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The odyssey: school to work transitions, serendipity and position in the field

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ABSTRACT

Little work on the significance and implications of decision-making has been undertaken since that led by Hodkinson in the 1990s, and the experiences of young people on vocational programmes and their reasons for undertaking them remain under-theorised and poorly understood. Drawing on two narratives from a study exploring young people's motivations for undertaking vocational programmes, this article explores the relationship between their positioning in fields and career decision-making. The article argues that social positioning is significant in its relationship to decision-making, to the way in which young people perceive and construct their careers and to the influence of serendipity on their transitions. Drawing on a range of international studies, the article explores the implications of these findings in terms of young people's future engagement with the global labour market, giving consideration to (dissonant) perceptions of vocational education and training as contributing to economic growth whilst addressing issues of social exclusion and promoting social justice.

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Introduction

The ways in which the transitions of young people articulate with, and are influenced by, structures, systems and individuals remain poorly understood and relatively under-theorised. Policy-makers globally remain resistant to the idea that transitions from school to work may not be straightforward, but variously extended, fractured, precarious and/or troubled in other ways. In addition, the potentially interesting relationships between positions in fields and career decision-making remain unexplored, despite evidence suggesting 'that career styles relate to positions and fields as well as to dispositions, even for the most strategic' (Hodkinson 2008, 10; drawing on Ball et al. [2002] and Bimrose et al. [2008]). This argument is supported by the data on which this article draws, which imply that subtle social class fractions or particular social positioning is significant in its relationship to decision making, the way in which young people perceive and construct their careers, the pathways and trajectories taken by them, and the way in which they exerted their agency through the decision-making process. The article also discusses the implications of serendipity, seeking to provide some of the 'further amplification' that Hodkinson (2008, 9) noted was required, and finds that, consistent with his tentative suggestions, these are influenced by positions and by the field. Further, it suggests that

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serendipity is of greater significance for those young people whose habitus is more transformative than reproductive (Mills 2008, 82). Two key theoretical frameworks are utilised. Firstly, the article draws on the concepts of structure and agency, habitus and field, and capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu, all of which are concerned with inequality in society and thus provide a useful framework for understanding the ways in which young people are constrained and enabled as they seek to navigate transitions from school to the world of work. These concepts also provide the opportunity to develop understandings which avoid 'a polarised explanation focused either on social structures or individual free choice' (Hodkinson 1998, 100), whilst acknowledging the impact that families' capital – social, economic and cultural – has in 'shaping [young people's] educational choices and decision-making processes' (Billett et al. 2010, 476) at a time when 'the boundaries between education and employment are evolving' (Aldous, Sparkes, and Brown 2014, 185). Secondly, the article draws on the theory of careership (Hodkinson 2008; Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996), utilising notions of horizons for action, pragmatically rational decision-making, and career construction, themselves heavily influenced by the work of Bourdieu.

The article also draws on data from a City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development-funded project (see Atkins, Flint, and Oldfield 2011). This qualitative study formed an independently investigated part of a broader, international project, including teams in South Africa and the Netherlands, exploring young people's perceptions of vocational education and training (VET). All three teams utilised common sampling and methodological approaches in order to facilitate international comparisons. Following university ethical approval, four geographically and demographically diverse institutions (two schools and two further education [FE] colleges) with which the university had existing relationships were approached and granted access. Participation of young people was voluntary, and parental consent was obtained for those younger than 18 years old. All individuals and institutions have been anonymised. In England, a group of 15 young people aged between 14 and 24 from each of the sites ($n = 60$), all undertaking either broad vocational or occupational awards, participated in video-recorded focus group interviews. One video-recorded, in-depth, individual interview lasting approximately one hour was also held at each site. The individual interviews had two purposes: to explore some of the issues arising from the focus groups in greater depth; and to provide a means of triangulation. Focus group and individual interviews were fully transcribed and subject to thematic qualitative analysis drawing on work on transitions and careership by, for example, Hodkinson et al. (1996), by Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000a, 2000b), and by Hodkinson (1998, 2008). For the purpose of this discussion, this article focuses on two narratives drawn from the individual interview data. Freddie and David were both representative of other young participants, and their personal narratives are used in the article to offer contrasting examples of the ways in which subtle differences in social positioning influence career decision-making and broader school to work transition experiences. The article does not seek to claim definitive findings. Rather, it utilises Freddie's and David's stories to illustrate findings from the UK study and to build on Hodkinson's (2008) work by making tentative suggestions about the implications of, and relationships between, serendipity, class fractional positioning and the field, in the context of contemporary policy understandings of school to work transitions in the United Kingdom.

