

Original citation:

Barnes, Sally-Anne and Brown, Alan. (2016) Stories of learning and their significance to future pathways and aspirations. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 44 (2). pp. 233-242.

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Publisher statement:

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* on 20/01/2016, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03069885.2016.1145194>

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Stories of learning and their significance to future pathways and aspirations

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This work was supported by Cedefop under the contract AO/RPA/GRUSSO-ABARA/Narrative of learning from the low skilled/022/12.

Stories of learning and their significance to future pathways and aspirations

Abstract

This explores the narratives from three individuals in low skilled employment in the UK. The interviewees reflected upon their experiences of learning from compulsory education and beyond and their pathways through education to employment. The narratives illustrate how with the support of significant others resilience and proactivity can overcome negative influences and subjective barriers to learning. Their barriers to learning will be examined in terms of their impact on future pathways and aspirations. The discussion will conclude by examining the role of significant others, and the potential role of careers professionals, in combatting negative experiences of learning in order to raise aspirations and support positive pathways.

Keywords: learning, narrative, career pathways, aspirations, low skilled

Introduction

The low skilled are particularly vulnerable to labour market change, which can sometimes be unpredictable and risky for them (Edwards, 1997). Indeed individuals labelled as low-skilled who were unemployed in 2013 constitute almost a fifth of the labour force in the EU or almost 10 million people, up from about 11.5 percent pre-crisis in 2008 (Ørsted, 2014). Learning, both planned and unplanned, inside and outside the workplace, has become a key mechanism and process in the transition from one type of job to another. The transitions which an individual experiences may be through choice or imposed externally. The latter may have implications for the way an individual experiences and copes with the transition and learning and their attitudes towards it (Glastra, Hake & Schedler, 2004). Field (2000) notes that education in adult life is a resource on which individuals can draw to improve their employability and mobility, but it is also a cause of further uncertainty and risk.

This article draws upon narrative interviews undertaken in 2013 and 2014 that investigated how individuals who leave initial education and training with few formal qualifications (defined as low skilled) could be supported in their learning activities, career development, employability and career transitions. The study was undertaken by an inter-disciplinary research team from seven European countries (including the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy and Poland). The overall aim of the study was to provide an in-depth understanding of the variety reasons (such as early learning experiences, influences of significant others, family life, health etc.) explaining why low skilled workers can be disengaged from education and learning throughout their life, whilst others are able to develop their skills to build successful careers. Across the seven countries common drivers for learning were identified, including a range of personality traits, individual motivations, goal orientated learning and/or significant others supporting and encouraging learning. The article focuses on the narratives of three individuals interviewed as part of the sample from England to explore how those who have had poor experiences at school and attained few qualifications have gone on to overcome subjective and objective barriers to learning with the support of significant

others.

Context

The OECD skills survey (2013) is of particular interest as it identifies three important sub-themes for the study: the trap of low skills, low paid employment leading to limited access to further education and training; the continuing influence of parental class, status and education upon adult skills development; and the ways in which participation in learning activities may bring about important labour market and social outcomes. One additional theme of particular interest arising out of international studies on the continuing influence of school attainment for adult skills development is the importance of conscientiousness (academic tenacity), perseverance and positive mindsets (Duckworth et al., 2007; Dweck, 2006; Farrington et al., 2012; Oyserman, Terry & Bybee, 2006; Yeager & Walton, 2011).

One-way people in low skilled work throughout Europe upgrade their skills, knowledge and understanding is when they take on new roles when they change jobs (Brynin & Longhi, 2007). That is, the work is either more challenging in itself and/or it offers an opportunity to develop new patterns of interaction and relationships, thereby developing individuals' abilities to make successful transitions. Being in low skilled employment is not necessarily problematic for a person's longer-term prospects but staying in such employment most certainly is (Bynner & Parsons, 1997), so supporting progression from low skilled work through engagement with learning and development is an important challenge.

When unemployment is high, experience of work is valuable as it is much easier to get employment if you already have experience of working. So engaging in low skilled work early in a career does offer opportunities in a number of respects. It can be used as a platform from which to seek other employment, it can help an individual develop their adaptability – the ability to apply their developing skills, knowledge and understanding in a new context. If coupled with a significant attempt at substantive learning and development it can also lead to the individual learning how to combine work, learning and personal development (Brown et al., 2010).

