

# ‘You can’t get there from here’

**Carlene Cornish** *details her research into marginalisation and the gatekeeping function of GCSEs\**

**N**owadays, engagement in education is portrayed as fundamental for successful competition in the neoliberalist knowledge economy. This ideology was embedded in Raising of Participation Age (RPA) legislation, the idea being that participation in post-16 education and training would promote social inclusion as well as enhancing academic and employment prospects.

To what extent, then, can former NEET and socially disengaged youth benefit from re-engagement provision as per RPA mandate? Ordinarily, they are considered ‘hardest to reach’ (DFE, 2004), the majority of this social group having no or lower GCSE grades. The study discussed here focused on the Level 1 Skills to Succeed (S2S) course, designed to attract and re-engage former NEET and socially excluded youth. Empirical research was conducted at an FE college in East Anglia with S2S tutors and 26 students from the 2013-14 and 2014-15 cohorts. Multiple methods of data collection were used, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. The study demonstrates that S2S students find themselves in a very competitive college environment; one which facilitates marginalisation and institutionalises a system of success and failure.

To illustrate this, consider Zette’s narrative: ‘I was doing health and social care level 1 last year and then I was going to do level 2 but I did not get the right GCSEs. So I thought that this course did GCSEs but it didn’t . . . they do ‘functional skills’ . . . so it was a bit of a thing for me. I don’t know . . .

I’m a little bit on and off about the course, really. It’s distressing having to do a level 1 S2S course! It’s hard because I could have gone on to level 2 but now I have to be here for an extra year. I don’t want to waste a year here on this course. My English is like a D and my maths like a F. But I don’t understand why I cannot do my GCSE maths if I don’t get a D? I don’t understand that! No, the tutors did not explain why I cannot do it. I would have thought that if you did not get the right GCSEs you can re-take them whatever they are? I didn’t know it had to be a certain grade for me to be able to re-take them . . . I need to take my GCSEs but I don’t know where to re-take them?’ (Interview with Zette - field notes November 2014)

Zette previously took a level 1 health and social care course. Her aim was to advance onto level 2 of this course, her ultimate ambition being to pursue a career in social work. However, Zette’s trajectory took a diversion when she discovered a key obstacle: she did not have the right GCSEs, and therefore could not advance. As an alternative, she was encouraged to enrol on Skills to Succeed (S2S) in the belief that she could still boost her grades.

Zette expected to do maths and English GCSE classes as part of S2S provision, but soon discovered a further obstruction: GCSE provision was heavily regulated within the college; only students with D grades in English and/or maths could gain access to GCSE classes. This imperative is similarly echoed in new government policies such as *Crossing the Line: Improving success rates among students retaking English and maths GCSEs* (Porter, 2015). Figures for the UK as

a whole showed a dramatic fall in GCSE results. Only about one in four of those retaking these two core subjects gained a C or above. In England alone, the A\*-C pass rate dropped from 68.8 per cent in 2015 to 66.6 per cent (*The Guardian*, 25 August 2016).

At the college studied, GCSEs have become a form of 'capital', a factor justified by the tutors' knowledge that very few students succeed at retakes (not just GCSEs). In essence, GCSEs have become a sought-after academic tariff which young people must pay in order to gain access to 'desirable resources' and higher levels of study or training. For Zette this meant that the prospect of resitting and improving upon her F grade in GCSE was diminished. She experienced further exclusion when she discovered that, although she met the D-grade entry requirement for English GCSE classes, S2S tutors prioritised Functional Skills - judging her unsuitable to cope with GCSE-related course demands. Such a decision may reflect tutors' awareness that they are in effect paid by results, such that it may often be better for them to 'play safe' and aim at a target they know they can hit, rather than risk going for GCSEs, even if doing so might 'pay' more. But other underpinning educational processes and S2S work practices would also have contributed to it, and in the end Zette lost the opportunity to do GCSE English, a key requirement in her situation.

### Despair

A substantial minority of students who were in a similar position to Zette voiced despair, but also dissent. For example, Adam said: '... Being honest with you ... look, look at the type of work we are learning ... adjectives and verbs. Yes, look ... I find it all a laugh! I want to learn proper English and maths ... you know what I mean? Not this stuff ... this is a waste of time.' In a profound way, this narrative reveals a student's appraisal of the type of education being made available in S2S. For students like Adam, re-engagement in education was fundamental; he needed to improve on previous academic failure. Maths and English were taught on the S2S course but the standard and quality of this provision were called into question by this student. He found it 'a waste of time' - his time. Access to what was considered 'real and meaningful' education seemed restricted. With this in mind, the possible influences of broader rhetoric and negative stereotypes of S2S students could not be overlooked. Nonetheless, Adam stated his desire to learn 'proper' English and maths. Raising objections, he seemed determined to make visible

the type of education on offer to him and others in the classroom. Hence his claim, 'look, look at the type of work we are learning'. 'Proper' education was found lacking - at present, S2S education is construed as a 'laugh'.

