Missing School: Educational Engagement, Youth Transitions & Social Exclusion

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Abstract

Qualitative research with 'socially excluded' young people in a prime 'underclass' locale is the basis for our examination of experiences of schooling in the shaping of youth transitions. Young people's accounts of school disaffection were depressingly familiar. Explanations for persistent truancy – for missing school - related, in part, to powerful, (sub)cultural critiques of orthodox claims about the instrumental relevance of education. Paradoxically, *in retrospect* the majority missed school, in the sense that they wished they were still there, and many came to hold more instrumental views about education. Our research suggests, however, that qualifications appeared to play a minor role in the shaping of overall transitions. We conclude that we cannot understand these contradictory, shifting orientations to the value of schooling without understanding the changing structures of opportunity that prevail for young people in different places and their 'fit' with localised, class-cultural tastes and aspirations.

Key words: Youth Transitions, Social Exclusion, School.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines experiences of schooling in the shaping of 'inclusionary' and 'exclusionary' transitions. Our wider research project was motivated by a concern to engage critically with dominant policy and academic representations of poor neighbourhoods and their younger residents and to understand ethnographically the experiences and transitions of 'socially excluded' youth in an allegedly prime 'underclass' locale (Murray, 1994). A key, general conclusion, hinted at here, is that many discussions of 'social exclusion' and 'the underclass' focus their analytical gaze too narrowly and only downwards towards the supposed 'cultures of poverty' and individual deficits of people in poor neighbourhoods (MacDonald and Marsh, forthcoming). As Jeffrey and McDowell suggest in their introduction to this volume, explanation of the cultural practices, outlooks and lifestyles of 'the excluded' is more convincing if located within a broader, global analysis of social change and economic restructuring, and how this impacts on particular places to create conditions and opportunities that serve to further entrench – and reproduce in new ways – familiar class divisions (Byrne, 1999). For us, the forms of working-class educational (dis)engagement that we describe can only be understood in relation to the specific contemporary and historical conditions of this place, its decline in respect of the national and international economy and, more precisely, the growth of unemployment and underemployment that has accompanied rapid de-industrialisation.

Like Coles (2000), we aspired to an holistic understanding of youth transitions and, as a consequence, analysed participants' family, housing, leisure, criminal and drug-using careers. We agree with Roberts (2000), however, that these wider realms of youth experience cannot properly be comprehended without a key focus on the 'economic sub-structure' of transitions – how young people carve out school-to-work careers in relation to the 'structure of opportunities' that prevail for them. A focus on biographical narratives of schooling is a first step towards understanding broader and longer-term processes of social reproduction and how exclusionary transitions are made, or not, by young people in poor neighbourhoods (MacDonald et al, 2001).

STUDYING YOUTH TRANSITIONS AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The project was undertaken between 1999 and 2001 in 'East Kelby' in Teesside, Northeast England [1]. Around thirty thousand people live here, in council housing estates originally constructed to house the families of workers employed in nearby chemical and steel plants. As recently as the 1960s, Teesside was a thriving, internationally renowned centre of heavy industry and virtually full employment. Economic success underpinned social cohesion and stability. Since then global economic competition has ushered in large-scale restructuring and redundancies that have led to persistent unemployment and long-term, concentrated poverty (see Beynon et al, 1994 for a fuller discussion). East Kelby's residents live in one of five 'poverty wards' (Glennerster et al, 1999); wards near the top of national league tables for multiple deprivation (DETR, 2000). In short, these neighbourhoods suffer from all the 'joined up' problems of social exclusion and have undergone the spiralling decline that concentrates the problems of poor areas and further separates them from more prosperous ones (Wilson, 1996; Power, 1998; Lee and Hills, 1998). It should be noted as well that Charles Murray (1994) picked out Kelby as a prime example of an area in which his 'new rabble' underclass might be found.

