



Javeria K. Shah

IMPOSED  
IDENTITIES AND  
BRITISH FURTHER  
EDUCATION

The experiences of learners classified  
as “low ability”

Collection Editor  
JANISE HURTIG

LIVED PLACES  
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The Education Studies  
Collection

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**Dr Janise Hurtig**



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In loving memory of my dear friend and creative genius, Jennifer Williams-Baffoe, who left the world a little sadder on 19 March 2022. Thank you, my sister ally, for the conversations, the love, the solidarity, and the memories. Never forgotten.

# Abstract

This book amplifies the stories of young people classified as “low ability” by drawing on the author’s “person-centred” research into the long-term impacts of “low-ability” classifications on young people’s academic performance and journeys beyond school. The study traced “low-ability” learners from the starting point of their vocational media Further Education (FE) journeys with a deliberate focus on eliciting learner voice and experience – alongside staff perspectives on systemic barriers to learning, teaching, assessment, and opportunities for classified learners.

Young people classified as “low ability” share in their own words their stories of negative school experiences, the impact of being classified, and experiencing vocational media education in FE while labelled as “non-academic”. Different learner accounts reflect larger issues surrounding their social classifications, and how they navigate intersectional identity amid their own identity formation.

This book brings the voices from FE that are usually omitted from educational research by providing direct insights into the narratives of young people classified as “low ability” in their own words over a sustained period. In doing so, readers are given insights into the lived experiences of young people who have been negatively classified while at school and the impact this can have on their self-identity formation, lived experience, quality of learning, and academic/professional outcomes.

## **Keywords**

Low-level learners, negative classifications, learner experience, media education, vocational training, Further Education, socialised identities, GCSE failure, low-ability learners, learner journeys

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I wish to thank my MA Education Consultancy family for the safe spaces, the encouragement, and support in bringing the counter narratives to the forefront. I am so grateful for you!

I add acknowledgement and thanks to the Further Education sector and to former colleagues, comrades, and students. Thank you for the memories – I have walked away with a strong pedagogy and a resilience that is serving me well.

This book is dedicated with love to my daughter, Arrisa – you can achieve anything!

# Introduction

This book is based on a ten-year-long research project that I conducted in an English Further Education (FE) college that I will be referring to as “South College”. During this research, I spoke to young people classified as “low ability” and FE staff who shared their lived experiences of studying and working in FE. Shared experiences that helped me understand the impact that negative categorisations can have on learners and the role that FE staff may consciously or sub-consciously play in reinforcing or challenging this status quo.

This research was inspired by my experiences of learning and teaching in the FE sector in the UK. My time in FE was instrumental in helping to shape my teacher identity as an activist educator committed to recognising the power and agency of a learner to generate their own meanings and truths. To affirm that learners aren’t empty vessels to be filled, or passive participants in education: that they are and should be active agents within an educational framework of respect, dignity, and equality. These values ran across all aspects of this research in the shape of “person-centred” approaches and continue to inform my teaching to this day.

During my time in FE, I noticed that there were significant changes being made to the level 2 (General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) equivalent) qualification landscape, as well as continued policy changes. Some of these changes included

a shift from the creative GCSE retake options in the 1990s to a primarily vocational equivalency model in the 2000s; especially the introduction and withdrawal of the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) and the implementation of the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC). Alongside these changes, I noticed a division between “academic” and “vocational” at level 2; a division that was much stronger than when I had been an FE learner. As an FE media lecturer, I also noticed that vocational level 2 learners were being marginalised in the classroom because of negative classifications such as “low ability”, “learning difficulties”, or “behavioural issues” and were often steered into lower-level vocational media qualifications. This made me wonder if these learners knew how they were seen and categorised. I also questioned the impact of negative classifications on these learners’ life chances. The more I thought about it, the more I questioned the role of level 2 vocational qualifications in the lives of negatively classified learners. I wanted to know more about:

- The experiences of negatively classified learners in their own words;
- The impact of negative classifications on learners;
- Whether educators and institutional management shared the same vision of the learning, teaching, and support they were providing young people; and
- Whether teaching staff were equipped and adequately supported to deliver specialist courses such as media studies.

Motivated by the premise that lived experience is not uniform across society, and that our sense of social reality in all its

classifications is constructed, I spent ten years trying to find the answers to my questions. In doing so, I gained valuable insights into the young people in this study, in their own voices. I learnt about their personal and academic struggles, their school contexts, their sense of self, until I left them after a decade as young adults in a world very different to the one at the beginning of the project. I kept the people in this study as my focus throughout and created a person-centred approach.

