Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning
Volume 23, Number 1, June 2021 ISSN: 1466-6529

Hidden speech, private thoughts: a case study in peer conversation and educational choice

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Abstract The role of peer and friendship-group conversation in educational and career choices is of great relevance to widening participation (WP) practitioners, but has been little studied in recent years. We interviewed young people and WP practitioners in Carlisle, an isolated city in the UK, to interrogate this subject. We found that young people were clearly discussing their future choices, sometimes overtly and sometimes in 'unacknowledged conversations'. However some topics and ambitions were seen as 'too private' to discuss; all of our young people had a plan for the future, but many believed that some of their friends did not, possibly because of this constraint. We also discuss the role of older students in informing choices, the phenomenon of 'clustering' that can lead to young people funnelling into certain options, and the role that geographical isolation might play in exacerbating some effects. Finally we give some recommendations for WP practice based on these findings.

Key words Peer conversation; widening participation practice; isolated area; friendship group

Introduction

The effort to widen participation for under-represented groups in higher education (HE) in the UK is a decades-long endeavour[i] involving many bodies and significant amounts of funding. One of the major actors in this landscape is the Uni Connect network[ii], consisting of regional partnerships between universities, colleges and other local partners offering outreach activities to target groups. The partnership is staffed by practitioners who work with

young people to increase their understanding of educational choices.

Hello Future[iii] is the Cumbrian arm of Uni Connect, working in an area of the country which is geographically isolated and with poor social mobility. Conversations with young people in their target groups led practitioners to wonder how peer interactions fed into decision-making processes – whether or not future educational/career choices were a subject of conversation for 14-16 year olds, whether such interactions tended to support a decision to go to university or work against it, and how the particular geographic circumstances of the catchment area might modulate these aspects. Hello Future was particularly concerned with how the answers to these questions might illuminate its widening participation (WP) practice.

This research project has grown out of the above questions. We interviewed both young learners and WP practitioners in order to answer the following questions:

- Do young people discuss their educational or career futures? If so, how much and in what way?
- Are there aspects of such conversations, or other peer interactions, which are specific to the Cumbrian experience?
- How might practitioners wish to adapt their outreach activities in the light of the above information?

Literature review

There are many influences on young people's educational and career decision making – school structures, careers guidance, individual teachers, extra-curricular activity, family and peer/friendship groups – and these are the subject of an extensive body of research built up over several decades. The literature concerning the specific role of peer groups within this broader category is not as extensive, although it contains some interesting findings. Some recent work, for example, has focused on quantitative studies of peer group ability on test scores and educational choices (Battiston, Hedges, Lazarowicz, & Speckesser, 2020; Mendolia, Paloyo, & Walker, 2018). Quantitative analyses of friendship networks, income and family background and their influence on educational trajectories have been performed by both Burgess (Burgess & Umaña-Aponte, 2011) and Kiuru (Kiuru, Nurmi, Aunola, & Salmela-Aro, 2009). The peer and/or friendship group is therefore situated within the literature as one of a number of influences on educational aspirations.

When it comes to the type of qualitative analysis of content and frequency of conversation that we undertake in this study, however, the literature is not extensive, and some of what there is dates back to the 1990s (Galotti & Mark, 1994; Taylor, 1992). Taylor's work from 1992 is particularly relevant to our study, and is ripe for revisiting; researchers conducted paired interviews with 392 young people from 10 English schools and found that friends were seen as a significant influence on post-16 choices. Girls were more strongly influenced by their friends, a finding echoed by Galotti & Mark. Other relevant findings include those of Winterton & Irwin, who conducted a UK-based qualitative case study of young women's expectations of going to university (Winterton & Irwin, 2012). Researchers found that those from less advantaged backgrounds were more likely to expect to access HE if their parents strongly encouraged them, and they were more likely to be influenced by other factors including friendships. Relatedly, Kremer et al found that while parents and friends play "unique and separate roles in the development of college-going attitudes and the setting of social norms", those from low-socioeconomic-status households for whom both family and friends showed little expectation or support towards HE were the most "at-risk" for academic failure, with the lowest grades and least confidence in their abilities to complete college (Kremer, Vaughn, & Loux, 2018).

