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Raising the Participation Age:

Lived experiences of extended participation within low-level vocational education and training

PhD Sociology

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Abstract

The school-to-work transition has been a key area of analysis for sociologists of youth and education, with much attention given to the exclusion and marginalisation of disadvantaged young people. While post-16 participation has been the norm for some time, the introduction of Raising the Participation Age (RPA) has created a new dynamic in the context of Further Education (FE), by requiring extended participation in education or training to the age of 18. Primarily concerned with reducing the number of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET), and enhancing employability, RPA has implications for what set of experiences lay between inclusionary and exclusionary school-to-work transitions.

However, rich accounts of young people's experiences of extended participation in education and training are absent from recent literature. Such accounts are vital in understanding how young people are responding to the growing centrality of education for labour market opportunities, and to the intensification of policy aimed at extending and expanding educational participation. This ethnographic study examines the lived experiences of young people in low-level vocational education and training (VET), as they are the group most precariously placed on the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

The two-year, multi-site ethnography shows that young people in low-level VET, although not NEET, still experience multiple forms of non-participation. The research revealed how deficit constructions of young people, based on notions of disengagement, implicitly and explicitly constrained opportunity and agency. Specifically, the findings highlight how factors such as teacher practices, learning cultures, and school and college policies all played a role in entrenching positions of marginality. All of which raises questions about the efficacy and value of RPA and participation in low-level VET.

The thesis concludes that, to more fully understand the processes and experiences which disrupt or (re)produce marginalisation and exclusion, a more complex and nuanced conceptualisation of (non)participation is required.

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Chapter 1: Introduction context and background

Introduction

It is widely accepted that there have been significant changes to patterns of educational participation in Britain over the last twenty years (Furlong 2005; Ainley and Allen 2010; Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014), with participation in post-compulsory education and training becoming the norm some time ago (Furlong 2005). Despite this being the case, 2015 saw the full implementation of the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) policy in England, extending the required period of participation in education or training to the age of 18.

Fundamentally concerned with the school-to-work transitions of those 'for whom school has been unrewarding' (Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014), and those 'at risk' of being NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) (Maguire 2015b), the new policy context created by RPA has particular implications for those on the margins of the education and training market. Concerns around NEETism have tended to centre on the creation of a 'lost generation' (Ainley and Allen 2010) and issues of social exclusion (Thompson 2011), stemming from the notion that being NEET would result in deleterious forms of long-term non-participation (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Shildrick and Macdonald 2007; Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014).

RPA is premised on the notion that an extended period of participation will enhance employability (Spielhofer et al. 2007; Atkins 2013) in an era of increased positional competition within the youth labour market (Brown 2013); the central assumption of the RPA policy being that an extended period of participation in education or training will result in the acquisition of new skills and qualifications (Simmons 2008; Maguire 2013). However, linkages between extended participation and improved employability are problematised by research proposing the emergence of an opportunities trap, whereby labour market positions have failed to keep up with the demands of an ever-more educated population (Brown 2003). It is suggested that the result has been an intensification in positional competition for the best educational opportunities, in a bid to gain a competitive edge (Brown 2013). In this environment of increased competition, the problem for RPA is that those targeted by the policy are pushed into

the marginal learning spaces of low-level vocational education and training, and 'employability' programmes (Simmons and Thompson 2011).

With a disparity of esteem persisting between academic and vocational education (Wolf 2011; Hodgson and Spours 2014), RPA will arguably only create new divisions, with the relegation of the most marginalised learners into an 'underclass' within post-16 structures (Ainley and Allen 2010; Williamson 2005; Brockmann and Laurie 2016). The dilemma created by RPA is thus how to ensure a period of extended participation does not simply further entrench positions of marginality. Expressing this concern in the lead up to the implementation of RPA, Russell, Simmons, and Thompson (2011a) comment:

> Under existing legislation, participation in education or training will become compulsory until the age of 18 by 2015, making even more acute the question of how best to engage those young people for whom schooling has been unrewarding (pp.478-479)

Such concerns lie at the heart of this study. This thesis is about how young people on the margins of education and training experience, make sense of, and navigate an extended period of participation.

Making sense of 'participation'

The term participation does not in itself hold any great complexity. In its most basic form, participation refers simply to the action of taking part. However, when used in analyses of school-to-work transitions and education, participation takes on a range of new applications. Within the fields relevant to this study – youth, social policy, education, and transitions – there are numerous levels, forms, and conceptualisations of participation.

On a macro level, policy denotes participation as a status relating to inclusion in an officially recognised form of education, training, or employment. This is set in contrast to non-participation, which forms one half of politicaleconomic formulation of social inclusion/exclusion (Fergusson 2014; Hayton 1999). On a meso level, participation can be viewed in terms of school and college cultures practices, and policies around what constitutes participation and how young people achieve these expectations. In these

contexts, participation is often associated with behaviour, engagement, (academic) performance, and effort/attitudes. On a micro level, classroom dynamics and teacher-student interactions are key to interpretations of participation. Participation can be understood as a function of how pupil participation is organised within the classroom (Hammersley 1990) and the nature of classroom encounters (Ball 1984a) where all of the macro and meso aspects of participation play out in practice.

Traversing macro, meso, and micro levels are discourses of participation. Using a Foucauldian perspective on discourse and power/knowledge (Foucault 1980; Foucault 1991, Crowther 2000) suggests the discourse of participation is owned by professionals and policy makers, creating a power differential between those who apply it, practitioners, and those who it is applied to, learners. The knowledge around participation is unequally distributed, so the expectations placed on learners, and what constitutes their participation, are hidden from them. Discourses of participation can therefore be seen as a way of shaping inequalities as some groups have more access to the required knowledge to others, as well as mechanisms for exerting control.

Furthering the link between participation and control, the field of development studies explores the nature of consultation, consent, and voice in affording control to groups within developing countries. In this context, participation describes the extent to which people's views and voices are heard and acted upon authentically, as opposed to tokenistically (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Following a similar theme, the field of childhood and youth studies relates participation to the ways in which children and young people are involved in decision-making in their lives and their relative level of empowerment-disempowerment (Hart 1992; Hart 2008). At the heart of this is whether children and young people are able to implement their decisions and display autonomy, or whether their options are dictated to them by others.

In the context of voluntarism within the community sphere, Woolvin and Hardill (2013) propose a spectrum of participation which encompasses diverse forms of participation. In their conceptualisation, Woolvin and Hardill suggest there is potential to move between forms of participation throughout the life course (Woolvin and Hardill 2013, p.282), thus depicting participation as a more fluid set of statuses. This is a useful perspective as it provides a framework for conceptualising participation as dynamic

and, therefore, as multiple statuses, not a single status. That is to say participation should not be viewed as a single descriptor relating to a common, uniform set of characteristics, but as an amalgamation of characteristics defined by social, cultural, and historical context.

In summary, participation is complex and multifaceted, with its meaning heavily influenced by the context within which it is used. While the thesis largely utilises the term as a status relating to participation/non-participation, it is often done with nuance in reference to the wider set of interpretations and applications outlined above.

Research focus

This thesis examines the school-to-work transitions of young people experiencing 'extended' participation in the context of RPA – those young people who may have otherwise become NEET, or attempted 'risky' fast-track transitions into the labour market at the end of compulsory schooling (Spielhofer *et al*. 2007; Jones 2009; Ainley and Allen 2010). The study is therefore not an explicit investigation of RPA but an examination of inclusionary and exclusionary transitions, taking place against a backdrop of an intensified focus on young people's participation in post-16 education and training. Of specific interest are the transition experiences of young people navigating low-level VET, as they are most exposed to the forces of marginalisation and positional competition (Atkins 2013).

Adopting an ethnographic/interactionist approach, the thesis explores young people's lived experiences of participation over time as they move from school into, and through, various modes of post-16 education and training. Particular attention is given to developing a deeper understanding and richer conceptualisation of participation. Specifically, how lived experiences of participation transform, disrupt, or maintain dispositions towards, and positions within, learning. Such analysis aims to move beyond a simple participation/non-participation binary, which denotes an arbitrary status of being included or excluded in relation to officially recognised school-to-work pathways (Maguire 2015b).

It is proposed that experiences of participation cannot be dislocated from the learning environments within which they take place. This study therefore utilises concepts of horizons for action (Hodkinson 1996), learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000a), and imagined futures (Ball, Macrae and Maguire 1999), to locate participation within sociological analyses of learning and transition. Additionally, Bourdieu's habitus, capital, and field are key tools used in the above concepts to examine how young people perceive, respond to, and navigate participation within the field of education.

With the exception of a few studies examining lived experiences of vocational education and training (VET) (for example, Atkins 2010; Atkins 2013; Atkins 2016; Lawy 2010) and work preparation programmes such as Entry to Employment (E2E) (Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011a; Simmons and Thompson 2011; Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014; Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014), contemporary literature and research has tended to privilege the more quantitative, empiricist youth transitions studies over the more enlightening and theoretically driven ethnographic studies (Miles 2000; MacDonald and Marsh 2005).

With a growing concern around the issue of youth unemployment, political and academic attention has turned to the policy-focused investigation of school-to-work transitions (MacDonald and Marsh 2005), which places an emphasis on social problems and young people's structural situations. This is reflected in official discourses of young people's post-16 participation with the language of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and EET (in Education, Employment or Training) symbolising the construction of a participation/non-participation binary in defining young people's statuses. It is also suggested that participation/non-participation has become the object of governance, whereby the development of various state sponsored interventions place responsibility for participation/non-participation at the micro level of practice and interaction (Fergusson 2013).

In the context of this research, an ethnographic investigation will offer an insight into the mechanisms and cultures that act to shape and influence the complex and differentiated nature of young people's educational participation. Indeed Hammersley (1999) suggests that researching educational experiences allows the focus to move beyond simply the outputs of education and towards the process itself. This is

especially pertinent in light of research which suggests that NEET status and non-participation 'is not primarily a problem of transition from school, but rather a more long-term problem about engagement with and attachment to learning and labour markets' (Hutchinson, Beck and Hooley 2015, p.709). The nature of young people's participation, and how this affects their dispositions towards and position within learning, is thus a vital aspect of school-to-work transitions.

This thesis therefore problematises the overly simplistic nature of participation as an explanatory term for young people's interaction with, and status within, the post-16 transition. It takes the language and discourse of participation and critiques it through an analysis of young people's lived experiences of education and training, in doing so illuminating what participation means to young people and how it plays out in practice. By following the journeys of three cohorts, each at different stages of the post-16 transition, the research is able to examine multiple aspects of educational experiences.

In order to achieve this, the following research strategy has been employed:

- A multi-site ethnography observing, and participating in, a range of school and further education and training environments, including:

  - Year 11 groups in three secondary schools.

  - Five classes in a further education college across a range levels - from foundation to level 3- all within vocational subjects IT, Health and Social Care and Travel and Tourism.

  - Tracking three cohorts across their post-16 transitions

Cohort 1 was approaching the end of year 11 and compulsory schooling at the start of the fieldwork. An initial 10 young people from across the three schools were tracked from April 2015 to June 2017. This meant young people were tracked from the end of year 11 to the end of their required participation as set out by RPA.

A second cohort of 10 young people from across the three schools were tracked from September 2015 to June 2017 (the start of school year 11 to further education and

training). This cohort was therefore tracked from the beginning of year 11 at school to the end of their first year in further education and training.

A third cohort of 15 young people were tracked from September 2015 to June 2017. This cohort contained a mixture of 16 and 17 year olds, some starting their first year of further education, some starting their second year. This meant some were tracked until their 18th birthday and the end of their requirement to be in education and training, while others were tracked beyond as they stayed in education or moved into employment.

Rationale and focus

The school-to-work transition has been a key area of analysis for sociologists of youth and education with much attention given to the exclusion and marginalisation of disadvantaged young people (for example, Bynner and Parsons 2002; Shildrick and Macdonald 2007; Gorard and Smith 2007; Smyth, Mcinerney and Fish 2013), illuminating the inequalities and tensions inherent in education systems and labour markets.

The language and discourse of participation espoused by RPA is however a relatively new addition to the education arena, moving away from a focus on structural and exogenous determinants of transitions towards individual and endogenous factors (Fergusson 2013). In this vein, the issue of non-participation (particularly in the context of education and training) has become associated with disengagement (Fergusson 2013; Simmons and Thompson 2013; Strathdee 2013), reducing analyses of youth transitions to simple assumptions of participation meaning engagement and non-participation meaning disengagement. Thus, it could be proposed that, in a period of fragmented and extended youth transitions (Goodwin and O'Connor 2007; Furlong 2009; Roberts S 2011; Honwana 2014), the binaries of exclusion/ inclusion, marginalisation/ participation and disengagement/ engagement are unsuitable for describing 'new hybridised, ambivalent forms of participation and non-participation (Fergusson 2004).

By setting out participation as a requirement, RPA intensifies this issue as non-participation becomes framed as an active resistance to the social norm and as in stark

contrast to being included and engaged in post-16 education and training. Indeed, contemporary policy conceptions of educational participation provide little recognition of the role factors external to young people play in shaping school-to-work transitions (Fergusson 2013). Young people are viewed as rational decision-makers who actively accept or reject opportunities to acquire human capital and enhance their employability (Archer and Yamashita 2003a). Non-participation is subsequently framed as a calculated disengagement with education. This thesis therefore aims to develop a more complex and nuanced conceptualisation of participation; one which reflects the experiences of young people on the margins of education and training and the interaction between subjective and objective dimensions of their post-16 transitions.

Elaborating further, the focus of this study is to capture how young people navigate and respond to participation on the margins of education. In doing so the thesis utilises a range of conceptual ideas, which capture the subjective and objective dimensions of young people's lived experiences. On implementing RPA, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government backtracked on the initial intention to enforce young people's participation in further education and training. Instead, they favoured an approach in which a variety of choices would result in young people wanting to continue their participation in education and training beyond the age of 16 (DfE 2014; DfE 2010).

This however takes a rather simplistic view of young people's motivation for learning, assuming that increased choice will result in them finding something that they want to do. This neglects the matter of learner identity and the subjective, yet structured, nature of motivation for learning. Analysis of learner identities then appears particularly pertinent in the context of the contemporary educational landscape. The intensification of the focus on educational participation, highlighted by a drive to extend periods of participation in education, is putting a greater pressure on young people to develop a motivation for learning and knowledge (Ainley and Allen 2010). Therefore, at the heart of the thesis are the concepts of learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000b) and horizons for action (Hodkinson 1996). These concepts help draw attention to the relationship between learning and transition, and the complexity of experiences within extended participation.

Key themes

Reflecting on the background and context to RPA explored above, there are a number of analytical themes that emerge:

- The relationship between (extended) participation and learning is a central feature of RPA. How young people position themselves as learners, and the learning experiences they are exposed to, are key to the efficacy of prolonged periods of participation in education and training.

- By linking extended participation with enhanced employability, RPA is implicated in expanding young people's opportunities, as well as reworking what young people perceive to be possible and desirable – their imagined futures.

- In attempting to address NEETism and replace risky fast-track transitions into the labour market with extended participation, RPA creates a somewhat binary construction of participation/non-participation. It is therefore necessary to understand how extended participation positions young people relative to exclusion, marginalization, and disengagement.

- RPA also creates somewhat homogenised perspectives on the transitions young people make through extended participation. Rather than a period of increased complexity and uncertainty, extended participation is framed as a process of convergence and crystallisation as young people focus their pathways and destinations. The nature and style of young people's transitions therefore provide a focal point in the analysis of RPA.

Overview of thesis structure

This thesis is organised into ten chapters. Chapter 2 situates RPA in the wider context of social policy, socioeconomic change, and the history of educational reforms around raising the age of participation. In particular, the chapter reflects on factors that have shifted the dynamics of participation as well as the changing discourses surrounding the notion of extending periods of involvement in education.

Chapter 3 provides a review of the key literature. The review begins with an examination of research and literature on school-to-work transitions and educational inequalities in order to establish the wider context. This is followed by a more detailed reflection on a key body of literature that explores the central issues of (non)participation, NEET, RPA, low-level VET, and the theoretical contributions of learning careers and horizons for action.

Chapter 4 outlines the conceptual framework underpinning the research, with a focus on the examination of learning careers, horizons for action, transition behaviours, and conceptualisations of (non) participation. This is supported by viewing lived experiences through the lens of Bourdieu's notions of habitus, field and capital (Bourdieu & Passerson 1990; Bourdieu 1993, 1997); Foucauldian ideas of discourse, power, and control (Foucault 1980; Foucault 1991); and Goffman's work on social roles and identities, and presentation of the self(Goffman 1969). This is followed by a justification of the ethnographic approach, a discussion of the research methods and data collection, and reflections on conducting fieldwork.

Reflecting the key themes outlined in the previous section, the empirical chapters are grouped thematically. Chapter 5 is the first of the empirical chapters exploring the findings from the fieldwork. This chapter examines teacher strategies for organising pupil participation within the classroom. Specifically, data is presented on how teachers structure their learning environments and how they interact with their students. The findings inform an analysis of how the concept of (dis)engagement shapes learning experiences (Vallee 2017).

Chapter 6 then explores wider aspects of the education landscape that interact with young people's opportunities and imagined futures. In particular, data is presented which highlights the permeation of marketisation, audit and performance cultures, and credentialisation into student mentalities and teacher practices. Observations of interactions between teachers and students showed the pervasive influence of assessment and attainment, and conversations with students revealed narratives of positional competition.

Chapter 7 presents findings on the nature and culture of post-16 decision-making within the fieldwork schools. The approaches schools took to supporting post-16

decision-making are compared and contrasted, and the ways in which young people took decisions are explored. Using the concept of horizons for action, the chapter reflects on how young people found their horizons limited and constrained by attitudes and practices that produced narrow accounts of the opportunities available to marginalised learners.

Chapter 8 focuses on the lived experience of extended participation, specifically in the field of low-level VET. Fieldwork focused on gaining an insight into the nature of young people's participation, shedding light on how the structure of low-level VET, and ways in which learning was conceived, shaped opportunities for upwards progression. Central to this chapter is how positions of marginality are maintained and disrupted and how various factors create complex experiences of participation and non-participation.

Chapter 9 then presents a series of case studies, which reflect the various typologies of transition routes and experiences of participation observed during the fieldwork. Young people's experiences of and journeys through extended participation are examined in relation to various transition concepts (Furlong 2009) and transition behaviours (Evans 2007). The findings engage with the debate around structure/agency/reflexivity and suggest that particular transition behaviours may have been incorrectly labelled or misinterpreted.

Chapter 10 then concludes the thesis with a discussion of the key findings and contributions, alongside a reflection on policy implications and recommendations for further research. The focus of which is on the various ways in which participation is conceived, enacted, and experienced, and the implications of these factors for notions of learning, transition, and participation positions. The thesis then concludes with recommendations for further research, focusing on reinvigorating more illuminating ethnographic studies that highlight the importance of lived experiences and processes of education in shaping meaningful and rewarding modes of participation.

Chapter 2: Locating RPA in the broader context of social policy and socioeconomic change

Policy Background

RPA in practice

The school-to-work transition continues to be seen as an important and legitimate area for government concern and intervention. Rather than focusing on stimulating labour market demand, recent government policy has been dominated by supply-side policies that frame youth unemployment as a problem of skills and credentials shortages as opposed to a lack of opportunities (Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014). By raising the age of participation to 18, the Education and Skills Act (2008) provides a prime example of this. Thus, premised on the notion that an extended period of participation in education or training will result in the acquisition of new skills and qualifications (Simmons 2008; Maguire 2013), the RPA policy buys in to supply-side analyses of youth unemployment.

In practice, participation, as set out by the RPA policy, is viewed as on-going attendance and involvement in some form of education or training. In contrast to the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA 1972), RPA does not require young people to continue their schooling, instead a range of post-16 options constitute continued participation, including:

- Full-time education (e.g., at a school or college)

- An apprenticeship or traineeship

- Part-time education or training combined with one of the following:

  - Employment or self-employment for 20 hours or more a week

  - Volunteering for 20 hours or more a week

This has been introduced in two phases where:

- Pupils who left year 11 in summer 2013 had to continue in education or training for at least another year until June 2014

- Pupils who left year 11 in summer 2014 or later have to continue until at least their 18th birthday (DfE 2014)

Ultimately aimed at young people seen as lacking the skills and qualifications to secure stable labour market positions, the Green Paper which preceded the 2008 legislation sets out the target population explicitly:

> Young people most likely to be affected by the proposed legislation are those who, in the absence of the proposed policy, would have probably been NEET [Not in Education, Employment or Training] or in JWT [Jobs Without Training]. (Spielhofer *et al*. 2007, p.1).

Suggesting that these young people are characterised by having 'few or no qualifications, and often a negative experience of school' (*ibid.*) It is this population of potential non-participants that continue to cause great public and political concern. Indeed 'the destructive consequences that non-participation is seen to create in a society' (Määttä and Aaltonen 2016, p.158) leads to social anxiety which legitimises the attempted control of populations perceived as problematic.

It is for this 'problematic' population that RPA represents a shift from participation as a right to an obligation (Määttä and Aaltonen 2016), reflecting how non-participation has become 'an object of governance' (Fergusson 2013). As non-participation becomes less tolerated, the question is to what extent policies such as RPA represent educational participation and engagement through choice or coercion (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010) and what this means for how young people perceive and respond to their experiences of extended participation.

The key dilemma created by RPA is addressed frankly by Russell, Simmons, and Thompson (2011a) who, leading up to the implementation of RPA, comment:

> Under existing legislation, participation in education or training will become compulsory until the age of 18 by 2015, making even more acute the question of how best to engage those young people for whom schooling has been unrewarding (pp.478-479)

By investigating the everyday experiences of such young people across the post-16 transition, the research will examine how this dilemma plays out in practice.

RPA critiqued

Reflecting on the history of debates around raising the age of participation, (Fergusson 2014, p.3) outlines three framing rationales and accompanying modalities and priorities.

Table 2.1. Rationales, modalities, and priorities for raising the age of participation

Rationale	Modality	Priority
Social ideals	Social progress	Advance/modernise society
	Social mobility	Ameliorate/manage inequalities
	Social justice	Optimise equal rights/outcomes
Politicaleconomic	Add value	Skill/educate workforce
	Warehouse	Manage labour supply
	Marketise	Maximise wage competition
Governance	Shelter	Protect/contain non-participants
	Track	Identify/monitor non-participants
	Juridify	Enforce participation/criminalise non-participants

It is suggested that RPA is fundamentally a reflection of attitudes that frame non-participation as a problem of governance rather than as a problem of a capitalist system (*ibid.* p.10). It is therefore the applications of state driven policies and arrangements at the micro level, which are viewed as key to addressing non-participation. In the context of RPA, this would represent the capacity of schools, colleges, and training providers to ensure young people's participation in post-16 education and training.

Following on from concerns around a growing population of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), RPA links the issue of youth unemployment not with a lack of jobs but with a lack of education and skills (Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014; Simmons 2008). In this light, the intended consequence of RPA is that young people who may have previously left school and attempted risky fast-track transitions into employment, will now find themselves continuing their association with the education and training system beyond the age of 16. The hope of those

responsible for RPA is that this will enhance employability and reduce the chances of becoming NEET at the age 18 and into adulthood (Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011b; Simmons, Thompson, and Russell 2014).

Questioning this logic however are those that suggest RPA will simply lead to young people being warehoused, only delaying their attempted transition into the labour market (Fergusson 2014; Maguire 2013). The suggestion is that there will be a population of young people that become 'NEET in disguise' as their participation in education and training will only mask issues of disengagement and uncertainty (Reiter and Schlimbach 2015). This is particularly linked to those young people who follow low-level vocational and basic skills pathways through post-compulsory education. The prevailing view being that these pathways do not deliver sufficient opportunities for progression to higher level qualifications or secure labour market positions (Lawy 2010; Hodgson and Spours 2010). Such a perspective challenges the notion that RPA will 'add value' and contribute to a more skilled and educated workforce.

Additionally, with greater numbers of young people participating in FE than ever before (Furlong 2009), the competition for places is pushing greater numbers into low-level courses. Therefore, GCSE attainment now plays a key role in gaining access into even the lower echelons of vocational further education, acting as a form of 'gatekeeping' for educational opportunities (Cornish 2017a). The new policy context created by RPA therefore has particular implications for those on the margins of the education and training market.

Much of what has been explored on the issue of school-to-work transitions is based upon the pursuit of engagement. As such, engagement represents a central concern, as the participation of learners is constructed as fundamental to achieving the prescribed aims of the 'educational project' (Aasebø 2011). At the heart of this project is the acquisition of qualifications and skills which, in an era of human capital (Fevre, Rees and Gorard 1999), epitomises individualistic notions of employability. A consequence of this supposition is the positioning of participation and engagement as the principal focus of educational policy and practice (Fergusson 2013).

Subsequently, disengagement and non-participation become key concerns.

The increased competition for labour market places and the greater demand for skills and qualifications (Ainley and Allen 2010) has placed greater significance and focus on education and training. Thus, while labour market factors are a key medium through which a range of social phenomena and dynamics are understood, it is education that represents the key medium through which these manifest. Investigating the lived experiences of those occupying marginal learning spaces then provides a key insight into the micro and meso level processes of exclusion, alienation and stigmatisation that are disguised by required post-16 participation.

Beyond the policy: extending educational participation in the context of social change

RPA, and participation in education, cannot be seen as independent from wider social conditions and, in order to more fully understand its manifestation and implementation, it is necessary to situate it within the context of contemporary social conditions. Although this is complex, there are a number of key factors that have influenced the introduction of this policy and an intensification of focus on educational participation.

One such factor intensifying the focus of continued participation in education and training is the need to meet the demands of post-industrial and globalised economies (Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014). Most pertinently, young people must be highly skilled and flexible in their ability to retrain to meet the changing demands of the global labour market (ibid). In this vein, the issue of youth unemployment, and therefore exclusion and deprivation, is not linked with a lack of jobs but with a lack of education and skills (*ibid*).

As a result of this, a great deal of attention is now being given to the continued participation of young people in education and training beyond their compulsory school years. Participation however cannot be seen in terms of a simple participant, non-participant binary where those who participate have access to opportunities for employment and social exclusion, and those who do not participate are marginalised from these opportunities (*ibid*). The experiences and outcomes of participation in further education are far more complex than this and, as Brown (2013) emphasises, the increasing level of participation in further education and training is only

intensifying positional competition and social congestion, as young people are having to achieve more to stand out from the crowd.

The result of young people achieving more and better qualifications is a process of qualification inflation (Ainley and Allen 2010), which means those who do not participate or 'get on' in further education and training become further disadvantaged and further marginalised from employment opportunities that require higher qualifications (Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014). This is particularly problematic for young people who undertake vocational qualifications as vocational education continues to be seen as inferior to academic learning and for those that are disengaged and of low ability (Hodgson and Spours 2010; Lawy 2010). The Wolf review supports this sentiment and also highlights that large numbers of vocational courses do not offer pathways into employment or higher education (Wolf 2011). She states that, although there are a number of respected and valuable vocational programmes, 'The staple offer for between a quarter and a third of the post-16 cohort is a diet of low-level vocational qualifications, most of which have little to no labour market value' (Wolf 2011, p.7).

This issue has been raised again recently in a report published by the House of Lords' Select Committee on social mobility (8 April 2016, HL 120). In the report 'Overlooked and left behind: improving the transition from school to work for the majority of young people', the social mobility committee highlights the persisting inequality between academic and vocational pathways, suggesting that 'attitudes to vocational education have not kept up with the pace of structural change, it remains the poor relation of academic attainment' (8 April 2016, HL 120, p.49). It is these young people following vocational pathways, principally at the lower levels, who therefore find themselves in 'NEET in disguise' as they are unable to turn their participation in further education into any form of labour market capital (Lawy 2010). This study therefore seeks to investigate how young people in these positions make sense of their participation in post-16 education and how they reconcile the differences between their vocational pathway and their future labour market prospects.

Furthermore, labour market changes have influenced the patterns and experiences of moving from education to employment (Ball 2008; Furlong 2007) and subsequently the

way in which education, and particularly post-compulsory education, is valued and engaged with (Ainley and Allen 2010; Coffey 2001). Once a predominantly middle-class trait, participation in post-compulsory education has now become a common feature of school-to-work transitions for the entire social spectrum (Furlong 2005). This highlights wider social changes interacting with, and being driven by, changes to school-to-work transitions and educational participation. It is therefore useful to explore this more fully in order to develop a more holistic understanding of these changes and interactions.

The changing nature of research and thinking around transitions from school-to-work emphasise the significance of social change over a period of time. The post-war period was characterised by notions of smooth, linear, and uncomplicated transitions (Goodwin and O'Connor 2007, p.557) with this early sociological work illustrating how the school-to-work transition was heavily influenced by factors outside the individual's locus of control. Transitions at this time were seen as being largely defined by the young person's family background and schooling (Ashton and Field 1976). Similarly, Ken Roberts (1975, p.142) argued that the pathways young people were taking upon leaving compulsory education were better explained by the opportunities available to them than by individual 'choices'. For Roberts 'opportunity structures' in education and the labour market were key in shaping the options open to young people, such that individual aspirations were a reflection of these rather than *vice versa.*

Such perspectives led to the emergence of the term 'career trajectory' (see for example, Roberts K *et al*. 1989) where young people came to be seen as having little influence over their transitions and destinations in adult life were closely linked to social origins. The idea of previously smooth and linear transitions has however been challenged, with the notion of unproblematic transitions experienced in previous decades being questioned (Vickerstaff 2003; Goodwin and O'Connor 2007). Their analysis showed that the majority of young people experienced very difficult and complex patterns of transition, in which they had to adjust their expectations to the realities of the labour market. While social class reproduction did occur, this was as a result of structural constraints, notably a lack of opportunities. Rather than being passively socialised, they argue that young people demonstrated a great deal of agency. Many moved jobs in their search for better training or took up what they

perceived as 'stop gap' jobs while waiting for the desired opportunity to come up, often acquiring skills in the meantime (Goodwin and O'Connor 2007).

The early focus on social reproduction contrasts with individualist perspectives which have become more prevalent since the 1990s and are based on assumptions that transitions have become more complex and less predictable as a result of increased unemployment, the diversification of educational pathways and the onus being on individuals to improve their 'employability' (Heinz 2009). The individualist perspective draws on sociologists such as Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) who refer to 'late modernity' as an era in which traditional structures and certainties have been replaced by a 'risk society'.

Historically, participation in post-compulsory education has been perceived as a differentiating factor between middle-class and working class young people (Tomlinson 2005), and one that resulted in transitions into skilled and professional employment, as opposed to the unskilled employment or unemployment characteristic of young people leaving school at the end of compulsory education (MacDonald and Marsh 2005).

Jones (2009) has conceptualised classed differences in educational pathways as slow and fast track transitions. Middle-class transitions were generally characterised as slow-track with extended periods of participation in education before entering employment. Conversely, working-class pathways could be seen as fast-track with attempts to enter the labour market usually happening immediately after completing compulsory education. However, increasing rates of participation in post-16 education and training across all social groups has distorted such binary transitions. Consequently, it is now suggested that classed differences are not best characterised by slow or fast track transitions, but instead by whether extended participation in education is viewed as necessary or desired (Furlong 2009).

The normalisation of participation in post-compulsory education (Furlong 2005) is then problematic in the context of structured employment outcomes. The question to be asked is what role participation in education beyond 16 plays in the disruption or maintenance of school-to-work transitions. Further examination of the school-to-work transition will highlight the potential significance and influence of extending

educational participation. This is important because the transitions young people make from education to employment are seen as a key factor in determining the positions taken in the social order (Evans and Furlong 1997). This is then a central focus for sociologists interested in the processes and experiences of school-to-work transitions and how these interact reflexively with sociocultural factors to produce, and perhaps reproduce, the social structures that exist.

The recent introduction of RPA, as a tool in shaping and influencing young people's transition from school-to-work, therefore has the potential to maintain or disrupt the production, or reproduction, of particular patterns of education and employment experiences and outcomes. This study, paying particular attention to how young people 'get on' or simply 'get through' schooling and further education, has the potential to contribute to this work. Thus, by taking a close look at the everyday experiences, this study can shed light on the distinct contemporary features of education and schooling that interact with young people's sociocultural status and produce such varied outcomes.

Finally, it is perhaps pertinent to situate extended participation in the context of political and ideological change. On face value, the RPA policy would appear to have little direct significance for the majority of young people in school, as non-participants in further education and training became the minority some time ago (Furlong 2005). It is however suggested by Spielhofer *et al.* (2007) that:

> Young people most likely to be affected by the proposed legislation are those who, in the absence of the proposed policy, would have probably been NEET [Not in Education, Employment or Training] or in JWT [Jobs Without Training]. (p.1)

It is this group of young people that have been constructed as a problem group (Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014) and one that has become associated with issues of social, cultural and economic exclusion and deprivation (Lawy 2010). Thus, RPA is symbolic of perceived linkages between poverty, exclusion and deprivation, and a lack of participation in education and work (Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014). Such perspectives were highlighted by Tony Blair's claim that, 'the best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education' (SEU 1999, p.6).

Indeed, education has often been portrayed as an answer to a range of crime, health, welfare, economic, employment and inequality issues (Haveman and Wolfe 1984) and there is an ever more influential political narrative of an important link between education, employment, opportunity and social inclusion (Gillborn and Youdell 2006). It is a narrative that promotes the significance of attainment and achievement in equalising opportunities (Levin and Kelley 1994) and one that has centred attention on the acquisitions of skills and credentials as the key to achieving successful school-to-work transitions (Brown and Lauder 1997; Levin and Kelley 1994; Spielhofer *et a*l. 2007).

Furthermore, a Nuffield report on education and training (Hayward *et al.* 2006) criticised too much 'policy busyness' on the part of government and suggested that:

> the current drive to ensure young people achieve the examination results needed to progress into higher education may have detracted from the quality of learning for 14-19 year- olds, and such an approach may be turning some students away from education" (2006, p.2).

This highlights the blind pursuit of results that has only become further entrenched over the years following the report. Such credentialisation (Ainley and Allen 2010) is perhaps best symbolised by higher education being positioned as the 'ideal' and as a normative marker for the measurement of educational and social progress. Michael Gove's foreword for 'The importance of teaching: the school's white paper' (DfE 2010) while secretary of state for education, was emblematic of such a view:

> It is only through reforming education that we can allow every child the chance to take their full and equal share in citizenship, shaping their own destiny, and becoming masters of their own fate. (p.6)…Our schools should be engines of social mobility, helping children to overcome the accidents of birth and background to achieve much more than they may ever have imagined (p.6)

The view of education as the tool through which empowerment and social mobility can be fostered is a key part of the RPA policy (Spielhofer *et al*. 2007) and is indeed a view that is commonplace in a range of, particularly Government, literature. The focus on social mobility has become an enduring feature of UK governments' educational policy (Brown 2013; Thompson and Simmons 2013; Tomlinson 2005). The post-war era, up to the 1970s was characterised by educational expansion and labour market growth in

professional and managerial areas, resulting in a period of significant social mobility (Tomlinson 2005). The belief developed that if you worked hard at school and achieved well, you would be rewarded with greater opportunities to acquire professional level employment and to climb the social ladder (Goldthorpe 1997).

A dominant discourse in the recent context of austerity and economic downturn has been that continued participation in post-16 education and training is a means to economic security (Brown 2006; 2013; DFE 2010). However, in a stratified, competitive education system and labour market, it has been argued that many forms of post-16 participation fail to deliver such security (Ainley and Allen 2010). This is emphasised by recent studies that appear to show that absolute mobility across generations is in decline (Bukodi *et al.* 2015) and that the gap between class-based chances for social mobility have widened (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010). In a recent Guardian article, 'More than 50 years of education reforms "have not helped social mobility"' (Doward 2016), this is problematised as the belief that hard work at school and in education will help you achieve social mobility is challenged. The problem posed is that hard work and attainment may not lead to social mobility and in fact could not be enough to stop downward social mobility, particularly for those at lower end of the social ladder as those at the top use their superior resources to maintain their advantage (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010).

For those at the lower end of the social ladder this then begs the question of what impact this is having on their motivations for and attitudes towards education as what they put in does not equate to what they get out. Furthermore, as schools and education providers continue to push young people to participate and achieve, what impact does the lack of outcomes for these young people have on the everyday experiences within these environments?

The making of RPA

Although RPA is new, the debate and policy around compulsory education and training is not. Jones (2009) suggests that 'in practice, the raising of the school-leaving age has been ongoing over the last century' (p.91). This is traced back by Ball (2008) who states that 'a fully universal, compulsory and free elementary education system was established only at the beginning of the 20th century' (p.62). In what Simmons (2008)

refers to as 'the first attempt to raise the "leaving age" to 18' (p.424), the Fisher Education Act of 1918 introduced the notion of day continuation schools. This provision was designed for young people who were not in full-time education with the intention being that these young people would be released from their employment one day a week. It was proposed that this would initially be compulsory for young people up to the age of 17 but rising to 18 by 1925.

This period was characterised by a general resistance to the day continuation schools and generally to any intervention that affected young people's labour as this was such a key part of the economy (Simmons 2008). Furthermore, employers believed that young people were better prepared for the challenges and demands of work through practical work-based learning, as opposed to the perceived theoretical learning of day continuation schools (Simmons 2008). This resistance, coupled with concerns about loss of pay, essentially put an end to the compulsion for continued participation in education up to the age of 18 (Simmons 2008).

The following decades saw a persistence of the resistance to an extension to compulsory education and thus an unchanging age at which compulsory education ended, 14. The dominant outcome at this time was for young people to leave school and seek employment; highlighting this point is the fact that by 1938, 88% of children were participating in education until the age of 14 (Ball 2008) but only one in five of elementary school leavers went on to participate in further full-time education (Simmons 2008).

The next time the debate on raising the age of compulsory education arose was in 1944 in the form of the Butler Education Act. This paved the way for the minimum school leaving age to be raised to 15 in 1947. Whereas in 1918 there was a widespread resistance to the increase in the age of compulsory schooling proposed in the Fisher Education Act, the 1944 Education Act has been described as part of a political settlement between the citizen and the state (Baron 1981) which was part of the rebuilding of post-war British society (Tucker and Walker 2009). This was in response to recognition of the need for 'political equilibrium, economic activity and social improvement' (Tucker and Walker 2009, p.103). This was symbolic of the social democratic consensus of the time that produced a growing acceptance of secondary

education for all (Tomlinson 2005). Although on face value education for the masses (Tomlinson 2005) appeared to be a positive step for equality of opportunity, the divisions in schooling based on the Norwood report (1943) were criticised for being based on class-divisions within education (McCulloch 1994).

One of the main features of the Act was the notion of tripartism, something that Ainley and Allen (2010) refer to as a 'conception of three different types of children for whom three different types of schooling were appropriate' (p.14). Although the 1944 Education Act introduced the notion of free and universal secondary education, it also introduced the division into grammar, secondary modern and technical education (Ball 2008) which was based on the notion of three different types of mind proposed in Norwood report (1943), the practical, the technical and the academic. This would feature heavily in debates focused on education for the next few decades. Selective education became a highly tensioned and divisive phenomenon concentrated predominantly on debates around equality of opportunity and parity of esteem (Tomlinson 2005). The polarised arguments proposed that, on one hand the selective education system was reproducing class-divisions, where young people from working-class backgrounds were unequally represented at grammar schools (Tomlinson 2005), but on the other hand selective education was espoused as equal but different (Ball 2008), reflecting the supposed different types of student with different types of mind proposed within the 1944 Education Act.

