

Student ambassadors: ‘role models’, learning practices and identities

Abstract

Employing students to market higher education (HE) and widen access is established practice in the UK and other developed countries. In the UK student ambassadors are held to be effective in aspiration and attainment-raising work and cited as ‘role models’ for pupils.

The focus of this paper is student ambassador outreach work in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths including medicine) subjects at two contrasting universities. The study deployed ethnography and approaches from across the social sciences to trace and analyse discourses surrounding ambassadors, explore their positioning within learning contexts, relationships with pupils and the learning that takes place.

Findings indicate that where ambassadors work collaboratively with pupils in contexts with ‘informal attributes’, pupils can identify closely with them. However, in contexts with more ‘formal attributes’, differences, not similarities, are highlighted. Stakeholder interests are found to significantly impact on learning contexts and on ambassadors’ efficacy as HE ‘role models’.

Introduction

The 21st century has been a time of ‘massive expansion in HE internationally’ (Gale and Tranter, 2011: p31). The scale of this is striking with a fifty three percent increase globally since 2000 in numbers of tertiary students (Morley, 2012); the expansion of HE in China has been particularly exponential with an increase from 1.58 million in 1990 to over 23 million in 2006 (Liu, 2013). Demand for HE is predicted to continue to grow to over 262 million by 2025 (Morley, 2012). Until the change of government in 2010, the approach to HE in the UK under New Labour was ‘emphatic’ (Parry, 2011: p142) in its commitment to increasing participation. As part of strategies to increase and to widen participation (WP) university students, most commonly entitled student ambassadors, were employed to work on school outreach activities. These student employees are used ubiquitously across HEIs in the UK and other countries. With the coalition government in the UK driven by a determination to cut public expenditure, there have been massive cuts to state funding for HEIs and a move away from sector wide HE expansion. The focus has shifted from the broad WP policies of New Labour to a narrower focus on ‘fair access’ and ‘social mobility’ (Sanders & Higham, 2012). This has significantly changed WP work in HEIs although outreach programmes continue as a way of implementing access agreements. Student ambassadors remain a fixed part of the HE landscape in the UK but the emphasis of WP activity has moved from general ‘aspiration raising’ to a more targeted focus on pupils as consumers in an increasingly marketised HE system.

This paper presents findings from a study of student ambassador WP outreach work in STEM subjects at two contrasting universities during the last New Labour administration. A series of vignettes of different activities illustrates how the pedagogies employed and the level of formality of learning contexts (Colley et al, 2003)

affect ‘discursive constructions’ (Willig, 2001) of ambassadors and their work. I consider how discourses and the positioning of ambassadors in different learning contexts impact on the relationship that develops between ambassadors and pupils, processes of dis/identification and the learning that takes place. Findings shed light on ways that student ambassadors can support and hinder widening access in these and other subject areas.

Ambassador Work: evidence of benefits?

A central theme of New Labour’s WP policy was raising the aspirations of young people. This ‘aspiration raising’ discourse was prevalent in WP policy and practice and is part of dominant wider neoliberal discourses of individualization - the emphasis being on the need for individual students to ‘raise their aspirations’. Burke (2012) describes aspiration raising strategies as being ‘largely constructed as an individual self improvement project’ (p105). These discourses neglect embedded social and structural obstacles widely acknowledged as constraining young people’s ability to progress into HE (Burke, 2012; Reay et al, 2005; Brooks, 2003). The student ambassadors in this study were positioned firmly within this ‘aspiration raising’ discourse and extensively seen as aspirational role models for school pupils (Sanders & Higham, 2012). Various evaluations of WP initiatives related the ‘success’ of ambassadors in this capacity (HEFCE, 2005; HEFCE, 2010).

According to HEFCE (2011: p2) during 2009 -10 ‘roughly one in every 150 13-18 year olds in English schools’ was ‘involved’ in working with university students. Despite the extensive use of ambassadors, there has been little research (Gorard et al, 2007). While Sanders and Higham identify a ‘substantial body of evidence’ to indicate that HE students gain from working as ambassadors, there is less focus on the impact of the

schemes for pupils. In their literature synthesis of HE students' role in widening access, Sanders and Higham (2012) report that literature generally suggests 'HE students can provide learners with a role model from which to develop more accurate perceptions of students and challenge negative stereotypes' (p19). Ambassadors are described as improving pupils' understanding about accessing HE and the HE experience, increasing pupils' confidence and improving motivation (ibid.). It has also been suggested that ambassadors can become trusted sources of 'hot' or 'warm' knowledge about university that is accessed and believed by pupils (Gartland, 2013; Slack et al, 2012). Sanders and Higham (2012), though, identify significant gaps in research, including about the importance of matching backgrounds, the deployment of ambassadors, their contribution in informal and formal roles, and the efficacy of different delivery models (2012: p24-25). They also highlight that much of the research has only considered the views of ambassadors and organisers. Indeed, there has been little focus on the 'voice' of school pupils despite their central place in all ambassador work and the increasing emphasis on the 'student voice' more generally in research with young people (Fielding, 2004).

