

# MANAGING ASPIRATIONS: REMAKING WORKING CLASS SELVES THROUGH MENTORING?

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Working Paper for [IPSE Seminar Series Transformations in the Education Workforces Seminar 2, The Blurring of the Boundary between Education and Care](#): 4<sup>th</sup> October 2011, London Metropolitan University.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on and develops arguments from a chapter in a book written by Louise Archer, Heather Mendick and myself called *Urban Youth and Schooling* (Archer, Hollingworth et al. 2010) which explored the experiences and identities of teenage Londoners who were predicted as likely to 'drop out' of school. The specific chapter argues that various education policies to encourage young people to stay on in education are underpinned by a perspective that assumes that working class young Londoners need to *change* (and hence *be changed*) in order to 'realize' that staying on in education is the good and right thing to do: i.e. policies are working (and some, we argue, *failing* to work) at re-making working class young people in this middle class model of the neo-liberal, reflexive, individualised self.

The chapter is structured in three sections:

- **'Bribing the self'** is about the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) which was a means tested payment (of up to £30 per week) to those who stayed on in education or training post 16. At the time of the study (2003-5) this was being piloted and we asked our participants what they thought of the initiative. We reveal that, for these particular young people, this incentive approach to stay on in education was largely condemned as 'bribery'.
- **'Monitoring the Self'** is about their views and experiences of the Connexions Service. At the time, the Connexions service was a careers advice service for young people but it also had a targeted remit to work with young people at risk of not progressing in education or training. Connexions Personal Advisors' (also known as PAs) role was one-to-one targeted support and mentoring for those young people designated as 'at risk'. From our interviews with young people in our study, the Connexions Service appeared to have had an overly surveilling/ coercive approach which many young people resisted.
- **'Remaking the self'** is about relationships with their learning mentors in schools. Learning Mentors, at the time of this study, were introduced into schools under the Excellence in Cities initiative to address underachievement and disengagement in urban areas. This, we argue, was the least resisted intervention. Staff were less target driven and these relationships were appreciated by the young people as being more supportive. Nevertheless, we show how the language of therapy creeps in, and

how an overly psychologised construction of the 'problem' of young people's 'disaffection' from education, masks the need for changes to the *system* and institutions– which could better be conceptualised as exclusionary to certain kinds of (classed) selves.

In this paper I focus on the roles of the Connexions Advisors and learning mentors (both forms of mentoring) to further explore the ways in which this work is, and isn't, a form of government regulation of subjects and subjectivities, and to draw attention to how this is mediated/facilitated by a blurring of boundaries between education and care to varying effects. we argue that Connexions mentoring (and the EMA initiative) were *resisted*, and this resistance was an attempt for the young people, ironically, to produce themselves as respectable -as independent from forms of state 'support'; (so through resisting state support or 'help' they felt they were managing their own career paths and their own futures). Whereas learning mentors produced much less resistance, perhaps due to a more subtle work on the young people to produce *themselves* as the 'right kind of selves' who were engaged in and committed to staying on in education.

I begin by setting out the context of mentoring and discuss how it is rooted in a psychologised understanding of people and their capacity for transformation. I outline how in the climate of Widening Participation and drives to increase participation in education, some education professionals' role has changed or morphed in a way that blurs the boundary between education and care. I then go on to discuss how our research found this takes on different forms and has different consequences for Connexions mentors and Learning mentors.

## CONTEXT

With its roots in the United States, youth mentoring has expanded rapidly in the UK over the past few decades, becoming '*a central ingredient of almost every UK policy initiative for social inclusion since the Labour party were elected in 1997*' (Colley 2003) and by the education interventions we at IPSE are regularly being approached to evaluate, looks set to stay.

Why has mentoring been such a popular policy tool? I would argue that this is because it chimes with a particularly psychologised and individualised construction of human beings, which is increasingly the normative perspective. It is in this climate that the rise of neuroscience (or 'neuromania' as it has been critiqued (Tallis 2011)) in education has gained currency and popularity. However, I argue that this perspective is underpinned by an epistemology which *begins* from a deficit model. The medical model (grounding both neuroscience and biological psychology) is a deficit model: it begins from the assumption that human beings are ultimately faulty and 'sick' and need experts to teach them the way to their own happiness. Indeed a happiness which can be indexed and quantified. And we see this seep into policy rhetoric as we are described as a 'broken society.' Of course, in this model, some of us are more broken than others.