Focussing on education, we see that East Kelby schools struggle to raise educational standards and outcomes against a backdrop of material disadvantage (e.g. 60 per cent of pupils from one East Kelby ward could claim free school meals, a standard proxy measure of poverty, against a national average of 19 per cent) [2]. In 2000, nearly 50 per cent of pupils achieved five or more GCSEs graded A-C nation-wide (GCSEs are the standard school examinations taken by 16 year olds in England; the proportions getting these higher grades in this examination is a common but contested measure of the educational success of a school). In that year, the 'best' East Kelby school recorded a figure of 20 per cent with the 'worst' showing only four per cent reaching these grades. Government targeting of 'failing' schools (Coffey, 2001) has resulted in the demolition of two of the schools that our interviewees attended, to make way for a new, part-privately financed City Academy and further policy initiatives in East Kelby have included an Education Action Zone (EAZs targeted greater resources, such as extra study support classes, to schools in areas of educational

underachievement) and the piloting of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) programme to encourage school-leavers to go on to college [3].

The major component of our fieldwork consisted of qualitative, biographically-focussed interviews with 88 young people aged between 15 and 25 years (45 young women and 43 young men). Virtually all were ethnically white, from 'working-class' backgrounds and shared other characteristics (e.g. family type, parental employment, educational qualifications) that suggested they were broadly typical of the local youth population. The sample was selected purposefully to reflect a wide range of experiences. It included youth trainees, single parents, young offenders, clients of drug agencies, the employed and unemployed, college students and 'New Dealers'. The interviews normally took place in people's homes or workplaces, were tape-recorded and lasted for up to two hours. Second interviews were completed with around 60 per cent of the sample within a year of the first. Notwithstanding the problems often reported in gaining research participation from 'excluded youth', we feel that this sample is large and varied enough (for a qualitative study) to allow for a relatively rare insight into processes of youth transition in a context like this.

SCHOOLING FOR THE LOWER CLASSES: INCENTIVES TO DISENGAGEMENT

What is perhaps most striking about our interviewees' renditions of life in school is their similarity to numerous descriptions of working-class educational experience that have been published over the past three decades (e.g. Willis, 1977; Ball, 1981; Brown, 1987; Riseborough, 1993; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000). Positive reflections on school were few and brief (of which more later). Criticisms and complaints were numerous and extensive.

Colouring Dinosaurs

Although some described some of their teachers as overly authoritarian, too quick to condemn and unlikely to provide academic encouragement [4], the most hostile comments were reserved for the quality and content of teaching rather than the teachers themselves. Despite repeated attempts over the past twenty-five years to 'vocationalise' the curriculum for 'less academic' pupils (see Mizen, 2003), it was seen by the majority here as 'pointless', 'meaningless' and 'menial'. In their view,

being in a low achieving school, especially being in a low achieving class in a low achieving school, resulted in them receiving education of a low quality. Although quick to downplay their own intellectual abilities, interviewees also resented the fact that apparently little emphasis had been placed upon providing them with intellectual challenges:

> All they were learning me when I left school was adds and takeaways and that was in secondary school. The Maths teachers used to take us weight training - didn't do Maths. So I just thought 'Sack it' [give it up].

> Lisa (24, non-employed mother of four).

> We never got no homework…//…Five years, I was never given it. Towards going for my GCSEs, I had to actually ask for homework…//…in, like, the first few years, I was in the bottom set and I think they just didn't bother with us…Well, I don't really know but that's what I feel, they just didn't bother with us…I mean, all the other classes were getting homework constantly and we just never got any.

> Simon (19, factory employee).

Sustained misbehaviour meant that some were routinely referred to a 'learning support base' where the standard of work required was even more basic than the mainstream education described above. This was a source of great amusement for Broderick and his friend:

Broderick: I got put on that thing…//…where you go to that thing and you're colouring dinosaurs and…

Paul: Yeah, the learning support base…it's like a special needs bit to, like…

Broderick: For the demented and that [laughter]…//…I think it was, like, three times a week. I'd miss certain, some lessons and go there and colour in and that and stuff like that…

JM: And what kinds of pupils went in there?

