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# Problems with ‘Bridging the Gap’: the reversal of structure and agency in addressing social exclusion

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*ABSTRACT: The Social Exclusion Unit’s Report ‘Bridging The Gap’ has had a major influence on the English government’s policy towards socially excluded young people. This paper argues, however, that the Report contains fundamental contradictions in its analysis of non-participation in learning and the solutions proposed. Despite appearing to re-instate a concern for the social, it locates the causes of non-participation primarily within individuals and their personal deficits. Yet it denies individuality and diversity by representing the socially excluded as stereotyped categories. In a flawed move, the Report presents non-participation not just in correlation to a raft of other social problems, but as cause to their effect. Deep-seated structural inequalities are rendered invisible, as social exclusion is addressed through a strongly individualistic strategy based on personal agency. At the same time, measures to enhance individual agency, notably the new ‘ConneXions’ service, are formulated within a prescriptive structural framework. Structure and agency are thus reversed in current English policy approaches. While such approaches will doubtless assist some young people, there is a significant risk that they may make things worse for others.*

**Key words:** discourse; disaffection; disadvantage; school-to-work transitions; guidance.

*The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience.*

Tony Blair, Foreword to *Bridging The Gap* (SEU, 1999: 6)

## Introduction

The English Labour Government has given a high policy profile to tackling social exclusion. This has been widely welcomed as a reinstatement of concerns for social justice following the previously dominant ideological assertion by the New Right that there is no such thing as society, and the pursuit of free market policies by the previous Conservative government (Levitas, 1996). In tackling social exclusion head-on, the Government are staking their reputation on solving a complex network of inter-linked problems, which are known to be extremely difficult to address. They are showing considerable determination and policy ingenuity, with radical proposals in the fields of

post-compulsory education and training (PCET) and especially guidance and support systems for young people in transition. The latter follows the publication of the Social Exclusion Unit's (SEU) report: *Bridging The Gap: new opportunities for 16-18 year olds not in education, training or employment* (SEU, 1999), which links with other policy documents. Its underpinning social and economic rationale is informed by the Green Paper *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998a). Wider proposals for the reform of PCET, including adult learning, were contained in the subsequent White Paper *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999a). Cascading down from these are specific proposals, including those for a new youth support service, *ConneXions* (DfEE, 2000), as well as guidelines translating policy into terms of reference for practitioners and service managers, such as those relating to the Learning Gateway (DfEE, 1999b).

There are positive aspects to this policy shift. *Bridging The Gap* contains a long overdue recognition of the negative and exclusionary impact of certain previous policies. For example, it identifies problems caused by an overly narrow National Curriculum and the limited learning styles associated with it; the pressures created by League Tables to exclude pupils who might lower schools' ranking; and the damaging legacy of the academic-vocational divide in the UK education and training system. The report identifies a number of other difficulties some young people face in their experiences of PCET. These include lack of financial support; inadequate provision for those whose experiences of school have been unsatisfactory; and multi-level fragmentation of different types of learning (funding, planning, delivery etc.), and of guidance and other support services. There is a welcome acknowledgement that barriers to learning impede certain social groups. The report identifies lack of adequate childcare provision; problems of access for ethnic minorities and the disabled; geographical differences in unemployment and other indicators of economic deprivation; and the way in which individual projects that have tried to reduce social exclusion have been hampered by short-term funding. *Bridging The Gap* seeks to address these problems, in ways that are heavily influenced by research.

Yet questions have been asked about whether the Labour Government's focus on social exclusion represents a sea-change in policy, compared with their predecessors, or simply a discursive reformulation (Levitas, 1996; Lister, 1998). These questions relate to Labour's underpinning analysis of the economic and social problems signified by the rubric of social exclusion, as well as to the appropriateness of the policy solutions proposed. Such questions seem particularly pertinent to a consideration of *Bridging The Gap*, which purports to quantify the extent of social exclusion among young people, to analyse its causes and consequences, and to propose solutions to 'bridge the gap' between social exclusion and inclusion.

We argue that closer examination of the analysis and proposed solutions in that report reveal serious flaws. They may lead to the pursuit of practices that are counter-productive, if we take policy objectives at face value. For these policies may actually make things worse for some of those defined as socially excluded, and create a climate of blame, resulting in scapegoating the supposed beneficiaries as well as practitioners and services implementing these policies in the field (Williamson and Middlemiss, 1999; Reid, 1999; Colley, 2000).

## **The analysis of the problem**

The analysis presented in *Bridging The Gap* centres on non-participation in structured learning between the ages of 16 and 18, and posits a causal relationship between such non-participation and the longer-term perpetuation of other indicators of social exclusion. First, we will challenge this analysis of the causes of non-participation. Later, we quarrel with the assumed causal relationship between non-participation and these other problems.