In this psychologised and individualised context, education (and its transformative potential) has been given primacy – imbued with an almost magical (yet scientifically based) potential – of 'rewriting the chances' for [disadvantaged] children (Gerhardt, Jowell et al. 2012). Simon Bradford and Valerie Hey theorise this example quite well:

*[E]ducation and learning have become the means, par excellence, of achieving a range of governmental objectives by aligning outcomes for the nation in a global economy ('national competitiveness'), goals for the domain of the social ('social cohesion') with the desires and aspirations of individual subjects ('creativity' and 'personal prosperity', for example). Implicit in this configuration is the 'responsible citizen', maximising their own human capital in constructing a viable and rational identity that incorporates ambition and aspiration as principal elements of self. (Bradford and Hey 2007)*

What I want to immediately point out is that ambition and aspiration (for *educational* success) are not ‘natural’ innate emotions – or not wholly – but are social constructs, which serve a particular function- especially in the economy.

In the context of *Widening Participation* to Higher Education, a highly emotive concept- the concept of *aspirations*- has been mobilised in order to achieve a policy objective. That is, to grow the sorts of workers necessary for the ‘knowledge economy’- flexible; autonomous; self regulating; entrepreneurial – and there is an assumption that higher education, in particular, is a key aspect of this self-realisation. Here, I want to link *doing* aspirations (as a form of emotional work which takes place between education professionals and young people) and subjectivity. How we come to understand ourselves is through this emotional work- that the psychologised subject is a particular way of being in the contemporary.

All educational institutions are under pressure to produce such ‘responsible citizens’; and both Connexions advisors and learning mentors are charged with nurturing all three facets of this responsibility – the economic, the social and the personal. Indeed the challenging position this put education professionals such as Connexions Advisors and learning mentors in, was not lost on such staff in our research. For example, for one Connexions PA, when we asked her how her role differed to her previous role as a careers advisor she revealed:

*It’s broader, it’s much broader. [...] And so say for example there are issues outside of school you would be working with those so it’s broader. It has been marketed quite badly as well in some ways because for example I had a parent ring up asking me to see her kid and I met the kid last week and I said ‘your mum rung up saying you wanted to see me, fire away’ sort of thing, ‘what is it about?’ And it is about his anger management and so I have gone from being a careers advisor to working with a kid about his anger management. The long and the short of it, what the kid needs is, well what I think he needs because I am not qualified, you know I am not a qualified counsellor or educational psychologist or whatever, it is a bit of social work in terms of getting involved in some groups [activities] but also counselling. And so I will refer him on to that.*

What I want to draw attention to here is how she constructs her role as much broader, she is often out of her depth, her role is misinterpreted; and she feels unqualified. However, this scenario also shows how a young person’s ability to progress in education; employment or career, becomes conflated with psychological issues. Ironically, she argues that this targeted ‘case load’ detracts from her ability to deliver quality careers advice, which is actually, she claims, what the majority of young people want. Of course this is one perspective, and comes from a PA who was originally a careers advisor before Connexions, and for PAs who were originally youth workers, EWOs or educational psychologists, the paradigm may well be constructed differently. Nevertheless, Connexions Advisors and Learning Mentors are charged with such a task of managing the social, personal and emotional aspects of young people’s lives (if it is to get in the way of their path to educational ‘success’).

What I want to argue is that the nature of *how* this is done (by the different quasi-educational agencies/ professionals), is important in its consequences.

## THE CONNEXIONS SERVICE

As I’ve outlined already, Connexions personal advisors (or the Connexions *service* they represented) were not *as well* received by our sample of young people. The one-to-one targeted approach, allocating PA’s to those ‘at risk’, was resisted by a noticeable number of these young people. It was construed variously as:

- stigmatising (*‘I just don’t like them kind of things [...] they talk to you as if [...] you’re not like everyone else, you need extra help or whatever’*)

- too educationally directive (*they 'don't really help, they wind me up [...] everything I wanted to do they put me off doing that'*)
- or even a conspiracy (For example, Robert described Widening Participation as a way to ensure that there are more people working *'for the government [...] in offices'*)

## LEARNING MENTORS

Learning Mentors on the other hand, were more positively received. Thirteen of the fifty or so teenage young people that we interviewed talked about regular contact with a Learning Mentor. Most were very happy about the relationship. When young people felt safe, respected, cared about and understood this had a positive impact on their engagement with education and enjoyment in school (whether provided by a teacher or another education professional). This emotional dimension was particularly a factor in young people's relationships with their Learning Mentors. As you can see from the following young people's accounts.