Ambassadors' 'aspiration raising' practices

The largest scheme funding the work of ambassadors under New Labour was Aimhigher which supported WP activity in universities and schools across England. Other government funded schemes and initiatives funded by individual HEIs often ran alongside this. Existing research into the work of ambassadors, though limited, does offer some insights.

There is a suggestion that ambassadors provide young people with IAG (HEFCE,

2011). Ambassadors are widely seen as ‘credible information-givers’ about HE (Hatt, Baxter & Tate, 2009: p341). Slack et al (2012) point to how brief encounters with students during university visits and events can particularly influence the decision making of disadvantaged young people who distrust ‘cold’ official sources. However, they and others question the quality of this information (Slack et al, 2012; Ylonen, 2010; Gartland, 2012/13).

The Aimhigher Associates Scheme, responsible for the employment of large numbers of HE students working with pupils, had foci on life at university, aspirations and progression, applying to HE, subject specific support, revision practice and study skills. However, evaluation of the scheme (HEFCE, 2010) reveals that focusing on access to university was problematic with school pupils who had no interest in going. Taylor, in her study of students from an elite university working with pupils in a ‘Students into Schools’ tutoring programme, comments that instilling the message that success is only achievable via going to university ‘may at times serve to inscribe impossibility and failure’ and that Aimhigher initiatives could sharpen ‘the dichotomy between ‘achievement’ and ‘success’ and non-participation and ‘failure’ (Taylor 2008: p161-2).

A further issue to emerge from existing research relates to ambassadors’ positioning as authority figures in schools during outreach activity. In the evaluation of the student associates scheme, ambassadors’ reported their need for help with classroom behaviour management and information about the school curriculum (HEFCE, 2010). This issue is raised in a study of Aimhigher ambassadors conducted by Ylonen (2010) and by Gartland (2013). Taylor (2008), identifies a ‘sharpening of notions of “us” and “them” amongst many ambassadors contrasting their success stories against the difficult behaviour and ‘educational “failures”’ they find in some schools. Taylor suggests that

‘social class is mobilized’ in these ‘constructions of the “good student” as against the “bad pupil”’ (p155).

The physical location of ambassador work and learning environment

Little has been made of the physical location of ambassador work though, from the literature considered here, this seems significant. The location of ambassadors’ work in schools appears potentially problematic. The available identities for ambassadors within school settings are circumscribed by the operations of these institutions, positioning ambassadors as authority figures. Taylor’s study also reveals how ambassadors’ understandings of pupils are defined through the geographic and classed locations of the schools they are in. She relates how students described pupils as ‘local’ and that this term had pejorative connotations. Some students more explicitly described their placements as being ‘located within ‘sink’ estates’ with ‘rough’ pupils’ (p157). This geographic and institutional positioning contributed to the sense of classed difference Taylor identifies as existing between pupils and ambassadors (p155).

In contrast, both Taylor and HEFCE make brief reference to how much more valuable some contributors viewed campus visits than the work of ambassadors in schools. In the HEFCE evaluation a college tutor commented that ‘the highlight of the year was a trip to the university’ and that ‘this had more impact than all the rest of the activity’. As Slack et al’s (2012) study reveals, students encountered by pupils during university visits are often viewed as reliable sources of information. Hatt et al’s claims for the importance of summer schools (2009) supports views that activity physically located at universities is more successful in supporting WP.

Given the significance of the physical locations and the practices of ambassadors in their work with pupils, I have found it useful to identify ways to conceptualise these differences. Theories from work based learning, particularly theories of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ learning have been important (Beckett and Hager, 2002; Colley et al, 2003). In contrast to the majority of the studies considered here, the focus of ambassador work in my study is subject specific and in some instances supported by academics with knowledge of the problem based learning (PBL) approaches that have gained hold in medical and engineering HE. This contrasts with much ambassador work in HEIs organised by WP units that are generally located in administration or recruitment and removed from academic areas (Burke, 2012). I am interested to explore how different pedagogies in these subject specific activities affect the positioning of ambassadors, their relationships with young people and young people’s learning.