Broderick: Naughty ones, dumb ones, demented ones…//…Yeah, you don't do nowt! [more laughter]. Just sit there and that. They just give you these books.

Paul: Big box of fat wax crayons [loud laughter].

Broderick: Yeah, like that…Sectioned off we were, from the other school, with all these doors and that!…Weren't allowed to sharpen your pencil too much. Nowt like that [laughter].

Broderick (18, unemployed) and Paul (16, YT trainee).

The perception of not being an educational priority was widespread amongst the interviewees. Anthony, now a part-time college student, commented: 'I was in lower sets…//…so I'd just, I think maybe *under that mark*, there didn't seem there was enough encouragement (our emphasis). This allegation that academically weaker pupils are neglected in East Kelby classrooms is supported by Simpson and Cieslik's evaluation of the local EAZ (2000: 13). They conclude that a latent function of its mission to improve educational standards in poor neighbourhoods has been a concentration of resources towards 'the more able and "borderline" pupils at the expense of the less able'. In targeting support towards those deemed most capable of reaching GCSE grades A-C (at the expense of those deemed unlikely to make this benchmark), the EAZ might be accused of *entrenching* practices that add to processes of educational underachievement and social exclusion (i.e. our interviewees reported school experiences *prior* to the introduction of the EAZ).

Getting Tortured, Fitting In & Informal Peer Culture

Alongside critique of the quality and type of schooling encountered in East Kelby, interviews contained extensive discussion of the way that informal social relations between pupils served to structure their experience and assessment of secondary education. For instance, a large minority of the sample had been victims of bullying that ranged from low-level name-calling to more intense, prolonged victimisation (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000; Ridge, 2002). For some, 'getting tortured' (to use the local parlance) wholly explained their affective and physical disengagement from school. Bullying was part of the repertoire of activities sometimes practised by informal peer groups in school in the pursuit of 'having a laugh'. Being part of a 'crew' made for momentary 'mad laughs', to use the words of Paul and Darren. Informants also recognised, however, that allegiance to such peer groups often involved the mutual reinforcement of (sub)cultural orientations to the formal business of school that could have broader consequences in the longer term.

Discovery and discussion of alienated pupil sub-cultures has been a staple of educational ethnography for years. One of the most useful discussions can be found in Brown's (1987) critical engagement with the classic work in this field: Willis's <u>Learning to Labour</u> (1977). Rejecting Willis's depiction of working-class kids' cultural engagement with school as falling on one side or the other of a resistance/ conformity dichotomy, Brown describes the plurality of 'different cultural responses *among* working-class pupils' (1987: 22, original emphasis). He argues that locally differentiated working-class culture generates alternative, cultural pre-dispositions towards education which are then moulded by the school's own systems of educational differentiation and labelling. A possible example of this is Broderick's throwaway comment, earlier, that '[I] didn't do no work *'cos* I was in all the bottom groups…' (emphasis added). Apparently, being relegated to the school's lowest ability stream combined with an incipient alienated orientation to generate for Broderick a more fully blown anti-school attitude.

The number and type of 'frames of reference' that might be displayed by pupils in a given context will reflect the different forms of local, working-class culture, the recent socio-economic history of the place, internal school systems and, we would add, the

consequences of special policy directives (e.g. the provision of financial incentives to 'stay on'). Brown's study identified three main forms: a 'positive', normative acceptance of school (typical of those pupils his informants described as 'swots'); a 'negative', alienated rejection (the 'rems') and, between them, an alienated but instrumental orientation to school ('the ordinary kids'). According to Brown, the theoretical and empirical significance of this latter group was missed by Willis in his fascination with 'the lads' and their more obvious cultural resistance to the school. Brown's 'ordinary kids' mixed a discourse of 'school irrelevance' with view that 'getting on' after school required an instrumental engagement with education.