Tim (Hillside Park) recounted: *'She just makes me laugh and makes me feel good. She helps me with my work, she gives me advice'*. Not only did Tim's mentor help him with his school work, but she also made him 'feel good'. Charlene (Cowick), for whom English was an Additional Language, initially discussed seeing her mentor three or four times a week. She was supported, not only with language, but by helping her deal with bullying and teasing. Charlene told us how, through this experience she *'became more confident': 'I was very quiet and she brought me out and made me stronger'*. Charlene's relationship with her mentor was clearly helpful in getting her through a difficult period of her life and adjusting to school. While, at the time of the interview, Charlene had stopped seeing her mentor, she felt comfortable with this, because her mentor had equipped her to deal with problems: *'she has done what she had to do, and said what she had to say, and now it's on me'*. Her mentoring experience was transformative and equipped her to take responsibility for her own educational success.

Jade (Blackwell Street) described how her Learning Mentor helped her to address her truancy and to gain a new perspective on her life and social relations, she told us how her mentor *'made [her] understand more.'* Like other young people, Jade valued the interpersonal relationship that her mentor had generated with her, and which underpinned the success of their work together: *'I think she's really nice and she's funny [...] She knows what to say, like she says all the right things. There's nothing that she's ever said wrong and she gives good advice'*.

Jordan (Blackwell Street) was similarly positive about her Learning Mentor and his pastoral skills, and described working with him to try and catch up on her work:

*'He could be having the worst day of his life and he'd still have time to sit there and listen, so. I'm not a very good one with coping with problems. I storm up to [the learning support centre] and tell [my mentor] and he sits me down and calms me down and tells me "it'll be all right, it'll be all right, we'll sort it out"'*.

Clearly Tim, Charlene, Jade and Jordan gained a lot from these mentoring relationships- One could argue that this intervention furnishes them with 'psychological capital' (Bradford and Hey, 2007: 600) which enables them, or facilitates them, to 'get on' in education (or to some extent).

However what I want to argue is that although Learning Mentors clearly supported young people's educational engagement, we can also see in their talk evidence of the language of 'therapy'. Mentors are 'helping' and 'advising' young people on 'coping' with problems, 'calming' them, giving them 'confidence', and making them 'stronger' and 'feel good'. The rise of mentoring in educational settings where the mentor is placed in a pseudo-therapeutic, role and is charged with 'supporting' and 'caring' for 'vulnerable' young people can be seen as part of this wider therapeutic turn I've outlined. Within this there is an increasing erosion of the

boundary between public and private, and a preoccupation with emotional well-being, self-esteem and self-help as authors like Katherine Ecclestone and Frank Furedi have written about (Furedi 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes 2009).

We can see that these young people clearly valued their mentoring relationships and I am not saying that they are undeserving of support. However, what I want to highlight is the pathologization that follows from both the remedial focus and the suggestion that the self needs fixing. For many minority ethnic and working-class groups, their experiences of the formal education system are ones of alienation and hostility, and characterized by feelings of 'not being good enough' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Reay 2001; Archer and Yamashita 2003). The role of mentoring in supporting and encouraging young people to manage their behaviour in order to become the right kind of person can reinforce this feeling of not being good enough (at point of entry, of course).

So why is it that Learning mentors are not resisted more by these young people (when EMA and Connexions more evidently are)? We would suggest that this is because of the *different* way that power works through them. As Foucault (1980: 119) writes:

*If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.*

Through mentoring young people do get the skills needed to be valued in schools and recognized by others as 'good' students. They thus get feelings of pleasure and success from this. This is both helpful *and* insidious. It teaches young people the rules of the game but without making them aware that it is a game, even presenting the game as 'just the way it is.'

Nikolas Rose's (1999) work on the governance of the self is also useful here. He argues that, in the reformation of welfare provision, we see a new role for the subject to regulate and manage their own conduct. In particular, certain self-governing traits – including, agency, self-responsibility and entrepreneurship - are positioned as normative. Thus subjects come to regulate *themselves* in the 'correct' way, namely through participation in education and employment.