What followed was the development of comprehensive schooling, introduced from 1965 onwards. It is suggested that the move away from the tripartite system came in response to growing criticisms of intelligence testing and selection at the age of 11 (Ball 2008) allied with the desire of some Labour politicians for an egalitarian education system that educated all children together and also a recognition of the Conservative government that having a greater number of more well educated young people was an economic imperative (Tomlinson 2005). This perhaps signalled the emergence of the principle that underpins education policy today, the need for a greater number of highly qualified and highly skilled young people to meet the needs of an ever-changing labour market and thus maintains economic competitiveness (Ball 2008; Brown and Lauder 1997).

The debate around selective vs. comprehensive education has persisted over a considerable period of time and is indeed still active and relevant today. Particularly steadfast has been the discourse on inequalities reproduced within the continuing selective nature of education. RPA, alongside changes to 14-19 education, promote the idea of a range of options within education and training to suit a range of young people and their needs, something which appears starkly similar to the some of the rhetoric around tripartism. Indeed, Tucker and Walker (2009) consider whether the principles of the 1944 legislation 'still underpin the provision for education and training in our "modernised" system of the twenty-first century' (p.103). At 14, those young people that are not inclined towards academic learning can choose more vocational options. This is mirrored in post-16 choices today where options range from the academic A-level route to BTECs which offer a balance between theory and practice, while additionally, there are the more practical opportunities that generally focus on the development of specific skills aimed at particular fields of employment.

The focus of the practical and vocational options on routes into work mirrors the efforts of the post-war government in preparing young people for work (Tomlinson 2005). A key difference however can be found in the rationale and opportunities existent at the times. The post-war period had a ready and available employment, which was needed for economic reconstruction (Tomlinson 2005) meaning there was a direct and tangible employment outcome at the end of compulsory education. The modern situation differs greatly in the respect that opportunities for employment are far more scarce and obscure (Furlong 2009), resulting in a need for a flexible and highly skilled workforce that can adapt to the changing demands of the labour market (Spielhofer *et al*. 2007; Maguire 2013). This has meant that the rationale and function of compulsory schooling may have economic connotations in both time periods but for different reasons.

A further important feature of the 1944 Education Act in the context of RPA was the proposed expansion of post-school education and training (Simmons 2008), this signalled the start of the growth in post-compulsory education, the outcome of which can be seen in the large and varied further education and training sector of today. The proposed expansion came at a time when the great majority of young people left school immediately at the end of their compulsory schooling (Simmons 2008). This was

a trend that would change in the proceeding decades, but not before changes would occur to compulsory education. Although the 1944 Education Act, and a number of subsequent reports, championed compulsory schooling until the age of 16, it was not until ROSLA in 1972 that this was enacted. This move saw the resurfacing of some of the resistance to the suggestions made to raise the age of compulsory schooling in the 1918 Education Act. There was a general opposition from working-class families and students as 'they were keen to get out and earn some money' (Ainley and Allen 2010, p.19).

ROSLA came at the start of a decade focused on tackling the effects of the economic crisis and the changing labour market (Hodgson 1999). The 1970s were characterised by rising youth unemployment and mounting disquiet from employers about the perceived inadequacy of young people's preparation for working life (Hodgson 1999). ROSLA then, to a certain extent, alleviated some of the pressure built up around youth unemployment and this was reinforced with a range of youth training schemes that responded to the concerns of employers (Tomlinson 2005). The effect of the introduction of these youth training schemes was not immediately felt however, with Miles (2000) pointing out that throughout the 1970s leaving school at 16 and entering full-time employment was still the dominant theme. The legacy of this time period however has proven to be greatly influential, in particular the discourse around vocationalisation of the curriculum and the introduction of programmes aimed directly at preparation for work (Hodgson 1999) have retained much of their significance.

The next shift in thinking around education emanated from Great Debate on education called for by Prime Minister James Callaghan at his speech at Ruskin College in 1976. This speech heralded the start of the neoliberal direction for education (Ball 2008) that was driven by the changing labour market and the view that education needed to do more to prepare young people for the needs of employers and the economy (Tomlinson 2005). 1976 is seen as the point at which the movement from a welfare state to a neoliberal state began (Ball 2008).

The neoliberal turn came into full swing in with the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979. Thatcher's government had to deal with the shift to a post-Fordist social structure in which the stable and predictable school-to-work

transitions of previous decades were now proving increasingly elusive (Furlong 2007). The result was a series of policies that placed an emphasis on individual responsibility within an education system that was being remodelled along the lines of increased effectiveness and efficiency achieved through expansion and marketisation (Hodgson 1999). A particular aim of these changes was to increase participation and achievement in full-time education and in doing so up skill the workforce (Hodgson 1999). Also significant in Thatcher's beliefs on education was the importance of choice and the subsequent need for schools to market themselves in the new educational market place (Coffey 2001).

All of the changes to the education system were taking place alongside growing youth unemployment, reaching a peak in 1986 when it was estimated that more than half of 16 and 17 year olds and a quarter of 18 and 19 year olds were unemployed (Ainley and Allen 2010). The narrative emerging symbolised the favoured perception of individual responsibility as it apportioned blame on the young people for failing to make the transition to independence, highlighting individual deficiencies and inadequate education for these failings (Ainley and Allen 2010).

The lack of employment opportunities for school-leavers in the 1980s had a significant change in patterns of participation in post-compulsory education, the large majority of young people leaving school going on to participate in a series of youth training schemes in what has been described as training without jobs (Ainley and Allen 2010). Another effect of the high levels of youth employment was the increase in appeal of educational options (Furlong 2007) as young people sought ways to gain an edge in the competition for work (Furlong 2009). By the start of the 1990s it had been nearly 20 years since the school-leaving age was raised to 16, the numbers of young people continuing in full-time education however was on the rise Furlong 2007). The 1988 Education Act and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act had sought to move away from the failed youth training schemes and move towards participation in further and higher education (Ainley and Allen 2010), a movement that would continue to gain momentum through the following years.

The election of Tony Blair's New Labour government in 1997 signalled another shift in state ideology on education, described by Ball (2008) as a move to the competition

state. The move from an industrial to a service economy (Ball 2008) meant that Britain's economy was reliant on an ability to prepare young people for this reality. New Labour retained a number of the Conservative ideas on education, including the focus on educational standards, participation and achievement and the role competition and choice within education played in this (Ainley and Allen 2010). From Blair's perspective this was vital for producing a highly skilled and highly qualified workforce that could offer flexibility for changing employment opportunities and thus ensure continued economic competitiveness (Ainley and Allen 2010) in the new knowledge economy (Simmons 2008). This saw a further push for young people to stay longer in full-time education in order to acquire the skills and qualifications required by the labour market (Ainley and Allen 2010). The series of changes politically and to the labour market have meant that staying-on rates in education have continued to rise since the 1970s (Jones 2009).

Under New Labour, the rhetoric around participation in post-compulsory education also focused on social inclusion as an aim and, in particular, concerns around a population of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Simmons 2008). This group of non-participants, although by this point a minority (Furlong 2005), became a focus of the Labour government due to the perceived social exclusion of the group and the connotations of anti-social lives that came with this perception (Maguire 2013). Fears of young people causing civil unrest and becoming a drain on the economy (Simmons 2008) led to a call for action to tackle this group. A range of approaches were taken over a period of time, the Youth Contract, and the New Deal for Young People, amongst others, were attempts at dealing with this population of supposedly disengaged young people.

The recession of 2008 intensified the concern around the NEET population with young people, as was the case in the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, being disproportionately affected in terms of unemployment (Maguire 2013). So while the rhetoric around increasing participation in further education and training initially focused on developing a more highly skilled population (Spielhofer et al. 2007) for the future 'knowledge economy' (Simmons 2008), the economically and socially negative impact of a growing NEET population also entered the frame as a driver for requiring greater levels of participation in education and training beyond the age of 16.

The suggestion of the Labour government in 2007 to raise the age of participation (RPA) then, at least in part, became seen as an attempt to solve the NEET problem (Maguire 2013). With the large majority of young people by this point participating in education or training beyond the age of 16 (Simmons 2008), participation rates could only be increased by ensuring levels of young people not in education, employment or training decreased. In an attempt to ensure this happened, the 2008 Education and Skills Act (E&S Act) set out an interventionist approach to enforcing extended participation.

In 2010, with the election of a new coalition government, RPA would have to undergo some changes to match the ambitions and ideologies of the new political leadership. RPA was maintained and was eventually implemented in 2013 with a subtly changed agenda. The 2010 coalition government white paper 'The Importance of Teaching' (DfE 2010) and the 2011 Education Act set out the new vision for RPA, including dropping the enforced aspect of RPA. However, the rhetoric around economic competitiveness remained and, alongside this, notions of social mobility and the role of education were brought to centre stage.

Finally, turning to consideration of how RPA compares with, and has evolved from, other initiatives focused on youth (un)employment and school-to-work transitions, some key areas for analysis and discussion arise. On face value, RPA may appear to be a new initiative, aimed at improving the employability of those young people who may have otherwise attempted fast-track transitions into employment (Jones 2009; Spielhofer et al. 2007). However, on deeper analysis, many parallels can be drawn with Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and policy initiatives focused on the issue of youth unemployment and non-participation.

Much like YTS, RPA has been criticised for simply warehousing young people (Maguire 2013; Cornish 2018). The contention of such criticisms being that RPA only serves to delay transitions into the labour market that are characterised by risk and uncertainty (Thompson 2011). Such perspectives find accord with Macdonald's view that the more things change, the more they stay the same (2011). In response to the youth unemployment crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, the YTS sought to address the issues emerging from mass non-participation (Maguire 2015b). With a focus on the

development of vocational skills through work-based training, the YTS placed the responsibility for participation in the hands of employers and training providers, as opposed to schools and colleges.

Following the period of YTS, various other initiatives have attempted to address issues of youth unemployment and non-participation. For example, New Labour's New Deal for Young People (NDYP) maintained the focus on direct employability. Alongside further initiatives in the form of Entry to Employment (E2E) and the Youth Contract (YC), government intervention since YTS has continued to operate deficit models of marginalised young people (Jeffs and Smith 1990; Smyth, Mcinerney and Fish 2013). By working within deficit modes of thinking, the aim of such initiatives has largely been to 're-engage' young people in alternative provision beyond the academic institutions of school and college (Fergusson 2014; Smyth, Mcinerney and Fish 2013). It is however suggested that another motivation for recent initiatives has been to pool all those at risk of non-participation in one place to ensure they can be effectively tracked and monitored (Fergusson 2014).

Superficially, RPA takes a different approach. Young people are seemingly free to choose from a range of options including further education, apprenticeships, traineeships, and accredited on the job training (DfE 2010, Maguire 2013). However, with good quality apprenticeship opportunities limited and highly competitive, and with other options complex and disparate, the reality is that the large majority of marginalised learners end up in low-level VET (see data tables below). Therefore, RPA has a similar effect on centralising the location of this targeted population.

Where RPA does differ is in its nature and purpose, taking much more indirect responsibility for employability, with young people responsible for taking advantage of the 'opportunities' associated with extended participation. Furthermore, rather than removing young people from the academic institutions within which they previously did not prosper, RPA centralises education and training in a mainstream education institution. This is significant as it has the potential to not only warehouse, but also further alienate young people. Thus, RPA brings new challenges to young people attempting to navigate a path from school to work.

In summary, RPA, it is clear, has been a long time in the making. From the proposal of day continuation schools in the early 20th century to a full requirement for participation in education and training until the age of 18 almost 100 years later. During this period there have been some significant changes alongside some persistent continuities. What is clear from the preceding section is that education is heavily entwined with political, social, and economic matters and that RPA then, is not solely an educational phenomenon but it is also a manifestation of the political, social, and economic ideology and circumstance of the time.

RPA policy context

Following the previous section's historicised account of how RPA came about, it is perhaps pertinent to focus in on the more recent matters of the conditions under which RPA was established and implemented. Of specific interest are the state of youth labour markets and changes in policy between 2008 and 2013, situated in the context of the Global Financial Crisis.

As set out in the previous section, RPA was initially conceived by the Labour government prior to the Global Financial Crisis and prior to the period of recession between 2008 and 2013. Arising during relatively positive economic conditions, RPA and the 2008 E&S Act were driven by notions of a knowledge economy and future skills needs, and by the view extended periods of participation would add value by upskilling and educating the future workforce (Leitch Report 2006; Simmons 2008; Fergusson 2014). Furthermore, as alluded to previously, there was also increasing concern about the persistent levels of 16-18-year-olds not in education, employment and training, and the perceived societal and economic implications of this group's non-participation (Maguire 2013). The concern around non-participation coexisted alongside a highly competitive youth labour market, which meant many young people finished education without good qualifications and struggled to find employment. Therefore, RPA symbolised the view that issues of unemployment and inequality could be addressed through educational access and achievement, thus legitimising government intervention in young people's participation in education and training (Simmons, Russell, and Thompson 2014).

Consequently, attempting to tackle concerns around youth unemployment and skills supply, the 2008 E&S Act made participation in post-16 education and training compulsory, setting out a robust and draconian set of measures to enforce participation (Maguire 2013). The RPA policy placed a duty on local authorities to ensure all young people aged 16 and 17 had an 'appropriate' offer of post-16 education and training, and to identify those who were not participating in order to take action against them and their parents.

However, with the election of the 2010 coalition government and the introduction of the 2011 Education Act, parts of the 2008 E&S Act were undone or subverted, with the changes resulting in a suspension of the elements relating to compulsion and enforcement, as the policy 'lost its teeth' (Maguire 2013). The changes meant young people's participation in post-16 education and training was to remain voluntary as the focus shifted from compulsion, to choice, with the government suggesting there should be support for participation rather than enforcement (*ibid.)*. Underpinning the 2011 amendments to the E&S Act were significant changes in economic and labour market conditions, as the UK was experiencing the effects of the Global Financial Crisis and significant youth unemployment (Fergusson 2014).

While, superficially, the removal of compulsion was motivated by a more liberal view around choice, the main reason for the 2011 Education Act amendments was perhaps concerns around the cost of enforcement and around the economic impact on employers (*ibid.)*. In particular, reluctant to burden or disadvantage businesses and employers in a period of economic challenge, the coalition government left open options of warehousing surplus labour or releasing cheap labour (*ibid.*). The concern around the economic impact on employers was allied with a period of austerity that reduced local authority budgets and capacity for funding post-16 provision, and for tracking and monitoring the delivery of RPA (Maguire 2013). Therefore, the social and economic motivations for RPA had fundamentally shifted.

Reinforcing the move away from compulsion and placing burdens on employers, by the time RPA came into effect in 2013, local authorities were no longer required to enforce participation, and employers were no longer obliged to make allowances and arrangements for training (*ibid.*). Ultimately, the change in government and the change

in economic conditions between 2008 and 2013 resulted in a significantly different outlook on the ideological and practical aspects of RPA, leading to a policy substantially evolved from conception to implementation. What remains is a policy that seeks to promote post-16 participation, not enforce it, and which maintains employment without training as a legitimate option for those leaving compulsory schooling.

However, despite the policy changes pulling back from enforcement, the need remains for local authorities to promote participation, and to track/monitor levels of young people not in education, employment, or training, or 'not known'. Allied with the 'September Guarantee' (local authorities are required, by the end of September, to ensure 16 and 17 year olds have an offer of a 'suitable' place in learning) (DfE 2018), the removal of measures requiring local authorities to enforce participation places greater pressure on schools and teachers to promote participation beyond the age of 16 (Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014), whether that be to occupy young people being warehoused, or to 'add value' and upskill the workforce. The question is, how schools and teachers enact this responsibility and what that means for young people's experiences of prolonged participation.

Turning to the specific responsibilities/targets placed on local authorities (and consequently, schools) in the context of RPA, the DfE (2018) reports on the following information:

- Annual NEET scorecard putting into context local authorities' figures on the proportion of young people NEET and those whose current activity is not known to the local authority;

- quarterly information which shows the proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds in education and training, broken down by age, gender, disability and ethnic group and the proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds whose current activity is not known to the local authority;

- the proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds receiving an offer of a suitable place in education or training under the 'September Guarantee';

- KS4 destination measures which show what proportion of young people from each school and local authority progress to a sustained education, training, or employment destination in the year after completing compulsory education.

To hold local authorities to account and to ensure their responsibilities are met, the DfE performance manages based on the NEET plus not known measure (DfE 2018). Therefore, while attention is given to rates of participation in education and training, the ultimate focus of the DfE is on the avoidance of NEET. Furthermore, as discussed above, the 'September Guarantee' (DfE 2018) puts pressure on schools to ensure all students have an offer of a suitable place in post-16 education or training. There is perhaps therefore the possibility that schools will direct their students to particular post-16 destinations to ensure they meet their responsibility in reducing levels of NEET plus not known, rather than to support the needs of the young people.

The motivation to focus on outcomes rather than needs is reinforced by the 'sustained engagement' measure, which tracks whether young people sustain their participation at a particular destination for two terms. Under this KS4 destination measure, schools may be pushed to promote post-16 options that are secure, stable, and low risk. Ultimately then, DfE monitoring of RPA outcomes do not explicitly direct young people into further education and training. However, particularly for marginalised learners for whom school has been unrewarding, there is a suggestion that the original focus of RPA on added value may have shifted to a focus on governing non-participation through sheltering and tracking (Fergusson 2014). Of interest therefore is what such a focus means for young people and the nature of their post-16 transitions and experiences.

In light of the local authority accountability measures described above, it is perhaps pertinent to examine the local and national context within which the research is situated. In particular, with the ultimate concern now being a reduction in NEET/Not known, rather than the enforcement of post-16 education and training, it is useful to examine young people's participation rates and the nature of their participation. The following section therefore sets out a range of data which outlines how post-16 participation rates, levels of NEET, and qualification outcomes have evolved in recent years.

Table 2.2. Participation in education and training of 16 & 17 year olds, England, 2012-2017

Participation type	end 2012	end 2013	end 2014	end 2015	end 2016	end 2017 (prov)
Education and training						
Full-time education	79.1%	79.9%	81.8%	81.7%	82.0%	82.1%
Work Based Learning (WBL)	4.6%	4.7%	5.1%	5.5%	5.5%	5.2%
Employer Funded Training (EFT)	2.2%	2.3%	2.6%	2.8%	2.8%	2.7%
Other Education and Training (OET)	5.1%	5.5%	3.8%	3.7%	3.4%	3.8%
Total Education and WBL	**88.4%**	**89.5%**	**90.1%**	**90.3%**	**90.4%**	**90.5%**
Total Education and training	**91.0%**	**92.3%**	**93.2%**	**93.7%**	**93.7%**	**93.7%**
Not in any education or training - in employment	2.5%	2.5%	2.1%	2.2%	1.9%	1.9%
Not in any education, employment, or training (NEET)	6.5%	5.2%	4.7%	4.2%	4.4%	4.4%
Total Not in any education or training (NET)	**9.0%**	**7.7%**	**6.8%**	**6.3%**	**6.3%**	**6.3%**
All	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-neet

Providing a high-level overview of national participation trends between 2012 and 2017, the above table shows an increase in the percentage of 16 and 17 year olds in education and training, and a decrease in both levels of NEET and levels of NET. Therefore, following the implementation of RPA in 2013, trends have been tracking in the desired direction. Unpicking these trends further, the below table presents data at the regional and local levels.

Table 2.3. Participation of 16 & 17 year olds in England by participation type and level, 2013-2017

Year	Level	Number of 16/17 year olds known	Full time education and training	Apprenticeship	Work based learning	Part time education	Employment combined with study	Other	Total	Current activity not known
2013	National	1,159,380	83.8%	3.6%	-	-	0.8%	0.7%	88.9%	4.5%
	Regional	176,190	83.9%	2.6%	-	-	0.5%	0.5%	87.5%	5.3%
	Local	2,780	82.7%	2.8%	-	-	0.6%	1.0%	87.1%	1.8%
2014	National	1,172,260	83.2%	4.2%	1.5%	0.3%	0.8%	0.3%	90.3%	3.6%
	Regional	179,370	84.4%	3.2%	0.7%	0.5%	0.6%	0.2%	89.6%	3.9%
	Local	2,950	81.2%	3.8%	1.0%	0.1%	1.8%	0.4%	88.3%	1.7%
2015	National	1,182,450	83.1%	4.9%	1.3%	0.3%	0.8%	0.3%	90.6%	3.8%
	Regional	185,590	83.7%	3.6%	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	0.2%	88.9%	5.1%
	Local	3,080	81.1%	3.7%	0.5%	0.2%	1.7%	0.3%	87.5%	3.1%
2016	National	1,171,390	83.4%	5.8%	1.3%	0.2%	0.7%	0.2%	91.5%	3.3%
	Regional	187,100	83.8%	4.8%	0.4%	0.3%	0.6%	0.3%	90.2%	4.0%
	Local	3,160	83.5%	4.7%	0.9%	0.2%	1.0%	0.0%	90.2%	1.5%
2017	National	1,156,870	83.3%	6.4%	1.2%	0.2%	0.7%	0.2%	92.1%	2.8%
	Regional	184,880	83.4%	5.4%	0.6%	0.8%	0.5%	0.3%	91.0%	3.5%
	Local	3,120	84.7%	4.0%	1.1%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	90.4%	1.8%

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/participation-in-education-and-training-by-local-authority

The data shows that the total proportion of 16 and 17 year olds participating in education and training is consistently lower in the fieldwork local authority compared with England and the South East. The figures are perhaps demonstrative of higher NEET levels in the local area. Beyond those young people participating in some form of education and training, it is clear there remains a significant proportion in employment without training, NEET, or not known. However, the trend across the board is an increase in total participation in education and training between 2013 and 2017. Coinciding with the implementation of RPA, the data perhaps signals a success in reducing the numbers of NEET young people. The below table therefore explores the NEET data in more detail.

Table 2.4. Proportion of 16 and 17 year olds not in education, employment or training or whose activity is not known by age, 2012-2016

		16 & 17 year olds				Age 16				Age 17		
		% NEET & not known	% NEET	% not known		% NEET & not known	% NEET	% not known		% NEET & not known	% NEET	% not known
2012	National	10.1%	4.5%	5.6%		7.0%	3.3%	3.7%		13.1%	5.6%	7.5%
	Regional	12.2%	4.2%	8.0%		9.6%	3.1%	6.5%		14.7%	5.2%	9.5%
	Local	7.2%	6.3%	0.9%		5.0%	4.8%	0.2%		9.4%	7.8%	1.6%
2013	National	8.4%	3.8%	4.6%		5.2%	2.5%	2.7%		11.5%	5.1%	6.4%
	Regional	8.5%	3.6%	4.9%		5.3%	2.4%	2.9%		11.5%	4.7%	6.8%
	Local	7.4%	5.4%	2.0%		4.7%	3.2%	1.5%		10.0%	7.5%	2.5%
2014	National	8.0%	3.4%	4.6%		5.0%	2.3%	2.7%		11.0%	4.5%	6.5%
	Regional	10.0%	2.9%	7.1%		6.2%	1.8%	4.4%		13.7%	4.0%	9.7%
	Local	11.1%	5.9%	5.2%		8.4%	4.5%	3.9%		13.8%	7.3%	6.5%
2015	National	7.1%	3.0%	4.1%		4.4%	2.0%	2.4%		9.8%	4.0%	5.8%
	Regional	8.5%	2.6%	5.9%		4.9%	1.8%	3.1%		12.0%	3.4%	8.6%
	Local	6.1%	4.1%	2.0%		4.0%	2.4%	1.6%		8.2%	5.8%	2.4%
2016	National	6.0%	2.8%	3.2%		3.9%	-	-		8.1%	-	-
	Regional	6.4%	2.5%	3.9%		4.1%	-	-		8.5%	-	-
	Local	5.3%	3.7%	1.6%		3.3%	-	-		7.4%	-	-

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/neet-data-by-local-authority-2012-16-to-18-year-olds-not-in-education-employment-or-training

Notes: a change in reporting meant the 2016 data was not broken down into separate NEET and not known percentages for 16 and 17 year olds. This was the point at which reporting shifted to the NEET plus not known measure.

The NEET data does indeed highlight a downward trend in the proportion of young people recorded as non-participants between 2012 and 2016. The increasing proportion of 16 and 17 year olds participating in some form of education and training, allied with a decreasing proportion of 16 and 17 year olds recorded as NEET does therefore signal a positive trend in the context of RPA. However, as discussed previously, it is important to understand where these young people are going and what their experiences are. Therefore, looking specifically at the fieldwork schools, it is worth examining the post-16 destination data in more detail.

Table 2.5. Destinations of key stage 4 students, 2012-2017

Year	School/level	Overall Education or Employment /Training Destination	Any education destination	Further Education College	School Sixth Form - state funded	Sixth Form College	Apprenticeships	Destination not sustained	Destination not sustained/ Recorded NEET	Activity not Captured in Data
2012	National	89%	86%	33%	37%	12%	5%	6%	3%	2%
	Region	90%	87%	31%	37%	16%	4%	6%	3%	2%
	Local authority	81%	79%	23%	48%	6%	3%	8%	3%	8%
	West Town	81%	78%	44%	28%	4%	5%	14%	3%	-
	Northumberland Girls School	88%	85%	29%	41%	14%	4%	6%	3%	3%
	Hartland Academy	41%	36%	30%	-	3%	4%	12%	6%	41%
2013	National	91%	88%	34%	38%	12%	5%	6%	2%	2%
	Region	91%	89%	31%	38%	17%	4%	5%	2%	2%
	Local authority	91%	88%	27%	53%	6%	4%	6%	2%	1%
	West Town	90%	88%	46%	37%	2%	2%	7%	-	2%
	Northumberland Girls School	88%	87%	41%	32%	9%	6%	6%	5%	-
	Hartland Academy	79%	75%	31%	39%	-	7%	12%	5%	3%
2014	National	92%	90%	34%	39%	13%	5%	5%	2%	1%
	Region	92%	91%	31%	39%	17%	4%	5%	2%	1%
	Local authority	92%	90%	25%	56%	6%	4%	4%	2%	1%
	West Town	90%	87%	46%	33%	6%	3%	6%	1%	3%
	Northumberland Girls School	96%	93%	28%	54%	8%	9%	-	-	-
	Hartland Academy	83%	75%	34%	35%	2%	4%	8%	7%	2%

Year	School/level	Overall Education or Employment /Training Destination	Any education destination	Further Education College	School Sixth Form - state funded	Sixth Form College	Apprenticeships	Destination not sustained	Destination not sustained/ Recorded NEET	Activity not Captured in Data
2015	National	94%	91%	38%	39%	13%	6%	5%	-	1%
	Region	95%	91%	34%	39%	18%	5%	5%	-	1%
	Local authority	93%	90%	25%	57%	6%	6%	6%	-	1%
	West Town	94%	92%	30%	53%	5%	6%	-	-	-
	Northumberland Girls School	89%	86%	31%	48%	6%	5%	-	-	-
	Hartland Academy	86%	78%	33%	44%	-	9%	14%	0	-
2016	National	94%	90%	38%	39%	13%	6%	5%	1%	-
	Region	95%	91%	33%	39%	18%	5%	5%	1%	-
	Local authority	96%	93%	27%	58%	5%	5%	3%	1%	-
	West Town	96%	92%	35%	50%	4%	3%	-	-	-
	Northumberland Girls School	94%	91%	36%	47%	8%	7%	-	-	-
	Hartland Academy	94%	88%	42%	42%	2%	10%	-	-	-
2017	National	94%	86%	34%	39%	13%	5%	5%	1%	-
	Region	95%	87%	29%	39%	19%	4%	5%	1%	-
	Local authority	94%	87%	26%	54%	7%	4%	5%	1%	-
	West Town	95%	87%	40%	40%	-	5%	-	-	-
	Northumberland Girls School	94%	87%	34%	46%	5%	5%	-	-	-
	Hartland Academy	83%	72%	38%	32%	-	6%	15%	2%	-

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-destinations

Table 2.6. GCSE Mathematics and English pass rates, 2012-2017

School/level	5+ A*-C or equivalents, including both Mathematics and English GCSEs						Percentage of Key Stage 4 pupils achieving grades A*-C in both English and mathematics GCSEs					
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
National	59%	59%	53%	54%	54%	57%	60%	60%	56%	56%	59%	59%
Local authority	61%	63%	59%	58%	59%	62%	61%	64%	61%	60%	64%	65%
West Town	52%	48%	46%	42%	46%	50%	52%	48%	48%	44%	56%	56%
Northumberland Girls School	47%	53%	46%	45%	42%	61%	47%	53%	47%	45%	49%	-
Hartland Academy	33%	45%	36%	26%	30%	29%	34%	46%	38%	28%	33%	32%

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-gcses-key-stage-4

Notes: 2017 data is based on the numerical system in which grades 9-4 represent the standard pass criteria, rather than A*-C

Most noticeably, table 2.5 shows a positive trend in the overall proportion of young people going to a sustained education or employment/training destination, with rates comparable across the national, regional, and local authority level. Similarly, apart from the most recent data, the percentage of young people going into sustained education destinations has increased on a national, regional, and local level. On the school level, West Town and Northumberland Girls School largely have rates of participation in education or employment/training similar to those at a national, regional, and local authority level. However, rates of participation at Hartland Academy are consistently lower across the board.

Also noteworthy is the relatively low levels of participation in sixth form colleges at the local and school level. With the absence of a local sixth form college, young people continuing in full-time education are essentially split between school sixth forms and local FE colleges. Drilling down into this aspect of the data, the numbers show that a significantly higher proportion of young people from the three fieldwork schools transition to a FE college relative to the local authority average. With local FE colleges not boasting large A-level provisions, the data highlights a significant proportion of young people entering VET.

Adding to analysis of post-16 destinations, the GCSE outcomes figures in table 2.6 show a large proportion of young people not achieving the minimum requirement in Mathematics and English (grade C or equivalent) at the three fieldwork schools. This will potentially have a dual affect as the 'gatekeeping' function of these GCSE subjects (Cornish 2017a) could prevent young people accessing level 2 and 3 vocational courses, pushing them into the lowest level of VET. While it will also result in the need to retake GCSE/level 2 Mathematics and English under the most recent policy changes (Fergusson 2014).

In summary, while participation in post-16 education and training is no longer to be enforced, issues remain around the nature and experience of post-16 transitions. It could be suggested that DfE monitoring will motivate schools to promote safe and secure post-16 options to ensure young people transition to a 'sustained destination', and to reduce NEET plus not known through sheltering and easy tracking (Fergusson 2014). The concern is that this will create a focus on meeting DfE targets rather than

prioritising the needs of individuals. Indeed Maguire (2015a) suggests that, while tracking is important to understand where young people are and what they are doing, sheltering young people could simply delay the issue of non-participation by putting young in post-16 provision that entrenches rather than disrupts exclusion and marginalisation.

Additionally, as described previously, low attainment in GCSE Mathematics and English, and the 'gatekeeping' function of those subjects (Cornish 2017a), will mean those staying in education will largely be confined to low-level VET. In the context of challenging economic conditions and youth unemployment, it could be suggested that young people in low-level VET are among the most affected by positional competition (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010) and the new tripartism of post-16 education and training (Ainley and Allen). Of interest therefore is whether occupying such marginal learning spaces (Simmons, Russel, and Thompson 2014) is simply preparing young people for marginal employment (Atkins 2013).

Finally, in addition to the potential issues outlined above, the policy changes requiring young people to retake GCSE/level 2 Mathematics and English until they achieve a passing grade, and the removal of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), has arguably made prolonged participation in education less desirable (Fergusson 2014). All of which highlights the importance of investigating what prolonged participation means for young people, the range of experiences associated with further education and training, and the circumstances under which young people make decisions in the context of their post-16 transitions.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 set out to contextualise and critique the RPA policy, situating it within socioeconomic change and evolving social policy. In doing so, the chapter unpacks the rhetoric and dynamics surrounding the policy. This is achieved by considering historicised perspectives on extending periods of participation in education alongside more contemporary analysis of the social and economic conditions that frame school-to-work transitions and rationales for RPA.

Reflecting on events leading up to the introduction of RPA, it is clear that the policy has emerged from a philosophy of extending periods of participation in education, starting more than 100 years ago. However, it is important to recognise the changing contexts and discourses that have shaped perceptions surrounding young people's participation. In particular, labour markets and economic imperatives have become ever more influential in education and education policy during this time (Fergusson 2014; Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011b).

The discussion around the evolution of the RPA policy between 2008 and 2013 brings such changing contexts and discourses into focus. Linked to concepts of human capital and employability (Fevre, Rees and Gorard 1999; Heinz 2009), initial conceptions of RPA were characterised by debates around social mobility and social inclusion/exclusion, and the notion that prolonged periods of participation in education and training would resolve aspects of disadvantage and marginalisation through school-to-work transitions (see for example, Simmons 2008; Maguire 2013; Fergusson 2014).

However, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the shift to a coalition/Conservative government saw a move away from enforcing participation due to concerns around the costs and a desire to maintain the option for a supply of cheap labour (Fergusson 2014). The issue then for young people experiencing extended participation is that they are entering a post 16 education and training system in tension, conflicted between social ideals, political-economic, and Governance rationales (*ibid.*). Therefore, greater focus on lived experiences of extended participation is required to understand how the tension between these rationales is playing out in practice.

Contributing to high-level understandings of how RPA is playing out, the data tables presented in this chapter depict a policy that is achieving the desired effects. NEET levels have been declining and the proportion of young people entering and sustaining post 16 destinations have been increasing. However, drilling down into the data and monitoring of RPA poses some critical questions.

Most pertinently, the participation and qualification data presented earlier in the chapter highlight that, although increasing numbers of young people are entering and sustaining post 16 education and training destinations, significant numbers are failing

to meet the required pass grades for GCSE Mathematics and English. Coupled with the RPA policy changes, which moved away from enforcement, removed EMA payments, and introduced the need to retake failed Mathematics and English exams, significant concerns remain around the desirability of extended participation in education and training. Such concerns reflect previously explored issues of discouraged workers (Raffe and Willms 1989)/reluctant learners (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; McDowell 2003), which noted classed dynamics of post 16 learning. In the current context of required (although not enforced) participation, the challenge for RPA is overcoming the classed differentiation between post 16 education and training in terms of it being desired (middle-class) or required (working-class) (Furlong 2009).

Furthermore, by placing an emphasis on the monitoring of sustained and trackable post 16 destinations, the DfE have potentially propagated a motivation for schools to promote 'safe' and 'secure' post 16 destinations that increase ease of tracking, and reduce NEET plus not known figures. Combined with the gatekeeping function of GCSEs in structuring post 16 opportunities (Cornish 2017a), many young people could be steered towards the marginal learning spaces of low-level VET. Thus, linking back to Fergusson's rationales, modalities, and priorities for raising the age of participation (2014, p.3), it should be considered that RPA and extended participation may be best characterised by warehousing and tracking, rather than social mobility, justice, or progress. Of interest is how such a rationale intersects with the experiences and dispositions of young people trying to navigate through post 16 education and training in order to negotiate social and labour market positions.

Additionally, this chapter has discussed how extended and expanded participation in post 16 education and training is problematised by factors such as qualification inflation and a new tripartism within post 16 participation (Ainley and Allen 2010). Both of these factors have the potential to increase positional competition (Brown 2013) and to create more complex/disguised forms of disadvantage and exclusion (Furlong 2009). Allied with the aforementioned policy changes on EMA payments and GCSE retakes, there is the potential for RPA to, at best, simply delay the issue of non-participation or marginal employment (Maguire 2009; Atkins 2013) and, at worst, entrench and intensify disadvantage and exclusion.

The question is then how RPA affects the school-to-work transitions, relationships with learning, and the issue of (non)participation for those experiencing extended participation. This thesis therefore examines the lived experiences of participation/non-participation in the context of RPA and the tension created between participation and learning when trying to engage those for whom school has been unrewarding (Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014). To contextualise and situate this study of lived experiences, the following chapter explores the key literature and research in the context of transitions, education and (extended) participation.

Chapter 3: Literature review

Introduction

Young people regularly find themselves at the sharp end of political, public, and academic debates. Concerns around school-to-work transitions, education, and matters of participation, inclusion and engagement often take centre stage. At the heart of these concerns are issues of youth unemployment and non-participation in the context of education and training, as well as the view that a failure to achieve smooth transitions into secure employment, adulthood and independence is harmful for young people and society more widely (Ainley and Allen 2010).

Sociology has played a key, and sometimes leading, role in these debates, particularly when considering social change and continuity. While in some respects debates and concerns in this field have evolved and transformed, in many respects, they have remained stubbornly steadfast in their fundamental focus. The following review of literature will therefore seek to examine the key debates around the concepts of education, transition, and youth with the aim of illuminating the changes and continuities that exist conceptually, theoretically, and substantively. In so doing, the following review of literature aims to situate the key debates in this field within contemporary contexts and conceptualisations. In turn this will help characterise the lens and framework through which an investigation of young people's transitions from school to post-16 education and training will be carried out.

With the disappearance of many traditional labour market opportunities, transitions from school to work have become increasingly complex, ambiguous and elongated for large numbers of young people (see for example, Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000; Bynner 2005; Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes 2010). As a result of labour market changes and uncertainties around transitions into employment, participation in education and training has become ever more critical (see for example, Furlong 2009; Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014; Simmons and Smyth 2016). With extended periods of participation (in education and training) being championed through initiatives such as widening participation and raising the participation age, education is essentially positioned as *the* way to address issues arising from transitions associated with risk and uncertainty (see for example, Thompson 2011; Snee and Devine 2014;

Simmons and Smyth 2016). Furthermore, RPA is part of a much wider perspective that is associated with processes of social mobility, social justice, and social inclusion, and with aims of increased productivity and economic output (Maguire 2013; Simmons 2008). This is fundamentally premised on the transitions young people make from school to work (Maguire 2013) and the importance of making successful transitions into work for the achievement of social inclusion (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Shildrick and Macdonald 2007).

The primacy of viewpoints positioning education as a key tool for addressing wider socioeconomic challenges has, however, been problematised. One chief criticism is that contemporary, reductionist analyses relating to participation in, and outcomes from, education and training have superseded analyses examining the *process* of education and training (MacDonald and Marsh 2005), and how participation in these processes play out in practice.

Focusing on RPA, and more specifically the notion of participation, this study is interested in three key bodies of research and literature:

1. **Transitions:** School-to-work and youth transitions

RPA is chiefly concerned with journeys young people make from education into employment and, subsequently, forms of inclusion and independence associated with traditional conceptions of adulthood. In this context, participation is examined through lens of inclusion in dominant constructions of preferred pathways that symbolise the route to achieving 'successful' transitions. Such modes of transition are generally characterised by smooth journeys through education into employment and into economic independence and social inclusion.

2. **Education:** relationships between participation, learning and inequality

Studies of schooling and education have served to highlight various factors that are complicit in the (re)production of inequality. In particular, sociologists of education have illuminated the significance of experiences and interactions in shaping young people's opportunities and subjectivities in relation to dispositions towards and outcomes from learning environments.

3. **Conceptualisation of participation/non-participation:** Exclusion, marginalisation, and disengagement

Linked to transitions and education, a diverse body of literature examines how young people are positioned relative to forms of participation and non-participation. These conceptualisations are concerned with understanding young people's structural situations in the context of relationships with learning and labour markets. This chapter will therefore review key research on school-to-work transitions and the sociology of education before focusing in on processes of education and training and what participation actually means for those experiencing it. A further section will then explore research which has a more specific focus on low-level VET, non-participation and NEET, and experiences of learning within marginal learning spaces.

