

Lost Generation? New strategies for youth and education

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Abstract

The article outlines the main points in my new book with Martin Allen. Published by Continuum in April 2010, it questions whether young people today really are a 'lost generation' as they have been called by the media. Or whether 'new strategies for youth and education' can bring together student and non-student youth in new forms of learning with their teachers through which the latter could recover their expertise if not their professionalism. This question is critical to the future of Education Studies to which our book sees itself as a contribution. It is addressed to teachers and students alike and builds upon our previous publication Education make you fick, innit? (Tufnell Press 2008). This was developed from an Education Studies core course in education policy. Now we suggest that, rather than being 'lost,' many young people know perfectly well where they are but are 'stuck'. Anxious to enter employment, repay debts and move on with their lives, they are a generation all dressed up but with nowhere to go. Inevitably, amongst the immediate consequences of this will be even more pressure for top grades in examinations to gain HE places with higher fees combined with pressure for shorter, local and more vocational courses. Concomitantly, many young people may begin to believe that education is losing its legitimacy as an agent for moving their lives forward into a meaningful and productive adult world. Hopefully the article can contribute to debate in Educationalfutures on how best to confront this development.

Keywords: student and non-student youth, apprenticeships, transition, Education Studies

Introduction

Martin Allen and my book, *Lost Generation? New strategies for youth and education*, (2010) provides an alternative account of the relationship between young people, the education system and the occupational structure. Our arguments are as follows:

- The collapse of heavy industry and its associated apprenticeships has pulled apart the post-war class pyramid so that the traditional manually working class has been recast into new divisions of knowledge and skill. Meanwhile, the application of new technology and the growth of services

- has resulted in the proletarianisation of previously secure professions as the automation and outsourcing of skilled manual work (Braverman 1974) was subsequently applied to deskill many non-manual middle-class occupations. Simultaneously, the introduction of new management techniques has transformed many 'professions' like teaching so that they are reduced towards the conditions of waged labour. The majority of the population is thus now part of a new 'working-middle' of society.
- Education to all levels has been complicit in 'upgrading' occupations in expanded services, sales, middle-management and administration. It has provided supposedly higher level courses certifying the 'skills' required for many of these new and often graduatised jobs. It has also contributed to 'degrading' jobs requiring no or largely worthless vocational qualifications at the base of the occupational structure, many of them part-time and all low paid and insecure. These developments have occurred 'in a context of persistent labour surpluses' (Roberts 2009) following the Thatcher government officially ending the 1944 Employment Act's commitment to full employment. Since then education policy has been substituted for employment policy which was abandoned to the global market. This was symbolised by the absorption of the Employment Department into the Department for Education and Employment in 1995.
 - Rather than resembling the diamond that would result from sustained absolute social mobility pulling more into the middle, the class structure has become pear shaped. This is reflected in a number of recent statistical studies of the occupational structure which show large numbers of people relying on wages and salaries that are well below the mathematical 'average'. According to Andrew Lansley (TUC 2009), for instance, though the 'mean' pre-tax income of the population could be calculated at £463 per week for the year 2006/7, the 'median' – the actual 'middle' – came out at just £377 with the 'mode' – in statistical terms, the 'most common' – even less at just over £200. The Hills Report published in January 2010, shows approximately 50% of the population earning below £23,000 per annum with only 10% above £45,000 and about 1 in 5 of the population surviving on £15,000.

The outcome

The result in schools, colleges and universities is like climbing up a down escalator where you have to run faster and faster simply to stand still. 'You have to go to university to get what 30 years ago you didn't even have to have A-levels for', as an FE student quoted in Ainley and Bailey (1997, 95) said. Rather than helping young people to 'move up', securing educational qualifications is now essential to avoid falling to the bottom. This is also true of older employees hanging on to their jobs with perpetual training and re-training. This fuels the

public hysteria over an education which is increasingly dysfunctional and serves largely as a means of social control (see below and Mizen 2004).

