Realisable or Thwarted Ambitions?: 'Access to Social Work' Students' Post-Compulsory Education and Career Choices

Jean Dillon

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING
http://www.Learning-Journal.com

First published in 2010 in Champaign, Illinois, USA by Common Ground Publishing LLC
www.CommonGroundPublishing.com.

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING is peer-reviewed, supported by
rigorous processes of criterion-referenced article ranking and qualitative commentary,
ensuring that only intellectual work of the greatest substance and highest significance is
published.

Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel
typesetting system
http://www.commongroundpublishing.com/software/

Realisable or Thwarted Ambitions?: 'Access to Social Work' Students' Post-Compulsory Education and Career Choices

Jean Dillon, Middlesex University, Middlesex, UK

Abstract: Based upon research undertaken by the author and her professional concerns as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at a post-1992 university in England, this paper explores an aspect of post-compulsory education where challenges and barriers to higher education entry may be experienced; namely, for black minority ethnic students enrolled on further education 'Access to Social Work' courses in England. Underpinned by principles of social justice, Access Courses endeavour to promote widening participation to higher education to students who have previously underachieved academically and who are generally from less privileged social backgrounds. Drawing upon theoretical ideas relating to social reproduction, critical race theory, feminist theory and life span development principles, the paper examines the education and career choices open to 'Access to Social Work' students, exploring whether their decision-making is influenced by any key 'turning points' linked to ideas and factors ideas. The paper ultimately identifies whether these students ambitions are realisable or are being thwarted by more stringent entry requirements for social work education introduced in 2003, and concomitantly the increased emphasis placed upon key skills development by Government and the social work profession's regulatory body. The paper also briefly explores the influence of learning cultures and gender on education and career decision-making and, manifestly, examines issues of intersectionality in the aforementioned areas with regards to race, gender and social class.

Keywords: Access Students, Black Minority Ethnic Students, Further Education, Higher Education, Social Work, 'Turning Points', Key Skills, Widening Participation

Introduction

STUDENTS FROM LESS privileged social backgrounds have been historically under-represented in higher education (HE) (see for e.g. Robbins, 1963; Dearing, 1997 and DfES, 2003a). Whilst widening participation policy initiatives seek to address this disparity, educational inequalities may actually be growing within some areas of HE. This paper elucidates this contention by drawing upon the author's doctoral study exploring the experiences and trajectories of predominantly black minority ethnic (BME) students enrolled on further education (FE) access courses trying to gain entry onto HE social work programmes. Discussion relating to what the author refers to as the three 'Cs', namely, Capital, Competition and Credentalism and theoretical concepts developed by Bourdieu and others, are expounded to illustrate some of the tensions of widening participation policy. The author argues that an understanding of life course factors, specifically, the situated social context of students, and a commitment to social justice, is essential if educationalists are to further avoid unwittingly disadvantaging already disadvantaged students. The paper concludes with some recommendations for HE practice.

COMMON
GROUND

Widening Participation Policy

Educational inequalities are a prevailing social problem in the UK that policy makers and educationalists have sought to ameliorate. The report of the Robbins Committee (Robbins, 1963), the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) and the 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, (DfES, 2003a) have documented the historical dominance in HE of more privileged socio-economic groups, and the under-representation of students from low income families, black minority ethnic (BME) groups and women. Widening educational participation policy seeks to address these inequalities by encouraging entry to students currently under-represented within British universities (QAA, 2008a). Whilst widening participation policy is underpinned by economic and utilitarian imperatives, Lall and Morley also illustrate its essential social justice tenets:

> Access to a university education is seen as an important policy intervention to counter social exclusion and poverty, and to promote local and national regeneration across the UK. Universities are seen as playing a vital part in expanding opportunity and advancing social justice (2004: 6)

To facilitate widening participation, a governmental target was set to increase participation rates among students between the ages of 18-30 to 50 per cent by 2010 (DfES, 2003b). Whilst participation rates have improved and are currently around 40% (Cabinet Office, 2009), students from less privileged social backgrounds are still under-represented in elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge and over-represented in post-1992 higher education institutions (HEIs) (Archer et al, 2003; Archer & Francis, 2007).

