Exploring possible selves during a week-long White Water Writers collaborative novel-writing project

Richard Seymour (r.a.seymour@keele.ac.uk)

Higher Horizons, UK

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the experience of year 10 UK school students taking part in a collaborative novel writing project within a widening participation context. The raising of aspirations in young people from deprived, working class areas has been targeted by widening participation practitioners since the early 2000s (Harrison, 2018). The 'poverty of aspiration' argument is rooted in the notion that a meritocracy exists in education and, indeed, in broader society: the idea that talent, allied with hard work, ought to be enough to allow anyone, regardless of background, to succeed (McCall, 2013). Mijs (2016) argues, however, that merit is not only a construct that favours some members of society over others but is dependent on factors that are themselves non-meritocratic. These include: genetic endowment, ethnicity, social class, parental influence and educational institution. Moreover, the very notion of merit is a subjective and shifting definition that is set by those the definition favours (de Botton, 2005: 175-179).

Furthermore, meritocracy can lead to 'victim blaming' (Owens and de St Croix, 2020). That is, where it is assumed that equality of opportunity exists then failure can be ascribed to a lack of talent or the unwillingness to work hard, allowing policy makers to distance themselves from responsibility where inequality in education persists. This creates a 'burden of meritocracy' where disadvantaged students feel pressure to work harder than their more advantaged peers and feel responsible for their own failure. Teachers, also, face the dilemma of emphasising the need for personal responsibility in students and an ethic of hard work on one hand,

while, on the other, acknowledging the many non-meritocratic barriers that stand between students and positive educational outcomes.

The Capability Approach (Sen, 1992) offers an alternative to the above understanding of low participation in higher education among disadvantaged young people. Put simply, the capability approach evaluates the ability of individuals to convert potential achievements, such as accessing higher education and getting a job (capabilities) into actual achievements, known as functions (Campbell and McKendrick, 2017). There is caution attached to the use of capability lists. To avoid the problems associated with the defining of 'merit', which inevitably serve to benefit those who get to define it, capabilities should be contextualised to be suitable for the evaluation of those being studied, who should also participate in their development (Robeyns, 2005). There exist, however, individual differences in the ability of individuals to convert capabilities into functions. Necessary for an individual to achieve their goals is agency. While a lack of agency could be the result of a paucity of resources, it may also be caused by a low sense of self efficacy (Hollywood et al, 2012). Indeed, it has been suggested that when young people develop ambitions alongside high self-esteem and self-efficacy they are more likely to achieve their goals (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2008). A study by Campbell and McKendrick (2017) confirmed previous research which suggested young working class people do not lack aspirations, but found also that they may suffer from low confidence and self-efficacy that, according to research by Reay, Cozier and Clayton (2010), stand in the way of participation.

The theory of possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) states that each of us imagines a variety of possible selves or identities for ourselves. We use these to help understand our lives in any given context, and to give expression to what we hope to become (and perhaps to avoid) in the future. It is also argued that it is possible through interventions to imagine and evaluate a possible future self. Cross and Markus (1991) claim that the more elaborate and vivid the image of a possible self is, the more likely it is to inform choices in the present. It is recommended by Watkins (2010) that an effective programme run in a school to leverage the concept of possible selves would boost learners' self-efficacy and locus of control. Even small increases in self-efficacy have been shown

to increase academic attainment significantly (Chevalier et al, 2009). Such interventions would encourage young people to broaden the possibilities of future selves and open young people up to their capacity to guide their future by means of forming vivid concepts of themselves - concepts that are generated by the young people themselves and not guided by adults. Many examples of possible selves, such as being a scientist or a teacher, introduce the need for higher education. However, so might possible selves which include contributing to society, to one's family and friends, or being free to explore one's full potential (Harrison, 2018). A Possible Selves programme, which encouraged students to develop hopes and dreams for the future, would increase the number of possibilities the students saw in their future and increase motivation to work in school. The students were helped by knowledgeable adults to design strategies for the achievement of those goals (Hock et al, 2006). It is suggested, therefore, that the ability to imagine a future self (with strategies to achieve them guided by knowledgeable adults), and boosts to self-efficacy and locus of control, have greater potential to lead to behaviour changes that may lead to widening participation goals than simple aspiration raising.

