

Skills for Life? Basic Skills and Marginal Transitions from School to Work

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Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative research project that explored the influence of basic skills on the school-to-work transitions of young adults. Large numbers of young people have poor skills yet it is a neglected area of study. We document how skill competencies act as barriers to learning and labour market opportunities, illustrating that some individuals are 'reticent' about accessing opportunities and that individual decisionmaking and agency are important to transitions. The paper illustrates the relationships between decision-making and the structuring effects of prior learning experiences and indicates therefore how structural conditioning and agential processes are linked and together shape transition routes.

Introduction

Recent surveys have suggested that up to one-quarter of adults may experience difficulties with literacy or numeracy (Moser 1999; Basic Skills Agency 2000) with even higher figures (between 20 and 40 per cent) for areas of social disadvantage and among young adults (Bounds 2001; Department for Education and Skills 2003) [1]. Over one-third of young people growing up in disadvantaged areas may therefore be struggling with poor skills [2]. Although the quantitative survey work of John Bynner and colleagues (Bynner & Parsons 1997, 1998) has investigated the relationship between poor skills and youth transitions, few other youth researchers have studied this area. These gaps in the existing literature led to the development of a research project that examines the place of skills in the social identities, cultural life and transitions of young people [3]. This particular paper documents how differential basic skill competencies inform the 'marginal' transitions that young adults make into employment [4].

Although we draw on data from a distinctive sample of young people those attending basic skills classes the extent of poor skills among young people suggests that our findings are relevant to marginal transitions more generally. We also argue that basic skills are important as they can reveal much about processes of identity formation and in turn the shaping of transitions to adulthood. We illustrate how early experiences inform later decision-making, in so doing our research raises questions about the relative contributions of agential and structural processes to the shaping of transitions.

We draw on the concepts of learning identity and learning career to understand how formative experiences (such as the early use of basic skills) come to inform identities and with it the dispositions people hold towards formal learning (see Cieslik 2006). These dispositions can then influence subsequent engagement with learning and employment opportunities and with it the sorts of school-to-work transitions made by young people. Drawing on realist theory (Archer 2003) we combine some of the insights of earlier research into youth transitions (Furlong & Cartmel 2004; Webster et al . 2004) and youth cultures (Bennett 1999; Miles 2000; Muggleton 2000) considering the complex inter-relationships between structures and agency and how they operate across individual biographies avoiding either voluntarism or determinism.

Explanations of Marginal School-to-work Transitions

In the United Kingdom during the 1950s and 1960s a buoyant labour market meant that, for most working-class young people, there were relatively short and simple routes into employment (Ashton & Field 1976). The subsequent restructuring of the economy, welfare state and family life have created more protracted and diverse

transitions* navigations to adulthood (Evans & Furlong 1997). The 1980s and 1990s saw concern about mass youth unemployment, although in recent years economic growth in the UK has reduced joblessness rates focusing attention on the expansion of poor quality work (Furlong et al . 2003). Hence numerous studies into marginal transitions and the development of various metaphors to describe such routes as fractured (Wallace & Kovatcheva 1998), cyclical (Craine 1997), and de-standardised (EGRIS 2001). Common to these accounts is the experience of government training, episodes of unemployment and poor work.

Although data suggest a relationship between marginal transitions and poor basic skills (Parsons & Bynner 2002), few have explored this in detail. There was little discussion of basic skills in the Economic and Social Science Research Council's 16_19 programme (Banks et al. 1992) or studies undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Jones 2002) or the Economic and Social Science Research Council's Youth Citizenship and Social Change programme (Catan 2004). Recent research into marginal transitions has continued this trend (Bynner et al . 1997; EGRIS 2001; Evans 2002).

Structure, Agency and Marginal Transitions

The issues of structure and agency was first popularised in youth studies by Roberts' work into opportunity structures that offered a critique of the occupational choice model of transition (Roberts 1968). Roberts suggested that transitions could not be explained by simply examining 'career decisions' rather the fluctuating demand for youth labour*the structure of opportunities was also critical to any analysis (Roberts 1968).