It will be argued that current conceptualisations of participation are too narrow, reductionist, and superficial, as they do not account for the richness and complexity of lived experiences. Of specific interest are experiences of learning and learning environments, and how these are in tension with dominant constructions of participation for those occupying marginal learning spaces (Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014).

The focus on lived experience is particularly pertinent at a time when disadvantages are obscured by increasingly complex and ambiguous transitions, and inequalities are subverted by discourses of individualisation (see for example, Furlong 2009; France and Haddon 2014). Viewing these matters through the lens of participation can therefore shed light on how structural forces and capacities for agency shape young people's disadvantage and inequality at the level of experience and interaction.

Transitions

The nature of transitions

Studies on school to work transitions have played a central role in the sociology of education and youth, and in developing insights into the operation and (re)production of inequalities and disadvantages. Various conceptualisations of school-to-work transitions have been produced, with many focusing on patterns and modes of transition. A central theme has been the changing nature of transitions with scholars

debating the extent to which, and ways in which, transitions have evolved (see for example, Goodwin and O'Connor 2007; Vickerstaff 2003; Roberts S and France 2020). An important idea within these debates is that transitions have become more fractured and uncertain in recent decades (Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000; Bynner 2001; Roberts S 2011).

Challenging the view of increasingly fractured transitions are those who suggest the transitions experienced by previous generations were not as smooth and uncomplicated as is often portrayed in contemporary research (see for example, Goodwin and O'Connor 2007; Vickerstaff 2003). The concepts of risk and uncertainty have also been used to characterise transitions that no longer hold any of the familiarities of routes into particular forms of professional or practical jobs associated with previous decades (Beck 1992).

A particularly prominent debate has emerged from proclamations around a perceived individualisation of youth transitions, forwarding the view that traditional markers defining transitions routes (class, gender etc.) no longer apply in such explicit and broadly-defining ways (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Avis and Atkins 2017). The suggestion is that structural issues now manifest at the individual level. Such perspectives have stimulated debate on what this means for young people's transitions and decision-making. A key feature of this debate has centred on conflicting interpretations of 'choice biographies' (Woodman and Wyn 2014). At the heart of this contestation is the extent to which young people manage their own biographies in light of changing social conditions.

Responding to notions of individualisation, various ideas have sought to capture the dynamics of structure-agency-individualisation. Ken Roberts (1997) forwarded the idea of structured individualisation which positioned structural forces as dominant to agency. In this conceptualisation, individualisation represents the fracturing and loosening of traditional modes and patterns of transition. Offering an alternative view, Evans (2007) proposed the notion of bounded agency. In this formulation, young people have increased capacity to exert agency and to self-direct their futures, but these capacities are bound by structural forces that act to limit or constrain.

Providing an insightful perspective on the matter, Furlong (2006) posits the idea of an epistemological fallacy whereby structural factors have simply become obscured by the complexity of late modernity. Furlong's analysis of how young people's transitions appear to be more individualised and reflexive, but simultaneously persist in reflecting more traditional inequalities, is a useful one as it allows a more complex understanding of the relationship between the 'individual' and social structures.

Moreover, in the modern world young people face new risks and opportunities. The traditional links between the family, school and work seem to have weakened as young people embark on journeys into adulthood which involve a variety of routes, many of which appear to have uncertain outcomes (Allen 2016; Roberts S 2018a). But the greater range of opportunities available helps to obscure the extent to which existing patterns of inequality are simply being reproduced in different ways (Furlong 2007, p.7). This raises the question of how more recent studies of youth and transition have embraced this complexity.

Key debates on the changing nature of school-to-work transitions do however largely neglect the minutiae of lived experiences of participation and their effects on transition. Emerging from the various conceptualisations of individualisation is therefore a need to understand how contemporary transitions play out at the micro level, the level at which complexities and implicit factors can be explored and examined. Offering a useful contribution to a micro level of analysis, O'Connor (2014) examines the subjective dimensions of agency and reflexivity, emphasising the value of exploring young people's decision-making and understandings around transitions:

> the subjective elements of agency and reflexivity form the crux of the individualisation debate. It is people's micro-level responses to, and understandings of, a changing social structure that both Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) highlight as important focal points. Second, while social research has concentrated on the more objective elements that shape people's abilities to act and reflect, it has largely ignored how young people themselves understand, plan for, and make decisions about their school-to-work transitions (p.376)

Emerging from O'Connor's analysis is the concept of 'degrees of reflexivity', which finds parallels with earlier work by Reay (2005) around 'degrees of choice'. Both analyses principally forward the view that choice, agency, and reflexivity – factors

associated with the notion of individualisation – are differentiated and constrained. Proposed is the idea that structural/contextual factors play a role in the level of access individuals have to self-directed decision-making and transitions, and consequently, in access to individualisation and biographicity.

Reflecting on O'Connor's degrees of reflexivity, the subjective dimensions of agency and reflexivity are key to understanding how young people are responding to, and planning for, modes of transition shaped by RPA. Perhaps underdeveloped in this field of work is an analysis of how lived experiences within various transition routes shape subjectivities around agency and reflexivity. Investigating experiences of school, post-16 education and training, and interactions within these environments can illuminate the dynamics that interact with young people's actions and decision-making. Essentially, including lived experiences in the analysis of agency and reflexivity/ subjectivities introduces the matter of extended participation – combining young people's perspectives and understandings with the substantive aspects of how these play out in practice.

Changing transitions/ social change

A contemporary theme within youth sociology is that which portrays young people growing up in a risk society (Beck 1992) that reflects the restructuring and transformation of key social institutions (Cieslik and Pollock 2002). It is suggested that this has resulted in the emergence of new patterns of identity formation, and with it, the production of new constructions of division and inequality (Cieslik and Pollock 2002). The focus on wider patterns of youth and transition has signalled a move away from the cultural studies of youth of the 1970s and 1980s (Wyn and White 1997) in favour of descriptions of young people's structural situations (MacDonald and Marsh 2005) that are defined by range of factors and statuses that label young people as being at risk or in trouble (Bottrell 2007; Miles 2000; Hayden 2007). Indeed, RPA engages with such notions with its focus on moving young people across statuses from non-participation to participation and also in its identification of risk factors for non-participation.

The privileging of structural analyses can be linked to the what works agenda (Farnsworth and Solomon 2013), whereby the outcomes of education are given

precedence over the process of education. However, neglecting the process of education overlooks the role of experiences in shaping outcomes (Gorard 2010). Various studies have examined the multifarious aspects of education and schooling which shape young people's dispositions and orientations towards participation in education (see for example, Archer and Yamashita 2003a; Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010; Ball, Macrae and Maguire 1999; Foskett, Dyke and Maringe 2008; Gorard 2010; Ross 2009). Young people's experiences of education and schooling, the cultures they create, and the perceptions they form are therefore key to understanding young people's relationships with, and responses to, an increasingly complex landscape shaped by risk (Cieslik and Pollock 2002; Simmons and Smyth 2016; Skelton 2002).

Richer exploration of the nature and quality of participation is perhaps particularly relevant for young people that have experienced disengagement and exclusion at school, as educational policy is often criticised for being premised on future employment needs as opposed to current educational needs (Mannion 2005). Furthermore, the attention given to employability, and reductionist analyses equating participation (in education) to employment (Maguire 2013; Mannion 2005; Spielhofer *et al.* 2007), creates a concern that wider structural issues and aspects of disadvantage are neglected or obscured (Percy-Smith and Weil 2002). A detailed ethnography of lived experiences can therefore serve to amplify the voice of young people and illuminate experiences of disadvantage and marginalisation.

The value of the transitions framework

More widely, the continued value of transitions as an analytical lens has been called into question within the field of youth studies (MacDonald *et al*. 2001; Wyn and Woodman 2006; Roberts 2007; Wyn and Woodman 2007; Woodman and Wyn 2015; Roberts S and France 2020). It is suggested that the concept of transition tends to create a narrow focus on a process of linear development based on economistic analyses of linkages between education and employment (Wyn and Woodman 2006; Fergusson 2016). Furthermore, transition discourses have been criticised for not capturing the experiences of young people who experience fluid transitions characterised by multiple movements and multiple trajectories (Fergusson *et al.* 2000).

In addition to question marks around the continued value of transition as a concept, a more specific concern seeks to look beyond school-to-work models of transition (Vaughan and Roberts 2007). It is suggested that such models 'tell us something about *what* people are doing but it would not tell us much about *what that means* to them' (*ibid.* p.92). Perhaps then, value can be found in exploring lived experiences in order to produce a framework that better represents the nature of young people's journeys and situations in contemporary contexts. In doing so, exploring the factors that come to bear on young people's positions within the field of education and employment.

<u>Structure and agency</u>

A range of research on the relative role of structure and agency in shaping school-to-work transitions emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Two key concepts symbolise the range of perspectives. The term 'structured individualisation' was developed by Ken Roberts and colleagues (1994), which suggested that young people do display agency, but that decision-making and transitions are shaped by structural factors. Similarly, the notion of 'bounded agency' developed by Karen Evans (2007) posits that young people's subjectivities are influenced by contextual factors that can develop or divert agency.

Emerging from this analysis of the influences of structure and agency is what Evans 2007) describes as a range of transition behaviours, where transition behaviours are described as:

> …the patterns of activity people adopt in attempting to realise their personal interests and occupational goals within social requirements and structural opportunities (p.3)

In total Evans describes four transition behaviours (2007, p.4):

- Strategic

- Step-by-step

- Taking chances

- Wait and see

Evans (2007) suggests, these behaviours reflect the permeation of meritocratic discourses and the view that 'if you 'failed' in life, this was probably your own fault and down to a lack of effort and determination' (p.11). Evans (2007) concludes that the consequences of this are that, in highly structured environments it is believed that there is 'less scope for individual, proactive effort' (p.13) while 'one consequence of an environment that fosters a belief that 'opportunities are open to all' is that people blame themselves for their failures in education and the labour market' (p.14).

This then begs the question of what sort of environment does the English education system create and what influence, if any, will RPA have on this? The neoliberalisation of education in England, through the development of competition between schools and the promotion of 'choice', certainly on face value suggests it is a system that offers an openness of opportunity. Putting the role of attainment to one side for a moment, the impact of RPA on freedom of choice of post-16 options cannot be underestimated.

Where previously the decision to remain in education or training post-16 was, superficially at least, a free choice, the advent of RPA has shifted the dynamics. By placing the responsibility for post-16 participation with local authorities and schools, there is arguably more direct intervention in young people's post-16 destinations. The precise terminology states that Local Authorities and, by proxy, schools, are responsible for ensuring young peoples' transitions into 'appropriate post-16 destinations' (DfE 2014). Therefore schools, sometimes through work delivered internally but sometimes delivered by external providers, are increasingly making a direct intervention into the decision making of young people.

The devolved responsibility through the 'September Guarantee' (DfE 2014) has meant that the potentially defining post-16 transition is based on the direction of schools. This can be problematised due to the selective attitudes of schools and the very functionalist approach to the non-participation-participation duality that is being promoted through RPA. The new tripartism of further education and training (Allen 2007), with the divide between the academic A-levels, the technically orientated BTECs and the more employability and skills focused vocational options, combined with the pressure on schools to ensure 'participation', has meant young people are increasingly

pushed or lured towards options that are 'appropriate' and will ensure success, or more cynically, options that match their abilities.

The influence of structural factors will inevitably still play their part in this process, however, the increasingly managed and monitored transitions will certainly affect Evans' 'taking chances' and 'wait and see' transition behaviours with a growing rejection of these transition behaviours as acceptable. Even prior to the implementation of RPA, the last 10 years has seen increasingly heavy policing of the NEET population (Maguire 2010; 2013) and much espousal of the detrimental societal impact of 'NEETs' (Simmons 2008; Spielhofer *et al.* 2007; Maguire 2013). Consequently, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that transition options, and consequently behaviours, will become more closely regulated going forward. Furthermore, the uncertainty associated with current labour market transitions and the 'qualification inflation' (Ainley and Allen 2010), which could be intensified by RPA, will also play its part in the reconfiguration of the transition behaviours of year 11 students.

Therefore, the significance of youth transitions remains steadfast in light of an ever more complex social, political, and economic landscape. Through RPA, the significance and attention given to this first step in the school-to-work transition is further heightened. Complicated by uncertainty around future labour market opportunities, a growing pressure on the attainment of qualifications and skills and the demands of a materialistic and competitive capitalist society (Apple 2015), this period of young people's life course is certainly one worthy of investigation. While previous studies have offered a more sophisticated approach to understanding the interplay of structure and agency, and have provided insight into situations of young people, they have often overlooked rich biographies and processes of identity construction.

Education

Inequality

At the heart of debates with the sociology of education are persistent, pervasive, and pernicious inequities (Tomlinson 2005). In particular, sociologists have sought to examine why and how patterns of disadvantage and differentiated experiences and

outcomes are produced, reproduced, or disrupted (Coffey 2001; Furlong 2007). Highlighting this, Foster (1996) provides a useful summary of how the sociological investigation of educational inequality has evolved over time. Foster 1996) suggests that initial sociological concerns focused on home backgrounds and the varying degree to which these backgrounds provided socialisation necessary for engagement and achievement in school. This point is premised on 'the relative failure of working-class children compared to middle-class children' (Foster 1996, p.21). These early developments in the sociological study of inequalities in education were interested in the capacity or ability of individuals to be educated and so emphasis was placed on individual traits and characteristics as opposed to the system of education itself (Foster 1996).

The development of a 'new sociology of education' (Foster 1996, p.31) saw a move away from the study of individual characteristics and instead began to pay greater attention to the role of the education system (Foster 1996). This was initially premised on the notion of streaming where the lower streams were dominated by working-class children and being in a lower stream resulted in poorer attitudes towards school (Hargreaves 1967). It was therefore seen that this generally intensified educational inequalities between social classes (Foster 1996).

Across the two frameworks, particular themes have emerged as central points for debate and discussion. Social class and its linkages to educational achievement and performance is a long-standing feature of the sociology of education (Coffey 2001) with particular attention paid to the role of education systems in reproducing or interrupting social inequalities. Emanating from this literature is a perspective, described by Boudon (1974) as 'cultural theory' (p.23), that portrays the education system as fundamentally unequal and one that symbolises the cultural values of the middle-classes being imposed on those that do not conform to those values (Young 1971). This has been conceptualised by Pierre Bourdieu (1997) through his notion of cultural capital whereby those from the middle-class possess the skills, dispositions and attitudes required by the dominant values of the education system and those from the working-class do not. In this regard inequalities are seen to manifest as a result of the 'cultural opportunities afforded by families according to their social background' (Boudon 1974,p.23).

Providing a complimentary perspective in the context of unequal cultural resources, Apple (2012; 2015) explores the role of schooling in social control and the maintenance of subordination. It is suggested that:

> 'The control of schools, knowledge and everyday life can be, and is, more subtle for it takes in even seemingly inconsequential moments. The control is vested in the constitutive principles, codes and especially the common sense consciousness and the practices underlying our lives, as well as by overt economic division and manipulation' (Apple 1990, p.4).

Education therefore serves to disguise disadvantages, legitimising structural outcomes through subjectivities and experiences of education (Apple 1992). The work of Bernstein (2000) is also relevant here, with his work advancing the notion unequal access to the 'official text' that defines the purpose and content of education. Young people who do not follow the official text are therefore positioned as rejecting the dominant culture of schooling and are consequently marginalised and excluded.

A further reproductionist perspective is proffered by Bourdieu (1997) through his notion of cultural capital, proposing that this resource is distributed unevenly across social classes, thus differentiating how people can profit from education. Sitting alongside a variety of other forms of capital, those that can acquire more capital than others are able to occupy and maintain higher social positions (Bourdieu & Passerson 1990). This, like Bernstein and Apple, is seen as a way for social divisions to be maintained in a capitalist society and to ensure education enables those with more capital to maintain higher social and occupational positions while simultaneously ensuring those with less capital are maintained in lower social and occupational positions. Examining the minutiae of everyday practices can therefore reveal the ways in which control, subordination, and inequalities and (re)produced or disrupted.

<u>Meritocracy, mobility, and inclusion</u>

Education has often been portrayed as an answer to a range of crime, health, welfare, economic, employment and inequality issues (Haveman and Wolfe 1984) and there is an ever more influential political narrative of an important link between education, employment, opportunity, and social inclusion (Gillborn and Youdell 2006). It is a narrative that promotes the significance of attainment and achievement in equalising opportunities (Levin and Kelley 1994) and one that has created a focus on

qualifications and skills as means to achieving success (Brown and Lauder 1997; Levin and Kelley 1994; Spielhofer *et al.* 2007). RPA reinforces these perspectives through its drive to ensure young people continue in education or training to increase their attainment of qualifications and develop their acquisition of skills (Spielhofer *et al*. 2007).

One of the tensions that exist in the context of an increasing drive for improved attainment of qualifications and skills is the conflict between the notion of meritocracy on one hand and the socially structured reproduction of inequality on the other. The notion of meritocracy, where achievement is rewarded, has become a dominant feature of policy (Vincent 2003; Levitas 2005). Furthermore, Evans (2007a), reports that it has permeated the mentalities and discourses of young people. In her study of the concept of bounded agency she finds that young people accept the idea that 'if you ''failed'' in life, this was probably your own fault and down to a lack of effort and determination' (p.89).

Finding fault with this view, Brown (1997) claims that 'meritocracy is based on giving everyone an equal chance of being unequal' (p.70). This highlights a critical outlook on meritocracy, which recognises that processes of attainment and skill acquisition do not take place in a 'social vacuum' (Brown and Lauder 1997). What is not fully known however is what influence this focus on attainment and skills is having on young people experiences and narratives of education, training, and transition.

The view of education as a source of opportunity is however strongly contested. Levin and Kelley (2006) propose the idea that the role of education is overstated and in fact is heavily reliant on the availability of opportunities that education can be translated into. Without these opportunities the skills and qualifications gained through further education or training are unable to be 'cashed in' (Brown 2006). This is something that Brown (2006) has termed the 'opportunities trap' where a false reality is constructed, which leads to the belief that achieving more and better qualifications, and developing broader and more specialised skills, will lead to greater opportunities.

Following a similar line of argument, Atkins (2010) suggests the availability of opportunities are particularly mis-sold to young people in low-level VET and employability programmes. Labelling it 'the great deception', Atkins highlights how

discourses around extending participation in education and training oversell the potential rewards for young people limited to accessing the lower levels of further education. All of which stems from supply side policies (Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014) that promote a link between education and employability, while overlooking the growing scarcity of secure, professional employment in a labour market now dominated by low-skills, service sector jobs (Roberts S 2012a).

It is suggested such circumstances increase positional competition (Halsey *et al.* 1997), with young people from the 'missing middle' experiencing a low skills trap (Roberts S 2012a) becoming stuck in low skill, precarious forms of employment as they are unable to compete with those following academic pathways. Thus, with RPA requiring participation in post-16 education and training, it is therefore important to know how young people view and respond to extended periods of participation in the context of opportunity, competition, and meritocracy.

Experiences of schooling

In the context of this research, young people's school experiences are seen as an important starting point for investigating their post-16 transitions. While the idea that school experiences directly impact on post-16 transitions, and attitudes to education more widely, is contested (Ross 2009), an ethnographic investigation of these experiences will offer an insight into the mechanisms and cultures that act to shape and influence the complex and differentiated nature of young people's educational participation. Indeed, Hammersley (1999) suggests that researching school experiences allows the focus to move beyond simply the outputs of education and towards the process itself.

This is especially pertinent at a time when education and schools are undergoing significant ongoing change, there is an argument for reinvigorating the more illuminating ethnographic investigation of young peoples' experiences within these changing worlds. In terms of the focus of such investigation, (Woods and Hammersley 1984, p.1) identify a number of key areas which have been theorised through ethnographic insights. They include: many aspects of attitudes and behaviours, processes of subject and occupational choice, responses to school organisation such as

streaming, orientations towards school, relations within school, teacher pupil and school cultures and responses and adaptations towards school.

The emergence of critical studies on schooling in the 1970s saw the development of reproductionist perspectives, which challenged the view of schools as sites of meritocratic upward mobility (Levinson and Holland 1996). Reproductionist analyses sought to demonstrate the ways in which schools reproduced rather than disrupted inequalities. The concept of school resistance is heavily tied up in the work of reproduction theorists, Paul Willis being a key contributor to this field.

Paul Willis (1977) in his influential work 'Learning to labour - How working class kids get working class jobs', sought to demonstrate how the rejection of academic schooling, and the perceived superiority of manual work by the young men he studied, was directly related to the culture of their social class background. Willis' ethnographic study portrayed a group of working-class 'lads' (1977) who displayed active resistance towards the capitalistic rules and norms of the school. Willis showed that the lads did not accept the capitalist discourses of competition and meritocracy, recognising that their socioeconomic position rendered their conformity within school meaningless. It was suggested that the perceived determinism of social class led the lads to take on a range of anti-school dispositions, reproducing their social position.

Similarly, Ashton and Field (1976) identified clearly demarcated trajectories whereby a person's family background determined school level and subsequent position in the labour market. Their analysis suggested continuous identities and transitions as young people's self-image, including their orientation to learning and to work, was shaped by the type of upbringing they experienced in the family, and was reinforced at school and in the workplace. Focusing on the structural determinants of social class, these studies ignored the subjective experiences of young people and were essentially deterministic, denying the agency of young people who were seen as passively socialised into accepting pre-determined trajectories.

While the general premise of this analysis no doubt still finds accord with contemporary school dynamics, the narrowness of the binary resistance-conformity perspective has perhaps moved on. Social, economic, and political changes have manifested in an increased centrality of education in young people's lives. High rates

of participation in compulsory schooling, further education and training and higher education has placed a premium on the attainment of qualifications and the acquisition of skills in accessing labour market opportunities (Furlong 2007; Spielhofer *et al*. 2007; Ainley and Allen 2010). Arguably then, resistance to and conformity with education must be re-assessed in this light.

More contemporary theorisations have shown a general shift towards the acceptance of educational attainment as necessary for positive life chances (Evans 2007). So, while resistance may still occur in some form, it has undoubtedly altered. Indeed, Maguire (2013; 2010) proposes the notion that cultural divides on the view of education have now become characterised by a growing instrumentalism. Rather than values being negatively or positively oriented towards the school and teachers, it is suggested resistance and conformity has now become a function of the perceived role and goals of education. The traditional middle-class viewing education as a process of attainment leading to access to wider opportunities, and the traditional working-class viewing education as a tool for developing skills for work.

Furthermore, intensification of the focus on educational participation, characterised by the recent introduction of the raising the participation age policy, suggests that resistance to school is becoming a more deeply problematic and marginalising phenomenon in current contexts. This is especially the case as young people extend their period of educational participation into post-16 education and training. An ethnographic study of resistant cultures in school and into post-16 will therefore provide a contemporary look at if, and how, resistance manifests, and how this is maintained or disrupted in a longitudinal sense as young people transition into and through post-16 education and training.

However, a rich account of how dispositions and attitudes towards schooling and education play out in practice, and in everyday lived experiences, is absent from much recent literature. Such accounts are therefore central to our understanding how young people are responding to the growing centrality of education for labour market opportunities, and an intensification of policy aimed at extending and expanding educational participation. This is particularly pertinent for those young people who are the tensioned position of recognising the need for education while finding themselves,

much like Willis' lads, on the wrong end of inequality. A school/college ethnography of educational disadvantage can therefore contribute new perspectives on how young people are reconciling their tensioned experiences of participation in education.

Streaming and differentiation

The influence of streaming also provides a useful insight into the dynamics of differentiation within schools. Peter Woods (1976) however, in his review of Dale and Griffith's (1966) study on pupil achievement, highlights that for many, the study of pupils' achievement deterioration in the context of school policy, teacher practices and pupil perspectives was not considered worthy of investigation. The possibility that ability streaming, might have consequences for teacher-pupil interaction and thus deteriorating performance only became apparent when subsequent studies researched the process holistically from inside and revealed the negative impact of these procedures. Both Hargreaves (1967) and Lacey (1970) specifically addressed streaming and its effects on working class children in differentiating them from their high achieving peers in the schools they studied. These single site ethnographies were later complimented by Ball (1981), who took up the issue of class much more explicitly in questioning what social mechanisms were at play in schools to explain the unsatisfactory performance of working-class pupils.

Ball's study, conducted at a time when growing tensions were appearing between symbolic interactionism and Althusserian Marxism, combined both interactionist and structural perspectives in detailing the constructed nature of pupil identities as they negotiated the streamed social environment of the school. Hammersley (1990), in reviewing the combined efforts of Hargreaves, Lacey and Ball, concluded that this cumulative project, with its interrelated theoretical ideas tested in different settings, was probably unique in contemporary sociology of education research. He dubbed their collective findings the 'differentiation-polarisation theory' as it demonstrated with commendable clarity that streaming or banding pupils according to academic-behavioural criteria had the effect of polarising attitudes in the school population, with those ranked lowest subsequently rejecting the values of the institution.

In the current context of educational expansion and diversification, where young people are expected to stay in education and training for longer and they are given

more choice in what they can study or train in, educational participation and educational attainment are becoming increasingly important. The increasing number of young people completing further, and higher education has led to qualification inflation (Ainley and Allen 2010) and the reality that educational credentials may not guarantee employment opportunities, but without them opportunities will be sparse. Therefore, investigation of the contemporary school experiences of young people may shed some light on the ways in which they continue to be differentiated.

Furthermore, there is an ever more influential political narrative of an important link between education, employment, opportunity, and social inclusion (Gillborn and Youdell 2006). However, popular and policy views of education as a tool through which empowerment and social mobility can be fostered are problematised by theorisations of differentiation-polarisation (Spielhofer *et al.* 2007). This is particularly pertinent in the context of increases in post-16 participation which, Ainley and Allen (2010) suggest, has been followed by a new tripartism of academic-vocational-low level education.

Young people are not just being streamed and differentiated within compulsory schooling, but also within ongoing modes of learning. The academic literature has arguably not kept up with the changes that have taken place in reactions to experiences of streaming and differentiation in the context of increases in post compulsory participation. New insights into how streaming and differentiation play out in the broader post-16 education and training system can therefore develop understanding around the contemporary dynamics of polarisation.

Offering a micro level analysis of participation within the classroom context, Hammersley (1990) reflects on the actions and approaches of teachers in organising pupil participation. In this instance, participation is associated with notions of authority, discipline, and behaviour – all key aspects of what teachers perceived to be necessary for effective pupil participation. By observing classroom dynamics and teacher actions, Hammersley (1990) was able to discern dominant conceptualisations of participation and 'the knowledge which teachers present' (p.16), which define expectations for participation.

In particular, the study highlighted that teachers sought close control of classroom interactions and behaviours, and that such dynamics were achieved through authority and discipline (*ibid.*). The research also revealed however the tensions teachers experienced in implementing various strategies. Specifically, teachers wanted students to interact and engage in the lesson, but to do so in a controlled manner as to avoid 'over-participation' (*ibid.*). Hammersley's study emphasises a key aspect of classroom participation, namely that teacher-student interactions and classroom dynamics not only shape participation but also the nature and dynamics of participation. This is particularly useful in the context of RPA and an examination of how teachers seek to organise participation with young people who are disenfranchised and disaffected with the learning environment.

Such perspectives also highlight the value of ethnography in achieving deeper and richer descriptions of how participation plays out in practice. Furthermore, an ethnographic approach was able to reveal the complexity of organising participation within the classroom and how interconnected teacher-student interactions shaped young people's lived experiences. In contrast to the authoritative approach described in Hammersley's study, more recent research has highlighted the effectiveness of rapport oriented approaches to pupil participation (Duffy and Elwood 2013). Focusing particularly on disadvantaged young people, Duffy and Elwood suggest that more informal, rapport focused, teacher-student interactions, which aim to develop positive relationships, are more productive in achieving positive participation.

However, various studies (see for example, Atkins 2013; Ecclestone 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes 2009; Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011a) have shown potentially harmful consequences of teacher approaches, focused on rapport and relationships, that slip into therapy rather than learning. Such research has shown that a rise in 'therapeutic education' (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009), particularly with marginalised learners, has led to classrooms characterised by uncriticality, a lack of challenge, and a fear of student disengagement. All of which has been shown to stigmatise young people and entrench their marginality within learning (Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014), and therefore their marginality within employment. The bigger concern is therefore whether a pursuit for participation in learning is actually leading to forms non-participation in employment (Atkins 2019).

Teacher-student relationships

One of the key aspects of experiences in school, particularly relating to participation and attainment, is the relationships between teachers and students (Duffy and Elwood 2013). Having a positive relationship with teachers, which is based on respect and understanding, is identified as a significant factor in motivation and engagement (Duffy and Elwood 2013). To situate this culturally, the work of Hargreaves (1967) can be used to describe the risk of a 'cultural clash' (p.83), which describes the differing and opposing attitudes and values of teachers and students. Hargreaves (1967) points out that teachers, as a result of their educational experiences (further and higher education), are conditioned in the attitudes and values of the educational environment, which can make it challenging for them to adopt a sympathetic stance towards those who differ.

Woods (1983) goes further in detailing teacher-student relationships in his description of the nature of their interactions. Woods (1983) looks at the role, actions and strategies of teachers and students and the way that these create particular dynamics within the school and within the classroom. More contemporary studies have highlighted the role of teachers in creating learning environments that maintain or disrupt disadvantages (see for example, Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010; Ecclestone and Hayes 2009; Lawy 2010; Mannion 2005; Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011a; Smyth, Down and Mcinerney 2014). Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth (2010) look at the significance of teachers creating learning environments built on respect and reciprocity, highlighting the importance of such dynamics in supporting the participation of disadvantaged young people.

All of which emphasises the importance of studies that examine the minutiae of classroom environments and teacher-student relationships in understanding experiences of engagement and participation. Therefore, from the RPA perspective of ensuring that young people want to participate in education or training post-16, it may prove useful to examine the ways in which structural and cultural factors manifest in the micro level interactions of the school.

(Dis)engagement and learner identities

Issues of disengagement, exclusion, and marginalisation have been significant features of much education-focused research. Such concerns are particularly apparent at a time when non-participation in education has gained ascendency in policy debates, and disengagement is positioned as a central explanation (Fergusson 2013). Understanding the nature of young people's (non)participation in education is therefore a key role for research in this field. One of the ways in which the manifestation of educational inequity has been constructed is through the experiences and interactions young people have within the educational settings (Woods 1983; Hargreaves 1967), the focus of which has been the way that young people become disengaged (Duffy and Elwood 2013) or excluded (Macrae, Maguire, and Milbourne 2003) from education and school and the impact this has on participation and achievement.

The focus on factors such as engagement and exclusion lead to a duality between either resistance or conformity (Bottrell 2007) in the sense that to be engaged and included requires conformity to the values and norms of the school and resistance to these will lead to exclusion and disengagement. As highlighted earlier, the idea of resistance was popularised by Willis (1977) in his depiction of a working-class culture that resisted the middle-class cultures of the school. More contemporary perspectives however have tended to promote the idea being at risk or in trouble (Hayden 2007) in describing negative experiences of education. This move towards more individualised conceptions of marginalisation reflects the current thinking around youth, education, and transition so the significance of this in the context of RPA may be a worthwhile perspective to take.

One of the most significant contributions of research in the area of educational participation, is the 'role of schooling in the shaping of "inclusionary" and "exclusionary" transitions (MacDonald and Marsh 2005, p.48). Archer *et al.* (2010) link participation to young people's construction of being 'good' and being 'bad'. Their study of 53 secondary school students in urban schools found that young peoples' association with being 'good', 'bad', or a combination of both, was complex and that their subjectivities were constructed based on a range of factors (*ibid).* They suggest that these subjectivities are constructed with reference to an imagined 'good student' (*ibid*, p.99). Youdell (2006) suggests that this revolves around identity categories, one

of which centres on the notion of a 'good' or 'ideal' learner (*ibid*, p,99). The 'good learner' is marked by:

> obedience, politeness, eagerness to learn, inquisitiveness, acquiescence to adult authority, restraint, cleanliness, asexuality, helpfulness, friendliness, good sense and common sense, childishness, maturity (ibid).

In turn, the 'ideal learner' is:

> constituted through discourses of ability (or intelligence) and even educability and, in the context of marketisation and the benchmarking of high stakes tests, through discourses of attainment and predicted attainment (ibid).

Archer et al. (2010) discuss how the antithesis of this, the lazy, disengaged, un-motivated 'bad student, is embedded in wider discourses around low working-class aspirations and poor attitudes to learning. Analysis of learner identities appears particularly pertinent in the context of the contemporary educational landscape. The intensification of the focus on educational participation, highlighted by a drive to extend periods of participation in education, is putting a greater pressure on young people to develop a motivation for learning and knowledge (Ainley and Allen 2010).

The way in which these issues are individualised is problematic as young people struggle to escape or shift their sense of being a bad learner (*ibid.*). Young people are often labelled as disengaged from education as they display behaviours that demonstrate frustration about their continued inability to meet the expectations and standards of teachers and the school (Duffy and Elwood 2013). Ross (2009) shows however that this disengagement is often misinterpreted. His analysis demonstrates that young people that are disengaged from school are commonly not disengaged with the idea of education; it is purely the nature and dynamics of the school that they disconnected from. This unfortunately is often neglected or not considered as young people's approach to school is often projected onto their perceived aspirations and general attitudes towards learning (Duffy and Elwood 2013).

These fixed notions of young people's educational identity persist in spite of research conducted over thirty years ago that demonstrated this is a dynamic rather than static process. Jenkins (1983), in his ethnographic study of a group of young men, highlighted how the lads, citizens and ordinary kids would shift between pro and anti-school

behaviours depending on the context. This emphasised the fluid nature of young people's identities and how the right conditions could stimulate engagement.

These critiques challenge the notion that young people play out straightforward and fixed identities that are often portrayed within policy and popular discourses, the NEET young person, the disengaged young person. This then emphasises the importance of understanding the factors involved in the construction of young people's learner identities in order to understand how the contemporary challenges of increasing educational participation can be met.

Extended participation: Conceptualisations of participation/non-participation

As has been discussed earlier, recent studies which investigate the fine-grain detail of, particularly post-16, education and training have been somewhat scarce. There are a few exceptions to this, including Bloomer and Hodkinson's (1996; 1998; 2000c) qualitative study of young people's decision-making and changing horizons across the post-16 transition, Simmons *et al.'s* (2011; 2011b; 2014; 2014) ethnographic study of work preparation programmes and NEET young people, and Atkins' (2010; 2012; 2013; 2015) analysis of decision-making and transitions in the context of low-level vocational education and employability programmes. However, they do not fully capture how the changing nature of post-16 education and training is blurring the lines between experiences of participation and non-participation. In particular, there is a limited focus on the effects of discourses which frame participation/non-participation as endogenised modes of engagement/disengagement (Fergusson 2013). This then demands a reconceptualisation of how what it means to be a participant or non-participant in the context of extended participation.

Key themes in studies of post-16 transitions

A range of studies from the 1990s and 2000s explore young people's post-16 decision-making (Hodkinson 1996; 1998; Foskett, Dyke and Maringe 2008; Archer and Yamashita 2003a) and how this translates into dispositions towards education and work (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000c). Other work during this period focused on the post-16 transition itself and issues of social exclusion and marginalisation (Ball, Macrae

and Maguire 1999; Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000; Bynner and Parsons 2002; MacDonald and Marsh 2005). These phenomena have also been revisited more recently in the context of low-level vocational education (Atkins 2010; Atkins 2013; Atkins and Flint 2015; Lawy 2010; Strathdee 2013; Reiter and Schlimbach 2015) and experiences of NEET and work preparation programmes (Simmons and Thompson 2011; Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011a; Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014; Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014).

This is perhaps particularly relevant for young people that have experienced disengagement and exclusion at school as educational policy is often criticised for being premised on future employment needs as opposed to current educational needs (Mannion 2005). RPA discourses promote the notion of improved employability through extended participation, offering a somewhat simplistic construction of the issue, unproblematically assuming participation will deliver positive outcomes.

This can be interrogated on both a subjective and objective level – young people's subjective orientations towards learning and work as a result of extended participation and their objective possibilities and opportunities structures based on what their participation enables them to do. In this context, young people's subjective orientations towards education and training take on greater importance in light of RPA, with the focus on young people having the desire to continue their participation post-16. In this vein, learner identities and learning careers become a central concern.

Opportunities structures also play a key role in defining what young people can achieve and how they experience extended participation. This is particular the case in the context of the perceived individualisation of youth transitions as young people see themselves as the directors of their own futures (Evans 2007). The important factor here is whether opportunities structures allow young people to realise the learner identities and learning careers they have constructed and, if not, what the consequences are of falling foul to the epistemological fallacy (Furlong 2009) of contemporary transitions.

The transitions young people make can also be situated within discourses of marginalization and exclusion. Such discourses challenge individualised constructions of a participation/ non-participation binary based on notions of

engagement/disengagement (Fergusson 2004; 2013; Simmons and Thompson 2013). The binary nature of these notions of participation emanate from increasingly empiricist analyses, which work on a simplistic model of NEET/ EET categorisations of young people present in much policy and practice (Maguire 2015a). The interrogation of reductionist thinking on modes of participation is further supported by the work of Atkins (2009; 2010; 2013) on experiences of low-level VET, and Simmons et al. on NEET young people and marginality (2008; 2014; 2014). As extended participation has the potential to 'push' young people away from NEET and into the marginal learning spaces of low-level VET, both fields of study are then central to situating analyses of the resultant modes and forms of (non)participation.

With a focus on extending participation, but without much attention given to the nature and experience of that participation, RPA runs the risk of neglecting the needs of the learners. The result of which could be further alienation and stigmatisation learners, with the consequence of entrenched and intensified forms of non-participation. It is therefore vital to understand the dimensions of post-16 education and training that shape how young people are situated relative to forms of participation and non-participation. In particular, further education, particularly vocational and basic skills education, has been criticised for simply warehousing young people until the labour market is ready for them (Maguire 2013). This essentially problematises the notion that extending participation in education is automatically a good thing, suggesting that extending the age of compulsory participation may intensify and entrench inequalities.

It is proposed that extending and expanding post-16 participation will only lead to further experiences of education shaped by class (Lawy 2010), characterised by a new tripartism with further education, comprising academic-vocational-low skill (employability) education (Ainley and Allen 2010). With low-level and employability focused VET heavily implicated in further marginalising young people from opportunities (Atkins 2009; Atkins 2010; Atkins 2013; Cornish 2017b; Cornish 2018; Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011a), RPA potentially risks not only maintaining, but also creating new forms of social division (Acquah and Huddleston 2014; Ainley and Allen 2010). In this light, the stratified nature of further education is seen as a

reflection of these class distinctions and of the (in)ability to 'get on' and progress in further education, thus representing a microcosm of wider social mobility issues.

Linking back to the broader context, the study of school-to-work transitions has historically focused on three main modes of transition (Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000).

1. Leaving school at 16 and attempting fast-track transitions into the labour market

2. Entering some form of vocational or technical post-16 education or training to develop skills for entry into the labour market at 18

3. Following academic routes to HE and then into the labour market

Much of the literature in this context appears to construct the vocational or technical route in a fairly simplistic way, as though young people go to college, participate in a course for two years and then attempt to enter the labour market. However, with greater numbers of young people now in further education, the expansion and diversification of, especially vocational, courses, and significant changes to labour market opportunities, this is arguably far from the reality.

Indeed, Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) argue that policy and academic literature largely misunderstands or misrepresents FE and young people's learning. They argue that rather than assuming further education involves a narrowing of an individual's educational focus (Coffield et al. 2008), further education in its entirety should be viewed as a transitional period itself. A more nuanced view therefore needs to be offered on the experiences and processes of 'getting on' in further education. The journeys and challenges young people face in moving through further education and leaving with something that is actually of any value in pursuit of a position within the labour market.