There are many ways to develop work-related skills, knowledge and understanding in employment, training and education contexts. For many people, work at different times in their life offers an important route to substantive skill development through engagement with challenging work (Brown, 2009). Apparently low skilled work can still offer opportunities for substantive learning and development (Brown, 2009). For example, driving a van delivering sandwiches for small businesses may seem relatively undemanding. However, the van driver may play a key role for the company in establishing a rapport with customers and his/her 'influencing skills' could make a significant difference to sales (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson & Unwin, 2009).

Work-related training can be an important means of up-skilling employees. However, the problem for employees in low skilled jobs is gaining access to such training – the more highly skilled you are already the more likely you are to be provided with such training. Some organisations do operate 'skills escalators' where all employees are able to access training which will equip them with the skills to at least compete for more highly skilled work (McBride et al., 2006). Such schemes have had

some success, although take up can be limited, particularly when training takes place in your own time, or because of other barriers to engagement with training, including issues around self-confidence, learning identities, time, cost and other responsibilities (McNair, 2010). Ivanic et al. (2007) expanded upon how learning activities and related social practices can extend across a range of education, training and employment contexts in ways that help individuals build stronger learning identities, and in this sense learning may be seen as a boundary-crossing activity rather than being linked to a single context. Wojecki (2007) was interested in how people develop confidence and succeed as learners in the workplace. It was suggested that by engaging in education and learning directly related to current employment, a worker can transform their view of themselves as learners. By developing work-related skills, knowledge and understanding, and through strengthening of an individual's learning identity, a worker can establish a platform of confidence and competence from which it is possible to progress from low skilled work. Engaging in a variety of roles, even in low skilled work, can be a vehicle to upgrade knowledge and understanding (Brynin & Longhi, 2007), such that individuals feel they are in a position to apply or (train for) skilled work.

There are two key issues that are of particular importance to the overarching question of how to engage the low qualified who are also doing low skilled work in activities, which develop their skills and abilities. The first is to recognise that, although learning-rich challenging work is exceptionally powerful in terms of individual development and access to such work is often limited to those who are already relatively highly qualified. It is, therefore, still possible for individuals to develop their skills particularly if they are willing to tackle a range of low skilled work in ways that develop their adaptability such that they can perform effectively in a range of contexts (Brown, 2009). However, individuals need to recognise that learning activities and related social practices can extend across a range of education, training and employment contexts, so learning needs to be seen as an activity which actively crosses boundaries. The second factor is that institutional support, from public employment services, career guidance agencies, adult learning institutions and similar, need to use frameworks which actively encourage awareness of the value of career adaptive behaviour (Bimrose et al., 2011). The following stories from three low skilled individuals explore these issues.

This article focuses on the role of significant others in helping individuals build their self-efficacy, frame their careers and develop aspirations. Whilst the three stories represent support from a range of sources that are significant to the individuals including from a training scheme mentor, family, colleagues and a job centre adviser. Support from this range of sources is seen as key to enabling individuals shape their aspirations and career trajectories. Support is defined here as informal advice and encouragement, help with learning and support with work experience activities. Whilst it is apparent that careers guidance is lacking in all of the narratives, others take on this role. The stories exemplify how these significant people offering support play in the process of changing negative experiences of learning to help raise aspirations and support career transitions. These changes are not driven by external events requiring a career to be 'reframed' (Brown, 2015). For those with few qualifications, careers are framed with support from and interactions with significant others through a process of building confidence and self-efficacy. Three stories of work and learning presented in this article illustrate how individuals have been successful in terms of framing their careers and building aspirations.

The Study

A narrative interview method was adopted for the study, as it had been successfully used in previous research (CEDEFOP, 2014). The aim of this approach was to draw out the key strategic career and learning biographies of the target population (Brown, 2004; Brown et al., 2010). A strategic learning biography tracks substantive changes in values, attitudes, behaviour and/or understanding, rather than just the non-reflexive small adaptations to everyday life. It encompasses all forms of learning: both planned or unplanned (non-formal learning); in formal or informal settings; in all types of learning situations (social, workplace, schools or training providing institutions); for personal or work-related purposes; from interactions with all kinds of people (teachers, trainers, mentors, colleagues, peers, and friends). The key theoretical underpinning related to the work on mid-career reframing adopted by Brown and Bimrose (2014), which identified that career reframing processes can usefully be viewed from three perspectives: reframing as a process of identity development, as a form of relational, emotional, practical and cognitive development and taking place within particular opportunity structures.

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on understanding individual career and learning experiences that linked to past, present and possible future career transitions, learning and labour market experiences. Interviews were informal lasting up to 2 hours. Fifteen interviews were undertaken with workers who left initial education and training with few qualifications in England. Of the 15 interviewees, eight were interviewed again one year after their initial interview. These follow-ups focused on changes over the last year, as well as providing an opportunity for further reflection and exploration of key experiences and transitions.