One such programme suggested here is White Water Writers: a project that gives groups of young people the opportunity to collaboratively write and publish a novel in just one week. Although guided by a facilitator, every idea is generated by the writers themselves. The project was built on the idea of collaborative creativity, with writers sharing the responsibility for brainstorming, character development, plotting, writing and proofreading. The process relies on communication between the writers; every idea is heard, discussed, negotiated and either accepted or rejected by a group decision. As part of the process, each writer develops a character. This includes deciding for that character: appearance, hopes and dreams, likes and dislikes, and hobbies and interests. Another key aspect of a writing week is that the facilitator takes a step back as it progresses, allowing the writers to self-organise and take full ownership, not only of the book, but the project itself. White Water Writers fits neatly within the capability approach as the sense of achievement that accompanies writing a novel in a week increases overall agency. In other words, individuals are led to wonder: 'If I can write a book in a week, what else can I do?' Additionally, the development of characters gives individuals the opportunity to explore

future selves. Finally, White Water Writers forms part of a broader widening participation programme of projects and provisions that include campus visits and talks about funding, applying to university, and so on. Therefore, bringing together the theoretical frameworks of the capability approach and 'possible selves', White Water Writers has the potential to influence behaviour change and encourage participation in higher education.

For Erikson (2007), possible selves are narratives that help us become our idealised self. While for Markus and Nurius (1986: 965) possible selves feed into a broader story we tell about ourselves and our place in society. Personal narratives, according to Murray (2000), allow us to create order from a disordered world. Creating a narrative forces us to give meaning to events and to order them in a way that makes sense. Moreover, these narratives, which we continually re-write as we re-evaluate our experiences are co-created between us and our environments, and serve as the basis for our identities (McAdams, 1993). For this reason, McAdams states, the stories we tell about ourselves may be rich sources of data regarding our cultural norms and how we see ourselves.

Adolescence is a time of change, with individuals re-assessing their relationships with their families, peers and society (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006: 1). The sense that adolescents make of this period — the narratives they create for themselves — may help or hinder them. However, we are all influenced by 'dominant' narratives (Hammack, 2008). Dominant narratives are culturally constructed and may be positive or negative. As dominant narratives are created not by the individual but by society, they are resistant to being re-written. Dominant narratives are pervasive in our society. If culturally constructed narratives disagree with personal ones, psychological distress may result. For instance, the socially constructed, dominant narrative may emphasise the importance of standing up to bullies. However, a victim of bullying's personal experience may lead them to feel unable to follow such an action, thus leading them to feel an even deeper sense of isolation.

Narrative therapy offers the opportunity for individuals to emancipate themselves from dominant narratives (Carr, 1998). It does this by encouraging people to tell stories about their experiences, allowing them

a greater sense of control. Narrative therapy asks individuals to write about real experiences. Fictional writing, however, can also be a useful tool for emancipating individuals from dominant narratives. Fictional writing encourages people to revisit past experiences and to reconstruct them in the light of a fresh assessment. Moreover, in fictional writing, dominant narratives can be challenged and different outcomes imagined. Another benefit of fictional writing is the possibility of exploring personal experiences that may be upsetting, through a fictional character, thus eliciting less intense emotions (Pennebaker, 1997). This is supported by Hunt (2010), who claims fiction encourages writers to overcome preconceptions they may have of themselves and to explore inner truths.

A powerful dominant narrative is one that enforces the perception among young working class people that higher education is not for them. Archer and Hutchings (2000) found that young working class people, especially, though not exclusively, white males, perceived that pursuing higher education represented a betrayal of their working class roots. They deemed the benefits of a university education as conferring on them a middle class status, which threatened their working class identity. This 'othering' of themselves extended beyond entering higher education to concerns of how they would fit in once there. It seems, therefore, that dominant narratives of class and education are powerful barriers to participation for young people and, where dominant narratives are at odds with those of the individual, potentially the cause of psychological distress. A programme capable of encouraging young people to challenge and re-write narratives, while instilling agency in them, may open up the possibility of challenging and re-writing those narratives.