Decision-making

Freddie was undertaking a two-year, Level 3 BTEC programme in Engineering at a large inner-city college in the English Midlands. He was from an aspirant, lower-middle-class family and proved adept at drawing on the cultural capital they made available to him. David was undertaking a one-year, Level 2 BTEC programme in information technology (IT) at a large urban college in an impoverished part of the North East of England. He was from a working-class (and work-less) family with little experience of education. His access to those capitals which are valorised in education was limited, and this impacted on his career orientations and decision-making.

Both students made career decisions which were heavily mediated by social class, gender, and serendipity. Connected to this, their decisions also illustrated the cultural capital they had at their

disposal; in particular their stories imply a strong familial influence. In doing so, they are consistent with Hodkinson et al.'s (1996) analysis of three overlapping dimensions of career decision-making. They also show evidence for the influence of positions and dispositions, and of relational forces in the field in which the young men locate themselves. To a lesser extent, both narratives also demonstrate the progressive construction of a career. In addition to reflecting each of the three dimensions of careership (Hodkinson 2008; Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996), Freddie's and David's stories also demonstrate the impact of serendipity, an aspect of careership theory which Hodkinson (2008) has suggested requires further amplification.

Freddie reported that he was the first in his aspirational family 'not to do A levels' (A-levels are a school-leaving qualification in England and Wales, offered in primarily 'academic' subjects and providing access to higher education [HE]). His twin brother was following an A-level route and both planned to pursue careers in engineering. Individual choices and trajectories are highly complex and subject to significant influence by, and interaction with, local job market opportunities (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001; Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996), something that was evident for many of the young people in this study. In Freddie's case, the local jobs market was dominated by a major car manufacturer who offered a small number of elite apprenticeships each year. His interaction with this was, in his own terms, unsuccessful. Two applications to the manufacturer – one at age 16 and one at age 17 – were unsuccessful. He did, however, contrary to his original plans, apply to university to undertake a degree in mechanical engineering – albeit with a foundation year – at a local university, something which was encouraged by his tutors. It is likely that Freddie was more willing to move in this direction because he was already, to some extent, 'embedded' in HE (Ball et al. 2002). Whilst a degree was second best to him, he was developing a different schema about opportunities, as he described the different (articulated as better) career paths offered by the degree in comparison with the apprenticeship. It is, perhaps, significant that his future horizons had gradually moved from apprenticeship to the HE trajectory which had been 'culturally scripted' as he followed a 'well understood and familiarly acceptable [route]' (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000, 71). Despite this, he remained firmly wedded to his conviction that practical experience gained on his BTEC course, and later in his 'year in industry', would ultimately give him an 'edge' in the labour market. Freddie's story exemplifies pragmatic decisions being taken by an agentic young person navigating a transition which is significantly influenced by his position and disposition in terms of both his choice of career and the path he eventually pursues towards it. Serendipity is also evident in this narrative – in Freddie's failure to win the coveted apprenticeship and in the fact that he was able to closely observe the different trajectory being pursued by his twin brother. It is apparent that his decision-making was also influenced by his college tutors. Progression to HE was highly valued in this BTEC programme, perhaps because it was an atypical trajectory. As Freddie reported, 'a lot of people at college tried to look for an apprenticeship; not so many go to university'. In addition to the role of serendipity in Freddie's career decision-making, there are also questions about how and to what extent his college mediated his decision-making and transition to university.