Perhaps the most relevant studies for our present investigation were performed by Blenkinsop et al (Blenkinsop, McCrone, Wade, & Morris, 2006) and Brooks (Brooks, 2003). Blenkinsop et al, who interviewed pupils, teachers and parents, found an interesting difference of emphasis between the views of teachers and young learners about the importance of peer influence in post-16 choice (Blenkinsop et al., 2006). While teachers felt that this decision was strongly influenced by friendship groups and peer pressure, many pupils emphasised the independence of their decisions, based on future aspirations or interests. In general, the role of friends was seen as being more complicated at age 16 than at age 14:

The way in which young people approached decisions in Year 11, particularly in relation to post-16 location, indicated that the role of friends (at least in terms of choice of institution) might be stronger (and certainly more complex) [than in Year 9].

Meanwhile Brooks conducted a series of interviews with young people aged 16-18 from a large sixth-form college in the south of England, interviewing 15 young people on six occasions each. The study found that students in the process of applying for university were not engaging in discussions with friends/peers over courses/institutions or their intentions. Some students indicated surprise that it was never brought up whilst they were going

through the UCAS process, whilst others suggested they wanted to make the decision without being influenced by others. Brooks suggests that such discussions were avoided because they had the potential to be divisive:

> …such discussions were often extremely difficult. Many of these difficulties stemmed from the hierarchical judgements that the young people made about differences (particularly those concerned with academic attainment, higher education institution and, to a limited extent, degree subject)… [these] served, in many cases, to undermine the perceived equality of the friendship tie, or at least to emphasize previously latent differences, and for this reason were avoided.

The literature, therefore, suggests a variety of mechanisms by which young people can directly and indirectly influence their peers' educational trajectories, an effect entangled with the impacts of socio-economic status and family attitudes. The role of conversation emerges from this review in a largely negative light, with young people asserting the independence of their decision-making from friends' views and the most detailed study of friendship-group conversation suggesting that such subjects are skated over. However friends' influence is known to vary with age, so it would be interesting to compare results of a group still in compulsory education with Brooks' findings.

In addition, we know that isolation can be a factor in educational experience; Gibbons and Vignoles (Gibbons & Vignoles, 2012) found that although the distance from a young person's home to university settings did not affect the decision to go on to further study, it strongly modulated the specific university destination. Because of such effects, it is useful to study educational influences in a variety of settings. A case study of peer conversation about educational and career futures from a geographically-isolated location is likely, therefore, to be a welcome addition to the body of knowledge in this area.

A Picture of Carlisle

Cumbria and its major settlement, Carlisle, are extremely geographically isolated by English standards. The ceremonial county of Cumbria is the third largest in England, after North Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, and the second most sparsely-populated after Northumberland. Carlisle is the only major settlement in the county (major towns and cities are defined by the Office for National Statistics as having populations of over 75,000[iv]).

Although the city is on the UK's West Coast Main Line railway, journey times are long to other major settlements; Edinburgh is around 75 miles north and Preston 80 miles south. The nearest major city, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, is 'only' 53 miles in a straight line; however that line crosses the northern edge of the Pennine mountains, meaning that roads and rail have to wind their way through meandering valleys and journey times are disproportionately long.

In addition to this isolation – and likely in part because of it – Carlisle also has one of the lowest levels of social mobility in England, with 2016 government figures[v] ranking it 320/324 on this measure. This implies that children from poorer backgrounds from Carlisle are much less likely on average to go on to have a good job and/or standard of living, which makes it a key target area for WP activity.

Given Cumbria and Carlisle's geographical exceptionalism, it would not be surprising if the educational and career choices of young people were affected by this isolation. This study considers how the peer conversation and milieu are affected by this factor.

Methodology

In order to examine the effects of peer influence and conversation on young people's educational and career choices in an area of geographic isolation, we gathered the views of young people studying at secondary schools and colleges in Cumbria, together with the testimony of WP practitioners who worked with them.

Interviews

Our main dataset was collected through a series of face-to-face interviews conducted by a member of the research team, a white male in his 20s. Table 1 gives a summary of our interviewees:

Pseudonymised name	School year	Research cohort
Grace	9	Young learners
Joshua	9	Young learners
Sophie	9	Young learners
William	9	Young learners
Chloe	11	Young learners
Daniel	11	Young learners
Emily	11	Young learners

Harry	11	Young learners
Oliver	11	Young learners
Olivia	11	Young learners
Samuel	11	Young learners
Thomas	FE college	Young learners
Casey	n/a	WP practitioners
Devon	n/a	WP practitioners
Harley	n/a	WP practitioners
Morgan	n/a	WP practitioners
Rowan	n/a	WP practitioners
Charley	n/a	WP practitioners

Table 1: Summary of study participants

Young learners

We worked with Hello Future to identify young people to be interviewed for this study. The Uni Connect network is tasked by the UK government to target certain groups who are underrepresented in higher education, and many of Hello Future's activities are directed specifically at young people in these groups. However other interventions are more broadly aimed, meaning that the organisation interacts with a range of young people. Our interview cohort reflects this; most young learners are from WP target groups, defined by factors such as area of residence and family educational history, but one or two fall outside such definitions.