*Bridging The Gap* uses the term ‘non-participants’ to describe the client group at which its policies are targeted. This is a more neutral term than previous descriptors such as ‘disaffected’, used, for example, in refocusing careers services (DfEE, 1997; ICG, 1999), which has been criticised for its narrow and pejorative connotations (Ford, 1999; Piper and Piper, 1998). However, much of the report is devoted to specifying the individual characteristics of young people not participating in structured learning. The two major factors identified are ‘educational underachievement and educational disaffection’, and ‘family disadvantage and poverty’ (SEU, 1999: 24). Within this framework, the target group is further defined by a number of other risk factors:

...young people from ethnic minorities, who are carers, homeless or looked after, young people with learning difficulties and/or disability, or those with problems of mental illness, teenage parents, young offenders and those misusing drugs or alcohol. (SEU, 1999: 24)

The notion of ‘less advantaged backgrounds’ (SEU, 1999: 8) is linked to the influence of parents who are poor and unemployed. Families ‘with little or no history of work’, particularly those who have suffered unemployment across a number of generations, are held to have a negative influence upon young people’s participation in structured learning (SEU, 1999: 48). Very poor families are portrayed as pressurising young people to find work as soon as possible ‘at the expense of their future prospects’ or forcing them out of the family home (SEU, 1999: 49). Ethnic minorities are portrayed as having greater difficulty in accessing training and employment opportunities, yet no clear explanation for this is offered. The main evidence presented relates to the failures of schools to monitor standards and achievement adequately during pre-16 education. The analysis of risk factors focuses on a catalogue of other problems. These include impaired adolescent transitions, physical health problems, depression, eating disorders, self-harm and suicide, lack of qualifications and basic skills, victimisation through bullying, school exclusion, unsettled accommodation, lack of family support, drug dependency, the reproduction of poor parenting by teenage mothers, and the choice of some young people to opt for criminal activity.

This litany of lacks and needs is underscored by the use of metaphors of descent and fall (e.g. SEU, 1999: 8, 23), terms which reflect powerfully negative cultural associations with loss of personal control (highly unacceptable in dominant British social codes), and evoke Christian connotations of the biblical ‘Fall’ and ‘original sin’. The selected quotes from young people heading up Chapter 4, *Why it matters*, compound a portrait of lazy and feckless youth staying in bed until the afternoon, then loafing about and engaging in petty crime.

Such representations of the target group are intensified by claims about young people's attitudes, values and beliefs, which *Bridging The Gap* presents as a major source of their exclusion. In considering young people in families where older generations have suffered unemployment, the report refers to attitudes:

This leads to *pessimism* about the prospects of achieving success in life through the formal education and training system, and thus to disengagement from learning in school and subsequently. (SEU, 1999: 48, emphasis added)

This notion of the way in which attitudes that reinforce social exclusion are handed down across generations also informs the report's focus on teenage and lone motherhood. The disproportionate numbers of young women choosing to give birth rather than participate in structured learning or employment (SEU, 1999: 54) must, by implication, be perpetuating these attitudes. Some non-participants are represented as 'lack[ing] any *purposeful* activity' (SEU, 1999: 8, emphasis added). Truancy and non-attendance are referred to as 'attitudes which harden' (SEU, 1999: 41) and negate the influence of careers education and guidance introduced in school at the end of Key Stage 3.

Values are spotlighted in a key quote from the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS), discussing the impact of living in certain deprived communities:

Communities may have developed a reputation...viewed by outsiders as an undesirable area...[Y]oung people feel they have to live up to their reputation. *Twisted value systems develop...* (NCVYS cited in SEU, 1999: 29, emphasis added)

Young people's beliefs about the labour market are highlighted as a cause of non-participation and social exclusion. The way in which these beliefs are described invariably implies that they are false:

[A]round a quarter of young people in the various 'economically inactive' groups are inactive *because they believe there are no jobs*. There is also *no reason to believe* that young people...who for example are lone parents or have a disability, could not participate in learning or work given the opportunity and help in so doing. (SEU, 1999: 22, emphasis added)

The Rt. Rev. Lord Sheppard of Liverpool is cited, in a headline quote, seeing the biggest single reason for young people's non-participation as:

...the culture that has developed that does not expect that there will be a decent job to go to. *Somehow a whole culture that has had no expectation of employment* has taken over communities – in some cases for three generations. (SEU, 1999: 29, emphasis added)

The tone of bewilderment in this remark underlines the implication, throughout the report, that young people's beliefs about the labour market are unfounded and irrational, and lead to unwise decisions to opt out of structured learning.

*Bridging The Gap* also analyses the problem in terms of the 'costs' of non-participation. The costs of social and financial deprivation for the socially excluded themselves are discussed. In addition, emphasis is placed on the costs to 'society as a whole that has to pay a very high price in terms of welfare bills and crime' (Tony Blair's Foreword, SEU, 1999: 6). Three pages of statistics are later quoted to underline this point (SEU, 1999: 35-37), focusing on the public expenditure costs of dropping out from courses, benefits payments, youth offending and illegal drug use.

