Absence of Value: Masculinity, Disability, Social Class and Alternative Provision

Introduction

Alternative Provisions (APs) were created to provide short-term support for school-aged young people excluded from or unable to be placed in 'regular' schools. In England, they have become a long-term educational setting for 80% of its student population, particularly (14 to 16-year-old) disabled men from 'poor' or working-class backgrounds (Department of Education, 2020). AP also remains an indefinite part of the English Education system, defined by Taylor (2012, 4) as *'an organisation where pupils engage in timetabled, educational activities away from school and school staff'*, which has come to prominence in recent policy agendas. Whether it is the supposed reformative potential or adaptability of alternative forms of education, belief in the benefits of AP has never been so strongly advocated in England. This is at a time where access to the resources available in regular school settings remains an important avenue for young people to accumulate the valued (social, cultural, and human) capital that helps them to improve or maintain – in comparison to those students permanently excluded from schools - their social position in a competitive, service-based labour market (Thomson and Pennechia, 2015). The advantages that are tied up with the being able to access and use certain forms of 'capital', or what Bourdieu (1986) argues are assets that allow, *"pre-emptive rights over the future"*, is reflected widely in youth and education literature, but the idea capital is unevenly distributed to AP has been pushed from the political imagination. This is surprising as AP is an area of an - arguably - inequitable English education system (Ball, 2018) which has consistently led to a range of poor life outcomes for the young people concerned (McCluskey *et al.*, 2015).

The first part of the chapter therefore considers the potential lack of capital available to or denied young disabled men in AP. The background, status and gender of these young people locates the article in current debates about class, disability, gender, and educational disadvantage and the capacity of APs to supplement young people's lives with modes of distinction (e.g. capital). While many young men have benefited from the division of labour, young disabled men from poor backgrounds - who may embody a marginalised identity - have suffered disproportionately across various areas, including low rates of employment (Office for National Statistics, 2019). The decision to focus this research on young men was made based on the potential to be further marginalised in APs. This social group has received limited attention in the literature, further contributing to their marginalisation. This is a crucial discussion as most of the AP literature views access to and the value of capital as inevitable,

mechanical, or automatic in nature. Indeed, policymakers currently paint a positive picture of the APs they seek to describe. Consequently, few have asked whether their descriptions and the resources being attributed to AP can overcome the social barriers and closed networks which exist and are growing for many young disabled men in England. This chapter will thus warrant a cautious approach to examining the role of AP in current policy by applying a critical lens on its ability to transform (at least ostensibly) young disabled men's work-related identity. This is an identity that must entail continuity and change, in part, through relationships formed in non-redundant networks of influence (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social disadvantage and young disabled men in AP

There are now several books and articles which helpfully spell out the background and origins of capital and critique these and their subsequent uses in various fields. I do not propose to rehearse these here, but Bourdieu's notion of capital is as relevant to APs as it is to any other. Bourdieu (1986) argued that (young) people from differing social positions vary from each other in regard to their access to capital: social, cultural and financial capital. The capital required in choosing, or adopting, work related dispositions, attributes or identities emerge from the interchange between these capitals. In this dynamic form social inequalities affect young people's status and career 'trajectories' over time. Arguably, a Bourdieusian approach is also most apposite when considering those stigmatised and marginalised groups because, unlike other approaches to resource disadvantage, his work is *'a theory of privilege rather than a theory of inadequacy'* (Morrow 1999, 760). This approach thus avoids framing young disabled men through deficit discourses or by their own 'poor' choices, behaviour, or disposition to learning or a composite of these. The first point I therefore attend to will relate to a concern over the poor distribution of resources to young people enrolled within APs. The argument here is that young people's poor access to differing links, and capital these nurtures, may sustain and underpin a range of social inequalities in and - arguably - beyond AP. Outside a handful of related studies such issues find little expression in the current literature.