A great deal of research has been done on streaming and differentiation in secondary schooling, and also about the class, race and gender inequalities in post-16 education and training. However, with post-16 education and training now the norm, more needs to be known about the structural, cultural, and subjective factors within further

education that act to disrupt or maintain inequalities and stifle or stimulate social mobility through upward progression.

(Non)participation (What, where, and how participation is conceptualised)

One matter not yet considered is the concept of participation itself. Under theorised within the field of education and school-to-work transitions, the term participation is often used in fairly simplistic ways. Largely used to denote a status or position as involved or included in an activity or group, participation is commonly used as one half of a participation/non-participation binary (see for example, Bynner, J. 2004; Department for Education 2014; Maguire 2015a). However, widening the lens of focus and looking to a broader area of research offers greater complexity to the concept and experience of participation.

Within the field of childhood and youth studies, participation is critiqued not only in terms of taking part but also in terms of the quality and nature of that involvement. Central to analyses of participation within childhood and youth studies are notions of voice, empowerment and authenticity (see for example, Hart 1992; Checkoway 2011; Määttä and Aaltonen 2016).

A particularly prominent contribution has been Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992) which sets out eight levels of participation, ranging from three levels of non-participation to five degrees of participation. Although much critiqued (including by Hart himself (Hart 2008)), the ladder of participation has featured heavily in practice, policy, and research. Its major value has been in providing a basis for analysis on differentiated forms of participation, opening up new modes of thinking on different dimensions of participation experiences. The various levels of participation have commonly been used as a tool for analysing the extent to which young people are included and empowered in decision-making processes on issues that affect their choices and opportunities.

While the levels of participation provide useful typologies, and the ladder offers a valuable heuristic device, they provide limited scope for more critical analyses of participation. There are two key limitations most relevant to the present study. Primarily, the ladder does not account for the intersection and entanglement of participation and non-participation experiences. As has been highlighted in a range of

recent research (Atkins 2012; see for example, Reiter and Schlimbach 2015; Fergusson 2014; Maguire 2015b), forms of non-participation are increasingly disguised within what appear to be modes of genuine participation.

Furthermore, the ladder perhaps overestimates the agency of adults to directly affect different forms of participation and non-participation. External macro/meso and implicit forces are not factored into the analysis of how adults influence or control young people's opportunities for participation. Therefore, while the ladder of participation provides a framework for better understanding the nature of young people's participation experiences, a more critically analytical layer is required to elucidate underpinning factors which shape the dynamics of participation.

Providing a more critical perspective from the field of adult education, Crowther (2000) questions the power dynamics embedded within ownership of the participation discourse. Suggesting the discourse of participation is one 'internal' to professionals and policy makers, thus embodying professional and policy interests. Crowther employs a Foucauldian analysis to emphasise they differentiated 'knowledge' between young people and policy makers/practitioners is implicit in the reconstituting of power through knowledge/ power formations (Foucault 1991).

Offering an important perspective on how participation is conceptualised in political-economic sense, Fergusson (2013) examines how (non)participation in education and training is governed. Pertinent to this study is the impact modes of governance have on how young people are 'managed' and on how this affects their experiences of post-16 education and training, and transition. As part of a concern around the (non)participation of young people, both in terms of education and training, and employment, much attention within policy and practice is given to how young people can most effectively be encouraged to develop human capital through the acquisition of skills and credentials (Simmons and Smyth 2016).

A driving force behind such concerns is the notion of employability (Gleeson *et al.* 2015), centred on the prevailing view that the development of human capital and an 'employable self' (Brown 2006) is the key to resolving youth unemployment. It has been suggested that such perspectives have led to non-participation becoming the object of governance, as state sponsored interventions seek to intervene in the issue

of unemployment (Fergusson 2013). RPA is one such example with responsibilities for influencing (non)participation placed in the hands of schools, colleges, and training providers. Thus, it is pertinent to undertake an examination of how the management of (non)participation at the level of education and training providers play out in lived experiences that have the potential to shape young people's access to participation. Of particular concern is how teachers, as those at the interface of practice and policy, enact their responsibility to govern and manage (non)participation.

On a more substantive level, the notion of non-participation is interlinked with concerns around young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET). A range of research has sought to shed light on the nature and experience of being NEET, with a particular attention paid to illuminating the diverse and heterogeneous nature of the demographic (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011b; Simmons and Thompson 2011), and investigating the processes and factors which drive young people to positions of exclusion and marginality (MacDonald and Marsh 2005; MacDonald 2011; Simmons and Smyth 2016; Thompson 2011).

Research has also shown that NEET discourses tend to create deceptive binary constructions of non-participation/participation (Maguire 2015a). The RPA policy contributes to this deception as it promotes the assumption that extended periods of participation will result in the acquisition of new skills and qualification and thus enhance employability (Spielhofer *et al.* 2007; DfE 2010; DfE 2014). However, by creating a participation-non-participation binary it perhaps only serves to disguise characteristics of disadvantage as young people appear to be engaged in meaningful forms of education. The result, Reiter and Schlimbach (2015) suggest, is a population that becomes 'NEET in disguise'. Those that are 'formally participants [in education and training], but fall outside dominant understandings of participation [making progress towards employment and domestic and financial independence]' (Fergusson 2004, p.314).

Furthermore, simple binary constructions portray somewhat linear and deterministic characterisations of participation/non-participation, which neglect the churn some young people experience as they move fluidly in and out of NEETism (MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Additionally, studies have shown that not insignificant numbers of young

people who participate in post-16 education and training become NEET further down the line (Hutchinson, Beck and Hooley 2015; Maguire 2015b). This suggests that NEETism is not a consequence of failed transitions from school but is a result of poor attachment with learning.

The points above emphasise that NEEtism and non-participation are not resolved by simply extending participation, consideration needs to be given to the nature and quality of that participation. Research on NEET young people also reveals the stigmatisation that accompanies experiences of non-participation and marginalisation, emphasising the importance of experiences that are meaningful, valuable, and inclusionary (Simmons and Thompson 2011; Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014). In light of the above reflections, an ethnographic study of extended participation and RPA is necessary to examine young people's lived experiences and to illuminate the complexity of participation and non-participation.

Marginal learning and (dis)engagement

Beyond a focus on (non)participation, much research and literature is concerned with experiences of learning and transition shaped by marginalisation and (dis)engagement. One such concern is the examination of precarious school-to-work transitions is low-level VET. While not explicitly framed as non-participation, various research has shown the role of low-level VET in maintaining and entrenching exclusion and marginalisation (Atkins 2009; Atkins 2013; Cornish 2017b; Cornish 2018; Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014).

A number of studies have examined forms of participation and non-participation within post compulsory education and training (see for example, Atkins 2009; Atkins 2010; Atkins 2013; Atkins 2016; Cornish 2017a,b; Cornish 2018; Fergusson 2014; Lawy 2010; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; MacDonald 2011; Maguire 2010; Maguire 2013; Maguire 2015b; Roberts, S 2011; Roberts, S. 2012b; Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011a, b; Simmons and Thompson 2011; Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014).

Most pertinently, work by Atkins (2009; 2012; 2013) reveals the powerful effects of participation in low-level VET in creating 'invisible learners' whose disadvantages are masked by their inclusion in an officially recognised mode of post-16 education. Contributing to the conceptualisation of invisibility, Cornish (2017b) highlighted the

role of Further Education in warehousing young people who were previously NEET and deemed to be 'disengaged' from education. What is of interest is how RPA, in trying to create smoother and more stable post-16 transitions, interacts with experiences of participation in low-level VET.

Previous research has suggested that post-16 transitions for 'reluctant learners' (Furlong & Cartmel 1997; McDowell 2003) have become characterised by 'normalized dislocation' (Fergusson *et al*. 2000). Proposed is the view that there is a significant group of young people not suitably described by transitions discourses or social exclusion discourses as they are 'neither "in" nor "out"', while engaged in 'multiple trajectories' (Fergusson *et al*. 2000, p.289). However, RPA has the potential to shift this dynamic for 16-18 year olds as it attempts to prevent them from undergoing multiple relocations, while also delegitimising jobs without and training in an attempt to promote studentship over employment.

How RPA shapes and informs post-16 transitions is therefore important in light of research which illuminates the forms of exclusion and disadvantage associated with low-level VET. With RPA still in its relative infancy, studies of the policy's effects are limited. Much of the literature on RPA examines the likely impact of the policy and its implications for how participation in education and training is framed (see for example, Simmons 2008; Maguire 2013; Fergusson 2014). Further emphasising the absence of relevant research and debate in this area, Atkins (2009) describes young people following the precarious post-16 pathway of low-level VET as an 'invisible cohort'. Atkins (2009) showed that young people falling between NEET status and higher levels of VET (level 2 and 3) suffered an invisibility due to being viewed as outside both exclusionary modes of non-participation and more inclusionary forms of participation. It is suggested the result is increased precarity as disadvantages are obscured and young people are put at risk of more toxic forms of non-participation beyond 18 (Hutchinson, Beck and Hooley 2015).

The precariousness associated with participation in low-level post-16 education is highlighted by the Wolf Review (2011) in which it is suggested that low-level vocational training may actually negative consequences for labour market opportunities. As Simmons *et al.* (2014) point out, this raises questions of policy initiatives such as RPA

which promote the link between extended periods of participation in education or training and employability. Particularly pertinent is the question 'what will be learned by those who may not otherwise have continued in education, and to what ends?' (Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014, p.103).

Consequently, it is not just whether young people participate or not that matters, but it also the nature of their participation that is of importance. At the heart of matter is the concept of (dis)engagement. Before unpicking the notion of (dis)engagement, it is first pertinent to note the heterogeneous rather than homogenous nature of (dis)engagement. Following the work of Ross (2009), it is clear that young people are not simply engaged or disengaged. Such reductionist perspectives deny the idea that it is possible to be both or neither simultaneously. Many of the young people experiencing low-level VET were disengaged from their immediate learning environment but were engaged with the notion of education and training more generally. For these young people, expressions of dissatisfaction were not representative of an outright resistance to participation, but of a desire for an alternative experience.

Conversely, there were students ambiguous to the merits of education and uncritical about their current position, simply buying in to the rhetoric around extended participation and employability (Atkins 2009; Atkins 2013). The question is which students are more engaged and more actively participating. Perhaps then, those explicitly rejecting their learning environment are displaying greater levels of engagement and participation than those passively accepting their fate. The point being that, without context, (dis)engagement is nothing other than an arbitrary descriptor. By looking more deeply at the factors which motivate, drive, and shape forms of resistance, disaffection, or ambiguity, more critical interpretations of (dis)engagement can be developed.

The supply side thinking behind discourses of employability and human capital (Avis 2009; Ainley and Allen 2010) have tended to champion individual responsibility over state responsibility in ensuring participation in employment is realised. All of which is reflected in an increasingly intensified discourse of disengagement, which transforms

(non)participation into an issue characterised by endogenous rather than exogenous factors (Fergusson 2013).

The shift from non-participation as an issue of exclusion and marginalisation to an issue of disengagement (Fergusson 2013) can perhaps be viewed part of a legitimation crisis in which flaws in capitalism, such as positional competition (Halsey et al. 1997; Brown and Lauder 1997), are legitimated through discourses of individual responsibility and deficit. Simmons and Smyth (2016) suggest this is reflected in state attempts to:

> legitimate neoliberal economic, social, and political arrangements through a process of redistributing risk and through strategies which aim to either motivate, reconnect, or coerce the individual into participation in education and work (p.138).

Particularly salient in the context of the present study is the increasingly coercive strategies, which justify, for example, continued participation in education or training, even when it does not deliver (Simmons and Smyth 2016; Strathdee 2013). The requirement for continued participation in education or training, as set out by RPA, is a prime example. While not directly enforced by the state, the requirement for participation is embedded more subversively in the pervasive narrative that extended participation is the officially endorsed pathway to employability. This raises an interesting point around how RPA, in stopping short of compulsion, serves to encourage and expand participation. Recent studies have reflected more widely on the tension between choice and coercion in various education/employment policies (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010; Strathdee 2013), outlining a variety of mechanisms through which policy attempts to achieve participation.

Focusing on wider strategies, Strathdee (2013) differentiates between policies that attempt to motivate, force or bridge. Paying closer attention to the relationship between policy and individuals, Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth (2010) describe notions of bribing, monitoring, and re-making the self. These analyses provide a useful basis for understanding how recent policy has sought to shift responsibility to the individual level and how it has sought to manage (non)participation through this lens. Having pulled back from compulsion and enforcement, the version of RPA

implemented by the coalition government could be viewed as a bridging, re-making policy. While initially conceived as a forcing, monitoring policy, the coalition rhetoric around choice shifted the focus. Extended participation is instead framed as a bridge between school and work, which provides opportunities to 're-make' an employable self through the acquisition of skills and qualifications.

Reflecting on the operationalisation and enactment of endogenised, individualised non-participation, Fergusson (2013) posits that:

> The problem of non-participation is thereby reworked. It ceases to be primarily a set of conditions which governments must address through policy interventions that extend and improve job opportunities and education and training places. The problem becomes instead the population itself. Non-participation thus ceases to be the subject of government, and becomes instead an object of governance – where governance refers to the infinitely more complex and multifarious interventions and actions that are not necessarily ordered by governments, but which may be initiated by a wide variety of official and lay agents, outside government as well as within it, who sustain the interface between state and population 'at street level' (p.22)

In the case of RPA, much of how the governance of (non)participation plays out at the 'street level' is disguised within interactions between teachers and students and within institutional policies, practices, and procedures.

Learning careers/horizons for action

In addition to matters of marginalisation and (dis)engagement, it is also appropriate to explore the relationship between extended participation and learning. In the context of RPA, how prolonged periods of participation shape relationships with and dispositions towards learning is particularly pertinent. Sociologists of education emphasise the social dimensions of learning, suggesting that dispositions to learning change over time, place and context (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000c; Bloomer 1997; Ecclestone 2007). They see 'learner identities' as being constituted through complex interactions between existing dispositions and changing circumstances across a range of formal and non-formal sites, arguing that: 'attitudes to learning… shift erratically over time, shaped by crises, transformations and changing images of identity within different spheres of influence' (Ecclestone 2003, p.473). This is important as it highlights the potential, positive as well as negative, influence educational

participation can have on young people's dispositions to learning. In this light, investigation of the mechanisms that serve to achieve this becomes highly pertinent.

In order to convey the developmental nature of young people's learner identities through a range of social, personal, and educational factors, they thus employ the term 'learning careers' (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000a). While arguing that learner identities evolve over time, these studies also emphasise that dispositions towards learning are far from being entirely contingent. As such, they employ the notion of habitus to indicate how dispositions are necessarily rooted in past experiences. Indeed, in a study of young people in vocational further education in the UK, Bloomer (1997) points out that broadly speaking, his respondents shared a similar lack of 'cultural capital' in terms of their domestic backgrounds. The point here, however, is that as young people confront new situations and changing opportunities through the course of their lives, so habitus itself changes. In this context, previously 'damaged' and 'fragile' learner identities can be reworked and transformed. Bloomer argues that his respondents:

> 'Acted upon' opportunities [for learning] as they perceived them in accordance with existing habitus, either confirming existing dispositions to learning and knowledge or embarking on gradual or, occasionally, radical changes in dispositions and, consequently, learning careers…The development of new habitus, new dispositions to learning and knowledge, new perceptions of opportunities and new actions… was symbiotic (Bloomer 1997, p.145)

As well as emphasising the changing nature of habitus, these studies also show how new identities can be reflexively constructed by young people in response to changing relationships with learning. As Hodkinson et al point out, in embarking upon newly perceived opportunities in education and work, young people are adept at 'reconstructing the past' as a way of 'embedding' new identities. They argue that 'when your view of the world changes, we reconstruct the past in our minds to fit current perceptions. That is, the past is retrospectively recreated out of the present, as… "the past for now… (1996, p.149). Bloomer (1997) makes a similar point, arguing that: 'pasts… are repeatedly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in response to new-found purposes… while [young people's] futures… are framed and reframed in the light of continually changing perceptions of opportunities' (p.153).

In identifying the sources of these changes in identity, studies of learning careers reflect the broader trend in youth research to look at multiple spheres in young people's lives. Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000), for example, highlight leisure activities and experiences in the labour market while others have emphasised a range of factors both within and outside of formal education programmes. Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000), for example, point to formative moments in teacher-student relationships.

In the context of RPA, and the drive for increased educational participation, the question is then how learner identities are maintained or disrupted. Particularly in the case of young people with negative attitudes towards learning who are now required to continue their engagement with learning beyond the age of 16. More needs be understood about how these young people embed their changing experiences of educational participation into their learner identities as they transition from school into further education and training.

While Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000c) longitudinal study tracks young people's educational experiences across a similar time-frame, their data emerges solely from a series of interviews with young people and teachers. Ethnographic fieldwork of the learning environments young people inhabit would thus offer another dimension to Bloomer and Hodkinson's analysis of the 'ways in which learners' dispositions to learning changed or not over a relatively short time span' (2000c, p.585). For young people who find themselves in marginalised positions within school, often characterised by 'bad' and 'disengaged' learner identities (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010), the post-16 transition then becomes an important moment at which these identities can be maintained or disrupted.

Research has identified a range of key factors that shape young people's post-16 decision-making and transitions. Specifically, social, cultural, and material circumstances have been identified as key factors (Coffield 1986; Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000; Bates and Riseborough 1993; Furlong 2007), alongside attainment and educational histories (Gorard and Smith 2007). Additionally, local opportunities structures have also been shown to interact with the pathways young people follow on leaving school (McDowell 2003).

However, amidst social changes, such as increasingly diversified and fragmented

labour markets, and the increase in post-16 education and training, some researchers have presented a view asserting the role of young people's agency in driving decision-making and transitions (Wyn and White 1997). Whilst such work has shifted more attention towards young people themselves than in some previous transitions research, much empirical research in this area continues to point to the significance of structural location in assisting young people towards particular destinations (Johnston *et al* 2000; MacDonald and Marsh 2001; Ball *et al* 2000).

Hodkinson (1996) locates this within the wider concept of career decision making processes, arguing that young people make choices about their transitions through individual 'horizons for action'. These are seen as:

> Perspectives on and possibilities for action given in any field or intersection of fields… Dispositions of habitus and the positions of education and labour market both influence horizons for action and are inter-related; for perceptions of what might be available and what might be appropriate affect decisions, and… opportunities are simultaneously subjective (perceived) and objective (out there)… (Hodkinson et al 1998, p.97).

Thus, horizons for action are seen as simultaneously limiting and enabling the choices young people make, both on the structural and cultural levels. Much like learner careers, drawing upon and developing resources of social and cultural capital may lead to the emergence of new opportunities, and subsequently a transformation of both habitus and horizons for action.

The post-16 transition therefore represents a point at which 'horizons for action', 'learning careers' and 'learner identities' all intersect. Investigating this period of young people's lives can therefore illuminate the ways in which young people are being affected by, and responding to the intensified focus on, educational participation.

Conclusion and research questions

The first section of the literature review examined the changing nature of youth transitions, as well as the value of the model. Key debates were explored, with a particular focus on the relative role of structure and agency in shaping transitions. Two key limitations of transitions studies were outlined, suggesting that normative models

of transition do not account for the experiences of marginalised young people, and that an economistic focus on structural situations foregrounds the outcomes of transitions, rather than what they mean to those that are experiencing them.

Following this, a section on education and schooling reviewed the literature pertaining to issues of inequality, streaming and differentiation, (dis)engagement, and learner identities. Particular reference was made to studies that explore the interactionist dimensions of education and draw on analyses of teacher-student interactions and relationships. Particularly pertinent for the present study is developing an understanding of continuity and change in relation to changes in the dynamics of educational participation.

The final section reflected more specifically on where extended participation set out by RPA sits within the realms of participation and non-participation. Specifically, the section drew attention to the complexity of experiences related to extended participation and how binary constructions of participation and non-participation do not capture this complexity. The concepts of learning careers and horizons for action were then studied in order to consider how relationships with learning, and interactions between young people's subjectivities and their opportunities, could provide a richer view of extended participation.

Following the review of literature, the following research questions were formed:

- What are the lived experiences of extended participation for marginal learners?

- What is the nature of participation/non-participation in the context of RPA?

  - What factors shape experiences of participation/non-participation?

- How has RPA positioned young people in extended participation across the spectrum of inclusionary and exclusionary transition routes?

- How do experiences of participation/non-participation interact with young people's horizons for action and learning careers?

  - How do young people construct their horizons for action and learning careers over time?

Chapter 4: Conceptual and methodological framework

Introduction

This chapter sets out the study's conceptual and methodological framework, as well as the lens through which the findings are interpreted. As emphasised through the review of policy and literature in previous chapters, there is a need for an examination of how a shift from participation as a right to participation as an obligation is playing out in the context of post-16 education and training. It is therefore the implicit, tacit manifestations of RPA that are of interest. In particular, little recent work has been carried out on the decision-making and lived experiences of young people transitioning from school to low-level VET and basic skills education. It is such young people who, occupying a space between NEET and the missing-middle, are largely 'invisible' (Atkins 2009) within policy and research.

Of specific relevance is how required participation, as espoused by the RPA policy, is manifesting at the levels of teacher-student interactions, classroom experiences, and school/college policies, practices, and cultures. Analysis of such micro and meso dimensions of lived experiences is however largely absent from current research on youth and school-to-work transitions. The conceptual framework presented below will discuss how the thesis seeks to make a contribution in this area.

The methodological section of this chapter then introduces the research approach, a multi-method ethnography, which is designed to examine how participation plays out in practice through experiences and interactions. Following an account of the methodological approach and research design, I provide a reflexive account of how my personal history, identity, and values have shaped the research, and my analysis of it, with particular reference to the critique of teachers and their practice.

This reflexive section provides some important context to the study, situating the research in principles of social justice and empowerment. Specifically, I describe how my representation of the field is framed by a belief in championing young people's voices, and by a view that teachers' interactions with young people in the classroom play a central role in the construction of lived experiences. Both of which aide the reading of the thesis by highlighting that my interpretation and analysis is rooted in a

philosophy that structural/institutional/cultural change, rather than individual change, is required to address issues of inequality, exclusion, and disadvantage. Finally, the chapter concludes with a consideration of ethical issues, a summary of the key themes to be explored, and an introduction to the structure of the empirical chapters.

Conceptual framework

In examining extended participation, this thesis holds a number of conceptual and substantive interests. Addressing the substantive interests, earlier chapters discussed how RPA links extended participation with extended learning. The relationship between participation and learning is therefore a key area in which the efficacy of RPA can be examined. Additionally, prolonged periods of participation in education and training are assumed to support the enhancement of employability and labour market opportunities. The research therefore seeks to illuminate how young people's lived experiences of post-16 education and training interact with their opportunities and subjectivities around future transitions.

On the theme of transitions, RPA can also be viewed as a tool for managing the transitions of young people perceived as at risk of non-participation. There is, therefore, interest in the nature of transitions that emerge from periods of extended participation. Finally, as a strategy for reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training, RPA creates somewhat binary constructions of participation and non-participation. From this perspective, the policy neglects the complexity of young people's experiences and positions within further education and training.

The concerns of this study can therefore be split into three broad categories:

- Participation and learning

- Transitions

- The nature of participation/non-participation

To analyse these concerns, the thesis engages with a number of conceptual ideas. Firstly, to examine the relationship between (extended) participation and learning, the

study utilises the concept of learning careers. Learning careers relate participation in learning to positions within and dispositions towards learning, framing it as a developmental process (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000b). It provides a framework for a specific examination of learning and how young people build a sense of future ambitions, achievements, and progress as a learner. Much like people build a vision of their work career, it is suggested that people have a vision for their learning career – what position they would like to be in, their status as a learner, and the steps required to get there. It is also posited that transformations in learning careers can occur with new experiences (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000c). Studying transitions from compulsory schooling to post-16 education and training therefore provides scope for investigating how a change in context and environment interacts with young people's visions for themselves as learners.

While learning careers are linked to experiences within given fields and contexts, the assumption is that these experiences are embedded into learner careers in a calculative or 'aware' way. This is largely a reflection of constructions of learning careers privileging narrative accounts. However, this neglects the aspects of lived experiences, which go on 'behind the backs' of those experiencing it. The use of ethnography therefore allows an insight into the implicit and 'hidden' dynamics that shape dispositions towards, and positions within, the learning environment, and the learner identities that emerge.

Secondly, the nature of young people's transitions has been a central interest of sociologists. In particular, school-to-work transitions and transitions from youth to adulthood represent primary concerns. Much of this research has centred on conceptualising the patterns of inequality characterising inclusionary and exclusionary transition routes (Roberts S and MacDonald 2013). More specifically, key debates address the relative prominence of structure and agency in shaping transitions.

Furthermore, research and literature exploring school-to-work transition has tended to use social reproduction-individualisation and structure-agency theoretical frameworks to explain patterns and modes of transition. Seeking to move beyond such binary analyses, the concept of horizons for action (Hodkinson 1998; Bloomer and Hodkinson

2000c) aims to capture the interplay between structure and agency, and between subjective and objective factors in young people's transitions and decision-making.

Horizons for action is seen as providing a means of conceptualising both the structures and the subjectivities which shape the ways in which young people make choices in their transitions. Young people's experiences and actions are seen as a manifestation of their past and present subjectivities and the objectively definable material conditions that shape them (Hodkinson 1996). In the context of this research this can be seen as the interplay between young people's perceptions of their school and transition experiences, the social/cultural dimensions of these perceptions, and the socioeconomic conditions that shape and influence them. This is to say that the meaning young people give to their experiences of educational participation will be developed reflexively as they interact with the world around them (Cohen 2013).

Essentially, utilising horizons for action (Hodkinson 1996) and imagined futures (Ball, Macrae and Maguire 1999) reflects on how young people's transitions are shaped by objective experiences, but also by subjective interpretations of those experiences. Particularly pertinent to the examination of young people's experiences of extended participation is the notion of educational inheritances (Ball, Macrae and Maguire 1999). The idea of inheritance suggests young people carry previous experiences (both positive and negative) with them, which affects their response to, and interaction with, future experiences. Young people's horizons for action therefore need to be situated by the sociohistorical context.

Such a perspective is particularly useful in the analysis of RPA and the experience of extended participation as young people seek to reconcile their position within the field of required post-16 education or training and their subjective orientations towards learning and education. Young people following low-level vocational and basic skills pathways are arguably most exposed to the tension between objective positions and subjective orientations as they most acutely experience a disconnect between their past experiences, imagined futures, and the opportunities afforded extended participation (MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Atkins 2010; Lawy 2010; Atkins 2013).

Finally, with concern around the deleterious effects of poor transitions (Shildrick and Macdonald 2007), much attention has been paid to the differentiation between

participation and non-participation. Indeed, studies of school-to-work transitions have been criticised for overly focusing on young people's structural statuses, creating oversimplified accounts of a participation/non-participation binary. Seeking to conceptualise differentiated experiences and statuses, research has however challenged binary constructions of participation/non-participation, suggesting more complex, hybridised identities (Fergusson 2004).

Much like NEET studies and studies of the 'missing middle' that portray a heterogeneity amongst such groups (Roberts S 2011; Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011b), it has been suggested that there are a complex set of experiences that lay between inclusionary and exclusionary transitions (Roberts S and MacDonald 2013). Furthermore, the changing nature of discourses around non-participation has been drawn into focus by research that highlights disengagement as the dominant explanatory device (Fergusson 2013; Simmons and Thompson 2013). It is suggested therefore that non-participation has become characterised more by endogenous factors than exogenous factors (Fergusson 2013), acknowledging a shift from social exclusion discourses to discourses of disengagement.

The changing nature of non-participation discourses is particularly pertinent in light of individualisation debate (Beck 1992; Roberts S 2012c), with suggestions that structural inequalities are being masked as individual issues as a result of increasingly complex and fragmented transitions (Furlong 2009). The task for ethnography is to gain an insight into how this plays out in practice, and what it means for the experiences of young people exposed to such discourses.

Furthermore, the conceptual ideas explored above are underpinned by theoretical perspectives developed in the work of Bourdieu and Goffman. While these perspectives do not represent a central focus, they are explored below in order to provide context to the thesis' conceptual framework. Bourdieu's concept of field (1993) provides a valuable framework for studying how young people are positioned differently in a stratified field of education, and how power relations are embedded in such differentiated positionality. Young people in low-level VET are invariably positioned unfavourably, so understanding the power relations between varying positions can highlight how inequalities are maintained or disrupted. Linking this back

to the notion of educational inheritances, Bourdieu's capitals (1997) also provides a lens through which young people's capacity to obtain various positions can be explored. Using this concept, young people who have previously had positive and rewarding experiences of education will inherit greater levels of capital, enabling them to negotiate more favourable positions within the field of education.

In utilising notions of habitus (Bourdieu & Passerson 1990), there is acknowledgment that identities and dispositions are not fixed and can transform over time. The relevance of this in the context of RPA is clear, young people for whom education has been unrewarding are now expected to continue their affiliation with learning. Based on the concept of habitus, horizons for action (Hodkinson 1996) proposes that subjectivities and dispositions can be reworked through experiences, with past events being given new meaning. It is suggested the result is new horizons on what is possible and desirable. New horizons for action are however not always positive, with experiences and changing habitus also associated with constrained subjectivities. Habitus and horizons for action are therefore useful conceptual tools in examining the relationship between young people's lived experiences, their subjective interpretations, and their actions within the context of structural factors.

The work of Erving Goffman is also pertinent as it takes a symbolic interactionist view of social interaction. Of most relevance is his work on social identity and the performance of 'roles' (Goffman 1969). In the context of RPA, teachers take on a particular role and present a particular 'face' (*ibid.*) when interacting with students. Of interest to the ethnographic study is the values, norms and codes of conduct teachers perceive to be involved in the presentation of this face. Furthermore, ethnography can also shed light on the views held by teachers away from their presentations within the classroom. By examining the distinction between presentations frontstage and backstage (*ibid.*), immersion in the field is able to illuminate any tensions that may exist between what teachers say and do in the classroom and what they believe away from it.

In summary, the methodology and methods acknowledge the role experiences and interactions play in shaping participation, and in maintaining positions of marginality and inequalities. Also recognising the role of capital in providing capacity to escape

marginalisation, and the role of habitus in shaping subjective horizons around what is perceived as possible and desirable. Additionally, the discourses and discursive practices underlying experiences and interactions are viewed as mechanisms through which power is deployed and through which control is exerted. Finally, the nature of interactions is considered a function of the values, norms and rules associated with the roles people perform.

Methodology

Sociology has, at times, been criticised for obscurity and a lack of practicability. However, in the context of sociologies of education and schooling, much illuminating work has been produced. Thus, without the input of sociology, there would not be the level of insight that currently exists into the minutiae and mechanisms of schooling (Woods 1983, p.175). In particular, ethnographic, and interactionist studies, by examining the minutiae and fine-grained detail, are able to 'reveal the myths and rhetorics that multiply around the reality' (Woods 1983, p.177).

In focusing on the phenomena of experience, this study lends itself to particular paradigmatic assumptions, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches. Specifically, the research is focused on capturing the phenomenological experience of young people over a period of time. In particular, gaining an understanding of their experiences of school, post-16 transition and further education. In doing so this research takes the perspective that the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of the individuals who are involved in its ongoing construction (Burrell 1979). More positivistic notions of the social world are therefore rejected on the basis that experiences are not able to be objectively understood and cannot be separated from subjective interpretations.

To understand young people's experiences of educational participation, this research will employ an interpretivist methodology in order to explore 'the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it' (Schwandt 2000, p.118). The research takes an interpretivist approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998) in its pursuit of gaining an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of situated individuals, seeking to 'understand the subjective world of human experience' (Cohen 2013, p.19).

Furthermore, an interpretivist perspective allows investigation of both the subjective and objective dimensions of lived experiences. The pursuit of rich, contextual detail (Geertz 1973) aims to not only reveal the subjective meanings young people hold but also examine the contexts within which they are formed (Cohen 2013). This approach also ensures that young people's own accounts of their lives are heard, not marginalised. This responds to the criticism aimed at recent studies of youth transitions, which suggests the focus of much youth transitions research neglects young people's accounts and narratives of their lived experiences (Shildrick and Macdonald 2007).

Specifically, the research combines perspectives from both phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. With the study's focus on examining experiences of participation within the context of education and schooling, the research takes a phenomenological perspective in acknowledging the 'social and cultural situatedness of actions and interactions, together with participant's interpretations of a situation' (Cohen 2013, p.21). As has been highlighted in the review of literature, experiences are differentiated by a range of structural factors, while also shaped by subjectivities stemming from differing sociocultural lenses. Of interest therefore is how individuals 'make situations meaningful'…, interpret the actions of others,… [and] make sense of events and how they build worlds of meaning' (Bouma 2004, p.180).

Interactions are also central to understanding how young people navigate their lived experiences of education and transition. Finding value in principles of symbolic interactionism, experiences of participation are viewed as active, dynamic phenomena that are given meaning through interaction and negotiation (Cohen 2013, p.23). An interactionist perspective understands actions as shaped by interactions and people's interpretations of those actions (Hammersley 2007, p.8). Such a position also asserts that interpretations and actions are continually revised through ongoing interaction. In this light, interactions mean different things to different people and also different things to the same people over time (*ibid.*). The value of ethnography is therefore clear as investigating young people's experiences and interactions over time enables an examination of how interpretations and actions evolve and develop in the context of extended participation.

Research methods

While it is recognised that various socioeconomic factors have implicitly pressured young people into continuing their participation in education or training beyond compulsory schooling (Furlong 2009; Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014), RPA represents a conceptual shift as it is the first time young people have been effectively obligated to participate in post-16 education and training. Although not universally the case, those targeted by the RPA policy - low-attainers and those deemed 'at risk of NEET' (Maguire 2015b) – tend to inhabit what have been referred to as marginal learning spaces (Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014; Atkins 2013) - those characterised as low-level and focused on employability.

In a very general sense, this study aims to explore the consequences, or perhaps more specifically the unintended consequences, of the RPA policy. To achieve this, an ethnographic approach is employed. The usefulness of this approach to policy critique is outlined by Finch (1988, pp. 188-190) who suggests that:

1. Ethnography shows 'how much change actually occurs in practice': "To put it more graphically, does a particular policy initiative lead to substantive change, or merely a change of labels?";

2. Ethnography can identify the 'unintended consequences' of policy initiatives;

3. Ethnography can expose 'the contradictions in policy' which are apparent when it is implemented. Ethnography "... makes visible the tensions, contradictions and incompatible aims which are often encompassed in the policies themselves.

The study therefore utilises a range of data collection methods in ethnographically examining young people's lived experiences. The aim of which is to produce a rich and thick description of how RPA plays out in the everyday experience and interactions. Accessing this level of understanding, according to Flick (2005), requires that 'qualitative research is multimethod in focus' (p.226), and while this could be seen as a lack of methodological clarity, it should in fact be viewed as strategy to secure data by whatever method is necessary in order to achieve a robust account of the lives being

studied, acknowledging that 'objective reality can never be captured' (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, p.4).

A key benefit of ethnography is that entering into close and prolonged interaction with people in their everyday lives, allows ethnographers to better understand the behaviours, experiences, and perceptions of the participants (Hammersley 1995). Ethnography demands the investigation of the participants' perspective and is generally considered to be focused on studying 'the cultural' (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). Mac an Ghaill (1993) however suggests such research approaches should move away from purely culturalist analyses and instead endeavour to develop analyses that consider both economic structure and sociocultural factors. This is a particularly pertinent point in the field of sociology of education in which this study is situated where the macro-micro 'problem' is a reoccurring and persistent area of debate (Hammersley 1993).

This study takes inspiration from this view, seeking to investigate young people's experiences of participation in education as the intersection between current socioeconomic conditions and situated subjectivities influenced by young people's structural situations. In utilising an interpretivist approach, the present research aims to not only describe and explain young people's experiences but also offer a theoretically informed analysis of the structural and sociocultural factors that shape and distort these experiences. This, while seeking to depict young people's lives and realities, is then also concerned with the 'the testing a refinement of theories' (Hammersley 1995, p.237).

On a basic level, ethnographic fieldwork is characterised by conducting fieldwork for an extended period, giving high status to the accounts of participants, and positioning the researcher's observations of participants and the environment they occupy as the main instrument for data collection (Coffey 1999; Davies 2008; Denzin and Lincoln 1998; Hammersley 2007). Fundamentally, ethnography is concerned with immersion in a fieldwork setting to capture the rich details and provide a thick account of the culture and dynamics (Bryman 2012; Hammersley 2007). In particular, immersion enables the researcher to capture the tacit, unarticulated dimensions of experiences and interactions – the mood, atmosphere, implicit dynamics that come with occupying

a space for a period of time and becoming aware of the culture of a place and the people. Brewer (2000) emphasises that much ethnographic data is collected by 'simply watching and listening attentively' (p.105). One of the key challenges of collecting data is therefore knowing what to watch and listen for.

Alongside the ethnographic fieldwork, the other method used to generate data will be semi-structured interviews with a number of cohorts of young people. This research is interested in the temporal and contextual dimensions of educational participation, namely the transition from school into further education. By interviewing young people on a number of occasions over a period of time, it is possible to examine how meanings can shift over time and how transformations and change can occur across the post-16 transition (Lawy 2010).

Indeed, Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000c) reflect that data collection over a period of time can 'explore the detailed lives of individual young people ... how their life histories, lifestyles and dispositions to learning evolve and change' (p.8). Interviews are a useful tool in this respect as they are well suited to understanding the experience of participants, particularly for identifying the meanings they ascribe to their experiences (Kvale 1996). A combination of semi-structured interviews away from the field and ethnographic interviews (Carspecken 1996) in the field allow young people to reveal their narrative accounts of participation in education.

Furthermore, research that samples the same participants over time, particularly rich, qualitative studies, can provide a rare insight into the ways participants live through their experiences (Shildrick and Macdonald 2007). Comparison of data over time allows for an enhanced understanding of the meanings revealed by participants (Lawy 2010), thus complementing the ethnographic fieldwork discussed above. Additionally, exploring both individual young people and collective experiences creates the opportunity to compare these accounts as a whole, creating a deeper understanding of the narratives and experiences of a cohort of young people (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000c).

Highlighting a key criticism of ethnography, Brewer (2000) describes a 'crisis of representation' which questions whether ethnography can present the 'reality' and 'tell it how it is' (p.43). Forwarded is the view that all data is tied to particular

ethnographer and the contingencies under which data collected (Brewer 2000, p.25). Ethnographies are inevitably 'partial truths', influenced by the researcher's subjectivity (Clifford 1986, p.6). There is therefore a need for reflexivity in order to acknowledge the social processes that brought about data and the limitations of the representation of 'reality'.

Additionally, generalisability is inevitably something not associated with small-scale qualitative research (Brewer 2000). The research findings therefore need to be viewed through the lens of the specific context in which they produced. However, ethnography provides rich descriptions of lived experiences and can thus illuminate the particularities of young people's situations. In the context of this study, rich descriptions are vital to understandings of how the RPA policy plays out in practice, informing a critique of the policy rationales. Additionally, while broad generalisations may be unsuitable, ethnography can yield typologies which provide a useful explanatory tool in characterising the type and nature of lived experiences observed within the fieldwork.