### **A individualised and moral analysis of social exclusion**

*Bridging The Gap* describes the young people, to which it refers, almost exclusively in terms of their lacks and needs. As we have seen, their attitudes, values and beliefs are seen as key factors in reinforcing their non-participation and, therefore, as aspects of *self*-exclusion. Overwhelmingly, they are portrayed as deficient, delinquent, or a combination of the two, as are their dysfunctional families and communities. The young people we meet in this report are at best passive victims of inevitable processes, from which 'few recover' as 'life goes wrong' (SEU, 1999: 8), sponging off 'society as a whole' in their costly benefit dependency. At worst, they are deviant perpetrators of criminal behaviour and drug abuse who pose a more sinister threat to the rest of society. Somewhere in the middle are the pregnant teenagers reproducing future non-participants at alarming rates, ready to pass on their misconceived negativity about education, training and employment to perpetuate the cycle of social exclusion.

There are strong parallels with the three chief indicators by which Charles Murray (1990) has defined, so controversially, the 'underclass'. They are single parent families with absent fathers, criminal behaviour often linked to drug abuse, and unemployment in the form of 'large numbers of young healthy, low-income males [who] choose not to take jobs' (Murray, 1990:17, cited in MacDonald, 1997:11). Similarly, such a focus on attitudes, values and behaviours is the hallmark of discourses which place a moral interpretation upon social exclusion, and pathologise those considered to be socially excluded (Jefferies and Smith, 1996; Lister, 1998; Reid, 1999; Watts, 1999). Disadvantage is defined as deficit or disease, which deftly locates it within the individual (Brine, 1998; Reid, 1999), and serves to undermine any acknowledgement of the social. Such discursive constructions both draw on and engender popular myths about social exclusion. Their very appeal to dominant moral codes restricts the space for policy debate, and legitimates particular policy innovations. Discourse thus becomes an important element of social practice (Marston, 2000).

This tendency is long-standing in British policies and commentaries on young people. There is a tradition of demonising and scapegoating young people in tides of moral panic, and to see them as little other than 'a mere locus of lacks' (Cohen, 1986: 54). Jefferies and Smith (1998) argue that the very category of 'youth' involves a deficit model, and note that policy tends to refer to young people in three ways, as *thugs*, as *users* (of harmful substances as well as of welfare benefits), and as *victims*. Their analysis is reminiscent of Bagguley and Mann's (1992) satirisation of representations of the 'underclass' as 'idle, thieving bastards' – which resonates ironically with the analysis

presented in *Bridging The Gap*, particularly its quotes from young people, noted above (SEU, 1999: 31). Identifying social barriers by reference to the generalised characteristics of social groups in this way serves to maintain rather than counter marginalisation and prejudice (Mann, 1994; Reid, 1999). Contrary to its rhetoric of combatting social exclusion through tailored interventions to meet the complex problems faced by individuals, *Bridging The Gap* continues to present an aggregated concept of social exclusion which relegates young people into categories and stereotypes. The case studies used reinforce this picture of 'cradle-to-grave' deficiency. Such a discourse links the degeneracy of the poor to a set of dysfunctional class characteristics, associated with indicators of failure that are socially constructed (Mann, 1994).

This is not to deny the traumatic realities that confront poor neighbourhoods. There is incontrovertible evidence that a minority of young people are involved in dangerously anti-social behaviour, such as violent and acquisitive crime, although the extent of the problem claimed by 'underclass' theorists can be challenged (MacDonald, 1997). Some young people may well have attitudes that are deeply resigned to their disengagement, or are hostile and resistant to genuine efforts to re-engage them (Williamson and Middlemiss, 1999). However, such authors point out that 'underclass' theories fail to account for the deeply intractable nature of the alienation of a section of young people, and the ways in which this alienation has been produced and reinforced by young people's experiences of formal systems throughout their lives.

*Bridging The Gap* perpetuates such a moralistic interpretation of the problem, which locates the causes of social exclusion in the deficits of individuals, and aggregates those individuals as generalised, and pathologised, social groupings. This represents a missed opportunity, for the term 'social exclusion' offers the possibility of reflecting multi-dimensional aspects of inequality and disadvantage, pertaining to participatory citizenship, democratic rights and wider social bonds, which go beyond definitions focused solely on economic deprivation (Brine, 1998; Lister, 1998; Silver, 1994).

One way in which this can be illustrated is by considering the omissions in the Report's lists of 'at risk' characteristics. For example, there is no mention of young gays and lesbians, who face immense problems of social exclusion, and experience particularly fragmented and difficult adolescent and career transitions, including the highest suicide rates of any single group in Britain (Packham, 2000). Apart from a brief mention in relation to the disabled, the word 'discrimination' does not enter the vocabulary of the report. The obstacles facing young people from ethnic minorities are relegated to three brief paragraphs entitled '*Access to work and training*' (SEU, 1999: 52-53). While acknowledging 'additional and particular barriers in finding work', such barriers are not identified in any way. In contrast with the detailed descriptions of dysfunctional youth, the statistics relating to the exclusion of young Black and Asian people remain unexplained. This presents the possibility that, given the surrounding material, the reader will draw the conclusion that it is something about being from an ethnic minority that leads to exclusion - rather than something about discriminatory practices, cultural exclusion and institutional racism.