Since the 1960s analyses have been developed that are sensitive to both structural and agential processes (Ball et al . 2000; Evans 2002; Hollands 2002; Roberts 2003). Yet the emphasis one places on structures or agents can shape the research process and its outcomes as is evidenced in recent debates between the two schools of youth research* youth cultures and youth transitions (see, for example, Bennett 2005; Blackman 2005; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006). This latter approach is best exemplified by work undertaken at the University of Teesside (MacDonald & Marsh 2001, 2002, 2005; Webster et al . 2004) and that of Andy Furlong and collaborators in Scotland (Furlong & Cartmel 2003, 2004; Furlong et al . 2003).

Poor Transitions: Economic Marginality and Variability of Transitions in the North East of England

Since the late 1990s the Teesside researchers have developed 'critical case studies' exploring transitions in areas of multiple disadvantage [5]. This work has a thorough analysis of agential and structural processes, although some of the key conclusions emphasise the latter. Marginal transitions largely occur because of young people's limited access to resources (mediated through family, social networks and early educational opportunities) and the structure of labour markets and post-compulsory education and training.

The insecurity of jobs was a central feature of the economically marginal education, training and employment careers the interviewees described . . . The local economy is crucial, we think, in shaping the overall outcomes of their transition . . . (Webster et al . 2004, p. 35; original emphasis)

Nevertheless, these researchers also note how sudden experiences in other career routes (drug/criminal, leisure, housing and family)*so-called critical moments (Thompson et al . 2002)*can also shape school-to-work transitions. As individuals respond to such events in different ways the resulting transition patterns can be confusing and unpredictable (MacDonald & Marsh 2001, p. 382). In documenting this variability within and between biographies, while revealing the shared experience of 'economic marginality' (MacDonald & Marsh 2001, p. 386), the Teesside

researchers endeavour to combine the investigation of both agential and structural processes (MacDonald *et al.* 2001, paras 4.12_4.13). We too acknowledge the significance of social background and labour markets but suggest a greater profile to agency and reflexivity by exploring forms of learning and in particular the skills of young adults. The Teesside research argues that, despite the evidence of variability, essentially it is the power of social structures, particularly labour markets and training opportunities, that shape the overall outcomes of transition. Hence the expansion of good quality employment and training opportunities is the way to improve the lives of disadvantaged young people (Webster *et al.* 2004, p. 43). Although we agree that labour market opportunities are fundamental to life chances, our data also point to instances where young people are reticent about taking up labour market and training opportunities. Even where opportunities are available they are avoided. Yet at other times the same individuals grasp these opportunities. Although the conditioning effects of social structures* the supply of opportunities are important* a focus on learning and skills can further illustrate how actors reflexively monitor their own biographies, dispositions and decision-making, which then inform the demand for opportunities.

We draw on Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000a) concepts of learning identity and learning career to understand how dispositions and decisions about opportunities are made by actors. These concepts theorise the movement of the individual through different social contexts and statuses, and in turn the (dis)engagement with education and labour market opportunities. Bloomer and Hodkinson's research illustrates how positions (career) and dispositions (learning identity) allow for a description of the complex relationships that individuals have with formal and informal learning. They show how past events condition patterns of engagement with education in several areas of life (such as the family, leisure, school) yet also illustrate how dispositions and participation can be transformed, and hence the routes that young people make from school to employment.

Vulnerable Youth in Scotland: Economic Marginality and Rationalised Individualisation

Work by Furlong and collaborators (Furlong & Cartmel 2003, 2004; Furlong *et al.* 2003) also illustrates how poor resources of young people (poor qualifications, family support and social networks) and the decline in secure employment opportunities structure marginal transitions. Their analysis also reveals how early experiences of labour market marginality can structure subsequent vulnerability to poor work and social exclusion (Furlong & Cartmel 2003). These empirical findings are similar to the Teesside research although there is also lengthy theoretical discussion of the strategies and reflexivity of young people* the so-called 'rationalised individualisation model of transitions' (Furlong *et al.* 2003, p. 7). This is a complex and subtle formulation, and space precludes a thorough exposition here. However, the kernel of this approach is that actors rationalise their situation* which involves ongoing monitoring and negotiations over their aspirations and available opportunities. Repeated disappointments can lead to the lowering of expectations, disillusionment and disengagement and 'drift'. Such individuals are then less able to mobilise resources and exploit the labour market opportunities that exist. Although the authors note the role of resources, opportunities and agency in their research, like the Teesside studies it is labour market opportunities rather than skills or individual decision-making that is accorded explanatory primacy.