At a basic level of capital or capital, assets, and resources (CAR) analysis, initial concerns may point to a disparity between APs and schools in terms of funding or access to similar and reliable levels of financial capital. Unreliable funding, primarily based upon the number of referrals an AP receives each term, can mean a lack of investment in facilities, staff, and a broad range of human capital (qualifications and skills). Indeed, Ofsted (2016) found facilities in APs were regularly not of the same standard as regular schools, the curriculum was often

limited to a Maths, English and/or a vocational qualification, and teachers in APs were three times less likely to be qualified (DfE, 2018a). The denial of appropriate learning environments, especially for those with high needs, is a key source of alienation from a range of career paths in the labour market (DfE 2018b). This is perhaps most profound when young people are contained in closed environments, high in forms of social capital (networks, norms, and trust). In other words, where they are situated away from networks that contain high volume capital (Field, 2005), such as school sports clubs or regular forms of social discourse, which nurture certain ways of thinking (cultural capital) or distinct skills, competences, speech, gestures, dress, and dispositions. These embodied capitals are differentially effective in specific social fields, and differentiate between young people; thus, establishing social hierarchy. It is, for example, a well-established fact that friendships produce social contexts that young people actively apply to *real-life* issues. Such social boundaries cause problems in building connections between social groups and in gaining access to forms of employment, because as Evans notes, *"[if] people cannot trust each other or work together, then improving the material conditions of life is an uphill battle* (1997, 2)." The main argument here is that differential access to differing relations and the existence of limited cultural norms form part of a specific habitus which is crucial to, and places limitations on, an individual's attitude towards learning (Field, 2005). Much of the 'promise' of APs is its focus on close relations and the amount of emotional capital (care, compassion, and reassurance) generated between staff and students. Whilst powerful, this under plays the fact that young people are also frequently absent from AP (Johnston, 2021). Indeed, ties to staff and students with dissimilar outlooks, mixing, studying, and being taught in different ways – is part of *'the unceasing effort of sociability'* (Bourdieu 1986, 252) that leads to new experiences, aptitudes, and a variety of capital, such as cultural capital, for example. It is through the activation and use of such capital that link the relationship between education and new forms of work, as a process, leading to a realisable future (Ball, 2003, 90). A mis-appreciation in much of the current AP literature ignores the context in which various forms of capital are generated and consumed. That is, young people enrolled in APs may be further marginalised in spaces that and places exist beyond even the sorts of capital which has long caused class-based divisions in the - arguably - unequal English education system (Reay, 2017) As Das (2006, 72) argues, to not consider the differential value of resources, *"obviates the need to conceptualise the way capital develops in, and is constrained by, the classed context in which the poor live*."

The idea that the capital accessible to young men is constituted in separate contexts, which may be exempt of material and symbolic assets, is a useful one. I say this because context gives rise to key factors that underpin social inequalities for young men in AP. This point is missed in the literature. Two points can be made here. First, as noted above, capital is not readily available to every student in AP. Geographic location and separate local authority arrangements can limit accessibility. Second, capital is not equal. This will depend upon where the capital is produced and, in part, upon the status of who produced it. This bipolar view is echoed by several writers, who see narrow social networks as posing barriers to learning, such as conformity and peer pressure (Johnston and Bradford, 2019). In this 2019 study, for example, social capital is deployed to place excessive claims on peers, which asphyxiates individual freedoms and exert a levelling-down effect on personal aspirations. Such closed network patterns mean that social relations and norms can control learning and has very real consequences (Field 2005). It is well known that some young men, particularly those who focus on social rather than educational goals, look to their peers rather than to teaching staff for guidance and approval, thereby diminishing the ability of AP staff to influence young people's work-related identity Due to these closed conditions, examining the adolescent culture inside and outside APs, its compositions and characteristics, may be more important in understanding and influencing young men in their career development. It is simplistic in the extreme, however, to suggest that a lack of capital is the only factor, or even the most important factor, involved in informing a young male's aspirations in alternative or any form of education. Indeed, as noted, inequalities of access to capital intersect with other concerns, such as the changing nature of peer culture or the historical changes within the communities where an AP is located (Archer, 2010). Yet, the AP literature frequently fails to recognise the culminate significance of such factors on the outcomes of young people's lives.