The current recession has seen the unemployed, or semi-employed, so-called 'underclass', which Marx called 'the Reserve Army of Labour' (see further below), continue to grow. In the July Office of National Statistics figures reported 14/7/2010, 2.47 million people were officially estimated unemployed (787,000 long term for more than a year), although the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicted a rise of another three-quarters of a million as a result of anticipated public-sector cuts (*Guardian* 11/6/10). However, only 1.46 million were claiming Job Seeker's Allowance as many had simply given up looking for work or were working part-time without signing on, adding up to c.8 million 'economically inactive', including many of the c.2.5m. under- and post-graduate students with another c.4m in some sort of FE or training.

Part-time work includes not only those working one or two days a week but also those on short-term contracts whose numbers grow with more agency working on still more flexible employment arrangements. Whether contracted in as 'self-employed' or part of the growing 'periphery' to whom work is contracted out as demand dictates, many of these part-time workers juggle several jobs simultaneously. Self-employment here becomes self-exploitation. In what the press has called 'part-time Britain', most students and trainees are amongst the 27% of all workers now in part-time jobs, while 39% of all further, higher and adult students and trainees are also part-time.

What is extraordinary and unprecedented about these figures is that the pattern of part-time working has changed. Although – as was the case even in the heyday of (male) full employment – most part-time workers are women, more women proportionately now work full-time and have careers as it now takes two 'bread-winners' to support a family. As well as many older semi-retired men and women who have also often worked part-time – part-time, insecure and casual workers now include not only the so-called 'underclass' to which the 'rough' and 'unskilled' section of the traditionally manually working class was relegated in the 1980s. In the absence of youth and graduate jobs, their numbers have been augmented by many school and college graduates. Many more graduate jobs – in the media, IT and ubiquitous 'consultancies' – have also joined those, like many artists and musicians, who have always worked in this way and who are therefore only as good as their last gig. Like actors, they are never actually out of work but often 'resting'!

Rather than 'employer demand for skills', it is the absence of work – particularly the disappearance of specific 'youth jobs' – that has been the reason for young people staying in full-time education for longer and experiencing a more 'prolonged' transition to adulthood – that is if they are able to make a transition at all. In the absence of work, education has little other rationality than to become the main instrument of social control of youth by enhancing existing divisions

amongst young people. Students are divided from non-students but also amongst each other in a competing hierarchy of post-16 institutions. Only some of those from elite universities are likely to be guaranteed 'graduate jobs'. Others – possibly up to 1 in 3 – are likely to be 'underemployed,' having to take jobs that have previously been done by non-graduates, that is assuming they are able to find a job at all. As many of those in their late teens remain dependent upon their parents, we argue that this dependency will continue for much longer as they accumulate up to £27,000-plus debt at raised interest rates, following the proposed tripling of fees in the government's reaction to the Browne Review. They also are faced with a housing market which, despite moving from boom to bust, still remains difficult to enter as 89% of first-time buyers have to rely on parental help (*Independent* 30/6/10). Rather than making a new type of 'prolonged transition', with up to one third of men and one fifth of women between 20 and 34 years old still living with their parents, we wonder whether many will make any transition at all!

Collective appreciation of this increasingly common situation has been undermined by the on-going class transformation outlined above. The 'standards agenda' in schools and the 'widening participation' programme in HE have also contributed to 'individualising' or rather 'disorganising' (Ainley and Vickerstaff 1993) social class. So it is not surprising that surveys and interview feedback show students, even though they are aware that different types of courses and institutions attract people with different social characteristics, consider class differences as being unimportant in the determination of destinies and see their college or university as treating everybody 'the same' (Ainley and Allen 2010, 127). Though becoming increasingly high stakes and competitive, 'learning' has also been reinvented as a personalised affair. The implication of being asked to take responsibility for their own learning is that students are also expected to regard their own failure as the consequence of individual inadequacies – 'You only have yourself to blame' if you do not achieve, as their F&HE teachers tell them (Ainley and Allen *ibid*).