As has been emphasised above, participant observation is a key dimension of ethnographic research. However, what distinguishes ethnography from simply observing participants is immersion in the field (Bryman 2012). Immersion allows for an attentiveness to the features of the field that go beyond the participants themselves – the culture, the environment, the tempo, the atmosphere, and a variety of other factors that characterise the field of study. Hammersley (2007) also recognises the importance of spending longer periods of time in the field as to get a sense of the contextual and historical dimensions of what is sensed and observed.

In the context of this study, it was important to observe participants in different settings and situations and over time in order to develop a contextualised understanding of participation. As Goffman (1969) suggests, people have multiple faces they present in varying situations. Observing young people both inside and outside of the classroom environment enabled me to observe differing presentations of the self. Similarly, teachers presented personal and professional selves within their roles as a teacher and a research participant.

When discussing participant observation within ethnography, a key issue is the role taken by the researcher. Specifically, whether the researcher is an active or passive participant within the field of study (Bryman 2012). This can be broken down further into four main typologies:

- Complete observer

- Observer-as-participant

- Participant-as-observer

- Complete participant
  (Gold 1958)

During the fieldwork, I found myself to be an active participant, best described as a participant-as-observer. Such a position was partly through choice and partly through circumstance. As rapport, both with young people and teachers, was central to achieving high levels of access, active participation was necessary. Participation is seen as a key element of the fieldwork as observation on its own would be of little value without the accompanying interaction and dialogue that flows from the ethnographer's presence in the field (Davies 2008; Hammersley 2007). It also suggested that, without participation, understanding of the social relationships and tacit dynamics of those being studied (Davies 2008, p.82) cannot be achieved.

Additionally, participating in classroom activities broke down some initial suspicion about my presence as a critical assessor. My participation demonstrated a desire to not only observe but also share the experiences of young people and teachers. Such an approach expedited my acceptance within the field. In summary, fieldwork observations did not simply represent a research method but rather they represented a research approach (*ibid.*). Observing participants was an approach to interacting with them, building rapport, and gaining an insight into the contexts, interpretations and meanings that drove their actions and experiences.

While fieldwork observation operated as the principal research strategy, interviews were used to focus in on pertinent topics. The nature of interviews varied, ranging from more standard semi-structured interviews, to more 'naturally occurring'

ethnographic conversations (Davies 2008, p.105). Interviews were therefore built around a set of topics I had in mind that I wished to explore. In diverging from the traditional approach of developing an interview guide (Bryman 2012), the interviews were conducted interactively (Davies 2008, p.110). My approach was to develop an understanding of people's experiences and interpretations, so I played a much more engaged role in constructing conversation and developing a process of reflection.

Such an approach was motivated by the view that interviews operate on three levels (Fairclough 2001):

- The level of discourse produced

- The level of interaction: the process of production and interpretation that occur between interviewer and interviewee

- The level of context: the social conditions that influence interpretation

Fundamentally, it was acknowledged that interviews are not a value free process without any dynamics of power and preconception. The interviewee inevitably interprets the questions and responds with reference to the factors outlined above. Therefore, a more interactive approach helps reveal the processes of interpretation and the meanings ascribed to particular questions. In engaging more actively with the interviewees, my approach enabled me to unpick and illuminate tacit assumptions. This process was in itself revealing, as it allowed interviewers to not only express their views and beliefs, but also the underlying factors that shaped those perspectives.

Furthermore, when reflecting on power dynamics, taking a more interactive approach to interviews was particularly pertinent in the context of researching young people in naturally occurring settings. With young people being accustomed to a particular type of relationship with adults within the context of schooling, developing a more conversational interaction supported the mutual importance of both interviewer and interviewee in constructing the discourse produced. This is to recognise that the concepts pertinent to this study are those 'owned' by policy makers and practitioners (Crowther 2000), so enabling interviewees to co-construct the discourse was vital to the process.

Accessing the field and gatekeepers

A key challenge associated with ethnography is negotiating access to the field (Hammersley 1999). Access can be particularly challenging when dealing with institutions, such as schools and colleges, which operate through layers of authority and bureaucracy. Schools and FE colleges are also now largely 'secure' spaces, with access to any outsider closely controlled due to matters of safeguarding young people. Being granted permission to spend time in such settings without an official role was therefore not a straightforward task.

Furthermore, due to a performance and audit culture within the school system, there was a degree of suspicion surrounding observations within the classroom. There were therefore layers of permission and access within the school and college settings, both formal and informal in nature. Getting access to be on site was the first layer; with access to classrooms the next level of permission, both representing formal layers of access.

On a practical level, existing relationships were key to accessing the field. Having previously worked with the schools and college involved in the study, I was able to call upon my contacts to negotiate access on my behalf. Although there was still a bureaucratic process of consent, having an 'insider' status enabled me to talk to the key decision makers and present them with my project brief. Once in the field, teachers were, at first, wary of my presence in the classroom, perhaps considering me to be a critical observer of their practice. Getting access to more informal interactions and discussions with teachers was therefore a further layer of access, which was negotiated more informally through the development of rapport. A final dimension of access was engagement with young people, the students within the classrooms. Again, more informal negotiation was required in this instance, developing trust, and displaying credibility central to participation and interaction.

Beyond the initial phase of acquiring access, the development of rapport with staff and students, and gaining familiarity within the settings, resulted in a growing 'invisibility' to my presence. No longer perceived as an outsider, young people, and staff in particular, moved beyond the novelty and incongruousness of my observations. Interactions also developed, with staff in particular engaging in more reflective

conversations, acting almost as a commentary to their practice and perceptions from the classroom as a way of justifying their approach and sharing their insight. This appeared to be largely borne out of a desire to offer an analysis, in the knowledge that I was there to analyse, and they were therefore hoping to helpfully inform it. I also appeared to take on the role of active/concerned listener in the eyes of the teachers as they used my presence as an opportunity to vent frustrations and complain/ challenge to a neutral person without fear of criticism or challenge.

On a substantive level, an interesting observation from the access process was that the levels of access granted differed across the schools and college. On reflection, the level of access granted was linked to differing institutional cultures. At one end of the spectrum, West Town had a very hierarchical culture and built upon authority and audit. Teachers were therefore perhaps more reluctant to allow an outside observer into the classroom due to a sensitivity around being performance assessed. Conversely, Northumberland Girls School had a more relaxed culture and greater familiarity with external professionals being on site.

Further elaborating on the access to the fieldwork sites, West Town in particular was reluctant to grant access to classrooms. Initially, access was only granted to the central hub of the school comprising staff offices and meeting rooms. I spent time with teachers and was allowed to talk to young people in the meeting rooms. Officially at least, this was due to safeguarding procedures and a reluctance from teachers to allow me into their classrooms. However, there was a sense that what I was allowed to observe was being limited by senior leaders, who were cautious of my presence as an outsider, perhaps as a result of a recent negative Ofsted inspection.

Over time though, the limitations on my access were relaxed, partly because I built rapport with staff and students and partly because I became a less conspicuous figure through increased familiarity. Although access to classrooms was still challenging, I was able to get a broad sense of young people's lived experiences within the school. In particular, opportunities to roam the corridors and to 'hang out' in the playground enabled me to get closer to everyday interactions and experiences that shaped what it was to be a student at West Town.

The limitations on my access at West Town could perhaps be seen as linked to two key factors. Firstly, following the recent Ofsted inspection, there was a culture of classroom observation and performance management, resulting in teachers being more sensitive to an outside observer and potential critique of their practice. Relatedly, there appeared to be a strong sense of authority and hierarchy within the school, as senior leaders set strict expectations on teacher practice. Therefore, there was a reluctance from both the school and its teachers to allow me to 'uncover' persisting issues or problems. Ultimately then, it could be suggested that what I was allowed to access was largely a controlled or regulated representation of the school.

In contrast, access to Northumberland Girls School was more straightforward and wide-ranging. There was not the same apprehension to my presence, and I was allowed to largely access the whole school without question or challenge. However, having initially spent time in classrooms, the majority of the fieldwork was spent in the school's social spaces talking to the young people about their experiences and perceptions. From the time spent in Northumberland Girls School, I would suggest that the freedom of access I was given was partly a reflection of familiarity with the presence of external agencies (social care, a range of pastoral services etc.), but also partly a reflection of a less structured, less organised, and less controlled school, compared to West Town.

Effectively, there was no official 'party line' or 'three-line whip' at Northumberland Girls School, as was experienced at West Town, and teachers appeared more at liberty to talk and act autonomously. Therefore, the fieldwork observations at Northumberland Girls School represented a loose amalgamation of different experiences, interactions, and approaches across teachers and classrooms, rather than a more discernible school/institutional culture and philosophy. In essence, the access I was granted enabled me to capture the messiness and complexity of secondary schooling that sits behind the institutional façade.

Access at Hartland Academy was shaped by the set-up of the school. The school essentially had two separate sites (although connected, they were largely separate), with the majority of teaching taking place on the main school site, and teaching beyond the main curriculum taking place in the sixth form block at the far end of the

site. I was granted access to the teaching taking place in the sixth form block, and to the wider school during break times. This was predominantly because the school suggested my target sample (those at risk of NEET, lower level attainers) were most often taught in the sixth form block, but it was also to prevent me disrupting the 'main teaching'. This view was perhaps symbolic of how the school positioned and valued the different groups of learners. The young people not following the main curriculum (instead taking more vocational qualifications such as public services) were essentially placed in a form of alternative provision. Based on conversations with staff, this approach was motivated by a drive to 'improve performance' (increase average attainment) following a negative Ofsted inspection. The view being taken appeared to be that isolating the 'problematic' population would allow other students to achieve more highly.

However, despite the apparent stratification of learners and types of learning, changes in the school curriculum just prior to the fieldwork commencing (certain subjects were no longer being offered – in order to focus attention on core subjects) meant that a sizeable proportion of the year 11 students had some teaching in the sixth form block on subjects beyond the main GCSE offering. Most of the teaching observed focused on vocational qualifications for those students commonly in the sixth form centre, and on 'catch up' (with core subjects) for those mostly engaged in the 'main teaching'. Therefore, while I was not able to observe the 'main teaching', access to the sixth form centre enabled me to interact with a wide group of students and to get an insight into what the school did with learners who were in more marginalised positions. Thus, in many ways, the access I was granted proved to be more revealing.

In addition to the three schools, the limitations on access at South Town College also provided informative insights into some of the more tacit aspects of the institution and its operation. The sheer size and complexity of the college meant I was only able to observe a small section of the institution. Split into a range of departments, the college essentially housed number of different institutions on one site. Departments included adult learning, vocational subjects (split into a foundation/level 1 section and a level 2/level 3 section), a small A-level provision, an LDD (learning difficulties and/or disabilities) provision, an Access to HE department, and a newly developed higher education faculty (HNDs etc.). The complexity was particularly apparent within VET as

it was not only split by levels of study, but also by subject groupings, with different subject departments across the college.

For simplicity and efficacy of the fieldwork (not trying to observe too much and diluting the data), and because of the focus on marginal learning spaces, I initially gained access to the foundation/level 1 VET department within the college. The department was contained within one part of the college and it delivered a wide range of vocational and employability programmes, therefore enabling me to access a range of subjects and young people in one space. Furthermore, a significant proportion of young people from the three fieldwork schools transitioned into the department and onto its courses, thus it provided an appropriate location to capture their typical learning experiences.

Following initial fieldwork in the foundation/level 1 department, I negotiated access to a range of level 2/3 courses (level 2 and 3 were separate courses but were connected and were run by the same staff team) that matched the subjects I had been observing at foundation/level 1 (IT, Health and Social Care [H&S], Travel and Tourism [T&T]). Although I was able to negotiate access, what became clear was the separation between the programmes. While teachers from level 2/3 courses were familiar with their counterparts in foundation/level 1, they were located in different parts of the college and their courses were entirely separate. Therefore, I was fundamentally conducting fieldwork in different contexts with different cultures and identities. Specifically, there was a distinct foundation/level 1 culture and identity, contrasted with a more subject based culture and identity at level2/3 – there were foundation/level 1 teachers and there were IT/H&S/T&T teachers.

Ultimately then, the limitations on access at college were largely a consequence of needing to be targeted and coordinated in my approach to fieldwork – it was simply not feasible, and not relevant to 'take in' a wider proportion of the college. However, by focusing my attention on foundation/level 1, and associated level 2/3 subjects, I was able to spend time gaining an insight into the nature of marginal learning spaces within FE, while also developing an understanding of how young people experience transition and progress across post-16 education and training. Therefore, the college

fieldwork findings represent a small, but illuminating, sample of learning and transition experiences in the context of post-16 participation.

Finally, in terms of ongoing access to young people in to track their transitions, a range of limitations occurred. In particular, when young people left school or changed course at college, they transitioned into a disparate range of destinations and locations. Meeting with young people at their place of learning, training, or work therefore proved to be difficult. While attempts were made to meet young people in person, their different geographical locations and availability meant alternative modes of communication were used to maintain contact where necessary.

In summary, access was not a simple process of getting consent to be in a particular space or setting. It was a more complex, ongoing, and negotiated process that encompassed the development of rapport and trust in gaining acceptance and legitimacy. Access was also not uniform or consistent as the fieldwork sites placed various constraints or limitations on where, who, and what could be observed, and young people's changing situations meant the nature of their participation in the research evolved over time and place. In many ways, the research therefore reflects the messiness and complexity of the schools and of the young people's lives.

Researching young people, teachers, and schools and colleges

Researching young people invariably creates a specific methodological challenge (Russell 2013). This is particularly apparent when young people are vulnerable or marginalised. In such circumstances it is vital to be attentive to ethical issues and potential power dynamics involved in researcher-research participant relationships. Of considerable importance is the need to ensure the meaning given to experiences and activities is not imposed on young people externally (Brewer 2000).

Although the research was conducted within formal and supervised school and college sites, I was nonetheless entering into the young people's space. It was therefore important that I was sensitive to the dynamics of the spaces I was entering as to not negatively affect social and group dynamics. There were also challenges around interacting with young people and engaging with discussions about potentially negative views they had towards the teachers and schools/college they were situated

within. It was necessary for me to be mindful or creating conflict or tension, putting both young people and teachers/schools/college in a difficult and uncomfortable situation. Equally, I did not want young people to be silenced or influenced by fear of reprimand or sanction for talking badly of their experiences. There was therefore a careful balance to be struck between encouraging young people to express their voice, while also safeguarding their best interests (Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014, p.75).

In the context of researching schools, as was discussed previously, you are not gaining access to one space or one group of people. Schools and colleges are large, complicated, diverse spaces with the presence of various groups across age, demographics, dispositions, culture etc. The challenge of school and college ethnography is therefore getting into the 'bowels' of the place, which are normally only accessible to insiders (Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2012). The most revealing aspects of schooling are perhaps not the classroom environments but the corridors, staff rooms, and playgrounds, where the formality of learning is suspended. These are the spaces in which the intersection of front stage and back stage presentations of the self (Goffman 1969) can be perceived. A significant, and perhaps understated, aspect of fieldwork is therefore spending time 'hanging around' (Hammersley 1999).

In the case of teachers, research can be muddied by the school or college context. In one of the schools, teachers were strongly encouraged to present a united front to the students, promoting consistency and uniformity of staff behaviours and approaches. This approach appeared to be motivated by a them (students) vs. us (teachers) mentality which portrayed an anxiety around control and order. Consequently, teachers were reluctant to step outside of the 'party line' and commonly espoused official policy and procedure as opposed to more nuanced perspectives. This was in itself revealing, but it tended to obscure teacher subjectivities.

The key to capturing the multifaceted lived experiences of young people and teachers within schools and colleges is therefore observing what goes on 'behind the scenes'. Teachers' comments outside of the classroom and conversations with other teachers were often more revealing than their actions within the classroom. Young people's behaviours and actions in the classroom were often contextualised and situated by

interactions with friends after the lesson. In combination, such insights provide the rich details only accessible through ethnographic investigation.

Sampling and selecting cases

As described previously, the school and college sites selected as cases were chosen largely due to previous contact, which aided in the commonly challenging task of gaining access to closed settings (Bryman 2012, p.427). However, the three schools were selected out of a pool of six possible schools. While it is rarely achievable for an ethnographer to select an 'ideal' site, precisely specifying the nature of the setting (Hammersley 2007, p.29), the three schools held many characteristics relevant to the research problem.

Each of the schools were located in areas with high levels of deprivation, histories of fast-track transitions, and marginalisation from learning and work. As such, they provided access to young people at the sharp end of the RPA policy's focus on non-participation and employability. Although the FE college was selected entirely on the basis of an ability to gain access, specific groups were selected within the setting. The three subject areas selected (Travel and Tourism, Health and Social Care, and IT) were chosen largely due to being given access to all levels of study, allowing insight into the stratified nature of extended participation for many young people entering low-level VET.

Once in the field, research participants, including teachers and young people, emerged largely organically. Through interactions and participation, I built rapport with groups and individuals in the natural course of the fieldwork. Within these groups, two sub-groups emerged – those participating in ethnographic conversations and observations, and those participating more formally with interviews and tracking over time. The second group of young people were selected to participate in the research more formally through purposive sampling (Cohen 2013), ensuring a range of experiences and transition routes were represented. While all of these young people shared the common experience of marginality within education and training, a variety of histories, trajectories and experiences were represented within the sample. In broad terms, this ranged from young people with negative experiences of extended participation, who displayed entrenched forms of marginalisation, to young people for whom post-16

education and training proved transformative for their learning careers and horizons for action, ultimately disrupting their marginality.

Research design

The primary focus of the study is on the transitions young people make from school into and through further education and training. An ethnographic study of the 'typical' learning sites of these young people was used to investigate the lived experience and meaning of educational participation within these environments. The ethnographic dimension of the study contributed to an investigation of the interactions, values, beliefs, and practices that shape young people's experiences and interpretations of educational participation.

Furthermore, three cohorts of young people were tracked over period of time, in order to examine how young people's narratives of educational participation shift, or not, as they make various post-16 transitions, and are exposed to new experiences and contexts. All of the young people involved in the study were interviewed at the start of their participation, followed by periodic 'catch-ups' to track their journeys through post-16 transition, while also capturing changes and continuities in their dispositions, subjectivities, and identities related to their learning experiences. While some of the young people tracked were also involved in the ethnographic study, the diversity of their transitions meant that some were only observed for a shorter period as they moved on to opportunities beyond the scope of the fieldwork.

In order to achieve this, the following research strategy has been employed:

- A multi-site ethnography observing, and participating in, a range of school and further education and training environments, including:

    - Year 11 groups in three secondary schools.

    - Five classes in a further education college across a range levels- from foundation to level 3- all within vocational subjects IT, Health and Social Care (H&S) and Travel and Tourism (T&T).

- Periodic semi-structured interviews with a cohort of young people being tracked from April 2015 to March 2017 (school year 11 to further education and training). These young people were identified by schools at the point of my initial access in April 2015, however, due to the time of the year my fieldwork access began (exam period), only very limited engagement with these young people in their school environment was achievable.

- A series of interviews with a second cohort of young people being tracked from September 2015 to March 2017 (school year 11 to further education and training). These young people have been part of the ethnographic study of the three secondary schools.

- A series of interviews with a third cohort of young people being tracked from September 2015 to March 2017 (transition from one further education and training academic year to the next). These young people have been part of the ethnographic study of the five further education classes or the traineeship and apprenticeship project.

This group of research participants, generally from working-class backgrounds, are all characterised by largely negative experiences of schooling and low attainment. Almost all have, or are going to, follow vocational education pathways post-16. The group is a roughly equal split of male and female and, although predominantly white, there is a mix of ethnic backgrounds. In terms of age, the group will be 15-17 years old at the start of the study and 17-19 years old at the end point of the fieldwork.

The first cohort of young people consists of 10 young people from across the three school fieldwork sites. This included six white, two Asian and two black young men and women. All were identified by their respective schools as 'at risk' of NEET or as being likely to experience problematic post-16 transitions. Six of this group transitioned into vocational courses at further education colleges, three transitioned into sixth form and one took up an apprenticeship.

The second cohort, also consisting of 10 young people, includes three white and two black young men and one Asian, two white and two black young women. All have similar educational traits to the young people in cohort one.

The third cohort consists of 15 young people across five, first and second year further education courses. This group includes one Asian, two black and three white (one non-British) young men, and two Asian, five white (one non-British) and two black young women. The group varies in age, with young people aged between 16 and 19. The large majority plan to continue in further education for the next academic year however four plan to move into an apprenticeship and two are planning transitions into full-time employment. Table 4.1 below presents more detail on the cohorts.

Table 4.1. Details of the sample and its evolution over time

Cohort 1	Notes	April 2015	September 2015-January 2016	March-June 2017
Kloie	White female. First interaction in April 2015 and communication maintained through email/telephone.	At West Town School in year 11	A-levels at West Town sixth form	A-levels at West Town sixth form
Patience	Black female. First interaction in April 2015 and communication maintained through email/telephone.	At West Town School in year 11	Level 2 Health and Social Care at South Town College	Level 3 Health and Social Care at South Town College
Ross	White male. First interaction in April 2015. Conducted three in-person interviews between September 2015 and March 2017.	At Hartland Academy in year 11	Level 2 Engineering at South Town College	Level 3 Engineering at South Town College
Sarah	Asian female. First interaction in April 2015. Interviewed once in November 2015 and remaining communication up to March 2017 maintained through email/telephone.	At Northumberland Girls School in year 11	Level 1 Childcare at South Town College	Level 2 Health and Social Care at South Town College
Naseem	Asian male. First interaction in April 2015. Interviewed three times between September 2015 and March 2017.	At Hartland Academy in year 11	Level 1 Business at South Town College	Remix for work programme at South Town College / in employment
Callum	Black male. First interaction in April 2015. Held two in-person interviews between September 2015 and June 2016. Remaining contact via telephone until March 2017.	At West Town School	Cabling apprenticeship	Employed at cabling company

Mitchell	White male. First interaction in April 2015. Conducted two interviews between September 2015 and January 2017. Final contact through email in March 2017.	At West Town School in year 11	A-levels at West Town sixth form	Level 3 Photography at South Town College
Nathan	White male. First interaction in April 2015. Interviewed twice between September 2015 and October 2016. Communication lost after this point, but school provided participation update in March 2017.	At West Town School in year 11	A-levels at West Town sixth form	A-levels at West Town sixth form
Alexa	Black female. First interaction in April 2015. Interviews conducted in November 2015 and February 2017 with email communication maintained in between.	At Northumberland Girls School in year 11	Level 1 Childcare at South Town College	Level 1 Travel and Tourism at South Town College
Conor	White male. First interaction in April 2015. Interviewed once in October 2015 and maintained communication until July 2016 through email. College provided participation update in March 2017.	At West Town School in year 11	Level 1 Construction at South Town College	Level 1 Carpentry at South Town College
Cohort 2	Notes	April 2015	September 2015- January 2016	March-June 2017
Louis S	White male. First interaction in October 2015. Communication maintained through text message and 'catch ups' at college. Final contact in April 2017.		At Hartland Academy in year 11	Foundation multi-trade at South Town College
Kieran	White male. First interaction in October 2015. Communication maintained through phone and email. Final contact in May 2017.		At Hartland Academy in year 11	Level 1 mechanics at South Town College

Liam	White male. First interaction in October 2015. Communication maintained through text message and 'catch ups' at college. Final contact in April 2017.		At Hartland Academy in year 11	Foundation multi-trade at South Town College
Louis B	Black male. First interaction in November 2015. Interviewed twice and further communication through text message. Final contact in June 2017.		At West Town in year 11	Level 2 catering at other FE college
Chloe	Black female. First interaction in November 2015. Interviewed twice and further communication through phone. Final contact in April 2017.		At West Town in year 11	Level 1 Hair and Beauty at South Town College
Lauren	White female. First interaction in October 2015. Communication maintained through text message and phone. Final contact in March 2017.		At Hartland Academy in year 11	Level 1 Hair and Beauty at South Town College
Shannon	Black female. First interaction in October 2015. Communication maintained through email. Final contact in April 2017.		At Northumberland Girls School in year 11	Level 1 Animal care at other FE college
Aisha	Asian female. First interaction in October 2015. One interview and 'catch ups' at college. Final contact in June 2017.		At Northumberland Girls School in year 11	Foundation Health and Social Care at South Town college
Danielle	White female. First interaction in October 2015. Communication maintained through text message and phone. Final contact in June 2017.		At Northumberland Girls School in year 11	Full-time employment in retail

		April 2015	September 2015-January 2016	March-June 2017
Kofie	Black male. First interaction in October 2015. Interviewed once and further communication through email and phone. Final contact in May 2017.		At Hartland Academy in year 11	Level 2 IT at South Town College
Cohort 3	Notes	April 2015	September 2015-January 2016	March-June 2017
Alannah	White female. First interaction in November 2015. Part of fieldwork observations. In person contact maintained throughout duration of study until June 2017.		Level 2 Travel and Tourism and South Town College	Level 3 Travel and Tourism and South Town College
Jamie	White male. First interaction in October 2015. Interviewed twice and communication maintained through phone until June 2017.		Foundation Health and Social Care at South Town College	Foundation Catering at South Town College
Euwera	Black female. First interaction in December 2015. Interviewed twice and communication maintained through email until May 2017.		Foundation IT at South Town College	Level 2 Travel and Tourism at South Town College
Kamil	Black male. First interaction in November 2015. Interviewed once and various 'catch ups' during fieldwork. Tracked until March 2017 through college updates.		Foundation Travel and Tourism at South Town College.	Level 1 Photography at South Town College
Connor	White male. First interaction in November 2015. Interviewed three times during data collection period and communication maintained through text message until June 2017.		Foundation Travel and Tourism at South Town College.	Level 3 Photography at South Town College

Shauna	Asian female. First interaction in November 2015. Interviewed twice and communication maintained through text message.		Foundation Health and Social Care at South Town College.	HR apprenticeship
Rachel	White female. First interaction in December 2015. Communication maintained through email.		Level 2 childcare at South Town College	Level 3 childcare at South Town college
Bethany	White female. First interaction in November 2015. Interviewed twice and various 'catch ups' during fieldwork. Communication maintained until June 2017 through text message.		Level 2 Travel and Tourism at South Town college	Level 2 Business t South Town college
AJ	Black male. First interaction in November 2015. Interviewed once and communication maintained through email until March 2017.		Foundation Travel and Tourism at South Town College	Hospitality apprenticeship
Mia	Asian female. First interaction in November 2015. Various 'catch ups' during fieldwork and communication maintained through email until April 2017.		Level 2 Travel and Tourism at South Town college	Level 2 Health and Social Care at South Town college
Waseem	Asian male. First interaction in October 2015. Interviewed once and communication maintained through phone until April 2017.		Level 1 IT at South Town college	Level 1 catering at South Town college
Declan	White male. First interaction in January 2016 (although known to researcher in professional capacity). Interviewed three times and tracked until June 2017 through updates from traineeship provider.		Foundation Mechanics at South Town college	Carpentry trainee course with alternative provider (Adviza)/ in employment

Tanika	Black female. First interaction in November 2015. Interviewed twice during fieldwork and tracked until March 2017 through college updates.		Level 2 Travel and Tourism at South Town college	Remix for work programme/ retaking Maths GCSE
Melissa	White female. First interaction in October 2015. Interviewed twice and communication maintained through phone until April 2017.		Foundation Health and Social Care at South Town college	Full-time employment in retail
Jess	White female. First interaction in October 2015. Interviewed once and communication maintained through phone until March 2017.		Foundation Health and Social Care at South Town college	In employment/NEET

The table shows the different cohorts and how the sample evolved over time, identifying when particular cohorts were first engaged in the research and how the young people transitioned over the course of the study. Due to the phased nature of the fieldwork, the participants were therefore tracked for different periods of time and different transition pathways and experiences. Some of the participants were tracked more fully than others, with some being interviewed, some interacting through more informal 'catch ups', and some interacting through email to provide updates on their transition status. Overall, 10 of the 35 were tracked more fully, five of which are outlined in chapter 9's case studies. The other participants were used to develop a wider analysis of transition behaviours and typologies.

In reality, the first cohort served as more of a short pilot and as a starting point for access into the three schools. As they were first engaged in the research late in their final year at school, little time was spent with them. The group were also recruited largely because the study's initial ambition to track young people from year 11 at school to a point where they had reached or were about to reach their 18th Birthday. The idea being that the study would follow them until the point at which they were no longer required to participate in education or training, as set out by RPA. Although half of this cohort did transition into the fieldwork college, the other half did not. Therefore, participation in the research became more sporadic for those going elsewhere, with tracking of their transitions largely relying on email and telephone conversations. Consequently, the contribution of this cohort to the study became predominantly setting the scene and understanding the common post-16 destinations of young people from the fieldwork schools.

As set out in more detail in the following section, cohorts two and three were then engaged during phase two of the research. Due to the initial fieldwork (phase 1) starting late in the academic year (April), there was a desire to track and observe the experiences of a new cohort of year 11 students over a full academic year to develop a fuller understanding of how their experiences in school built up to post-16 transitions. Cohort two thus comprised a further group of 10 year 11 students. Additionally, recognising the stratified and transitional nature of FE (i.e., different levels of study and common for young people to move between courses and levels during the course of their participation), cohort three were engaged from a variety of courses and levels

of study at the college, thus attempting to capture a variety of experiences and transition routes. While recruitment of the year 11 students was more straightforward (they were engaged early on in the fieldwork), cohort three took longer to develop as it took time gain access to the various subjects and levels of study, and then to engage the young people. Cohort three was therefore recruited between September 2015 and January 2016.

As with cohort one, the disparate nature of post-16 destinations across cohort two meant the nature and level of tracking/interaction varied greatly from young person to young person. As described previously, observing the learning experiences of all young people for the duration of the study was not achievable. Cohorts one and two thus largely provided insights into school experiences, as well as the nature of post-16 transitions. Cohort three however, in many respects, provided the most complete/multifaceted findings. As they were all first engaged at the college, and most remained in college at the end point of the study, cohort three experienced regular interactions with the researcher, as well as regular observations of their learning experiences over time and (in many cases) across levels of study and subjects.

Beyond the three cohorts, the nature of the study (ethnographic fieldwork in large education institutions) meant that a range of young people appear in the findings in various ways, even if they are not one of those being tracked. While there were young people who are part of the tracked cohorts in many of the fieldwork observation, inevitably their friends and peers contributed to the ethnographic data. Therefore, the sample should be viewed on two levels: firstly, the three cohorts that contribute to both an examination of learning experiences, and an investigation of post-16 transitions; and then secondly, a wider group of young people who help build a picture of the everyday lived experiences and interactions across a typical range of learning sites and contexts. The findings thus represent the fluid and disparate, but also rich, nature of the sample and its evolution over time.

Phases of research

Phase 1 involved the initial fieldwork and interviews, carried out between April 2015 and July 2015. During this phase approximately 120 hours of fieldwork was conducted, with approximately 40 hours spent at each of the three schools. Each of the 10

research participants (year 11 students) were interviewed during this first phase, exploring their perceptions of their school experiences, while also reflecting on their decision-making around post-16 education and training. Additionally, 5 teachers were interviewed on various topics, including: school rules, young people's post-16 transitions, teaching practices, and notions of disadvantage. Over the summer the data collected was reviewed and was used to inform phase 2 of the project. Specifically, analysis of the common post-16 destinations of the research sample demographic (marginalised learners), informed the vocational subjects within the FE college selected for fieldwork.

Phase 2 included a continuation of fieldwork at the three schools. This included observations and interactions with the new year 11 students. Fieldwork took place from September 2015 to April 2016, representing the start of year 11 until the period just prior to students undertaking their GCSE exams. In total 360 hours of fieldwork was conducted, with approximately 120 hours spent at each school. In addition to fieldwork observations, seven teachers were interviewed across the three schools.

From the year 11 students observed during fieldwork, 10 were tracked until June 2017. Each of the 10 students were interviewed early in the fieldwork and were subsequently communicated with on at least three further occasions during the data collection period. For some of the young people, this involved interviews, for others, as a result of their circumstances, telephone conversations were conducted. While the telephone conversations did not provide the same depth of data as the interviews, they nonetheless offered an opportunity to track young people's transitions and to capture their current thoughts and feelings. A similar process was followed with the first cohort of year 11 students. Following initial interviews, contact was maintained with young people until approximately June 2017.

Beyond the school focused data collection, fieldwork and interviews were also conducted within a further education college. Between September 2015 and June 2016, approximately 360 hours of fieldwork was conducted, spread across foundation and level 1 Travel and Tourism, Health and Social Care, and IT. Between September 2016 and April 2017, approximately 480 hours of fieldwork was undertaken, split across, level 1, level 2, and level 3 Travel and Tourism, Health and Social Care, and IT.

From the various groups involved in the fieldwork, 15 young people were tracked from September 2015 to June 2017, combining interviews with other forms of communication to keep in touch. Additionally, 10 teachers from across various subjects and levels of study were interviewed.

The table below provides a basic sketch of the fieldwork sites and structure. The fieldwork was split broadly into three spheres: school, foundation learning, and level 1-3 vocational education. This highlights the distinctness of young people's experiences and locations across the three spheres, with foundation learning separated from the higher levels of study in the sense that learning spaces and teachers were entirely different.

Table 4.2. Field sites and structure

	Schools			South Town College		
Level 3				Travel and Tourism	Health and Social Care	IT
Level 2				Travel and Tourism	Health and Social Care	IT
Level 1				Travel and Tourism	Health and Social Care	IT
Foundation learning				Travel and Tourism	Health and Social Care	IT
Year 11	West Town	Northumberland Girls School	Hartland Academy			

Introducing the fieldwork: sites, staff, and students

In order to contextualise the lived experiences of young people that are examined in the proceeding chapters, it is first necessary to explore the environments within which those experiences are shaped. The following section describes the three schools and one FE college within which the research took place and examines the staff who populated these fieldwork sites.

The fieldwork sites are all located in a large town in the South East of England, with a population of over 300,000 (around the urban area). It is a university town with an average age of under 40. Situated not far from London, the town has a strong economy and broad range of labour market opportunities. There are high levels of development across the town, bringing a high volume of work in construction. There are also buoyant service and IT sectors providing a range of employment opportunities. Additionally, there are a number of large employers, including the university and local authority, a large hospital, as well as a science and technology hub. Despite the prevalence of employment opportunities, youth unemployment and numbers of young people not in education, employment and training have been above the regional average.

The issues of youth unemployment and NEETism are perhaps linked to the make-up of the population. The town is very urban in places but more suburban, and even semi-rural in others. The town is surrounded by areas of significant wealth but the town itself has high levels of inequality and deprivation. There are a number of large council estates where there are high levels of intergenerational worklessness, poverty, crime, and low educational attainment. The three schools are located in or near areas with a high concentration of council housing, meaning their students are exposed to the issues described above. On a wider level, the schools across the town reflect the characteristics of the population, with high levels of inequality across the state schools and a number of grammar and private schools. The town is therefore best characterised as having a strong economy with good labour market opportunities, but with sections of the population shaped by inequality and structural factors that produces marginalisation and exclusion.

Turning to the three schools, they all, superficially at least, shared a number of commonalities. All recently (within the previous six months at the point of access) experienced Ofsted inspections, the results of which suggesting each school was failing to meet required standards as set out on the spectrum of Outstanding-Good-Requires Improvement-Inadequate.

Hartland Academy received the lowest grading, inadequate, and received particular criticism for not providing students with stimulating and challenging teaching. The school also received recommendations on improving disruptive behaviour within the classroom environment. The school is situated within a deprived part of the town, with entrenched issues of intergenerational worklessness, anti-social behaviour, and low socioeconomic status.

Very few young people at the school progressed to HE, rates of school exclusion were high, and, historically, large numbers of young people became NEET on leaving school. The school is classed as low performing with GCSE attainment well below average and only a small proportion of learning entering post-16 education to undertake A-levels. The sixth form part of the school runs a large number of level 2 vocational qualifications, which the majority of those attending sixth form undertake. The school has two sports academies that are associated with professional football and basketball teams. These academies attract young people to the school who have ambitions to play sport professionally. Therefore, the school is generally characterised by a split between sporting students, those headed for vocational education, and those who are at risk of NEET or precarious employment.

A key feature of the academic (rather than the sporting) aspect of the school is a culture of focusing on the employability of their students. There is an acknowledgment across the staff body that education, in an academic sense, holds little value to the majority of young people within the school as, within families, there are limited experiences and horizons that embed the need for education.

In regard to teacher cultures, creating an ordered environment was the chief concern. The implementation of rules and boundaries was disparate across the school. Some teachers took a far more hard-line approach than others, with specific staff identified as leaders on this front. The consensus amongst staff appeared to be that a more

authoritative and consistent approach was required to create engagement and participation in learning. However, teachers largely saw this as an individual rather than a collective responsibility.

Drawing parallels with Hartland Academy, Northumberland Girls School was also characterised as a low performing school. Occupying a similar geographical space, Northumberland Girls School also served a deprived area with high levels of poverty, worklessness, and crime. However, the 'critical mass' of the student body was altered by a group of students sent to the school because it is single sex. As an all-girls school, Northumberland Girls School attracted students either for cultural reasons or because it was perceived to be an alternative to the all-girls grammar school only a short distance away.

This resulted in a more ethnically, culturally, and academically diverse student body. The added diversity brought both benefits and challenges. The school was able to celebrate high achievement amongst a proportion of their students and use this group as a tool for promoting the benefits of positive educational engagement. However, the group in question were commonly very socially different to lower achieving students. This resulted in a polarisation that served to entrench rather than disrupt disadvantage. Highlighted by a student's distinction between 'the grammar girls and the apprenticeship girls'.

More widely, the school was noticeably focused on the pastoral as well as academic aspects of schooling. A number of teachers commented that this was driven by large numbers of young people requiring support with mental and emotional health, and with home lives characterised by the involvement of social services. This meant that teaching was not always deemed to be the top priority.

The third school, West Town, had a slightly different profile. While Hartland Academy and Northumberland Girls School had long histories of low academic performance, West Town had experienced mixed results. As a consequence, the school took a much more traditionally academic approach. While large numbers of the students clearly did experience similar levels of disadvantage to those at Hartland Academy and Northumberland Girls School, the schools overriding focus was on promoting good

values and behaviours that were perceived as conducive to academic success, pastoral matters appeared to be secondary.

The mixed results could perhaps be partly explained by the geographical position and the student body. Whereas Hartland Academy and Northumberland Girls School were situated in the heart of a deprived area, West Town sat on the border of an old council estate and a more traditionally middle-class area. As such, Northumberland Girls School, and Hartland Academy in particular, took on 'underclass' identities, whereas West Town tried to maintain a high status. The school culture was consequently less sympathetic to anti-school dispositions and subjectivities that criticised the value of education. The school was therefore defined by a fundamentally binary conceptualisation of 'good' and 'bad' students, with those deemed to be falling short excluded and marginalised from mainstream opportunities.

The college is not easily characterised due to the scale and complexity of the institution. It is a large college offering a wide range of post-16 education and training options, varying from adult learning to vocational qualifications, to A-levels. The size of the building also meant that it had the feel of a small campus. Each mode of study had its own designated space. Consequently, there was not a distinguishable college culture, but more cultures specific to the various elements.

Even within the focus of this study, vocational education, there was a clear distinction between foundation learning and the higher levels (levels 1-3) of study. Foundation learning formed its own 'department', with lessons and staff based separately from the higher levels of vocational education. At the higher levels, staff were split into subject areas so largely formed a group culture within their specific area of study. The college therefore felt less interconnected than the schools, there was not one overriding philosophy or ethos underpinning its various elements.