Purposive sampling was used to capture interviewees who met the inclusion criteria. The English sample comprised eight men and seven women aged 25-40 years (with 10 interviewees between the ages of 24 and 32 years), who had left school with no or low level qualifications and were in employment. Six interviewees had left school with no or low qualifications and/or had participated in low vocational education and training to achieve a Level 1 qualification. Six had attained a Level 2 qualification and three a Level 3 qualification. All qualifications attained were vocational and associated with a trade, such as hairdressing, construction, health and social care, electrical engineering and administration. Three reported a disability or health condition. There was a mixture of single and married people, some of whom had children. Eight interviewees lived in urban areas and seven in rural areas. All participants were employed in low wage occupations.

The data analysis was an iterative process whereby transcripts were read, re-read and coded. The narrative approach provided rich data that was analysed in-depth to generate detailed descriptions of the different types of pathways into, and potentially out of, low skilled employment. The narratives were also explored and analysed in terms of: subjective and objective barriers and drivers to learning; the impact of learning and learning experiences on future trajectories and aspirations; perceptions on skills and competences and their usefulness to the labour market; and attempts to build resilience and adaptability.

Stories from the low skilled

The following section explores the stories of three individuals whose poor education and learning experiences were overcome with support from significant others to help build self-efficacy, frame career aspirations and start a career. Support, in all three work and learning stories presented, provides the encouragement for these individuals to return to learning for future careers. The stories from Carl, Jack and Sarah illustrate how they begin to understand what learning means to them. Learning becomes a more positive experience and individuals begin to build their confidence and self-efficacy.

Support to build self-efficacy

Carl's story illustrates how support has the potential to frame career aspirations, but that learning is more readily undertaken when it backs up those aspirations. It highlights how some individuals need continued support and perhaps career guidance to understand the wider (or longer-term) value of learning and qualifications. Carl's story is very much about learning for his job and undertaking learning that is relevant to him.

Carl is 31 years old and works as a parts supervisor at one branch of a large car dealership where he has been employed for 14 years since leaving school. As part of his role, he oversees and manages the work of a parts adviser and an apprentice. Carl's family had a long history of working in the motor trade and it was expected that he would leave school at 16 and start work in the trade. For Carl, school was about acquiring the skills and qualifications to enable him to work in the motor trade as a motor mechanic. His family supported this aspiration. Through his school's extended work experience programme, some students during their final year were able to spend one day a week at work. Carl was able to work in the family business, which he said he had benefited from and started to build his confidence. It could be argued that it was this that started to build his self-efficacy.

However, when Carl completed his compulsory education he had only achieved low grades in a number of key subjects. With advice and support from his family, teachers and the school's career services, he successfully applied for a Level 2 college course in Motor Vehicle Engineering. The course was a combination of classroom and practical sessions in a workshop. Carl talked about how he enjoyed the practical elements, but found the classroom element more difficult. He successfully completed the practical assessments, but he was less successful with the classroom element, partly because the number of hours he spent doing part-time work at a garden centre increased. He said he fell behind and failed the classroom part as there was a lot of Maths. For Carl, earning money became more important than learning at college. As he struggled with the academic element of his course which could have led to progression to a skilled worker (level 3) course and qualification, Carl took the easier route. For him, employment had status and opened doors, it meant: 'doing what everybody else was doing. I was 17 and it was the money. I thought I'm getting paid for this and I'm not getting anything going to college'. Carl said that he enjoyed the independence that having his own money enabled. After a few months starting a permanent full-time job at the garden centre, Carl's grandfather found him a job at the local car dealership where Carl now works. Support from his grandfather played a role in building his confidence, so he applied for the position knowing that it was what he really wanted to do:

I thought to myself at the time och aye, I think this is right up my street. It's not mechanics, but it's in the motor vehicle industry and that's where I wanted to be and to be honest as soon as I started I fell in love with it.

Carl had adjusted his career goals and started as a parts apprentice with the company despite it paying less than the garden centre. He completed the required Level 2 qualification in Distribution and Warehousing with distinction, which involved one day a week with a local training provider. This achievement further boosted Carl's confidence.