Conceptualising learning

Burke (2012) notes ‘an over-emphasis on collection of measurable data’ (p70) in WP research and evaluation. In practitioner research, given the critiques of WP initiatives an understandable preoccupation developed with identifying quantitative and qualitative evidence of shifts in orientation to university. Hodkinson and Macleod point out that a research focus on the outcomes of learning such as test results, the ‘static’ products of learning’ (2010: p180), are indicative of seeing learning as acquisition. This critique is also applicable to the focus on outcomes in WP research. As David (2010: p6) identifies, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of ‘teaching and learning’ in relation to WP questions.

Hodkinson and Hager suggest it is useful to think about ‘learning as becoming’ (Hodkinson & Macleod, 2010: p175). This metaphor presents learning as a process of

developing identity rather than simply acquiring information. If we consider learning as ‘becoming’ it is useful to consider post-structuralist thinking about subjectivity. The ideas of Butler about ‘performativity’ are of particular relevance. Her work suggests that identity is performed and that we become who we are through the ways we speak and behave - that our identity is ‘constituted through action’ (David et al, 2006). Butler highlights the importance of social acts in the process of becoming:

At the most intimate levels, we are social; we are comported towards a ‘you’; we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that condition us fundamentally. (Butler, 2004: p45)

Butler did not apply this analysis in an empirical setting, but others have. Burke (2012) identifies post-structural and critical sociological approaches as being particularly appropriate in WP settings as they emphasise that identities are produced within discursive sites and practices of schools, colleges and universities (p105). She points out that ‘aspirations are relational...formed in relation to others’ (2012:109). Davies (2006) in her analysis of the ways in which primary school teachers position and ‘constitute’ their students suggests that power wielded by those in positions of authority is unacknowledged because educational thinking emphasises the learning process of the individual. Davies explains how only certain ‘subjectivities’ are recognised in schools as ‘viable ways of being’ (p430).

In their study of science identities, Archer et al (2010) cite the need for more research that ‘understands learning as tied to processes of identity construction’ (p2). As they suggest there is a need for an appreciation of the complex interplay of STEM subject

and learner with other aspects of identity that constitute the subjects, the young people, that are at the centre of this debate.

If we consider these insights we move away from separating the social learning that occurs amongst peer groups from the learning that occurs in more formal contexts and focus also on how dominant ways of thinking in education constrain processes of identity formation. It is then useful to consider how dominant discourses iterate with different learning environments, impacting on the positioning of ambassadors and on the relationships that pupils and ambassadors develop and the ‘viable ways of being’ made available in these contexts.

Method

This paper draws from a study conducted over a two-year period during the final years of the last New Labour administration, at two London universities, Bankside, a ‘new’ university and Royal, an ‘old’, ‘elite’ institution, and focused on their ambassadors’ WP outreach work in engineering, medicine and related STEM subjects.

Researching student ambassadors’ work with school pupils is challenging as encounters are often extremely brief. Following Ball (1994), I have drawn on ‘a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories’ approaches from across the social sciences including Foucauldian discourse analysis (Hollway, 1984; Willig, 2001; Wetherell et al 2001) and the theories of poststructuralists, especially Butler (1997). The ‘concept of subject positions’ (Willig, 2001) has been useful; allowing me to examine how discourses circulating within and around HEIs and schools which develop in Foucauldian terms as regimes of truth,, define and constrain subject positions available to people working within these institutions.

Ethnography has been central, enabling observation of a wide range of ambassador/pupil interactions and providing the opportunity to explore ‘the social process of subjective re/formation’ (Youdell, 2006: p513). I have also specifically drawn on a constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003). This has facilitated a systematic approach to exploring data gathered during each activity.

By tracing the discourses relating to student ambassadors, I was able to trace how these discourses were the same and different, the interplay of learning contexts and how ambassadors and pupils were positioned and interacted. These approaches gave me the tools to provide a rigorous analysis of ambassador work with pupils, despite its fleeting nature.

The activities

Activities were funded and organised by a range of bodies including Aimhigher and individual HEIs. Pseudonyms are used throughout for institutions, activities and participants.

At the time of the study, Royal, supported by a local charity, funded outreach activities with G&T pupils in socio-economically deprived areas of London in order to recruit diverse young people to their extended medical degree (MAS). Activities discussed include a day and a similar half day for pupils interested in medicine at the university introducing medical skills.

A HEFCE funded WP project to encourage pupils into engineering, the Accessing Engineering project (AEP) was based at Bankside at the time of the study. Activities considered include a day introducing engineering skills at the offices of a local

employer (Train Tracks) and two days at a five day Engineering Camp based at a rural university.

