

What a person can be they should be: *an exploration of the efforts of one school in the West Midlands, England to raise aspirations and widen horizons for their pupils through their work experience programme.*

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Abstract

In 2008 the report, 'The work experience placements of secondary school pupils: widening horizons or reproducing social inequality?' was published by Hatcher & Le Gallais. The researchers investigated the distribution of pupils to placements with particular emphasis on differentiation by social class. The processes utilised by the various schools in the allocation of placements formed an important part of the research. The above research demonstrated that work placements tend powerfully to reflect and reproduce patterns of social class inequality, rather than to widen pupils' vocational horizons.

Five schools were involved in the original research. One of these schools, anonymised as Avon School, has an intake selected by ability; the other four schools, namely Bedford, Cumbria, Devon and Essex are comprehensive schools. Eligibility for free school meals (FSM) was used as a proxy indicator of the socio-economic status (SES) of the school populations, which, whilst limited as an indicator, allowed the researchers to categorise the schools as high SES (Avon), middle SES (Bedford and Cumbria) and low SES (Devon and Essex).

Taking the data for all five schools into account the number of professional placements accessed by one of the schools, namely Essex School, was higher than one might reasonably have anticipated from its low socioeconomic status. This intriguing anomaly provided the stimulus for undertaking this piece of small scale qualitative research in 2010-2011.

Two members of staff at Essex School with specific responsibilities for the school's work experience programme together with 36 Year Twelve pupils took part in interviews and/or questionnaires. Data showed that the number of professional placements had increased considerably since the previous research with many pupils stating that they were now intending to go on to university as a direct result of their placements. In addition, pupils' aspirations had been raised with regard to the types of future careers they were considering, which contrasted dramatically for some with their family background.

This research confirms the marked directive stance adopted by Essex School in terms of pupils' freedom to choose their own placements. However, there is a subtlety to this stance in that the lack of choice is linked more to the quality of placements than to where a pupil chooses to go. This approach appears to be an important factor in the success of Essex School's work experience programme as a vehicle for raising aspirations and widening their pupils' horizons. Furthermore, it is evident that the programme forms just one part, albeit significant one, of the school's overall strategy of enhancing their pupils' psychological capital and addressing the dearth of social capital amongst their families.

Introduction

This paper explores how one aspect of young people's educational experience, namely their work experience placements, might aid a widening of their horizons in terms of opening up their options regarding future career paths. The importance of work experience for young people's decision making is noted by Foskett *et al.* (2003: 15) who observe in their study of pupils' perceptions of influences affecting their decisions about post 16 choices that

Work experience was often reported to be an axial point in decision making about individual careers, helping pupils determine what they want or did not want from future careers.

Similarly, the Wolf Report (2011: 12) acknowledges the important role of quality work experience, in particular post 16, where Wolf

recommends, as a matter of urgency, that more 16-19 year olds be given opportunities to spend substantial periods in the workplace, undertaking genuine workplace activities, in order to develop the general skills which the labour market demonstrably values.

A well organised work experience programme offering 'genuine' experiences of work related activities which are stretching and informative about the world of work affects not only a young person's awareness of career possibilities; it can also impact positively upon their self esteem, confidence, ability to relate to adults, acceptance of responsibilities and, for some such as those at Essex School, their belief in their own potential to achieve beyond the limitations set by their background and local environment.

Iannelli & Paterson (2005) observe that there have been many studies which show 'that education and the acquisition of educational qualifications are important means through which middle class families pass on their social and economic advantage to their children'. This small scale research examines how Essex, a low SES school, strives to bridge the gap between the social and economic disadvantages of their lower class intake by opening up access to middle class professional placements as part of their work experience programme. Whilst the placements may only be one or two weeks in duration, their impact in terms of encouraging the pupils to think outside the confines of their neighbourhood has repercussions beyond the time and space of the placement. This is evidenced through pupils' descriptions of their placements and the affect they believe the experience has had on their career aspirations, their attitudes to school and their educational pathways.