We interviewed a total of 12 young learners in two settings in Carlisle: a secondary school and a youth centre. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and lasted up to 30 minutes. Four participants were from year 9 (i.e. aged 13-14), seven from Y11 (aged 15-16) and one, aged 18, was studying at a further education college.

For safeguarding reasons, our researcher was accompanied by a WP practitioner, a white female in her 20s not known to the young people. Young participants' names are anonymised using the top 10 boys' and girls' names for 2005 births.

Widening participation practitioners

All the practitioners interviewed worked for Hello Future. Interviews were conducted at the organisation's offices and lasted up to one hour. Of the six practitioners we spoke to, four were Cumbrian natives while two were from similarly-remote parts of the country, namely East Anglia and the South West. Because of

the limited number of contributors in this group, we bolster anonymity by using gender-neutral pronouns and pseudonyms[vi].

Impact of Covid-19

Data collection with young learners took place during the first months of 2020, and we had originally intended to speak to participants in different secondary schools. However during the project the UK's national Covid-19 response began, including closure of workplaces and embargoes on unnecessary travel. It was felt by researchers that schools were likely to be closed for a number of months, that they would need time to readjust to changing circumstances, and that it would be unfair to place another burden on school leaders by asking them to accommodate research activity. We therefore decided to curtail data collection for this project in mid-March 2020.

Analysis

Interview data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The material was read several times to ensure familiarity, and then tagged with initial codes. Each code was then tagged with sub-codes. These were then examined in order to develop overarching themes, and the initial coding revisited in light of these.

Results and analysis

We consider findings in two broad areas, as follows.

1. Peer conversation and perceptions of the views of others:

a. Perceptions and realities of peer conversations about educational and career futures;

b. What subjects are open for discussion, and which are 'private' or too personal;

c. Young people's views of their friends' future plans as opposed to their own.

2. The influence of peers on decision-making:

a. The influence of friendship groups on educational and extracurricular choices;

b. The role of advice from older students, siblings and friends.

Most findings are focused on the role of peer interactions and conversations in educational/career decision-making in a general sense; however where findings have a specific relevance to the Carlisle setting, this is noted.

1. Peer conversation and perceptions of the views of others

a. Perceptions and realities of peer conversation

The consideration of peer influence on educational choices finds a natural starting point with the question of the extent to which young learners discuss their future plans. Here we immediately find an area of disagreement amongst our practitioners, with most feeling certain that these conversations are not taking place spontaneously, with a few equally sure that they are. Charley's belief is that not many conversations about the future are taking place:

They might maybe talk about it. But I think the majority, they might come out of school and go about their daily thing…

Others suggest that conversation does not take place without the prompt provided by their session. Morgan says:

I think the one time we go in and talk to them about what they might want to do is probably, maybe, the first time that they've talked to each other about what they might want to do.

So is this assessment supported by the testimony of pupil participants? It was fairly common for young people to state that they did not talk to their friends much about the future or their plans. However there are strong indications in their interviews that these conversations actually are happening, although participants may not recognise them as such when asked directly. Joshua, for example, had the following exchange with our interviewer:

Interviewer: What do you think your friends want to do? Do you talk about it much?

Joshua: No, not really to my mates.

[…..]

Interviewer: So what do you think your friends will want to do?

Joshua: Well, some will want to be a footballer. I think one wants to be a mechanic. One wants to be a plumber, I think.

Interviewer: What makes you think that? Just things they've said in passing?

Joshua: Well, they keep going on about it really.

William's interview was similarly revealing. Asked whether he and his friends talked about the future and next steps, he said "No, not at all," and "There are better things to talk about". However he had already told our interviewer that his friends "all want to go on to further education, like me"; later in the conversation he

observed that some friends had interests they want to pursue in the future, while others "had no idea at all". Conversations were, then, clearly happening on some level.