Socially, David was very differently positioned to Freddie. He had left school at age 16 and obtained low-paid, low-skill employment in a local Woolworths. The company had gone into liquidation when David was 19 years old and he had lost his job. He lived in a part of the North East beset by high unemployment. Job opportunities, especially for young people with few credentials, were limited. Thus, he spent the following two years out of work. Circumscribed much more than Freddie, the symbolic capitals to which David did have access had 'restricted transposability' (Moore, 2008, 114) and did not include either the embodied or objectified forms of cultural capital valorised in education. Consequently he lacked the means to explore his educational options – he simply did not know that there were any. He did not know that he could enrol at college at his age (21 at time of interview) or that financial support was available. This demonstrated not only the way in which his horizons for action were constrained, but also, perhaps, helps to explain the reasons why his transition was more profoundly influenced than Freddie's by serendipitous events. David's younger sister had wanted to do a floristry course and asked David for a lift to college. As he waited he fell into conversation with an IT

tutor who told him that courses were available for people his age and ‘convinced me that this [Level 2 BTEC IT] was right for me’, reflecting the role of serendipity in decision-making. David liked the idea of doing a course with ‘no exams’ and of learning on the job, illustrating a degree of pragmatism, but possibly also the ‘progressive construction of a career’ (Hodkinson 2008). He intended to progress to the Level 3 course, recognising that his choice was limited to ‘do Level 3 or get on the dole’.

David’s uncle had told him about the forensic IT experts who were employed by the police force. He aspired to join this elite group ‘catching hackers’ but, like the young people in earlier research (Atkins 2009; Bathmaker 2001), had no role model and was ‘not sure’ of the entry requirements or how to access his idealised career. He acknowledged that he might not achieve this aspiration and subsequently discussed the possibility of lower paid, lower skilled work, such as ‘fixing computers’ or ‘working in a computer shop’, reflecting a degree of pragmatic rationality, as well as notions of idealised and realised dispositions and identities (Colley et al. 2003). In addition, having worked at Woolworths, ‘working in a computer shop’ formed part of a schema, informed by embodied habitus and field, of ‘a job which is right for me’ (Bates 1993). Like Freddie, David recognised that society perceived his BTEC course differently to ‘academic’ programmes. Referring to his friends, he commented that ‘they are not sure what it is; they don’t think it’s very high’. Despite this, his family were ‘pleased’ that he had returned to education. Unlike Freddie, and possibly reflecting subtle differences in class fractions, like earlier generations of young people (Bates 1993, 47; Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000, 66; Atkins 2009, 129–130), David was more concerned with social rather than educational aspects of the programme:

It’s more convenient for where I live. The College is not too far from where I live. And the hours are suitable for me. It sometimes feels that there are not enough hours in the day. That sounds a bit thingy, but there are [not]. It’s not too far from where my friends live. You never get bored. If you don’t want the refectory, you can walk into town. There are always people around us; different departments get their breaks at different times

It is evident that David is a young person significantly ‘influenced by the complexities of the relations of force within a particular field’ (Hodkinson 1998, 103) and ‘heavily circumscribed by class’ (Bloomer 1996, 148) as well as by habitus, and the geographical space in which he is located. The volume and structure of the capital to which he has access is limited in its currency in the labour and education markets. His agency is constrained, mediated and enabled by forces beyond his control: the liquidation of Woolworths, the meeting with a tutor recruiting to a programme, the lack of opportunities in the local labour market, and the nature of opportunities available at his local college.