At the time of this research in 2010-2011 almost all school pupils undertook some form of work experience during their secondary school education in accordance with schools' 'statutory requirement...to ensure all Key Stage 4 pupils have suitable and high quality work-related learning opportunities as part of a broad and balanced curriculum' (DCSF 2009: 28). This has usually taken place in Year 10. Guidance regarding work experience placements can be found in two Department for Education (DfE) publications: *Work Experience: A guide for secondary schools* (DfES 2002a) and *Work Experience: A guide for employers* (DfES 2002b). The DfE guidelines for schools recommend that

As a minimum, schools should check that their programmes are free from both overt and covert stereotyping. Whilst schools will clearly need to be sensitive to the risk that placing pupils into areas of work in which they feel uncomfortable may be counterproductive, they should, nevertheless, consider how far they should allow their pupils free choice of placements. (DfES 2002a, p12)

The cautionary advice that schools 'should...consider how far they should allow their pupils free choice of placements' is interesting. It implies that, if left to their own devices, young people may well select stereotypical placements which may be comfortable but not necessarily challenging or beneficial. These words are particularly relevant to this paper in that the school upon which this research focuses was identified in previous research (Hatcher & Le Gallais 2008) and is confirmed in this research to be directive in its stance vis-à-vis pupil choice regarding work experience placements. Indeed the Headteacher of Essex School commented

Comfortable? I don't want them to be comfortable. I want them out of their comfort zone. Otherwise (this area) is *it* for them! Broadening their horizons is so important.

In contrast, other schools in the research undertaken by Hatcher & Le Gallais (ibid. 57) spoke of pupils being encouraged to find their own placements, regardless of the quality.

Let's be honest, my concern is to get 156 people 156 places. And relax, you know. The more worthwhile they are, great, whoopee. I'm even happier, sort of thing. But there is not enough time provided to go around and check that everybody has got a super placement... They might be bored witless after three days, but a lot of them will be very good and I think it's what you make of it. (Teacher, Avon)

Avon School is a high SES school, where the social capital of the parents ensures quality placements regardless of the school's involvement. Clearly for all schools there is considerable pressure on staff to get pupils out on placement and support from parents and the pupils themselves in achieving this is obviously going to be welcomed. Even where efforts are made by school staff to identify more challenging placements, the pupils do not always accept them, as was the case for Cumbria School, a middle SES school. Their staff had tried to find their gifted and talented pupils professional placements but they met with such resistance that they now accept the pupils' choice of placement.

At the moment we are led by them and try and fit them with something that they want to do because there is no point at this age sending them out and making them do something that they don't want to do... (Teacher, Cumbria) (ibid. 56)

Similarly, the teacher at Devon School, a low SES school commented

Personally I feel that the pupils who found their own are hopefully more likely to make a success of it particularly if the pupil does display challenging behaviours, I found that if they found their own with a relative or friend, somewhere they feel comfortable with then hopefully it will go well for them. (ibid.)

Thus it was that, for four of the five schools involved in Hatcher & Le Gallais's research 'the most effective way of meeting pupil preferences was to encourage them to make their own choices and arrangements independent of the school' (ibid.). Whilst Sian's predecessor at Essex School was less 'hands off' with placement allocation than the other four schools, she was also realistic about the fact that she was at the beginning of building up her bank of prospective placements

The way it is working at the moment because it is all new and our bank of employers isn't that big, and I know that fewer employers are doing it now anyway because of the pressures they have got, so if they find their own placement then for me that is a really good thing because they have gone out and looked for it themselves. (Teacher, Essex) (ibid. 57)

Despite this she still provided a significant number of professional placements which her pupils were unlikely to have had access to through their own contacts. Forty-five percent of her pupils felt that the school had influenced their choice of placement massively or quite a lot. This compared with a response of ten percent to the same question from the pupils at Avon.

When this interventionist stance was mentioned to the present Headteacher, she acknowledged it to be a necessary approach in order to fully support her pupils

We have to be the parent for our pupils. Our (pupils') parents are not able or cognisant enough to play the game and the children here make choices according to bus routes. Our directing them means showing them a different side of life.

