes to occupy a central 'significant other' within their lives and is described and valued as a 'mother' figure, providing practical advice, guidance and emotional support. This appears particularly the case for the young mothers whose experiences of parenthood expose them to particular vulnerability.⁷ Having a close adult figure with which to confide constitutes a crucial resource at critical moments. In the following extract, Pauline describes the differences in reaction between her mother and the coordinator to the traumatic discovery of being pregnant.

How well do you get on with Anne?

Very well, Anne has helped me a lot. When I found out that I was pregnant first, Anne was the first person I told. When I first told Mum she didn't talk to me for a week. When I told Anne, it was all hugs, she was crying and everything. When I told Mum I was hoping Mum would react the way Anne reacted, but she didn't. I love Anne to bits. ... If I was stuck for anything, I just go to Anne and she helps you out'.

For Pauline, as with others, the underlying sense of emotional connection between themselves and Anne is the trust they feel exists within their relationship. A notable biographical case is Ciara, who arrived at Youthreach in a highly vulnerable state and experiencing little direction and poor resources or capital to negotiate her way in the world. Ciara was first interviewed while in her fifth year of attending Youthreach and describes the close ties built up with Anne over her time there. There is an expectation that Anne will provide the emotional resources of detecting her anxieties and empathy to her circumstances:

... Anne is like a second mother to me, I could tell her anything. Especially with my mum being in Redston [village], and it's such a long drive, so I can tell her anything and she knows everything about me and my situation, she's brilliant. For me anyway, she's good for me. ... She would know if I was upset, she would know if there was something worrying me and she knows I am pretty genuine, she would trust me. And I know that of her like. If I ever need to know something she'll know it for me.

Ciara wonders where she would have ended up in life if she hadn't met Anne. The same set of sentiments is true of Cathy, who also represents one of the more vulnerable participants of the programme. Again, the 'mother' image is invoked in her strong admiration: 'oh she is brilliant, she is like a mother to everyone, she is, yeah, Anne's sound'. Similarly, Patricia knows that if ever she has a problem, she can rely on Anne to provide the kind of attention where she is treated as an individual. She knows that she will be regarded seriously and never dismissed.

Do you get to sit down with Anne much on a one to one?

If ever, even I had a problem at home or a problem with Jenny [daughter], she would make time for ya; she is very busy; she has no help in the office. So if you wanted to talk to her, she would make time for you on a one to one. For how long you ever wanted to. You could be all day talking to her, she would listen.

In a foundational way, Anne provides the kind of support to these young adults that otherwise seems lacking as a resource base in their ‘individualized systems of social capital’, that is, the ‘dynamic, social, spatially, culturally, temporally and economically embedded group, network, or constellation of social relations, which has the young person at the core of the constellation and which provides authentic opportunities for everyday learning’ (Raffo & Reeves, 2000, p. 148). Several young mothers have limited family support and such trust relations are important in stabilizing young people’s ontological security in the face of everyday vulnerabilities. Such vulnerabilities for the young mothers come in the form of potential social isolation they can experience and the significant constraints in aspirations and access to the labour market or education without practical and emotional supports (also Anderson *et al.*, 2002). It can also come from the insecurities felt in the stigma of being a ‘lone parent’ (Smith, 2002).

While Anne demonstrates deep empathy and connectivity with the participants, her communication style is still based on an ‘authoritative’ one and she is not regarded as one who is easily manipulated despite her positive self-efficacy expectancies for the young people and generous investment in promoting their welfare. High nurturance as part of her authoritative style also demands high control and all participants agree that she is unrelenting in terms of demanding the best efforts from them. Some maintained that Anne could get especially annoyed when participants showed up late or were seen not to be pulling their weight.

Sense of freedom

Among many participants, a key differentiating factor between Youthreach and school is the sense of individuality and freedom that young people experience. The ability to ‘speak one’s mind’ appears as one of the dominant features of a renewed sense of freedom that young people value (also Francis, 1999, p. 311). Again, this links directly to the styles of communication, which mean that young people demonstrate little of the hesitancy they may have once experienced in school. The superordination–subordination power relation (Giddens, 1984) that is so characteristic of their school experience is replaced by a relation that enhances young people’s awareness of their learning.

In what ways [is it different to school]?

You have more independence and freedom, you don’t have to be afraid to speak what you’re thinking; ‘cos if you are thinking you just tell somebody here; they will do whatever they can for you. ... [second interview] you don’t have to be something you are not out here, you can just be yourself. You can’t do what you want, but you can say what you want whereas in school you wouldn’t have that freedom. It is a smaller class. You can say what you want and people will respect you for saying it. Here everybody is encouraging you, you wouldn’t get that in school, not as much as here in Youthreach.