There may be more to the role of capital in young disabled men's existence in AP than a lack of access. Given the complexity of a service-based labour market, and given the pressures or cutbacks on spending by employers as a result of the pandemic, constant attention needs to be given to acquiring new learning habits and strategies which have the capacity to bridge new, unknown and unstable landscapes of employment. This landscape is mediated by current trends calling on people to be choosers and creators of their own careers. Likewise, choice and creativity are seen as important in a person's capacity to experiment with their identity (Roberts, 2018). This, of course, assumes that every person has equal "*means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over (their) bodies* (Shilling, 2003, 2)". However, to what

extent can young men from poor backgrounds choose when it comes to their body and to what extent could they participate or be embedded within wider network associations? Superficially, I agree with policymakers that young men, who have been excluded from school, might gain from a transition to APs. Indeed, their transition may symbolise a second chance to construct new attachments, which may embed them in networks of support. That said, I also view these transitions - particularly those students at 14-16 years of age who are at a critical juncture of their educational life - as being a source of differentiation, where issues linked with capital inequality do not lessen. Rather, they remain up front, and get played out inequitably. This is because the bodies of disabled, gendered, and classed young men are and have been devalued in relation to current social, cultural, and economic trends that promote soft-skills, able-bodied traits, and middle-class positions. In the next section, I argue that young disabled men are stripped of certain capital(s), because their bodies are represented by deficit and in need of correction by the values that uphold and constitute success in England.

Absence of value: class, masculinity, and disability

There are processes of reordering at work in Western Society which may have positioned young disabled men in different and less resource-rich social relations. It is not, however, my intention to review the plethora of evidence associated with a gathering of factors (disability, gender, and class) that contribute to a young man's marginalisation. Rather, I identify how these processes mark out and categorise difference. In other words, I illuminate working-class (masculinity) and disability as structural sites of oppression and explore how these intersect with dominant discourses to illuminate how they act as exclusionary mechanisms that manifest in a disproportionate number of young disabled men being referred to APs.

Cultural Analysts have long raised concerns about the impact of neo-liberal ideals, such as individualism, rationality, and competition, on those young people and families who do not hold the relevant capitals to navigate new forms of differentiation in society. Studies have also found connections between certain behaviours, identities, and levels of attainment within the English education system (Reay, 2017), with the reductive processes of categorisation beginning at a young age. This is because market form carries with it a vision that articulates a narrow conception of a useful and correct self as a social ideal, which masquerades as exclusive criteria positioning some differently in an *'economy of student worth'* (Ball, 2004, 10). For example, the logics and values of this economic individualism have become tied to multiple gazes, such as school effectiveness targets, and a recent political preoccupation with

ameliorating 'poor' behaviour. Considering the disadvantages working-class young men begin with, school remains a place where many feel '*powerlessness'* (Reay, 2009, 25). Consequently, some, *'perceive troublesome, oppositional and resistant behaviour within school as a social good'* (ibid: 27), a key exercise in constructing their identities. This has led some politicians to depict working-class modes of distinction as embodiments of deficient capital which leaves the interplay between boys' social and educational identities fragile. This is also the case in regard to the assumed abilities required for the labour market, and the limited capitals (knowledge and social skills) vested in a disabled body, which situate young disabled people as a poor investment; slow to learn and economically un-productive in relation to the idealised embodiments and normative assumptions promoted through regular education. Indeed, what is not widely acknowledged in the AP literature is that the characterisations of deficit and failure, used to separate or strip disability of power in regular education, is similar to sets of supposed defective characteristics currently being attached to many working-class men. In many ways, ability, and social-class differences interlock to characterise young men as lacking in mind and spirit. As Thomson acknowledges, *"this sense of embodiment is conceived as either a lack or excess … (with young disabled men) … regularly, if not always, described in terms of aplasia, meaning absence or failure, or associated with hypoplasia, meaning mind-body-emotional underdevelopment* (2001, 7)." The key point here is to regard working class traits and values as performances of disability, whose 'psychic' properties intertwine with negative views of disability and working-class masculinity to represent some young men as subjugated bodies. The current policy view of young men as being tormented by forms of deficit, trauma, and in need of compensation in the form of rigorous forms of care and attention may be creating a false map of the problem.