Access Courses

Access courses play a fundamental widening participation and social justice role by providing progression pathways to HE for students who have under-achieved academically or had their education disrupted because of personal circumstances but whom, nonetheless, have the potential to study for a degree or professional qualification (OCN, 2007). These courses are generally delivered within FE colleges and their key objective is to build confidence and equip students with the skills to study at HE level (Jones, 2006; QAA, 2008a; QAA, 2008b). Women and mature students are over-represented on access courses, and growing numbers of BME students are also enrolling on them (QAA, 2008b: 5-6). Despite endeavouring to improve the life chances of less privileged students, access courses have less academic kudos than 'A' levels, the standard qualifications needed for entry to British universities. Students following the 'traditional' 'A' level route are far more likely than 'non-traditional' students pursuing vocational routes to HE to be offered university places (Wolf, 2002; HEFCE, 2006 & 2009).

Black Minority Ethnic Students Experiences

BME students have high aspirations and expectations of the value and benefit of HE qualifications and such beliefs influence their education decision-making (Connor et. al, 2004). Indeed, they are more likely than their white counterparts to undertake HE qualifications (ibid). Despite higher participation rates, BME students are mainly to be found within post-

1992 universities and disproportionately experience barriers when accessing and progressing through HE (see HEA, 2006; HEFCE, 2006; Tolley & Rundel, 2006; Archer & Francis, 2007). They also do less well in degree performance than white students on average, gaining fewer 'Firsts' or 'Upper Second' class degrees overall, and are awarded more 'Thirds' or lower class degrees (Connor et al, 2004). Post-university, minority ethnic graduates also do less well in the labour market and have, for example, higher initial unemployment rates (Connor et al, 2004: xviii).

Capital

Bourdieu's (1990) theoretical ideas relating to the acquisition of different forms of capital provide one possible explanation for persistent educational inequalities among less privileged students. Bourdieu saw the education system as a hidden structure manipulated by the powerful to reproduce the overall society and described the social processes by which minority elites shape society and perpetuate their interests, thus advantaging themselves and their families in the process (ibid). Bourdieu (1990) referred to the concept of 'field' to describe a set of positions and relationships in different contexts (e.g. within the family or schools) that are linked to the possession and interaction of different amounts of cultural, economic, symbolic and social capital that people have, and the influence these have on shaping life chances and opportunities. *Cultural capital* relates to cultural knowledge and competence accrued from trips to art galleries, for example; *economic capital* refers to the financial/economics resources at the disposal of the family/individual; *symbolic capital* is associated with individual prestige one has; for example, an influential parent employed within a high status profession. *Social capital* relates to access to influential social networks which can help individuals' social advancement by perhaps opening 'social doors' which might otherwise have been closed. Bourdieu (1990) argued that whilst adaptation occasionally takes the form of radical conversion (notions of agency), that social forces such as capital accumulation generally tend to be reproductive rather than transformative.

The social disadvantages and poorer educational outcomes resulting from a lack of capital accumulation among BME students are well documented in the research literature (see for e.g. Reay, et al, 2005). BME students generally having lower socio-economic class profiles and HE entry qualifications on average (Connor et al, 2004). Moreover, fewer of these students take the traditional 'A' level route to HE than their white counterparts, instead, being more likely to come into HE from FE colleges (HEA, 2006). The literature also reports evidence of racial bias in degree admissions processes for BME students (Connor et al, 2004).

Life Course Theories

Life courses theories are also pertinent to an exploration of students' experiences and trajectories, recognising that since societies have become more diverse that there is a greater need to understand the multiplicity within societies on a more individual level (Elder et al, 2006). Life course development theories are underpinned by five central tenets:

Firstly, development is lifelong; secondly, people are actors with choices that construct their lives; thirdly, the timing of event and roles, whether early or late, affects their

impact. Fourthly, lives are embedded in relationships with other people and are influenced by them, and fifthly, changing historical times and places profoundly influence people's experiences (Elder, 2002: 1-2).

From these suppositions it can be inferred that opportunities and life chances are not necessarily linear or static, and can – and do – change over the life course. Moreover, individuals can play an active role in shaping their lives. Finally, peoples' lives are influenced by key experiences. In embracing notions of agency, these theoretical ideas are less deterministic than structural theories of educational inequalities; instead advancing the concept of free will and suggesting disadvantages can be overcome over the life course, and that social mobility is possible.