While the college attracted students from a wide geographical area, extending well beyond the borders of the town, the majority of students entering(particularly low-level) VET were almost exclusively from local schools. More specifically, low-level VET contained large numbers of students from Northumberland Girls School, Hartland Academy, and West Town. The result was a concentration of marginalised learners in one place.

Data collection and analysis

As discussed previously, data collection was based on observations and interviews. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed using transcription software. Ethnographic conversations and observations were recorded as field notes. The process of recording field notes was however not straightforward. To maintain a position as a participant-observer, I avoided the continuous writing of notes.

Furthermore, I avoided overtly and consistently recording notes in order to try and reduce issues of reactivity (Davies 2008). A further challenge was the periods of time spent in the field in a single stretch. In order to immerse myself in the lived experiences of a particular group, I would follow them from lesson to lesson in order to capture the varied nature of those experiences, while also capturing the interactions outside of the classroom. This meant opportunities to write field notes were limited. I therefore largely relied on head notes and jottings (Emerson 2011), using them to recall my observations and create 'scenes' in the form of fuller field notes (*ibid.*).

Due to the nature of ethnographic research and the focus on studying cultures, groups, dynamics, interactions, and some of the more tacit aspects of everyday experiences, the researcher is the key research instrument (Hammersley 2007). Field notes are a manifestation of the researcher's subjective interpretation of what has been observed (Brewer 2000), highlighting that analysis cannot be dislocated from data collection (*ibid.* p.107). In this regard, the recording of field notes can be viewed as in-the-field analysis (LeCompte and Schensul 1999).

It has however been proposed that data analysis in qualitative research comprises three sub-processes: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). To undergo such a process, the field notes and interview transcripts were transcribed and then coded using NVivo using an iterative process of thematic analysis. The many phases of this process allowed for themes to emerge and then to be established, reworked, or consumed within wider themes and concepts. Ultimately however, the notes and the process served as an aide-memoire to the experiences of researching in the field. Coding, in a technical sense, simply provided the structure and

framework for interpretation of the fieldwork. By providing an overview of the fieldwork findings and stimulation reflection, the coding process enabled the production of categories, patterns, and linkages, which gave meaning to events and interactions (Brewer 2000). It was through this process of 'bringing order to the data' (*ibid.* p.105) that analysis took place.

Coding was conducted in a broadly inductive manner (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). Transcribed field notes were examined, and key words, concepts and quotes were transformed into individual items. Subsequent phases of analysis then reviewed the individual items to find themes and patterns. A repetition of this process ultimately yielded a number of key ideas that represented the key research findings. It should however be recognised that this process was not relied on exclusively to inform the research findings. It largely served as a process to structure the field notes and to 'make sense' of what had been observed within the field (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). To provide a fuller account of the analysis, table 4.3 below presents an overview of the key outputs.

Table 4.3. Outputs of analysis

Outputs	Based on
Macro-level context – practices, perceptions and discourses around participation, structural dimensions (education system response) and transition patterns and behaviours	Policy documents, literature, official documents, patterns across groups, institutional responses
Meso-level – institutional culture, ethos, and practices,	Dynamics between individuals and groups, implicit/tacit forces, institutional/ teacher/ group policies (informal-formal/ explicit-implicit)
Micro-level – young people's stories, teacher-student interactions	Field notes, observations, ethnographic conversations

Analysis at the micro level focused predominantly on interactions, experiences, and dynamics observed within the fieldwork. Key foci included teacher practices and mentalities, teacher-student interactions, young people's experiences and subjectivities, and the nature of learning and transition. Emergent themes included teacher approaches to the organisation of pupil participation, student engagement, and learning cultures. All of which examined the process of education and the minutiae of everyday practices and experiences (Hammersley and Woods 1976).

It is important to note here that the majority of the meso-level analysis is based on the ethnography, which studied a range of implicit policies and practices within institutions and amongst teachers. These policies and practices often operated tacitly and worked 'behind the backs' (Goffman 1986) the students. In this instance it is young people's experiences of these implicit policies and practices which is of interest and, in particular, the way these experiences are organised and conceptually framed (Goffman 1986).

Using such a conceptual frame highlights how experiences of participation are organised in such a way that there is a different understanding and expectation between young people and the teachers who are structuring it. There are therefore a number of things which go unsaid because of the fundamentally different outlooks, which leads to disempowered young people, frustration, and a lack of agency. It also results in young people being disadvantaged by not having the necessary [official] knowledge (Apple 2012; Bernstein 2000) set by the teachers, the institution, the education system, and society (capitalism).

Macro analyses drew attention to wider patters of transition and participation observed across the fieldwork, reflecting on how extended participation positioned young people across the spectrum of inclusionary and exclusionary transition routes (Roberts S and MacDonald 2013). In particular analysis centred on wider forces legitimising marginalisation and exclusion by rebranding it as individualised modes of disengagement (Fergusson 2013).

Critical reflections/ reflexivity

In conducting ethnography, it is necessary to acknowledge the inseparableness of analysis, interpretation, and reflexivity (Brewer 2000, p.126). The interpretations of the fieldwork, and the presentation of these interpretations in the process of writing up, are a representation of the connections between and identities of the researcher and the researched (Davies 2008). The research cannot therefore be properly understood without a critical attitude towards the preconceptions, power relations, and the nature of interactions implicit in the construction of observations that become data (Brewer 2000; Davies 2008). The following section therefore considers some of the factors that shaped the fieldwork.

Author history and identity - preconceptions and locating the self

As set out above, the researcher's history, identity, and preconceptions are intertwined with how the field is interpreted and represented. The personal nature of ethnography means who the researcher is and what they believe is an important part of the findings (Hammersley 2007). The following section thus sets out key characteristics and dispositions of the researcher in relation to how the study has been conceived.

Brought up in the South East of England with two siblings, a mother who is a medical professional and a father who is an academic researcher, my upbringing could be seen as traditional and middle-class. However, my mother comes from a working-class background in South Wales with a father who occupied a low rank within the Navy and a mother who worked part-time in low-level jobs. My mother was able to be socially mobile due to academic performance and the introduction of the comprehensive school system. My Father was brought up in Suffolk with two Polish parents who had moved to England after WW2, having served in the RAF. Therefore, while I am a white middle-class English man, my recent family history is not so straightforward.

Growing up, with two parents who had been through tertiary education and who had professional/academic jobs, my experiences and socialisation could be characterised by the acquisition of middle-class cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997). Beyond my home life, I generally did well in education and had two main friendship groups – one more

local group, who largely had parents working in trades/low-level jobs and had not been through tertiary education, and one group based on my classmates at school, who largely had professional parents who had been through tertiary education. Therefore, I was exposed to a range of social statuses and variety of habitus' (Bourdieu and Passerson 1990). Reflecting on my time at school, it is clear that the different dispositions towards schooling and the different outcomes across my friendship groups were linked to different social statuses and upbringings, perhaps symbolising the middle-class culture of schooling and the differentiated access to 'official knowledge' (Apple 1992, 2012; Reay 2001).

Within my local friendship group, I was always seen as the sensible, calm one who would make rational and informed decisions. Sometimes this would lead to ridicule, but at other times it would mean friends would confide in me and seek advice and guidance. In some respects, I was therefore a 'helper' or supporter. This is a feature of my personality which has been maintained into my career, as I have taken on a number of jobs designed to support young people. My career working with young people began while I was undertaking my first degree in Sports Engineering in London. Alongside my studies, I took on a part-time job working with young people involved in crime who were not in education, employment, or training. My experiences working with young people in such contexts sparked an interest in this type of work, which continued after finishing my degree as I spent five years as a youth worker.

As part of my training as a youth worker, I completed a master's degree in Youth & Community Work. I found the lecturers and the teaching stimulating and inspiring, with the culture being somewhat anti-authority and anti-establishment. Much of the focus was on empowering young people to push back against systemic injustices and to give young people a voice in shaping their own lives and futures. I found comfort and familiarity with such values as my mother has always been involved in community activism and my father has a dislike of authority. In many respects, my training as a youth worker provided a focus for the values I had been imbued with during my upbringing.

The real driving force and inspiration behind the research for this thesis came after my time in youth work. Still working in a job supporting young people, I spent a year

working in a pupil referral unit (PRU). My role involved working with young people in secondary schools across the area who were at risk of permanent exclusion. I would visit a range of schools and work one-to-one with young people to try and address the issues putting them at risk of permanent exclusion, as well as with the school(s) to implement strategies to support improved engagement. What was clear from the outset was the schools (who paid for the service) very much saw it as being a matter of 'fixing' the young people, working with deficit modes of thinking that framed the issues as intrinsic to the young people, rather than as an issue the school could affect. However, although the factors causing a risk of exclusion were largely individual behaviour, my work with the young people highlighted the issues were far more complex.

Many of the young people I worked with were characterised by problematic/unhappy home lives, community level inequality and disadvantage, intergenerational poverty, structural inequalities, and a sense that life chances were limited. For them, school was either not a priority, as they had bigger issues to contend with, or it was viewed as something that was of little use or benefit for people like them, reflecting previous studies of dispositions towards schooling (Willis 1977). The manifestation of these factors was often behaviours and attitudes that did not conform with expectations of the school and teachers. Although disruptive behaviour understandably needs to be addressed in a school environment, where the needs of other students also need to be considered, school/teacher responses and approaches were a source of frustration.

My experiences, observations, and interactions showed that little consideration was given to young people's perspectives and that there was little explicit recognition of young people's lived experiences of school. Young people commonly experienced labelling, isolation, and exclusion, and they regularly espoused feelings of unfair and unjust treatment from teachers. For young people, their behaviours were symbolic of a dissatisfaction with the way they were treated, and the situation they were in. However, the dynamic was such that young people were expected to change even if there was no change in their situation or the way they were treated. My perception was that the schools ultimately showed little appreciation of what school/teachers could do differently. Perhaps understandably, young people therefore felt

disempowered and pushed back in the only way they felt they could, through behaviour.

These experiences led to a frustration that there was little I could do to support young people at risk of exclusion, beyond attempting to change their lives outside of school, as 'the system' was not going to change for them. Most commonly, young people focused their negative views at individual teachers, as they ultimately were the 'face' of the school and schooling. Teachers were viewed as those enacting the policies and practices of that school and of the nature of schooling more widely. My values and dispositions meant I was inclined to view young people as in a position of reduced power, and therefore requiring support/advocacy in championing their views. Such a stance created a tension as it put me in a position of opposition or conflict with the views of the school.

In an attempt to reconcile these tensions, I became interested in the nature and significance of teacher-student relationships, which was the starting point for this study. While preparing an application to undertake a PhD, I familiarised myself with the literature in this field and found an article on the importance of teacher-student relationships for lived experiences of schooling, particularly in relation to disadvantaged students (Duffy and Elwood 2013). The article struck a chord with my experiences working with young people at risk of exclusion, in which relationships with teachers were frequently cited as a significant factor in dispositions towards school and learning. A major theme in young people's dissatisfaction with school was the lack of respect they felt teachers showed towards them, suggesting that students were expected to respect teachers, but not vice versa. This is supported in research which looks at the factors that underpin positive experiences of schooling for disadvantaged young people – respect, reciprocity, and relevance (Archer, Mendick, and Hollingworth 2010).

In summary, my socialisation growing up, my experiences and values both personally and professionally, and my empathy/sympathy for young people in positions of disadvantage/marginality created a particular lens through which the research project was conceived. Ultimately about championing young people's views and highlighting the experiences they face; the research was motivated by a desire for social justice and

by an attempt to redress the perceived power dynamics observed within schools. There is therefore perhaps a tendency on my behalf to side with young people as those who are on the receiving end of the 'system' rather than teachers who (even if they personally do not agree with certain aspects of it) represent the 'system'.

However, while the research was initially conceived in the context of what I perceived to be harmful teacher practices, it is important to recognise that what teachers do and say in the classroom represents only one aspect of the field. Essentially, what is observed 'frontstage' (teacher practices and interactions) does not necessarily represent 'backstage' (teacher identities, beliefs, and agency) (Goffman 1969). Therefore, in discussing the issue of representing the field, the following sections acknowledge that teachers are constrained in many ways by the system and the ideologies/philosophies that underpin contemporary education and schooling (Lauder et al. 2006).

The nature of interactions and representing the field

As emphasised by the 'crisis of representation' (Brewer 2000, p.43), ethnography can perhaps only provide partial truths (Carspecken 1996). Interactions with teachers and young people took place in a particular context and were shaped by interpretations of the purpose of those interactions held by the researcher and the researched. In particular, the previous section highlights how researcher history, identity, and preconceptions frame the process of interpretation and analysis.

To apply these concepts to practical matters, interactions were largely informal in nature and were framed by reflective questioning. I would say I positioned myself as an 'ignorant outsider' (Coffey 1999, p.20), asking people to inform me of their 'realities'. Ultimately however, the reflective questions had a critical edge and demonstrated a pre-existing level of insight. There was therefore a degree of initial interpretation embedded within the interactions themselves. Representations of the field can thus be viewed as a reflexive relationship between the 'knowledge' I took into the fieldwork and research participants' interpretations of my expressions of that knowledge.

Additionally, an inevitable consequence of my presence in the field was the issue of reactivity (Cohen 2013). Young people and teachers inevitably had initial suspicions

about the motives for my presence. Teachers in particularly seemed initially apprehensive about allowing me to observe their classroom. For young people, I was clearly not a teacher so was not easily placed. Managing these perceptions was an important part of the fieldwork. I was keen not to be viewed as 'on the side' of the teachers, as I felt this would have created a power relationship between the young people and myself. Equally, having mutual conversations with the teachers was important to break down perceptions that I was there to assess or criticise them.

Relationship management (Bryman 2012) was therefore a key part of addressing power relations. Spending an extended period of time in the field also assisted in reducing issues of reactivity. While it is not feasible to know what the nature of the dynamics before commencement of the fieldwork, over time the novelty of having a researcher in the classroom diminished and my presence became somewhat normalised.

Furthermore, it is important to note that what I observed within the fieldwork, particularly in the case of teacher practices, only tells one part of the story. Building on the point made in the previous section, it is pertinent to acknowledge that the manifestation of teacher practices 'frontstage' in the classroom do not necessarily reflect teacher beliefs and attitudes 'backstage' away from the classroom. There is therefore a need to be cognisant of the factors which have the potential to influence teacher agency and what is achievable and desirable in terms of classroom practice and interactions.

Indeed, it has been suggested that there has been a tendency to overestimate the agency adults (teachers, practitioners etc.) have in how they work with young people (Hart 2008). Linking the issue of teacher agency back to this study, analysis of the fieldwork data elucidated a number of factors which were outside the immediate control of teachers and acted to define and shape the agency those teachers had in terms of classroom practice and interactions. For example, retention focused policies within college; a systemic culture of performance, audit, and assessment; an academicisation of VET; and continued disparity of esteem affecting low-level VET, were all intersecting factors in the manifestation of learning environments and teacher-student interactions. Furthermore, many of these factors operated 'behind

the backs' of the staff and teachers, as well as behind the backs of their students, further limiting agency. Classroom observations can therefore by viewed as an interplay between interactions and interpretations, shaped by wider contextual factors that limit the agency and awareness of both young people and teachers/practitioners.

A reflective account of teacher practices

Following the above discussion on the nature of teacher agency, it is perhaps pertinent to reflect more deeply on how teachers are represented within the fieldwork. While teachers may be seen as those ultimately responsible for enacting key aspects of the learning environment (i.e., pedagogy, discipline, interactions, curriculum), they do not operate free from constraint or influence as entirely autonomous actors. As emphasised in the previous sections, various meso and macro policies, cultures, discourses, and ideologies shape how teachers can and do act.

As Mac an Ghaill (1994) discusses, the nature of teacher cultures inevitably change as schooling is restructured and reconceptualised. Indeed, the professionalisation of teaching and the permeation of a political philosophy and discourse, based on neoliberal principles of performance, standards, managerialism, and audit (Ainley and Allen 2010), has transformed teaching into a more technical role, focused on outcomes rather than the process or purpose of education. In particular, the introduction of performance tables and the process of surveillance and control through Ofsted has pushed schools to focus their attention on attainment (Gillborn and Youdell 2000), with the associated A-C economy creating a discourse in which GCSE outcomes are conflated with the quality of teaching in a school (Youdell 2006). Teachers are therefore put in a position where the quality of their teaching is assessed largely by the achievement of their pupils, resulting in a situation where the needs of individual students are side-lined by the needs of the school in 'raising standards' and improving 'performance' (Mannion 2005).

It could be suggested that such a focus on attainment and outcomes risks creating a group of 'disposable' young people (Chadderton and Colley 2012), as those deemed to be 'no-hopers' in achieving A-C grade GCSEs (Youdell 2006) are marginalised/neglected in order to focus on the 'borderliners' (*ibid.*), who are viewed as more likely to achieve pass grades. A similar situation is perhaps emerging in the context of post-16

education and training as the focus on sustained engagement in FE is driving a focus on retention, perhaps forcing teachers to triage learners to assess who is likely to 'survive' and who is likely to drop out (Cornish 2018). Ultimately then, teachers are constrained by the expectations of their role and by the reforms to education and training which shape what constitutes being a 'good' teacher in an era of performance and managerialism.

It is therefore recognised that many of the factors driving these changes are not necessarily linked to teacher identities and dispositions but neoliberal policies and changes to the education system beyond the control of teachers. In this sense, teachers can be viewed as playing out the political economic imperatives that frame the purpose of education and teaching. Teachers are therefore being socialised within these cultures and practices and have to conform in order to fit in and 'succeed' (Reeves 2018). Agency and capacity to act autonomously is therefore constrained by the expectations of being a teacher within a contemporary education and training landscape shaped by performance, standards, and managerialism.

There is also a need to acknowledge individual identities and the fact that teachers will have their own histories, values, and perceptions that underpin their practice and their motivations. As outlined above, there are the 'frontstage' elements of teacher practices, but 'backstage' there are people who have their own identity separate from that as a teacher, or in tension with dominant understanding of being a teacher (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009). Indeed, recent research has revealed how teacher identity work is fraught with challenges due to a dissonance between teacher's values (for example: care for students, critical views on schooling) and the expectations placed upon them (for example, educational triage, performance focus) (Reeves 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to recognise that being a teacher is in many ways a 'performance', which does not necessarily reflect the beliefs or dispositions of the person. The 'performance' is thus ultimately an intersection between various aspects of identity and external factors that shape the agency of teachers, some of which can inevitably be in tension with each other.

However, in seeking to champion young people's views and by taking a phenomenological approach to understanding lived experiences, the thesis does

largely capture 'frontstage' observations. As young people rarely have access to the 'backstage' aspects of their teachers' practices and of their own lived experiences, what manifests 'frontstage' is 'real' to them. Ultimately, what underpins teacher practices and school/college policies is rarely made explicit to young people, so what matters to them and their (dis)positions are the everyday experiences and interactions. Therefore, while attempts are made to draw in analysis of the factors described above that shape teacher agency, the thrust of the thesis is on illuminating participation in education and training from the point of view of young people's lived experiences.

Ethical issues

One of the key considerations in undertaking the fieldwork was safeguarding the research participants, particularly young people. This meant ensuring that involvement in the research did not lead to any harm or any adverse effects. One of the chief concerns was putting young people in a problematic position by asking them to comment critically on their experiences of education and training and on their views of teachers. To mitigate against this risk, young people were always asked if they were happy to engage in the interaction and told that they did not have to share anything they did not want to. Furthermore, best efforts were always made to ensure conversations did not take place where teachers could hear the content. Additionally, attentiveness was shown to the potential vulnerabilities and sensitivities when talking to young people about their lives and potentially emotive experiences. Therefore, all efforts were made to enable young people to talk openly but on their own terms.

Also pertinent is the, somewhat contentious, concern of informed consent. Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2012) question whether consent can be seen as establishing common ground or a process of methodological grooming. On a basic level, all research participants were given a document which outlined my research project, the nature of the research, the data to be collected, and the rights of the research participants. The document explained that research participants would be given anonymity and confidentiality would be adhered to. Informed consent also highlighted the rights of research participants to view all data collected on them, have any data removed, and withdraw from the research at any time, with all related data removed.

Research participants were also invited to raise any questions of queries before, during, or after the study.

Beyond gaining initial consents, I also undertook a dynamic consent process, ensuring participants were happy to engage with me before entering into interviews, conversations, and other modes of data collection. I also continuously reflected on my interactions with research participants to ensure I was not engaging in any form of coercion and that there were not any implicit signs that research participants were not happy to continue their engagement with the study.

Finally, confidentiality and data security represented a further feature of my ethical considerations. When recording field notes, I always used coded information to ensure anonymity and that individuals or places were not identifiable. Field notes were always kept on my person and written up at the end of each team before being stored securely. All electronic files were kept on a password protected memory stick to ensure data was not accessible to anyone other than the researcher.

Conclusions

This chapter has set out the conceptual and methodological frameworks for this research. At the heart of this is a view of lived experiences as shaped by interactions, habitus, discourses, and the roles and identities people perform. All of which examine young people's horizons for action, learning careers, and transition behaviours in an analysis of school-to-work transitions and (non)participation. To study young people's post 16 transitions, a multi-site ethnography, which tracked young people over time, was employed. By investigating multiple education and training sites and institutions, the research was designed to capture the multifaceted nature of the education and training field, and young people's experiences of it.

However, as noted earlier in the chapter, the personal and embedded nature of ethnography means that the way the field is represented is shaped by the author's history, identity, and values (Hammersley 2007). Therefore, the reflexive sections provide an important footnote to the findings and analysis contained within the thesis. The most germane points emerging from my reflexive thinking are the belief in championing young people's voices, and the focus on challenging deficit/individualised

modes of thinking, which risk pathologising young people experiencing exclusion, disadvantage, and marginalisation. The findings therefore foreground a young person's perspective.

Placing a focus on young people's lived experiences results, at times, in a robust critique of teachers and their practice. I do however recognise that there are a variety of factors which constrain teacher agency and autonomy, and which shape actions and interactions. In discussing the 'frontstage' and 'backstage' (Goffman 1969) aspects of teaching, I also acknowledge that teachers 'perform' a role, which does not necessarily reflect their personal identity and beliefs. The critique of teachers and their practice in the following empirical chapters thus needs to be read and analysed with reference to the various factors of political philosophies in education, school cultures, changing roles of teachers, and socioeconomic change, which all hold the potential to constrain agency and shape actions.

Bringing the focus to the findings, it could be suggested that the primary challenge for RPA, and extended participation, is creating sound and fulfilling attachment with learning amongst young people for whom previous experiences have been unrewarding (Hutchinson, Beck and Hooley 2015; Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014). The lived experience and nature of participation in both school and post-16 education and training is undoubtedly central to achieving this aim. However, the lived experience of extended participation is not a phenomenon easily reducible to distinct components. Nonetheless, each of the following empirical chapters therefore represents certain dimensions of lived experiences, which are connected to and intersect with all the others. At the centre of these chapter are the concepts of participation, learning, and transition.

Empirical chapter structure

Chapter 5 begins by setting the scene and by providing an overview of the fieldwork sites. In particular, the findings explore the school and college context and examine how (dis)engagement underpins many aspects of young people's learning and transition experiences. Chapters six to eight then take a temporal look at participation, learning, and transition, covering the journey from school, through post-16 decision-making, and into further education and training. All of which considers how different

constructions and applications of participation play out in young people's experiences of learning and transitions. Finally, chapter 9 presents a number of case studies which examine how the issues covered in the previous chapters manifest in individual young people's journeys from school into post-16 education, training, and employment.

Chapter 5: Teacher, school and college policies and practices: managing learning and (dis)engagement

Introduction

This chapter explores the role of school and college policies, and associated teacher practices, in shaping young people's experiences of education and training. Of specific interest is how practices and policies focused on those at the margins frame participation in education and training as an issue of (dis)engagement. The findings therefore examine how attempts to manage both learning and (dis)engagement shape the practices and policies that underpin how marginalised learners experience schooling and post-16 vocational education and training (VET). The chapter contends that such practices and policies are commonly harmful and that they have the potential to (re)produce inequality and exclusion, rather than foster participation and inclusion. Put simply, it is suggested that attempts to stimulate extended participation, and reduce non-participation (in post-16 education and training), by addressing perceived issues of (dis)engagement, creates learning experiences that maintain or entrench, rather than disrupt marginalisation.

The concept of (dis)engagement has become a central feature of discourses surrounding disadvantaged and marginalised youth. Such discourses reflect the contemporary paradigm of individualism and responsibilitisation, which links non-participation in education and training with individual deficits, rather than with structural factors (Fergusson 2004; Simmons and Thompson 2013). (Dis)engagement also represents a concept widely utilised by policy makers and practitioners in reference to young people's dispositions towards and responses to education, as exemplified by the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) policy. In the context of RPA, (dis)engagement is also inextricably linked to the notion of learning, with young people now required to continue their participation in learning (education and training) until the age of 18. The role of teacher practices and school and college policies consequently assume a dual function, managing both learning and (dis)engagement (Vallee 2017).

The purpose of this chapter is therefore to explore the ways in which managing the competing demands of learning and (dis)engagement played out through teacher

practices, as well as through school and college policies. While the issue of (dis)engagement can ultimately be linked to macro-level analyses of social and economic inclusion (Levitas 2005), this chapter draws greater attention to the micro and meso-level manifestations of (dis)engagement (Vallee 2017). Using the early school ethnographies of the late 1960s to the early 1980s as a reference point, the findings explore classroom experiences, teacher-student interactions, and student cultures in order to examine the nature and meaning of (dis)engagement in current educational contexts. In particular, reference is made to the strategies teachers employ, the classroom environment and interactions these strategies stimulate, and the effects these have on student participation.

Teacher strategies and approaches

Discussion around the implementation of RPA produced varying and changing views on how best to deliver its aims – increasing rates of participation and engagement in post-16 education and training (Spielhofer *et al.* 2007; DfE 2010). Initial thoughts focused on enforcement and punitive action (Maguire 2013), but ultimately turned to notions of developing a range of appealing and desirable options which would encourage young people to want to continue their participation post-16 (DfE 2014). This was particularly targeted at ensuring those 'at risk' of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) extend their education or training beyond compulsory schooling (*ibid.*). As Russell, Simmons, and Thompson (2011a) comment, this poses a particular challenge for those tasked with handling this population:

> Under existing legislation, participation in education or training will become compulsory until the age of 18 by 2015, making even more acute the question of how best to engage those young people for whom schooling has been unrewarding (pp. 478-479).

Implicit within this view is the dilemma post-16 institutions and teachers face. On one hand there is a population of young people, largely characterised by negative learner identities and dispositions towards school (Thompson 2011), who are seen as in need of 're-engagement' with learning (Smyth, Mcinerney and Fish 2013). This view leans towards approaches which aim to build and support young people's engagement, in a loosely therapeutic sense (Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011a). In contrast to this more welfare orientated view, is a position which places responsibility for engagement

with the individual students. This position tends to promote approaches aimed at regulating or controlling forms of engagement and participation.

This poses a challenge which is enacted in various ways at the institutional level but also the level of classroom experiences and teacher-student interactions. What is striking is how the different approaches produce apparently contradictory outcomes for the students. During the course of the fieldwork, four key dimensions of students' lived experience of engagement and participation emerged. These are broadly conceived as:

1. Teacher orientations and approaches to student participation and engagement – classroom teacher-student interactions

2. The implementation of boundaries/ organisation of pupil participation

3. Learning cultures and activities

4. Teacher ideologies/ subjectivities – influences on teaching cultures and practices

The ethnographic examination of classroom interactions is a now well-covered topic, with many prominent examples found within the British sociology of education literature (Hargreaves 1967; Sharpe 1976; Lacey 1976; Hammersley 1976; Delamont 1976; Willis 1977; Furlong 1976; Ball 1984b). This body of work covers a wide range of issues but one in particular, which is most pertinent here, is the nature of interactions that are specifically geared towards the establishment of student participation and engagement.

These interactions have been conceptualised in various ways with Delamont (1976) describing initial and routine encounters as forming part of a classroom battle in which teachers and students go through a process of negotiation. Framing the issue more in terms of the establishment of boundaries and control, Woods (1983) examines teacher strategies used in the organisation of pupil participation. Attempting to look beyond 'fixed and static patterns of interaction' Ball (1984a, p.108) investigates the more dynamic nature of initial encounters from which the more routine encounters emerge in what is referred to as the 'process of establishment (Ball 1984a, p.109). The

following section explores the encounters, processes and strategies described above, developing a contemporary analysis of these aspects of classroom interaction by framing them within the current context of extended participation in education and an intensified focus on (dis)engagement and non-participation.

Shaped by these overarching teacher strategies is a range of encounters, classified by Delamont (1976) as initial or routine. Based on the work of Delamont (1976) and Ball (1984a), initial encounters can be conceived as those which seek establish rules and relationships and as being more experimental and developmental in nature. They take place in a context containing more unknowns and in which strategies are tested and evolved (Delamont 1976; Ball 1984a). More familiar patterns of interaction, routine encounters, are then established through a process of teacher-student negotiation in which teacher and student adaptations take place (Delamont 1976; Ball 1984a).

An initial authority-oriented approach is evident in the following classroom observation involving the first full lesson of a new level 2 Travel and Tourism group.

> The teacher [Chris] arrives (just before the scheduled lesson start time) and the class is half empty. I have been present for a few minutes prior to this and there are approximately ten students awaiting the teacher's arrival. On arrival the teacher comments 'where is everybody'. A student replies 'there's lots of traffic today'. In response the teacher says, 'I drive but I'm here on time'. The teacher appears annoyed and comments 'this is not a good start'.

> The teacher begins to take a register in a traditionally formal manner. She calls out the students' names and they respond to acknowledge their presence. During this time one student arrives late. She knocks on the door and enters 'where have you been? Why are you late?' asks the teacher. The student looks slightly sheepish and replies 'I don't know'. 'You don't know!' replies the teacher, 'then you better stay outside until you can think of a good reason, I think I need a reason, don't you?' continues the teacher.

> The teacher shuts the door and turns to the class to say in an annoyed tone 'don't arrive at my classroom late without a reason for it, it's just rude'.

> Turning her attention back to the lesson the teacher says, 'Okay guys, I start my lessons by looking at the news, so you need to come to my lessons every week prepared to talk about what's been going on in the news'.

> The teacher engages with students on this topic for a short period before a couple more students arrive late. A similar exchange as with the first late

student takes place, however these students give an excuse, are reprimanded but are allowed into the class.

The teacher however follows this by addressing those late in front of the whole class: 'right, those of you that have just arrived, we have already had 5/10 minutes of the lesson, you've missed that bit of the lesson now. You've interrupted these guys who were here on time, you've interrupted me. I now have to go back again and start the lesson again (said with an escalating voice). We have now lost 13 minutes of this lesson because I've had to keep repeating myself. I know transport can be a pain, but you cannot be late. If you are going to be late, you must email us, and that's the bottom line of it. In future, if I don't get an email from you, you will be excluded from the classroom. Be grateful that it's me this morning and not George (a teaching colleague), as she would have excluded you immediately.'

(Travel and Tourism level 2 class, South Town College field notes, 14th September 2016)

This extract from the field notes provides an example of the structure and strict boundaries employed during this class's initial encounters. There is a clear teacher expectation of the students and the consequences of contravening these expectations are made explicit. There is however an attempt to pull back from an overly authoritarian stance as the teacher comments 'be grateful that it's me and not Georgina [George]', suggesting to the students that she is not that strict relative to others. This offers a useful insight into the teacher's ambitions of asserting boundaries while also maintaining some level of rapport with the students.

Later in the lesson a further example of the teacher initial encounters and the establishment of expectations:

The teacher sets the students a task and comments 'Now, I don't know you yet but I'm going to be kind this morning and let you work with your friends. If I let you work with your friends that means you get on with your work, get your head down and you don't natter about what you're doing at the weekend, I need you to concentrate on what you are doing'. (Travel and Tourism level 2 class, South Town College field notes, 14th September 2016)

In this example the teacher makes reference to what she perceives as the acceptable nature of engagement and participation. Again, attempting to portray a fair approach, the teacher sells this as part of a trade-off with the students – they are allowed to work with their friends if they conform to the teacher's expectations. Implicitly, the

teacher is suggesting that contravention of these expectations will result in the loss of that privilege.

Throughout the above interactions the students are quiet and attentive. The teacher has left little room for negotiation but perhaps the student response represents what has previously been referred to as the 'disciplinary illusion' (Hargreaves 1972), whereby students' quietness is conflated with conformity and engagement but, implicitly, there is resistance and (dis)engagement. In the context of participation, this is important as what young people present on the surface, may not reflect their subjectivities and dispositions 'below the surface'.

Essentially, it could be suggested that an overly authoritative approach may result in compliance and docility but may not lead to the development of learner identities and learning careers associated with active and empowered forms of participation in learning. This is particularly pertinent for the dispositions towards learning of disadvantaged and marginalised learners who, research has suggested, are influenced most from positive relationships with teachers (Duffy and Elwood 2013). The approach teachers take to learning and (dis)engagement in the classroom therefore possess the capacity to play a central role in how young people perceive and experience continued participation in learning.

Picking up on the link between authoritative teacher practices and forms of participation, it is argued that docility and compliance do not cultivate active and empowered experiences of learning, as young people have little ownership or agency in their participation. Instead, participation is framed more by passivity and disempowerment. In terms of creating meaningful and fruitful learning experiences, passivity and disempowerment are in contrast with research that emphasises the importance of student autonomy and agency in learning for outcomes in education (Gorard 2010). Therefore, teacher practices framed by a strong disengagement have the potential to be unconducive to the aims of RPA.

In contrast to authoritative initial encounters, an alternative strategy observed was based on building rapport and a feeling of belonging within the college environment. Immediately apparent during this observation is the far more informal and relaxed

classroom dynamic. The following edited field notes describe a foundation level health and social class in one of their first week of the new academic year:

The students are already present and seated on my arrival. They are sat around grouped tables set out in a cabaret style. The teacher [Andy] is setting stuff up and preparing a few materials for the lesson. I engage with the students for a few minutes, having general conversations about school and college.

The teacher begins by talking about NUS student cards and all of the perks it can give you, he recommends all of the students sign-up for one and that it is a perk of being a full-time student. There is a low-level of chat amongst the students but nothing disruptive. The teacher then introduces the lesson activity 'can anyone on your tables think of a time when it could be good to making timetables, in any career or now? Why is it a good thing to be able to timetable or schedule? When would you need to do it?' There are a few responses from students 'everyday', 'so you know where you are'. The teacher then replies 'Exactly, and in what careers would you ever have to make a timetable? So, would you have to do rotas in a nursery? So rotating staff on different shifts in care homes or support homes'. The teacher then asks, 'would any of you want to do anything like that?' There are a couple of responses of no and the teacher then comments 'well you never know, people often change when they are at college'.

The teacher then sets the task in which the students are required to produce a timetable based on a range of written information they have been given. The teacher outlines a number of approaches to completing the task then commenting 'don't worry, I've got easier ways if you need, and I'll help with all of them if any of you are worried about time as time is often the hardest bit on maths'. 'So, you are going to work in teams to do this, do you want to work in your tables?' The teacher then distributes the worksheets.

(Foundation/level 1 Health and Social Care class, South Town College field notes, 15th September 2016)

The initial encounters taking place here reflect the pseudo-therapeutic dynamics described by Russell, Simmons, and Thompson (2011a) in their ethnographic study of two entry to employment (E2E) programmes. There are many parallels between the E2E programme, and the foundation-learning context described above. Many of the learners share similar characteristics with the young people found within Russell, Simmons and Thompson's study, and the work is typically basic as commonly found in studies of alternative learning sites (Smyth, Mcinerney and Fish 2013), which is perhaps detrimental to learners' pride and prospects (Atkins 2019).

Also noticeable from the above field notes is the teacher's desire to 'sell' the activities to the students. This is perhaps symbolic of the teacher's perceived need to get buy-in from the students. This is a common theme across the foundation learning observations and is particularly evident in rapport-oriented approaches. It is however in contrast to authority-oriented interactions, which are characterised more by activities being delivered by instruction.

The need to 'sell' the activities to student mirrors the actions of staff within alternative learning programmes (Lawy 2010; Simmons and Thompson 2013) and it could be suggested is similarly grounded in constructions of young people as anti-education (Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011a) or as 'hurt' by an unjust system (Reay 2001; Youdell 2006). Also clear in the act of selling the task is the link to employment, attempting to make explicit the value of such a task in the work environment. It could be suggested that this is based on the view that these students are motivated more by employment than education. This is a common theme in studies of similar groups in which it is assumed that practical learning is preferred over academic learning, resulting in exclusion from opportunities to engage with more high-status learning (Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011a).

Teacher motivations and influences

What is perhaps most instructive about these encounters is the motivations which inspire them. Over the course of a number of ethnographic conversations, teachers revealed the rationale behind their particular approaches. Interestingly, this often manifested as a form of justification for their given strategy, mostly unprompted. This is perhaps suggestive of two insights, firstly that teachers actively thought about and

reflected on their practice and secondly that they sensed an element of scrutiny on their techniques. The teachers that fell loosely within a rapport-oriented approach often constructed their approach to engagement as developmental or therapeutic in some way:

> 'You have to get them on board first, most of these guys didn't like school so you need to build their engagement…They are often anxious about coming to college so it's important to put them at ease' (Andy, foundation/level 1 Health and Social Care teacher, 16th February 2016)

> 'Confidence and communication are big things for these students. Once they feel comfortable and are able to get on well with others, they are much more likely to do well' (Rachel, level 1 Health and Social Care teacher, 11th March 2016)

These views embody the prevailing construction of learners on low-level courses as lacking the skills and dispositions required for engagement within the institutional context. In contrast, authority-oriented approaches reflected a form of 'training' of students. Students were commonly perceived as in need of moulding or being prepared for their notional futures, through a 'tough love' philosophy.

> 'The students need to be prepared for what will be expected of them on level 2 and in the future when they are in work. I could be more relaxed with them and let them get away with more, but I wouldn't be helping them. They would only fail in the future' (Marina, Foundation level Travel and Tourism teacher)

> 'They can't just come in here and mess around. They have to be able to follow the rules and get on with the work because there's a lot to get through on this course. Everyone's got a different way of working but if the students want to get on in my class, then they have to work the way I want. It'll be the same for them at work, they'll have certain expectations that they have to conform to' (George, Level 2/3 Travel and Tourism teacher, 14th October 2016)

While the above quotes highlight the motivations behind particular teacher approaches, they do not address the influence of wider pressures. Indeed, the debate around young people's agency is a well-developed one, what is lacking however is an understanding of how teachers' agency is shaped by wider influences and changes. This is not to say that teachers' actions are entirely determined by external forces but that their agency is in some way structured or bounded (Evans 2007).

One of the key factors influencing foundation programme teacher approaches in this context was the expectations of higher-level courses. The differentiated expectations across levels are characterised by perceptions of harder and more intense workloads, a greater need for student autonomy, and the importance of conformity with teacher expectations and boundaries. This is captured in the following quotes:

> 'I'm not like this with my level 2 and especially level 3 students, I'm much stricter with them and I demand a lot more' (Rachel, Health and social Care teacher reflecting on her different approach to teaching level 1 and level 2 and 3 groups, 15th February 2016)

> 'They can't expect to get so much support in level 2 and 3, they have to just get on with the work and do as we ask' (Chris, level 2 and 3 Travel and tourism teacher discussing the challenges for foundation students progressing to level 2 and 3, April 12th 2016)

Implicit within these comments is the preconception that higher-level and higher-status courses require an increased formality and structure, while perhaps also reflecting normative assumptions about differentiated student capabilities. Perhaps shaped by culturally bound constructions of work ethic and labour market expectations, these preconceptions reflect one key way teacher agency is influenced.