The ideals of a service-based economy and choice also subject young disabled men's bodies to new forms of correction and inequalities. This is achieved, first, by reducing cultural tolerances for social dissimilarity by espousing such 'ideal-traits' as excellence and youthfulness (Hughes *et al.*, 2005) in the labour market. Second, inequality occurs by stifling the resources required to widen capacities for self-innovation in segregated spaces, where itinerant or nomadic lifestyles and risk are not norms (Giddens, 1998). Risk and itinerancy are, of course, identifiable in AP. But they are fixed in place when politicians talk of, and many APs are funded to, correct behaviour through disciplining the body (Shilling, 2003) in ways that will positively affect economic success or happiness in normative terms (a big house, a good job) across multiple spaces and relations that may be new or uncertain. Certainly, Harris

and Clayton (2018) argue that basic qualifications are still relevant but transferable skills, personality, drive, and passion are increasingly important to decode the type of paid work now emerging outside AP. In effect, a student's cultural capital, or cultural know how, will be critical to enable a position to be taken up in relation to new forms of employment. Reay (2017) argues such systems belie a (middle-class) orientation to 'futurity' or a confidence gleaned from varied, non-redundant network experiences that make imagined futures possible via the actions of the present. In contrast, Johnston's (2020) study of young disabled men found that such qualities are not readily felt within their habitus. Indeed, the young men's 'poor' attitude to learning and behaviour (subversive acts resistance to support) was increased by the insular relations found within, and resistance to APs normative systems.

Several studies have been less optimistic about increasing the centrality of insular relations in AP. One such study of disabled young men, moving from school to further Education, was by Johnston (2019). Johnston points out that work-related identity is not a subject position that is grabbed voluntarily. Rather, the positions that are attained at birth and then added to and elaborated on by a young person's relations in AP, often restricts 'hopping' between subject positions. This point is key, as it describes working class young people, and young disabled men, in terms of being inactive beneficiaries of non-reciprocal practices, rather than active social agents set 'loose' by multiple social networks and their associated social resources and liquid social relationships that supposedly mark the new (post-16) educational economies. These lived experiences go overlooked in the rationalised day-to-day understandings of educational normality which, arguably, repositions young disabled men with traits that suggest 'anomaly', or what Goffman calls a *'spoilt identity'* (1963, 3). This appears to have resulted in the student's incarceration within paraphernalia of professional support systems and networks that appear far removed from the socio-scapes of the individuals for who they were designed. The 'othering' of young disabled men therefore takes many forms at a time when APs are seen as an educational positive in their lives but fail to conceive of the idea that some young men may not have access to the capital required to 'reinvent themselves'. Often, identities are contained by relations of power and by disabling contexts. Accessing the opportunity structures beyond AP and declaring an identity other than one implied by deficit will, to a degree, be enhanced by their confidence in new networks of experience – but, these lie outside segregated spaces. In other words, access to network influences offer a weight of evidence, solidarity, and support to create confident perceptions that might inform new actions. It is to these important aspects, which I now turn.

The immobilisation of a young disabled student's identity in AP

The above view contrasts sharply with the individualised approach to learning currently adopted in many APs (DfE 2018a). The prevailing fallacy in developing such an approach is that this could make the difference in meeting a student's needs by acting as a 'safety net' for students (DfE, 2018a). There is a taken-for granted assumption that their needs are best served from a known reservoir of resources that must first exist and then be drawn upon, to learn along a linear normatively structured and heavily behaviourist model (Thomson and Pennechia, 2015). This vision is flawed as it can impose upon, rather than develop from, the life experiences and situations of variably disadvantaged students. Subsequently, it produces the foundation for a number of oppressive processes which may militate against a young person's sustained access to capital, and which may labour to transform a work-related identity over time. My concern at this juncture is of young men entering APs with highly localised social skills, unable to gain capitals to engage and be absorbed into a wide range of socio-scapes. As illuminated by Archer *et al.,* (2010), many young people - mainly boys - who have been out of education for some time may have the social and relational skills or street capital (Sandberg, 2008) gained by factors other than, and which militate against, normative forms of success. For many such men, the ability to manufacture sustained access to society's 'opportunity structures' could present a problem, not only because of a social status as other, but also because of their powerlessness to "decode the system"; or grasp the cultural logic of an unstable service-based economy. Addressing such issues and considering what appropriate relations must consists of in AP, signals a more inclusive form of learning than that predicated on integrative assumptions: capitals in the form of influential social skills or 'social energy', which is ultimately useful in relation to finding paid work. Eaude, (2006) notes, however, that none of these are skills to be taught in segregated ways but, rather, are ways of working and attitudes learnt predominantly through practice. For him, all students can and should be taught new social rules and strategies, but it is primarily through practicing and through repeated experiences of what these feels like that they can become internalised.