There is a clear need for young people to re-take GCSEs. In both Adam's case and Zette's the aim was to obtain higher academic grades that could grant access to higher levels of further study and a social work career. However, both students learnt an important lesson: GCSE provision was firmly placed out of reach for students with low or no prior GCSE qualifications. Although Zette, Adam and similar students were participating in RPA provision, scope for them to improve upon previous academic results was in reality diminished. They knew they were stuck with their existing low grades.

On top of this, the option to undertake work-related or practical learning was practically non-existent for S2S students. Traineeship provision as a stepping stone to apprenticeships was not offered. This institution, like many others with satisfactory or lower quality ratings, was prohibited from delivering traineeship provision, and although it has since achieved a 'good' quality rating, traineeship provision is still not delivered, leaving apprenticeship as the only option.

But here again there are complications. Higher GCSE grades were an essential prerequisite for apprenticeship provision too, the entry requirements for this being four to five A\* - C GCSEs with at least a D grade in maths and English. In a profound way, academic competence and qualifications featured as major requirements to access industry-related training. As a consequence, the majority of S2S participants could not apply to do apprenticeship training. The S2S ethos was contradictory. It claimed to be an employability course, yet did not offer students prospects for actual work-related training, provision being entirely classroom-based.

### Stringent

The minority who could apply for apprenticeships were further disadvantaged when they discovered that entry to this provision was subject to still more stringent criteria. Space was limited and, given the high entry requirements, at this college, level 1 S2S students were competing with BTEC Level 3 and degree students for access to apprenticeships. The academic conditions were tough: recruitment policies were strict, space was limited, class sizes were capped, and students were required to find for themselves employers who would offer an apprenticeship position. On this, Kyle stated: 'I'd like to do an apprenticeship but it's not as easy as

that, there is obviously a lot of people going for it too and there's not enough spaces. I think there should be more apprenticeships because if you look on the website there's not actually that much.' (Interview with Kyle - field notes November 2014)

Kyle was aware that it was difficult to get an apprenticeship. GCSE grades have become an important yardstick to govern access and determine which types of students are allowed to participate in apprenticeship and hence the labour market. Again, then, S2S students were restricted to classroom-based education, and within this work simulations which could be bizarrely unrealistic.

Importantly, educational policies such as those in the White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010) played a key role in establishing the academic ideal reflected in the required five A\* - C GCSE grades including maths and English. Although the stated aim is to raise academic standards and qualification levels amongst post-16 youth, Zette's experience shows that it has also reproduced broader systems of inequality and exclusion within educational settings. The academic ideal operated under structural constraints, policies and practices. Organisational and government policies regulated the re-taking of GCSEs. Access to essential and 'meaningful' provision was restricted. S2S students therefore faced exclusion from a range of educational opportunities, placing higher levels of vocational courses, apprenticeship training and the opportunity to re-take GCSEs out of their reach. Stringent academic conditions and a high GCSE tariff brought them into direct competition with better qualified young people. The forms of 'capital' that most S2S students possess have been progressively devalued.

### Unequal

Commentators with a critical focus on the education system, for example Simmons et al (2011) and Ainley & Allen (2016; 2010; 2013), have drawn attention to the fact that the system itself contributes to structurally unequal academic and employment opportunities. At the college studied, GCSE provision facilitated social exclusion and inequality, with most S2S participants on the receiving end. It was used to construct an intellectual divide, segregating those with low prior attainments from those deemed more academic. On a broader scale, such practices arguably facilitate a divide along class, ethnicity and gender lines, with some judged to be 'inside' and others 'marginalised', 'socially excluded', 'chavified' or 'precaritised'. S2S students experienced uncertainty and

marginalisation, and it is questionable whether engagement in this form of education can lead to rewarding jobs of the type referred to in rhetoric about the knowledge economy. On the contrary, for them engagement in a prolonged period of post-16 education and training, far from guaranteeing the benefits claimed for RPA, may actually be diminishing the opportunities it purports to open up.

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### **\*A longer discussion of Carlene's research is available as follows:**

Cornish, C. (2017) 'Case Study: level 1 Skills to Succeed (S2S) students and the gatekeeping function of GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) at an FE college', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, Volume 22, Number 1, March 2017 pages 7-21