These earlier studies are essential reading for those seeking to understand how long term socio-structural processes in the UK have shaped the transitions of young adults in recent years. Though our own research suggests that in addition to these labour market processes people with poor skills are often unsure about accessing opportunities and their difficulties with literacy and numeracy affected their ability to make a success of their work careers. Furthermore, these earlier studies into marginal transitions emerged in part out of a critique of Conservative underclass

theories. Such a critique was an important development in youth studies (for example, see Cieslik 1997) locating the source of marginality not in deviant attitudes and behaviour but rather in structural inequalities. We recognise the significance of this research but suggest there is further scope to explore transitions at an individual level. The battle to debunk the underclass thesis has been won but this approach we believe has led at times to an over-cautiousness about the role of individual decision making and subjectivities in school-to-work transitions.

Basic Skills and Transition Studies

Most accounts of marginal transitions underplay the role of basic skills, although there are some exceptions (Furlong et al . 2003; Furlong & Cartmel 2004). This work highlights how poor skills are **associated** with low educational attainment and the experience of poor quality work. There is less discussion of the **processes** by which skills feature throughout the individual biography informing key points in transitions. Bynner and colleagues have studied basic skills in far more depth (see, for example, Bynner & Steedman 1995), drawing on survey data to illustrate how competencies are related to problems such as unemployment, social exclusion and offending behaviour. They show that low levels of literacy are associated with accelerated transitions and routes into poor quality employment and early childbearing (Ekinsmyth & Bynner 1994, pp. 50_51). Those with poorer skills are more vulnerable to unemployment and experience longer periods of joblessness than those with better skills (Ekinsmyth & Bynner 1994, p. 54). Data from more recent surveys show these patterns of marginal careers continuing as the sample members move into their twenties and thirties (Bynner & Parsons 1997; Parsons & Bynner 2002).

These studies have made important contributions to our understanding of basic skills yet we suggest a greater emphasis could be placed on the analysis of individual decision-making and reflexivity and their role in transitions. Where research has studied basic skills they tend to regard basic skills in a one-dimensional way* as competencies that some individuals lack and that lead to negative outcomes. Drawing on the work of Barton and Hamilton (1998), we understand basic skills more as a relational resource having positive and negative outcomes, shaped by ways in which individuals use such skills and influenced by the context in which skills are employed. In this way, therefore, similar skill competencies can have very different 'value' for different individuals or in differing social settings.

Methodology

A sample of 55 adults aged between 20 and 30 was interviewed between November 2002 and July 2004. These sample members had undertaken basic skills learning in a community, college or work setting. This had either been 'embedded' in training such as New Deal or was dedicated basic skills provision. In total 24 men and 31 women were interviewed and all live in the North East of England in disadvantaged communities. In-depth, qualitative life-history interviews were used (Bertaux & Thompson 1997; Hubbard 2001) to construct biographical 'life grids' (Webster et al . 2004) that charted the transition experiences of each individual. These were understood in relation to major career routes such as leisure, school-to-work, family and housing. The research aimed to investigate the relative significance of skill competencies (literacy, numeracy and oracy) to the structuring of transitions to adulthood and compared more 'successful' routes with more 'marginal' transition experiences. The project also examined how particular transition experiences (such as post-compulsory education and training and unemployment) could in turn also influence skill levels of young people. A further aim was to investigate the construction of dispositions to learning across individual biographies and how we can understand young people's demand for learning across the life course [6].