In contrast, Freddie’s decision-making involved extensive discussions with both his family and his tutors:

My mum and dad gave me advice; I think my mum found the course. I must have spoken to a couple of people, a few of my friends’ dads that work at [car manufacturer]; I certainly spoke to them about the apprenticeship. And definitely my step-dad

Whilst both young men’s lives were subject to mediation by contingent and serendipitous events, David’s decision-making was based on a chance meeting with an IT teacher, reflecting a much more simple choice based on significantly less information. Thus, it is apparent that, in theoretical terms, the interactions between position, field, dispositions and actions all strongly influenced both Freddie’s and David’s decision-making in different ways and to different degrees. Whilst these were not deterministic it was apparent that David, in common with other participants from the lowest class fractions, was significantly more constrained in his decision-making and had less potential for agency than Freddie and their peers from more advantaged class fractions (see also Reubzaet, Romme, and Geerstma 2011, 21). This intra-class variance implies ‘graduations in the formation of habitus between the “well-formed” and the “less well-formed”, which is expressed in their capital configuration’ (Moore, 2008, 114), thus explaining both David’s more restricted access to those capitals which are valorised in education and perhaps also the more significant influence on his transition of serendipity. The interactions also reflect the impact of serendipity in terms of positioning in the field (Hodkinson 2008). For example, many marginalised students take things for granted, rather than recognising ways in which their transitions could be transformed (Mills 2008, 82). Illustrating this point, Freddie did not obtain the coveted apprenticeship but had access to cultural capital that informed his decision-making process. David

lacked access to similar cultural capital, meaning that his decision-making was more significantly mediated by a chance event in a way that would have been unlikely for Freddie.

Young people's future engagement with the global labour market: the implications

A broad range of empirical and theoretical works have, over time, noted the global relationships between skills policies and neo-liberal concepts of a knowledge economy (see, for example, Groener 2000 and McGrath et al. 2004 as quoted in Needham and Papier 2011, 6) and increasingly that these policies are now prevalent across both the developed and developing worlds (see, for example, Aryeetey, Doh, and Andoh 2011, 6). Neoliberal economic policies see VET not as a form of education which is a 'political act' (Apple 2013, 5) or as an activity which serves to initiate young people into 'a worthwhile form of life' (Pring et al. 2009, 10), but primarily as a source of 'work-ready' human capital. According to these discourses, such human capital is endowed with the requisite skills to enter the knowledge economy; however, the same rhetoric exaggerates the size and accessibility of the knowledge economy, ignoring the need for workers in 'routine' employment, generating glamorised discourses around potential employability and selling false hope to young people on low-level, low-value vocational programmes, for whom routine employment is the most likely outcome. In particular, the notion that economic growth will be promoted by workers with particular skills fails to acknowledge that the skills conferred by vocational education, particularly at its lowest levels, are largely low value with limited exchange value in the labour market (Keep 2004, 18–19, 2005, 547–548) or, indeed, in education. David's programme was typical of this, something he showed implicit recognition of when he said 'there must be things I can do; there must be doors it can open', a statement dissonant with his idealised career in forensic IT work.

There is also evidence to suggest that, contrary to policy rhetoric, in advanced economies such as the USA, Europe and Australia, globalisation is 'redistributing employment opportunities and incomes' (Spence 2011) and that the impact of this is different for different groups within individual economies. Such influences have particular implications for Freddie, David and their peers. Firstly, it is apparent that those young people with more restricted access to the symbolic capitals associated with education have particular constraints associated with their socio-spatial positioning. Historic and contemporary global economic developments and changes influence multinationals' investment – or lack thereof – in particular geographical areas, meaning that different types of work are increasingly located in specific areas and increasingly polarised (Pring et al. 2009, 141). Their ability to engage with a global labour market is further constrained by social positioning, and by habitus, both mediated by individuals' 'response[s] to the topography of place in which, and from where, aspirations are ... formed and decisions ... made' (Webb 2014, 16). This was particularly evident for David. His vision of his future was local, close to his family, and moving beyond the area in which he had grown up was inconceivable to him. This locality was a powerhouse of industry at a time when Britain and globalisation might have been synonymous terms, but now has an economy heavily reliant on public-sector employment and which, according to Campos et al. (2011) of the Office for National Statistics, saw amongst the highest rises in unemployment during the recession (32% in the year this fieldwork was conducted). The implications of this for David are likely to be articulation with the 'low-cost, low-specification' economy rather than his idealised high-pay, high-skill career. Although Freddie, differently positioned, hoped to go to university, he was applying to a single local institution and his imagined future saw him working either for the same multinational that had twice rejected him or for the unknown company with which he would spend 'a year in industry'. The orientations to career and work of these young men imply that their ability to engage with the global economy – even for Freddie, whose skills acquisition is likely to be at a high level – will be constrained by geography as well as habitus, supporting Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson's proposition that pragmatically rational career choices are constrained and enabled by external opportunities and personal subjective perceptions (1996, 3). It is also worth noting that the broad field of engineering is increasingly