Summer schools at both universities are also discussed: at Bankside the summer school was funded by Aimhigher and supported by the AEP and at Royal it was funded by the university for G&T pupils. The summer schools allowed pupils to focus on subject areas; I observed a group of pupils interested in studying medicine at Royal and engineering at Bankside. I also attended a series of Maths workshops supported by Bankside and Royal ambassadors based at a local school and funded by Aimhigher.

As well as activities, I attended meetings, interviewed staff about their work and talked to organisers and teachers during events and activities. Where possible I combined observation with focus group/interview conversations which were transcribed in full. Over the course of the study informal conversations/ focus groups were conducted with 41 pupils and 16 student ambassadors at activities at Royal and 71 pupils and 16 ambassadors at Bankside.

The participants: gender, class and ethnicity

I consulted similar numbers of male and female ambassadors at events though more female pupils volunteered to participate in focus groups. Pupils were all at secondary school and from Years 8 –11. With the exception of the summer school at Royal, which had a wider intake of G&T pupils, all activities were with pupils from south-east London state schools from ‘deprived’ boroughs (IMD 2004), with extremely low participation rates in HE. These indicators together with those gathered during conversations suggest that pupils are predominantly from working class and lower middle class backgrounds (Brooks, 2003). The overwhelming majority of

student ambassadors were the first generation in their family to progress to HE and many were from south-east London themselves, some having attended the same schools as pupils. This again indicates their working and lower middle class backgrounds. Pupils and ambassadors were ethnically diverse, with Black African the largest group represented.

It is important to note the pupils' voices represented (Fielding, 2004). This study may do little to serve the 'interests of students who are least well-served' (Silva, 2001: p.98); pupils heard here have established learner identities, are generally successful and engaged with education. I hope, however, to reveal 'power relations which create voices' and the 'voices created by the pedagogies' (Arnot & Reay, 2007: p312); this approach should provide insight for the routinely excluded as well as those at the centre of the study.

Findings: learning contexts, practices and identities

During activities ambassadors worked with pupils in different ways, depending on the views and objectives of stakeholders and organizers. There were wide variations between the foci and location of activities and nature of tasks undertaken. The differences between 'learning situations' have long been theorised in terms of formal and informal learning (Beckett & Hager, 2002; Colley et al, 2003). Colley et al (2003) suggest that in practice 'elements of both formality and informality' can be found in every 'learning situation' and that instead of these being described as formal or informal, formality and informality should be seen as 'attributes' of these situations. The term 'attributes' is used both to suggest that learning has many attributes and to highlight that labels are 'attributed' by writers and that learning is neither 'inherently

formal' or 'informal'(p30-31). Four main groups of in/formal learning attributes are outlined: 'process', 'location and setting', 'purposes' and 'content'. These provide a useful framework for exploring the learning contexts considered here.

Performing teacher and dis-identifications

The data present a picture of how dominant discourses in schools and universities impact on the positioning of ambassadors. Organizers of activities within universities inevitably attempt to accommodate the wishes of schools and teachers in order to reach pupils but this has implications for the practices of ambassadors.

Teaching the syllabus

Neo-liberal discourses of the HE marketplace featured heavily in the accounts of ambassadors and project organisers at both institutions (Gartland, 2012/13; Gartland, 2014); one clearly identified group of consumers was teachers in schools. During a meeting to discuss ambassador work at Bankside, a Borough co-ordinator for Aimhigher commented on the 'growing requests from schools for mentoring and teaching' and observed the contribution student ambassadors should make to both 'aspiration raising' and 'raising C/D borderline'. This focus on raising levels of achievement among groups of borderline C/D pupils, especially in maths, has become a pressing focus in schools (Williams et al, 2010; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). League tables have focused attention on 'borderline' groups, which has translated into requests made by schools for ambassadors. This discourse of credentialism had been taken up and practised (Willig, 2001) by organizers of WP activities functioning as a regime of truth in the context of outreach work.

This was illustrated by the Maths workshops held two days a week at one south east London school, where ambassadors were supporting Year 11 pupils working on maths GCSE papers. The focus on exam papers during these workshops and the right/wrong format that this stipulated meant that learning was ‘propositional’ and outcomes were ‘rigidly specified’. The ‘purposes’ of the learning were the ‘prime and deliberate focus’ of the activity and were ‘designed to meet the externally determined’ needs of the exam board. The ‘process’ was ‘didactic’ and the assessment of the learning ‘formal’ – the GCSE exam (ibid.: p31-32). The location in a school classroom was another ‘formal’ attribute.