Some of the practitioners had observed this phenomenon of the unacknowledged conversation. Devon made this observation:

Yes, if you said to them, "Are you talking about it?" they would probably go, "No, not really." I think they talk about it more than they even realise they're talking about it. It'll be face to face, it'll be through social media, it'll definitely be on WhatsApp. It'll probably be quite smart conversation... I think we maybe do them down, an injustice sometimes.

Some of our young people were, in fact, very clear that they did discuss future intentions with friends. Harry, for example, had a detailed knowledge of his closest friends' plans, including what degree course they wanted to study at which university. Chloe, meanwhile, reports that "We, like, talk about it a lot at lunch and break and on the way to school, and things. So, like, we try and help each other with that type of thing."

It is clear, then, that contrary to the belief of many of the WP practitioners we interviewed, young people in Carlisle do speak to each other about their futures, and our young people were well informed about their friends' intentions for the future, although this may occur via 'unacknowledged conversation'.

A point made by both groups of participants was that discussions about the future spiked at particular decision points, such as option choice or towards the end of year 11. Practitioner Rowan, for example, noted:

I think the conversations that are happening are generally about their next immediate step in education. Like, they'll be really having conversations about choosing their options and a lot of conversations about, "Well, are you choosing that option? Because then I'll choose that option as well and we can be in class together."

Young participant Chloe cites mock exams, choosing options and visits from apprenticeship representatives as provoking conversation. Olivia notes:

We usually only talk about it when it's, like… Actually, yes, it's when it comes around exam times, they're, like… "I need to get these grades to get to college, to get to university," or something like that. So, just, like, those conversations usually jump in when it comes around exam times.

b. What subjects are open for discussion?

It appears, therefore, that young people are discussing their future options, either explicitly or implicitly, to an extent that was not suspected by most of the practitioners. However there is a limit to such conversation. Half (6/12) of our learners, even those who reported discussing the future with their friends, volunteered the opinion that some aspects of future ambitions could be too private, too personal, to be a subject of discussion. This ties in with Brooks' earlier finding that future plans could be seen as a divisive issue.

Daniel talks to his friends about the future, but "I respect it if they don't want to talk about it. I don't want to get too in-depth. I just don't want to invade their privacy." Harry feels that "It's not small talk in the school, it's not something you say to somebody just random, it's more, like, quite a personal thing."

William sees the subject of HE as almost taboo:

Because Carlisle isn't a massively thriving place education-wise, and not everyone's families have gone to uni like mine, so…

Harry believes that his peers see the prospect of such conversations as almost frightening:

Most people just kind of glide and then we hit something nice and we stick with it for a while. And then the idea of a conversation about university is almost committing yourself to something, and that nailing down is scary, if you don't know what you want yet… those conversations are almost threatening, because they're so solitary in the outcome of them.

Some participants reported having certain ambitions that they could discuss and certain that they could not. Joshua, for example, is not sure whether he would prefer to pursue a career as a sports professional or as a maths teacher – but has shared only one of these ambitions with his friends.

Joshua: If I told one of my friends about being a maths teacher I think they'll just really take the mick…

Interviewer: Why would they do that?

Joshua: I don't know.

Interviewer: Okay, so some things you can talk about, like [sports].

Joshua: Yes, talk about [sports] but not being about a teacher… Because people go on about how they hate teachers.

The idea of such boundaries to 'acceptable' conversation was also voiced by some practitioners, mainly in the context of in-class conversation. Harley, for example, feels that financial matters can be a source of such embarrassment;

…they're more than happy to have conversations about, like, working as that project manager at BAE on £50,000 a year, but don't want to be talking about potentially, like, the reality of working in McDonald's or working whatever it is, that lower end.

This may be a particular issue in isolated areas such as Carlisle, where the range of jobs on offer may be perceived to be limited.

It may also be difficult for young people to share any disquiet they may feel about the future. Chloe is happy to chat to friends about her plans, but not her concerns or anxieties:

I tend to talk about that with, like, my mum or my boyfriend because I tend not to almost worry my friends about that… it would just be a bit hard for them because we're always positive with each other.

c. Young people's views of their friends' future plans

It is notable that all the young people interviewed had an idea of what they wanted to do in the future. Some were concrete, for example a specific career, post-16 course or apprenticeship; others were broader, a desire to do something related to a passion such as music. All, however, were clear that they had one or two options to pursue.