globalised and competitive, suggesting that Freddie's career prospects locally have the potential to become increasingly precarious over time.

A significant factor in the decision-making processes of these young men was the educational opportunities available to them, and the way in which these were mediated by institutions and serendipity. The small number and competitive nature of apprenticeships in his local area put Freddie on an eventual pathway to HE, albeit via a vocational path which required him to do a foundation year at university. The Level 2 vocational programme undertaken by David had no exchange value in the labour market place, which he recognised, thus leading him to progress to the next level of the same programme. David was explicit about the role of serendipity: 'it's by chance I'm here'. Their stories, similarly to others from the same study, are indicative that, consistent with Hodkinson's (2008, 9) argument, 'neither positional factors nor the forces interacting in the field are deterministic'. It is apparent, however, that whilst not deterministic, these factors are significantly mediated by global economic policy drivers, enacted by governments and mediated by institutions, with structural factors such as funding mechanism and increased youth unemployment, combining with perceived global imperatives for 'skilled' workers, constraining and enabling the horizons for action of young people seeking to navigate productive transitions from school to the labour market. It is also apparent that the constraining and enabling factors are closely aligned with the cultural capital available to each young person. These analyses also imply – but this would need further investigation – that serendipity is of greater influence and significance where young people have more restricted access to the volumes and structures of cultural capital that have most currency in the fields of education and work.

Vocational education: driving global economic growth and ameliorating social exclusion?

A key tenet of VET policy over decades and across governments of different ideologies has been the belief that social justice and a competitive economy can be the twin ends of the same means (Department for Education and Skills 2005, 10, 2006, 1; Department for Education 2011, 1; see also Department for Education/Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013, 26), despite arguments to the contrary (see, for example, Avis 1996, 2007). Concerns about what may loosely be termed the 'social outcomes of learning' have received international prominence since, in 2005, OECD social policy ministers made a move from 'remedial approaches' to 'making work pay', leading to greater concern with learning experiences which might result in integration in the labour market, something also regarded as supporting the 'traditional goal of social justice' (Machin 2006). More recently, global policy rhetoric has conflated social cohesion with 'skills' and 'good' or 'sustainable' jobs (see, for example, Department for Education/Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2014). However, this is inconsistent with UK research which has consistently found that much vocational education is more likely to lead to transient, low-pay, low-skill, 'bad' quality jobs (for example, Atkins 2010; Keep and James 2010, 2012) and lacks clarity about what might constitute either 'sustainable' or 'good' jobs.

Despite acknowledging the need for better quality vocational education in order to address these issues, UK Coalition policy (2010–2015) was only partially successful. The policy focus on higher level vocational education (Bathmaker 2014) in response to the Wolf (2011) review has failed to address the needs of those young people who are not equipped, in terms of credentials or personal skills, to enter higher level vocational programmes such as apprenticeships and who do not meet the criteria for the 'supported internships' (Department for Education 2012) introduced to meet the needs of young people with special educational needs. The 'gap' between the two has recently been filled by 'traineeships' which include 'work preparation training' (Department for Education/Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013, 5) alongside 'high quality' work experience and functional skills, for a period of not more than six months. Whilst there are valid arguments, such as those put forward by Wolf (2011, 53), that high-quality work experience makes a young person more likely to

