'There for me': learning from young people about challenges and enablers to continuing education

Deborah J. Crook, Candice Satchwell & Jacqueline Dodding

Published online: 14 Oct 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ⎘

View related articles ⎘

View Crossmark data ⎘

'There for me': learning from young people about challenges and enablers to continuing education

Deborah J. Crook [a], Candice Satchwell [b] and Jacqueline Dodding [b]

aSchool of Health, Social Work and Sport, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK; bSchool of Psychology and Humanities, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK

ABSTRACT

Young people's perspectives are not always central to policy and practice in widening participation contexts. This article explores enablers and barriers to educational progression by considering factors that young people suggest influence how they envisage and act on their futures. The underpinning study asked students aged 12–23 in disadvantaged areas of northern England to think about their possible selves using creative methods to encourage dialogue, including an animation and board game co-designed with university students. The findings suggested that students' perceptions of their own futures are influenced by their experiences of being categorised or labelled, both in and out of school, as well as the quality of their relationships with adults and peers. The authors discuss how these factors tended to shape the young people's experiences of being at school, with a view to rethinking labelling and enabling participatory spaces that cultivate the intersecting relationships, influences, structures and self-belief that make a difference.

Introduction

The Rewriting the Future group of studies (2018–2023) investigated enablers and barriers to progression in state-funded education for young people from groups currently under-represented in Higher Education (HE). The widening participation agenda in England has contributed to increased numbers of young people entering HE; however, patterns of inequality remain. For example, according to official government statistics, progression in 2021/22 for disadvantaged students, categorised as those who at age 15 were entitled to free school meals and who had completed A-level courses, was 32.5% compared to 51.7% for the non-disadvantaged (Gov.UK, 2023). But this figure is greatly skewed by regional variance, as shown by the figure of 50% of disadvantaged students progressing in London. Whilst statistics about underrepresented groups may be useful in identifying inequalities, they provide an incomplete picture of why some students progress despite barriers, or why, for example, the 7% of students educated in fee-paying schools in

CONTACT Deborah J. Crook ✉ dcrook5@uclan.ac.uk ▢ The Centre for Children & Young People's Participation, School of Health, Social Work and Sport, University of Central Lancashire, ER113 Eden Building, School of Health, Social Work and Sport, Preston PR1 2HE, UK

England (Whitty et al., 2015) were twice as likely (63.2%) to receive HE places than those in state-funded schools (Gov.UK, 2023). Much literature describes these inequalities in access (Arday et al., 2021; Jerrim et al., 2015; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019). However, solutions are scarce (Whitty et al., 2015) and the complexities involved in these decisions and how they should be addressed are undertheorised.

In the UK approaches to widening participation in HE have tended to focus on equality of opportunity, but this does not necessarily take into account the nature and impact of social inequalities, including those inherent in the educational opportunities offered at school (Donnelly & Evans, 2019; Reay, 1998; Whitty et al., 2015). This article adds to the field by focusing on school experiences in relation to accessing HE. The devolved UK nations have used different funding approaches to resist the stronger emphasis in England on neoliberal ideology, which generally positions young people as responsible for their own social mobility and for engaging with and competing for opportunities in education for individual economic advancement (Donnelly & Evans, 2019). Individualism promoted by high performance schooling mirrors problems across social services in England with identifying the aims and sort of society that these enculturate (Biesta, 2010; Fielding, 2006), which is reflected in widening participation policies and initiatives. These continue, on the one hand, to present socially just endeavours to increase HE opportunities for disadvantaged students, but on the other, disregard injustice by continuing to commend education systems that privilege certain academic subjects and students, reinforcing inequalities (Jones, 2021; Pearce & Wood, 2019). Coherence is achieved by developing widening participation initiatives, which fail to expose the kinds of spaces in schools that perpetuate inequalities (Mowat, 2015). These socially constructed spaces are where the physical and social meet, each affecting the other, and influencing people's intra-subjective experiences (D. J. Crook, 2021; Nind et al., 2022).

Missing from the existing research evidence are the perspectives of school students most likely to be underrepresented in HE. Their views and lived experiences are generally disregarded in the planning and delivery of school curricula, and marginalisation may be reinforced by dominant societal attitudes prevailing at school through curriculum and pedagogic practice (Donnelly & Evans, 2019; Harrison & Atherton, 2021; Nind et al., 2022; Pihl at al., 2018). Deficit constructs about expected attainment, low attendance or perceived lack of aspiration or motivation fail to address the whole story of young people's educational challenges (Harrison & Waller, 2018). Related to this is the way in which labelling may serve to entrench these assumptions. Becker (1963) made a connection between labelling and individuals' self-concept. Young people's behaviour may change because they perceive adults as judging them based on assumptions made about their labelled circumstances. Labelling mechanisms can then trigger self-fulfilling prophecies from early childhood (Blease, 1986; Campbell, 2021), with educators' responses mediating the success or failure of young people from particular groups (Leacock, 2019).