During the Maths workshops ambassadors were positioned in formal ‘didactic’ roles (ibid.) similar to teachers. Pupils’ discursive constructions of the ambassadors’ work reflect this. They repeatedly commented on difficulties with explanations given. They also drew on discourses relating to the professionalism of ambassadors, expecting them to behave like teachers:

Yvonne: His explanation is not that good ...

Yvette: Yeah, he speaks quite low and I can’t hear him

Go on – explain what you mean by his explanation is not that good

Yvonne: Like he’ll always do the longer way – ‘cause there’s always an easy way to do a certain thing but he always does the long way and he teaches us things that we don’t really need and we’re not going to remember in exams

Bim: Yeah, he showed me this complicated stuff

...

Yvette: The way he comes in, like, they're forcing him to come in (laughter) he just comes in like they are forcing him, like, when he comes in he just sits down and waits for a student – he doesn't get up and say, do you need help, he just sits there waiting for people to come (Year 11 pupils)

Ambassadors were generally viewed by pupils as inadequate substitutes for real teachers.

The teachers also identified issues posed by positioning ambassadors as teachers of GCSE maths when they have had no experience or training:

One of the main issues ...is the fact that we're not convinced that all of the undergraduates have the skills required – maths skills I am talking about now, not just communication and imparting knowledge skills (Maths teacher)

Positioning ambassadors as teachers simply because of their maths expertise is problematic. The ambassadors were enacting teacher, with various degrees of success, and in this learning context ambassadors embedded existing formal attributes. This was seen at times to impact negatively on pupils' confidence and sense of self-efficacy in maths with pupils unable to understand ambassadors' explanations.

The aim was to drive up pupils' GCSE achievement in maths; the effectiveness of ambassadors in supporting this aim is questionable but it is also important to interrogate the learning this approach reinforces. The narrow focus on examination practice, defined by dominant credentialist discourses operating across institutions, in Williams et al's (2010: p109) view, presents maths as having 'exchange value' with pupils only focusing on their learning for exams in order to gain access to the next stage in their schooling. Williams et al suggest that this promotes identities amongst pupils as surface

learners rather than as ‘users of mathematics’ which would encourage progression in the subject. These data reveal that embedding ambassadors in these tutoring roles neither supports engagement nor encourages ‘aspirations’ amongst pupils to study maths at university.

In this learning context pupils’ accounts were notably absent of reference to ambassadors as ‘role models’ or even as being similar to themselves. Indeed, one group very clearly articulated ways in which ambassadors were different:

Yvette: They all look too smart. When they come in they’ve really big bags – they’ve got their big shoes and they look too smart

Janine: Big shoes (laughter)

What does that tell you about them?

Janine: They’re educated

Yvette: It looks like they’re people that get bullied – yeah (laughter)

While there were a number of factors impacting on this process of dis/identification including intersecting (Crenshaw, 1989) aspects of pupils gendered, classed and raced identities (Gartland, 2014), the learning contexts and pupils dis-identification with the subject area were evidently significant to this:

So style wise they are different?

Yvette: Similar interests?

Bim: Oh way different

Leticia: Maths all the time

Bim: And I don't think they socialize or anything like that

In this and other learning contexts with formal attributes (Colley et al 2003) ambassadors' work with pupils appeared only to highlight their differences. As in Taylor's (2008) study, differences rather than similarities between ambassadors and pupils were accentuated. If we consider these interactions as performative they are reinforcing pupils' understanding that identities as mathematicians are not 'viable ways of being' (Davies.2006: p430) for them.

Managing behaviour

There was real ambiguity in the accounts of organisers and ambassadors about ambassadors' authority and responsibility for managing pupil behaviour. At the G&T Summer School at Royal one student's account outlines a tension between the need for ambassadors to 'make bonds' and the demands of different activities. She refers to the need for 'authority' and having 'a teacher role' and the conflicting positionings of being a friend and authority figure:

Munira: I kind of speak on a level with them 'cause then they feel more comfortable talking to you and then you can fit in well with them and it's easier to make bonds but obviously when you're in a situation where you have to kind of tell them to quieten down, you take authority then you have your authoritative voice like, "guys, come on quieten down" this sort of thing – then you become like a teacher role but usually we just go and speak to them like...

Than: As a friend

Marvin: I think we're more friends than teachers but there's times where we need to be – have the same authority as a teacher I think

Carla: I do think they still respect us even though they feel they can talk to us they definitely... but this group are very well behaved

Marvin: Compared to the Easter school

Carla: The Easter School – they're a bit rough

Alicia: Was that an Aimhigher one?

Carla: Yeah it was an Aimhigher ...