It is not sufficient to explain disadvantages as existing exclusively inside and, thus, open to being managed by an AP. What may be missing are the opportunities to build a relationship with organisations or groups outside such communities as well as offering a much broader curriculum, beyond just Maths and English. Indeed, to form a disposition to interact positively with a range of work-related tasks, people must be routinely exposed to these types of exchanges (Falk, 2006). Consideration of capital is of no formulaic value to learning strategies

that need to rationalise the time and space of young people. I therefore argue that organised learning generates an absence of purpose and reinforces restrictive capital. This is achieved through repetitious activities, which reproduce pedagogical rituals and routines that are akin to the Fordist workplace which in turn, inculcate a fixed identity and produce docile subjects. At its starkest, disabled men are passive consumers of 'rights' in AP, defined and delivered by professional others rather than as active agents and, thus, members of a community forming rights in the inter-change of duties. This does not mean risks and new opportunities will never be visible in a young man's existence in AP. On the contrary, there might be an increase in the extent to which opportunities appear in their lives and this will be vital to their choices. First, such risks are fixed, due to a student's vague knowledge of their capabilities and aptitude for negotiating the many *'social antagonisms and divisions existing in wider society'* (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 13). Second, they may not have access to networks that provide insights into the risk taking and changes still needed to take place in their work-related identity. Lastly, decisions are not easily reversed without personal cost. A capital-poor student might make poor choices in relation to risk and opportunity. This is not due to any aspiration difference in contrast to their mainstream peers but, rather, might well be due to the cost of failure being greater. Risk is, after all, rooted in the constantly changing forms of social exchange, obligation and through signs and symbols in different forms of education which are likely to make it difficult for school-aged students to become at ease in society. For example, as fixed transition routes into employment transform, so will the norms of reciprocity, and the reproduction of work-related identities. That is, young men recognising themselves in the models that are close at hand and acquiring identity relevant skills and knowledge by following in the footsteps of someone they know to be similar to them. Roberts's (2018) analysis of transitions of working-class young people to employment is one study that points out this period is no longer informed by culturally authentic support, which young men used to experience or understood. Advocates of AP, such as Malcolm (2021), see the role of professionals as central to providing the types of support needed to counter such trends. However, this underplays the *'interactive trouble'* (Freebody, 1995, 296) between a young person's social and work-related identities, such as a young men's failure to pick up on *'cultural cues'* (ibid, 296), and the role of social difference in dictating trust-based behaviour and gaining employment. Moreover, they fail to note the influence of a secular and consumerist society on young disabled men's relationships with other people around them. Certainly, the influences and impacts of careers related to distinct consumerist lifestyles, which have now come to symbolise the youth identity, are of relevance here (Hughes, 2005).

Conclusion

Despite shifts in English policy over the last 20 years (often separate from broader education policy changes and marked by irregular funding, and several reform proposals emanating from various stakeholders), AP is now seen as a positive in young people's lives but, at the same time, is situating some young people in different spaces and capitals than those in regular schools. This may justify new sets of social relations that are influential but restricted and are situated away from capitals that may make available more valued forms of self and identity. As I have outlined in this chapter, young disabled men from 'poor' backgrounds, literally and figuratively, already start from a point of significant disadvantage in relation to accessing, sustaining, and composing learning events, activities, and relations to overcome the many barriers to gain paid work. Thus, the capital that has most significance for young disabled men in APs is at risk of being unresponsive to an evolving work-related identity. This is, in part, because of the segregation, devaluation, and the abject positioning of a disabled male body in relation to the many deficit discourses that seem to reflect the priorities of middle class non-disabled students. Moreover, the networks, the support, and trust offered to young people may not lubricate their 'travels' through new urban economies. This can be summed up best by relationships with staff that are marked more by requirement, than reciprocity, and by their existences in detached spaces of capital production and consumption.

References

Archer, L., Hollingworth, S., and Mendick, H. (2010) Urban Youth and Schooling, Open University Press McGraw, Hill Education

Ball, S. (2008) *The Education Debate* Policy Press. London

Ball, S. (2018) The tragedy of state education in England: Reluctance, compromise and muddle— a system in disarray, *Journal of the British Academy*, 6, 207–238.