Present study

The present study conducted a thematic analysis of three novels, written during White Water Writers weeks at three schools in the north midlands of the UK. A thematic analysis identifies key words in a text and groups them into themes. The project was funded by Higher Horizons+, part of the UK's National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), which invests in widening participation in further and higher education. Each writing group was asked 'What matters to you as young people today?'

as an initial prompt. The purpose of the analysis was to discover which main themes the writers tackled in their novels. Focus groups were also conducted for each of the writing groups. In these, we asked the writers about their experience, how they found the process and how they felt it affected them. Finally, teachers were asked to reflect on the project. All interviews were thematically analysed.

Method

Design

The present study was a qualitative intervention where three groups of ten adolescents took part in a White Water Writers project. The participants collaborated with each other to write and publish a novel in a single week, guided by a facilitator. The collection of interview data took place at a later date.

Participants

30 year 10 school pupils (27 female) from schools in the north Midlands of the UK were chosen to take part based on the following criteria. The schools are identified in the data analysis as Cardinal Newman, Co-op and Rudheath. Each participant had to be in academic years 9-13 and from postcodes identified by the Office for Students as areas of low participation in higher education, making them eligible for National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) funding. School contacts selected participants based on their own criteria from a list of NCOP eligible students.

Procedure

White Water Writers takes place over five days. On day 1, writers were prompted by being asked 'What matters to you as young people today?' They brainstormed ideas, created and fleshed out characters, made a storyboard and laid out each chapter on a Class Responsibility Collaboration card in correct chapter order. Day 2 began with each chapter being bullet pointed with up to ten things that happen in that chapter. Once done, writing began using Google Drive word processing. By the end of Day 3

a first draft was completed. Day 4 was spent proof reading on paper and entering corrections on the online documents. Day 5 was taken up with choosing cover art, titles, chapter titles, and writing blurbs, author bios and making finishing touches. The facilitator only moved the writers on to the next task and did not suggest any ideas, touch a keyboard or assist with the proofreading. This ensures the book is entirely the achievement of the writers. The book was then uploaded to Amazon's self-publishing site and was available to buy a few days later.

Data collection

PDFs of the novels were printed off. Previous anecdotal evidence from writers and staff suggested that the writers gained in confidence from the experience and became more active students. It was therefore deemed worthwhile to collect these comments more formally. It was hoped that analysis of the interview data would illuminate aspects of the White Water Writers process that were especially effective at increasing confidence and motivation. It was further hoped that interview data would reveal effects that the project designers had not considered. Interviews with the writers and staff took place up to three months later. These were audio recorded. Teachers were also invited to submit answers anonymously to an online survey.

Data analysis

The novels were thematically analysed as per Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen as thematic analysis is not tied to a particular theoretical framework. Moreover, an inductive, data driven (as opposed to a deductive, analysis driven) approach to the data was taken as there was no specific research question being explored. Rather, the present study took an explorative approach to the data. Key words and phrases were identified. These were then grouped into themes. Several themes were identified, with two dominating and being common to all three novels. Interview data was subjected to a thematic analysis in the same way.

Analysis

Two major themes were interpreted by the researcher: diversity and interpersonal connectivity. Two of the texts covered the topic of homosexual relationships and feelings, while the third dealt with intimate relationships among peers. Homosexual relationships were troublesome for the protagonists in the stories, with personal, societal and religious prejudices causing distress for those grappling with homosexual feelings. One character, Simon, confided that he began a relationship with a girl to hide his homosexuality from his parents, who were Christian:

> Well as you know, I am gay and my family have a Christian heritage. They didn't know how I really felt, and so I decided to put on a mask at school and in the end got a girlfriend. (Cardinal Newman)

Here, the dominant narrative — that of religious prohibition of homosexuality — is in conflict with Simon's identity as a young, gay man. He finds it easier to conform to the dominant narrative, to the point of instigating a heterosexual relationship. However, he discovers the fantasy world of an enchanted forest, where no dominant narratives exist, where he feels free to explore his sexuality. A young man Simon confides in, Tyler, has feelings for him, but recoils when he acts upon them. After kissing Simon he pulls himself away and says:

> I'm sorry, that was never meant to happen...I'm so disgusting.... (Cardinal Newman)