Building upon these theoretical ideas, Hodkinson et al (1996: 142-143) suggest individual social action can be shaped by three types of 'turning points' or key life events, classified according to their causes – structural, self-initiated or forced. *Structural turning points* include, for example, socio-economic disadvantages precluding individuals from pursuing education opportunities to improve life chances. *Self-initiated turning points* refer to when an individual exercises individual agency. *Forced turning points* are the result of external events; for example, academic under-attainment may prevent a student from going to university. These concepts provide useful insights in relation to BME students' trajectories. Some of these students may have, for example, come to the UK to improve their quality of life and material conditions and experienced discrimination and barriers to employment on arrival. This, in turn, may have prevented a prioritisation of educational opportunities until a later point in the life course.

Competition

Other causal dynamics linked to persistent educational inequalities, and which have created tensions for widening participation, relate to *Competition* and *Credentalism*. Competition for HE places in England has increased significantly over the last ten years. The number of students entering British universities has increased by 44% since 1999 (UCAS, 2010), but the increase has been most marked since the current economic recession in the UK. In 2009, 106,389 students applied to British universities and by January 2010 HE applications had risen by a further 22% compared to 2009 (UCAS, 2010: 1). Unfavourable labour market conditions have led to a renewed interest in students applying to undertake degrees in social work and nursing, which are perhaps considered as providing more stable future career prospects:

> There were signs that the recession was prompting people to apply to higher education as they sought to retrain... Compared with last year, the number of applications to study social work is up 41 per cent, while nursing is up 74 per cent (Times Higher, 2010, p. 1).

Increased numbers of HE applications inevitably mean greater competition for places which can present challenges for HE admissions staff when trying to distinguish between applicants and whilst also endeavouring to widen participation. Increased competition also heightens the risk of what Coates and Adnett (2003) refer to as *cream-skimming* and *dreg-siphoning*, whereby, only candidates considered to have the 'best' academic credentials are selected

and those with 'less' desirable credentials, and/or considered risky *vis-à-vis* meeting HE academic standards, are rejected.

Credentalism

Cream-skimming relates to a phenomenon known as 'credentalism' or 'qualification inflation', when the stipulated academic credentials of specific jobs do not match the inherent skills required, or the demands of particular professional roles (Levidow, 2002). Human capital theorists see qualification inflation as a response to demand and supply issues and this is more evident when there is surplus labour (ibid). This phenomenon can potentially impact upon the life chances of people from disadvantaged social backgrounds who already generally have limited economic, social and cultural capital. This paper has already indicated that credentalism is an enduring problem within HE, evident in relation to the academic/vocational *vis-à-vis* HE entry, with 'A' level qualifications generally given more merit than vocational qualification awards. Credentalism is also a problem for graduates from less privileged backgrounds when seeking access to high status professions such as journalism and law, for example (Cabinet Office, 2009). Entry routes to the professions, particularly for people from BME backgrounds, have not widened as the following government report illustrates:

> ...the glass ceiling has been raised, but not yet broken. Despite increasing numbers of people from black minority ethnic backgrounds in professional jobs, many professions are still unrepresentative of the modern society they serve. And most alarmingly of all there is strong evidence [...] that the UK's professions have become more, not less, socially exclusive over time (Cabinet Office, 2009: 6).

This report cites the increased emphasis now placed upon credentials and professional qualifications, and selection and entry procedures underpinned by cultural and attitudinal barriers as contributory factors for this disparity (Cabinet Office, 2009). Credentalism has also been reported as a problem within nursing and social work, associated with these professions having shifted from diploma to graduate level entry (ibid).

In the case of social work education, a new qualifying degree was introduced in 2003 alongside more stringent Department of Health (DH) academic entry requirements. The DH outlined four key entry requirements with the new qualifying degree in social work; all applicants must have key skills in English and mathematics equivalent to GCSE grade C (see footnote 1 for further explanation). Whilst these baseline academic entry requirements may seem a reasonable expectation for HE entrants, a central concern of the author is that they have led to an over-emphasis on the academic credentials of applicants. Manifestly, this has resulted in less consideration being given to important 'softer skills' such as empathy and 'warmth', equally important attributes for qualifying social workers. Tensions of widening participation associated with the three 'Cs' have been compounded by the British government's concerns that labour market participants are able to compete in the global, economic market (BIS, 2009). An increased emphasis is now placed on key skills development and employability during initial schooling and post-compulsory education courses (DfWP, 2007). These tensions are being magnified by concerns that widening participation policy may be under threat. In response to the current economic recession, the British government plans to

make cuts to the HE budget generally and to place a cap on the number of students going to university in future (HEFCE, 2009).