Ball, S. (2004) *Education for Sale! The Commodification of Everything*, King's Annual Education Lecture, November

Best, S. 2017. Aspiration, abjection and precariousness: The neo-liberal educator's desire for compliance. Power and Education [online] March

Bourdieu, P. (1986) The Forms of Capital in Richardson J. (eds) *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, p. 241-58. New York Greenwood Press

Das, R. (2006) Putting Social Capital in its Place Capital and Class: Value Capital and Beyond Vol. 90, Autumn Edition

Department for Education (2018a) *Creating opportunity for all: Our vision for alternative provision*: March. London: Department for Education.

Department for Education (2018b) *Forgotten Children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions*. London: Department for Education.

Evans, P. (1997) Introduction: Development Strategies across the Public-Private divide‟ In P. Evans, (ed) *State-Society Synergy* University of California Press

Eaude, T. (2006) *Children's Spiritual, Moral, Social, and Cultural Development,* Exeter: Learning Matters

Falk, C. (2006) *A Theory of Reciprocity: Games and Economic Behaviour,* Vol. 54, No. 2 February, p. 293-315

Field, J. (2005) *Social Capital and Lifelong Learning*: Policy Press, London

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish* London: Penguin

Freebody, P. (1995) Everyday Literacy Practices in and out of Schools in low *Socio-Economic Urban Economies* Vol.1 Melbourne Curriculum Corporation

Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*, Hamondsworth, Penguin

Giddens, A. (1998) The Third Way, Cambridge: Polity Press

Harris, R., & Clayton, B. (2018) Editorial: the importance of skills – but which skills?, International Journal of Training Research, 16:3, 195-199,

Hughes, B., Russell, R and Paterson, K. (2005) 'Nothing to be had off the peg': Consumption, identity and immobilization of young disabled people‟ *Disability and Society,* Vol. 20, No. 1 p. 3-17.

Johnston, C. and Bradford, S. (2019) Alternative spaces of failure, Disabled 'bad boys' in alternative further education provision *Disability & Society*, 34 (9-10), 1548-1572

Johnston, C. (2020) Dis/locating Imagined Futures: The disabled habitus and young disabled people in alternative provision *People, Place and Policy*, 14 (2), 173-186

Malcolm (2021) 'Relationships in Alternative Provision: A review of the literature', *Relationships Foundation* Available online: https://www.integrated.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/210512-Relationships-in-AP-literature-review-compressed.pdf

Morrow, V. (1999) Conceptualising social capital in relation to children and young people: A critical review, *Sociological review*, Vol. 47, No. 4 p. 744-765

Office for National Statistics (2019). *Disability and employment*, UK

Ofsted (2016) *Alternative provision;* the findings from Ofsted's three-year survey of schools' use of off-site alternative provision

Reay, D. (2009). Making Sense of White Working Class Educational Underachievement. Who Cares about the White Working Class? K. Pall Sveinsson. London, Runnymede Perspectives: 22-28.

Reay, D. (2017) *Miseducation* Bristol, UK: Policy Press

Roberts, S. (2018) *Young Working-class men in Transition*, Routldge; London

Sandberg S. (2008) Street capital: Ethnicity and violence on the streets of Oslo. *Theoretical* Criminology 2008;12 (2):153-171

Shilling, C. (2003) *The Body and Social Theory* (2nd edn) London, Sage

Stanton-Salzar, R. (1997) A social capital framework for understanding the socialisation of racial minority children and youths

Harvard Educational Review Vol. 67, No. 1, p. 1-40

Taylor, C., (2012) *Improving alternative provision*:

https://files.schudio.com/oswaldtwistleschool/files/files/Taylor_Report_on_AP.pdf

Thomson R.G. (2001) 'Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory' *NWSA Journal* Vol. 14, No. 1

Shilling, C. (2003) *The Body and Social Theory* (2nd edn) London, Sage

Thomson, P., and J. Pennacchia (2015) “Hugs and Behaviour Points: Alternative Education and the Regulation of ‘Excluded’ Youth.” International Journal of Inclusive Education 20, 6, 622–640