Person-centred research can be characterised by its inclusion of individual subjectivities that are treated as an intrinsic part of an inquiry (Biehl, Good and Kleinman, 2007). This type of research aims to develop holistic understandings that can only be achieved through access to the personal truths of those affected by what is being researched (Quinney, 1982; Woodward, 2017).

The value of subjective experience and personal truths was the strength of this project. Furthermore, the presentation of individual voices without editing or reinterpretation was an additional strategy used to ensure that participant narratives were presented as close to how they were shared. The ideological framework that underpins this study is nuanced in its focus and considers the various elements that make up the human experience within education structures.

Marx *et al.* (2017) observe that education mirrors society and its hierarchies of privilege and marginalisation and that lived experience and personal stories can highlight individual impacts of these hierarchies. The positioning of the educational institution as a reflection of society challenges the educational researcher/practitioner to make sense of their lived experiences within the

broader praxis of the educational space (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010; Fraser, 1997; Frost *et al.*, 2010).

This book returns to my study to delve deeper into the experiences of young people and staff to identify how inequality can play out in the British education system – but also with a purpose to tell the stories that may not otherwise be heard. Stories of negatively classified learners and stretched FE staff in their own words.

I have used aliases for the college and all individuals to maintain anonymity and have framed each chapter with learning objectives so that readers can take something tangible away for their practice and reflections. Finally, this book is my parting gift to FE, as I try to bring the voice of the individuals within the system to broader discourse on policy, education, and the FE sector.

# 1

## The Further Education policy context

This chapter sets out the South College landscape that the young people were studying in, as well as introducing the English FE sector that South College is a part of.

### **Learning objective: Understanding the FE landscape**

- To facilitate a broader awareness of the FE landscape and the significant part that policy plays in defining the sector and its provision.
- To enable broader awareness of the crucial part that FE plays in supporting diverse learner groups.
- To raise awareness among FE decision makers on issues surrounding the employment of unqualified sessional staff and the potential negative impacts of this on learners.

## Understanding the English FE sector

The sizeable FE landscape differs widely in its provision and blend of funding organisation and channels (Briggs, 2005; Lingfield, 2012). The sector offers provision to 14-plus, adult, lifelong, and community learners in the shape of vocational and general education, short courses, higher education (HE), and apprenticeships and hosts diverse learner groups of all ages and experiences (Corbett, 2017). Bathmaker and Avis (2005) aptly profile the FE learners as

[f]ull-time students, workers and trainees doing part-time off-the-job learning, mature students returning to learn, people taking night classes, learners following individualised study programmes, as well as groups of students learning in the community.

(2005, p. 8)

Figures released by the Association of Colleges (AoC) in 2017 reported that the sector was servicing 2.2 million people, including 16,000 14–15-year-olds and 712,000 16–18-year-olds that were enrolled into 280 colleges of which 186 identified as FE colleges (Association of Colleges, 2017). AoC figures also reported that the average college trains 1,200 apprentices and, in 2017, 77,500 16–18-year-olds were recorded on apprenticeships with a global figure of 313,000 students on apprenticeship provision in colleges (*ibid.*). The report also stated that 1.4 million adults were studying in colleges, of which 151,000 people were studying higher education in a college (*ibid.*). In 2015/2016, sector income totalled £7 billion (*ibid.*). These figures support assertions from

Norton (2012), who states that the diverse English FE sector plays a crucial role in servicing its local, regional, and national communities with lifelong learning opportunities.

The FE sector is frequently positioned as a second-chance provider for 14–19-year-olds (see Foster and Park, 2005; Hodgson and Spours, 2017; Mehaffy, 2012; Tolland, 2016) – and is recognised for the positive role that it plays in the academic development of the secondary failed learner (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015).

Students whom no one else wants to teach, namely, those who have failed to gain five good GCSEs at the age of 16, and, through sheer hard work and through forging more respectful and inclusive relationships, (FE) restore(s) them as human beings who begin to see themselves again as worthy of respect and who can and do succeed in gaining qualifications.