The Study

The study addressed some of the concerns discussed in this paper by focussing on the experiences of predominantly BME students enrolled on three FE college access courses in the South East of England, and had five key aims. Firstly, to explore access students social backgrounds. Secondly, to explore the education and career decision-making and choices open to students, with particular reference to BME students'. Thirdly, to investigate whether students' education and career aspirations were influenced by key 'turning points' in their lives. Fourthly, to identify the outcome of students' HE applications. Finally, to elicit course tutors perspectives on students' education and career decision-making and any barriers to HE entry.

Methodology and Sampling

The study used a mixed method approach involving questionnaires, initial and follow-up focus groups and individual interviews. Convenience and purposive sampling strategies were employed to select the college sites and students, that is, the nearest and most convenient locations were chosen and BME students were specifically, but not exclusively, selected to participate in the study (Robson, 2002). The views and experiences of a minority of white/other students were also sought on the basis of the author wanting to be inclusive, and to facilitate some comparative analysis.

The Samples

Fifty-five students completed social background questionnaires; 21 students participated in initial focus groups and 13 in follow-up focus groups. Interviews were conducted with 4 students and 3 course tutors. Finally, higher education/choice outcome questionnaires were completed by 12 students near completion of their studies. Most of the students (74%) were from 'working class' or less privileged social backgrounds and nearly all were combining study with low paid/status work. The majority lived with a partner, children or family members. They were mainly mature students – their average age was 32 – were predominately women (78%) and from BME backgrounds (78%).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis methods were used to analyse the social background and HE choice/outcome questionnaires and thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected. Techniques used built upon those developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), and included developing initial codes and categories, memo writing and grouping the data in terms of emergent themes and patterns, regularities and irregularities.

Findings

Key findings are discussed under the following headings: *Prevailing and New Social Inequalities; The Influence of Life Course Experiences; Counterbalances to Social Inequalities* and *Triumph over Adversity*.

Prevailing and New Social Inequalities

As was illustrated earlier, the majority of the students were from working class backgrounds, and they were mainly working in low paid/status employment within health and social care where the rate of pay was comparable to the British national minimum rate of £5.73 per hour (Directgov, 2009). In general, the students, who were predominantly women, were following similar careers trajectories within the 'caring' professions to those of their mothers. This suggests, as Bourdieu (1990) argued, that social inequalities are reproduced over generations of families. However, there was some evidence of social mobility across generations as the students were generally pursuing higher status career choices than their mothers, and which would potentially improve their future life chances.

Social disadvantages such as poverty, time pressures and initial low confidence in academic ability presented additional challenges for some of the students when striving to progress to university. Perhaps partially as a result of these social disadvantages, the students were less likely to apply or to be offered places at pre-1992 universities; indeed, less than half (30%) of the 53 students who supplied information applied to pre-1992 universities, and only 1 student secured a social work place at this type of institution. Some students also experienced difficulties in gaining entry to post-1992 universities. This finding may, in part, be explained by the number and type of universities within the geographical areas where the students lived. Students' education decision-making may have also been made on a more practical basis linked to their family commitments and the distance of particular universities from their homes. Conversely, the limited university choices of the students may provide further confirmation of the under-representation of less privileged students in elite universities and their over-representation in post-1992 HEIs, illustrated earlier in this paper.

Barriers to HE entry were disproportionately apparent among BME students. They were less likely than their white/other counterparts to be short-listed, or to secure HE places after undergoing admission selection procedures that sometimes included sitting numeracy and literacy examinations and undergoing individual and/or group interviews. Moreover, a minority of these students were unsuccessful in securing places on either vocational or non-vocational degree programmes. The access course tutors linked these disparities to issues of social disadvantage, a lack of capital, ethnocentricity and eurocentricity, resulting in racial bias during HE admission processes. One tutor, for example, illustrated how the animated communication of BME students during group discussions was on occasion misconstrued as aggression. Other barriers for BME students reported by the course tutors included problems with basic skills development in mathematics and/or English. This was especially an issue where English was a second or third language and for students with previous limited academic attainment. Issues with basic skills were also found among a minority of black African students who already had first degrees awarded overseas. Other reported obstacles related to the demands and challenges of the access course, which proved insurmountable for some students, and resulting in them having to leave or withdrawing from the course.