However, as the fabric of the reality they find themselves in begins to fall apart at the end of the book, Tyler overcomes the shame he feels and accepts his sexuality. The dominant narrative of sexuality had been overcome, replaced by an inclusive narrative. This acceptance had to struggle against the background of judgement and prejudice. This was more implicit in the second text, in which members of society were segregated from each other by means of a government policy intended to organise people and keep them happy. However, the policy sees homosexuality and criminality conflated, as both groups are forcibly separated from the rest of society:

> I want him isolated from everyone. I don't want my people learning from him. They are straight and being gay is not accepted here. (Rudheath)

The dominant narrative here is that homosexuality needs to be contained and that heterosexual people ought to not be exposed to it. This prejudice is aligned with orthodox masculinity, which places strict rules on what is acceptable behaviour and ostracises anyone who does not conform (Blanchard et al, 2017). One aspect of orthodox masculinity is the feminisation of education (Reay, 2002: 232), which sees young males of any class who exhibit orthodox masculinity reject education, especially literacy-based subjects. The present study took participants from areas of low participation in further and higher education. The reasons for low participation among the working class in FE and HE are complex. Among them is the attitude among some young people that FE and HE is just not for them (Connolly and Healy, 2004: 15), a dominant narrative that persists in areas of low participation. However, in both the texts analysed above, we can see dominant narratives of homosexuality (something often linked with rejection of education among working class boys) discussed and resolved in a fictional setting, where any outcome is possible.

The third text analysed did not deal with themes of sexuality. It did, however, focus on another feminised concept: intimacy. Protagonists in all three books analysed felt the urge to be understood by others and connected with them:

> The way they talked about this made Mya remember the times when they would do nothing but sit and talk at the park, and this made Mya not feel so alone in this world of nothing she had someone to understand her, someone to talk to, someone to rely on. (Cardinal Newman)

During adolescence, feelings of isolation increase. At this age, young people often find it difficult to connect with their parents. They, therefore, are likely to turn to their peers. However, if they do not have peers to turn to, or those who will understand them, feelings of loneliness are exacerbated (Maes et al, 2016). In one text, the protagonists have all emotions except

one removed by a well-meaning scientist who had experienced loneliness as a child, and so come together to feel complete:

> A feeling of tranquillity, integrity swirled in everyone's stomachs and the feeling of together ran through their veins. Everybody's emotions calmed and everybody felt connected. (Co-op)

Adolescence is a time where individual identity is sought. However, the above excerpt suggests togetherness is valued highly among teenagers. Feeling connected leads to calm, implying that anxiety is associated with feeling isolated. This highlights the dichotomy that accompanies adolescence: the need to seek one's own sense of self, coupled with the desire to feel part of a group. The texts suggested that the participants, though in their early teens, were aware that adolescence is a time where the parameters for relationships change, with previous friendships replaced by more mature ones:

> It was confusing to them both, how one interaction could spark a friendship so strong. It was something new to them both, since they were 18 now and had given up on all of the childish introductions and being best friends with someone you'd talked to for at most one day. (Cardinal Newman)

In summary, adolescence is a period during which we seek our own identities. However, this is not such a simple matter. While, on the one hand, adolescents seek an identity of their own that is at first separate from their parents, they must balance this need with the urge to remain close to their peers. Changes to their identities and changes to those of their peers, plus the needs once met by parents not met elsewhere, can lead to loneliness if not negotiated well (Laursen and Hartl, 2013).

Interviews

Focus group interviews were conducted with the writers. The purpose of these was to discover what the participants themselves made of the process. Of special interest was the effect the week had on their confidence levels and aspirations.