What is different for the Learning mentors from the Connexions PAs is the absence of progression targets. Students are not feeling the weight of coercion but encouraged to do it themselves. Mentors are helping young people to regulate the self in an individualized way. For example, through the mentoring relationship, Jade is able to understand more about herself and her relationships, Charlene takes her mentor's advice and then works on her self ('now it's on me'), and Jordan's mentor helps her to control her unruly behaviour. All these modifications and self-regulation feed into becoming a 'good student'. They support the development of the forms of psychological capital that are valued in the field of the school (or to some extent).

This therapeutic approach is a particular way of narrating or 'telling' the self (Skeggs 2004), which cultivates a neoliberal, reflexive subject; and draws on this discourse of aspiration and ambition to do so:

*By fostering 'psychological capital' the potential reach of governmental power is also extended by increasing the capacity (and, potentially, desire) of the subject to work on self under the specific tutelage of the authority of success discourses. (Bradford and Hey, 2007: 600)*

Simon Bradford and Valerie Hey write about how discourses of success, or New Labour's project of 'successification' are shaping young people's subjectivities- via the promise to offer pathways from recognizably disadvantaged spaces to more desirable ones.

Thus young people who are identified as 'at risk' of disengaging from education are worked on to become reflexive and self-regulating, to control their aversions to learning. They are being engineered into the 'correct' way of being and doing - to become the agentic, enterprising self who values and pursues education and the professional and economic success it supposedly brings.

Other authors have argued that this neoliberal subject fits within a wider context of an increasing 'normalization' of middle-class lifestyles values and attitudes (Allen 2008): a moral project in which the self has to show itself to be proper and good, as an object to be worked on.

Further, this very process of actively working to 'better one's self' through education is a process by which students become more worthy: Skeggs argues:

*One of the main processes by which the 'subject of value' can be distinguished from its constitutive limit is via the amount of labour that is made evident in its making. As a moral imperative people have to show that they are working on their own development, establishing value in their own subjectivity, extending their cultural exchange value. (Skeggs et al., 2007: 3)*

One way of accruing value in the person is through investment in education. Following Skeggs, this is a middle-class mode of production of subjectivity. Those young people 'disengaged' from education, on the other hand, are depicted as not investing in the 'self,' by resisting formal education.

And we can see this particular telling of the self of transformation and redemption, often on television, or in the media. For example following the riots, a typical story is ex gang member, ex youth offender tells the story of how they used to be 'bad' but now they have realised the error of their ways (usually through some kind of youth work/ mentoring or educational (or sporting) experience)!

However only some people can make this transformation; and other classed bodies become fixed or stuck. Only certain selves are able to/want to tell themselves and produce themselves, in this desired way.

Only one young person showed any resistance to Learning Mentoring, but it is quite telling. Yesim (Eastleigh) lamented:

*Well basically you used to go to a mentor once or twice a week and speak to her about what you do in school. How would you develop your work ... and things like that. If you're late, why are you late? How can you resolve this? [...] I don't really find that useful [...] they're like 'why are you late to school?' It's because you woke up late or you couldn't catch a bus or if there was traffic, whatever. But they can't stop that can they?*

Yesim's response expresses her irritation at the intense level of personal analysis (or perhaps even indulgence) that mentoring applies to what she saw as practical issues (missing the bus, getting stuck in traffic, and so on). However, Yesim enjoyed a very close relationship with one of her teachers (who she saw as a 'mother' figure), and hence this resistance may be due to the fact that she didn't need another mentor-nurture relationship. In Yesim's reaction we can see that the individualized, therapeutic (middle class) focus on work on the self can generate resistance.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I hope to have brought together ideas of the therapeutic turn in education; the psychologised human being; and the neoliberal, self-regulating subject to explore the ways in which the technologies of government regulation work on and through young people (in this instance) to become the right kind of selves fit for the (ever elusive) 'knowledge economy', but particularly how this plays out for such 'targeted' working class young people.

What I want to do here is argue, not for an avoidance of the emotions in public policy and public services, nor to discard the importance of this emotional labour, but to argue for a more sociological theorization of human relationships- as messy, and complicated, and incomplete – which grounds emotions in social and classed relations, as opposed to in one's head or in one's brain.

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