Munira: And the thing I was going to say is just like, in terms of the teacher/friend balance it can be sometimes quite difficult. (G&T Summer School)

Ambassadors described the pupils on the Aimhigher Easter School - who are selected on quite strict targeting criteria in terms of their backgrounds – as being 'a bit rough'. This discursive construction of 'rough' pupils resonates with those found in Taylor's study where ambassadors' experiences of difficult pupil behaviour in classroom contexts contributed to an entrenched sense of difference 'as opposed to seamless peer "sameness"' (Taylor, 2008: p5). Ambassadors' dis-identification with these pupils may well be understood by pupils as 'a process of finding out what they cannot have' (Reay et al, 2005: p85); that they do not belong at Royal.

Pupils on the Engineering Camp identified the work of the ambassadors as being predominantly disciplinary. The pupils and ambassador were all female and from

Nigerian backgrounds but despite being well ‘matched’ in ethnic and gender terms, their ‘supervisor’ was viewed with hostility:

Janine: some of them need to change their attitudes towards us – they can be so rude. My lead supervisor she’s so moany. In the morning she complains and moans cos I take a long time to do my hair

Carly: I don’t appreciate that – knocking on your door – time to get up

Janine: she barged into my room (Engineering Camp)

This positioning of ambassadors as ‘supervisors’, responsible for ensuring pupils behaved appropriately and completed projects on time, inevitably impacted on the nature of their interactions with pupils. Being responsible for pupils’ work and behaviour could impact on the subjectivity (Willig, 2001) of ambassadors and pupils; potentially entrenching pupils’ identities as different to ambassadors and negatively affecting developing subject and HE identities.

It is clear that ambassadors are not adequately trained or supported to teach pupils the curriculum or to manage challenging behaviour. It is also worth questioning what subject specific learning and learning about HE ambassadors facilitate. The Maths Workshops and Engineering Camp are both contexts where the learning process and content of activities dictate ambassadors’ take up of formal didactic positions in relation to pupils. These formal attributes highlight differences between pupils and ambassadors and potentially constitute pupils as inappropriate and even in opposition to the university and subject identities that ambassadors represent.

Attributes of informal and experiential learning

The activities in the vignettes presented here could be placed on a continuum of their formal and informal attributes. The Maths Workshops were at one end, with many attributes of formal learning, whilst the Train Tracks Day was at the other. The Summer School at Bankside and Medical Day/Afternoon at Royal also had many informal attributes.

During the Train Tracks Day, for example, pupils and ambassadors worked practically together building train platforms and tracks. They were provided with real world problems that they had to solve by drawing on their knowledge of science and maths. If we consider 'process' the Train Tracks Day can be contrasted with the Maths Workshops and other contexts with more formal attributes (Colley et al, 2003). The learning 'process' was more 'negotiated' and there was no planned formal assessment or pressure on ambassadors to ensure particular learning outcomes. There were no 'predetermined learning objectives', 'curriculum' or 'external certification' (ibid, 2003). The learning during the Train Tracks Day took place in the Train Tracks offices, another informal attribute. Whilst subject learning was taking place, curriculum learning was not the main aim. In fact, the 'purposes' were somewhat ambivalent – aspiration raising, subject knowledge, promoting key messages about engineering and knowledge of progression routes all featured - and so outcomes were to an extent 'learner determined' (ibid. p31) as there were no closely defined expectations about what specific learning outcomes would be.

The attributes of the 'content' of the learning were also largely informal as outcomes were somewhat 'serendipitous' and the emphasis was on 'uncovering knowledge derived from experience' (ibid. p31). So while the activities did have broad planned learning outcomes, in terms of raising awareness about and enthusiasm for HE and

careers in engineering and STEM, such outcomes could only be ‘activated by individual learners’ (Becket and Hager, 2002) as a result of their engagement with the activity and ambassadors. The learning experience was quite ‘organic’ (ibid.); learning took place as a consequence of undertaking the task and through unplanned conversation with ambassadors. These events were activity and experience based and collaborative (ibid.) with pupils and ambassadors working together in a team.

A key difference in how pupils were learning during the Train Tracks day and Maths Workshops was that the former provided pupils with practical ‘experiential learning’. According to constructivist thought experiential learning is ‘concrete experience, reflective observation of experience, abstract conceptualism and active experimentation’ (Colley et al, 2003). The input of subject specialists from engineering and medicine disciplines with knowledge of PBL approaches is significant to the experiential approaches described here and to activities developed as part of the MAS. Working collaboratively (Beckett and Hager, 2002) and supporting pupils with ‘uncovering knowledge derived from experience’ (Colley et al, 2003) rather than being prescriptive, was important to the development of positive relationships between ambassadors and pupils in these contexts. Ambassadors listening, allowing pupils to lead and ‘negotiate’ their learning and explain their views without ‘interruption’ were important informal attributes of these learning contexts and facilitated warm and open relationships between pupils and ambassadors.