The Place of Basic Skills in Marginal Transitions from School to Work

As we have already shown, early schooling and labour market experiences can influence later transition pathways. This section shows how the use of literacy,

numeracy and oracy can influence early schooling and labour market experiences. Our data indicate that basic skills can inform interactional competencies that in turn can influence young people's access to formal opportunities (at work and in education) and their participation in the informal culture and organisation of institutions.

Schooling and Basic Skills

Low educational attainment and disaffection from school usually feature in accounts of marginal transitions (Willis 1977; Brown 1987). These were common experiences for our interviewees. Some were disaffected because of involvement in anti-school peer groups or were low achievers through long-term illness. For the majority of the sample, however, their poor English, numeracy and communication skills had a negative influence on their formal education. Many made an effort to access opportunities at school yet found their skills presented various obstacles to learning.

Like with my memory. I've got like no short-term memory, so when we were doing English and we'd learn the spelling rules and that and a few days later I wouldn't remember, I struggled. (Steve)

All through me school years, it was all scruffy writing . . . eight times out of ten I couldn't read my own writing . . . I'd just guess it. (Dougie)

The inability to fully participate in learning meant these students were often labelled as 'low achievers'.

Yeah, like when I left junior school and went to senior school, we were sat in the hall and they'd like ask you spelling or whatever . . . they categorised you . . . Struggled and was in most of the remedial classes round school like. (Steve)

Many spoke of their frustration and disillusionment with the school system and their lowered expectations of what they might achieve. Some just drifted through the final years of school, attending but making little effort. Dougie had a much more active resentment of education.

I used to read* I started a book and I used to read the first few pages and it wouldn't sink in. And then I would have to start again. Some books I would read the first two or three pages three or four times and it wouldn't sink in, so I wouldn't read. I hated school. I was never there. (Dougie)

Others came to resent schooling because of their experiences of the informal organisation of learning. They had difficulties with the complex banter and argot of friendship groups, poor speech and memory skills meant that they often struggled to 'fit in' with their peers.

I didn't like school at all 'cos I got bullied, 'cos I wasn't very clever at school. I 'ad reading problems, I 'ad reading and spelling problems. I couldn't speak at the time properly. I found school difficult and a lot of people called me names . . . I got called a lot of bad names, one was a retard. I used to get me pocket money taken off me, I used to get locked in cupboards. (Heather)

Bullying was widespread across the sample. Good communication skills are essential to acceptance by ones peers, and to lack these skills makes one very visible and vulnerable to bullying.

These negative views of schooling were informed by a conjunction of experiences difficulties in learning, being labelled and the exclusionary experiences of bullying. Of course such experiences raise questions about the wider context of learning. Many sample members had specific learning needs that went undiagnosed. Teachers did little about the bullying and parents lacked the knowledge and skills to lobby for extra

learning support for their children. As we discuss later these early experiences came to shape the 'learning identities' of these individuals. Over time, they built up a picture of themselves as 'poor learners'. This had implications for how they accessed opportunities later on in life. For these young people at least basic skills played an important role in the shaping of their social identities and also their academic attainment, which influence the making of subsequent transitions to adulthood.

Labour Market Experiences and Basic Skills

Most interviewees experienced periods of youth training, unemployment and unskilled, poorly paid work. These early transitions are perhaps predictable given the poor opportunities in local labour markets and the poor credentials and low expectations of these young people. Women experienced 'accelerated transitions' (Roberts 2003) establishing intimate relationships and becoming young mothers as teenagers.

A minority of women and the males, however, sought to make their way through waged employment. As with schooling experiences, data suggest that skill competencies affected their ability to undertake tasks and training, and in the long-term their ability to access these opportunities. Andrew had experienced several episodes of training, placements and unemployment.

I had a work placement stacking shelves in a supermarket. I can't always read the labels on the cans so I go by the colours . . . you know they are blue and white with stripes . . . Thing was, these cheap lines are all the same colour so I mixed up all these pallets of beans and spaghetti. (Andrew)

Sabrina attended a basic skills class one evening a week and had also experienced a series of work and training placements as a junior secretary.