Our own experiences as teachers and researchers, as well as of non-traditional routes into the academy, suggested we must look beyond the rhetoric to really understand what is happening in young people's lives. By recognising young people as being experts in their own lives, we reposition their knowledge as making an important contribution to future developments in widening participation. However, there are tensions in doing so,

including: the ways in which schooling is standardised to students with particular characteristics; patterns of student subordination and teacher power; and how school processes can suppress young people's voices (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 (UNCRC) places responsibility on all adults to act appropriately and in the interests of all young people. Despite recognising that they have the right to a say in all matters that affect them and devolved nations taking varying steps towards this, UK policy and practice has yet to recognise the everyday and embodied decision-making of young people (Cross et al., 2021). Without this, opportunities for student voice may be 'episodic' pseudo-choices, claimed as personalisation, but taking little account of young people's own meaning-making (Fielding, 2012) and reinforcing the individualism, middle-class attributes and social inequalities (Pearce & Wood, 2019) that are already challenges for widening participation. The extent to which 'students' experience of decision-making is situated within multi-layered contexts' (Reay, 1998, p. 527) remains highly relevant, because this calls for their recognition as agentic in their education, and therefore requires a closer look at what 'being' in schools actually entails (Jones, 2021). Thus, we developed a research design that allowed young people to look forward, but also take stock of where they are now and what might help.

Possible selves theory, first introduced by the psychologists Markus and Nurius (1986) and subsequently used extensively in a range of fields, recognises that contexts can affect how future selves are viewed. Young people who are negotiating their identities as they transition into adulthood are likely to be influenced by their socioeconomic contexts, opportunities and people around them when envisaging who they might become, what they would like to become and what they fear they could become (Kelley et al., 2023; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Application of possible selves theory to educational contexts is not new nor without its critics, including Henderson (2018), who notes the individualism potentially inherent in the model. Jones et al. (2022) overtly used the model in interviews with FE students, asking them to consider their 'like-to-be selves' and their 'like-to-avoid selves' in the context of transition from further education to HE. They used the notion of 'elaboration' to determine whether students were able to articulate the steps required to achieve their aims, and concluded that it is important to consider appropriate support and avoid deficit lenses when viewing students' hoped-for futures.

Our studies build on those mentioned by incorporating students as young as 12 *and* university students. Our use of creative methods to enable younger participants to explore perceptions of their possible future selves, together, not only revealed what they expected, but also enabled them to imagine alternative 'hoped-for' futures that may not previously have been voiced. Contributions from older students enabled exploration of stories in which people's 'possible selves' had shifted over time. The findings provide new insight into perceived barriers and enablers relating to continuing educational progression and how they intercept.

Materials and methods

This paper focuses on Phase 2 of Rewriting the Future, which involved working with students at our university and in three secondary schools located in two coastal towns and a city in northern England, all of which have consistently been included in rankings

Table 1. Approaches used for the Rewriting the Future studies.

Phase 1	Phase 2
30 young people aged 12–24, in groups ranging from 2–12 participants, including one care-experienced under 16 not in education, training or employment (NEET) and eight aged 16+ attending an entry programme for young people who were NEET.	14 students (eight male) aged 11–16, in groups of 3–7. Three secondary schools (two multi-academy trusts; one voluntary-aided). Five undergraduates and one postgraduate student. Specific under-represented groups in HE: ethnic minority backgrounds including Gypsy, Roma and Travellers (disclosed by six); special educational needs/disabilities (disclosed by five); care-experienced. Students identified by schools as living in areas of low representation in HE.
One LA (local authority) service youth group, one voluntary sector youth group and college students in places of low representation in HE.	
Methods	
- Group mapping of hometown - Walking and talking with photography - Songs and stories of present and future - Co-produced movie storyboards - Individual interviews - Dialogue groups with young people and adults	- Board game and animation used with school students as stimulus for dialogue groups to talk about their possible future selves - Individual interviews with young people to discuss these further - Analysis framework developed with RAG using Phase 1 findings
Data and analysis	
Drawn and annotated maps and photographs of the local area, handwritten and illustrated songs, stories and storyboards, researchers' fieldnotes and interview transcripts. Iterative thematic analysis as an ongoing process with participants and then by researchers, individually and together.	Researchers' observational field notes and audio recordings of discussions; interview transcripts; research advisory group transcripts; analysis frame from Phase 1. Iterative thematic analysis, individually and together, identifying additional themes (Table 2).

of the most deprived areas by The English Indices of Deprivation since 2007; they are also areas with the lowest participation rates in HE. The students included those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); ethnic minority backgrounds including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller; and experience of care. We built on participatory arts-based and story-tellingrapproaches used previously (Satchwell et al., 2020) to enable participants to express their ideas creatively, encouraging personal reflection and dialogue in small groups. The approach recognised that ideas about possible selves are socially constructed and constrained (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Phase 2 was informed by our learning from Phase 1 (D. Crook, 2020); a summary of the cohorts, approaches and data collected is provided in Table 1.

Ethical considerations

The research was given full approval by the University's Ethics Committee (reference BAHSS 550). Informed consent was gained from all the participants. Parental consent was also obtained for young people under the age of 16. Non-return of parental consent from three students meant that they were unable to participate. All participants were reminded that the research was voluntary, and they did not have to take part; indeed, one preferred to attend PE instead.