(Coffield *et al.*, 2007, p. 724)

While some have acknowledged the role of FE as crucial in supporting and developing students that have failed in the mainstream system (see Appleby and Bathmaker, 2006; Department for Children, 2008; Hayward *et al.*, 2005; House of Commons Education Committee, 2011), there are others that have problematised the positioning of GCSE failed learners in FE on predominantly low-level vocational courses and questioned the credibility of GCSE examinations as a “reliable indicator of achievement” (Sheerman and Silver, 2013, p. 24). For example, the Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training in 2005 reported that GCSE-failed learners belonging to low socio-economic



groupings were mostly attracted to low-level vocational courses in FE and challenged the assumption that learners achieve general qualifications based on ability. The Review stated that “the struggle to renew students’ interest in learning does not get reflected in the values implicit within the tables by which providers are judged – even though ‘social inclusion’ is at least formally an aim of government policy” (Hayward *et al.*, 2005, p. 196).

Despite a substantive remit, FE is often identified as the Invisible Man or Cinderella to account for its perceived marginalised status (Hyland and Merrill, 2003; Norton, 2012). Steer *et al.* (2007) and Atkins (2009) have cited both the nature and frequency of educational policy change as accounting for FE’s marginalised status.

## **FE and policy**

Many have acknowledged the challenges for FE in implementing ambitious policy changes with ever decreasing funding (see Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Hayward *et al.*, 2005). A 2015 survey conducted by *FE Week* revealed disaffection among FE staff due to funding cuts, a singular apprenticeship government focus, and an increase in retake maths and English GCSE offer. The report stated that

there was a clear sense from everyone in the follow-up survey that government reforms will have unintended and damaging consequences. These reforms appeared to be based on little or no evidence, it was viewed – if impact assessments had been carried out, they hadn’t been communicated to the people interviewed.

(Burke, 2015)

The article concluded that,

despite the determination of everyone to provide a professional and effective service, the deep cuts and contradictory policy demands will inevitably hit learners – with the most disadvantaged being the worst affected. Provision to school leavers who – through no fault of their own – fail and need the help of FE will almost certainly deteriorate.

(*ibid.*)

Connecting the demands made on the sector with a lack of funding represents policy expectations that could be argued as ambitious and unrealistic (Hayward *et al.*, 2005). Begging the question: how will FE lecturers be able to successfully guide learners to qualifications over one academic year, when the same learners were unable to achieve these qualifications after 11 years in the schooling system (Burns, 2014; Wolf, 2011)?

## **14–19 policy**

During the time of this study, 14–19 educational reform was a crucial backdrop to the FE lives of staff and learners and some of the young people in this study had their first exposure to South College aged 14. FE and school partnerships featured strongly in the 14–19 reforms as a means of co-facilitating vocational training. However, findings from Rose in 2012 concluded that “school partnerships were less defined in their approaches and were often characterised by informal, personal and ad hoc processes” (2012, p. 88). Comparatively, Haynes and Lynch (2012) noted that cross-sector collaborations were “loose” for

level 2 and, while demonstrating that the “key elements” were in place, still reflected a “limited drive”, being at their “strongest” for level 3 (2012, p. 438). Moreover, Hillier (2006) argued that some schools were exploiting the framework to achieve positive data and pass off students that were found troublesome or at risk of disengagement. These assertions were supported by Burgess *et al.* (2010).

A teacher survey conducted by the National Union of Teachers and University College Union in 2012 substantiated this picture by concluding that

14–19 education and training is a complex, turbulent and sometimes bewildering area of education to work in for teachers and lecturers and that there is often no settled will on key aspects of national policy.

(Hill *et al.*, 2012, p. 29)

Sector shifts were underpinned by New Labour’s emphasis on challenging issues of parity of esteem between vocational and academic. This involved an aim on the government’s part to enhance vocational choice and excellence by shedding vocational education’s identity as a “sink option for failed students” and aimed to attract the “bright and able” to applied courses (DfES, 2002, p. 4). Some, such as Hillier (2006) and Haynes and Lynch (2012), problematised the access to opportunity for learners classified as low ability in their appraisal of the reforms. It has been argued by some that the 14–19 framework has promoted a plethora of middle-track qualifications (Hodgson and Spours, 2008) that have potentially compounded the marginalisation of young people most likely to undertake them (Atkins and Flint,

2015). This discourse has highlighted an “unintended” (Hodgson and Spours, 2009, p. 6) policy-levered marginalisation of second-chance learners. Atkins (2013) has supported these assertions by extending FE’s invisible identity to the low-level vocational learner.

Media educationalist David Buckingham has described the 14–19 reform as “one of the most misconceived and expensive educational disaster stories of recent times” (2017, p. 32). He positions this within the context of a still complex vocational landscape that he ascribes to “policy hyperactivity” (*ibid.*, p. 27).