By contrast, most of the young participants – 9/12 – felt that at least some of their friends did not have such a plan. Grace, for example, is contemplating two career paths, with a third as a fall-back:

Interviewer: Do you think your experience, your ideas, are the same as a lot of other people in Carlisle?

Grace: Probably not, no.

Interviewer: No? How are they different, do you reckon?

Grace: Because I've two main plans and one back-up plan.

Reporting that certain friends in a group did not have future plans was common. Sophie said: "There's some that are not too sure what they want to do yet." Daniel noted that "I know people who would have been thinking about it from year 7. I know people who still haven't got a plan, near their GCSEs."

Some interviewees seemed slightly critical of their peers in this respect. Samuel said: "I know [some people] that haven't had a single thought about what they're going to do in my year at school." However Olivia brings a different perspective: "A lot of them say they don't really know what to do and, like, they're scared of what might happen… Scared of not knowing what to do."

The universality of the sense that our interviewees had a plan for the future, and of their conviction that some of their friends do not, gives one pause. It is possible to infer that the majority of young people do, in fact, have some plan for the future; whether they share this with their friends is another matter, either because such conversations just haven't arisen, or because, as discussed before, some topics are seen as too private to pursue. 'Having a plan' may be more universal than our learners perceived, however young people may be unwilling to discuss this, particularly if it depicts a vision of the future which might be perceived as 'unglamorous' or routine.

Discussion

There is an intersection between conversational effects here that is worthy of attention by WP practitioners. The first aspect is that young people are discussing their future plans with their peers or friendship group, even if this is via 'hidden' speech that they themselves are not aware of. In other words, these discussions may not be explicit, or a deliberate attempt to exchange information about educational or career-based thinking; rather the information may be relayed in passing, via allusive references and fleeting thoughts. However such dialogues occur, the young person is left with a conception of their friend's intentions.

However the second aspect is the fact that young people see some thoughts about their future as private, too sensitive for public consumption. There are many reasons why this might be the case; fear of mockery, reluctance to express difficult emotions such as anxiety, or concerns that some choices – for example, those that are highly academic – might prove divisive (Brooks' "hierarchical judgements"). This second aspect modulates the first; Joshua, for example, tells his friends he wants to pursue professional sports, but not that he is considering teaching as a profession. Chloe talks openly about her future plans, but not the anxieties that these stimulate. Some young people clearly give their friends the impression that they have no plans at all; as we have noted, it seems more likely that these plans are, rather, being suppressed, in some cases because they appear somewhat mundane.

The amalgamation of these influences has the potential to lead to a situation where young people perceive their peers as either planning a future in a limited set of socially-acceptable routes, or having 'no plan'. For example, one might be considering university, but not Oxford; or a career in fashion, but not working in Primark. And if either Oxford or Primark is the young person's goal, friends may instead gather that the person has 'no clue' as to their future. Having an inaccurate or incomplete idea of their peer group's future plans has the potential to adversely impact on young people's

decision-making; WP practitioners may wish to counteract such influences.

2. The influence of peers on decision making

a. The influence of friendship groups on educational and career choices

Practitioners speak of a 'clustering' or 'pocketing effect'; a tendency for young people to move through different educational stages in groups. This phenomenon was noted by both practitioners and young people at key choice points, such as GCSE options or FE choices; for example Chloe reports having consulted with a friend to ensure they did some GCSE options together, while Thomas notes that "There are some seniors that attend college and sometimes they're just a bit like, "Well, I'm doing this course, but I don't really know if I want to do it. I'm just on it because my friend's on it."

Another key area where clustering occurs is around decisions to participate in extra-curricular activities such as those offered by Hello Future. Practitioner Morgan, for example, notes that "…in the activities that they take part in with us, in school and outside of school, a lot of the things they will do are because their friend is doing it or not doing it,", while Harley describes this tendency as "Taking their community with them to leave their home community".

Practitioners felt that this effect was magnified by Cumbrian communities' geographical isolation. Devon notes:

I think, for some part of it, it might even just be to do with the fact that because we're insular and have knit communities, if one friend says, I'm going to go and study at UCLan, another friend will say, I want to do accountancy… I'll apply there, so we can go together. You see kids going in pockets to universities, a little bit. Yes, like confidence in numbers slightly.

Practitioners felt the effect was even greater in Cumbrian rural and coastal areas of Cumbria; however due to Covid-19 restrictions we were unable to interview young people in these areas.