Development of research tools from Phase 1 analysis

Two resources for Phase 2 – an animated film and a board game – were directly drawn from young people's ideas about their past and present experiences, which themselves were seen to shape conceptualisations of their possible selves. In Phase
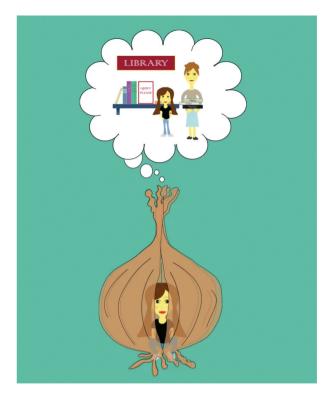
Figure 1. Screenshot from the Lydia animation.

1, one group had fashioned an onion from brown paper (see Figure 1) symbolising how they felt young people are frequently misunderstood by adults. Only their outside 'layer' is seen by others, whilst the inner multiple layers of experiences are ignored. Combined with findings and ideas from movie boards created by other young people during Phase 1, this image of an onion became central to a short animation of a fictionalised journey through education which a [university] Masters in Animation student was commissioned to develop. A character (Lydia) is depicted inside an onion which gradually loses its layers as her story of accumulated complex and melded layers through bereavement, financial hardship and friendship problems, unfolds. Yet she is able to discover a potential path to a career in nursing by seeking advice from a nurse (the father of a friend) and the school librarian.

A version of a board game designed by Crook and a lecturer in Games Design was also developed, for instigating dialogue in research (Figure 2). Devised from findings and themes developed in Phase 1, the game involves players navigating their own route across stepping-stones around the board. acknowledging that educational journeys vary. Sets of Chance and Myth-buster cards, based on young people's perceptions and experiences, stimulate discussion as players progress or pause their journeys.

Figure 2. The board game.

Phase 2 methods

The animation and board game were refined in consultation with a Research Advisory Group (RAG) recruited at the start of Phase 2, to enable researchers and participants to inform the suitability of potential approaches and to extend co-reflexive activity. The RAG comprised five undergraduates (three male, two female) and one male postgraduate, from Games Design and Education courses at our university, who had experienced barriers to progression, thus positioning them as authentic and valued advisors representative of the widening participation agenda. They met regularly online with the three academic researchers (authors) and Games Design lecturer; four also agreed to be interviewed about their evolving ideas of possible selves.

Workshops in schools involved 14 students (eight male, six female) drawing images of their present selves and the people they hoped to be, surrounded by representations of their future hopes and dreams. Researchers showed the 'Lydia' animation to facilitate discussion about their own perceptions around barriers and enablers to educational progression, and each group noted their ideas on a large sheet of paper. We then played the board game with the young people to facilitate further discussion on what it might mean to progress to HE, using the Chance and Myth-buster cards they selected to introduce themes. Thematic analysis involved each researcher reading and annotating the transcripts, as well as examining the drawings and written contributions from students, along with written fieldnotes made during and after workshops. Discussions among the three researchers enabled comparison of the individual analyses, and ultimately led to agreement on a set of major themes and their elements (see Table 2) that affect engagement and progression either negatively or positively.

Table 2. Elements that affect engagement and progression (either negatively or positively).

Theme	Elements identified
Perceptions of young people (by self and others)	Identity, personal qualities, talents, disability, gender, mental health
Relationships with others	Friendships, peers, social networks, family, teachers, other significant people
Influential sources	Adults who listen, adults who have made a difference, older siblings, role models, media (e.g. TV documentaries, dramas or social media), careers advisors
Structural/contextual issues	Finance, school–life balance, place, culture, curriculum, non-curricular opportunities
Knowledge and understanding	Opportunities for talking, access to information/knowledge, alternative trajectories

Limits of the research

Access to schools was limited by several local lockdowns during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Although 18 secondary schools were approached, most were reluctant to participate due to these conditions. In the three schools that did provide access, we requested representation from marginalised groups, but background information about individuals was not available to us. We noted that the school educator present during workshops could be crucial in enabling young people to express their views about school life freely; for example, a careers lead who was also an extra-curricular cadet group leader encouraged the young people while allowing physical distance for them to speak. We have observed the opposite in other studies; for example, in a project about careers education, young people were reticent about offering their opinions when a senior school leader sat with the group directing their turn-taking.

Findings

We present examples from the data that demonstrate how the themes in Table 2 interconnect to influence young people's participation in education. Firstly, we present findings that suggest an interplay among relationships, influential sources and young people's perceptions of their selves and how they believe others perceive them. This is followed by examples of the ways that themes intersect through young people's experiences of being at school.

Relationships emerged as an important theme because these were associated with whether different elements were construed as enablers or barriers to young people's progression. A variety of people were highly influential, including family or extended family members, interest group leaders, educators and friends or peers. Positive relationships were cited when individuals knew the young person well and consistently had their interests at heart; over half the participants looked to fathers and older brothers for inspiration. In contrast, where young people appeared to be judged by others against limited criteria (or were perceived to be by the young person), barriers emerged. Close family ties were important for all the young disabled people because they suggested that family members (rather than schools) mostly supported inclusion and thus would be involved in their decisions about continuing education. There was no evidence that more distant media role models made a difference; however, watching documentaries or dramas about a particular profession were influential.