gain employment, it is also true to say that, during an extended global recession, and given structural changes in the labour market discussed by MacDonald and Marsh (2005), for many young people this type of work experience will merely form a phase in an ongoing 'churn' as they move between different forms of engagement with employment, education and welfare agencies. Further, the narrow range of eligibility for traineeships excludes many young people, leaving them with only the option of undertaking low-status broad vocational qualifications such as that on which David was enrolled. Given the limited jobs in the youth labour market, the low value and low status of such programmes and the significant funding cuts in FE – the impact of which are not yet fully realised – this implies that a consequence of this policy approach is that those young people in the most challenging circumstances with the most limited social and economic capital will continue to be disproportionately constrained in both the education and labour markets as they seek to navigate productive transitions from school to work.

Such neoliberal economic (and lifelong learning) policies also articulate two dissonant models of youth (Billett et al. 2010): as a problem and as a resource. Both objectify youth and define them as a homogenised 'other' failing to acknowledge individual selves and lives. The deficit model perceives youth – and, implicitly, working-class youth – as a problem to be solved, a characterisation first noted over three decades ago (Clarke and Willis 1984, 1) and forming a stark contrast to an alternative 'utilitarian' (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000, 146) conceptualisation of youth as a resource or form of human capital. Freddie and David might be regarded as personifying these characterisations – David in a deficit model of unemployed, low-attaining youth on a low-level VET programme, and Freddie as preparing to enter HE and later embrace the knowledge economy in a skilled and professional career. Lifelong learning policy rhetoric, particularly in the United Kingdom, attempts to bring the two into alignment, by providing 'opportunities' for problematic youth, which, it is argued, will enable them to access the high-pay, high-skill economy, thus becoming re-conceptualised as youth as human capital. These discourses are consistent with global policy rhetoric promoting 'the need for young people to engage actively in and manage their own learning' (Evans 2002 and Stokes and Wyn 2007 as quoted in Billett et al. 2010, 475). This would seem to imply a parallel need to 'engage actively in' and negotiate their own transitions, irrespective of how problematic these might be, and irrespective of the limitations on the 'opportunities' available to individual young people such as David.

The perception that young people can all effectively manage their transitions assumes that all have similar access to high levels of cultural capital, and maximum potential for agency as well as the 'dispositions, subjectivities and attitudes that are associated with the capacity to be good navigators through new economies' (Wyn 2005, 218). It also assumes that young people follow 'ladder-like' (Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996), planned trajectories, and there is an absence of consideration of those transitions which are variously extended, fractured, difficult, troubled and/or precarious. As well as 'othering' and homogenising certain (working-class) groups of young people, the deficit model of youth holds them personally responsible for their failure to participate in a neoliberal knowledge economy (see, for example, Atkins 2009; Billett et al. 2010; Clarke and Willis 1984) and applies particular characterisations to them, such as disengaged and disaffected, which, as well as being disproportionately applied to 'the poor and ethnic minorities, confers an inferior status on those [so] labelled, viewing them as being morally inferior' (Apple 2013, 50–51), thus problematising the individual and not the system. The unchanging tenor of policy discourse over time, not to mention the failure of governments to secure social justice and a high-functioning economy, would seem to suggest either that youth is a problem beyond the resources of generations of policy-makers, or that the self-same policy-makers are suffering from a global failure of 'policy memory' (Higham and Yeomans 2007) at the highest levels or possibly seeking to divert attention from any critical consideration of a VET system which obscures the existence of systemic and structural hegemonies confining young people to an allotted place in life, constraining their individual agency and replicating social class and other social inequities.