I am here to brush up on my spelling and grammar and punctuation, 'cos that has effected my work career . . . When I was doing my NVQs the training advisors knew and said that I needed to go and sort it out . . . I always used to write it down in the book and then proof read it to see if it made sense but I used to always change it all the time. Several times I used to go through and change it, it didn't make sense and then what I used to do is type it up on the computer and use the spell check and grammar check. (Sabrina)

Although her ambition was to work as a legal secretary, after several placements she was still unsuccessful at securing her preferred employment.

So anyway, I joined as a typist, but I found that very hard. It was very hard reading people's handwriting and it was hard typing complex words up, especially the legal terminology and it was just hard. It was a struggle with the punctuation, the grammar, especially when you have to proof read it and you're the only typist there, typing for 25 barristers. So it wasn't easy at all, it was hard. That's the reason why I left and they didn't take me on, because me English was poor, me typing was poor . . . the one who interviewed me said that look we're not going to take you on, 'cos your English is not that good, your typing is not that good'. (Sabrina)

Poor skills often presented difficulties when undertaking tasks at work and during training. It also affected relationships with work colleagues. Heather spent several years working in various care homes for the elderly, interspersed with an unhappy period employed at a local food-processing factory. Her job was to operate a large frying machine that cooked onion bhajis.

I was slow 'cos you 'ave to be quick to do everything because the machine was going and everything and you had to speak to tell 'em when your next one's finished and right, 'there's 20 cases gone through so if you can jot down how many they did that day' and my job was to count 20 but the machine was going that fast, I couldn't think that fast, so I got bullied and I got teased. (Heather)

Eventually the bullying was one of the reasons for Heather's decision to leave her job. As with her school experiences Heather struggled to 'fit in' at work, her communication and mental reasoning skills influencing her ability to be accepted by her work colleagues.

These data suggest that difficulties with 'fitting in' at the workplace are an important barrier to labour market participation and progression. Difficulties with learning were also a barrier to accessing the available training opportunities and chances of enhancing employability in the long term* essential for transitions to secure well-paid employment. Even when employment opportunities were available on completion of training and work placements the evidence points to how skill problems undermined chances of securing such work.

This paper focuses on skills* although these competencies are relational and situated and so their effect is mediated by the structural context in which they are used. Employers are obliged to provide training opportunities that are sensitive to the learning needs of young people* although this was rarely the case. Few employers or training organisations offer specialist basic skills support for young people (Spilsbury 2002). Instead young people often have to seek out such help in their own time. Moreover, recruitment decisions by employers are inevitably influenced by labour supply. A plentiful supply of labour and demand for work can lead employers to recruit more qualified and able young people rather than offer opportunities to those requiring specialist basic skills support.

Basic Skills, Learning Identities and the Shaping of Transitions

So far we have shown how basic skills have informed the experiences of our sample at particular points in their school-to-work transitions. Poor skills can hinder the take up of learning and labour market opportunities influencing the process of marginalisation. In this section we draw on case study material to illustrate how individuals reflexively monitor their biographies (Archer 2003), creating dispositions that are significant to transitions. These dispositions emerge across individual biographies and inform patterns of (dis)engagement with learning and labour market opportunities.

Florence was 28 years of age at interview and was married with one young son. Her early schooling was spent in Germany. She had left school with three low-grade GCSEs and had undertaken youth training in the UK, where she trained as a hairdresser. She had worked in a number of gent's salons and experienced several periods of unemployment. She had lived in several places in the UK as her husband of five years moved with different military postings. They settled in the North East of England three years ago when her husband secured a job as a security guard. She has been at home for one year since her baby was born, recently taking up a place on a basic skills literacy course two mornings a week.

A feature of Florence's interview is how she expressed doubts about her abilities yet paradoxically was able to manage at work. She nevertheless spent much time adapting to situations where she used basic skills.