Similarly, little distinction is drawn between the experiences of young men and young women in the report, except to highlight the fact that young men tend to perceive a criminal record as the obstacle to employment, while young women tend to cite caring for the home and children (SEU, 1999: 33-34). Yet the Equal Opportunities Commission

(Rolfe, 1999) have pointed to ways in which the recent refocusing of careers services, a policy forerunner of the approach in *Bridging The Gap*, have concentrated on the disaffection and underachievement of young men. They claim that this has undermined the already weak performance of those services in pursuing gender equality and challenging the structural disadvantages facing young women in the labour market.

Arguably the greatest sin of omission in *Bridging The Gap* is the failure to recognise, value and support the strengths of many disadvantaged communities, which provide a sense of inclusion to their members, but whose efforts and resources tend to be judged against agendas set by others. Watts (1999) points out that many young people not participating in formal education, training or employment display considerable commitment to work, though the only feasible opportunities with which they engage may be informal. Searle (1997) describes the skills and knowledge developed by young people from ethnic minorities, which are often interpreted negatively, or remain unrecognised and unaccredited. Even the struggle by homeless youths, to survive the worst excesses of social exclusion, develops identifiable skills (Ford, 1999). Rather than deviance, disease, or deficit, it is possible to see many of these experiences as forms of cultural adaptation which contain constructive possibilities that policy-makers and practitioners could support for positive change (Watts, 1999).

### **The absence of social structure in the analysis of social exclusion**

Insofar as external causes of non-participation and social exclusion are identified in *Bridging The Gap*, they are almost entirely represented by statements about the failures of professionals and of educational and other social institutions. While certain instances may well be true, these claims must be treated with caution. The way in which Careers Services are dealt with in the report will illustrate the point. Once again, quotes from interviews are used to set the scene. A remark from a college representative recommends that Careers Services should 'adopt a more advisory approach...not merely supply information', while a young man states that his careers adviser 'just told me to go on the dole' (SEU, 1999: 39). Careers Services are criticised for failing to provide careers sessions in Year 11, and for poor perceptions by young people of those that received such a session (SEU, 1999: 41). The Report notes that 5% of Year 11 had not received a careers interview. Yet given the much larger scale of disaffection from school reflected in *Bridging The Gap*, this represents a high level of penetration on the part of Careers Services. The comment that less than half of those who did have a careers interview felt it helped them reach a clear decision is used to imply poor performance again. But this could be interpreted in a number of alternative ways. Other research for the DfEE with the same cohort (Morris et al, 1999) indicates that nearly two-thirds of young people wanted more help from the Careers Service, not less. This reflects the inadequacy of the single half-hour interview to which careers advisers are usually restricted with most of their clients, but hardly indicates an alienation from the service as a result of clients' initial contact with it. What goes unrecognised in *Bridging The Gap* is the fact that the pressures of blanket interviewing and prescriptive action planning were imposed by the DfEE through funding targets after privatisation. They undermined the effectiveness of guidance work by driving it towards information-giving, and de-skilled careers advisers in the process (Ford, 1999). At the same time, technically rational models of career decision-making, favoured in policy and imposed through DfEE guidelines (e.g. DfEE,



1998b), emphasised labour market information, not advice, as the basis of guidance (Hodkinson, 1997). Careers Services are also berated for failing to track non-participants adequately (SEU, 1999: 43). However, such clients were de-prioritised by previous government policies and funding targets, so that Careers Services had insufficient resources to undertake such activity, given that work to maintain contact with socially excluded young people is extremely resource-intensive (DfEE, 1997; Ford, 1999). *Bridging The Gap* thus presents a biased view combined with a punitive tone, which shows no understanding of the policy-driven pressures which have led institutions like Careers Services to fail some young people.

This points to glaring omissions in the way that *Bridging The Gap* explores the external causes of social exclusion, by restricting its explanations to such institutional and professional weaknesses. It fails to acknowledge the functioning of deep-rooted, structural factors in society, such as class, race, and gender, which profoundly affect young people's life chances (Ball et al, 2000; Bates and Riseborough, 1994; Reid, 1999). While stigmatising whole communities, it neglects issues such as the unequal operation of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), although this has been shown to influence children's allocation to better or worse-performing schools (Byrne and Rogers, 1996) as well as post-16 transitions (Ball et al, 2000; Hodkinson et al, 1996). Such effects are intensified by the credential inflation that has taken place, as work has moved into what some term a post-Fordist phase (Byrne and Rogers, 1996). *Bridging The Gap* presents an entirely positive view of current labour market conditions, ignoring the considerable evidence of large-scale structural unemployment and underemployment created in response to new technologies and globalisation (Byrne, 1997; Killeen, 1996; MacDonald, 1997; Young, 1999). In particular, amid all the rhetoric of raising aspiration, it fails to reflect the consequences of the collapse of the youth labour market (Ashton, 1993), and the 'warehousing' and 'cooling out' role that much PCET has come to play (Reid, 1999; Roberts, 1995). Ferguson et al. (2000) argue that the very diversification of the PCET market in recent years has imbued youth identities and transitions with instability and dislocation, in particular through repeated shuttling between PCET and jobs, which a substantial minority of young people have embraced. This both cuts against the SEU's vision of sustained participation, while also contributing to the further marginalisation of those unable to normalize these experiences through new subjectivities.