For Carl finding a job that he loved reinvigorated his motivation and interest in learning. Learning became about excellence at work and improving his performance. His employer has been supportive in providing learning opportunities for Carl and feedback from management was positive, which increased Carl's self-efficacy. Carl opted to undertake a Level 3 qualification in Customer Care because: 'It was the best for the job I was doing and matched the job role better than the rest.' This was financed by his employer and undertaken in work time. Carl's future aspirations are to undertake a management course, but he said he would only do this through the company. It is his ambition is to become a Parts Manager with the company and longer-term take over his family's business with another family member.

Carl's story illustrates that support from family, managers and colleagues have been key to his success at work and motivation to learn after school. By building his confidence, Carl was able to start rethinking his career aspirations. Carl reflected on the praise and feedback about his work recognising that they are key motivators. His family have also shaped and supported his aspirations to work in the motor industry. After more positive experiences of learning, Carl now recognises the value of having skills and experiences that he can not only use in his local labour market, but that also means he would be able to work in the family business. Whilst the support has been pivotal in assisting Carl achieve his aspirations, impartial advice may have helped Carl in assessing the relative weight to give to earning through part-time work and gaining qualifications to support future progression. With the continuing support Carl has had from a variety of sources since leaving school it is evident that he has developed a strong work ethic and commitment to performing well, which could provide a basis for work in an alternative occupation, if desired. Carl's self-efficacy appears grounded in his relative success in both working and learning after leaving school.

Support to frame career aspirations

Jack is 28 years old and lives with his parents. He is currently employed full-time as a care worker in a privately owned care home where he has worked for two years. Jack had a poor school experience leaving early without attaining any qualifications. His confidence was low and with low self-efficacy he had no particular aspirations. With positive support from a guidance worker at a local training centre, positive role models and support with a trainer, his subjective and objective barriers, revolving around his dyslexia, to learning were overcome.

Jack was diagnosed with dyslexia at age 10, so he struggled at school to understand the teachers and keep up with the written work: 'I was always putting

myself down because I couldn't do any written work or anything like that.' He reflected upon his school experience:

If I could change anything change. I'd try a bit harder in school, but s'pose you can only do as much as you can. I needed the help [...] I was just sitting there not knowing what to do 'cos everything was wrong. I wasn't quick enough, but kept going to school and didn't clown like other people, but tried my best. I wish I'd gone straight into the job I have now.

After leaving school at 16 believing he was not very 'bright', Jack went to a training centre and started a training scheme. There he received additional support and help from a tutor, which enabled him to attain qualifications in mathematics and English. He said that it was the first time he had been encouraged to ask for help. Importantly for him, he also learnt how to speak more confidently to people:

They made us feel comfortable and wanted to listen to us when I took it a bit slowly and helped us to talk and understand. It took them a while 'cos I wasn't very good with words [...] they used to say to me don't put yourself down because I used to do that a lot.

With support, he was encouraged to consider work he might do what he was best at and about his hobbies. The tutor helped Jack match his skills to different employment opportunities. Jack recognised that he liked practical work so a job using manual skills was a preferred choice. His father worker in the car trade, so Jack started to think about becoming a car mechanic. The training centre arranged a work placement at a local garage, which he enjoyed as he learnt from the mechanics who were helpful. His tutor visited him regularly to support his learning. The work placement was only supposed to be for a limited number of hours a week, but Jack ended up working six days a week so he left. It was at this stage, Jack can be seen to start to develop an understanding about himself and grow in confidence. His career trajectory then starts to take shape.

Following discussions with the tutor, Jack started to think about care work realising that his mother was employed in care and that he had used to help care for his grandmother. So he switched career direction and during his second year with the training centre, he had a placement for nine months in a care home. His tutor visited him every few weeks to watch and help him with learning to perform work tasks, whilst support with the written elements of the job were undertaken with help at the training centre. He recognised the value of that support stating that: 'they helped us through everything.' The one-to-one work with the tutors made a positive difference to how Jack saw himself and he gained confidence in what he could do. Jack said that at the care home he learnt to listen and talk to the residents, understanding that it was an important component of the job.

At 18 years old and at the end of the scheme, Jack's father found him a job at a garage. After a successful interview, Jack accepted a permanent full-time job as a parts assistant and driver. Jack said that he was sad to leave the care home because he received positive comments from the residents about his work, but, as he had always

wanted to work with cars, he wanted to take the opportunity at the garage. Job security was an important part in taking the job. He enjoyed the job especially driving the cars in the yard. Jack thrived with the on-the-job training, but he was never offered the opportunity to go on any courses. After eight years at the garage, he was made redundant and had to sign on at the job centre. At the time he reflected upon his work placements and recognised that he had gained the most satisfaction from the care work, so started applying for jobs in that sector.