In school, Sharon was particularly debilitated by her fear of asking questions of the teacher in case she appeared ‘stupid’ to her classmates and the teacher, and in this

way was constrained in advancing her understanding of subjects. In Youthreach, however, she says ‘Oh God, I wouldn’t even hesitate about asking for help. ... I am not embarrassed to say it in front of the others’. In the following extract, Alex identifies an important aspect in the way in which young people’s own interpretations are accommodated as relational resources in Youthreach. There is evidence of greater disposition towards exploratory learning and ‘thinking beyond’ the way knowledge is typically transmitted. According to Bloomer (2001, p. 440), who has investigated the social construction of learning, ‘the opportunity to exploit the relationality of learning, it appears, is the key to ‘thinking beyond’ and further learning’. Alex finds comfort in being enabled or having the freedom to explore alternative constructions of knowledge:

You can speak your own mind in the classroom. If you don’t like something you can say it. If you don’t agree with something they are doing, the teachers are doing, you just say it to them and try to reason with them and in school it’s like ‘that way and that way’. You have to do it that way.

If a teacher was doing something in a particular way and you didn’t agree with it?

You would say it. Even if you didn’t understand everything, you could say it to them and try and get them to do it a different way. There is a lot of ways to explain the one thing. Most of them will explain it in a different way.

Bloomer (2001) highlights the importance of the ‘relational’ in the realization of knowledge and the gaining of meaning within learning. The social situation is, therefore, of critical importance and in the evidence here we can see that it is in providing youth with a greater sense of self-comfort — on the part of tutors — that enables knowledge production as a meaningful activity. This sense of self-comfort is described in terms of the absence of fear, choice as to whether one speaks or not (freedom from coercion), absence of intimidatory structures, possibilities for individual attention. Some comments that display this include:

How are you finding the way subjects are taught here, compared with school?

Sharon: Good, I like it and you are not afraid to ask for help or anything. Well I am not, that used to be my problem in secondary school as well, but here they are just nice and say ‘no problem, I am not to know if you don’t say, that’s what I like — if you say [something]’

Pauline: I find myself more open and if I have a problem with something in class, like a question I can ask my tutor, whereas in school you can’t, afraid of putting your hand up or you will have everybody looking at you, everyone saying ‘oh she doesn’t know that’. At least here you are treated the same, you are not being shouted at and if you have a problem, you have one of the tutors there that will help you, even during break or afterwards.

For Patricia, another sense of freedom is evident from her narrative. Freedom came through being able to ‘think beyond’ the immediacy and urgency of her situation as

a mother and here we can see that through relational resources (that is, possibilities for positive interaction and learning) Patricia's knowledgeable about her identity solely in terms as a mother could be transcended and her understandings about herself widened. In this sense, she becomes enabled in her attempts to transcend the constraints imposed by her role and identity.

So I suppose it has been tough enough then?

It was, I really... if I hadn't started here that winter, because I didn't really know that many people. 'Cos a lot of my friends had moved away and when you come back you are like, hiding in a hole, it got me out and about here, it really did. You suddenly think, my life is the baby, but it wasn't. I was learning new things and you didn't feel confined (*interviewer: coming here?*) yeah definitely.

Communicating adult status and equality of position

What has becoming increasingly obvious to youth researchers in recent years is the inferiority of status afforded to young people in society. Dax *et al.* (2002, p. 176) identify quite succinctly their unequal place and 'voice' as follows:

Very often youth behaviour and action is seen as immature, irrelevant to local issues and/or unhelpful in identifying solutions. Indeed, adults often dismiss young people's views without trying to understand their world-view or making any effort to identify alternative means by which to achieve greater youth participation.

Being treated in such terms characterizes much of what young people associate with the institution of schooling. Quite a different portrayal is articulated in their new institutional setting. Young people obtain a sense of inclusion by being treated as 'adult' or on a more level playing field with their tutors (also Francis, 1999, p. 313; Goodley & Clough, 2004, p. 349). Several participants contrast the huge disparities between social interactions with their school teachers and those with the Youthreach tutors. For participants, there is strong antipathy towards the inferior status they were made feel at school and which they associate in terms of being treated as a child. In conveying an understanding of the way people interact in Youthreach, several youth immediately contrast its characterization with school. For Catriona (17 years), school appears as a distant memory to Youthreach, where interactions no longer can be characterized through the structures of domination that served to reduce her and her peers to almost objects in need of control and discipline and which gave rise to feelings of insecurity:

And you get on well with the tutors, I suppose?