It was thought that writing fiction would allow participants the opportunity to explore issues that mattered to them in a safe space. A thematic analysis of the books suggests they did so, and this is supported by the participants themselves. In the following excerpt fiction is explicitly being used to engage with aspects of the writer's character that she wanted to explore:

> I mean there were aspects of your personality that you could put into it but there was a bunch of like imaginary things you'd like to put into it. It's like either aspirations for what you want to be or like something you think is good in other people and it was good to like put it all into one kind of caricature. (Cardinal Newman)

Here the writer is experimenting with possible selves (Harrison, 2018). The 'caricature' she created is aspirational, aspirations that in this case may include engagement with higher education to achieve. The writer here was unconsciously using a technique Hunt (2010) calls fictional autobiography, defined as the use of fictional techniques to capture personal experience. For Hunt the restrictions placed on us during our formative years by dominant narratives lead to a sense of identity that is resistant to change, particularly if we did not feel safe during our upbringing. Fictional autobiography provides just such a safe space to explore new, more flexible identities. This is reflected in the following comment by a writer who was asked if the experience had changed her at all:

> Like even people who don't feel like comfortable with everyone in the group they felt that they could express themselves as well. Yeah it was a great way to show who we are as a person. (Cardinal Newman)

The efficacy of autobiographical fiction and White Water Writers, as a process for providing a safe place for young people to explore their identities, experiment with new ones and have the confidence to change, is supported by one participant who discovered the potential of narrating the life of a fictional character as a push toward choosing her own qualities for herself:

> I want them but now that I was able to like voice them and see how easy it was for my character to have them now I think I want them even more than what I did before. (Co-op)

The imagining of possible selves as a path toward widening participation differs from the White Water Writers process in that, unlike creating fiction, the 'character' being developed is a representation of one's self. However, the link between a fictional character and one's possible self is made by this writer. Here, the writer is describing how she was able to endow the character she was responsible for with qualities that she had previously harboured for herself. The novel writing process allowed her to think about herself differently by creating metaphors for experiences that could then be played out in a fictional (safe) setting. Moreover, she was able to be liberated by 'hiding' behind the metaphors that she had created for herself. The technique the writer unconsciously stumbled upon is similar to the Self as Source (Moskowitz, 1998), which calls upon the writer to reflect upon themselves and to use different aspects of their character as the main source material for their writing. This was reflected by one writer, who found confidence in speaking through a fictional character. When asked how it made her feel she stated:

> Quite empowering. Even though it was kind of indirect because it was through a character it still felt quite special to me to have been able to express myself through that. (Cardinal Newman)

The writers, when asked, also spoke about how the writing week helped them to feel more confident in themselves. An important aspect of the White Water Writers process is that the writers are allowed to take full ownership of the project, with the facilitator guiding them from one task to the next. This ensures that the achievement is their own:

> I think being treated like adults also helped us a lot [...] So the fact that it was people our age group spinning us in one direction or the other direction sort of helping us out, let the team work that helped us. (Co-op)

It is thought this sense of accomplishment will lead to an improvement in self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, defined as the faith a person has in his or her ability to complete their goals, is linked to psychological resilience (Salanova et al, 2006). It is also associated with an individual's sense of competence and the control they perceive they have over their environment (Hobfoll et al, 2003). It is also identified, alongside locus of control, as an essential mechanism of the capability approach (Campbell and McKendrick, 2017). This was reflected in the comments of the writers:

> When I had the book actually in my hands I was like whoah we've done this. I can do things similar to this in the future if I wanted to because I am capable of it as is everyone else in the group. (Cardinal Newman)

The above comment feeds directly into the capability approach and the importance of agency. Here, the writer has drawn confidence directly from his achievement as an author. Being able to see himself as an author has opened up the possibility of other possible selves. The comments from the writers were echoed by the members of staff at the respective schools. Asked if she had noticed a change in the writers, one staff member reported an increase in the confidence of the writers that was sustained beyond the writing week:

> I think obviously for their confidence and self-esteem, you've got a couple of students there who probably battle with that on a regular basis. It's really, really given them a boost. (Anonymous teacher survey)

While the collaborative aspect of the project makes the achievement possible, this does not dilute the sense of accomplishment felt by participants. This is likely to be because each individual had creative contributions accepted and the success of the novel relied on each writers' efforts. It was also noted that the writing camp appeared to bring the group closer together:

> So some of them were like a friendship group but they weren't a group of friends per se. There were two girls who don't get on

> and were like no. But then actually two of those girls we took to London a couple of weeks ago and they actually roomed together. And I think a lot of it was a result of having a week, that intense week together, where you've got to get on, and you kind of see, I suppose you see things from different perspectives. And you start to see other people's experiences, don't they, because you've got that intensity. (Anonymous teacher survey)

Here it is suggested that the intensely creative and collaborative environment of the writing camp was responsible for building closer relationships among the writers, even going so far as to reconcile two girls who had previously clashed. The teacher also suggested it was the sharing of other people's experiences that created intimacy between them.