When watching the animation, participants noted the importance of peer friendship and care to their engagement: 'If people aren't really nice . . . then you don't really want to spend time in school . . . you try and get off . . . say that you're ill.' Being understood was important too: 'People just struggle through daily life a lot of them . . . nobody says anything . . . people are just scared to show those issues.' Family members in some cases helped modify low self-esteem, but sometimes reinforced this. For example, a student reported that her mother had said: 'You're just like me . . . she didn't say you're not going to go far in life, but . . . .' Girls suggested that they were sometimes treated differently to male siblings: 'Both my brothers had tutors to get ready for their GCSEs; it was never even an option for me.' Where young people reported feeling a sense of belonging, usually as part of interest or social groups, they could identify relationships that were helpful in enabling them to achieve their hopes and dreams. One young person noted that at school, 'if you're on your own you're less likely to want to try'. Although none of the participants explicitly expressed a sense of belonging at school, the importance of feeling connected was implied by one autistic undergraduate whose experience changed when he moved from school to college:

> [College] shaped me for who I am now . . . a drastically different person than I was in high school . . . . I'm more outgoing and confident because throughout high school I was always a bit self-reserved . . . minding my own business . . . college helped me come out of my shell . . . having a good support network of like-minded people . . . where everyone that I know and talk to enjoy the same things.

Social networks with shared interests were seen as positive influences, including some online communities. Students had connected with people who had applied for particular HE courses before going to university. Gamers intervened to keep a school student on track:

> When I play with them and it's been like five hours . . . they tell me . . . stop playing . . . go and revise . . . do homework . . . . They make sure I do the stuff that I need to for school.

Interest groups also enabled young people to identify personal qualities and practise interpersonal skills that they did not believe they were developing at school:

> I've done Scouts for around nearly ten years now, so that's kind of very much shaped what I've done and what interests me . . . helped with team building, independence, volunteering and things like that.

Quality relationships with adults within hierarchical school structures were sometimes difficult to forge, particularly when it was senior leadership who were engaged in providing social and emotional support to marginalised students. One group discussed this: 'I don't really like the system. I don't really trust them, so I'd rather just speak to a normal teacher.' Trust could be quickly undermined. For example, a male under-graduate remembered how a teacher regularly disappeared from class, and they saw her 'sneakily doing something on the computer outside'. Trust was extremely important for students with SEND who had learning support assistants: 'Being able to trust them is a big part of my school life because then if I don't, my education can be ruined.' Continuity was important too: 'Senior leadership, the amount of times they've changed . . . in such a short space of time.' Young people wanted more attention to everyday relations, rather than crisis intervention:

> Just having someone to talk to . . . you don't have to say, Oh I'm feeling depressed, Oh, I'm feeling anxiety or feeling this or feeling that.

Occasionally relationships with teachers helped young people to engage at school. A male undergraduate described a teacher

> Who just went above and beyond in his job . . . . He wasn't just my teacher he was also my friend if that makes sense? Like he was there for me and he was there to hear and help me with any troubles . . . . I guess if he wasn't there, I'd probably be a lot different as a person.

The explicit reference to 'being a different person' in several participant quotes resonates with possible selves theory, as recognition that an expected (or feared) possible self was modified through experience towards a more positive possible self. Sometimes teachers made connections for students between their capabilities and possible selves. An undergraduate returned to her primary school for work experience and described meeting with the headteacher who highlighted qualities that she had not seen in herself. These moments were important in identifying possible selves, alongside consistent encouragement from respected or liked adults. One female 15-year-old told us:

> There's two teachers . . . they've helped for a long time, since I was in Year Eight . . . with loads of things and kind of building up things I can use for my CV and stuff.

We observed this ongoing support in Phase 1 of the study too, where a former art teacher encouraged his nephew to take art exams and investigate routes to study film. However, these appeared to be the exception rather than young people's regular experience with adults in their lives.

Consistently positive relationships, recognising young people's interests and capabilities, enabled them to see themselves as active in shaping their lives. A 15-year-old girl envisaged her future self by actively learning in Scouts how to access travel opportunities that would otherwise be unfeasible due to her socio-economic circumstances: 'So tomorrow I'm doing a meet-up for an international trip . . . We have been doing fundraising as much as we can.' In this case, the double effect of this very positive experience outside school, along with consistent and positive relational intervention from teachers specifically tasked with supporting extra-curricular development and leadership opportunities, meant she had a clearly defined possible self as an outdoor adventure sport instructor who would learn French to work overseas.

What does this mean for being in school?

Relationships, influential sources and young people's perceptions of their selves and how they believe others perceive them influenced how young people experienced being at school. There was a sense that relationships were more positive in primary school where 'you already know the teacher' or 'It's a lot less judgemental . . . no-one really knows much, and everyone is just friends with everyone.' However, in secondary school, 'It's just like get on with your work.' Young people suggested that adults reinforced barriers to their progression through low expectations and judgements due to assumptions about their circumstances. Labels assigned to young people, without explanation or consideration of the implications, were problematic when accompanied by unfounded assumptions about capabilities. Young people of all ages keenly expressed negative reflections:

> I had one teacher, oh my God, I think it were Year Three, Year Two, and she used to belittle me for getting things wrong . . . . That's where a lot of my confidence . . . it just sort of went at the beginning.

Issues of disability or specific learning differences, gender and relationships with parents, teachers and peers all contributed to an early sense of identity and lack of agency. One undergraduate reflected:

> I used to have to go to like special classes . . . I was told I was dyslexic . . . I were really nervous I didn't feel comfortable to put my hand up and ask questions so I kind of just slipped through the net . . . . The teachers seemed to go to smarter children . . . I think I was difficult to teach.