Problems of what the author refers to as *vocational stratification,* characterised by the interplay of social factors relating to ethnicity, gender and class, appear to have both created and reinforced the HE barriers experienced by some students. These educational inequalities were considered by the course tutors to have intensified since the introduction of more stringent entry requirements for the BA Social Work in 2003, and the increased emphasis placed by government on key skills development. As a response to these stipulations, one college had introduced tougher admissions criteria, resulting in higher percentages of students failing to gain entry to the access course. Issues of *vocational stratification* were exacerbated by some students receiving less financial State support for their studies compared to those pursuing other 'care' related courses such as childminding or a Business and Technology Education Council[1] (BTEC award), as the comments from two students illustrate:

> *...with the BTEC, you get £15 week training money, and Jobcentre Plus will pay for childcare for you as well. And if you needed help with books, they were also willing to help with that as well. But for this course, if they ask you to a work focus interview you have to go or you'd be penalised. And if they ask you to go on a training course, you have to go. They don't put any value on this course whatsoever* (Joni – White British female student).
>
> *As Joni said they were quite happy helping me to be a childminder; they'll quite happily give you all the resources and all the help, all whatever you need and a little bit of training chucked it. But when you want to do something – I mean I'm not putting that down, I was a childminder for a few years – but I want to use that experience to do more now, to be focused in another area and to be able to make it more personalised* (Sheba – Black/White dual heritage female student).

As a consequence of the access course not being recognised as providing a viable route to gainful employment, several students had to demonstrate to the Jobcentre Plus agency[2] that they were actively seeking work by attending work focus interviews. To be able to continue with the access course, one student reported providing inaccurate information to Jobcentre Plus about the course she was attending. These dynamics provide evidence of another form of stratification which the author refers to as *institutional stratification*; namely, jobs such as childminding – that are already highly gendered and associated with limited career prospects and low remuneration – being encouraged and reinforced by government policy, while those offering more status and scope for professional development are not. This not only suggests that some 'caring' careers choices are historically socially reproduced, but that new forms of social inequalities are becoming apparent within some areas of vocational education and training.

The Influence of Life Course Experiences

Life course experiences influencing students' trajectories were significant. Similar to those identified by Hodkinson et al (1996), experiences marked by key 'turning points' were found

---

[1] BTEC are a form of vocational educational qualification in the UK. They are equivalent to other qualifications such as the GCSE (levels 1 to 2), A Level (level 3) and university degrees (levels 4 to 6), but are based on practical work or coursework rather than timed examinations (Edxcel, 2010).

[2] Jobcentre Plus is the government-funded employment agency facility and the social security office for working-age people in Great Britain (Department for Work and Pensions, 2009).

to be 'structural', 'self-initiated' or 'forced'. Structural inequalities, linked to poverty for example, frequently compounded by the interplay of ethnicity, gender and class, formed the catalyst in the 'self-initiated' education and careers decisions of the majority of the students. They also reflected an attempt by some of the students to improve their material conditions. It was also evident that earlier 'forced' inhibitory factors such as lack of qualifications and adverse social circumstances had prevented an earlier prioritisation of the self and a focus on self-development. However, key influential factors linked to significant life events were often more complex and can be subdivided into what the author has termed 'primary' and 'secondary' 'turning points'. Whilst *primary turning points*, for example, time spent in care during childhood were significant, it was often the more cumulative effects of *secondary turning points* occurring at later points in the life cycle that had the most impact on shaping students self-identity, dispositions and their trajectories. Students, for example, who had come to the UK as refugees and experienced racism upon arrival, were particularly sensitive to personal suffering and social problems in society. They were also strongly motivated to support others and alleviate suffering, as the following comments illustrate:

> *Initially I was just hoping to get a degree of any discipline. Em, but the fact is that I focused back on my…where I come from, the problems of my families, friends and I faced. I thought oh social work is the best programme I should do. Em and yes, once I qualify to be a social worker, I think I would help not just myself but many other people* (Alanda – Black African male student).
> *…coming from Africa, and part of my area was being affected by the civil war. And I found that down there my area became so vulnerable, in the sense that children died, and children and adults died, and some were left to decompose because of the land mines. The thing is down there, there is not enough resources, for example like medication, education was sabotaged, and hospitals and the factures, everything. People were able to cultivate their own food where they could get a source of income; it was all destroyed. And from that time I say, if I receive education in this country I'm able to go back to serve my people down there* (Esmea – Black African female student*)*.

These findings suggest that students' education and career decision-making are highly reflexive processes influenced by a multitude of factors relating to key experiences over the life course. They also suggest that the influences on students' decision-making in these areas may differ cross-culturally; as the two excerpts from the transcripts suggest, African students may have a more collective/communitarian view of society which is in direct contrast to the more individualistic idea of society prevalent within Western societies.

Counterbalances to Social Inequalities

Supportive learning cultures were an important counteracting factor to the social disadvantages experienced by the students. In addition to academic and pastoral support, one tutor in particular played a significant role in raising the career aspirations of black African students who had come to the UK with limited understanding of the distinctions between social care and social work. Two of the tutors coming from BME backgrounds themselves also provide an indication of the importance of having teachers from a range of different backgrounds. Such teachers may have an enhanced understanding of what the issues are for students from

similar social backgrounds, and may also provide important role models (Cropper, 2000). Informal support structures formed among the student body were also an important source of emotional and academic support, particularly during times of personal crisis. The value of this kind of support is recognised as important for students (Jones, 2006), but especially for those from less privileged backgrounds.

Triumph Over Adversity

Whilst the majority of the students were experiencing significant social disadvantages, compounded by the interplay of ethnicity, class and gender, they were, nevertheless, not 'victims'. Neither were they necessarily 'lacking' academically as is sometimes depicted in widening participation policy (Leathwood, 2006) – even though it is acknowledged a minority of students had difficulties with basic skills development. Rather, these students had to work hard to overcome socio-economic inequalities experienced over the life course. As a result, they were not necessarily at the same 'starting point' as perhaps 'traditional' students from more privileged social backgrounds. They also generally had less economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital. Consequently, it was taking longer for these students to overcome sometimes multiple disadvantages. These important life course factors are given insufficient consideration when assessing and selecting 'non-traditional' students for HE. Neither is there sufficient awareness among HE educationalists that access courses entail achieving 'A' level equivalent standards generally in half the time taken for 'A' levels. Consequently, these courses are very academically and psychologically demanding as comments from one of the course tutors and a student demonstrate:

> *...the programme itself is harder than other Level 3 programmes. If you compare it to a BTEC Health and Social Care for example, the access programme is harder. If you compare it to a short Level 3 course like Youth Justice, that is what I teach, and people do go to university after that, the access programme is 55,000 times harder. There's lots of units to do in a short period of time. However, the hardness isn't a problem the hardness actually prepares the students for work at university. It more prepares them than BTEC does or the Youth Justice course does* (College C Course Tutor – Black British female).
>
> *I nearly left the course. It was a very brief – just personal stuff happened. It was a bit like err when you make a really rash decision because you think it will alleviate everything; I felt that was the option and it made me feel better. It would have been in the short term; obviously talking to people and especially* [her tutor] *helped. I sat with him for about an hour and just went through why, and it also taught me how I've made rash decisions in the past. It seems like I'm running away. It made me realise how much I wanted this, enough to stick it through* (Sheba, Black/White dual heritage female).

A central finding from the study, therefore, is the triumph over adversity demonstrated by the students. In addition to working hard to overcome socio-economic disadvantages and other obstacles experienced over the life course, the students were passionate about wanting to make a contribution to society.