This new type of fatalism can be contrasted with the collective culture of working-class boys about to leave their Midlands' secondary modern school in the 1970s described by Willis in 1977 where the 'lads' had already taken on many of the characteristics of the un-/semi-skilled working-class male factory shop-floor culture they were about to enter. They were amongst the last to make this relatively smooth transition from school to work which was invariably soon followed by a process of leaving home and 'settling down', perhaps after a short period of what was then called 'juvenile delinquency' (Downes 1966). Phil Brown's *Ordinary Kids* (1987) also continued to make a collective transition even as apprenticeships collapsed but some new opportunities became available, especially for girls. In comparison, the post-war middle class followed a parallel transition with a period of attending minority HE (c.7% at the time the Robbin's Report (HMSO 1963) recommended expansion) away from home and returning briefly before commencing a chosen career. Following *The Polytechnic*

Experiment 1965-1992 (Pratt 1998) and widening participation to mass HE, all this has changed; although the latest Coalition proposals, based on Browne and the Public Spending Review, are perhaps an attempt to reverse previous policy.

While recognising the role of business and mass media in the promotion of a new identity culture, we dispute post-modern claims that the disappearance of the 'old certainties' of class from the consciousness of young people will result in their 'forcible emancipation' and require them to develop new strategies to survive the transition from youth to adulthood (Ainley and Allen 2010, 129). Neither is it the case that inter-generational inequalities are now the main dividing line within society as Willetts alleges (2009). We argue that, even though young people may not be 'class conscious' in the traditional sense, class differences run through the process of transition from youth to adulthood. In particular, differences in economic power continue to determine access to the 'good schools' that ensure class advantages are maintained. For example, the 7% of the population (12% in London; 20% in Bristol) still able to afford private education can continue to be assured that not only are 50% of 'A' grades at A-level achieved by this sector, but that one third of those being privately education will achieve three grade 'As' and thus that a place at a Russell university, while not certain, is much more likely. As Peter Wilby pithily pointed out, 'All you need to succeed in our meritocracy is privilege' (*Guardian* 17/6/06).

Even as average student debt continues to rise along with fees, by 2010 up to 100,000 students were predicted to be living in 'hand out homes' bought by their parents (*Telegraph* 26/1/08), while those from routine/manual backgrounds received less than half of the amount from their parents compared with those from professional/managerial backgrounds (*ibid*). They are also the ones more likely to be living at home and attending local universities on grounds of cost. They are least able to afford continued post-graduate study or to take unpaid internships. In these respects these 'new types of students' to whom participation has been widened may have more in common with 'non-students' than they do with many of their campus-based counterparts. Indeed, the upper class remains 'the most class conscious' and 'best organised', despite being 'the smallest' class (Roberts 2001, 161-192) with 'helicopter parents' ensuring their offspring thrive in the best universities and enjoy the pick of the 'first jobs' (Ainley and Allen 2010, 116-7).

As graduates on average earn more than non-graduates and Russell graduates more still, it is quite understandable that young people continue to queue in large numbers for higher education despite the speculations about just how much of a premium graduates may enjoy. However, while the relative advantages of being a graduate might hold up in a 'labour queue' for employment, the ratio between graduate earnings and graduate costs will fall as the latter rise and the balance between well-paid permanent employment and casualised 'Mcjobs' continues to tilt. Elias and Purcell (2004) predict the 'graduatisation' of a further tranche of jobs, mainly in retailing.

In response to a 10% rise in UCAS applications, the New Labour government agreed to fund up to 20,000 additional HE places for 2010. The coalition government reduced this to 10,000. With the number of applications even higher this year – including those reapplying from last year, thousands of students could be forced to take an(other) unplanned ‘gap year’. There will be one more ‘fat year’ in 2011 before four ‘lean years’ as cuts in teaching grant to all but STEM subjects of 10% per annum from 2012-6 are accompanied by a possible tripling of fees. Meanwhile, up to a third of graduates anticipate occupations for which they are over-qualified (www.highfliers.co.uk) and so as graduates move into non-graduate jobs, the incomes of those with lower level qualifications are suppressed still further as they are forced to look for lower paid employment whilst many young people cannot find work at all.