In largely ignoring the structural dimensions of social exclusion, the analysis in *Bridging The Gap* also overlooks the intractability of poverty, inequality and social exclusion, and their relative nature. In many of the various ways in which social exclusion is now defined, there have always been socially excluded groups and individuals, though the gap between haves and have-nots is widening (Hills, 1995; Oppenheim, 1998). This is a significant trend, for all serious studies of poverty, including those just cited, point out that it is a relative, not absolute phenomenon. This widening gap thus indicates that poverty is effectively increasing, despite all the efforts of the Labour government to deal with the problem. One of the attractions to policy makers of the term 'social exclusion', is that it minimises the significance of poverty and social inequality, masking this issue of relativity. But social exclusion is relative in the same way, being defined as what those at the bottom of the heap lack, which most others possess. This is clear in the deficit tone of *Bridging The Gap*. The narrowing of

inequalities can be achieved, but is difficult and politically unattractive. Indeed, Young (1999) argues that we are now living in what he terms ‘the exclusive society’, which he links to the processes of globalisation. Yet the rhetoric of *Bridging the Gap* is that most if not all such young people can be brought back on track, claiming that their proposals will deal effectively with ‘a smaller number of young people who will still struggle to succeed post-16’ (SEU, 1999:14). This will be done through a series of initiatives predominantly directed at giving them personal guidance and support, after the age of 13. What is more, they will be back on track by the age of 19, when the ministrations of the new *ConneXions* service are planned to end.

Thus, the analysis of the problem advanced in *Bridging The Gap* contains contradictions, and a perspective that differs little from New Right thinking which has been widely challenged by researchers. Despite appearing to re-instate a concern for the social, the report locates the causes of non-participation and social exclusion primarily within individuals and their personal characteristics. Yet at the same time as focusing on individual deficit, it does so in a way that denies diversity and individuality, and reduces those it describes to categories and stereotypes. ‘Non-participants’ in structured learning are portrayed as hapless victims or delinquents. Either way, they are seen as threatening ‘society as a whole’ by draining its resources or engaging in anti-social behaviour. This in turn obfuscates the social aspects of disadvantage, the deeper structural causes of inequality and differential life chances, which the report entirely neglects to mention. This brings us to consider the solutions proposed in *Bridging The Gap*.

### **Inadequate solutions**

*Bridging The Gap* has been influential in the development of new policies by the Labour Government, which set out to address the problems it identified. Many of these new approaches, perhaps especially the new *ConneXions* Service, were recommended in the report. It is our contention that the combination of an inadequate analysis and inappropriate policies will result in making things worse for a significant number of the very young people that the authors of the Report intended to help. This is particularly so if these approaches are seen in combination with other policies directed at this particular age group. We do not have the space to critique all these policy initiatives in detail. Instead, we focus upon the overall approach to developing policy solutions, which is advanced in the report.

Central to this approach are two correlations. The first is between low educational attainment (defined as levels of qualification) and factors such as unemployment (SEU, 1999: 31 and 32) and being ‘not in education, training or work’ (SEU, 1999: 24). The second is between non-participation between the ages of 16 and 18, and a raft of future problems, including poor health, criminal activity, and having a job without training (SEU, 1999: 33 and 34). These correlations are then assumed, for policy purposes, to demonstrate cause and effect. If we could increase the proportion participating in education, training and work before the age of 19, and increase the level of qualification achievement at the same time, they would be much more likely to get jobs, and would not, therefore, be socially excluded. This approach is reinforced by the audit approach to education and training, in Labour Government policy, which rewards colleges and training providers for higher retention rates, and penalises them if some of their students fail to complete the course, or to achieve the aimed for qualification.

The first problem with this approach lies in the assumption that, as the Prime Minister's Foreword to *Bridging The Gap*, cited at the head of this paper, emphasises, social inclusion is best achieved through paid employment. Indeed, throughout *Bridging The Gap*, social exclusion is effectively defined as paid employment. This has been a consistent theme of the Labour leadership, even prior to its election in 1997 (Holden, 1999; Levitas, 1996; Lister, 1998).