Discussion

The study has illustrated the complexities of less privileged students' trajectories and the challenges they may experience when attempting to gain entry to HE. Typically the students had less capital accumulation than more privileged students and were juggling several competing priorities in their lives, including study, work and family commitments. The educational inequalities historically apparent among BME have been intensified by the impact of the three 'Cs', compounded by the interplay of race, class and gender and, finally, by evidence of *vocational stratification*. As a result, these students have a multitude of structural and situational barriers to overcome. This indicates that widening participation policy has not been effective as would have been hoped; especially for the students who had their education ambitions thwarted by not managing to complete the access course, and for those who failed to obtain a HE place. The students who were more successful demonstrated high levels of resilience and determination to overcome existing barriers to HE. Hence, the struggles experienced and overcome by the students in the study mean that "...black achievement inevitably remains a triumph over the odds, a victory over struggle" (Edwards & Polite, 1992: 3).

Conclusion

This paper indicates a pressing need for more to be done to facilitate less privileged students' entry and transition to HE. This is especially important if universities are to address their historical legacy; to avoid further disadvantaging less privileged students and, essentially, fulfil their commitment to social justice articulated through widening participation policy. To facilitate this commitment, more recognition is needed among HE professionals of the sometimes complex and non-linear trajectories of less privileged students. Indeed, the unique life course experiences of all students' need to be valued and seen as an asset to HE. Correspondingly, university admissions procedures need to be more holistic and balanced, taking into account contextual information relating to less privileged students' social backgrounds. There also needs to be an assessment of these students potential to succeed not just at the point of entry, but over the duration of their time at university. More reflexivity is also needed when making admissions decisions to avoid issues of ethnocentricity and eurocentricity. This could be facilitated by cultural awareness training for admissions staff, and the development of admissions tools giving equal consideration to the assessment of both academic and non-academic attributes. Access students with limited social capital would also benefit from HE professionals explaining the differences between pre-1992 and post-1992 universities during college talks so that students on access courses are able to make informed choices on their university application forms. Finally, initiatives such as mentoring schemes and university taster days would also help in making the HE ambitions of less privileged students more realisable than is currently the case.

References

Archer, L. Hutchings, M. & Ross, A. (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion*, London: RoutledgeFalmer.
Archer, L. & Francis, B. (2007) *Understanding Black Minority Ethnic Achievement*, London: Routledge.
BIS (2009) *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy*, London: BIS.
Bourdieu, P. (1990) *The Logic of Practice,* Cambridge: Polity.

Cabinet Office (2009) *Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions*, London: Cabinet Office.

Connor, H., Tyers, C,. Modood, T. and Hillage, J. (2004) *Why The Difference? A Closer Look at Higher Education Minority Ethnic Students and Graduates*, Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills.

Coates, G. and Adnett, N. (2003) 'Encouraging Cream-Skimming and Dreg-Siphoning? Increasing Competition Between English HEIs'*, British Journal of Educational Studies*, 51(3): 202-218.

Cropper, A. (2000) 'Mentoring as an Inclusive Devise for the Excluded: Black Students' Experience of a Mentoring Scheme', *Social Work Education*, 19(6): 597-607.

DfES (2003a) *The Future of Higher Education,* London: HMSO.

DfES (2003b) *Widening Participation in Higher Education,* London: HMSO.

DH (2002) *Requirements for Social Work Training*, London: Department of Health.

Edwards and Polite (1992) *Children of the Dream: The Psychology of Black Success*, New York: Doubleday.

DfWP (2007) *Opportunity, Employment and Progression: making skills work*, Norwich: The Stationary Office.

Directgov (2009) *The National Minimum Wage Rates*, downloaded from: www.direct.gov.uk/en/Employment/Employees/TheNationalMinimumWage/DG_10027201 (accessed on 06.07.09).

HEFCE (2006) *Widening Participation: a review*, Report to the Minister of State for Higher Education and Lifelong Learning, Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council.

HEFCE (2009) Letter to HEFCE from The Rt Hon John Denham MP Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills), downloaded from:
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2009/efficiency/letter.htm (accessed 15.03.10).

HEA (2006) *A Review of Black and Minority Ethnic Participation in Higher Education, Aimhigher Project*, Prepared by the National Black Minority Ethnic Education Strategy Group.

Hodkinson, P,. Sparkes, A.C,. & Hodkinson, H,. (1996) *Triumphs and Tears: Young People, Markets and the Transition from School to Work*, London: David Fulton.

Jones, K. (2006) 'Valuing Diversity and Widening Participation: The Experiences of Access to Social Work Students in Further and Higher Education', *Social Work Education*, 25(5): 485-500.