Overcoming education’s credibility crunch...

Education faces its own credibility crunch as unemployment and fees rise. This affects not only students mortgaging their increasingly uncertain futures for fees and universities speculating in sub-prime student markets but the whole education bubble of recent years. With qualification and grade inflation from GCSEs to degree classifications apparent to all except Vice Chancellors and exam boards, concern persists about quality – including the basic literacy and numeracy of those deemed university ‘graduates’. Not only in primary schools, teaching to the test has made subject knowledge and understanding a thing of the past as students prepare for a succession of competitive exams that start earlier and end later. Even where formal study allows genuine intellectual development, educational participation starts from the largely instrumental motive of gaining labour market credentials. This is recognised as ‘overschooling’ when school, college and university graduates fail to find employment comparable to the level of qualification they have acquired as the quality of this level of qualification declines. Graduates’ inability to capitalise on their investment in time and money leads to the conclusion that *‘Education make you fick, innit?’* (Allen and Ainley 2007). Consequently, a crisis of legitimacy is endemic for pupils/students and their teachers/lecturers at all levels of learning from primary to postgraduate schools. Anecdotally, this reaches even to Oxford tutorials which tutors complain are turned into cramming sessions by tutees anxious to pump them for correct exam answers. Nevertheless, some students at what *The Times Guide* calls ‘Good Universities’ are sometimes more aware of what is really going on than those at the (by implication) ‘Bad Universities’ who lack the confidence to confront their personal investment in believing the promise of professionalisation that has been held out to them and their parents by widening participation (see Ainley 2008a).

This is because when there is no genuine community of practice for which education or training prepares people then the identity of learners becomes the object of (ex)change independent of any use value. This alienation is occurring at

all levels of state and private sector learning but especially amongst the mass of university students, for example those for whom their increasingly packaged university experience is conceived primarily in terms of a 'once in a lifetime' 'rite of passage' or 'transitional experience'. The result, as Lave and McDermott write (2002) following Marx (1844), is

'Alienated learning... "external to the learner", not freely undertaken... It is activity experienced as suffering. Alienated learners are only themselves when they are not learning... Such learning does not satisfy a need: it is coerced, forced, and a means to satisfy needs external to it...' (pp.19-48)

Rather than finding, or becoming themselves, 'It is a loss of self.'

The situation has long been familiar in the USA where, as Roberts records, 'cohorts of young adults graduate with high but imprecise job aspirations' (2008, 57). The US pattern, Roberts argues, has been universalised, superseding dual academic and vocational systems in Eastern and Western Europe. In response, Graff (2003, 12) notes 'The spread of college "first year experience" courses...'. These 'generally stop short of providing intellectual socialization' and, as Graff continues, 'need to go beyond teaching study skills, time-management, using computers, and test-taking to give students more help in entering the academic culture of arguments and ideas.' Thus, the place to build a critique of institutionalised and alienated learning is, as Graff says (*ibid*, 274), to think through the problem of education 'from the view-point not of the already educated but of the clueless student for whom the very words "education" and "academic" are opaque'. This is the situation widening participation has created and this is where we must begin to address it.

The role of Education Studies...

As I have argued previously (2009), as a field of practice to which a body of knowledge can be applied, Education Studies shares common features with other disciplinary fields. It is also unique in that its field – learning in the widest sense – is also what its students do – learn. Study is also what all students are supposed to do and hence Ranson (1993) argued for the centrality of education as the common focus of all HE study. Practically and immediately the most that may be achieved institutionally is indicated by Bell *et al.* (2009). They seek to 'reconstruct the student as producer' (126), drawing upon Boyer's 1999 *Reinventing Undergraduate Education*, as well as Humboldt's 'organic scholarship', to go beyond the rather peripheral pioneering of, for example, the University of Warwick's Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research and the larger movement for student as researcher (Jenkins 2004). Instead, Bell *et al* aim 'to construct knowledge through increasing participation within different communities of practice' (130). This returns to the problem of the absence of

such real communities in the absence of students taking 'society as their school', as the Chinese slogan once had it.