I worked in a hairdressers . . . I ended up getting stuck into gents' hairdressing from where it was easy. So I stuck to that because I didn't have to write appointments, they just arrived so I wasn't under any pressure, with any spellings or anything, so it was just easier for me to do that . . . because I panic about people's names and then I go around it and I'll say, 'Oh what's your surname', so I won't feel so embarrassed about asking how to spell their surname. I know. I just found the gents you didn't have to do that, they just walked in, sat down and it was easy. (Florence)

Florence, like other interviewees develop strategies for managing the risks at work*

reducing their exposure to situations where basic skills are required. These adaptations were seen across the sample. Steve who was a manual worker for an electrical contractor spoke of missed opportunities at work because of his worries over his reading and writing.

Like I've had opportunities to go in as clerk in the office but I've thought no. I mean it's more conversations on the phone and telling you things that you've got to write down. I'll be able to read it but no one else be able to read it. (Steve)

Despite being presented with opportunities for advancement at work these young people declined these offers. Florence missed out on opportunities to work in the larger, more successful ladies salons that would have provided better prospects for career advancement. Working with male clients meant that she had fewer opportunities to develop her hairdressing skills. Although poor skills limited her work she spent ten years in and out of employment in gents' salons* she was reluctant to improve her skills. Existing research indicates that only about one in ten adults with a basic skills need actually attend some sort of formal learning provision (Parsons & Bynner 2002). In some instances it is the structure of provision or the pressure of work and family commitments that prevents the take up of learning opportunities (McGivney 1999; Sargeant 2000). Although the supply of learning opportunities and structural constraints placed on individuals are significant there is the issue of the demand for learning and how this affects the demand for employment opportunities. Florence's earlier experiences of learning have created quite negative and enduring dispositions towards formal education that have informed her reticence about further training and labour market opportunities.

Oh God it's really difficult. I would have loved to have come back into college and retrained and done something completely different . . . I mean there were certain situations that I've been in and been through which have been really embarrassing and I didn't want to put myself through again . . . I remember in 3rd year of college in beauty therapy, we had a new lecturer and she stood up and she said that she was dyslexic and she said that I know you are too Florence. Nobody in the group knew and I was just devastated. (Florence)

Being labelled as dyslexic symbolised Florence's problems and her status as different to other people. For most of her life she has seen herself as a 'poor learner'. Over the years there have been countless routine, basic skills events that reminded her of the skills that she has problems with. Making mistakes and being unable to complete tasks that others take for granted has shaped Florence's sense of self and her discomfort about situations where she uses her literacy skills.

Dispositions to learning, however, and the decisions they inform are only a part of transitions. Learning identities are shaped historically and reflect previous classed and gendered learning opportunities that were available* like many in the sample, Florence received little or no extra support for her learning needs while at school, in training and employment. Also dispositions can be transformed and we can see that a conjunction of events helped her to reconsider her views towards learning and employment. When she became a mother Florence had reflected on her past and future deciding that a return to education and improved skills would help with her child rearing.

She [Lauren, her child] absolutely loves books and I do feel it's important. I remember my mum saying to me, we never read to you as a child because we were always told that when you went to school you would be taught everything. Now they are saying to read to your kids do everything at home and she loves it and I enjoy it. (Florence)

For Florence a good mother was one that read to their children and helped with schoolwork. Basic skills classes could help achieve this. A return to college was also seen more instrumentally, in relation to her longer-term plans about work and

earning an income.

They said [at the college] you can go on and do a qualification, you can do City and Guilds and things like this. And I'm thinking, 'Oh you can get something out of this . . . I wanted to go into catering so I'm looking at maybe doing that part-time and then working at the college. (Florence)

Florence's return to learning, initially at a basic skill class, was something she had enjoyed as she had been given specialist support for her literacy needs. Over several months she had become more confident about formal learning and the possibility of going onto other courses. This led her to begin to think about pursuing other career options than those in hairdressing. In the way that wider events helped to transform Florence's learning identity, so were contextual factors significant for enabling participation in basic skills provision. Central to this re-engagement was free local classes that provided free college-based childcare. Florence also received much support from her partner who valued education and was aware of how important basic skills learning is to her well being. Although, crucially, Florence's decision to return to formal learning was also about personal change.