Making links between teacher practices and the labour market is particularly pertinent in the context of RPA, where continued participation in education and training is explicitly linked to employability and school-to-work transitions (Simmons 2008; Maguire 2013). Through this lens, teachers are bound by neoliberal, capitalist policies that aggrandise and centralise the need for education to train and supply labour (Bernstein 2000; Brown 2003; Fergusson 2014). Coupled with positional competition (Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2010) that young people experience, both for positions within education and the labour market, teachers are perhaps forced into practices that focus on future employment needs rather than current educational needs (Mannion 2005).

This resulted in many foundation and level 1 teachers expressing a need to prepare students for the increased demands of level 2 programmes, leading to some approaches reflecting 'training'. This is most explicit in the following exchange with a foundation programme Travel and Tourism teacher:

'I can't let them do what they want, I have to try and run the class like level 2 otherwise they'll fail when they step up. Chris and George [level 2/3 teachers] are quite strict and expect their students to just get on with their work so I have to prepare for that. If I don't, I'm not doing them any favours' (Marina, Foundation level Travel and Tourism teacher, 8th November 2016)

While explored more fully later in the chapter, it is pertinent here to note the student responses to the varying teacher approaches to engagement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is greater resistance to the more coercive approaches to engagement while approaches that seek to build or support student engagement receive more positive responses. This strikes a chord with Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth's (2010) wider analysis of policy initiatives aimed at increasing educational engagement in which more controlling policies were less well received than policies focused on personal development and self-regulation. The importance of such subjectivities is emphasised by research that demonstrates a link between attainment (both grades and post-16 transitions) and young people's sense of autonomy and agency (Gorard 2010).

The implementation of boundaries

A particular facet of teacher strategies for engagement is the implementation of boundaries. Rules and expectations are a central part of organising student participation and engagement and they represent a defined element of overall teacher strategies. They provide a tangible application of teacher ideologies and dispositions and institutional cultures and norms. It could be argued that in some respects the implementation of boundaries represents the observable manifestation of a range of intersecting factors, combining to create a contextualised expression of the individual elements. As such, this section seeks to explore the various dimensions of boundary implementation, in doing so portraying the complex nature of regulating and facilitating engagement and participation. The following field notes extract depicts one particular approach to the implementation of boundaries.

At the back of the room the girl is on her phone, the teacher [Adam] asks what she is doing, 'I'm playing weed farmer on my phone sir, you have to grow and sell weed'. She continues to be on her phone throughout the session. Two of the boys engage in horseplay with the girl including occasional loud shouting and swearing- taking each other's phone off each other etc. The other boy just sits in the corner- he is looking up mountain bikes online. One boy and the girl continue to mess

around and be loud and use their phones, they are repeatedly asked (nicely) by the teacher to put them away, 'put them away or I'll give you a yellow card'. They eventually test their luck and the teacher had had enough. 'Right, give me your planners', 'oh but sir', says the girl in an exasperated/ frustrated voice. The teacher takes the planners and says, 'if you get off your phone and get on with some work, I won't give you a detention'. After a couple of minutes- during which time the girl continues to use her phone, he hands the planners back 'right, detention for you ...' the girl is given a detention 'you've got away with it ...' the boy is reprieved from being given a detention. 'Sir, you're long' says the girl. 'I didn't want to give you a detention, but I have to follow the rules' says the teacher.

Although the reprieved boy did not complete any of the set work, his avoidance of overt resistance ensures sir does not give him a detention. In continuing to explicitly disobey orders, the girl leaves sir with no choice but to give her a detention in order to save face.

(IT class, Hartland Academy field notes, 16th December 2015)

In this extract, the teacher distances himself from being an authority figure, instead suggesting he is simply the distributor of rules, which are external to his control. This strategy is perceived to be employed by the teacher in order to protect his relationship with the students, symbolic of his rapport-oriented approach to student engagement.

In contrast to an approach which seeks to create distance between the teacher and the application of rules, control and authority oriented approaches tend to be characterised by teacher ownership of boundaries. In these contexts, teachers regularly link authority to the self: 'leave my classroom', 'you've disrespected me', 'you haven't followed my rules'. These quotes, taken from classroom observations, typify authority-oriented teacher responses to students infringing the boundaries and expectations they espouse. The following vignette from a remix for work lesson captures such an approach:

> The students are working on a task set by the teacher [Marina]; there is a buzz of noise as the students chat while working. There is a busyness to the class as the teacher floats around the room helping students with their work. The mood is bright and there is a dynamic feel to the room. This is abruptly halted as the teacher addresses one of the students, she has seen using her phone. The class falls silent as the teacher raises her voice in an authoritative tone, 'Right, give me your phone' says the teacher. The class watches on, waiting for the student's response, 'No, can I just put it in my pocket?' she replies, resistantly. Escalating the matter, the teacher responds 'No, either hand me your phone or

leave the lesson'. At this point the bright and dynamic atmosphere has been replaced with a sense of tension as the confrontation evolves.

A friend of the reprimanded student chips in, attempting to defuse the situation, 'No just give it and she'll give it back at the end of lesson, I swear' she says to her friend. The student pauses for a moment, the teacher and class await her response. 'Can I not just put it in my bag' she replies, in an attempt to negotiate with the teacher. A short, sharp 'No you can't' is the riposte. Not happy with this the student changes tack 'why are you being so rude?' she says in a now argumentative tone. Attempting to stay calm but getting more and more exercised, the teacher replies 'I'm not being rude, I've been watching you…', the student, speaking over the teacher says, 'why are you shouting, stop shouting', 'I'm not shouting, you're on your phone, you're disrespecting me. Either you hand me your phone…', the student interrupts again 'how am I disrespecting you, I have not spoken to you to disrespect you'. 'I asked you not to get your phone out in class and you continued to get it out, you either hand me your phone or you leave my lesson now' asserts the teacher.

The student is muttering under her breath while slowly packing her bag. As a final statement of authority, the teacher declares 'I'm putting you on a disciplinary, please leave my lesson'. The student, displaying a face of annoyance, very slowly gets her belongings and leaves the room. During which time the teacher stands silently watching her until she leaves the room. The class remains quiet with a number of students showing clear signs of discomfort. The teacher turns to her computer to put the incident on the monitoring system. There is no noise from anyone in the class for nearly a full minute; they don't dare put a foot wrong. When they do begin to continue with their work and interactions, the class does so very gingerly.

(Remix for work class, South Town College field notes, 10th February 2017)

This vignette captures the very personal application and receipt of authority and boundaries, the teacher throughout asserting that she had been disrespected and that her classroom expectations had been violated. In response the student takes this as a personal attack. In some respects, this reflects the classroom 'battle' depicted in Delamont's (1976) study of classroom interactions. What is perhaps of most interest, and what differentiates this encounter from those discussed in Delamont's study, is the teacher's reflection on this exchange a few minutes after the event. Offering an insight into the rationale for her approach the teacher comments.

'If I let her get away with it, they'll all think they can get away with it. With these students it's important to clamp down on things straight away and not let

them escalate. If I stamp out the little things, then generally the behaviour doesn't get too bad. They need to understand that, if they're going to get on in college and progress, they need to follow the rules. The teachers on level 2 and level 3 courses won't tolerate bad behaviour' (Marina, Remix for work tutor, 10th February 2017)

This demonstrates the focus on upholding boundaries and the perceived consequences of a failure to do so. Resonating with the teacher perceptions found in schools, the rationale for the teacher's stance on boundaries reflects a broken windows style approach to the maintenance of order (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Plank, Bradshaw and Young 2008). A common narrative across authority-oriented teachers was that targeting minor misdemeanours would 'set standards' and ensure higher-level disruption was prevented.

Following on from the above explication of her strategy, the teacher reveals the role institutional factors and wider constructs of competition in education have played in the encounter.

'The problem is that this course is oversubscribed, there is a group of people on a waiting list for this course which the college needs to do something with. So, if there are people on this course that don't want to or can't engage properly then they need to go so someone else can have their space' (Marina, Remix for work tutor, 10th February 2017).

The ruthlessness that is symbolic of competition within some areas of education is evident in this remark. The teacher's comment is marked by frustration at this situation but also by an acceptance that she must enforce it. In this example, the intersection of policy and practice has resulted in an approach to organising pupil participation, which has the potential to be exclusionary as demonstrated above. This demonstrates one way in which policies and perspectives of educational engagement are permeating the classroom and shaping young people's experiences. This is made explicit in a remark made by one teacher reflecting on the pressures staff face within further education.

'I have to be tough with these guys; we can't afford to keep people on for them not to survive the course. Our managers are on our backs about retention figures. If students drop out after week 6 it goes on our figures, and we lose funding for the course. It means I have to go hard on them in the first few weeks to check that they can hack it, I would like to be more supportive, more nurturing of those students that need extra help, but the reality is we can't

anymore' (George, Level 2 and Level 3 Travel and Tourism teacher, 4th October 2016)

Teacher narratives from earlier literature reflect approaches based on a perceived norm of authority (Ball 1984a). In contrast, George suggests a desire to be more nurturing is oppressed by a need to test the student's capacity to 'survive the course' due to pressures on retention and completion. This is perhaps another demonstration of the neoliberalisation of education (Ball 2008; Brown 2013), and further education more acutely, as competition and audit permeate the classroom context.

Furthermore, across the three school fieldwork sites there were different approaches to the application of rules and boundaries. These differences manifested largely at the institutional-cultural level with the schools displaying differing practices, values and mentalities surrounding the rationale and justification behind disciplinary strategies and systems. The following section thus explores the various dimensions of boundary implementation, in doing so portraying the complex nature of regulating and facilitating engagement and participation.

The interaction with the teacher in the below extract is symbolic of the low-level misdemeanors regularly picked up on across the fieldwork schools. As has been highlighted in previous sections, this commonly results in an escalation of the situation, as a small issue becomes a big issue. The below example reinforces this perspective.

> On route to a lesson observation, there is an exchange taking place between a senior teacher [Mr Rogers] and three male students. The exchange is taking place in an outdoor part of the school; it appears that the students are travelling between classes. The teacher tells the students to pull their hoods down, as they are not allowed to have them up in school. One of the students appears to challenge the teacher, 'sir, I've just got it up as I'm walking between lessons'. This provokes an angry reaction from the teacher, he now screams at the students, orders them to pull down their hoods and begins to berate them regarding their behaviour and attitude.
>
> (Playground, Hartland Academy field notes, 16th December 2015)

The teacher in question, Mr Rogers, holds a particular reputation amongst the students at the school. During the lesson observation following witnessing the above exchange, a number of students are overheard talking about Mr Rogers.

'Mr Rogers is such a dickhead' comments one student. 'I know, he's always shouting, he needs to chill out' another student replies. I ask the students about Mr Rogers, 'So who is Mr Rogers, is he really strict?'. One of the students responds 'He's one of the assistant principals, he's always telling people off. Whenever there's a problem he always gets called'.

(Year 11 student, Hartland Academy, 16th December 2015)

Later in the lesson in a moment when the students are preoccupied, I ask the teacher about Mr Rogers.

'I've heard quite a few of the students talking about Mr Rogers, he appears to have quite a reputation?'. The teacher [Mark] replies 'Yeah, he's responsible for behaviour in the school so the kids don't really like him. Someone has to do it though and he's quite good. When he comes and tells a student off, they listen'. I reply, 'Oh right, so there's an actual behaviour focused job?'. The teacher responds 'Yeah, each of the senior leaders have something they focus on, and Mr Rogers' area is behaviour. The only problem is that people rely on him to keep boundaries, teachers don't keep to the rules themselves, they just call on him'.

('Catch up' class, Hartland Academy, 16th December 2015)

This extract highlights the focus on one staff member maintaining authority, embedding the application of rules into the hierarchy of authority with Mr Rogers being a senior staff member.

During the fieldwork there was an observed trend towards cracking down on the finer details of institutional rules. One feature which stands out is the focus on uniform and appearance. Although it may appear on face value to be a trivial point, it is perhaps symbolic of a wider concern around perceived slipping standards and the notion of generation in crisis (Jones 2009; Simmons and Smyth 2016). From the school's perspective, it is about maintaining order:

'If you let the little things go, like uniform, appearance, and manners, it raises the threshold so students feel they can get away with more. If you set the standards high and pick up on the small things, then you stop things from escalating'.

(Clare, Head of Year, West Town, 19th May 2015)

For young people, the crackdown on dress and appearance represents the application of 'stupid rules'

> 'They say if you wear a hoody, it affects your learning, if you have piercings, it affects your learning, how you have your hair, it affects your learning, no it don't, it's silly'

(Patience, Year 11 student, West Town, 14th April 2015)

And also, an oppression of individuality and a double standard

> 'We get told we have to dress a particular way and we can't do stuff with our hair, wear too much make-up or have certain piercings. How come we can't express ourselves, but teachers can have massive beards and are allowed to wear their own clothes'

(Danielle, year 11 student, Northumberland Girls School, 18th March 2016)

For teachers it is symbolic of the need to set standards from the bottom up – the idea that if small things like uniform are in order, then other things will fall into place – the notion that if you give an inch, they will take a mile – let small things go and it leaks out. The majority of teachers across the fieldwork schools support the idea of tight boundaries and see it as a way of maintaining control and authority. There are however a couple of teachers who express reservations.

> 'You end up telling them off for unimportant things like uniform, so they disengage, surely it's better that they are engaged in the class and are learning. If I have to tell them off for every little thing, I'm not able to build a relationship and I just become another adult telling them what to do'

(Andy, foundation/level 1 Health and Social Care teacher, 15th January 2016)

> 'It's just another way to punish students. Some of them already have negative views of school because they struggle in class, are always told they are not good enough because they can't do the work and telling them off for little things like uniform is just another reason for them to have an argument with the teacher… A lot of them have parents that didn't have good experiences at school and sending them home for not having the correct uniform just reinforces the parent's views of school as an authority figure'

(Debi, pastoral staff, Northumberland Girls School, 21st June 2016)

The application of rules is also regularly linked to notions of employability and 'work-readiness', with students' behaviours measured against work expectations. Talking to one of the students, a teacher comments:

> 'You need to be able to follow orders and be respectful when you get a job. You'll also have to dress a particular way so I don't see why it should be any different at school'
>
> (Stacey, Head of Year, West Town, 10th April 2015)

Another teacher disagrees however:

> These young people know the expectations of work, they know they need to dress smart for work. This is different, we can't expect them to treat it like work.
>
> (Andy, foundation/level 1 Health and Social Care teacher, South Town College, 10th February 2016)

Responding to the rules culture within school, students reflect on the perceived hypocrisy and lack of respect displayed by teachers.

> When I come to school, I like to have a little bit of fun, if I can't have no fun then fair enough but If I don't have fun, I'm just going to play up more. That's how I look at it and that's with a lot of students as well. If they're not allowed to have a little bit of fun… We're still young, we're teenagers, we're not grown people yet. People say act your age, but even people 16 years of age like to have a little bit of a joke here and there. And they like to do that so that they can keep concentrating, they can have a little laugh and then get back to work.

Shifting his focus to the teacher's role in this:

> But some teachers just like silence in the class, you can't teach a student like that, you can't. Teachers talk though, they speak and have laughs and that, but they know that they have got to do the work so why should it apply for the students. They couldn't just sit in the office all day in silence and do their work.

Continuing, Callum reflects on the issue of respect.

> Teachers shout at you but if you shout back you get in trouble. They back each other up as well; they'll always take the other teachers' side. They don't show you respect as an adult so why should we show them respect just because they're a teacher.

Another young person comments**:**

> Teachers don't respect you, they are rude to you and cuss [insult] you but if
> you cuss them back, they get all aggy [annoyed].

(Kloie, year 11 student, West Town, 17th April 2015)

This issue of respect acts as a regulating principle – students participate and engage
more fully when they perceive they are respected by the teacher. One student
commenting:

> If the teacher shows you that they have respect for you, by actually listening to
> what you have to say, and not always telling you off without talking to you,
> then you're more likely to behave for them.

(Kofie, year 11 student, Hartland Academy, 9th February 2016)

This offers an interesting counter perspective to the view that strict boundaries are the
best method for developing effective student participation in the classroom. Indeed,
other research has suggested that authentic, meaningful teacher-student
relationships, which value students as people, are impactful in creating positive
dispositions towards learning (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010; Duffy and
Elwood 2013).

Teacher typologies

Following the exploration of classroom environments, teacher-student interactions,
and the implementation of boundaries, the following sections seeks to define the
broad strategies which teachers employ in an attempt to achieve student engagement.
These strategies can largely be conceived as the methods by which pupil participation
is organised with the classroom setting (Woods 1983). This is an often-necessary task
when exploring the complex and heterogenous social world and one which is
commonly undertaken within the sociology of education. Indeed, Mac an Ghaill (1994)
reflects:

> In recent work on the politics of education, I have explored the changing nature
> of teacher occupational cultures in response to the restructuring of state
> schooling. In examining their everyday work lives, I have found it heuristically

useful to place teachers within an ideological typology that focuses on their different educational and social world views (p.18)

Mac an Ghaill (1994), in his ethnography of Parnell school, proposes three such typologies based on teacher's educational ideologies – 'The Professionals, the Old Collectivists and the New Entrepreneurs. The Old Collectivists were characterised as those who viewed teaching as a vocation and valued being a classroom teacher. It was suggested such teachers held largely left-wing views and sought to create the next generation of critical activists. Contrastingly, the 'New Entrepreneurs viewed teaching as a career, within which progression and promotion out of the classroom into leadership roles was the primary motivation. This typology of teacher was also associated with neoliberal discourses that promoted the notion of marketisation and competition. Finally, the 'Professionals' were those socialised with cultures and managerialism, performance, and audit, and thus viewed their role in a more technical light. Such teachers considered teaching as the enactment of policy and strategy, often focusing heavily on the outcomes rather than the process of education.

A specific examination of teacher ideology, pertinent to the issue of engagement, is outlined in Hammersley's (1976) assessment of teacher strategies to maintain authority and gain pupil attention. Particularly apparent from this assessment is authority-oriented teacher's application of rules, the presentation of authority and demonstration of authority through the command of acceptable behaviours and norms. However, as highlighted previously, teachers' positions as authority figures have become complicated by contemporary pressures to encourage the educational engagement of previously marginalised and disconnected young people (MacDonald and Marsh 2005) and by changes to an education system which is now facing increasing demand to engage learners meaningfully and constructively beyond the age of 16. It is therefore important, as Mac an Ghaill (1994) suggests, to explore changing teacher cultures in response to such restructuring and reconceptualisation of education and schooling.

Emerging from the fieldwork sites is a range of broad approaches to student engagement. The typologies outlined below provide a conceptual framework for the examination of teacher strategies and the role socialisation has played their development. Indeed, Woods (1983) comments that 'within teacher strategies lies the

key to what a teacher can and cannot achieve within schools' (p.116). The following analysis therefore provides a starting point and model which further studies of contemporary educational landscapes can refine and develop.

Observational data revealed four broad orientations. These include polarised authority oriented and rapport oriented approaches, with conflict-avoidance and self-regulatory strategies on the authority-rapport continuum. This is not to say authority and rapport are mutually exclusive but that teacher orientations tended to be either authority or rapport dominant. It is also important to emphasise that these orientations are not always produced in pure form with a number of teachers straddling two or more typologies. There was also evidence of teachers enacting different orientations depending on the perceived characteristics and expectations of the students. In this sense there was also the presence of a fluid/ flexible teacher orientation.

Associated with each orientation there were a set of ideas about underlying motivations and normative assumptions about 'ideal' learners' traits (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010). The combination of these two factors then informed the learner identities of students, with those matching the teacher's normative assumptions deemed as 'good' learners, and those diverging from such assumptions positioned as problematic learners.

Teacher orientations	Underlying motivations/ strategy rationale	'Ideal' learner traits	Problematic learners
Rapport	Developing learner identities and helping students 'fit in'	Interactive and communicative	Shy, closed
Self-regulatory	Develop skills and resilience	Independent and confident	Needing support
Conflict avoidance	Maintaining order and rapport	A combination of interactive and conformist	Direct, personal challenge of teacher rules
Authority	Moulding dispositions and 'training' students	Conformist and disciplined	Talkative, unstructured

Figure 5.1. Formulation of teacher orientations

A number of teachers from across the fieldwork sites assume a position of mentor or counsellor, attempting to engage students in their learning sites through the development of rapport and respect. Such rapport-oriented approaches are typologised as 'the relationship builders'. This approach produces a particular set of strategies:

1. The teacher presents as being with the students rather than in-front of the students

2. The teacher develops the classroom as a shared space as opposed to their space

3. When applying boundaries, the teacher seeks to justify their application in an attempt to avoid being perceived as an authoritarian.

4. Interactions are based on developing positive and mutual relationships with students

Furthermore, teachers operating within broadly rapport-oriented approaches to engagement commonly displayed a preference for communicative learners who engaged in reciprocal relationships.

In contrast to rapport-oriented approaches, teachers focused on asserting authority stereotypically assumed the position of enforcer, placing the application of rules and maintenance of discipline at the heart of their approach. Such orientations, typologised as 'the Old school', tended to result in the application of the following strategies and mentalities:

1. The teacher assumes the traditional position as the head of the class, directing the lesson from front of the room

2. Classroom dynamics and expectations are highly structured and there are clear normative assumptions about the necessary learning behaviours required by students

3. Boundaries were linked to the personal authority of teachers and non-compliance was conflated with disrespect

4. Interactions were based around 'training' or 'schooling' students on correct learning dispositions

Teachers taking an authority-focused approach to engagement tended to favour tightly controlled learning environments in which conformist, passive learners were constructed as the ideal type. This has implications for the classroom experiences of learners with teacher-student mismatches becoming a central feature of (dis)engagement. This has been variously conceptualised in terms of culture clashes (Hargreaves 1967) and as a result of teacher-student relationships (Duffy and Elwood 2013).

Finding a space between rapport and authority-oriented approaches, a group of teachers were characterised by a strategy focused on the development of self-regulation. Typologised as 'the mentors', teachers focused on self-regulation did have a prominent role in the dynamics of the classroom, but the ambition was not to lead but to facilitate. In this sense, young people were given greater autonomy in directing their approach to learning, but this was achieved within a structure and process of guidance set out by the teacher. In this regard teachers symbolised 'mentors'.

A further approach is that of conflict avoider, typologised as 'the survival strategists'. Teachers in this categorisation attempted to manage rapport and authority. This largely manifested in an indirect application of authority, suggesting it was not their personal ambition to discipline, but that they were following school policy. Such an approach was used to try and maintain an identity as a teacher who could engage in more informal interactions with students and build mutual relationships. Teachers who displayed conflict-avoidant approaches described it as a survival strategy, suggesting that consistently taking an authoritative approach was draining and 'not worth it'. Maintaining rapport with young people is therefore seen as a way of providing balance.

As outlined in figure 5.1, the teacher typologies were associated with differing notions of 'ideal learners'. Reflecting on the construction of ideal learner typologies, this research found similarities with the findings of Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth's (2010) analysis. Fieldwork observations highlighted that developmental and supportive approaches to engagement are not unproblematic, with young people experiencing

such approaches often judged against 'ideal' learner typologies just as much as coercive approaches, but in different ways. Further reflecting on ideal learners' constructions, Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth (2010) suggest education tends to problematise and privilege different learner characteristics along lines of class, gender, and race (p.57), proposing middle-class, de-sexualised girls and non-laddish, effortlessly achieving boys as 'ideal learners'.

While such typologies, based on structural distinctions, may indeed be present in broad terms, it is proposed that classroom applications of ideal learners, in an interactionist sense, are more nuanced, and that what constitutes an 'ideal learner' thus largely stems from teachers' constructions of engagement. Illuminating such manifestations of structural factors at the micro level is a key benefit of ethnographic research. Specifically, teacher approaches and associated 'ideal learner' typologies have important consequences for student engagement. The apparent shift towards a demand for more control and authority-oriented approaches has the potential to have a detrimental impact on student engagement and participation. The following extract from fieldwork notes and an interview with a year 11 student is emblematic of what was widely observed during the fieldwork.

Just prior to meeting Callum for the interview, I have been in the staff office of the school's achievement leaders (heads of year), the head achievement leader (Mrs Bell) suggests 'maybe you could have a bit of a chat with him because he's... being a little... naughty' [Having previously known me in a professional capacity as a youth worker, Mrs Bell saw an opportunity to utilise my experience in working with young people]. Mrs Bell then takes me next door where Callum is waiting. Clearly having heard Mrs Bell's comment Callum asks 'who's that, hopefully not me' in a slightly dismissive tone. When asked if he's ready to have a chat, Callum replies 'yeah, hopefully you could have a bit of a chat with him'. Aiming this sarcastic riposte at Mrs Bell who is leaving the room. Clearly annoyed by this Callum further comments 'see what I mean, bear [lots of] teachers give me shit in this school'. This sets the tone for the interview in which Callum reflects on his relationship with staff and the dominant teacher cultures which fuel his views.

      D D: So, what was Mrs Bell talking about just then?

Callum: [In a somewhat annoyed and defiant tone] That was just about something I was wearing on my head. Like I've said, it's just little things that lead up to big things. I know I shouldn't be wearing stuff on my head but they're not going to try and take something off of me, I won't let them. I was wearing one thing on my head and obviously she was like, I saw you with it on and I said, nah I didn't have it on [intentionally denying it as an act of resistance].

D D: What was it?

Callum: Just a little wave cap thing to keep my hair compressed. And it was break time at that time so I thought, I ain't causing no disruption to no one. Fair enough in lesson and that but, obviously I'm not allowed to wear it but…

(Callum, year 11 student, West Town, 17th April 2015)

The interaction with the teacher in this extract is symbolic of the low-level misdemeanours regularly picked up on across the fieldwork schools. As is alluded to in the interview extract, this commonly results in an escalation of the situation, as a small issue becomes a big issue. This finds parallels with an extract from the field notes presented in an earlier section on 'rules and respect' where two students receive an angry reaction from the teacher on refusing to pull the hoods of their coat down while walking between classes.

More widely, teachers commented that Callum was too outspoken, too often challenged teachers, and too often refused to accept responsibility/ apologise for his actions. However, Callum's perception (as a black young man) was that he was treated differently to other (white) students and that his actions were often driven by a desire to push back against perceived unfair action taken against him. While it is not a major theme within the findings, Callum's interactions with teachers, and his perceptions of the school, provide a good example of how race played a role in the lived experiences of some young people. Having been reprimanded by a white teacher for wearing the wave cap, Callum's reaction highlighted the sense that he was being picked on and treated unjustly/unfairly because of a cultural/raced difference.

While the approach teachers took to engaging with Callum may well have simply been a matter of establishing order (Ball 1984a), or the organisation of pupil participation (Woods 1983), research has suggested that 'Blackness' can be perceived negatively by (dominant) others (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010, p.42). Although not

necessarily done cognisantly, it could be suggested that a largely white staff body perceived Callum's actions as more confrontational and more out of line due to discourses of black young men as deviant (Wright 1987a, 1987b). Such a viewpoint finds parallels with earlier ethnographic work which suggests that, particularly black boys, are often more readily and more authoritatively reprimanded within schooling (for example, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Gillborn 2003), as they are perceived (by white teachers) to be a greater threat to order in the school (Gillborn and Youdell 2000).

Moreover, Callum's experiences and perceptions could be linked to race (but not necessarily racism), as different cultural practices and different teacher-student cultures could lead to misunderstandings/misinterpretations. Indeed, Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth (2010) discusses how dress and appearance associated with 'black cool' (p.40) are conflated with subversion and resistance to the mainstream. As such, it could be the case that the teacher viewed the wave cap as a form of resistance, when it may have actually been part of an ethnic identity and appearance. Therefore, reflecting critically on these matters, it should be recognised that lived experiences of school and teacher-student interactions are a complex intersection of factors. Identities, histories, and structural/institutional matters all play a part. Thus, while it could be claimed Callum's interactions with teachers were racialised, they were not necessarily reflective of teachers' personal values or beliefs, but instead symbolised structural and institutional disparities in how particular groups of young people are perceived and treated (Gillborn and Youdell 2000).

Returning the interview and the wider discussion on boundaries, Callum discusses his position on such approaches.

> Callum: If I know I'm in the wrong I'll say, yeah cool, but I'm not going to have an argument with teachers because that's what they want. I'm here to educate myself, If I want to educate myself, I can do that, If I don't want to do it… No one can force me to educate myself, it's my future, it's not their future….

Here there is clear reference to schools aspiring for a sense of control versus students' perceptions of agency and self-responsibility. Taking on a more reflective mood, he continues:

Callum: Teachers have to know, they can't just be in the job for the money, they have to have some sort of friendship with the kids and that, understand them.

Discussing student responses:

Callum: I've seen videos of students stating such facts in the classroom and the teachers don't like it. There's one kid who got famous for stating facts about how you should teach students, seven million views on YouTube, and all of it was true.

D D: What was he saying?

Callum: He was just saying truth. That teachers need to have respect for students, and they shouldn't be thinking that we're not just people like them

(Callum, year 11 student, West Town, 17th April 2015)

Across the interview extracts and boundary implementation examples, emerging with much clarity is the detrimental impact authoritative approaches have on student engagement.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore how the enactment of participation (in education and training) by teachers and institutions (schools and college) played out through the challenge of managing learning and (dis)engagement. The findings in this chapter suggest that there is an imbalanced focus on (dis)engagement in the experiences of young people occupying marginal learning spaces, such as those in low-level VET at college, or those in lower attaining groups at school. For young people in these positions, teacher practices and school/college policies commonly revolved around normative assumptions that occupation of marginal learning spaces equated to disengagement from education and learning.

Learning and disengagement

The issue inherent in such practices and policies is that they relegate learning to a subordinate concern which, as emphasised by the findings, creates harmful experiences that (re)produce forms of marginalisation and exclusion in post-16 transitions. In particular, the chapter has highlighted the intertwined nature of

learning and (dis)engagement. In doing so, it has emphasised how constructions of, and approaches to dealing with (dis)engagement shape classroom experiences and teacher-student interactions. Specifically, fieldwork observations of and conversations with teachers revealed how constructions of 'ideal' learners – the characteristic teachers desired in their students - were shaped differently by the varying approaches to engagement, as set out in the different teacher typologies. Young people's learner identities as 'good' or 'bad' learners were therefore influenced by whether they fit with the teachers' normative expectations of an 'ideal' learner.

Fundamentally, learner identities, and therefore their learning careers, were thus constrained by how well they matched the expectations set out by the teachers' practices, perceptions, and preferences. In response, young people tended to develop negative perceptions of the teachers for whom they did not meet their expectations. The result was often the development of a dislike for that subject area and a belief that they were not able to succeed academically. All of which reaffirms the view that good teacher-student relationships are key to constructive educational participation (Duffy and Elwood 2013). In this light, the concept of (dis)engagement shapes both young people's learning experiences and their constructs of being a learner.

(Dis)engagement and transition: choice and horizons

The fieldwork also revealed how teacher practices, based on particular constructions of (dis)engagement, shape young people's choice and agency by producing positions of marginality and forms of self and material exclusion from transition opportunities. In a very basic sense, teachers were driven to focus on either building engagement amongst reluctant learners or trying to enforce participation, both of which had consequences for participation, and were shaping factors in young people's opportunities structures (Roberts K 1975, 2007). On one end of the spectrum, rapport focused constructions of engagement diminished subjective horizons and produced stigmatisation, whereby uncritical and unstimulating learning experiences labelled young people as 'bad' and 'dumb' learners. In contrast, but still harmful, authority focused constructions of engagement tended to have different effects on young people's horizons; self and material exclusion emerged as key features of a 'survival of the fittest' type approach, which led to 'disposable' learners (Chadderton and Colley

2012) whereby young people not conforming to the teachers' expectations would be written off.

Additionally, a significant feature of young people's extended participation, particularly at the very lowest levels of VET, was the tendency for staff to engage in forms of 'therapeutic education' (Atkins 2009; Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011a; Ecclestone 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes 2009) whereby engagement was conflated with learning. Within therapeutic learning contexts, young people's engagement in learning was prioritised over creating a stimulating and challenging learning environment. Teachers expressing the belief that a challenging learning environment would result in disengagement and non-participation, as the fragile learner identities of young people would not hold up against cognitive challenge and experiences of academic failure. The result was often low-level learning in terms of both curriculum and pedagogy that focused on 'quick wins' attempting to achieve 'success' for young people and build stronger learner identities.

However, it has been suggested that such forms of therapeutic education limit the potential for agency (Atkins 2009, p.137), as unstimulating learning alienates young people from education and training, while simultaneously limiting learner identities (Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011a) and widening the gap to more challenging levels of study, therefore constraining horizons for action. All of which highlights how young people's trajectories (Roberts K 1975, 2007) and agency are still shaped and bounded (Evans 2007) by structural factors, and through teachers' normative assumptions and approaches, rather than clear labour market pathways. The findings therefore emphasise how choice and choice biographies (see for example, Roberts S 2010; Woodman 2010) are perhaps not suitable concepts for interpreting the transitions of marginalised learners (low-level VET), as structural factors still shape their transitions, but in more complex and obscured ways (Furlong 2009; France and Haddon 2014).

Shaping influences

Beyond the micro level effects of (dis)engagement on young people's experiences of learning and transition, the findings also highlight a number of meso and macro level factors which underpinned many of the teacher practices and strategies. On a meso

level, the implementation of boundaries, classroom interactions, and the process of establishing classroom dynamics were inevitably influenced by the institutional cultures and philosophies within which they were situated.

In particular, the different institutional approaches to systematising teacher practices were a noteworthy finding. While at West Town and Hartland Academy teachers appeared bound by policies and expectations set at a senior level, staff at South Town College and Northumberland Girls School presented as having greater autonomy in classroom. It is suggested that teachers bound by more explicit and authoritative institutional expectations were less able to act with nuance and meet their learners needs as they were driven to apply a uniform/universal approach across a diverse student body. Such an approach inevitably advantaged some young people, while disadvantaging others.

In a similar vein, the findings also revealed how the differing institutional contexts across the fieldwork framed the dynamics of (dis)engagement. Specifically, schools with a hierarchical approach tended to frame the matter as a battle between the school and the students, taking the view that students were naturally disposed to be disengaged and that the school had to enforce engagement. In contrast, less autocratic contexts tended to yield teacher approaches that framed the (dis)engagement as something established at the classroom and interactionist level. Therefore, young people deemed to be disengaged were those disfavoured by the institutional approach to engagement (Ryan *et al.* 2019), or by the nature of teacher and classroom interactions. All of which emphasises the power and significance of the institutional in positioning young people relative to forms of (dis)engagement and (non)participation.

On a macro level, a focus on performance and a notion of standards based on traditional academic principles stratified learning contexts and placed a pressure on teachers to 'aspire' to modes of teaching associated with greater formality and structure. Additionally, the impact of positional competition (Brown 2013) in an era of human capital and educational expansion (Furlong 2009) meant teachers were implicated in the supply side expectations on education/training and the shaping of young people's opportunities through education and training. Therefore, teachers found themselves under pressure to enact practices and modes of thinking that

stratified learning and learners (Taylor *et al*. 2019), which ultimately drew focus to future (labour market) outcomes, rather than current needs and the process of education (Mannion 2005).

Therefore, while the tension between learning and (dis)engagement has significant implications for young people's attachment to learning and for their post-16 transitions (Hutchinson, Beck and Hooley 2015, p.709), teachers are also influenced and constrained by wider pressures associated with managing (non)participation. Teacher typologies thus ultimately portrayed the intersection between various micro, meso, and macro level influences, which served to create stratified and differentiated experiences of (dis)engagement for young people.

In conclusion, the findings show how linkages between non-participation and (dis)engagement in official discourses (Fergusson 2014) are shaping harmful and exclusionary experiences for young people on the margins of education and training. In particular, a focus on (dis)engagement within school and college practice and policy is side-lining the significance of learning and being a learner, resulting in young people displaying diminished or underdeveloped learner identities and learning careers.

In the context of RPA, the development of good learner identities is important, as young people are required to continue their association with learning. The findings are therefore problematic in the context of research that suggests the development of negative, or lack of, learner identities can have a lasting impact on what young people see as achievable in a learning environment (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010). The issue is ultimately that expectations of continued participation within a learning environment are being allied with practices and policies counterproductive to the development of a sense of enfranchisement and 'engagement' with learning, thus turning young people away from extended participation in education and training.

Drilling down further into the problematic nature of certain practices and policies, the next chapter will explore how experiences of school interact with dispositions and orientations towards learning, examining the notions of learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000a) and horizons for action (Hodkinson, Phil 1996). In particular, the chapter investigates how school experiences are shaped by a conceptualisation of

participation and learning that focuses on the outcomes rather than the process of education.

Chapter 6: Learner identities, learning careers, and horizons for action: young people's experiences of contemporary schooling

Introduction

The previous chapter examined how the lived experiences of marginalised learners were underpinned by practices and policies shaped by a tension between learning and (dis)engagement. The findings highlighted how the push for extended participation was framed by a focus on (dis)engagement, with negative implications for learning experiences, dispositions, and opportunities. This chapter continues the analysis of how learning experiences interact with young people's disposition towards and opportunities for extended participation. However, rather than focusing on the concept of (dis)engagement, the findings presented below consider how participation at school is viewed in terms of outcomes in education, rather than the process, representing the manifestation of neoliberal principles of performance and competition. Fundamentally, the school fieldwork revealed how a focus on grades and achievement, as the chief measure of participation, resulted in lower-achieving students being exposed to experiences that positioned them as 'bad' learners, with consequences for their engagement and inclusion.

The chapter ultimately highlights that experiences of schooling for marginalised learners are commonly unconducive to developing positive dispositions towards continued participation in learning contexts, and that perceptions of school serve to 'prepare' young people for extended participation in learning in disadvantageous ways. The ethnographic and interview data presented below therefore focus on the minutiae of young people's lived experiences within school, critically reflecting on how harmful and exclusionary experiences at school have the potential to (re)produce inequalities and to reinforce polarised views of education. This chapter therefore considers how young people's experiences in the school context interact with their dispositions towards learning, and their conceptualisation of being a learner.

The significance of schooling for post-16 participation

With young people now required to continue in education or training beyond compulsory schooling, learning experiences arguably play a more prominent role in ensuring young

people develop the dispositions or habitus (Bourdieu &. Passerson 1990) towards continued participation. Indeed, Ball, Macrae and Maguire (1999) make reference to the significance of previous educational experiences in 'preparing' students for future modes of participation in education and employment. Specifically, their research suggests that experiences of education have the potential to create dispositions and orientations where 'some young people simply want a job and a wage and "no more learning", others come with a long term commitment to gaining higher qualifications' (Ball, Macrae and Maguire 1999, p.195). Furthermore, acknowledging the importance of learning experiences for post-16 transitions, other research also highlights a number of factors involved in young people's progression into post-16 education and training, including the status and culture associated with learning contexts (Foskett, Dyke and Maringe 2008; Gorard 2010).

In order to analyse the relationship between experiences of schooling and orientations towards continued participation in learning, this chapter engages with concepts of learner identities, learning careers, and horizons for action. Learner identities (see for example, Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000; Archer and Yamashita 2003a) is a useful concept to examine how young people position themselves as learners relative to normative assumptions around what constitutes a 'good' learner (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010) and relative to ideas of being a learner in post-16 education and training. Learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000a; 2000c) conceptualises how young view the role and function of learning in achieving their aims (both in terms of education and training, and work), i.e. do young people see learning as a central and necessary part of realising their aims and ambitions. Finally, horizons for action (Hodkinson 1996) seeks to make sense of school-to-work transitions by examine the interplay between subjective and objective dimensions, and the interplay between structure and agency. In the context of this chapter, that relates to the interplay between what young people see as subjectively desirable (post-16 'choices') and what is objectively possible (opportunities) in terms of post-16 transitions.