The last observation is a poignant reminder of how negative experiences can result in children feeling responsibility for a perceived lack of progress and may unquestioningly accept the expectations and routes through education assumed for them by others. Some young people also felt negative pressure to meet academic expectations for fear of 'letting the school down', with one boy suggesting that there is a 'separation between image [of the school] and what will benefit people'. Self-esteem was instead built through being recognised as capable, able to deal with adversity (experienced through multiple circumstances) and young people seeing themselves as active in making change. Teachers being open about their own educational routes and circumstances was helpful. In one school, young people were positive about an event in which

> Teachers show the different ways how they got to the career they have now . . . the different paths they could use. It's not just one set way you have to use.

Young people linked mental-health issues to underachieving academically and worried that this might have consequences in later life: 'It'll bring down performance which will lead to lower grades' and 'limit options later on'. The invisibility of poor mental health was flagged as a barrier to achieving success in exams, and as adding additional pressures. Lack of curriculum relevance and reliance on exams as the basis for measuring capability were also considered irrational and unfair: 'You could be getting nines in every one of your marks but on your actual GCSE you could have an off day and get a five.' Young people instead used their life experiences to imagine their futures. One girl expressed how she would address inequalities experienced as a visually impaired person by setting up a social enterprise:

> Me and my brother always said about opening a company which works with kids with disabilities, obviously a football company where we can coach kids that might not be accepted in normal football circumstances.

Coaching younger children at a football club outside school brought this potential opportunity to her imaginings, unlike the physical-education curriculum at school. The importance of being accepting of others and not making assumptions was discussed by all the groups. One young person described how some people do not recognise the capabilities of autistic people:

> I can hear people . . . being rude to each other, saying you're stupid by asking if you're autistic or something. But being autistic isn't being stupid.

Young people believed there were differences in how cultural expectations were embraced between schools: 'Ours is just more free . . . . I've heard in other schools, you're not allowed beards or anything. You have to shave them off.' Culturally informed advice from teachers was important, for example to help young people access additional educational opportunities whilst continuing to attend their local mosque for study. A university student talked about her inner conflict about student loans and Muslim faith:

> There's like this big emphasis on interest and taking loans with interest . . . . I was a little bit hesitant on going to university but [my parents] still encouraged me. They did say that it's really difficult to do it any other way . . . . They tried to show me the other sides to it . . . other opinions from scholars.

Young people also showed awareness of the consequences of unequal distributions of cultural and social capital when navigating the education system: 'People who don't have the parents to go to will kind of be stuck because they don't know what they're doing' and 'rich or upper class . . . most of them already know each other and they all just get offered jobs, even if they don't know anything about it'.

Inequalities between state-funded and fee-paying schools were discussed:

> You've got a better chance of getting a better education because you've got more options after and there's less people in the class. You've got more attention.

Smaller class sizes were considered to be better for building relationships, as well as providing personalised teaching and a sense of continuity and achievement. One 15-year-old who had attended a small rural primary stated: 'I feel like I advanced so much . . . . I was doing Year Six work in Year Four . . . . I'm now [in secondary school] doing stuff that I've already done.' Busy classrooms, on the other hand, were problematic: 'I was a very shy child, just very timid. I didn't like putting my hand up.'

Discussion

Intricacies emerged from the findings of the social relations between young people and adults, both in and out of schools. Quality relationships, with adults who know young people well, appear to lay the foundations; however, these are also part of a more complex picture of institutional habitus, social networks and personal beliefs that are important to understand in the context of widening participation (Reay, 1998). Our findings demonstrate some of the ways in which disadvantaged young people can be further marginalised by education systems (Harrison & Atherton, 2021), what this actually means for young people, and where attention must be given to address these challenges. Inviting young people to consider their possible selves, watch the animation and play the game enabled the researchers to work with them to co-create deliberative spaces with adequate time and care for reasoned reflection (Pearce & Wood, 2019). In turn, this conveyed respect for their rights by adjusting the often 'taken-for-granted' performative interactions at school (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012) and allowed them to speak more freely. This enabled us to access together a gap or 'third space' beyond the expected teaching and learning culture (Nind et al., 2022), where more complex recognitions could surface.

The intra-subjective influences played out through the ways that young people are encouraged or not to progress, highlight the significance of inclusive daily interactions and processes at school (Messiou, 2016), as well as how educational journeys are in turn perceived by disadvantaged young people (Mowat, 2015). Labelling and deficit assumptions can serve to oversimplify such complexity, obscuring the prejudice, inequalities and intolerance of difference that these influences really represent, as well as how they interplay with young people's self-concept (Becker, 1963). As the young people's accounts have demonstrated, there is a fine line between a label which leads to resolute and distinctive support, and a label which designates young people to a particular future without even consulting them. We discuss below the importance of spaces in schools and how these intersect with the problems of labelling.