I don't want to be afraid anymore. I want to be able to sit down and write things. If someone phones me and I need to leave a message for somebody at work, anything like, 'cos I'm totally doing it for a personal thing and not for a qualification. So it's for me. (Florence)

Discussion

This paper contributes to our understanding of youth transitions by showing how basic skills can inform the marginal routes that **some** young people with poor skills make into employment. It builds on existing accounts that suggest that social backgrounds, individual resources and labour markets structure transitions. Although additionally, we argue that basic skills as communal and/or individual resources can enable or constrain the take up of opportunities.

The paper builds on existing research by calling for a greater consideration of individual agency and reflexivity in the formation of transition pathways. Existing studies suggest young people often face relatively meaningless choices between one poor job or training scheme and another. They have choices that are subjectively significant but these decisions very often make objectively little difference to their overall transition destinations. Hence the popularity of concepts such as structured individualisation (Roberts 1996; Furlong & Cartmel 1997; Wallace & Kovatcheva 1998) and bounded agency (Rudd & Evans 1998; Evans 2002). In focusing on basic skills this study tries to uncover the processes that link the work of actors and the effects of social structures. Data suggested there were many instances where individuals were reticent about accessing opportunities. At some points they reflected on their situations and made decisions not to pursue opportunities. It was not always the case that these did not exist as such. There were opportunities for Florence to work in hair salons or for Steve in junior management. Certainly the young people themselves felt that these decisions had real consequences and they expressed regret about these decisions. We need therefore to examine the subtle workings of agency in relation to the structural processes that frame the lives of young adults. We need to understand the processes that shape the demand for employment and learning opportunities. After all, governments have repeatedly expanded provision of opportunities only to be disappointed about the take-up of these schemes (Heath & Clifford 1996). A major challenge for governments is how to persuade adults to take up these opportunities.

Space precludes a more thorough discussion but to argue that individual decisions have a bearing on marginal transitions does not imply the actor exists as a free agent* voluntarism. Some recent research has been vulnerable to such criticisms

(Polhemus 1997; Muggleton 2000). Realist theory (Archer 2001, 2003) suggests that although the dispositions of actors have a bearing on outcomes, these are always structurally conditioned by past events and by present social contexts. Hence learning identities (and the decisions associated with these) operate in relation to earlier biographical experiences. Such past experiences are also reflective of previous structural conditioning, and so past agential and structural processes are embedded in learning identities.

Analyses that explore the conditioning effects of social structures on the lives of individuals run the risk of implicitly developing a deterministic approach* some crude notion of habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). Nevertheless, as our empirical data suggested, there is much variability within and between biographies* learning identities and orientations to opportunities do change. Individuals over time come to reflect on their learning histories and develop new projects and orientations to learning. Although, as the case studies illustrated, there were often other long-term experiences (such as the birth of a child or a supportive partner) that influenced this transformation. Where in the past individuals had been reticent about learning or a new job, at a later point they were more receptive to these opportunities.

There might be several objections to these arguments. Firstly one could suggest there is little empirical evidence to support the claim that basic skills competencies could account for different sorts of transitions. This is evidenced by examples of young people with poor skills who make 'successful' transitions and others with good skills who make marginal transitions (Furlong & Cartmel 2004, p. 22) [7]. But, as we document elsewhere (Simpson & Cieslik 2006), our data suggest a correlation between the level of basic skills and the extent of marginality experienced. We found that those with a number of weaknesses in different skill areas were more vulnerable to poor transitions than those who had just poor literacy or numeracy. There was often a process of skill substitution or compensation, where individuals could cope in situations by adapting tasks so that they could employ their good skills rather than ones that were weaker. Those with multiple weaknesses were less able to accomplish these adaptations. Respondents also developed relationships with 'literacy brokers' (Bird & Ackerman 2005) who were trusted individuals who helped with everyday tasks. The use of coping strategies illustrates why there are not always straightforward relationships between skill levels and objective transition routes.