One consequence of this assertion is that the socially included – Blair's 'society as a whole' (SEU, 1999: 6) – are presented as a homogeneous group. In making such a generalisation, the vast inequalities that exist within the paid workforce are swept under the carpet (Levitas, 1996). These are not merely relative inequalities, but represent 'the real emmiseration of employed workers' as ever larger numbers of working people are forced into low-paid jobs (Byrne, 1997: 31). Not only are they low-paid, but they also work increasingly long and unsociable hours, and these conditions themselves create major social problems, particularly for families and children (Freedman, 1993). Bond (1999) has documented the ways in which self-employment has reduced a significant number of UK households to poverty, with heavy debt burdens, high proportions of mortgage defaults and subsequent house repossession, and substantially less rights to welfare benefits than those unemployed who were previously working for others. To ignore such issues presents inclusion through paid employment as *de facto* beneficial, and at the same time it relegates those who are 'non-participants' to the status of 'others' who do not form part of 'society as a whole' (Levitas, 1996; Mann, 1994).

Such discursive strategies obscure the amount and value of unpaid work outside formal employment structures (Levitas, 1996) – and, by implication, the learning that is created by such work. Far from only 'dander[ing] about' (SEU, 1999: 31), research evidence demonstrates that a great deal of work is undertaken by those outside the formal labour market (MacDonald, 1997; Webster, 2000). Such work includes household work, performed predominantly by women, the value of which, if it were paid, is estimated to be equivalent to the total sum of wages paid by employers. It also includes work carried out for undeclared income, estimated to be as much as 15% of gross national product (Watts, 1999). For many young people who, for various reasons, are unable or unwilling to engage with PCET, these informal economies represent the most realistic means to earn an income, connecting them with important networks by which their communities survive disadvantage, and generating genuine social inclusion for many.

The next flaw in the approach to policy outlined in *Bridging The Gap* relates directly to the two correlations themselves. In converting them into causal relationships, the possibility that there are other, deeper factors of inequality, that contribute both to rates of participation and levels of qualification achievement, and to the associated problems with health, employment etc, is overlooked. For example, Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) notion of capital (cultural, social and economic), draws upon a complex pattern of inter-relating factors, which underpin, though do not rigidly determine, success in all walks of life. To be sure, the achievement of qualifications adds to the cultural capital a person possesses in parts of the labour market, but it is not the only factor involved. What is more, no matter how the educational and employment field is altered or developed, those with most capital tend to find ways of gaining advantage for themselves and their children. This links directly back to the earlier point, that poverty and social inclusion are relative. As the gap between rich and poor widens, the

use of cultural capital to achieve success becomes more important. Two fairly obvious points can be made. Firstly, if current policies succeed and many more young people get qualifications, many of the jobs and other life chances currently associated with such achievement will be displaced, to those with higher grades and superior qualifications. In Labour's bipolar terms, the boundary of social inclusion will be raised. Secondly, if qualifications presented a predominantly homogeneous picture of educational achievement, other factors would increase in significance as a means of differentiating between haves and have-nots. From this perspective, qualification achievement is a symptom of inequality, not a solution to it.

This problem is partly illustrated in a recent study of the learning experiences of young people in further education (FE), which focused upon a successful Sixth Form College, 'Stokingham' (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000). This college had many of the trappings of educational success that government policies value: hard-working, well-motivated students, very high retention rates, and impressive levels of qualification achievement. What is more, it was located in a relatively impoverished northern town, with high unemployment and high indicators of social exclusion. In other words, if the approach advocated in *Bridging The Gap* was enough, socially excluded young people's problems would be over, if they had achieved access to this college. However, a key part of the college's success lay in what Hodkinson and Bloomer termed its 'subtle elitism'. The students felt different from and superior to those at the nearby FE college. Whilst this situation persisted, it is difficult to see how the FE college, with its generally academically weaker and more disadvantaged students, could replicate Stokingham's success, or how that success could be sustained, if there were no longer a large number of people with lesser achievements against which the college and its students could judge themselves, and be judged.

Ironically, some current educational policies may make those relative inequalities greater. Over the last 30 years, many studies (Aggleton, 1987; Ball et al., 2000; Brown, 1987; Carlen et al., 1992; Hayton, 1999; Stone et al., 2000; Willis, 1977) have shown that a significant minority of school pupils become deeply disillusioned by their experiences. Some, arguably those directly targeted by *Bridging The Gap*, are so disillusioned that they rebel and or flee, avoiding the system as much as they can. Others, in the notable words of Brause (1992), 'endure', with no enthusiasm and minimum effort. In attempting to deal with these problems, current English educational policy focuses upon two things. The first is the achievement of ever-improving standards in regular national tests and external examinations. The second is the rigorous inspection of provision, set against predetermined standards, and a focussed on improving teachers' and schools' performance. The assumption is that many of the causes of and remedies for educational failure and eventual exclusion lie within the control of schools and teachers, operating within the current policy and funding parameters set out by the Government. The Social Exclusion Unit endorses this approach:

[T]he policies the Government has put in place...*will provide a much better platform for success in secondary education and then afterwards.* But even the most optimistic person would still accept that there will be a need for a structure which can deal effectively with a *smaller* number of young people who will still

struggle to succeed post-16 despite earlier best efforts. (SEU, 1999:14, emphasis added)

But what if such educational approaches are part of the problem, not part of the solution? It is plausible, even likely, that this drive for narrowly defined standards increases the sense of failure and alienation in those who do not succeed, at each measured threshold. Furthermore, there is pressure, on those institutions that can choose, to avoid 'difficult' pupils or students who are less likely to contribute to the prescribed performance indicators. This problem is intensified in areas where schools and other providers are competing for pupils (Ball et al., 2000; Gewirtz et al., 1997). Thus, the drive towards ever-higher standards of qualification achievement reinforces the exclusion of those who are unable to achieve them. This will arguably increase rather than decrease the scale of the social exclusion/non-participation problem. In any event, as the above quotation acknowledges, it is likely that there will always be a minority of young people who are strongly disaffected by their experiences of schooling. Trying to solve their problems by giving them more of the same is unlikely to succeed with many. As Ball et al. (2000: 8) suggest,

many of those outside education and training post-16 ... carry with them 'learner identities' (Rees et al., 1997) often severely damaged by their experiences of compulsory education. More learning is the last thing they are interested in.

The main solution to these problems, outlined in *Bridging The Gap*, is the creation of the new *ConneXions* service. This, it is claimed, will provide every young person, and especially those at risk of social exclusion, with a Personal Adviser. This Adviser will help with all their problems, combining the roles of careers adviser, youth worker and probation officer, amongst others. This will ensure the support needed, thus reducing the likelihood of dropping out, increasing the likelihood that they will stay on, and thus achieve qualifications and eventual success in the labour market. Given the structural problems that lie behind non-participation and the competitive nature of schooling and qualification achievement, this solution seems naïve and inadequate, at best. The manner of its introduction compounds this assessment, for there are dilemmas around the nature of the *ConneXions* service itself. For example, will the Personal Advisers be able to work with young people on the client's terms? Given the predominant focus on educational achievement, the gaining of employment, and the reduction of social security dependence, this seems unlikely, where those terms differ from the official view. For example, will Personal Advisers be permitted to help a young person drop out of a thoroughly unsatisfactory educational experience, if that is what they are determined to do? Will Advisers have the status and power to challenge institutions such as schools, colleges, the police or the Employment Service, to fight for what their client wants? If the Personal Advisers are seen as policing rather than helping, their influence upon some clients is likely to be extremely limited. The establishment of one Personal Adviser, dealing with all your problems and needs, is attractive, but only if you feel that that Adviser is on your side. If not, their concentrated role means that there are fewer other places to go for help. Furthermore, these Personal Advisers are to become operational very rapidly, with minimal educational preparation. Many of them will be careers

advisers, suddenly given a very different role, which they have not chosen and for which they were not previously trained. Those with school-based caseloads (to be known as 'Learning Mentors') will be directly employed by head teachers, and isolated from the organisational base that Careers Services have hitherto provided. They will be arguably in a weaker position than careers advisers under the previous system to give young people advice and guidance that cuts across official school perceptions.

This raises directly the significance of the two correlations, and the causal assumptions drawn from them. One of those assumptions is that young people who drop out of college are at far greater risk of social exclusion than those who do not. Consequently, all young people must be prevented from dropping out, by their Personal Advisers and others. Yet, at the level of the individual, the act of dropping out may not be especially significant. Research by Bloomer and Hodkinson featured the stories of two young women: Amanda Ball (Bloomer and Hodkinson, in press) and Tamsin Rooke (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000). Both were working class, and had some of the attributes associated, in *Bridging The Gap*, with non-participation. Both faced significant deprivation, yet both progressed successfully to FE College. Amanda dropped out, not primarily because of any inadequacies in the education she was receiving, but in order to earn money and to look after her sick partner. Tamsin completed her FE education and achieved her target qualification, despite many problems and difficulties. Two years later, both found themselves in similar situations. Each had a job, but their original ambitions to progress to higher education and eventual professional careers were becoming more remote and unlikely, as financial and other pressures took their toll. Each had avoided the drop into non-participation, but Tamsin's achievement of her qualification appeared to give her no advantage over Amanda, in this respect.

In a related way, there is something very odd about the Labour Government's obsession with solving social exclusion for young people quickly – by the age of 19. This was built in to the remit for the Social Exclusion Unit, in preparing *Bridging The Gap*. Of course it is desirable to 'socially include' young people by that age when it can be achieved but, given the depth and complexity of the problems faced, this seems extremely unlikely for many of those who face the greatest difficulties. Nonetheless, the indications are that coercion will be an increasing element of welfare-to-work reforms (Stepney et al., 1999). Ministers are already taking a hard-line tone. One announced tougher sanctions of 6 months loss of benefit for young people judged to have breached New Deal regulations on three occasions, stating that 'New Deal will provide every reasonable chance for young people. But in return we will not tolerate those few who shirk the system' (DfEE press release, 10th February, 2000). The Secretary of State for Education and Employment, with reference to Education Maintenance Allowances, argued that '... with rights come responsibilities. Young people need to stick with what is on offer' (DfEE Press Release, 3rd February 2000), presumably whether it is in their best interests to do so, or not.