Yeah, they are all dead sound. You can talk to them and they won't talk to you like you are a child or tell you to be quiet or give you detention, I used to hate that [about school]. The shouting in class used to wreck my head.

So you can relate to them?

Yes, you can have a chat with them, like stand up and talk to them outside, even talk to them about the weekend. Just talk.

For Catriona, the structures of engagement with tutors affirm a sense of individuality for her, which can be dissociated from the childlike experiences of school 'I feel more independent and you have to look out for yourself. ... You're treated as an individual'.

Alan makes the case that there is a genuine concern on the part of tutors to ensure the participants' understanding of a subject and, importantly, that the communication is channelled in a way that conveys an equality of status. For the participants, the civility of communication is regarded as 'normal'. An excerpt from Alan's account reads as follows.

Do you think that people communicate differently here than at school?

Yes, it's a different atmosphere between the tutors and the students. The tutors are there offering to help, even when you don't need help they would ask you, they would talk to anyone. Like the way we are talking now or the way I talk to the lads; that is how they talk to you. I don't know if you are supposed to, but we call them by their first names.

The normality of behaviour is also conveyed by Paul, who describes the acceptability of being able to smoke cigarettes without fear of punishment as would be the case in the school environment. Freedom and openness to smoke in comfort is a publicly symbolic act of a new status afforded to the participants, one more closely aligned with the world of adults.

Similarly, Sharon was particularly struck at first by the 'normality' of interaction between the 'authority' figure of Anne and other participants. Whereas there was an obvious hierarchy of status at school between students and teachers, interactions at Youthreach confer a more equal status, symbolized here in the open sharing of space:

The first thing I do in the morning is go in and sit beside the radiator in Anne's office. When I came here first I suppose I was so used to the Community School ways that I just couldn't believe that people were going into Anne's office, with her on the phone and writing up letters and stuff, but now I do it without thinking. I just walk into her office and I stay there until she gets off the phone, not that I am listening, it's just I have nothing else to do, so I go up to Anne for a chat or make her a coffee.

On several of the visits made to the centre as part of the interviewing process, it was typical to see participants, mostly female, moving in and out of Anne's office with considerable ease, some sitting in the office having relaxed conversations among each other and with Anne.

In conversation with the woodwork tutor, we spoke about his pedagogical approach in which he treats the classroom as a 'workshop' situation as one would in 'industrial settings'. In this way, it is a type of adult working relationship that he seeks in the relationship between himself and participants; one that connects with the everyday language of the young person. This involves being called by his first name or his nickname.

Independence and responsibility

According to Allatt (1993, p. 149) ‘One means of inducing a sense of autonomy is to create in the individual the belief he or she can affect events. It is about agency’. The connection with self-efficacy appears here, in that the events over which the individual has autonomy should perhaps be viewed more as the control they might come to experience over or believe of their own agency, for example, in terms of one’s orientation or disposition towards one’s learning. In other words, in order to help realize longer term projects (gaining qualifications), actors’ competency and contingency beliefs must be mobilized (see note 6). For several youth, the challenge of responsibility is one that seems to be relished rather than rejected. The cultural approach is one where the responsibility for learning is transferred to the young person, but in the context of an enabling environment. In this way, actors assume control over the approach they take and are, thereby, enabled through knowledgeability. For both Brendan and David, who were particularly active in resisting teachers at school, freedom comes from lack of coercion to act in ways contrary to one’s preferences.

Why is that [his like of Youthreach]?

They don’t get ‘thick’ with you or anything, they let you do your own thing. And you are sort of forced to do it in there [school]. If you are forced you don’t want to really. Over here, if you don’t do it, it is your own problem. You’re not gaining anything.

Does it make you want to do it then? Yes. Whereas in school you have to? Yes, you would feel pushed into it. And you didn’t like that? No.

Participants come to realize that they have an active, agentic role to play in influencing the level at which they can attain qualifications. In this sense, the relational aspect of not pressurizing participants, which conveys the message that it is the participant’s choice as to whether or not to engage in their own learning, begins to enter their knowledgeability as realization that responsibility for learning is one that can be assumed by the actor. An excerpt from Catriona’s account is indicative of the process.

How has it changed you, do you think?

It is a lot more easy going even though you have to work hard. You can work hard if you want to, and you don’t have to if you don’t want to, it’s up to you at the end day. If you want to get the marks you are looking for you are going to work hard anyway, nobody is forcing you or pushing you, they are not putting pressure on you, it is up to you to do what you have to do. If you don’t have it done, it’s your own fault.