Her comments about the parents being 'not able or cognisant enough to play the game' are reminiscent of Strand & Winston's (2008: 24) reference to homes where young people were not provided with 'the navigational capacity to aspire'. Strand & Winston undertook research into educational aspirations and the factors which influence them in five inner city schools. These schools were located in 'areas of considerable poverty', with 'high levels of deprivation' and high unemployment figures, similar to those experienced by Essex pupils. They comment as follows

For those (ethnic minority) groups where the home environment does not provide young people with the navigational capacity to aspire...then the school is needed to fill the gap. The higher than expected aspirations of pupils in School 1 suggests that schools can have a positive impact on aspirations.

This is something which the Head of Essex is determined to do and the school's work experience programme is just one, although, I would suggest an influential one, of the strategies she employs 'to fill the gap'.

In order to appreciate the enormous strides this school has made in terms of raising its pupils' aspirations and heightening their expectations of what they can be and can achieve in life it is important to set the school within its social and economic context.

Essex School

Essex School was, until 2010, a mixed 11-16 comprehensive school situated in an inner-city area in the West Midlands, England. In the autumn of 2010 the school admitted its first intake of sixth formers and in September 2011 has 187 Year 12 and 13 pupils on roll. Its catchment area is one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas in the country. The unemployment figures for the city in August 2011 are 12.5% and in the school's local ward the figure is 27.8%. These figures compare with an unemployment rate of 5.5% in the United Kingdom as a whole. There are multiple deprivation factors present and these, together with high levels of crime, create tremendous challenges for both the school and the local community. According to DfE statistics, the school had 950 pupils on roll in 2010. The percentage of pupils with special needs statements was 2.1% and the percentage of those with special needs without statements was over 40%. The percentage of pupils known to be eligible and claiming free school meals was 66%, although the Headteacher in an interview in 2011 commented that she believed the figure was now nearer 72%.

Another proxy indicator of the socio-economic status of the school's catchment families relates to the number of Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) claimed by pupils in 2010. Sian, Vocational Manager in charge of work experience placements, comments as follows

The figure claiming EMA is a staggering 98%! So nearly every pupil studying in the sixth form (in 2010) was in a household which has an income of less than £23,000 per annum - mostly fixed incomes, but some on income support/family tax credit.

According to figures for January 2011 provided by Essex School the percentage of pupils with English as a second language is 86%. The predominant ethnic make up of the school is Bangladeshi (43%), Pakistani (29%) and Black Somali (11%).

In 2006, an initiative set up within Essex School to address pupil behaviour and to create stronger links with the local community drew the following observations concerning Essex School:

The local area is the first point of settlement for many refugees. The demographic trend is for economically successful families to move out, leaving behind the most vulnerable. Overcrowding exists in 19% of homes, 5 times the city average. Homelessness, especially amongst young people is increasing. Unemployment, especially amongst males, is the highest in the city. As the area has the highest child density in Birmingham, youth unemployment is set to remain very high. The combination of poor housing, poverty, unhealthy diet and limited physical and recreational activity contribute to high levels of physical and mental ill health. The rise in the drug culture has raised levels of mental instability and violent crime. The three surrounding areas (inner city suburbs) have the highest number of murders in the city since 2000 and families suffer multiple disadvantages. One consequence is that local children are twice as likely to be on the Child Protection Register making it crucial that we (Essex School) work towards stable and sustainable systems of pupil and family support via a multi-agency approach.

The school also provided the following information about their pupils' examination results. The

percentage of pupils gaining five or more A*-C grades at GCSE in 2000 was just 15%; by 2011 this had risen to 82% with 53% of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades including English and Mathematics in 2011. The Wolf Report (2011: 8) into Vocational Education states that

English and Maths GCSE (at grades A*-C) are fundamental to young people's employment and education prospects. Yet less than 50% of pupils have both at the end of Key Stage 4 (age 15/16)

In this respect Essex School pupils are achieving above average results, all the more remarkable considering the 'multiple disadvantages' outlined above. Although Essex pupils may lose out on economic and social capital the indications are that they make up for much of this deficit through what Bradford & Hey (2007: 600) refer to as 'psychological capital'. Whilst acknowledging the 'speculative' nature of the concept Bradford & Hey (600-601) comment

Psychological capital inevitably intersects with (social and cultural capital) and, like them, it is differentially distributed. It is constituted in practices of self-esteem, confidence and self-belief which are generated in a range of settings (the family, communities of various types, friendships and formal institutional settings like schools and youth projects) and can be transformed into resilience and the dispositions needed to cope with the exigencies of contemporary life (Bradford, 1999; Bradford *et al.*, 2004).