Whether or not young people spend much time explicitly discussing their futures, their actions and experiences throughout their school career may tend to lead to a clustering effect. Children's choices regarding immediate decisions, for example whether to go on a trip, participate in an outreach activity or choose a particular subject at GCSE, are clearly influenced by the views of their friends. Thus the friendship group frames the child's

experience and opportunities when it comes to future life decisions, even if conversation on these subjects is transient.

Practitioners had observed how this tendency affects post-18 choices. Devon notes that

If we were to talk to teachers and say, how are last year's Year 13 doing? they'd be like, Yes, Sarah, Katy and Megan have gone to… [such and such a place]. Four of the lads have gone onto an apprenticeship with Sellafield… They seem to pocket.

This was Devon's own experience – as a native of a rural area, their friendship group found themselves all gravitating to the same university. Interestingly, they feel this is not a product of explicit conversation; rather, it was a unified outcome of a series of decisions taken seemingly independently by the group:

I do remember clearly making a decision for myself. It wasn't just based upon them, but at the point of choosing, we made choices that aligned. At the point of making the final decision, it was down to me and I didn't consider my friends in my decision. I considered my parents a little bit and then made a decision and if you talk to my friendship group, I think they'd say similar, but we all ended up migrating to the same place.

This echoes the findings of Blenkinsop et al.

Some of our practitioners and young participants saw this clustering tendency as potentially detrimental. Harry, for example, cites one friend who had chosen a course that he saw as inferior.

One of my friends… she's got a group of friends and they're all very close-knit. Because of this, they're going to the same place for A level… I feel that that can negatively impact quite severely… I feel like you can definitely be easily swayed into sacrificing yourself, when the pack is so dependent on something else.

However in some circumstances, the group dynamic can, Charley feels, provide useful support to a young person wishing to follow a different path:

I think one of the big helps in influencing them going out, to those smaller groups, is friends, yes, I think definitely. So, we see a few people who go away. And maybe there is a group of three of them and they all want to go away to different unis. But because they've all kind of backed each other up.

Under these circumstances, the larger community 'pocket' may be pulling one way, but a smaller friendship group can provide the confidence to push to leave.

Whilst this clustering may not be the result of explicit conversation, some participants reported feeling that their friends

might not want them to leave, or that they might not want their friends to leave. However none of those who mentioned this thought that this would be a serious influence. William, for example, who in year 9 is already clear that he wants to move to London in the future, says:

My parents, they'd be down. I think it would be friends. I think some of them would be staying and then they'd be like, "Oh no, stay with us," but I want to leave. I don't think they would be barriers for me.

This echoes findings in the literature (eg Blenkinsop, Brooks) that young people see it as important that they make independent decisions about educational progression. But weighing against this is the fact that earlier small decisions can incrementally produce a 'clustering' which steers the young person's experience and opportunities in a particular way and can result in whole groups continuing to the same sixth form setting, university or even course as reported by our participants. It is worth noting that our practitioners felt that the isolated Cumbrian setting exacerbated the clustering effect, due to lack of influences or experiences external to the peer group and community.

b. The role of advice from older students

The influence of slightly older students on thinking and decision-making was not much discussed by our practitioners, but was spontaneously raised by a number of young participants, with varying degrees of positivity. Thomas, who is in college, sees himself as a role model:

I know a few times people have said that they didn't know what they wanted to do, but because they've seen me get my job, they're a little bit more concentrated on what they want to do now because they've seen me do it.

Samuel, meanwhile, says many of his friends are older than him and that although he had not specifically talked to them about what college was like, "I can just see it," through his interactions with them. Sophie knows older people through out-of-school interests, and has gleaned what life is like doing GCSEs from these interactions.

These interactions are clearly seen as positive and enlightening. However other students were more dubious about their value. Olivia has friends in the sixth form at her school:

I've spoken to them about sixth form and they were, like, it's different, like, it's a lot different to what you'd actually do in school, and you get your own time to study, and what they were mostly

talking about was you get to go out of the school to go to McDonald's for lunch.

Young people are often exposed to two sources of advice from those a step further on in life choices. Firstly, informal guidance can come from friends and siblings; secondly, this can be supplemented by visitors/student ambassadors organised by school or organisations such as Hello Future. The latter interactions, while not exactly formal, are pre-arranged and are likely to have different content, focusing much more strongly on choice of university and course, how teaching works in HE, living arrangements and career prospects. While the social side of university life may be mentioned, it is unlikely to be the focus of the event, but rather mentioned in passing.