Spaces matter

School settings are highly political because what young people learn both intentionally and implicitly can empower or disempower through the values that constitute practices (Biesta, 2010). Educational spaces – and the intra-subjective results of social relations operating in relation to environments and structures – can be considered prefigurative (Fielding, 2012; Nind et al., 2022), and are therefore critical in shaping students' perceptions of possible futures, including whether these might include HE. School spaces influence how students remember their educational experiences – for example, children too anxious to put their hands up – and in turn how they see their present and possible selves – as learners capable of progression or not (Strahan & Wilson, 2006). The twenty-first-century reawakening of concerns about space for reflection and growth in social services, and especially about relationships and young people's sense of belonging (Nind et al., 2022), is highly relevant to the evidence shared through our study because young people may not act on their aspirations in spaces where they perceive there are barriers to doing so (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Young people in our study highlighted how relationships influenced their engagement, what and where they learn, their access to opportunities, and to knowledge about potential futures relevant to their real interests and capabilities.

Schools were not consistently offering the sorts of relationships and understanding that young people identified as helpful to progression because they were failing to produce deliberative or socially democratic spaces (Nind et al., 2022; Pearce & Wood, 2019). These spaces were well described in interest groups such as Scouts or sports clubs, where opportunities helped young people to identify their interests and hopes for the future, and adults consistently encouraged and supported them. This solidarity only occasionally emerged as third spaces in school, as brief gaps between formal processes and structures (Jones, 2021), where young people felt teachers were there for them. For the visually impaired student, belonging was found in the football club that encouraged her own participation, and also her teaching and support of other marginalised younger children. Through recognising her own capabilities, she was able to envisage a possible self at college and opening an inclusive facility where disabled children would be genuinely respected.

The relationships that mattered to young people in the study needed to be strong enough for adults to 'know them' well, and for them to feel recognised through

encouragement, care and respect (Anderson et al., 2022). Staff must be trustworthy, potentially rethinking relationships through their everyday engagement (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). The observation that senior leadership staff are too distant to build quality relationships with students is particularly poignant given the move in England away from pastoral to 'progress leader' roles. The onion layers in the animation provide a visual reminder of the multiple layers of experience that shape young people and the understanding necessary to see them fully. Previous work conducted with care-experienced children (Larkins et al., 2021) also suggests how attitudes of professionals, including teachers, matter for education progression. The best allies are adults who support and encourage young people and 'convey[ed] high hopes for them whatever their previous attainment' (Larkins et al., 2021 p. 41). Burke et al. (2021) in their research with care-experienced young people suggest how this might mean 'walking alongside young people in a non-hierarchical way' (p. 11) supporting them to recognise their own capabilities

Rethinking labelling

Young people with SEND, care experience and ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to follow conventional pathways to HE, and therefore are less supported to do so, which can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy (Blease, 1986; Campbell, 2021). The lack of demographic data provided to us meant that we could not neatly generalise findings to the categories our funder requested. Indeed, Messiou (2016) suggests that focusing on specific marginalised groups may conceal individual challenges, potentially increasing the subjective marginalisation felt. Although each young person faced multiple modes of disadvantage, their marginalisation was reinforced through the dominant societal attitudes, unsuitable structures and lack of relevance at school (Harrison & Atherton, 2021; Mowat, 2015; Pihl et al., 2018). Even so, they shared similar ideas about what could be done to support their progression more effectively.

Young people's behaviour may change because they perceive that adults are judging them based on assumptions about their labelled circumstances (Leacock, 2019). Identities are forged through these negative contexts (Oyserman & Destin, 2010): for example, the young person who felt belittled for having dyslexia and lost confidence, or the bullied child who eventually just 'gave up'. Mannay et al. (2017) identify potentially damaging effects of labelling, including adults' approval of lack of academic progress or even retreat from education due to cultural expectations or complex circumstances. Both effects were described in our data, including the parent describing her daughter as 'just like me'. The link that young people made between a mental-health stigma being detrimental to good exam grades belies a system that continues to conflate ability with performance and manipulate young people and teachers to own this (Fielding, 2006). The baseline qualifications for a pathway to HE are five GCSEs at grade four or above (usually including English and Maths). Yet the perception persists in schools that only students achieving the highest grades go to university, alongside the idea that some of these routes are 'harder' (and therefore more prestigious), perpetuating the neoliberal model that outputs rather than opportunities matter (Donnelly & Evans, 2019). It is clear from our study that deficit assumptions about young people's being, rather than how they become students (Jones, 2021), were often unquestioned by professionals. Labelling did not help

young people to progress, but recognition and understanding from adults to navigate towards hoped-for futures were helpful, as discussed earlier.

There were unspoken inferences from participants about the ways in which mental health is labelled too. Reluctance to speak up and a sense that more needs to be done to create opportunities in schools where mental health can be talked about openly, indicate how labelling also interconnects with the intra-subjective influences on school spaces. Young people empathised with Lydia's Story (the animation) and recognised the way she was regarded as 'different', identifying with the lack of confidence that this can bring, especially when such judgements reinforce, rather than counter, negative perceptions of their selves. They identified with the prevalence of bullying, helpful and not so helpful adults when they faced challenges, and a sense that these had somehow become 'normalised' within schools, reflecting subtly active and implicit discrimination that labels can obscure (Becker, 1963). Labelling effects in widening participation may have been overlooked, perhaps, because deep and honest reflection is required about young people's lived experience and the roles that adults in schools play.