The data gathered through this research indicates that Essex School is supporting its pupils regarding their 'self-esteem, confidence and self-belief' in the same way the successful schools in Bradford & Hey's research are enabling their pupils' discourses of success.

The work experience programme at Essex School

Previous research (Hatcher & Le Gallais 2008) identified Essex School to have been particularly successful in the provision of professional placements for their pupils. The number of professional placements was higher than one might reasonably have anticipated from its low socioeconomic status. This piece of small scale qualitative research was undertaken in order to explore the story behind the figures.

Two members of staff at Essex School with specific responsibilities for the school's work experience programme together with 36 Year Twelve pupils took part in interviews and/or questionnaires. The staff were interviewed on several occasions over the course of 2010-2011 in order to gather longitudinal data. The Headteacher was also interviewed at the end of the fieldwork phase of the research. Additional data were gathered from school documents and other school staff.

The work experience placement staff

The staff central to the successful acquisition of so many professional placements are the Assistant Head 14-19, Shaun, and the Vocational Manager, Sian. Shaun likens Sian's *modus operandi* to a military campaign – 'she takes no prisoners'.

Sian will look at the profiles of each pupil and then try to place them in a suitable placement. She will look at their academic profile, their interests and hobbies and

somehow place them in the most suitable environment. She will spend time talking to pupils about what they hope to achieve from their placements. Some will say I'd like to work in a retailer's because I want to earn a bit of money if I stay into the 6th form. Some will say they want to go into medicine so she will set them up with a pharmacy or a doctor. I have never heard any one be so persuasive on the phone trying to get employers to take our pupils. They don't stand a chance! If they say yes to one, she'll ask for two. She'll say they are lovely girls. If they say they can only take one she'll remind them they took two last year...She'll cold call them, she'll get in the car and visit them, she'll knock on doors, she'll go into shops she'll chase them up at the weekend.

Sian laughs as she recalls one organisation referring to her as 'The Persuasive One'. She admits that, like staff in the previous research, she is grateful if some pupils can find their own but she is mindful of the potential problems that the placement may not be as challenging or as beneficial as it could be. She fully appreciates the lack of social capital possessed by the parents and sees it as her role to compensate for this through her own extensive network of contacts. In the past the school has arranged its work experience to take place later than most schools. This has been a deliberate act

We do one week in October in Year 11. There are two reasons, one - it avoids the competition. There are only one or two schools in the city which send out their pupils in Year 11. And two, the children here are wonderful but... the pupils mature later here so it's much better for them to go out in Year 11 when they benefit more from the experience.

Sian keeps her eye firmly on the ball where potential new placements are concerned.

And this year for the first time ever we've had the Birmingham Children's hospital. They gave their first placements *ever* on the week we were going out. It's the first time they'd offered placements and we were there! They've taken a lot (of our pupils). I also have another superb placement where they spend time with doctors and spend time in admin as well and it's a very good placement for those who want to go onto higher education and study medicine.

When asked if these pupils were doing work experience linked to medicine rather than, as with the previous research (Hatcher & Le Gallais 2008), working in other areas such as catering, Sian is adamant about the quality of the placements she obtains in terms of the types of tasks the pupils undertake.

In the medical centre for example, they will sit in with the doctor; at the library in town they will work as librarians; if they are with a solicitor they will go to court every day. One lad working in the hospital was given a research project where he was asking patients about their anti-emetic medication and his report was used by the staff.

This is borne out by the comments of pupils such as Maham, a Year 12 pupil at Essex School

I worked at a medical centre. I worked with different nurses and doctors as they taught

me how to deal with different patients; how to enter information on the computer and how to carry out injections. My placement has helped me to decide on my career and I want to do something in the medical field. I am so much more confident now about talking to staff and being in a work environment. I have far greater expectations for my education and I feel my aspirations are higher. It has made a big difference to me and I am now even more excited about going to university.