Brown's critique resonates with the findings of our own study. It helps us grasp in a more nuanced way the different cultural forms of '*being* in school and *becoming* adult' (1987: 31, original emphasis) that exist in East Kelby and the provenance of these in relation to local working-class culture and history and the changing structure of opportunities perceived by young people (of which more later). In returning to Brown's book during the writing of this paper, we were struck by the uncanny similarity between the Rems' accounts of educational disaffection and those presented here. The contours and details of their narratives were virtually identical, despite being separated by several hundred miles, nearly twenty years and some rather important socio-economic changes in the interim (Brown's study was undertaken in South Wales in the early 1980s). We consider the significance of this observation in conclusion.

At least some of our narratives of school experience also seemed similar to those of Brown's 'ordinary kids'. In fact, much of what our interviewees said about school can be understood in terms of the competition, played out day to day in the class room, between a generally alienated but instrumental orientation to school and a complete disengagement from its formal purposes and strictures. The choice to 'get your head down' and make personal effort toward academic progress was balanced against strong informal sanctions in the opposite direction. Those who worked hard in class, completed homework or revised for exams risked 'getting tortured' (at worst, severe bullying and exclusion from friendship groups). Being 'a swot' was an identity to be avoided, suggesting that - in contrast to Brown's findings - *any* display of educational engagement was treated as signalling conformist acceptance of the school deal.

Consequently, saving face amongst peers group was often viewed as more important than striving to achieve higher GCSE grades:

> Claire: It's peer pressure as well. You wanna have a laugh and a joke and you don't wanna be the swot of the class, 'cos they're doing all the work.
> Emma: Yeah, 'cos you just get tortured. You'd just get tortured at school. It's hard at school, isn't it?
> Claire: The people like that had no friends.
>
> Claire (20, non-employed mother) and Emma (25, non-employed mother).

Going by these accounts, oppositional pupil cultures were wide-spread and held a powerful claim over the social identities developed by young people in and towards school. The efforts of the school or pro-school pupil groups to co-opt behaviour towards academic goals was weak in comparison:

> [School] was alright when I first started. I just started mixing with the wrong people, experiencing drugs about 13/14…//…I mean, I was stood outside the Headmaster's office all the time…Smoking, fighting, nicking out of lessons, everything. I just didn't take no notice of the rules or nowt…I just wanted to be like the others, you know what I mean? Just like a little gang that used to knock about together: if they done it, you done it.
>
> Adam (20, inmate of Young Offender Institute).

Several interviewees claimed [5] that they had wanted to work harder at school but found this difficult given the low level disruption of learning caused by the implicit imperative to 'mess about' and the informal sanctions operated against those seen to be bowing to the formal school demand of academic work: 'there was a couple of us in our class who just wanted to do work, but like you get all that, don't you? "Swot, swot!" and you get yourself tortured' (Allan, 21, non-employed). Significantly for our broader research interests, 'inclusion' in the formal life of the school could mean effective 'exclusion' from informal friendship groups. It was not just young men who described this insistence on 'messing around' and 'having a laugh'. Although national

level-trends and debates would predict clear gender differentiation in forms of educational orientation and achievement (Coffey, 2001), there was little evidence here to suggest that young women were pushing ahead of young men in terms of academic achievement or adopting notably more instrumental attitudes to study.

We are not convinced, however, that pupils' cultural orientations to school are as stable as implied in Brown's analysis. Sometimes the same individuals recounted narratives of school which contained episodes of *both* instrumental engagement and complete disaffection, occasionally reversing the sequence of such episodes that would be predicted by other studies. That is, some of our informants described a process of instrumental accommodation in the latter years of compulsory schooling, following earlier disengagement. Others were currently attending Further Education College after earlier, negative school experiences:

> Nobody was learning owt, 'cos everybody was still messing about and stuff. But some of us, like, we got into year 10 and 11 then we started to settle down and, still a bit of talking here and there but…

> Samantha (16, college student).