We especially want to draw attention to young people's assertions that it is recognition of their talents and interests from adults, rather than performance, which supports their progression. Bourdieu's (1991) ideas around capital as a metaphor for the ways that schools, amongst other systems, are structured for the already advantaged through accumulation of particular capitals of value, have been poorly appropriated by Ofsted. Quality judgements based on schools' success in 'equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed ... the best that has been thought and said' (Ofsted, 2019, n226) locate young people as requiring remodelling. These judgements obscure any mismatch between performance (image, as the boy in our study pointed out) and what is being done to support disadvantaged students. They also disregard how young people are grouped together to perform tasks in particular ways without regard for their socio-economic and cultural differences and experiences (Bourdieu, 1991), using a narrow one-size-fits-all approach (Mowat, 2015). Some of the young people did demonstrate how they were developing social and cultural capital through networks and the broader knowledge and experience these bring). However, this needs to be understood within the broader reality of the cultural and institutional modes of inclusion or exclusion operating (Reay, 1998). Educational relevance was found in how they were able to be attentive to the world around them, placing themselves in relation, in community and recognising where they can make a difference (Fielding, 2012). That requires a rethinking of what labelling is and is used for.

Conclusion and implications for policy and practice

Drawing on possible selves theory, this study has shown how perceptions of young people by themselves and others can alter how young people envisage their own futures. Labelling can mean that futures are played out according to assumptions about students rather than their unbounded potential. We have shown, by researching with young people, interconnections among different contexts of young people's lives, including relationships, influential others, social and institutional structures, and knowledge and understanding. Our study has highlighted that the widening participation in HE agenda has implications for schools which are often neglected. Having identified challenges and

enablers to educational progression from participants' perspectives, we are in a position to make some recommendations for policy and practice in schools that recognise these multi-layered contexts.

The ways in which inequalities are reinforced through marginalisation at school must be addressed as a priority for young people to be able to envisage educational progression beyond mandatory attendance. Labelling and ability-based practices in schools can impose unnecessary limits on learning, whereas the involvement of students in their own learning through adults listening to young people, and by providing more time, space and open-ended curriculum experiences, enhances progression (Swann et al., 2012, p. 45). Further, we suggest that educators working in partnership with students in schools to create spaces where young people can envisage alternative possible futures will help to reduce inequalities among students progressing to HE, by offering choices rather than prescriptions for routes through school and beyond. Class teachers, careers teachers and mental health support workers all have a part to play in facilitating a rights-informed focus on young people's participation at school, through more inclusive, person-centred approaches that enable young people and adults to reflect on and value their experiences (Burke et al., 2021; Fielding, 2006).

At a time when young people's wellbeing in the UK is precarious, better relationships should be an imperative, particularly in light of our findings that relationships are key to decision-making about young people's futures. In the performative world, where grades can count more than young people's growth as human beings, educators receive little recognition for the work they do in building positive relationships and bringing hope and ideas for the future to young people. More emphasis by schools and school inspectors on recognising the importance of positive relationships would provide schools with a legitimate means to make interactional spaces a priority. Regular activities that recognise and respond to the experiences that young people are involved in both in and out of school will root the purpose of education in real contexts (Fielding, 2012), as well as provide meaningful opportunities to imagine and build futures shaped by genuine collaboration between students and staff, creating spaces that allow young people to flourish, not fail (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012).

Future research about widening participation should look beyond instrumentalised short-term interventions supplied to schools from outside, to implement instead more consistent and sustainable whole school approaches to progression through student participation, including opportunities to co-create future possible selves.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Funding

ORCID

Deborah J. Crook 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1852-1130
Candice Satchwell 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8111-818X
Jacqueline Dodding 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1956-0086

References

Anderson, D. L., Graham, A. P., Simmons, C., & Thomas, N. P. (2022). Positive links between student participation, recognition and wellbeing at school. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *111*, 101896. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2021.101896

Arday, J., Belluigi, D. Z., & Thomas, D. (2021). Attempting to break the chain: Reimaging inclusive pedagogy and decolonising the curriculum within the academy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *53*(3), 298–313. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773257

Becker, H. S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. Free Press.

Biesta, G. J. J. (2010). Why 'what works' still won't work: From evidence-based education to value-based education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *29*(5), 491–503. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-010-9191-x

Blease, D. (1986). Teachers' personal constructs and their pupils' self-images. *Educational Studies*, *12*(3), 255–264. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305569860120303

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Polity Press.

Burke, P. J., Cameron, C., Fuller, E., & Hollingworth, K. (2021). The relational navigator: A pedagogical reframing of widening educational participation for care-experienced young people. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, *10*(1). https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2021.v10.x.015

Campbell, T. (2021). In-class 'ability'-grouping, teacher judgements and children's mathematics self-concept: Evidence from primary-aged girls and boys in the UK millennium cohort study. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *51*(5), 563–587. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1877619

Crook, D. (2020). Rewriting the future: Young people's stories of educational engagement. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, *45*(1), 59–67. https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.4508

Crook, D. J. (2021). Children changing spaces, changing schools. *Children & Society*, *35*(3), 445–460. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12429

Cross, B., Mannion, G., & Shanks, R. (2021). Making waves: A cross-study analysis of young people's participation arenas in Scotland's schools. *Childhood-A Global Journal of Child Research*, *29*(1), 75–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682211053972

Donnelly, M., & Evans, C. A. (2019). A 'home-international' comparative analysis of widening participation in UK higher education. *Higher Education*, *77*(1), 97–114. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0260-3

Fielding, M. (2006). Leadership, personalization and high performance schooling: Naming the new totalitarianism. *School Leadership and Management*, *26*(4), 347–369. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430600886889

Fielding, M. (2012). Education as if people matter: John MacMurray, community and the struggle for democracy. *Oxford Review of Education*, *38*(6), 675–692. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.745044

Gov.UK. (2023). *Academic year 2021/22 widening participation in higher education*. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education

Harrison, N., & Atherton, G. (Eds.). (2021). *Marginalised communities in higher education: Disadvantage, mobility and indigeneity*. Routledge.