A second objection is that it is axiomatic that young people experience marginal transitions because of redundancy and short-term contracts, not because of poor skills. Yet surveys into basic skills suggest that between 20 and 40 per cent of these young people may have poor skills (Bynner & Parsons 1997; Bounds 2001). In some cases it appears the significance of basic skills has been neglected. In this research project the interviewees were forthcoming about their skill needs they were interviewed in classroom settings. However, these young people all spoke about their embarrassment about poor skills and efforts they made to conceal this. Few felt comfortable being reminded their skills were similar to those of 10-year-old or 11-year-old children. There is therefore a major problem with the under-reporting of skill needs in social research even for studies that have set out explicitly to study such phenomena (Bounds 2003; Parsons 2002).

A third objection is that young adults in disadvantaged districts of the UK do not have meaningful choices about jobs and training. Subjectively they feel their decisions are significant, but objectively there are wider social processes they are unaware of and which shape their lives. Weber's dictum about the incompleteness of actor's knowledge and the notion of epistemological fallacy warn us against according too much value to subjective interpretations. Although we can acknowledge that actors have partial insights into their lives we must take care when discounting their

interpretations otherwise we run the risk of turning our informants into cultural dupes* ‘puppets pulled by economic wires’ (Popper 1962, p. 101). Recent concerns in the transitions literature about the underclass thesis, government policy and the cultural turn have led to what we believe is an over-cautious treatment of skills and individual decision-making. A greater emphasis on agency, skills and learning is needed otherwise transition studies will be vulnerable to criticisms that suggest they endlessly document the privations of young people ‘trapped at the margins of society’.

Conclusions

To read some of the more popular accounts of youth transitions today it would seem that few young people are able to escape the problems of insecure work, poor-quality training, crime and drugs. It has become orthodoxy in transition studies to focus attention on what are in reality a minority of young people. Most school leavers in the UK gain qualifications, enter training programmes and, with time, secure employment. The focus on ‘youth problems’, although we are sure well intentioned, has produced many studies of young people buffeted by social forces over which they seem to have little control. Because we (the present authors included) have created studies that focus on social processes as the ultimate causes of youth problems, the corollary is that transformation comes about more through external interventions than by the skills and actions of young people themselves. The fundamental message is that ‘poor individuals’ can often do little to change their lives. We have to wait for governments, practitioners and policy-makers to create better opportunities before change will be forthcoming. This world would not be recognised by young people themselves. It seems to us that the transformative potential of young people themselves, notably through various forms of learning, should be accorded a much greater place in our research.

Notes

[1] The majority of interviewees, when beginning their skill classes were assessed at between entry level 1_3 and level 1, equivalent to an average 11_14 year old’s literacy and numeracy competency.

[2] Payne (2003) has outlined several concerns about current estimates of the numbers with poor skills in the UK.

[3] Mark Cieslik worked for several years as a basic skills tutor, which led to this project, ‘The Role of Basic Skills in the Extended Transitions of Young Adults’ (Economic and Social Science Research Council award no. RES-000-22-0331).

[4] In recent years the term ‘skills for life’ has tended to be used in place of ‘basic skills’.

[5] The authors participated in the most recent of the Teesside projects (see Webster *et al.* 2004). The focus of this research was similar to the earlier Teesside projects and did not have an explicit focus on learning, basic skills or transitions at an individual level, hence this particular project into basic skills, learning and subjectivities.

[6] The discussion draws on data from an initial analysis of interview material. What follows are some of the emerging themes from this ongoing analysis. Although we discuss several case studies or cameos these were chosen as illustrative of the more general themes emerging from our data. For example, over three-quarters of those who had experienced marginal transitions spoke of how poor skills had influenced their access to, or participation in, labour market opportunities, schooling or post-compulsory education and training. As the analysis is incomplete we expect to refine these findings in the future.

[7] Although it should be noted that statistical data imply probabilistic relationships rather than deterministic ones.

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