Pupils who are reliant solely on one of these sources for information can, then, garner radically different views of the university experience. The fact that these two sources may be offering different visions of the future is highlighted by pupil Harry. Reflecting Olivia's comments, he suggests that older brothers and sisters can make university seem like it is all about social life: "No-one posts that they're studying, right? …They can see it as a big game quite easily." But he notes that young people without that family context have a different experience:

And then there's the other side of it, which are kids who don't see that online, and those kids only get the university talks. So, then they say, "Oh, university is not for fun, it's [to be taken seriously]." Where you can definitely have a good time there, I'm guessing… I think they can be really polarised.

Discussion

As a source of information and motivation, young people's friendship and wider peer groups have a complex impact. In an echo of the 'hidden speech' discussed in the previous section, young people reject the idea that they may be influenced in their decision-making by the opinions of friends, but nevertheless we see a pronounced clustering effect at multiple decision points, from joining WP activities to attending the same university. This can be prompted by fleeting conversational moments – a close friend mentioning a particular college in passing, or a comment on a school trip – but these transitory exchanges have the potential to direct future decision-making through the cumulative effects outlined above.

The communicated experience of slightly older peers can also be a factor of significance, particularly when it comes to educational choices. Young people with friends or siblings who attend university are likely to hear passing references to the 'fun' or social aspects

of university life – perhaps to the exclusion of information about learning. The informality of such discussions stands in contrast to the formal 'talk' that might be delivered by a student ambassador in a WP setting. Here a potentially important dichotomy emerges between those young people who access information via older friends and siblings, and those whose contact with university students is limited to outreach sessions. The first group are likely to disproportionately hear about the social side of college or university, particularly on social media, while the second will hear that university is a serious endeavour focused on achievement and career building; in a low social mobility area such as Carlisle, the latter aspect may dominate. Of course some young people will have access to both types of information; those who do not, however, risk gaining an unbalanced or polarised view of what HE 'is'.

Recommendations

The findings above lead us to make a number of recommendations aimed at WP professionals and those working to further young people's understandings of educational and career choices. These recommendations fall into two broad categories: raising practitioner awareness, and suggestions for how activities can be structured.

Practitioner awareness

The following information and suggestions could usefully be incorporated into initial training sessions for WP practitioners:

- The starting point for careers activity should be an assumption that young people have discussed their future plans to some extent, whether or not the learners themselves are aware of this. In our study most practitioners believed no such conversations had taken place.
- Practitioners should be made aware that most young people will have a plan for their future, even if this is not recognised by their peers.
- However young learners may not feel able to discuss these plans, and any views that they express in sessions may be a limited version of their true thoughts. In future-oriented peer conversation, some topics or choices are seen as 'private' or 'too personal'.

Structure of activities

When considering how to organise activities, the following suggestions may be useful:

- For WP/careers projects done in groups, try to depersonalise the activity, so that young learners can gather information without identifying their plans to their peers. For example, ask participants to act as a 'careers adviser' for a fictional character.
- When discussing future plans, consider whether private spaces can be provided to encourage openness. It is also worth questioning whether it is wise to raise subjects that could potentially be embarrassing or divisive in group contexts.
- Peer conversation is particularly prevalent around key transition points such as exams or option selection. Group work to expand on conversations at these times might have the potential to open a greater breadth of opportunities to young people.
- Be mindful of the fact that 'clustering' tendencies in extra-curricular choices can impact young people's future decisions; this type of implicit peer influence is likely to be more impactful than direct appeals to follow a certain path. Structuring activities to make it easier for young people to attend alone may be helpful in this regard. Isolated areas may be particularly vulnerable to such effects.
- The role of the student ambassador needs careful consideration. If ambassador talks are strongly focused on education and career choices whilst informal information from older friends/siblings is largely around socialising, a dichotomy of expectations around HE can be built up.

If these considerations are brought to the fore when planning WP interventions, the role of peer interactions in educational decision-making can be harnessed to bolster young people's futures.

[i] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8204/
[ii] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/
[iii] https://www.hellofuture.ac.uk/
[iv] https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/townsandcitiesintheuk
[v] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-index
[vi] https://medium.com/@cherrycanovan/how-unisex-is-your-babys-name-4348002a2ec8

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