Harrison, N., & Waller, R. (2018). Challenging discourses of aspiration: The role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(5), 914–938. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3475

Henderson, H. (2018). Borrowed Time: A sociological theorisation of possible selves and educational subjectivities. In H. Henderson, J. Stevenson, & A. Bathmaker (Eds.), *Possible selves and higher education: New interdisciplinary insights* (pp. 27–40). Routledge.

Jerrim, J., Chmielewski, A. K., & Parker, P. (2015). Socioeconomic inequality in access to high-status colleges: A cross-country comparison. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 42, 20–32. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2015.06.003

Jones, I. (2021). Reconceptualizing the "problem" of widening participation in higher education in England. *London Review of Education*, 19(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.19.1.02

Jones, S., Hordósy, R., Mittelmeier, J., Quyoum, A., & McCaldin, T. (2022). 'Possible selves' in practice: How students at further education colleges in England conceptualise university. *Research Papers in Education*, 37(6), 757–772. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2020.1864765

Kelley, J., Arce-Trigatti, A., & Haynes, A. (2023). A road less traveled: Possible selves as a theory for mentoring first-generation students. *Journal of First-Generation Student Success*, 3(3), 193–206. https://doi.org/10.1080/26906015.2023.2210774

Larkins, C., Crook, D. J., Thomas, D., O'Riordan, Z., & Farrelly, N. (2021). *Creating our lives: A participatory study commissioned by NICE to explore looked after children and young people's perspectives on outcomes and interventions. Supplements 2 and 3.* https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng205/evidence

Leacock, E. (2019). The influence of teacher attitudes on children's classroom performance: Case studies. In K. M. Borman (Ed.), *The social life of children in a changing society* (pp. 47–64). Psychology Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315792309

Mannay, D., Evans, R., Staples, E., Hallett, S., Roberts, L., Rees, A., & Andrews, D. (2017). The consequences of being labelled 'looked-after': Exploring the educational experiences of looked-after children and young people in Wales. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(4), 683–699. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3283

Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *The American Psychologist*, 41(9), 954–969. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954

Messiou, K. (2016). Research in the field of inclusive education: Time for a rethink? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(2), 146–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1223184

Mowat, J. G. (2015). Towards a new conceptualisation of marginalisation. *European Educational Research Journal*, 14(5), 454–476. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904115589864

Nieuwenhuis, M., Manstead, A. S. R., & Easterbrook, M. J. (2019). Accounting for unequal access to higher education: The role of social identity factors. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 22(3), 371–389. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430219829824

Nind, M., Köpfer, A., & Lemmer, K. (2022). Children's spaces of belonging in schools: Bringing theories and stakeholder perspectives into dialogue. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. Advance online publication. 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2073061

Ofsted. (2019). *School inspection handbook. Ofsted guidance September 1st 2022*. Retrieved June 26, 2023, from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif/school-inspection-handbook#evaluating-the-quality-of-education-1

Oyserman, D., & Destin, M. (2010). Identity-based motivation: Implications for intervention. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 38(7), 1001–1043. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000010374775

Pearce, T. C., & Wood, B. E. (2019). Education for transformation: An evaluative framework to guide student voice work in schools. *Critical Studies in Education*, 60(1), 113–130. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2016.1219959

Pihl, J., Holm, G., Riitaoja, A. L., Kjaran, J. I., & Carlson, M. (2018). Nordic discourses on marginalisation through education. *Education Inquiry*, *9*(1), 22–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2018.1428032

Reay, D. (1998). 'Always knowing' and 'never being sure': Familial and institutional habituses and higher education choice. *Journal of Education Policy*, *13*(4), 519–529. https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093980130405

Satchwell, C., Larkins, C., Davidge, G., & Carter, B. (2020). Stories as findings in collaborative research: Making meaning through fictional writing with disadvantaged young people. *Qualitative Research*, *20*(6), 874–891. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120904892

Strahan, E. J., & Wilson, A. E. (2006). Temporal comparisons, identity, and motivation: The relation between past, present, and possible future selves. In C. Dunkel & J. Kerpelman (Eds.), *Possible selves: Theory, research and applications* (pp. 1–15). Nova Science Publishers.

Swann, M., Peacock, A., & Drummond, M. J. (2012). *Creating learning without limits*. OUP.

Thornberg, R., & Elvstrand, H. (2012). Children's experiences of democracy, participation, and trust in school. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *53*, 44–54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2011.12.010

Whitty, G., Hayton, A., & Tang, S. (2015). Who you know, what you know and knowing the ropes: A review of evidence about access to higher education institutions in England. *Review of Education*, *3*(1), 27–67. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3038