Jack experienced a lack of support from the job centre. After a few months, he found employment at a private care home. Jack has been supported through work to successfully complete Level 1 and 2 qualifications in Health and Social Care. The trainer has supported Jack at work to complete written work with a touch screen computer. He said that the availability of technology made a huge difference in addressing his difficulties with reading, writing and mathematics. Jack loves his job:

It makes me feel wanted and I like to make residents feel the same. [...] You are looking after people better by doing training through the job. Some people just do the course first, but this wouldn't have suited me.

As a result of praise from the residents, the care home manager asked Jack to become an onsite trainer for moving and manual handling. The support of his manager gave Jack confidence and he was successful:

I didn't think I could ever do it but the manager said 'I've got faith in you that you can', we had to lead something and I'm not good at that sort of thing but I managed to do that. So, I was over the moon when I stuck at it and got passed.

Jack has also signed up for training to complete a Level 3 qualification in Health and Social Care, which would enable him to take on a more senior role. Although he understands the value of attaining the qualification, he is uncertain whether he would be able to lead others and he is anxious about how more difficult the job may be. He seemed confident that the qualification was attainable with the extra support from the trainer. Jack can see himself working at the care home for the next ten years, but he would still eventually like to work with disabled children.

Jack's story illustrates the importance of support in overcoming subjective and objective barriers to learning and how negative experiences can be overcome to enable learning to be more successful in the future. Jack's dyslexia has obviously had a major impact on his experience of learning and confidence. It is only now, several years later, that he is able to understand how he can learn and what works for him. Jack has received support from his parents, tutors, trainers and a number of employers leading to greater self-efficacy. This support has helped him realise his aspirations and his growing self-awareness and confidence has helped shape his career trajectory. He understands what is important in terms of his career – job satisfaction, being able to care for people and job security. The support from staff on the initial training scheme provided a vital role in growing Jack's confidence, they believed in him and provided support with his learning and his performance at work. The scheme also gave him space to test out his options and to think about what he liked doing and translate this into considering his

options in the local labour market. They provided a positive learning environment. Through a process of career exploration, Jack has been able to start his career and develop aspirations to progress in that career. Whilst Jack still has some confidence issues, his story is hopeful.

Support to reframe career aspirations after problems with initial transition into work

Sarah is aged 37 and currently works part-time in a bakery. Her story illustrates someone who has had a varied work and learning pathway, but with support was able to find meaning in what she was doing and gain positive reinforcement. Similar to Carl and Jack, for Sarah her confidence in herself and an understanding of her abilities and preferences, which had developed over time, played an important role in driving her learning. She spoke of doing what she enjoyed and was good at, and her attitude to learning became more positive. Her comments reflected a desire to improve her self-efficacy. Sarah's work and learning story highlights her strong work ethic, but also her need to seek out and learn from new challenges. Since leaving school, she has had one period of unemployment of four years and has spasmodically engaged in some form of learning. Sarah left school early returning to take her exams. She had been predicted to achieve good grades, but left with low grades. It is something she regrets:

Maybe I shouldn't tell my kids that GCSEs don't count for much, but I feel stupid writing mine down on application forms because it's what I've done since that's important. My results haven't stopped me from doing what I wanted to do and haven't helped either.

Sarah recognised that at the time she had been keen to earn money. She also felt anxious during the school exams, while her vocational courses rely on continuous assessment, which Sarah says is better suited to her learning style.

Her story about her school to work transition is confused. During the 18 months after school, Sarah started a training scheme in Administration, which included a day release to do a Level 1 qualification. After six months, Sarah left as she found the job 'mind numbingly boring' and returned to school to join the sixth form to undertake a pre-vocational course, but she left after a few weeks, believing the course was irrelevant to her. After this, she registered on a Level 2 Administrative training scheme, but after nine months she left the programme because she did not enjoy the work. Sarah then moved into hairdressing and enrolled on a full-time Level 2 course, but within four weeks she discovered that she was pregnant and left.

For Sarah, her experience of learning is positive when she sees it as directly work-related and relevant to her current job or future career prospects. This type of training 'doesn't feel like training. It just happens as you go along.'