As the Personal Advisers and others strive to meet the output measures that will be set for them (DfEE, 2000), there is a serious risk. Those who cannot be brought into education, training or employment 'in time' may have their situation made worse. As with many of those who currently drop out of the system, they may be ignored once they move beyond the pale of approved support (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999). Others will be further alienated by their experiences of what is on offer, making them even harder to

help in the future than would have been the case had current interventions not been made. A more profitable approach entails keeping support structures open well into adulthood.

There is evidence to support such a stance. For example, Feetham (2000), an experienced practitioner working with the long-term unemployed and educationally excluded in Hull, describes proven approaches to helping members of these groups. There are three components. Firstly, attempts to reengage into learning must start with the interests and objectives of the people themselves. In her experience, a direct focus on gaining employment is seldom an effective trigger. Secondly, such approaches have to be gradually incremental, without the restrictions of an externally imposed time-scale. Finally, such approaches are much more likely to succeed if they are grounded in communal activity, located within and strongly influenced by the needs and priorities of the communities where these individuals live. Current policy approaches overlook these lessons, especially where young people are concerned.

Paradoxically, rather than reducing social exclusion, the plethora of current schemes and initiatives set in train by the Government, before and after the publication of the *Bridging The Gap* Report, are actively constructing it, in a particularly narrow and restrictive manner. By defining acceptable behaviour and thus the boundaries of social inclusion tightly, they label potentially large numbers of individuals, groups and communities who live partly different lives and hold partly different values or priorities, as excluded.

### **The reversal of structure and agency**

One way of making sense of the paradoxes, contradictions and omissions of the *Bridging The Gap* Report, is that the approach reverses the roles of structure and agency. That is, it attempts to address deep-seated structural problems through a strongly individualistic agency approach, whilst individually focused agency-enhancing activity is approached through a prescriptive structural framework. We help those at risk to help themselves, for example through the appointment of a Personal Adviser, but only in ways that we have predetermined in advance, and within an unrealistically short time-scale that we have imposed. Deep-seated and increasing inequalities, for example of class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability and place of abode, are unaddressed and rendered invisible, in the continuing discourse of individualism and its closely associated victim-blaming.

All governments in capitalist democracies find dealing with structural inequalities very difficult, though, if there is a genuine concern with social exclusion, there is a moral obligation to try. Unfortunately, the majority of middle class voters do not really want to see themselves and their children with no advantages over others. Nor, in the current climate, is there much will for dramatically increased, extensive, long-term investment to address such problems, with the associated higher levels of redistributive taxation.

But with regard to the second problem, the government is culpable, for many of their current approaches make it harder to help many of those in need. Those working with the socially excluded, however defined, are having to devote much of their attention not upon the actual needs and priorities of their clients, but upon increasingly punitive government targets, which derive from the flawed analysis of the problem described above. In other words, successful agency-focused interventions are being undermined. This happens partly because agency is approached in a structured, mechanistic way.

Those at risk of social exclusion are dealt with as a category (or several closely related sub-categories). Uniform approaches, rules, targets and time-scales are imposed. As a result, the divergent individual circumstances, strengths and needs of those targeted is lost. Variation is only recognised and addressed when it falls within the tightly drawn boundaries of acceptable behaviour, and within the approved time-scales. Agency growing out of community ownership and activity is lost.

If this analysis is even partly correct, the results are predictable, at the level of broad generalisation. There will be considerable successes for the deserving poor: those who, for a variety of reasons, find the nature and timing of current initiatives largely congruent to their needs, or who are prepared to allow their own preferences to be subservient to the official agendas. This is especially likely at a time of falling unemployment, though it remains to be seen how secure some of these people will be when we enter the next recession. However, a significant rump of young people and adults will be left beyond the pale. Furthermore, for many of these, their failed experiences of *ConneXions* and/or the myriad of other schemes being currently developed, risks increasing their sense of alienation, lack of self-confidence and distrust of official schemes and helpers. Far from 'bridging the gap', for such 'socially excluded' people, who are the very group the Report's proposals were designed to help, the impact of current policies will seem more like 'closing the door'. If we take those policies at face value, this would indicate a damning failure to achieve the targets of social inclusion that are espoused. But it might succeed politically, provided enough of the deserving poor were taken off the unemployment registers and not claiming social welfare payments. It would be easy to paint this as a major policy success, and to blame those who failed to take advantage of the opportunities made available to them. So is the Labour government naïve or disingenuous? With regard to social exclusion, we suspect a little of both.



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