‘I think apprenticeships are the way forward.’ Alternative learning options in England for young people with lower attainment

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An enduring criticism of the English education system has been the disproportionate emphasis on academic qualifications, and the consequent neglect of academically less successful young people. Decades of successive reforms aimed at the vocational offer created a complex and fractured system with numerous courses and qualifications (Keep 2015), which, however are of relatively low status and function as a residual category for low achievers (Roberts & Atherton 2011).

Whilst policies at a European level focus on keeping young people with lower attainment in education or training, targeting potential ‘early school leavers’, this term is largely missing from the English policy discourse. Within a UK context, the role of education has instead been primarily interpreted from a labour market perspective (Ryan & Lőrinc 2015). Alternative provision therefore includes vocational courses and apprenticeships on the one hand; and foundation courses, traineeships and pre-apprenticeships on the other – the latter usually providing English and mathematics classes, as well as employability and other soft skills training.

This paper presents the findings of our research involving five alternative learning courses in London, (one foundation learning; one pre-apprenticeship; three apprenticeship schemes). In this presentation we concentrate on apprenticeships and will discuss the opportunities and challenges presented by this pathway.

The apprentices who took part in our research praised its many benefits: acquiring in-demand skills and real-life work experience, earning a salary, and being in a more mature learning environment. Staff members however highlighted issues around the quality of training provision; governance and funding of apprenticeships; and communication issues between the various partners involved. While all agreed that apprenticeships have a great potential to answer many of the challenges young people face in their school-to-work transition (Hogarth, Gambin & Hasluck 2012; Sloman 2014), it was evident that the scheme is not yet recognised as a valuable and effective learning pathway by many schools and parents. Apprenticeships have the potential to grow into a highly valued and successful educational alternative, well suited for those who prefer hands-on training to academic studies. However, our fieldwork has also found that in the context of rising tuition fees in higher education, high youth unemployment (Ainley & Allen 2013) and demand for apprenticeships greatly outstripping supply, it is uncertain to what extent low achievers can take full advantage of this promising alternative learning option.

References

Ainley, Patrick & Martin Allen (2013) Running up a Down-Escalator in the Middle of a Class Structure Gone Pear-Shaped. Sociological Research Online 18(1)8