Those who saw the instrumental rationale of education but simultaneously felt the countervailing pressure of counter-school peer groups faced difficult choices. Walking a line between them was virtually impossible. Rarely were young people confident enough to assert their commitment to school over the risk of being 'tortured'. Leanne was one exception:

> When they [friends] started nicking off, like quite a lot, I was going into my 4th year and it was an important year for me, so I just said 'No, I'm staying'. They used to ask me every day, 'Are you nicking off?'. I said 'No, I'm going into school today'. 'Oh, you snob!'. I said 'I have to'…// …It didn't bother me, 'cos I had, by this time, I had loads of friends so like one friend wouldn't matter losing…

> Leanne (16, recent school leaver).

Although Leanne's case was unusual, even here we see the importance attached to popular opinion and friendships in school. She explains her ability to resist the cajolery of truants *because* of her attachment to a new, wider friendship group that remained committed to school. This extract introduces one of the most obvious consequences of young people's general, negative experiences of schooling, and their attachment to counter-school peer groups in particular: their physical escape from the school. Lack of space disallows a proper discussion of truancy (see MacDonald and Marsh, 2003; Social Exclusion Unit, 1997; Carlen, et al 1992; Osler et al, 2002; Ridge, 2002). In brief, unauthorised absence was reported as being wide-spread by interviewees, nearly half of whom reported having missed school on an extensive and persistent basis. The explanations that truants gave referred to their particular dislikes (e.g. those who were bullied presented this as the sole but compelling reason for their absence). The influence of peer groups was particularly strong and, for some, even overrode their relatively enjoyable if infrequent encounters with school. Finally, a prominent minority discourse contradicted directly the instrumental claims of education: having a good education and possessing GCSE qualifications would *not* necessarily enhance their later job prospects. If little was to be gained from regular attendance, why not truant? Broderick puts it bluntly:

> [My parents] argue about it. Our Neville [his step-father] come home and he'd say 'Hasn't he been to fucking school again?'…He'd just go 'He'll never get a job when he leaves school 'cos he's never there'. *Why*? So if you go to school for a full five years, you're definitely getting a job when you leave? *All that - full of shit – no*!

> Broderick (18, unemployed: his emphasis).

MISSING SCHOOL: REGRETS, CLAIMS & COUNTER-CLAIMS

Towards the end of the interviews we asked young people to look back over their lives and to consider whether they wished they had done anything differently. Typically, interviewees compared their current lives with schooldays. Favourable reflections on schooling itself were rare but, as in other recent studies (e.g. O'Donnell and Sharpe 2000; Osler et al, 2002; Ridge, 2002), our interviewees reminisced

nostalgically about the value of school as a site for making and seeing friends, for passing the time in a (not too) regulated way, for having fun. As Darren put it, 'we used to go to school and have a good laugh, like sit in the class and have a good laugh and that, didn't we?'. Brown (1987) describes how, in comparison with later experiences of unemployment, being in school was valued because it provided opportunities for sociability and 'a sense of social worth, dignity and *predictability*, even though they [were] not academically successful' (1987: 49, our emphasis). With their school days behind them, our informants had encountered a world that seemed less certain, more risky, more serious:

> I still wish I was at school, 'cos now you have to get out, if you're not going to college…//…I have to get out, find a job and it's just hard. You have to make all your own decisions and everything. When, when I was at school, I just got out of bed, got dressed and off and now I just…I wish I was back at school.

> Clare (16, recent school leaver).