Lall, M. & Morley, L. (2004) *Social Disadvantage and Widening Participation in Higher Education,* The New Deal for Communities The National Evaluation, Research Report 52, London: Neighbourhood Renewal Office.

Leathwood, C. (2006) 'Identities and Inequalities in Higher Education', paper given to the *Widening Participation Annual Conference* at the Institute of Education, London, 13th March 2006.

Levidow, L. (2002) 'Marketizing Higher Education: Neo-liberal Strategies and Counter-Strategies', *The Commoner*: http://www.the commoner.org (accessed on 12.11.04).

Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994) (2nd edition) *Qualitative data analysis*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J., Chauhan, B., Jones, G., Wenman, H., & Hussein, S. (2009) 'Hanging on a Little Thin Line': Barriers to Progression and Retention in Social Work Education', *Social Work Education*, 28(4): 363-379.

NCIHE (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Summary Report* (referred to as 'The Dearing Report'), London: HMSO.

OCN (2007) The *London Access to HE Courses Directory 2007-2008*, London: OCN.

QAA for HE (2008a) 'Outcomes from institutional audit: Institutions' arrangements to support widening participation and access to higher education' (Second series), downloaded from: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/SupportForWidening.asp*df* (accessed on 22.02.09).

QAA for HE (2008b) *Access to Higher Education statistics summary* (2006-07), downloaded from: http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/partners/statistics/2008/QAA.pdf (accessed on 07.02.09).

Reay, D., David, M.E,. and Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of Choice: social class, race and gender in higher education*: Trentham Books.

Robbins Report (1963) *Higher Education*, London: HMSO.

Robson, C. (2002) (2nd edition) *Real World Research*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Times Higher (2010) 'Take a Number: applications to study rise 23%, 09 February 2010, London: Times Higher, downloaded from: (www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?section-code=26&storycode=410307&c=1 (accessed on 09.02.10).

Tolley, J. & Rundle, J. (2006) *A Review of Black and Minority Ethnic Participation in Higher Education*, London: The National BME Education Strategy Group.

Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter?: Myths about Education and Economic Growth*, London: Penguin.

About the Author

Dr. Jean Dillon

Jean Dillon is a Senior Lecturer at Middlesex University, London, England. Her area of specialism is admissions procedures in the context of social work education and widening participation policy. Underpinned by a strong commitment to social justice, Jean has undertaken extensive widening participation work with local colleges and schools to promote access to higher education, particularly for students from less privileged social backgrounds. As part of doctoral studies at The Institute of Education, University of London Jean researched issues emerging from her professional practice; namely issues relating to social reproduction and vocational stratification, and has published a number of papers on this topic.

Please visit the Journal website at http://www.Learning-Journal.com
for further information about the Journal or to subscribe.

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS JOURNALS

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* THE ARTS IN SOCIETY
www.Arts-Journal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* THE BOOK
www.Book-Journal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* CLIMATE CHANGE Impacts and Responses
www.Climate-Journal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* THE CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT
www.ConstructedEnvironment.com

DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
www.Design-Journal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* DIVERSITY in Organizations, Communities and Nations
www.Diversity-Journal.com

THE GLOBAL STUDIES JOURNAL
www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* THE HUMANITIES
www.Humanities-Journal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* THE IMAGE
www.OnTheImage.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* LEARNING
www.Learning-Journal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* MANAGEMENT Knowledge, Culture & Change
www.Management-Journal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* THE INCLUSIVE MUSEUM
www.Museum-Journal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIETY
www.ReligionInSociety.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* SCIENCE IN SOCIETY
www.Science-Society.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* INTERDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL SCIENCES
http://www.SocialSciences-Journal.com

SPACES & FLOWS AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL of Urban & ExtraUrban Studies
www.SpacesAndFlows.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* SPORT & SOCIETY
www.SportAndSociety.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* SUSTAINABILITY Environmental, Cultural, Economic & Social
www.Sustainability-Journal.com

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* TECHNOLOGY Knowledge & Society
www.Technology-Journal.com

UBIQUITOUS LEARNING AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
www.ULJournal.com

JOURNAL *of* THE WORLD UNIVERSITIES FORUM
www.Universities-Journal.com

FOR SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT
subscriptions@commongroundpublishing.com