Instead, academics draw upon students' life experiences for validity, contributing to 'the autobiographical turn' in student writing (Chamberlayne *et al* 2000). I have experimented with this myself but come to find it wanting in teaching sociology of education at Greenwich (Ainley 2008 *o.c.*). Too much group work also confirms these limiting tendencies and reinforces student timidity at publicly addressing audiences they are not familiar with, at worst leading to 'the blind leading the blind'. As Graff says, 'Let's not break up into small groups!' (179). Moreover, it is hard in the humanities and social sciences – though it should not be in Education Studies – for academics to present courses that are relevant to student concerns because their modularised offerings are usually disconnected from one another. They rarely cohere as cumulative programmes of study but make a virtue of choice between the very different styles and perspectives presented by their lecturers. Students then attempt to suss these out for each lecturer on each course. 'Carousel' courses spreading through the humanities and social sciences may be delivered on a repetitive treadmill by experts in their area, like accountancy, marketing, economics and etc. in Business Studies but they do not necessarily cohere into a body of knowledge in its own right. At least Business may have a vocational relevance but in the USA the English curriculum has 'bloated until it includes soap operas, Looney Tunes, muscle magazines, bubble-gum cards and graffiti', as Frederick Crews (2006) has the fictional N. Mack Hobbs proudly declaring. Yet in US universities, there is at least – as in Scotland – a first-year foundation. Often in the USA, these are often given over to 'teaching the conflicts courses' of the type that Crews satirises (but only because the conflicts have, as he sees it, become so absurd in the USA).

The crisis of student (academic) literacy is combined with one of legitimacy as the widened student body desperately hopes their expensively purchased degrees will gain them more than 'a Sainsbury's job' on graduation. This is forcing academics to agree what is important in the subjects they teach as they seek to enable new generations of students to adapt tertiary level learning in the way comprehensive school teachers previously struggled to open secondary schooling to the mass of the population. That this is happening first in 'The Bad Universities' (above), contributes to the denigration of such efforts, seen by the 'Good' ones as abandoning 'academic standards' or 'quality' (Filippakou and Williams 2009). And indeed, it is in these mass institutions that the pressure is on to reduce traditional programmes towards two-year degrees, either as Foundation 'degrees' or, as in Vince Cable's suggestions (*BBC News* 15/7/2010), as three-year courses delivered over two years to include the summer in order to utilise plant and staff more efficiently; or merely as preliminary to post-graduate study when 'real HE' can begin. We can also expect collapses of institutions into residual 'learning hubs' distributing their remaining functions by distance learning to home-based students. Already, these are also the institutions where most students live locally and are in part-time if not full-time employment, as well as

having the greatest needs and disabilities such as dyslexia. Campus universities meanwhile will seek to distinguish themselves by offering a 'real' – if increasingly packaged – 'student experience', different again from 'the balls and the boat race' artificiality of an otherwise 'nerdy' elite. Raised and differentiated fees will accentuate and heighten instead of concealing these differences. (On such a typology of international, researching and selecting universities as against national, teaching and recruiting ones, plus local, training and clearing institutions see Ainley 2008b.)