School life provided a rhythm to the days and relatively few choices (apart from whether to attend or not). On leaving school, broad, taken-for-granted friendship groups began to peter out. Normally, the post-16 options many had moved into since then - the Youth Training Scheme, the Further Education College, the workplace – did not provide the same opportunities. People – themselves included - came and went too quickly to establish new bonds. Those who were long-term unemployed, single mothers or young offenders had even fewer obvious opportunities for socialising. Occasional meetings in the street or in the Post Office queue, or sharing a prison cell, provided an unsatisfactory replacement. The most poignant expressions of this sense of loss of easier times were given by young men who, at other points in the interview, presented a harder face. Here are three young men, interviewed in Young Offenders Institutions:

> I wish I was back at school – with all my mates and have a good laugh. I don't see many of them in here.

> Richard (20).

People used to say to you that you would miss it [school] when you left, that you'd wish you were back. I ignored them. I used to think 'I hate school'. I was obviously wrong, given how I feel now. I miss waking up in the morning, hearing the bell, going into school. I miss me mates…//…yeah, there's mates and routines in here but it's different. A different set of circumstances.

Gazz (20).

I miss school. I wish I was back there…Why? I don't know. It would be nice to go back, be back there. Be younger again.

Andrew (18).

This sense of loss was combined with a regret for not having worked harder at school and became one of the most regular, predictable responses across the interviews as a whole. The majority seemed to have bought into the orthodox educational contract, at least with the *benefit of hindsight*: working harder at school would have delivered better qualifications which, in turn, would have increased the chances of getting better jobs. This was a message that they had heard often enough from teachers but which had been ignored or questioned by many of them at the time. Numerous recent studies report this same instrumental orientation to the value of educational qualifications amongst British youth (e.g. Evans, 2001; Coffey, 2001; Ball et al, 2000). In one short extract Catherine, a 19 year old, New Deal trainee, describes three competing discourses that ran through many of these interviews before reaching her conclusion ('qualifications have no instrumental value, 'people like me fail anyway', 'qualifications do have instrumental value'):

I didn't think they'd [GCSE qualifications] do me any good and then I thought I'll do crap in it. So I never done 'em but I wish I'd done 'em now…Dunno, they'd help me get a job better, and most jobs want GCSEs.

It would be easy for us to conclude our consideration of this question here, given the hegemonic status that the orthodoxy of educational instrumentalism has achieved in professional and academic thinking *and* the predominance of this sort of resolution in

young people's accounts. The teenage kicks of early school disengagement were now regretted as they faced the difficulties of the post-school world. Looking back from their current vantage points – and trying to understand the course of their lives since school - the majority of young people seemed to conclude that they had been wrong and the teachers right. Only in retrospect were they beginning to see the vocational value of education.

Yet this is not the whole story. Many who declared these sorts of final regrets had earlier in the same interview described their school experiences school in very negative terms and expressly *denied* the relevance of educational qualifications to post-school careers. This is an intriguing conundrum for those of us interested in understanding the subjective engagement of 'socially excluded' young people with their schooling. How do we explain it?

'Brain box, works in a cake shop'.

Firstly, let us consider the counter-claims to the 'education = jobs' equation, a viewpoint strongly held by a significant minority of people. Several referred to individuals who had been amongst the school's high achievers (the 'swots' or 'snobs') but who had since experienced faltering school-to-work careers. Gail described a group of girls who, despite doing well at school, had still found themselves in dead-end, low-paid jobs:

> Well, Caroline - she's on the dole. She was dead brainy and they thought that she was something, she's just on the dole now…//…or if they've got a job they haven't got a good job 'cos one of them, brain box, works in a cake shop. What's *that*? It's not as if she's actually *done* something and gone…I thought she'd go to college and you know and all that, but she isn't, she works in a cake shop in East Kelby!

> Gail (27, non-employed mother: original emphasis).

Similarly, Darren and Broderick describe the current status of one of their school's academic stars:

Darren: It's mad really…//…Cos there's a lad – Timothy Spence - he got 5 A's, I think it was, what was it? 3 A's, 2 A stars?

Broderick: Oh he got all sorts him, didn't he!

Darren: Working in Morrisons now.

Broderick: I know, yeah.

Darren: That's what I mean. He got the best scores, right? And he's working in Morrisons!