Sian's role is not an easy one and it takes both tact and tenacity as shown by the example below

We have had placements at a medical centre year on year but when I rang this year they said 'well actually we've had such a bad experience that we have decided not to accept any work experience pupils in future'. So I pleaded and pleaded with them and they agreed to take a Health & Social Care pupil. Then, when I went to visit them they said that last year they had been sent a boy who had wanted to work in a garage and when they asked him why he was there he said he had not wanted to go there but had been sent by his school. What can you say?

Sian is meticulous in her record keeping, noting down the dates, times and the number of calls made and letters written. There is no escape for those, from whom she hopes to obtain a placement and once committed, she will hold them to their promise rather than disappoint the pupils.

I spent a week phoning around to get placements. It is a considerable amount of time. Others ask me how do you find all these work placements? I say you ring up and ring up and ring up. Here's my little book and you can see I ring up *until I get the person and the answer I want*.

When asked 'Does your heart sink when the letter comes saying they cannot help?' Sian responded firmly 'No, (because) I don't accept it. I keep going at them till they change their mind'. Sian readily acknowledges that her predecessor, who took part in the original research in 2008, built up the status of the work experience programme such that it now has an important and recognisable part to play within the curriculum.

She believes that work experience brings many benefits to her pupils.

First of all it brings them a sense of what work is about; the discipline of going out in the morning every day, working with adults. For pupils who are a little fazed about what to do when they leave school, it helps them to learn if it's what they want to do. There are no longer jobs for life so they need to learn to be more flexible.

Sian tries to encourage them to 'go outside the box and see what a job might be like, rather than stick to what they know and think they want to do when they leave'. The pupils are not simply given placements and, contrary to the comments of the pupils, Sian states that she does not tell pupils where to go

They have to spend a lot of time preparing their application form and they also go through an interview process. No it's very much their choice and they have to spend time filling out the application form and they will be scrutinised. They will be interviewed and not all the pupils are accepted...the professional placements will usually support us in doing this. It is essential they have an interview. Some schools just want to push the pupils out regardless of the value of the placement. That's not our way.

Her predecessor was also firmly of the opinion that the pupils had a completely free choice as to their placement, despite indications to the contrary from pupils' comments. However, Sian's statement that it is not their way to 'push pupils out regardless of the value of the placement' indicates a high level of intervention to ensure pupils have a worthwhile placement. Moreover, her pupils in large numbers, namely 78%, say that the school found their placement for them with only 8% saying they found their placements completely on their own.

Unlike many schools, Essex does not employ the services of a broker to identify and organise placements, although the school does use a broker to vet the placements in terms of Health and Safety requirements. Sian prefers to be in charge of the selection and acquisition of placements herself, partly because she is protective of her bank of placements, but also because she feels the money can be better used elsewhere in the school.

The Work Experience Placement at Essex School: Key findings relating to pupil responses

There were four key questions set to the pupils of Essex School. The first involved their assessment of how they had found their placement with 78% of the pupils saying the school had found the placement for them. Over 70% of these same pupils identified no other assistance. Three pupils mentioned parental support and seven also referred to advice from careers staff. Only three of the 36 pupils participating in this research stated that they had found their placement independently of help from other sources. These figures serve to confirm the continued directive stance of Essex School with regard to identifying placements and matching them to their pupils.

This research has helped to clarify the conflict between the staff's assertions and the pupils' perceptions regarding placement choice. The issue is not whether pupils are directed towards certain placements; it is the fact that the school is directive in its identification of quality placements and in encouraging pupils to believe that they can apply for and go on work experience to such placements. They are interventionist in that they do not let pupils do just anything for a fortnight. They intervene in the potentially low expectations of the pupils regarding their right to fit in places where their parents have no social capital to support their choices. What is at play here is the staff's use of their own social capital and knowledge of 'how to play the game' to ensure their pupils are not disadvantaged by the parents' lack of social capital.