Performing student: Shared Learning and Subject identities

In learning contexts with ‘experiential’ and ‘informal attributes’ (Colley et al, 2003) where pupils worked collaboratively’ with ambassadors, pupils regularly described ambassadors as sharing identities; discursively constructing (Willig, 2001) ambassadors

as learners and students like themselves.

This was made explicit by an ambassador during the Medical Afternoon at Royal where pupils worked alongside ambassadors with medical equipment:

Mani: I think they were able to be more relaxed around us, like because we're obviously students as well and closer to their age and this is pretty much a life environment rather than just being lectured or talked to and yeah, we were just joking and I was pretty sure that they seemed really interested in learning about life, especially the basic life support ...it was them getting involved as well and being hands on so that was really good (Medical Afternoon)

At the Bankside summer school where pupils and ambassadors worked together on a range of activities, including programming robots, one ambassador described how pupils can 'imagine themselves in uni' because the ambassadors are 'close in age to them'. She stresses their shared student identity as being important to pupils, 'we're students as well'. It is these perceived similarities in age and status that Qadira identifies as enabling pupils to see becoming a university student as a logical 'next step':

Qadira: ... we're students as well and they're students ... We're so close to them it's like - after them - it's us - we're the next step so it's more closer for them to imagine themselves in uni because we are more close in age to them so it's like we're all students together (SS)

During the Train Tracks Day one pupil commented that the ambassadors' status as students was more important than their age in enabling them to 'seem like us'. Rachel, the ambassador she worked closely with, was a mature student:

Ayisha:.. because we're students and they're students –I know they might not be the same age but - you kind of have the sense of...they seem like us

This group of younger pupils discussed how the combination of ambassadors being older - though still young - more experienced, having more expertise but still studying, enabled them to talk and relate to each other:

Meena: They're in the same boat

Aiysha: Yeah they're experiencing what we are. The fact that they're older does help because you can ask them about their experiences and stuff

Meena: We've asked them about what they're doing and stuff like that

Sarah: They have more experience than us – they have more skills

Meena: They're easy to talk to

Aiysha: They're similar to us because they're students – they're young and they understand the difficulty of making choices and the pressure we're under (Train Tracks)

Pupils' accounts at these events reflected a strong conception of themselves as learners. Various studies have suggested the importance of biography and established learning identities to how willing and able young people are to engage with learning opportunities (Brooks, 2003; Reay et al, 2009; Hatt et al, 2009). Existing research into the work of ambassadors suggests a lack of interest in HE amongst pupils as obstructing relationships and even contributing to a sense of social difference (HEFCE, 2010; Taylor, 2008). The pupils contributing to this research were positively orientated to

university and/or aware of their own success as learners:

Anwa: Miss said that we...she said we were very special like to be there (Medical Day)

A group of G&T boys at the Medical Day talked specifically about ambassadors as 'role models'; contributing to this were their shared youthful, student and learning identities:

Ton: They are not old but they are young so they are basically like us, but like in a few years' time

Dixon: I think they understand us more than the older people ... everyone is kind of from the same generation – kind of even though they are an age apart – some ages apart but like

Ebo: They show you what they've done

Ton: Many of them might have just started university

Ebo: They are like a role model

Dixon: So they know what it's been like to be like a child and to be like us and also like, I think they all like to learn and we like to learn as well (Medical Day)

The subject identities of ambassadors and pupils were an important aspect of their shared learner identities. This is illustrated by the enthusiastic response to an ambassador by a pupil at the Train Tracks Day:

Ayisha: I always wanted to do further education within a certain field but knowing how someone else went through the same thing - yeah, kind of drives you more.

During a focus group at the G&T Summer School at Royal one pupil explained that pupils and ambassadors all ‘have very similar ideas’ and that this is because they all share an interest in medicine:

Martin: Yeah just really friendly and really relaxed and (inaudible)... about everything. Obviously most of us here want to go into medicine – so we have very similar ideas (G&T Summer School)

As has been discussed in the context of mentoring relationships, while there is much emphasis on matching backgrounds in terms of gender and ethnic identity, similarity ‘may be indicated by qualities such as shared interests’ (Liang & Grossman, 2007: p251). While other intersecting aspects of pupils and ambassadors’ identities (Crenshaw,1989) were significant, shared subject interests, highlighted by collaborative subject based activities, here contributed to identification between school pupils and ambassadors.