Learning content: ‘It’s all about the real world’

There is some debate, especially in the UK, about the underlying ethos and approach to ‘competence based learning’ in the workplace, particularly between those concerned with behavioural outcomes and those in the ‘interactionist’ camp (Bates,

1999). Youthreach perhaps fits the ‘interactionist’ end of competence learning which emphasizes the ‘importance of individual agency in the construction of meanings and the need for education to treat learning as a creative process in which the outcomes are to some extent unpredictable’ (Bates, 1999, pp. 112–113). This is perhaps most evident in the orientation to learning in the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, where assessment is primarily based on the completion of tasks or group project work and assignments rather than examination alone.

Ciara spoke about this issue and the feeling of achievement she gained in being able to research an issue that bears directly on her identity and that of significant others in her life. What the following extract demonstrates is the opportunity for Ciara to pursue a project with direct ‘lateral connectivity’ (Bloomer, 2001) with her own life; that is, there is a direct relevance of the subject matter to her life outside of the centre (Dwyer, 1996). Through this curricular approach, Ciara was enabled to select and engage with a project that would help enhance her knowledge.

So the tasks that you do, you have to write them up?

Yeah, you have to write a report. For example this year, we had a personal achievement task which I done on the elderly ‘cos I worked with the elderly. I got my work experience with the elderly. And we had a contemporary issue and I done it on single parents, so it kind of relates to me and it relates to my mum and a lot of friends who are single parents, so that was brilliant. That went really well. You had to stand and present — you had a board and you had figures on single parents, you had figures on social welfare payments, like Cura, different organizations that single parents can attend.

In conversation with Anne, one of the key moments for her in recent years was this remarkable change that occurred in Ciara’s personality. For her, the significant change was symbolized most in the way in which Ciara handled her ‘contemporary issues’ project to display a new level of confidence and initiative:

The first session of the first semester, they call it sessions, she had to do a task and she almost had to be hand fed that task, because she didn’t really know the format or how to do it. One year later she came in here and she said to me — ‘can I use the phone? I want to phone the Central Statistics Office, because I want to find out’ — she was doing a project — ‘on the changing attitudes of the local community to single parenthood’. She was on the phone and asking them whatever questions she had laid out. I just sat back and thought to myself — it’s really all worthwhile.

Participants are also encouraged to help one another by sharing their understandings of course material and explaining subject matter to one another wherever there is difficulty in comprehension. Project work tends to be undertaken in groups, which in itself can create tensions but also learning experiences if treated as experimental and ‘authentic learning situations’ (Te Riele & Crump, 2002, p. 260).

For those who are particularly oriented to vocational skills and engage better with hands-on work, Youthreach provides a meaningful curriculum and point of connection. This was particularly mentioned by Finbar and Brendan, who are both in the ‘foundation’ skills course. Finbar enjoys the artistic metal work he is able to do while

Brendan likes being able to spend a considerable length of time trying out metalwork and woodwork and the choice of making something substantial or spending time fixing his motor bike. He contrasts his experience to school where he says ‘there was more maths, English paper work; you never really learned anything. If you were going to make anything it was just a toy or something small’. Likewise, Paul speaks about the differences in what his brother is able to achieve at Youthreach and how it has tapped what appears as a natural talent:

It’s different, it’s better. It’s all about the real world instead of the ‘make believe’ world over there [school]. ... He [brother] has got into carpentry and he’s very good. All the furniture in his room is made by himself. He’s gifted. In school in woodwork he never made a thing. Never came home with anything. He’s over there a few months and he’s loving it. Never knew the lad could do what he’s doing..

For Cathy and Ciara, who both had difficulties comprehending the abstract instruction of school, the staff affirm that there are alternative ways of demonstrating meaning and alternative means of expressing oneself.

Even the ones you did at school, and didn’t like, do you find it different now?

Cathy: Everything is different here, even I am doing maths now and God I hate maths but, I don’t mind doing it here, because even the maths that you learn at school, its turned around to be a more practical way of looking at it. It is the same maths but in a different way. In a better way really, you do Ys and Xs at school, what are Ys and Xs going to do for you? They put practical things like measuring, its totally different they put it more practical, that you know what you are looking at instead of Xs and Ys, Ps and Qs. So it’s not too bad.

Ciara: I felt that for say English for example I couldn’t ... what I was thinking in my head I couldn’t put it down on paper if you know what I mean, as in Youthreach I would tell Anne and she was ‘there’s other ways of getting around it, put it down in another way then’. You know, you can get around not being able to spell a word. I was always in trouble at school. I was always on detention. I had no interest.