The second key question concerned the quality of the placement in terms of the type of work the pupil experienced on placement. In previous research (Hatcher & Le Gallais 2008) there was a marked contrast between the high and low SES schools, not only with regard to

professional and non- professional placements but also with regard to the expectations of the placements as far as task allocation was concerned.

As part of this research pupils were given a questionnaire listing a range of tasks and were asked to tick/add any which applied to their own placements. Whilst a few pupils, namely 9%, referred to carrying out quite basic tasks such as making the tea, the majority, 69%, felt they were treated like colleagues with 64% responding that they 'played an active role like a 'real' member of staff' and 58% talking of work shadowing which helped them to understand more about the job. Pupils also referred to being allowed to carry out responsible tasks such as putting up medicines, planning and running classes. No pupils described being expected to carry out demeaning tasks such as those faced by the pupils from the other low SES school, Devon School, namely cleaning toilets. In fact, Essex pupils' responses have more resonance with those given in the previous research by the pupils at Avon School, the high SES school, where pupils spoke of work shadowing as the norm in their placements with support and advice about how to enter certain professional careers. No pupils from the other schools in the previous research mentioned such experiences on placement.

The third question sought to identify what benefits the pupils had reaped from their placements. Their responses show the importance of their work experience in terms of confidence building, social skills and an increased sense of responsibility. Of particular interest for this research are the eighteen pupils (50%) who stated that they were now considering careers they had not believed they would be able to undertake.

The final area of questioning concerned pupils' views about possible attendance at university. Pupils were asked whether anyone in their family had been to university. Five pupils said a parent had attended university; eight had a brother or sister at university and nine mentioned a relative had gone to university. Fourteen pupils had no history of university attendance in their immediate or wider family.

91% of the Essex pupils involved in this survey said that they intended to go to university. (It is important to acknowledge here that the pupils participating in this research were members of the sixth form and that the ability spread was not therefore representative of that of the whole school.) Pupils were then asked whether their decision about university had been influenced in any way by their experiences on placement, to which 69% said it had encouraged them to consider university as an option. Twenty-seven pupils (75%) felt that their work experience placement had encouraged them to work much harder at school. Only four pupils said that their placement had not had an impact on their decision about university and their reasons tended to be that they did not get the placement they wanted or that they could not get a placement in the career area they were considering. Pupils were asked to elaborate on their answers and a selection of responses is shown below. Of particular interest are the comments concerning family background regarding attendance at university and the types of work undertaken by family members.

There's no history of university in my family, one of my parent's a chef and the other works in a warehouse. I did my placement in a school and now I am keen to go to university.

No one's been to uni in my family. They're in shop work. I did my placement in the children's hospital and I really want to go to uni because of my placement.

There's no family history of university but my placement at the children's hospital where I did work shadowing has convinced me to apply.

I had a placement in a pharmacy. Working there's motivated me to pursue my chosen career as a pharmacist. My family work in restaurants and are self-employed. One of my relatives went to university.

None of my family's been to uni. My work experience was in the city council offices and the staff there encouraged me to consider uni. They treated me well and gave me responsible tasks. I was encouraged to attend meetings and to give my opinion.

My placement encouraged me to consider uni despite there being no one in my family at uni. Their jobs have been in factories and restaurants.

Nine percent of the participants did not intend to apply to university. Of these only one added a comment:

Well, there's no one in my family's been to university. They've got jobs in construction and a care home. My work placement was in a shop, and hopefully I will work in a shop when I leave school.

Distribution of placements

In discussion with the member of staff responsible for identifying and allocating 162 placements in 2010 I was able to categorise 42 placements (26%) to be of a professional nature in terms of the organisation itself and the type of work experience offered (and in line with Rose & Pevalin's (2001) *Operational Categories of the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification*.) This is a considerable increase on the 15 professional placements identified in our previous research, all of which were in the legal field. These 42 placements comprised: eleven in medical/pharmaceutical; eight in banking or accountancy; fourteen in architecture/design; three in legal organisations and six in management services or organisations where they were located in managerial areas. 34 pupils (21%) were placed in educational institutions, mainly primary or nursery schools, although there were also some FE college placements in vocational areas. (Clearly some of these educational placements could also be considered 'professional' in terms of the job roles undertaken but there was insufficient detail in the data to do this.) Retail and service outlets accounted for 37 placements (23%). These ranged from department stores to shoe shops and internet cafes. There were four auto-centre placements with the remaining pupils being placed in hotels, IT firms and other organisations.