This study has shown that many of the writers were surprised at their achievement, which has the potential to lead them to wonder at what else they may be able to achieve. This was noticed by one teacher:

> [...] being selected for participation in the project has made the students realise that staff see, and value, their academic potential and strong personalities. Also, the students were unaware how much they could achieve when working independently, [...] They surprised themselves, which has greatly increased their determination. (Anonymous teacher survey)

The realisation of what can be achieved, which was linked to increased determination, has been identified in the literature as leading to an overall improvement of well-being. Bandura (1994) suggested a relationship between self-efficacy and well-being when he noted that individuals who reported a high sense of self-efficacy did not attribute failure to an intrinsic weakness but to a lack of effort, which could be easily remedied. Those individuals recovered from setbacks more swiftly than those who reported a lower sense of self-efficacy and were less vulnerable to depression and anxiety (Seymour and Murray, 2016).

Taken together, comments from the writers and school members of staff suggest White Water Writers has a positive effect overall. In particular,

the writers report an increase in their confidence by the end of the week, with the attitude, 'if I can do this, what else might I be able to achieve?' prevailing. The efficacy of White Water Writers as a means for writers to explore their identities through fiction and the possibility of growing into new concepts of themselves is also strongly suggested.

Discussion

A major theme in the texts was interpersonal connectivity, expressed through the concept of loneliness. Lau (2016) suggests that the development of social skills in adolescence may reduce the risk of loneliness and its impacts on mental health and academic achievement. The modern world is increasingly diversified, not least of all in the workplace. Adolescence is an ideal time to encourage the development of social intelligence, defined by Lau (2016) as a range of skills developed by an individual to help them negotiate social situations and maintain positive relationships. White Water Writers encourages adolescents to develop social skills through collaboration. The writers reported they learnt how to form a group, how to work together, share ideas and handle tension within the groups. They said, also, they feel they will be able to carry these skills into the rest of their academic careers. This suggests White Water Writers can help negate loneliness, improve well-being and aid academic performance. The latter of these may, according to Harrison (2018), have been the result of writers creating vivid images of possible selves, which have motivational power that will manifest in improved academic performance. The present study also suggests that White Water Writers may provide a safe place for adolescents to explore issues that matter to them. Some of the writers reported using the fictional characters they wrote to express thoughts and ideas they would not normally be comfortable expressing. This sense of safety in fiction can be used to explore a wide variety of issues. The theme of diversity, expressed mostly through the prism of sexuality, fed into thoughts of isolation. However, attitudes to sexuality were used as a means to explore the meeting of dominant narratives with personal ones, reflecting a time in a young person's life when the search for a personal identity can be at odds with expectations from parents, teachers and the wider society. In the novels dominant themes of sexuality clashed with personal identities, struggling against them but eventually being

accepted. It was also clear that the writers consider isolation and loneliness important topics, with the need to feel connected to others providing a sense of safety and belonging they appear to value. Indeed, when used in psychotherapy, similar writing groups, which encourage self-disclosure, increase group cohesion and stimulate intimacy (Wenz and McWhirter, 1990). This is supported by the present study, in which one teacher who spoke of the difficulties the group had at first, said that pre-existing conflicts were resolved, lasting relationships formed and the group was brought closer together by the process. Reports from the participants and those of their teachers suggest that the sense of accomplishment that comes with the completion of the novel, and the experience of managing group dynamics, can lead individuals to believe they can achieve much else they had previously not considered possible. This supports the idea that self-efficacy is subject to influence. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) note that children with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to behave well and be more motivated to work, adding that teachers may design lessons accordingly. It seems, therefore, that as self-efficacy in young people can be increased using a properly designed intervention, White Water Writers is equipped to positively influence a student's sense of competence in themselves and what might be possible for them. The experimenting with a character's qualities in a fictionalised setting also appears to lead individuals to believe they can adopt such qualities for themselves. That is, by taking control of the personal narrative of a fictional person, they are exploring possible selves and are encouraged to believe they may take control of their own personal story and identity.