To contribute to countering these predictable developments, there should be an emphasis upon the contribution to knowledge that students can make in their chosen academic disciplines or fields of practice through independent research, scholarship, creation or application in the form of their final year dissertation. In many programmes of undergraduate study – including often ES – a large part of the final degree mark is constituted by the final year dissertation, inquiry project or investigation, like the 'end of degree show' in art and related subjects. The coherence that this original contribution imposes upon their programme of study as a whole should be made clear to students at induction and the first and second years of their programme should build towards it. Thus students will be progressively introduced to the debates – if not 'conflicts' – that are integral to the on-going constitution of their chosen subject discipline or area of application preparatory to making a contribution to it. They will also be introduced to the canon of texts, case studies and experiments as exemplars presenting the conceptual tools with which to order the field's information base. They can then recognise that the truth claims they make in the wider world of public debate and professional practice – to which their final dissertation makes a small contribution, accord with the accepted criteria of scientific and logical proof and so go beyond personal admissions of opinions, beliefs or prejudices.

Above all, educational community should be preserved in the Humboldtian dialogue of teachers with students and this is where research and investigation, scholarship and experiment should find their place. As then-Minister for Higher Education, Bill Rammell, argued in a speech at Warwick University in October 2006, 'an understanding of the research process (asking the right questions in the right way; conducting experiments; and collating and evaluating information) must be a key part of any undergraduate curriculum.' The importance of conventional presentation, including spelling and grammar, punctuation and paragraphing in academic and other writing can then be stressed, including the reasons for correct citation and referencing (rather than the confused fetish different academic instructions often make of the Harvard referencing system).

Conclusion

Education or institutionalised learning in its widest sense can be defined as the critical transmission of culture down the generations. 'Really useful knowledge' (and skills) are recovered from the past in order to discover new knowledge and skills for the future. That education at all levels has failed in this purpose is the

most damning indictment that can be made of its record from Big Bang in 1986 to Big Crunch in 2008. Incidentally, this was when the majority of recent and current undergraduates grew up but their 'widening participation' only contributed to exacerbating social disparities in an increasingly unequal society (David 2009).

Many of them are hoping desperately that their educational investment of time and money will pay off when and if the economy picks up. Instead, the emergency budget of the coalition government and fears of a European if not global meltdown are likely to exacerbate a prolonged depression, if not 'double dip' recession. Even if there were recovery of a conventional kind, many school leavers would be displaced by graduates trading down in the jobs market. Resumption of business as usual is in any case impossible without inflicting irreparable damage on the ecology that sustains human life. Debt is also forgotten and the tensions of dependent living are glossed over in a voraciously consumerist culture. Many graduates wake to a prolonged hangover before finally facing 'with sober senses the real conditions of their existence' and by then it is often too late. Their youth has been consumed by a society that has no place for them and an economy in which they function only as a reserve army of labour, surplus to employment.

As Gamble (2009) says of Marx:

'His analysis suggested that capitalism could go on renewing itself through successive cycles of boom, crisis and slump until it had exhausted all room for further investment and opportunities for profitable accumulation, and that the pragmatic as opposed to the moral case for replacing capitalism would not arise until alternatives to capitalism were already present within it, and capitalism was visibly becoming less and less able to function successfully. But if Marx was correct that would not occur until a fully globalised economy had been created, with all nations and all territories drawn fully into capitalist production, in which production methods had advanced to the point where most production processes were fully automated, and most of the population had become surplus to the requirements of the production process.' (48-9)

Our alternative description of the increasing dysfunctional education system suggests that this process is beginning with the 'angry and defrauded young' who Kipling memorialised in his *Epitaphs of the War 1914-18* for the first *Lost Generation*. This is a generational crisis for it invokes *The Youth Question* that Phil Cohen rethought in 1997: how society integrates the new generations into its on-going structures in order to maintain itself by making the future resemble the past. The renegotiation of relations between the generations and the genders which is required, not only by underemployment in part-time working but also by the housing crisis, involves recognition of interdependence rather than the ever-receding goal of transition to an independent identity. New identifications of self

with others and with the world will be required of future generations but education can only help people achieve these if it abandons the individualism and competition it has promoted for so long. Teachers and others who work with young people can contribute to undoing the damage of a market culture rather than sustaining illusions in it. Education Studies has a central role to play in this renegotiation. Through its focus on learning it affords a means to regain not only our self-respect but our expertise as teachers.

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