Within the ‘social education’ and ‘vocational preparation’ modules, there is particular emphasis in bringing into young people’s horizons an awareness of issues that have ‘lateral connectivity’ with their lives. Sharon talks emphatically about the benefits in the knowledge gained within these modules about practical, everyday realities such as knowing about her employment rights, tenancy rights, as well as advice on budgeting and so on. On the same subject of youth and risk (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997), Alan notes how the content was concerned with ‘ways to look after yourself ... it looks at all the dangers and all the opportunities as well for life’. David, who, at the first interview, demonstrated a fairly open masculinist attitude in some respects, spoke about his changed views at the follow up interview:

David: Social education does smarten you up if you know what I mean. It makes you wise to what’s going on, the contemporary issues class opened my eyes to an awful lot that’s going on in the world. Before I went to Youthreach I wasn’t that open minded

Conclusion

In an overall sense, this paper has sought to account for and appreciate the processes through which educational inclusion assumes an 'authoritative resource' in young people's lives; that is, in the language of structuration theory, its principles are dedicated towards the 'constitution of chances of self-development and self-expression' (Giddens, 1984, p. 258). The processes documented herein are suggestive of an institutional provision that we might define as a 'positive welfare' provider, which helps (re)ignite an 'active culture of learning' in young people's learning careers. In order for young people excluded from traditional educational provisions to find 'a capacity for creative reconstruction of biography in terms of personal progress and fulfilment' (Bates & Riseborough, 1993, p. 6), young people require reconnection with authentic institutions and relationships. Relationships and particular forms of interaction are the key mechanism through which cultures of learning and social inclusion can be inculcated. Within the Youthreach programme, what matters for the youth is the resilience that prospers through relationships and from which youth can experience renewed trust, inclusion and security. For vulnerable youth to find their way back into learning, and to find room for change in their lives, associative relationships are needed with practitioners and other young people so that these elements can flow more easily. While institutions such as school have lost connectivity with many young people's biographies, there is a stark need for the kind of institutions where connectivity can be regained. In turn, institutions depend foremost on the quality of the relationships fostered within them. Such institutional structures, practices and relations can foster the kinds of 'everyday allegiances' that Giddens (1994, p.187) regards as important in establishing positive welfare.

Finally, as a word of interpretive caution, our analysis can not ignore the nature of the systems that serve to constrain actors in selective ways — as evidenced in class, gender and ethnic divisions — and the need for broader changes in how education is generally shaped, but rather seeks to underscore the relational and psychosocial considerations and conditions that appeal to the everyday lived realities of young people distanced from mainstream education.

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Notes

1. A 'capabilities' approach to social exclusion is particularly evident in the work of Sen (1999), while Giddens (1984) can also be viewed as fostering a 'capability' perspective on power.
2. The intensity of this debate is not as apparent in the Irish case.

3. In Ireland, under the Qualifications (Education & Training) Act, 1999, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) now has responsibility for making awards previously made by independent training bodies in different sectors, e.g. in marine and fisheries, catering, tourism. FETAC's functions include making and promoting awards, validating programmes, monitoring and ensuring the quality of programmes, and determining standards. It represents a move towards standardized, easily recognizable, certification which is intent on bringing more coherence into what appeared as a disparate array of awards within further education and training. This has been consolidated through the National Framework of Qualifications, published in October 2003.
4. Established in 1991, NCVA operates a vocational qualification framework at four levels. The foundation level is pre-vocational and for those without any qualifications; level I is an introduction to general vocational skills; while level 2 offers a higher skills component and can provide a route to higher education; level 3 is being developed around master crafts/advanced vocational skills.
5. All ages in parentheses refer to the first interview stage.
6. 'Contingency beliefs are beliefs in the probability that certain actions will affect outcomes in particular ways. Competence beliefs are the beliefs people have about their capabilities to act in ways that will produce the probable outcomes' (Flammer, 1997, cited in Evans, 2002, p. 248). The former we could say are 'outcome expectancies' and the latter 'efficacy expectancies' (Crozier, 1997, p. 168).
7. One substantive resource recently provided through Youthreach is the crèche facility, which has had significant implications for young mothers as a group of participants. All mothers agree that the constraints of child rearing are such that without the crèche being available, they could not participate either in further education or the labour market in a full-time capacity. The crèche caters for 14 children at a cost of 10 per week to the participants. It is staffed by two full-time childcare workers, one of whom is a lone parent who completed the highest level of qualification in childcare.

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