Conclusion

This study looked to explore the experience of young writers taking part in a collaborative writing project that had the aim of widening participation in higher education. Themes interpreted in the books that were written and interview data strongly suggest that writers are exploring ideas, identities and possible selves in their fictional writing. It also appears that participation in the collaborative writing project increases agency in the writers, with individuals wondering, if they can write a book in a week, what else can they do? Both the exploration of possible selves and the increase

of agency have been identified as effective for increasing motivation and opening pathways to higher education. Oyserman et al (2004) recommend that young people are given the opportunity to develop possible selves as part of the school curriculum, with adults on hand to help devise strategies that could lead them on a path toward higher education. White Water Writers is funded by a programme which looks to encourage young people into higher education, who would not normally consider it for themselves. Many of the writers have either interacted with the broader programme previously or would very likely go on to do so. These interactions may come in the form of campus visits, careers advice and mock lectures, among others. Therefore, the present study suggests that, when operating within a broader widening participation programme, White Water Writers is a suitable activity to encourage disadvantaged young people to consider higher education. It is well suited to do so through increasing confidence in individuals and enabling them to challenge dominant narratives by means of taking control of their own personal stories and identities.

Recommendations for further study

A further study of White Water Writers or any similar widening participation activity would benefit from measuring self-efficacy and locus of control. It would also be interesting to examine the effect on attitudes to higher education.

Limitations

The present study had a number of limitations. The participants were not selected randomly. To be eligible for funding, all participants had to be from postcodes identified by the Office for Students as being areas of low participation in higher education, which makes it impossible to generalise the findings. However, since the project being evaluated targets young people who live in those postcodes, this is not a shortcoming for the study itself. The participants were then chosen by their schools based on their own criteria, which were unknown to the researcher. While the thematic analysis was conducted following the process laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researcher that conducted the thematic analysis also led the writing project, and though every attempt was made to be

impartial, a discussion of themes with the participants themselves would serve to confirm or deny the findings. Finally, the gender ratio was heavily skewed toward females, with only three of the thirty participants being male.

References

Archer, L., and Hutchings, M. (2000) '"Bettering yourself"? Discourses of risk, cost and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 21, 4: 555-574.

Bandura, A. (1994) 'Self-efficacy' in V. S. Ramachaudran (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of human behavior*, New York: Academic Press. (Reprinted in H. Friedman (Ed.) (1998) *Encyclopedia of mental health*, San Diego: Academic Press.)

Blanchard, C., McCormack, M. and Peterson, G. (2017) 'Inclusive masculinities in a working-class sixth form in northeast England', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 46, 3: 310-333.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative research in psychology* 3, 2: 77-101.

Campbell, L. A. and McKendrick, J. H. (2017) 'Beyond aspirations: Deploying the capability approach to tackle the under-representation in higher education of young people from deprived communities', *Studies in Continuing Education* 39, 2: 120-137.

Carr, A. (1998) 'Michael White's narrative therapy', *Contemporary Family Therapy* 20, 4: 485-503.

Chevalier, A., Gibbons, S., Thorpe, A., Snell, M. and Hoskins, S. (2009) 'Students' academic self-perception', *Economics of Education Review* 28, 6: 716-727.

Connolly, P. (2006) 'The masculine habitus as "distributed cognition": A case study of 5- to 6-year old boys in an English inner-city, multi-ethnic primary school', *Children and Society* 20: 2 140-52.

Connolly, P. and Healy, J. (2004) 'Symbolic violence, locality and social class: The educational and career aspirations of 10-11-year-old boys in Belfast', *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 12, 1: 15-33.

Cross, S. and Markus, H. (1991) 'Possible selves across the life span', *Human development* 34, 4: 230-255.

de Botton, A. (2005) *Status Anxiety*, New York: Vintage.

Erikson, M. G. (2007) 'The meaning of the future: Toward a more specific definition of possible selves', *Review of General Psychology* 11, 4: 348-358.

Social Exclusion Task Force (2008) *Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities*, London: Cabinet office.

Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (2006) *Young people and social change, 2nd edition*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Hammack, P. L. (2008) 'Narrative and the cultural psychology of identity', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 12, 3: 222-247.

Harrison, N. (2018) 'Using the Lens of "Possible Selves" to Explore Access to Higher Education: A New Conceptual Model for Practice, Policy, and Research', *Social Sciences* 7, 10: 209.

Hobfoll, S. E., Johnson, R. J., Ennis, N. and Jackson, A. P. (2003) 'Resource loss, resource gain, and emotional outcomes among inner city women', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, 3: 632-643.

Hock, M. F., Deshler, D. D. and Schumaker, J. B. (2006) 'Enhancing student motivation through the pursuit of possible selves', in C. Dunkel and J. Kerpelman (Eds) (2006) *Possible selves: Theory, research and applications*, New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Hollywood, E., Egdell, V., McQuaid, R. and Michel-Schertges, D. (2012) 'Methodological issues in operationalising the capability approach in empirical research: An example of cross-country research on youth unemployment in the EU', *Social work and society* 10, 1.

Hunt, C. (2010) 'Therapeutic Effects of Writing Fictional Autobiography', *Life Writing* 7, 3: 231-244.

Lau, J. (2016) *Social intelligence and the next generation*, London: National Citizen Service and Kings College.

Laursen, B. and Hartl, A. C. (2013) 'Understanding loneliness during adolescence: Developmental changes that increase the risk of perceived social isolation', *Journal of Adolescence* 36, 6: 1261-1268.

Linnenbrink, E. A. and Pintrich, P. R. (2003) 'The role of self-efficacy beliefs in student engagement and learning in the classroom', *Reading & Writing Quarterly* 19, 2: 119-137.

Maes, M., Vanhalst, J., Spithoven, A. W., Van den Noortgate, W. and Goossens, L. (2016) 'Loneliness and attitudes toward aloneness in adolescence: A person-centered approach', *Journal of youth and adolescence* 45, 3: 547-567.

McAdams, D. P. (1993) *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*, New York: Guilford Press.

Markus, H., and Nurius, P. (1986) 'Possible selves', *American psychologist* 41, 9: 954.

McCall, L. (2013) *The Undeserving Rich. American Beliefs about Inequality, Opportunity, and Redistribution*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Mijs, J. J. (2016) 'The unfulfillable promise of meritocracy: Three lessons and their implications for justice in education', *Social Justice Research* 29, 1: 14-34.

Moskowitz, C. (1998) 'The Self as Source Creative Writing Generated From Personal Reflection', in C. Hunt and F. Sampson (Eds) *The self on the page: Theory and practice of creative writing in personal development*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Murray, M. (2000) 'Levels of narrative analysis in health psychology', *Journal of health psychology* 5, 3: 337-347.

Oyserman, D., Bybee, D., Terry, K. and Hart-Johnson, T. (2004) 'Possible selves as roadmaps', *Journal of Research in personality* 38, 2: 130-149.

Owens, J. and de St Croix, T. (2020) 'Engines of social mobility? Navigating meritocratic education discourse in an unequal society', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 68, 4: 403-424.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1997) 'Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process', *Psychological Science* 8, 3: 162-166.

Reay, D. (2002) 'Shaun's story: troubling discourses of white working-class masculinities', *Gender and education* 14, 3: 221-234.

Robeyns, I. (2005) 'The capability approach: a theoretical survey', *Journal of human development* 6, 1: 93-117.

Salanova, M., Bakker, A. B. and Llorens, S. (2006) 'Flow at work: Evidence for an upward spiral of personal and organizational resources', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 7, 1: 1-22.

Sen, A. K. (1992) *Inequality reexamined*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Seymour, R. and Murray, M. (2016) 'When I am old I shall wear purple: A qualitative study of the effect of group poetry sessions on the well-being of older adults', *Working with Older People* 20, 4: 195-198.

Watkins, C. (2010) 'Learning, performance and improvement', *INSI Research Matters* 34.

Wenz, K. and McWhirter, J. J. (1990) 'Enhancing the group experience: Creative writing exercises', *Journal for Specialists in Group Work* 15, 1: 37-42.