Broderick: Packing fruit! [laughing].

Darren (16, unemployed) and Broderick (18, unemployed).

Of course, this perspective may simply be part of a popular rhetoric that serves to justify individuals' previous misbehaviour in school and their subsequent lack of labour market progress. If even the best qualified, hardest working pupils can be presented as 'failing' later, what point is there in striving for academic success, particularly when this would carry the cost of working against the normative pressures of school-based peer groups?

Because ours was not a statistically representative sample of school-leaving cohorts we are unable to directly assess the effect of GCSE pass rates on later outcomes. One method of investigating these questions, though, is to consider the post-school careers of those with the highest levels of school qualifications (i.e. those six interviewees who passed 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C), against those of the majority who appeared to have no (n. 34) or lower levels of qualification (n. 48) [6]. To what extent *does* the orthodox educational deal work for young people in East Kelby?

There is some, albeit limited evidence that higher educational attainment was associated with more conventional school-to-work careers. All six of those with 'successful' GCSE outcomes stepped from school into a full-time Youth Training scheme or college course and all but one were so engaged until the age of 18 (but usually not on the original scheme or course: there was a lot of switching between courses). All of them gained further qualifications as a result (e.g. GCSE re-sits, NVQs, A levels). Overall, though, there was remarkable similarity between the longer-term post-school careers of these six and the rest. *All* informants reported

erratic, complex and economically marginal transitions, consisting of training and education courses of mixed quality, spells of unemployment and episodic engagement with usually low paid, low skilled and insecure jobs (MacDonald and Marsh, 2001). In scanning the current labour market destinations of the whole sample it would be impossible to identify those six who had achieved the most 'success' at school: their transitions and outcomes were too similar to those with no/ low educational qualifications.

CONCLUSION: CONTINUITIES IN EDUCATIONAL DISENGAGEMENT

Young people's positive reflections on school were limited to nostalgic memories of easier times, free of the risks and uncertainties they faced afterwards. These were weighed against recollections of discouraging teachers, the perceived pointlessness of the curriculum, the sense that people like them were not an educational priority, the torments of those who were bullied and powerful peer sanctions against school engagement. Tales of school were recounted with the resilient tone of the 'taken-for-granted'; a weary, sometimes jocular and occasionally questioning acceptance that this was their lot. Anger was rare. We are aware, of course, that we are presenting a depressingly familiar account of working-class educational disaffection. Why spend time reporting all this?

Firstly, continuity in social experience can be intriguing in its own right, especially where this is set in a markedly different socio-economic context to that which helped explain working-class 'failure' in education previously. Willis's (1977) explanation hinged on the cultural correspondence between inherent, class-based tastes, masculine counter-school cultures and – crucially - later destinations in 'real', manual, working-class jobs. Youth unemployment in the 1980s and '90s had a severe impact on the structure of opportunities facing all working-class youth and O'Donnell and Sharpe (2000: 45) suggest 'it no longer made sense [for them] to adopt the cocksure attitude to job prospects of the lads of Willis's study'. By the time of Brown's study (1987:174), the closing down of routes through post-school employment to 'respectable' working-class adulthood was beginning to undermine the instrumental orientation of 'ordinary kids' to school:

The material bases of the frames of reference exhibited by the ordinary kids (and rems) can now be seen to reflect past processes rather than current practices. It is making it increasingly difficult for the ordinary kids to see why they should continue to 'make an effort' in school if it is no longer the basis for personal survival in the labour market.

Moving forward in time we think we see in these accounts from East Kelby further evidence of the weakening hold that this form of 'ordinary' working-class, instrumentalism has on young people's orientations to school. This frame of reference seemed less common than in Brown's study and less capable of withstanding the counter-claims of a more disaffected, disruptive point of view that directly contested the 'education = jobs' equation; a point of view that runs against most studies in this field but which our, admittedly imperfect research, showed to have some merit. There was little substantial difference observable between the post-school careers of the most and least qualified.