During the next five years, Sarah married and divorced and had two more children. She was employed in a range of jobs that fitted around her caring responsibilities. With help and support from her lone parent adviser at the job centre, she was able to enrol on a hairdressing course. To attend the hairdressing course, Sarah

received support to pay some travel and childcare expenses, but also needed help from her partner, parents and a childminder. Without this emotional and practical support, it would have been impossible to take the course. She enjoyed the hairdressing course and was successful in gaining full-time employment at a salon. However, she was less keen on the work itself and left hairdressing as she wanted a change and 'did not want to be in a job she did not like for the 20 plus years like her mum.' She joined a bakery as the hours and work suited her. In her initial interview, Sarah was content with her job at the bakers:

I don't really want to [go for a promotion]. I've got to that stage in my life where I'm not living to work, just working to live. I go out socialising with the girls. Work pays my bills, it lets me have holidays abroad I've had three this year, it puts food on the table and it's a very secure job.

However, a year later she had enrolled on the supervisor's training course saying that: 'I'm ready for a new challenge. I like [company name] so I want to stay and work in this branch if possible after the training course'. Sarah continues to enjoy her working environment, especially her working relationships in the shop.

Sarah's initial story is complicated and reflects a person who lacked support and direction, so took any opportunity that appealed to her. Her decisions seemed to be driven by a sense of boredom or lack of challenge, work restrictions or lack of social relationships. However, with timely support, she was eventually able to reframe her career direction in a more positive way. Sarah has a strong sense of self-efficacy, which derived from her confidence in tackling challenges associated with learning and adapting to new types of work. She is very confident in tackling new activities and is self-motivated. With age, her story has become more considered.

Discussion: the importance of support in stories of the low qualified making progress in their careers

The interesting point about Carl, Jack and Sarah is that they all left school with no qualifications and initially found it difficult to make progress in their careers. The opportunity structures associated with education, employment and training pathways open to individuals without qualifications may act to limit what are seen as feasible ways forward for this group. However, the three individuals were able to draw on support to build their self-efficacy and frame and reframe their career aspirations until they eventually reached not just stable employment, which gave them job satisfaction, but also employment with realistic prospects of them undertaking more senior roles in the future.

For a number of other interviewees from the seven countries, the lack of support from significant others, of the type offered here by family, work colleagues, supervisors or tutors, meant that they often continued to struggle on the margins of employment or training pathways which could lead to meaningful career progression. Pressure from peers (and/or family) to get a job and earn money can play a considerable role in the lack of engagement with learning in teenage years, as the experience of Carl and Sarah illustrate. Not only does such behaviour have an immediate negative impact on the

likelihood of a successful transition into work, it also creates a poor foundation for subsequent career progression.

Our three case exemplars show, however, that recovery is possible, but because it is difficult and they often have limited resources upon which to draw, then the timing and quality of support becomes critical. Their learning and work narratives show that it is possible for the low skilled to experience success in their learning and development, which leads to an increased self-efficacy. This in turn leads to a willingness to participate in further learning and can also lead to more challenging, but attainable, career aspirations.

Significant others (such as a family member, mentor, teacher, colleague etc.) were found to play a significant role in the narratives of the three individuals, motivating them to re-engage in learning. Meaningful personal contact with significant others, which is supportive, encouraging and challenging, can foster the willingness of individuals to engage in learning in settings where they are able to rebuild more positive learner identities based on success with a broader approach to learning and development than was typical during their school careers.

What is missing from all three stories is any interaction with formal career guidance support. In their struggles with their initial transitions to work it is likely that formal career support could have helped the young people in a number of ways, not least in trying to help these individuals combat their initial negative experiences of learning and help them shape positive experiences in order to raise aspirations and support positive career trajectories. The stories illustrate how poor educational and learning outcomes early in life can have negative consequences in terms of future prospects, but positive ways forward can still be built if support is successful. They were successful with other forms of formal and informal support, but career guidance could also have a key role to play in helping such individuals build their confidence, resilience and self-efficacy from an early age and throughout their life course.

Our three 'successful' stories illustrate the importance of support for those emerging from formal education with few qualifications. Support should help them: challenge the view that their negative experiences of learning in the past need shape their future learning experiences; enable a broader reflection on their past education and learning experiences to recognise and realise how to build on their strengths (and tackle their weaknesses as appropriate); reframe their aspirations in order to support challenging but attainable career aspirations; and build self-confidence, self-efficacy and resilience. There is also a need to recognise that the above prospectus will take years to accomplish, hence there is a need for continuing support. Success, however, is possible as our three cases illustrate. The three cases also align well with earlier work on mid-career reframing by Brown and Bimrose (2014), as the reframing processes could be seen in terms of a combination of relational, emotional, practical and cognitive development, which formed the basis of building coherent work identities, even after major problems with initial school to work transitions.

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