During these practical, collaborative interactions pupils joined ambassadors in performing ‘university student’. The shared performance of these student and subject identities, powerfully provides pupils with the opportunity to engage in possible and ‘viable’ new ‘ways of being’ (Davies, 2006). These enactments can again be considered as ‘performative’ according to Butler’s theories, through these enactments pupils are constituted -through discourse, through their actions and speech - as future university students. This can be conceptualized as a process of ‘subjection’, the ‘making of a subject’ (Butler, 1997: p.83).

The impact that this process can have was illustrated in the accounts of ambassadors who had participated in activities when they were school pupils themselves. One

explained how attending activities at Royal as a pupil made her 'look up to' the ambassadors and consequently made her want to become an ambassador herself. Ambassadors discussed how relationships established during activities, facilitates the building of relationships as pupils progress to the university. Alicia describes how it 'makes them feel more comfortable' and Carla, who says she is not a 'typical' Royal student herself in classed and raced terms, worked with ambassadors from Royal when she was at school and explained that 'it can be quite scary coming to university' and having the security of having 'someone you know... is quite nice'. Their accounts reflect those Reay et al (2005: p99) identify amongst working class students, and suggest that feeling 'comfortable' or at ease was partly achieved in their own progression by relationships formed with ambassadors and fellow pupils during outreach activities. These young people's identities as Royal students', despite their coming from backgrounds that can result in 'class matching' (Reay et al, 2005) with less elite institutions, were 'rendered' (Youdell, 2006) through this engagement.

Student Ambassadors: flawed assumptions and future potential

Generalized discourses about ambassadors being 'role models' circulate widely both within HEIs and amongst policy makers but there is no shared understanding of how this works in practice. The term 'role model' has become part of conventional public and policy discourse and is used ubiquitously, especially in relation to the 'aspiration raising' work of ambassadors. However, this paper highlights the inadequacies of assumptions that student ambassadors are inevitably role models for pupils.

This study indicates that while these discourses circulate, stakeholders have vested interests in ambassador work, which defines and constrains its foci. The location of

many WP units within HEI marketing departments embeds marketing discourses positioning pupils as consumers. This discourse is being further entrenched by coalition policy and can undermine ambassadors' ability to support progression amongst pupils (Gartland, 2012/13). Dominant discourses of credentialism and school cultures position ambassadors as responsible for curriculum learning and pupil behaviour. Stringent 'targeting' of disadvantaged learners, that was adopted by Aimhigher (HEFCE, 2007) is also potentially problematic. The Aimhigher Associates Scheme, for instance, like the Maths Workshops in this study, placed ambassadors in schools working with groups of 'disadvantaged' learners in order to 'raise aspirations'. This study indicates that positioning ambassadors in contexts with many 'formal attributes' to work with pupils without established learner identities, can be performative, entrenching their subjectivities in opposition to ambassadors and potentially damaging both learner and subject identities and developing identities as HE students.

However, there is a significant story here of learning about HE that is taking place during subject specific interactions in contexts with 'informal attributes' and where ambassadors and pupils are able to relate to each other more equally as learners. In learning contexts where activities were planned with the support of subject experts and drew on practices of experiential PBL within HEIs, pupils were provided with insights into real world applications of subjects and HE subject identities. During interactions in these learning contexts, school pupils often identified closely with ambassadors, reinforcing their developing STEM and HE identities. I suggest that in these contexts, working with ambassadors is again performative; school pupils are provided with an opportunity to enact student and subject identities and the identities of these pupils as possible university and STEM students are 'produced within these discursive sites and

practices' (Burke, 2012). This process allows pupils to gain insight into HE and their potential positioning within it and has the potential to 'interrupt dominant identity patterns of (dis)identification' (Archer et al, 2010: 21) with STEM.

The current government focus on pupils as rational choosers of HE who need access to better information (BIS,2011) entrenches further individualised discourses of pupils as consumers in the HE marketplace. These policies neglect research evidence that pupils' perception of what is possible is defined by their peer group, family, school and social networks (Reay, David and Ball, 2005; Brooks, 2003). This study indicates that interactions between ambassadors and pupils and learning activities could extend pupils' perceptions of what 'constitutes a 'feasible' choice' (Brooks, 2003: p292). This is not simple. Interactions need to be thoughtfully enabled in these situations to facilitate the development of relationships where such learning can take place and the quality of the information exchanged about subject areas and routes needs further interrogation. It is though clear that currently the powerful influence of stakeholder interests over HE outreach with schools and simplistic conceptualizations of 'aspiration raising' and of ambassadors as 'role models' undermine the potential of ambassadors to support and reinforce pupils' HE identities in this way.

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