Given the demise of the diploma system, it is possible to conclude that the only functioning legacy of these reforms is the continued inclusion of 14-plus learners in FE, which, according to Elwood (2013), is shaped though a range of discrete partnership programmes that are no longer representative of the nationwide policy-driven narrative.

## **FE and the creative arts**

In 2010, a coalition between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats replaced a New Labour government and policy focus was moving away from the 14–19 vocational strategies in favour of new reform (Young, 2011). The change in government led to a notable shift in policymaking with a marked emphasis on “academic rigour” (House of Commons Education Committee 2011, p. 61), marked by reforms to the national curriculum, a reduction in GCSE/A Level re-sit opportunities and the launch of an English Baccalaureate (EBacc). Policy emphasis on the value of academic subjects demonstrated a notable omission of

the arts, including media studies, which are often classified as soft subjects (see Hayward *et al.*, 2005; O'Connor, 2000; Ofsted, 2010; White, 2013). Hodgson *et al.* (2017) assert that the policy-driven "erosion of the Creative Arts subjects" (2017, p. 36) reflects a lower status for the Arts. Buckingham (2017) has asserted the challenges in locating low-level vocational media education in FE. An appraisal of the literature supports these findings and reveals a knowledge gap in the positioning of media education in FE policy frameworks. This can also be connected to the generally marginalised status for arts disciplines under recent policy reforms (Dennis, 2016).

Some have also problematised the position of the media lecturer in the context of a conflicted identity for media education in a digitally evolving world (Buckingham, 2007; Shah, 2017). This prompts us to question whether this identity for the discipline is negotiated in digital contexts where the learners are often identified as digital natives and may demonstrate a higher technical aptitude than their teachers (Shah, 2017; Buckingham, 2011).

Framing vocational education and training (VET) within the praxis of market-led policy rhetoric leads to a discussion on the positioning of industry training and exposure within the qualifications. Alongside Wolf (2011), some studies have also problematised the quality of industry contexts to vocational training. For example, findings from a study conducted by James (2002), which focused on the GNVQ teaching experiences of a Business Studies lecturer, concluded that learners demonstrated a "source of tension" because of the "tenuous links between

the course and eventual employment (and) students felt that a business studies qualification should lead directly to a good job" (2002, p. 400). The study concluded that learners felt disaffection at learning that their business "course had no work experience provision and there was no clear progression route into employment" (*ibid.*).

In his appraisal of the Creative and Media Diploma, Buckingham (2017) highlights the lack of media industry/employer input into the generation of these diplomas. Although Buckingham (2017) recognises some positive media teaching to have emerged from within the short life span of the diplomas, he concludes that broadly speaking the diploma was unsuccessful due to an insufficient balance of vocational and academic focus (2017, p. 37). Buckingham (2017) observes that in recent years there has been a notable increase in the disciplines vocational and higher education offer, which, although positive for the status of the subject, has also been problematic in respect to the increase in graduates requiring media employment in a competitive industry (2017, p. 32). Educationalists have continued to argue that media education remains removed from industry (see Buckingham, 2007, 2017; Buckingham and Scanlon, 2005; Kirwan *et al.*, 2003; Thornham and O'Sullivan, 2004), raising questions in connection to the recruitment of young people onto media courses. What attracts GCSE failed learners to GCSE-equivalent media qualifications? What do they hope to achieve because of undertaking media qualifications? Are young people taking these courses to enable educational progression or access to the industry?

In a study including BTEC level 2 and 3 creative media students in FE, Atkins and Flint (2015) claimed that learners had joined their courses by “serendipity” (2015, p. 35) and asserted that

[r]ecent 14–19 policy, structured around models of instrumental or technical rationality (Hodkinson et al., 1996, p. 120; Wright, 2005, p. 9), mistakenly assumes that all young people have the ability, support and understanding to make an informed rational and unconstrained career choice from an almost infinite range of possibilities. The data from this study disputes this.

*(ibid., p. 45)*

Framing media education into this, it is possible to argue that some learners may be entering media courses in FE without sufficient information on what the subject involves and subsequently how their course may benefit them in the future.

In summary, while the decisive role of FE as a second-chance provider is widely acknowledged in the literature, educational discourse suggests a complex and often transient FE landscape because of the policy process, often acknowledging a disconnection between the rhetoric and reality and asserting a policy-levered instability and inequality to the sector. Others have criticised the lack of local actor inclusion and evidence-based approaches. Taking this criticism of educational research into consideration, I chose to develop a person-centred research approach that would address the lack of voices.

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