What is particularly telling is not just the increased number of professional placements but also the type of work undertaken in these placements. In the previous research (Hatcher & Le

Gallais 2008) theoretically 'professional placements' were identified where the pupil was actually engaged in menial tasks and was not experiencing the aspiration-raising potential of the placement. One example relates to the pupils at Devon School who were placed at a local hospital but who were based in the kitchens - in contrast to the Avon pupils at the same hospital who were in medical areas which offered role modelling and work shadowing experiences. This does not seem to be the case in 2010 for Essex pupils, mainly due to the member of staff involved in placements making it very clear what she expected from the placement for her pupils.

Discussion

The question I sought to address at the start of this research was how this school was continuing to provide such a high proportion of professional placements for their pupils. There is little doubt that the staff involved in the placement programme are very committed to procuring quality work experience for their pupils. However, it cannot rest on this alone. Schools such as Cumbria School (Hatcher & Le Gallais 2008) had originally attempted to organise searching and challenging placements for their gifted and talented pupils but found the pupils unwilling to travel and eventually they gave up.

It is clear that Essex School is working on several fronts both to provide opportunities *and* to ensure their pupils take full advantage of what is available to them. The Headteacher commented that when they changed the uniform to blazers, the pupils almost seemed to stand taller; 'it was like a grammar school to them'. Expectations regarding behaviour and attainment are high. Links with parents are fostered with great care. Pupils believe in themselves and in their right to aspire to more than might be envisaged within the limiting factors of their neighbourhood.

This positive attitude towards their right to achieve their full potential contrasts dramatically with the working class pupils at City Park School (Archer & Yamashita 2003: 66) who not only 'knew their place' (Bourdieu 1986) but 'knew their limits' – that is, the boundaries of 'their place'. City Park School bears similarities to Essex School in its level of deprivation, multi ethnicity and high unemployment rates. The staff at City Park had also made 'careful and committed efforts to provide pupils with work experience that could build aspirations, confidence and realistic views of work (which) had been invaluable in extending the pupils' sense of 'limits' and achievable aspirations' (ibid. 66). However, despite such efforts on the part of the school, the researchers found the pupils low in self esteem such that they felt the poor school environment was 'good enough' (ibid. 64) for the likes of them. Because City Park was a school in special measures, there were the additional problems of high staff turnover. As Archer & Yamashita (ibid. 65) comment

Issues around staffing were crucially important for the young people because teachers were identified as critical influences. This influence could be either a source of demotivation (when teachers were thought to be temporary and 'not bothered') or a source of encouragement and motivation when they were seen to know and care about pupils

In contrast, Essex School is succeeding against the odds, considering its catchment area and a key factor relates to the stability of the staffing. The school's Personnel Manager made the following points about staff turnover at Essex School

The turnover of teaching/non teaching staff is very low, probably less than 1%. Last July nobody left. The only people who do leave are those who retire (and then they come back and work part time. Currently, we have 3 retired teachers who are on part time contracts). Some staff move away and so look for a job elsewhere. (When they return to the Midlands, they often come back here to work. 1 teacher at the moment in this category.)...Some teaching staff leave to find promotion. However, there is an ethos of promoting good staff within (the school), creating a sustainable and stable environment.

In their article *Educational aspirations in inner city schools*, Strand & Winston (2008: 16) identify several factors they believe to be the predictors of high educational aspirations, namely

'Commitment to schooling, high academic self-concept, positive peer support, the absence of disaffection-negative peers and high educational aspirations in the home'.

These factors have been shown to be present at Essex school and their successful work experience programme is set firmly within this whole school ethos of expecting the best from both staff and pupils and of challenging notional 'limits' and 'boundaries of place' (ibid. 66), such that Essex pupils learn to aspire beyond what they thought they could achieve.

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