

# Negative or damaged learner identities? Moving beyond boundaries.

---

Dr Helen Bovill  
University of the West of England  
Bristol



# Background to this presentation

---

- 3 yr PhD study
  - Method/ology
    - Participants
  - Some findings



# Some explanations for differentiated post-16 participation - barriers.

---

- Institutional
- Situational
- Dispositional
- “The metaphor of ‘barriers’ to participation is an attractive one that apparently explains differences in patterns of participation between socio-economic groups, and also contains its own solution – removal of the barriers. So, if it is observed that participation in HE is costly and that potential students from lower income families have lower rates of participation then it can be hypothesised that cost is a barrier, and removal of cost a solution, to widening participation.”

(Gorard, *et.al.* 2006: 9)



# 'Wicked issues' & 'early life inequality'

---

- 'Conventionally qualified students from poorer backgrounds are just not there in sufficient number...' (Watson, 2006: 6).
- ...family poverty, lack of role models and a sense of 'not for us', coupled with poor experiences of initial schooling, can act to create a kind of lifelong attitude to learning – a negative learner identity.' (Gorard and Smith, 2007: 153).

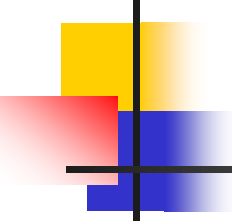
# Negative or damaged learner identities: 1?



---

- “This one teacher slagged me off all the time. He came round and said my family is really dumb, he was surprised at my sister’s GCSE results, he said ‘I thought she would fail, your brother’s going to fail as well’. And then he goes ‘there’s no point in you doing GCSE’ he did it in front of the whole class.”  
(Natasha, first interview October 2005).

# Negative or damaged learn identities: 2?



---

- He was not a very nice teacher. He liked the brainy ones as he put it and he made it obvious the ones that weren't so clever. I was in the stupid group; he used to call it the stupid group. Lots of us from this group were later found to have dyslexia. I'm slightly dyslexic, I didn't know until I got to college, I'd already got through my GCSEs by then (Emma, first interview July 2005).



# Implications of these findings

---

- Conventional policy responses as irrelevant for many – removal of barriers may not address underlying issues.
- Is it multiple disadvantage or negative school experiences that most affect the participants? More research needed.
- Is it negative or damaged learner identities that develop? Or is it simply rational responses based on social inequality?
- 1. Schools continue to ‘...fail to make any real connection with the lives of many working-class children.’ (Plummer, 2000: 29).
- 2. Many young people are ‘cooled out’ of ambitions. (Colley, *et.al.* 2003).
- ‘Education cannot compensate for society’. (Bernstein, B. 1971). But rather than focus on barriers do we need to focus on for example
  - 1. size, design, organisation of schools to best serve the needs of less resilient children and young people? (Wetz, 2006).
  - 2. Could we look toward international models of education more closely e.g. ‘social pedagogues’.



# References.

---

- Bernstein B (1971)"Education cannot compensate for society" in Cosin B et al *School and Society*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bovill, H. (2008) *How and Why do Working-Class Women Engage with the Structures of Higher Education? PhD thesis*. Bristol: University of the West of England.
- Cameron, C. (2006) *New ways of educating: Pedagogy and children's services: Final report to the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation*. London: Thomas Coram Research Unit.
- Colley, H., James, D., Tedder, M. and Diment, K. (2003) 'Learning as Becoming in Vocational Education and training: class, gender and the role of vocational habitus', in *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*. 55 (4): 471-497.
- Dunne, M. and Gazeley, L. (2008) 'Teachers, social class and underachievement', in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. 29 (5): 451-463.
- Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2006) *Review of Widening Participation Research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*. Bristol: HEFCE.
- Gorard, S. and Smith. E. (2007) 'Do barriers get in the way? A review of the determinants of post-16 participation, in *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. 12 (2): 141-158.
- Plummer, G. (2000) *Failing Working-Class Girls*. London: Trentham.
- Watson, D. (2006) *How to think about Widening Participation in UK Higher Education*. Bristol: HEFCE.
- Oxtoby, K. (2009) 'Social pedagogues in mainland Europe: Lessons from Europe on pedagogy', in *Community Care*. March 18<sup>th</sup>. Available at: [www.CommunityCare.co.uk](http://www.CommunityCare.co.uk) (Last Accessed: 3.9.2009).
- Wetz, J. (2006) *Holding Children in Mind Over Time*. Bristol: Bristol Education Initiative.