Following Brown, and as we argue elsewhere (MacDonald and Marsh, 2001 and forthcoming), this can be understood in relation to the changing structure of opportunities that await school-leavers in their localities. As Jeffery and McDowell make clear in their introduction to this volume, place is crucial in understanding the ways that different sections of the youth population make transitions to adulthood. O'Donnell and Sharpe (2000: 46) found that few expressed 'the contempt for education' typical of Willis's 'lads' or Brown's 'rems'. The difference between their findings (from London) and our own is possibly explained - in part - by the relative employment opportunities available to working-class youth in these two places. The contemporary paucity as opposed to historical abundance of decent, working-class jobs in East Kelby has undermined the traditional educational contract that served to incorporate the majority of working-class pupils into begrudging acceptance of the instrumental value of schooling. Serving in cake shops or stacking supermarket shelves do not, in their view, require GCSEs. A few of the sample had clung to a belief in school, 'got their head down' and managed to resist pressure to disengage. Several arrived at the instrumental thesis *after* leaving school. These people often appeared to be voicing inchoate attempts to understand their lack of progress in individualist terms ('if only I'd worked harder at school…') (Evans et al, 2001). The

uncertainties and hardships of post-school life bred nostalgic memories of school days and after all, they kept hearing 'the qualifications = jobs' mantra repeated by college tutors and YT trainers. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) call this the 'epistemological fallacy': the flux and complexity of contemporary youth transitions engenders subjective feelings of individual agency amongst those stuck in them. Consequently, 'failure' is interpreted as an outcome of an individual's own actions rather than as an experience shared by many in their class position.

We must allow as well that some had, through experience, discovered that qualifications were of use after all. Qualifications are requirements for entry to the plethora of post-16 educational 'options' that now soak up many school-leavers. There is not the room here to delineate the details of the sample's later school to work and other careers (see MacDonald and Marsh, forthcoming) except to reiterate that the possession of educational qualifications appeared to play an at best minor role, by this point in their lives, in the shaping of overall transitions for these young adults. This is best explained by reference to the particularities of this local labour market and the cultural knowledge, tastes and aspirations of this group. Ironically, these interviewees were distinguished not by anti-employment attitudes, as suggested in conservative underclass theory (Murray, 1994), but by *hyper-conventional* views about the value of jobs. That the locality continues to provide them for this age group, albeit now in the form of severely casualised employment that pays no regard to educational credentials, does much to explain the ready abandonment of formal education by East Kelby teenagers and their often dismissive attitude to it.

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Notes

[2] The local statistics quoted in this section are derived from Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit unless otherwise stated.

[3] Our study was not intended to evaluate these initiatives. The majority of the sample had concluded secondary education and had had little direct contact with them. That said, their qualitative accounts of the experience of schooling in this context have some important implications for policies of this sort and we discuss them when appropriate.

[4] For instance, 'they'll put you down…they don't, like, build your confidence up and that, they always say "Oh you're never gonna get a job, you're thick" and stuff like that…' (Paul, 16, YT trainee).

[5] We suspect a degree of post-hoc rationalisation in some accounts of educational underachievement. We did not access young people's accounts of school experiences as they were happening and are unsure whether, at the time, these people were actually keen to work harder. Later we interrogate a theme that was very prevalent across our interviews: a strongly expressed regret for not having worked harder at school.

[6] These levels of qualification are unusually low but comparable to those typically gained in East Kelby schools during this period. Some gave fuzzy responses to our questions about qualifications; hence the word 'appeared'. This partly reflects their embarrassment they felt about the official status of their qualifications: 'oh God! the highest was a C and then they were all Ds and not worth mentioning!' (Claire). Others did not know their results. Roy, for instance, was working by the time they were published. For him, the immediate costs of collecting his results (threatened suspension and loss of pay) outweighed the potential longer-term benefits of knowing them.