Troubling transitions in troubled times

It is apparent that the two young men profiled in this article both experienced transitions which were, to different extents, uncertain, troubled and troubling. Freddie was waiting to hear whether his application for a single programme at a single university had been successful. If so, he was destined for an extended transition, including a foundation year at university (meaning that, including a 'year in industry', it would take him five years to achieve a bachelor's degree). If not, his horizons would become much more limited. David's already fractured transition promised to become extended as he committed himself to three years of study in FE in the hope that this would confer skills he could exchange in the labour market. Both transitions were also precarious. Both young men depended on financial capital generated by themselves or their families in order to facilitate their educational pathways, and on the availability of appropriate externally located opportunities in the labour market at the end of that transition. There were, however, significant differences between the two in terms of their decision-making processes and capacity, concepts of career and broader transitions from school to work, which appeared to bear a relationship to their social class positioning that endows them with particular volumes and structure of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 108–109) which may, or may not, be valorised in education. In addition, this positioning appeared to bear a relationship to the extent to which each young man's decision-making had been influenced by the serendipitous events he had encountered during his transition.

Hodkinson (2008) has argued that a weakness of some transition studies is the focus on working-class youth and suggests that the impact of relations between forces in the field may be very different for middle-class students. Freddie and David's stories imply that although all trajectories are complex, those that most nearly match the straightforward and 'ladder-like' policy concept are likely to be those of young people with greater access to valorised cultural capitals. These young people, like Freddie, may, however, have their potential for agency constrained in other ways, by familial expectations of particular educational pathways and careers, and it is possible that those constraints are more significant amongst certain class fractions. This is an area that warrants further exploration. David's story, again consistent with Hodkinson's research, implies that more marginalised young people are at greater mercy of serendipity and less likely to make the successful transitions they aspire to in terms of 'a job [that you do] for the rest of your life'.

Policies, and the rhetoric and discourse emanating from policy, direct young people into particular forms of education, mediating and influencing decision-making in that decisions are justified and rationalised in the context of discourses around achievement and attainment. These discourses of justification are grounded in an ideologically based, neo-liberal rhetoric in which is embedded 'an ethic of individual achievement based supposedly on merit' (Apple 2013, 32) and driven by perceived economic imperatives. These are discourses from which consideration of the implications of influence of field and habitus are absent, which privilege particular forms of academic achievement and make explicit and implicit assumptions about those young people whose educational pathway or credentials might be described as 'practical' or 'vocational'. Such assumptions are based on a perception that certain young people, implicitly working-class young people, are 'suited' to different forms of curriculum which remain 'divided and divisive' (Tomlinson 1997, 1), providing disparate and differently valued pathways to different types of labour and unequal life chances.

Vocational education continues to be held in low esteem in England, and, at the lowest levels, fails to articulate with work entry (Keep 2014). Despite the recent policy focus on higher level vocational education in the United Kingdom, issues remain about the relative esteem of different pathways into HE, the familiarity – or not – of admissions tutors with vocational qualifications, the hierarchy between different types of university and 'HE in FE', and the preparedness of young people who have accessed HE via a vocational route, all of which have potential implications for a young man like Freddie, seeking to enter HE from an FE context (see Pring et al. [2009, 149–167] for an extended discussion). For young people like David, the possibilities remain limited to low-value VET with minimal exchange value in the educational and labour market places. The likelihood of the government addressing this

in terms of changed (and possibly more honest) rhetoric or different curricula approaches (see Atkins 2009, 2010, 2013), which might add ‘other cultural capital to [young people’s] repertoires’ (Delpit 1992 as quoted in Mills 2008, 85) and ‘legitimate locally produced knowledge’; 2008, 84) rather than the atomised and ‘profane’ (Marx [1843] 2012) knowledge associated with VET, seems remote.

Concluding remarks

David and Freddie both navigated a process of decision-making fraught with uncertainties, and it was evident that for David, in common with the most marginalised young people in the wider study, ‘career decisions [were more] unstable or transitory in nature and [less] predictable’ (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000, 15) than those of more advantaged peers such as Freddie, who was better able to utilise the greater volume of cultural capital at his disposal. This may, in part, be reflected in the fact that despite a majority of the young people who participated in the study being aware of the national careers guidance services, and many having experienced some contact with it, normally at the 16+ transition, most, like Freddie and David, had sought advice from families, friends and teachers with which to inform their decision-making. This would seem to suggest, that despite attempts by the UK government to ‘target’ the most vulnerable as they make their transitions, similarly to Australia, ‘the needs of “at-risk” students such as David who may have limited access to the forms of capital offering the best support for these negotiations are not well addressed [by policy]’ (Billett et al. 2010, 472). It was also apparent that there is a significant dislocation between policy rhetoric implying straightforward, rational trajectories and the realities of the students’ own worlds, in which their ‘horizons for action’ are both constrained and enabled by external opportunities and personal subjective perceptions (Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996, 3).

There is also an issue about the extent to which ‘institutional habitus’ (Smyth and Banks 2012) and responses to policy enactment and to economic imperatives, which influence the availability and nature of post-school educational opportunities, are mediating the transitions of young people in terms of their horizons for action. Institutions, influenced by policy at macro level, but also local pressures and the ethos arising from their history and management, have a significant impact on determining what is possible for young people in terms of the educational opportunities they can access. Recent austerity measures have placed particular pressures on institutions, suggesting that young people’s choices are contingent upon and subject to serendipity in new and different ways to those who participated in Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson’s (1996) seminal study, and possibly than to those young people who have participated in more recent work on transitions which took place prior to the economic collapse of 2008, and to which Hodkinson (2008) has referred in his own, more recent work. For example, recent significant cuts in FE funding, concomitant with changes to funding mechanisms, increasingly privilege apprenticeships and other ‘elite’ forms of vocational education (for which many young people, such as David, do not meet the entry criteria) and have significantly altered the education and training options available to young people as colleges and training providers have rationalised and withdrawn provision.

This article has focused on the narratives of just two young men. Although drawing on a broad range of international literature, the studies cited were limited in that most merely offered a snapshot of a moment in time. A longitudinal study, ideally across international boundaries and exploring wider transitions amongst young people from a broad range of class and cultural backgrounds, is needed to provide a firm base for theoretical development in this area. In particular, this would facilitate investigation of three key issues raised in this article: the need for a more nuanced understanding of the significance and implications of decision-making, the need for a similar understanding of the role and relative influence of serendipity in decision-making specifically, and transitions more generally, and a need for an understanding of how decision-making is mediated by educational institutions – particularly in the light of their micro and macro responses to global and local policy initiatives and imperatives – and by structures such as careers services, families and others, and the implications of this for how young people exert their agency and construct their careers. In order to achieve this,

such a study would need to encompass young people from a broad range of cultural, class and class fractional boundaries.

Finally, whilst the analyses put forward in this article imply a need for further research into and around transitions, they also raise serious questions about the way in which VET courses, particularly at lower levels, articulate with the labour market, and the implications this has for working-class youth. It also raises questions about FE's perceived core aim of social justice. To what extent, if at all, can this be realised in a policy context that privileges economic imperatives over educational imperatives, and certain types of knowledge and education above others, and denies 'valuable' knowledge to mainly working class young people? There are alternatives. As Mills (2008, 87) argues, the transformative potential of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital implies possibilities for teachers and institutions to improve educational outcomes for marginalised young people.

The dual conceptualisations of youth as deficit and resource discussed in this article are both utilitarian and concerned only with individuals as forms of capital. The conceptualisations of FE as producing this capital imply that, rather than social justice, the core aim of the sector is now to meet the perceived economic demands of a global economy. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, 164) have suggested, this merely renders the sector more adept at concealing its social function of legitimating class differences behind its technical function of producing qualifications, and supports Watts and Bridges (2006, 143) argument that 'the twin agendas of social inclusion and economic development lead to the reformation rather than the resolution of injustice'.

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