School and student status – a reflexive relationship

Building on earlier work examining schools' effects, the notion of reflexivity challenges the unidirectional construction of student engagement and culture, proposing instead a circular relationship between school and student. The work referred to is

characterised by studies that explore the role of education and schooling in generating particular student cultures and dispositions (see for example, Reynolds 1976; Rutter 1979; Cooper 1993; Smyth 2012).

A pertinent example is Reynolds' (1976) investigation of 'the delinquent school' in which the relationship between school characteristics and student deviancy and delinquency are examined. The study draws direct comparisons between school performance and various factors such as uniform, discipline, class size, the aesthetics and state of the facilities and the social class groupings of the student body. In conclusion the study suggests that rather than purely looking to the students, attention must also be given to nature, process, and operation of the school itself (Reynolds 1976, p.229) in order to fully understand the generation of delinquent cultures and dispositions as well as educational failure. Missing from this analysis is the reflexive relationship between school and student, examining how the perceived and given status of the school reflects back on the student horizons and how this in turn shapes school performance.

During a fieldwork observation, a group of students are discussing the results of a recent Ofsted inspection in which the school was deemed inadequate. As part of an ethnographic conversation two students reflect on their perceptions of this assessment of their school:

> The classroom is abuzz with noise, the students are at their computers and a variety of conversations are taking place around the room. A number of these conversations are focused on the recent news that their school has been 'put in special measures' (assessed as inadequate by a group of Oftsed inspectors). In response, the head teacher has called an after school meeting for parents taking place that evening. Students are discussing whether their parents are attending while also commenting on the outcome of the Ofsted visit. Various comments are flying around, deriding the quality of their school. 'See, this school is shit, no wonder we're all failing', 'the teachers here are rubbish'.

> Two students are asked why they think their school has been put in special measures and what they make of it. One student comments 'it's a shit school', the other expands saying 'shit school, shit teachers, shit students'. Continuing, the student says 'this school is so dead. I'm embarrassed to come here; my friends cuss me about it'. Asked who these friends are and what they say he replies, 'They think they're so sick because they go to Park School [another

local school] and it's a better school and they just cuss me for coming to such a rubbish school'. Asked what he says in reply, he comments 'I can't say anything because our school is dead'.

(Kofie, year 11 student, Hartland Academy; Kofie's friend, year 11 student, Hartland Academy, 8th March 2016)

This excerpt from the field notes is emblematic of the student view that they attend a sub-standard school and that their opportunities and outcomes are affected as a result of this. What is clear is that students are taking an interest in this situation. A large proportion of the students in the class are those likely to be regarded as 'disengaged' or as not caring greatly about their schooling. From the liveliness of the discussions, this would not seem to be the case. Also apparent is the differentiated level of capital that the students can employ in social interactions based on the status of their school.

The following interaction with a couple of students attending another school demonstrates the influence the overall appearance of the school has on student constructions of 'quality':

> 'This school is so nasty. Look, all of the walls are dirty, and everything is falling apart. How do they expect you to feel good about your school if it's so budget... They could spend a bit of money on repainting it or something, just to make it look a bit nicer. The school's full of nitties as well who are all dressed scruffy and that don't make it look like a good quality school, no wonder students don't really care'.

(Melissa and friend, year 11 students, West Town, 10th April 2015)

This quote provides an example of how student subjectivities form around the 'quality' of the school. It could be that the reflexive relationship between school and student status is a factor in this. Significantly, the students in this study appear to build judgements on the entirety of their school experience, developing somewhat homogenous views of the school as a whole as opposed to appraising distinct elements of the school. The amalgamation of teaching, school appearance, the student population into a single evaluation of the school's status appears to have consequences for student's appraisal of their own position and status relative to the externally perceived 'other'. This results in students assessing their possibilities for attainment and 'doing good' in relation to students in other schools, based on the perceived relative quality and status of the schools.

All of which demonstrates the permeation of neoliberalised discourses around competition and performance into the mentalities of students in school (Lauder et al. 2006). This matter is front and centre in the views of a group of students from Northumberland Girls School.

> 'Everything is so old and rubbish, the school has no money because it's spent it all on the new building so we're using really old text-books that are falling apart'

> (Aisha, year 11 student, Northumberland Girls School, 13th October 2015)

Also suggesting an impact on the ethos.

> 'The teachers are budget like the school, and they don't try to motivate you or get you to aspire to anything'

> (Shannon, year 11 student, Northumberland Girls School, 13th October 2015)

This is important as the students spoken to appear to suggest that their engagement in learning and with schooling is influenced by the status of the school and the perceived possibilities/ expectations for those who attend it. This in turn impacts on the performance of the school and by proxy, its status.

It could be suggested that this reflects the permeation of educational marketisation into everyday mentalities. The students in these examples have bought-in to the discourse of school performance and competition, through which a process of institutional marginalisation occurs whereby schools take on 'underclass' traits (MacDonald and Marsh 2005). This manifests in a situation in which the student body is susceptible to the more open labelling of the institution they inhabit. It could be argued that the neoliberalism of education is therefore complicit in the marginalisation of students through a form of institutional streaming which reflexively streams the students. A process referred to by Youdell (2004) as institutional triage.

It is through such processes of institutional triage that students find their possibilities for participation constrained. For some young people, the reflexive relationship with learner identities is one factor in limit learning careers, as subjective horizons are diminished. In this sense participation is more than just a status of taking part in or opting out of learning, it reflects the intersection and blending of learner identities,

institutional labelling, and the discourse and practice of positional competition.

Essentially, school status represents a form of capital which young people reference when locating their position within the field of positional competition, while also acting to frame habitus' and the way young people perceive and respond to wider social structures. Conceptually therefore, participation takes on greater complexity and nuance as it cannot be dislocated from wider meso and macro level factors. The operationialisation of participation perhaps then needs to shift away from analyses of the individual, as is the case in policy and practice, towards more multi-layered analyses.

Contemporary schooling – school before students

The significance of school experiences in shaping orientations towards post-16 participation is particularly problematic in light of research, which suggests many features of contemporary schooling – competition, performance, credentialisation, and individualisation – are not only unfavourable for disadvantaged young people, they are actively harmful and injurious (see for example, Reay 2001; Smyth, Down and McInerney 2014). In an era characterised by audit and performance cultures within the school context (Apple 2015; Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010; Ball 2008), as well as an increasingly credentialist labour market (Ainley and Allen 2010), attention has tended to focus predominantly on the educational outcomes of young people rather than their educational experiences (Miles 2000; MacDonald and Marsh 2005).

However, with RPA introducing the requirement for extended periods of participation in education and training, positive learner identities and inclinations towards continued participation in learning contexts have perhaps gained greater salience (Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014). It is therefore pertinent to investigate the impact contemporary schooling has towards pupils' dispositions towards education, and the room this leaves for varying forms and degrees of student participation.

It could be suggested that discourses of school performance, espoused by successive governments in various forms and legitimised through Ofsted ratings, have prompted schools to prioritise meeting the targets against which they are assessed, chief of which is KS4 attainment (year 11 GCSE results). The pursuit of improved school performance has

become framed by a neo-liberal notion of human capital and the imperative for a highly qualified and skilled workforce that is of benefit to the economy (Hoskins and Barker 2014; Simmons and Smyth 2016). This has led to some criticism that educational policy and practice is being premised on future employment and economic needs as opposed to current educational needs, while also driving schools to prioritise the needs of the institution over the needs of students (Mannion 2005).

Offering an impassioned critique of the current state of schooling and its consequences for disadvantaged students, Smyth *et al.* (2014) suggest that present policies and practices are not only marginalising those students most in need from participating in owning their own learning (p.22) but also wounding and damaging them. It is argued that neo-liberal school reform, championing values of individualism, competition, docility, and compliance, has left the most disadvantaged students further removed from constructive and meaningful school experiences and has resulted in constrained and passive learner identities.

This section explores the contemporary school environment and how the conditions of audit, performance, credentialisation and competition play out in the lived experiences of students in their final year of compulsory schooling (year 11). The fieldwork and ethnographic conversations revealed a number of aspects of the school experience which appeared to harm young people's opportunities and orientations for continued participation in learning. These lived experiences offer an insight into the consequences of school conditions for students' educational dispositions and identities, as well as enabling critical reflection on how students interact with and respond to such an environment. All of which is used to consider the types, degrees and forms of participation students are able enact in their school lives.

A striking feature, which emerged across each of the three school fieldwork sites, was the importance given to GCSE attainment for the purposes of Ofsted ratings. In this respect, student attainment appeared to be not so much about the individual successes or failures of the students, but rather the inferred success or failure of the school.

> The students filter into class and take their seats in the computer room, the location of this lesson. The room is located at the far end of the school, so the students filter in gradually over the space of 5-10 minutes as they travel from various locations across the site. A group of three students (one girl and two boys), who arrive first, head to the back of the room to take their seats, they are chatting

and laughing as they do so. The lesson eventually starts as the last students arrive and the teacher sets the work for the lesson – they are completing a task linked to the completion of an IT qualification. The group of three students who are sat at the back are still talking excitedly, they appear not to have heard or heeded the teacher's instructions and have made no attempt to begin working – they have yet to log on to their computers.

Sensing an apathy and disengagement with the lesson, I go and sit with them to investigate the situation. After some initial small talk to build rapport, I ask what they are doing, 'So have you guys not got any work to do?' The girl replies 'I don't want to do an IT qualification; I didn't choose to do it. They're just making us do it because we got taken out of our other lesson'. After probing this further, one of the boys comments 'We were all doing public services, but they said it wasn't a proper subject, so they stopped it and made us all do this IT qualification'. The girl adds 'I chose to do public services because I want to be a police officer or something, they shouldn't just stop running it once we've already started, so I'm not doing this shit IT thing'.

Later in the lesson I ask the teacher [Adam] about the situation. He reflects 'It's all about Ofsted. After we got put in special measures (the school received the lowest Ofsted rating – inadequate) we need to get all the points we can. The public services course didn't count towards anything so the school dropped it and got the students to do this IT qualification because it's quick and easy to get them (the students) through it and it might boost the Ofsted score slightly'. Elaborating further, the teacher comments 'It's not ideal, they (the students) don't want to be here and it's not what I'm meant to be doing (the teacher is meant to be supporting a small group of students who have additional needs or are at risk of exclusion). I've just got to try and get them all through it'.

(IT class, Hartland Academy, 2nd February 2016)

The above extract emphasises institutional responses to the pursuit of grades, also highlighting the impact of this on individual students. For the girl who had chosen to study public services with the aim of becoming a police officer, the ownership of her learning had been removed as she became a passive participant in the learning environment – her voice disempowered by the institutional response to performance measures. In an exchange with the girl later in the lesson, it became clear that the school's decision to remove the public services had consequences for her participation in learning beyond the immediate classroom disengagement. In a conversation about aims and ambitions for post-16 education, the girl revealed that studying public services was her initial intention.

'I was hoping to do public services at college, I'm not really that bothered about school and that, but I quite liked the idea of learning about the police and fire service and stuff like that. Because I'm not studying it at school now, I doubt I'll be able to do it. It just shows that they [the school] don't really care about the students, if they did, they would have kept running the course because they knew a load of us wanted to do it'

Asked what she would do instead, she replied.

'I don't know really, there's nothing else I really want to do. Hair and Beauty, I suppose, I could probably do that'.

(Lauren, year 11 student, Hartland Academy, 9th February 2016)

What was clear was that this was not a particularly desirable alternative, there was a clear sense of frustration in Lauren's comments. Her reaction also revealed the potentially damaging impact the removal of the course had for her dispositions towards continued participation in learning. While the idea of studying post-16 public services evoked authentic and active engagement with the notion of continued participation in learning, the alternatives appeared far less inspiring. Using the concept of learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000a), it could be suggested that the frustration and disappointment experienced served to constrain Lauren's horizons for action (Hodkinson 1996) in terms of what she saw as subjectively possible. The result, a damaged learner identity and diminished disposition towards learning. For Lauren, this influenced how she framed participation in learning and her learning career.

Stepping back from the specific case and the micro level of the individual experience, the above example poses particular questions for policy. RPA seeks to extend the learning careers of young people who may have otherwise gone into JWT or become NEET, but simultaneously the performance agenda is pushing schools to prioritise institutional needs over student needs, having an exclusionary effect on certain students. Such contradictions arguably leave disadvantaged students in helpless positions as their school choices become tightly controlled and their post-16 horizons for action are both subjectively and objectively constrained. The learning careers of those young people at the sharp end of such policy contradictions perhaps therefore become characterised by disempowerment and passive forms of participation.

Attempting to reconcile institutional needs and individual needs, the below excerpt demonstrates the dilemma a performance agenda can create for individual cases.

I am sitting in a staff office that is home to the heads of year for year groups 9, 10 and 11 (the staff that have overall responsibility for a particular year group). Next-door is a small computer room with 6 stations. The room is used to house students that, for various reasons, are not in lessons on a normal timetable. In this room students from all year groups come and spend periods of the day completing work independently, there is no teacher present to offer guidance or support. The students are set work by their class teachers and the heads of year occasionally pop in to check on them.

One of the students participating in the research, Callum, turns up for period 2 and takes a seat in the computer room. Callum's head of year (Mrs Bell) briefly checks on him asking 'Alright Callum, you've got some work to get on with, right?' 'Yes miss' replies Callum. During previous interactions with Callum, he has revealed that he has had a fairly turbulent school experience, often being in trouble and in conflict with teachers. In terms of attainment teachers have described Callum as being capable of doing well, 'if only he put his mind to it'.

Having not spoken to Callum recently, I sit with him in the computer room. 'How's everything going? What are you doing in here?' I ask. 'They've put me on a reduced timetable. I'm only doing five subjects now, so I come here for the lessons I'm not doing anymore' Callum replies. Seeking to find out more, I respond 'Oh right, so how did that come about?' Callum replies, 'Well I kept getting in trouble in some lessons because I was refusing to do the work. I said to them there's no point me doing those subjects because I know what I want to do after school, and I don't need those subjects. I said I just want to get my Maths and English so I can go to college. So, they said I can just do five subjects so I can concentrate on those to get better grades rather than trying to do well on all subjects'.

A while later I ask the head of year 11 about Callum's reduced timetable. I comment 'Callum was telling me about his reduced timetable, he said he's been allowed to drop certain subjects so that he can focus his efforts on his best 5?' The head of year 11 responds 'Yeah, he wasn't getting on well in certain lessons so I thought it would be best for him to focus on getting five A-C's (GCSE grades) rather than stretching himself across more subjects and getting lower grades. At the end of the day, all Ofsted look at is five A-C's at GCSE so it's better for the school if the students get higher grades in fewer subjects. And for Callum, it means he can concentrate on passing his Maths and English.

(Staff office, West Town, 3rd November 2015)

During the fieldwork it became apparent that this was not an isolated case, with a number of students in year 11 given a reduced timetable with a reduced number of subjects. In the above example, an interesting point to note is that Callum and the head of year 11 had different perspectives on the matter, Callum suggesting he was the driving force behind the change to his timetable, contrasted with the head of year 11's version of events in which a calculated decision was made in an attempt to boost attainment. Whether or not this is of benefit to Callum is unapparent, what is clear however is the shaping influence of an audit and performance culture within the school – acting 'behind the backs' of the students.

The mismatch in motivations and understanding between the school and the students was also apparent in a number of student interviews. In the below examples, students express their views on learning and attainment, which are in stark contrast with the views of the school.

> D D: I heard that you keep getting kicked out of your science lessons?
>
> Conor: Yeah, they keep trying to make me do this coursework thing, but I keep refusing to do it.
>
> D D: How come?
>
> Conor: Well, there's no point me doing it, I don't need to know about science. I know what I want to do after school, and I don't need what they are teaching in science.
>
> D D: What is it that you hope to do after school?
>
> Conor: I want to be a carpenter, do an apprenticeship or something like that. So, I'm better off spending my time in DT (design technology) and graphics where I'm actually doing stuff that's useful. They say you need Maths, English, and Science in every job, but I know what I need to know already.
>
> (Conor, Year 11 student, West Town, 4th April 2015)

The importance of good attainment in Maths, English and Science was a prominent narrative across the fieldwork schools, often in direct reference to future opportunities. This was captured in an exchange between a teacher and student.

Teacher: If you want to get a good job in the future, you're going to have to pass your Maths and English. That's the first thing that employers look for. Without that, they won't even consider you.

Ross: But we learn stuff that isn't even relevant. When am I ever going to use it in the future? What's the point in teaching stuff that we're not going to use in our work?

(Mathematics class, West Town, 12th January 2016)

In the above examples, both Conor and Ross have a clear sense of 'useful' learning being associated with knowledge and skills for work, in contrast to the school's view of improving employability through the acquisition of credentials. Arguably then, Ross and Connor's non-participation is not a reflection of disengagement with education and learning but rather a disengagement with the credentialisation of schooling (Ainley and Allen 2010), coupled with a clear sense of what is and is not useful in the context of their learning careers.

The risk associated with schools being driven by neo-liberal agendas of audit and performance is that, as Youdell (2004) suggests, discourses of ability and conduct gain prominence, serving 'to inform and constrain the particular identities constituted and, therefore, who students can be' (p.428). In the case above, Callum's learner identity is shaped by the message that his misconduct and level of ability has precluded him from higher levels of achievement, the ambition being 'passing his Maths and English'. The question and dilemma this poses is what effect does this have on Callum's wider construction of his participation in learning and education beyond the school environment, and where does he fit in the education and training sphere beyond school?

Educational triage, labelling students and learner identities

Reflecting on the central issue, the current school context is characterised by an instrumentalism, symbolised by the A-C economy (Gillborn and Youdell 2006), whereby increasing attainment has become the *modus operandi* of compulsory schooling. The previous section highlighted the institutional dimensions of what Youdell (2004) refers to as 'engineering school markets', with schools employing strategies to survive in the marketised, performance driven education sector. The following sections move from the institutional to the individual to reveal the central

role grades and attainment play in shaping young people's experiences of and positions towards participation in education and learning.

The ways in which young people's experiences of education are differentiated has been well documented and examined with issues of class, gender, and race emerging as key features of such analyses. Early work in the sociology of education revealed contrasting pupil cultures - Hargreaves (1967) detailing the academic-delinquent divide, the work of Willis (1977) depicting working class anti-school cultures and Gillborn (1990) examining inequalities shaped by race. Exploring the issue through a different lens Ball (1984b) sought to highlight how institutional structures and hierarchies in the form of banding had the potential to produce differentiated experiences and identities amongst pupils.

During the fieldwork, the centrality of (predicted) attainment as a method of student differentiation and characterisation was a defining feature. Much like the earlier studies referred to above, inequalities were intrinsic to such processes. Being labelled by attainment and grades are shaping young people's learner identities and learner careers, as young people are socialised within the discourse of the A to C economy and the narrative that attainment defines a young person's ability as a learner and shapes future opportunities in further education and employment (Youdel 2006; Francis *et al*. 2020). In this sense the overly explicit use of attainment to define students, promoted by Ofsted as a strategy to inform students of their progress, is influencing students' horizons for action, particularly what they subjectively see as possible and desirable. The narrower focus on attainment is therefore constraining the participation possibilities of those students on the receiving end of grade predictions that fall outside of desired A to C benchmark.

The impact of this is evoked in the following interview excerpt with two year 11 students discussing their school's use of predicted grades.

> D D: So, what do you think of the school giving you predicted grades?
>
> Patience: When they do that it lowers your self-esteem, they tell you that you're an E grade student and it puts you down… If they think I'm a D grade student, I might as well work as a D grade student. It puts you down, so you don't want to work hard at school. I think they should let the students decide

what their predicted grades are going to be. If Kloie goes "I'm going to try and get an A", so whatever she picks, she's going to have to work for it

Kloie: Yeah, and the teacher's treat you a particular way depending on what your predicted grade is. If they think you're an E or D grade student they don't really care about you, they only help the smart kids

(Kloie and Patience, year 11 students, West Town, 4th April 2016)

This draws parallels with much of the research on banding, streaming and differentiation. For example, Ball's (1984b) research on banding, identity and experience Ball refers to 'band stereotypes' (p.30) in which students were typologised according to the band they were in, rather than by teachers' evaluations based on classroom interactions. In the current context, this process of banding is intensified by the characterisation of students according to grades.

The perception that levels of teacher support are differentiated by grades offers another interesting insight. There are connotations for the inclusion and exclusion of particular students, suggesting that the school categorises certain, lower achieving, students as 'disposable' (Chadderton and Colley 2012) in order to focus attention on the higher achievers. A process referred to by Gillborn and Youdell (2006) as 'educational triage' whereby students are categorised as either safe, treatable or no-hopers. As highlighted in the views of Kloie and Patience, this has the potential to have a damaging effect on the learner identities and the active participation of students in school.

The most explicit presentation of educational triage was at Hartland Academy during a year 11 lesson. The following extract from the field notes captures a moment in which the categorisation of students is laid bare.

> There are around 25 students in a large computer room, organised into rows of four or five. The teacher [Adam] is sat at his desk in the top corner of the room. The students have this time to catch up on any work they are behind on or revise for their upcoming exams. The lesson is largely unstructured with varying degrees of work being done. Some students are chatting while playing games on the computer. It is a mixed ability group with students ranging from top to bottom sets.

About 10 minutes into the lesson, the teacher says to one of the students 'Come on, you should be doing some revision, not playing games on the computer. You want to make sure you pass your Maths and English [GCSE's]'. In a bullish and jovial response, the student replies 'Sir, don't worry, it's calm. I'm an A grade student, you don't need to worry about me'. The teacher, looking something up on his computer, replies 'I don't think you are. I'm looking it up, I think you're a borderline student'. 'Nah Sir, trust me. I'm going to get an A, I'll pass easy' says the student. Having found what he was looking for on the computer, the teacher responds, 'According to this spread sheet you're predicted a B for English and a C/D for Maths, you'd better get on with some Maths work'.

One of the other students chips in 'What am I sir?' Looking through the spread sheet, the teacher replies 'You're alright, you're predicted B's'. The teacher then scrolls through the spread sheet and identifies a number of other 'borderline' students, using this to target the students he then prompts to get on with some work.

Later in the lesson, I ask the teacher about the spread sheet. He shows me the document on his computer. It is a document containing the pictures of every student in year 11 along with their predicted grades. The students are organised by their position relative to the C pass grade. The students on the C/D grade boundary are labelled as borderline on the document and are colour coded as amber. The higher achieving students are colour coded as green and the lower achieving students are colour coded as red.

('Catch up' lesson, Hartland Academy, 16th March 2016)

The most striking feature of this extract is the clear targeting of the 'borderline' students and the neglect of those who fall outside of this category. Also apparent was the clear categorisation of students along lines of predicted attainment. Beyond the above observed classroom interaction, another example demonstrating the manifestation of educational triage emerged in a later lesson. The following extract highlights the practical implications of the triage process.

A teacher [Marie] enters and asks for Kieran 'Can I have a quick word with you…. I'm just looking at your predicted grades and I can see you're predicted a C/D for Maths. I am doing 1-1 sessions for students who are on the C/D border to help them get a grade C. Would you like me to do some extra sessions with you? She sits down and begins a session using a past exam paper – don't worry about the higher questions, just focus on doing the other ones well and that'll be enough to get a C.

The strong sense of grades and 'ability' affecting teacher-student interactions is also expressed at another of the fieldwork schools. During a conversation, taking place in a social space over the lunch break, a group of year 11 students are discussing what they think of their school. Having been asked about the teaching they give the following response.

> Young person 1: The teachers don't really care about you; they care about your grade.

> Young person 2: Yeah, they also don't want you to work at any other level than the one they think you should be working at. If they think you're a B grade student then they want you to work to that level, if they think you're a D grade student then the same. They don't see you as anything other than that grade, so they don't push you or anything.

> Young person 3: That's all that they're focused on as well, getting grades. They don't really teach you anything, only how to pass an exam or coursework to get a grade.

> (Group of year 11 students, Northumberland Girls School, 17th March 2016)

In a further statement of how limiting the practice of educational triage can be for students' possibilities and learner identities, another group of students at the school discuss the fallout from their recent mock examinations.

> Young person1: I'm predicted to get a C in my actual exam, but I got an E in my mock. I didn't revise though because it's not a real exam. I'll revise for my actual exam so I should get a C. The teachers are getting all stressed though saying I need to do extra work.

> Young person 2: Did you hear what they said to Josie after she got her results?

> Young person 1: No, what?

> Young person 2: They accused her of cheating because she got a B in her mock but is only predicted a D. She was crying and everything.

> Young person 1: Nah, that's deep [wrong].

> Young person 3: Isn't it though? She worked really hard revising for that exam apparently.

> Young person 1: That's so bad, they should be saying well done, not 'you cheated'. They just want you to work to the grade they think you are.
>
> (Group of year 11 students, Northumberland Girls School, 17th March 2016)

Clear from this exchange is the fixed labels teachers apply to students, with little to no flexibility. The young people's comments also highlight how the classed (re)production of inequality plays out through the struggle for value (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). To gain legitimacy and value in context of contemporary schooling, it is necessary to accrue human capital (credentials). The other defining feature from across each of the fieldwork schools is the focus on the outcomes of schooling, rather than the process. The attention given to student attainment has diverted attention away from developing actively engaged, motivated and, empowered learners.

Across the three fieldwork schools there is apparent de-humanising of the pupils and classroom environment as an instrumentalism dominates teacher mentalities and practices. The consequences of the performance and outcomes driven process of labelling students is explored by (Youdell 2004) who, drawing upon the Foucauldian concept of subjectivation, examines the role of educational triage in constraining students' subjectivities and 'the ways in which students come to "be" particular sorts of students inside school' (p.420).

This is important for the present study as particular sorts of student – learner identities – can be associated with learning careers and the ways in which students frame their (continued) participation in learning. In essence, it is suggested that the process of educational triage, specifically the labelling of students by 'performance', has the potential to shape how young people see themselves as learners and therefore how they participate in learning. This highlights how young people can, formally, be participants but experience forms of exclusion within inclusion (Fergusson 2004).

Of most concern however is how an uncritical and somewhat absent minded buy-in to the A-C economy (Gillborn and Youdell 2006) is leaving students feeling labelled, often neglected, and differentiated as 'borderliners', 'safe bets', or 'no-hopers'. The consequence portrayed by students is a diminishing buy-in to the learning environment and a sense of disempowerment. All of which poses the question how

young people can be sold a narrative of individualism and effort while they are seen as nothing more than a letter in a spreadsheet.

Here it could be seen that the schools were making grades (student attainment) to make the grade (Ofsted rating). Inevitably, this intense focus on the attainment of year 11 students had consequences for the lived experiences of those students. One of the key ways in which students had their active participation constrained and damaged was through a process of labelling according to grades. Labelling has repercussions for RPA and young people's continued participation in education and training as

> Feeling encouraged to learn more and intending to continue at age 16 are both associated with pupil autonomy in setting learning targets, and being encouraged by teachers to make up their own minds (Gorard 2010, p.15)

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how the lived experiences of school interact with young people's learner identities, learning careers, and horizons for action. Furthermore, the findings also studied the contemporary pressures and neoliberal philosophies which shaped many teacher practices and underpinned many of the harmful features of the school experience. In summary, the chapter contends that many features of contemporary schooling, including a focus on performance and outcomes, are harming what young people at the margins see as possible and desirable within learning contexts.

In particular, the fieldwork showed how school experiences damaged learner identities and learning careers as the manifestation and enactment of neoliberal philosophies reduced schooling to a depersonalised and decontextualised pursuit of outcomes. While teachers did try and resist the pressure to focus on outcomes over experiences, the imperative for school performance largely acted to position young people as statistics rather than learners. Ultimately, framing participation in terms of grades and achievement proved counterproductive to development of learner identities and learning careers associated with extended participation in education and training (Ryan *et al.* 2019).

Educational triage

The findings showed how school performance (as set out by Ofsted and as embedded in neoliberal philosophies of competition), and the institutional culture surrounding school performance, was heavily linked to student attainment. Consequently, lower achieving students were positioned as problematic for school performance and therefore commonly found learning experiences positioned them as 'bad' learners. The issues associated with a focus on attainment were particularly apparent in processes of educational triage. Young people were explicitly labelled according to grades or expected grades, resulting in an injurious form of streaming that clearly placed lower-achieving students as inferior. This had an impact on dispositions towards learning as students developed polarised views on the value of schooling.

More widely, the labelling of students according to (predicted) attainment through processes of educational triage (Gillborn and Youdell 2006; Youdell* 2004) presents problems for RPA and the notion of continued participation in learning. As has been highlighted throughout the chapter, students' identities as learners became constituted simply by academic performance, reducing constructions of engagement and participation to limited analyses of performance and outcomes. Put simply, whether students are seen as good/bad or engaged/ disengaged learners is determined by their attainment. However, as Ross (2009) suggests, young people can be disengaged from school but engaged with education and the notion of learning.

Additionally, young people's comments showed how they felt ownership of their own learning was taken away as schools and teachers dictated the specific levels of attainment individual students should be working towards. As has been found elsewhere (see Gorard 2010), a lack of ownership and a lack of capacity to set their own ambitions is a barrier to young people's continued participation in education. The consequence of such constraint was learning careers limited by attainment and a sense of disempowerment, leading to young people not able to see themselves as learners beyond the traditional structures of academic assessment.

School-student relationships: 'Hurting' young people educationally

The findings also highlighted how performance driven practices of educational triage acted to damage young people's learning careers and learner identities in more

implicit ways. Reinforcing the work of Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth (2010), the findings emphasise young people's desire for respect and reciprocity within the classroom environment. Indeed, the fieldwork found that 'ideal teachers' were characterised by young people as those able to assert authority through respecting young people as individuals beyond simply being a student in school, and an approach to the classroom context which championed reciprocal relationships. In essence, young people wanted teachers who showed an interest in their lives beyond school and who allowed equal interactions within the learning environment (i.e., avoiding practices such as shouting at a student but then not allowing them to shout back).

However, positive teacher-student relationships were found to be largely absent in the school environment. Cultures of audit and performance, motivated by attainment, resulted in practices of educational triage which (Gillborn and Youdell 2006) acted to depersonalise interactions. Teachers' profiling of students based on attainment therefore created barriers to the development of teacher-student relationships built on respect and reciprocity, thus neglecting what has been identified as a key aspect of (dis)engagement in education (Duffy and Elwood 2013).

Institutional triage and positional competition

Moving away from micro-level, interactionist analyses of learning careers, another way in which young people's dispositions to learning were shaped was through a process of 'institutional triage'. Reflecting another representation of competition and marketisation within education (Halsey *et al*. 1997), young people positioned themselves relative to others based on the status of their school.

Young people regularly espoused the notion that they were in direct competition (for jobs) with other young people both locally and nationally. Through this lens, young people described their opportunities as being associated with the quality of their school relative to others, and therefore the likelihood of them achieving good grades relative to others. Embedded in wider issues surrounding school demographics in deprived, working class areas, processes of institutional triage had a significant impact on school performance, school status and, consequently, student status and perceived horizons.

The direct link made between the perceived quality of the school and the outcomes of its students highlights how embedded performance cultures have become within schooling. A large number of young people in the study expressed a level of determinism in their likelihood of attaining poorly and having reduced opportunities as a result of attending a substandard school. All of which is perhaps rooted in structural inequalities manifesting in micro/meso discourses of school and student status, resulting from neoliberalised performance and competition entering into the mentalities of students.

While there were of course a range of factors shaping the achievement of students, the act of institutional triage was important as it formed part of a learner identity and learning careers that accepted the fate of disadvantage. The reflexive process became difficult to break as students who embodied academic disadvantage almost inevitably achieved poorly, which only further reinforced the perceived poor quality of the school and the teaching. The magnification of inequality through the process of institutional triage thus highlights how competition has a negative impact on the participation of disadvantaged students in unexpected ways.

In conclusion, the findings show how many of the performance and attainment focused practices and cultures within the school context proved to be harmful for marginalised learners. Specifically, the fieldwork showed how the manifestation and enactment of competition, performance, and audit within schooling resulted in a conceptualisation of participation focused on school needs and outcomes as opposed to student needs. The consequence was institutional policies and practices, and consequently learning experiences, shaped by a narrow focus on the achievement of grades, rather than a broader view of the process of education. As such, learning was less about the participation and more about the result.

Additionally, the direct links made between attainment and opportunities, and the overbearing influence of educational triage, meant young people destined for lower attainment found their options for post-16 participation narrowing. This narrowing occurred both as a result of a reduction in subjectively perceived opportunities, as learner identities and learning careers were constrained, but also as a result of schools steering such students to restricted elements of vocational education. The rhetoric of

choice quickly became an illusion for these young people as their scope for decision-making around post-16 destinations diminished. The following chapter investigates this further by examining in more detail young people's processes, and schools' practices around post-16 decision-making.

Chapter 7: Post 16 decision-making: key factors shaping young people's post-16 decisions and destinations

Introduction

While chapters 5 and 6 considered the wider school and college experience in a thematic manner, this chapter follows on temporally from chapter 6, examining the processes and moments that stitch school experiences and post-16 transitions together. Specifically, the findings presented below explore the circumstances and factors that frame young people's post-16 decisions and transitions, in doing so developing an understanding of how participation is interlinked with transition.

The chapter contends that, by requiring participation in post-16 education or training, Raising the Participation Age (RPA) introduced a range of issues for schools and marginalised learners. In particular, the complexity of the vocational education and training (VET) system, and the pressure on schools to ensure their students did not become NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), resulted in uncritical decisions framed by a view that some form of post-16 participation was better than nothing. Fundamentally, schools sought to manage the transitions of marginal learners, taking on a risk-averse approach that promoted simple and straightforward options, and that (mis)sold the value of low-level VET. The consequence was transitions characterised by sense of obligation and by a (mis)conception that extended participation would enhance labour market opportunities.

In summary, whereas chapter 5 explored the impact of participation being viewed in terms of (dis)engagement, and chapter 6 considered a conceptualisation of participation based on outcomes rather than experiences, chapter 7 reflects on a perspective that reduces participation to a simple analysis of non-participation (Not in Education, Employment or Training) as bad, and participation (in Education, Employment or Training) as good.

Positioning the role of RPA in post-16 decision-making

The previous chapter explored how school experiences shaped young people's perceptions of learning and of being a learner, while also considering how schools and teachers positioned young people as academic or vocational learners and as 'good' or

'bad' learners. Those findings emphasise how school experiences act in many ways to 'prepare' young people for particular types and modes of post-16 transition (Ball, Macrae and Maguire 1999). This chapter progresses this line of inquiry by considering the post-16 decision-making process itself. Specifically, the findings offer an insight into the school practices and wider factors that influence and inform young people's post-16 decision-making processes.

Post 16 decision-making is of key interest to those studying school-to-work transitions. The decisions young people make are viewed as a key point at which unequal patterns of transition can be observed (Furlong 2005). It is also viewed as key juncture at which young people act on the horizons for action and learning careers that have developed during the course of their compulsory schooling (Ball, Macrae and Maguire 1999; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000c).

While a range of research examines post-16 decision-making and post-16 transitions, a large proportion of this is interested in the nature of post-16 decisions and transitions, and their determinants (see for example, Gorard and Smith 2007). Most pertinently, an extensive body of research engages with the relative role of structure and agency in shaping post-16 transitions, with recent attention focusing on choice biographies (see for example, Furlong, Cartmel and Biggart 2006; Woodman 2010; Roberts S 2010, Snee and Devine 2014), individualisation (see for example, Beck 2002; Furlong 2009; Thompson 2011), and the changing nature of transitions. In the context of barriers to, and determinants of post-16 decisions and transitions, common themes include the role of social class and capital(s) (see for example, Ball, Maguire and Macrae; Archer 2003, 2010; Reay 2010) and the structured nature of learner identities (see for example, Youdell 2006; Gorard and Smith 2007; Stokes and Wyn 2007).

These are all undoubtedly legitimate and important areas for analysis, the findings in this chapter however consider the experience and process of post-16 decision-making and transition. Specifically, the chapter explores how various factors shape how post-16 decision-making processes play out, including:

- Teachers-young people interactions

- Young people-young people interactions

- School practices

- Challenges with navigating post-16 education and training

Different school support systems

Within the local context of the research, responsibility for ensuring that all young people had the offer of an appropriate post-16 opportunities mainly fell with individual schools. The fieldwork revealed that this manifested in various ways across different institutions. Of interest is how these varying approaches impacted on the nature and style of young people's decisions. Examining such phenomena, Foskett, Dyke and Maringe (2008) propose a number of school factors which influence decisions of post-16 participation, suggesting that the way schools frame opportunities for different learners impacts the decisions young people make.

A range of research has sought to frame young people's post-16 decisions as either a reflexive process, utilising forms of agency (see for example, O'Connor 2014), or as largely guided by structural and cultural features of class, race and gender (see for example, Furlong 2005; Roberts K 2007). The implementation of RPA has led to more invasive interventions from institutions such as schools and careers services in this process and therefore demands attention be paid to the micro and meso level influences on young people's post-school transitions.

In exploring these factors Foskett, Dyke and Maringe (2008) discuss the ways in which schools actively or implicitly influence young people's choices, in doing so outlining the consequence for orientations towards education. The implementation of RPA, and more specifically the requirement for schools to ensure young people's post-16 participation, has created a new dynamic between schools and their students. Schools are now more accountable for the post-16 destinations of their students. The next section therefore examines the role this dynamic has played in shaping the way schools influence young people's decisions.

The production line

The push to ensure the post-16 participation of their pupils produced a very structured process in one of the three schools, West Town. There was a small office off one of the

main corridors and there was a regular flow of year 11 students entering the office. This was the school's 'careers office' which housed two staff, the careers manager, and the careers assistant. The opportunity arose to spend some time in the office and see the operation. Asked about their role in young people's post-16 transitions the careers manager commented:

> 'We do a lot of work to make sure our NEET figures are really low. Last year zero percent of our students were NEET six months after leaving school. They're starting to measure that figure now as part of school performance and we've always done well. We meet with each of the students individually and make sure they have an appropriate post-16 place. We make sure it's something they want to do and are able to do. We don't want to set them up to fail by signing them up for something they're going to not turn up for or drop out after two weeks'.

He then shows me his spreadsheet of students and their post-16 places. He has a list containing all of the year 11 students in the school and their post-16 options. He has them colour coded green, amber or red. The colours signify the level of confidence that the student will participate in their placement.

> If they are amber, we will meet with them occasionally as the year progresses and as they get closer to finishing to make sure their option is still suitable. We will also have back-up plans in case they don't get the grades they are hoping for or if things change. The students in red are those we are most concerned about becoming NEET. We'll try and meet them more regularly and work with them to find something. Most of the students in red are those that don't attend school very often though.

Throughout the day various students come to the office to meet with the careers staff. The general scenario involves the young people being asked what they want to do next year, looking at what they enjoy, what they are good at and what their grades are like. They then examine a range of options before completing an application. Most of the students are those leaving school and going to college. Those staying on at sixth form are seen as 'safe', as long as their predicted grades are suitable. For students with lower than required predicted grades, they are directed to the careers office to apply for college as a 'plan B'.

The large majority of young people appear to be directed to the local further education college. Asked about what most of the students do post-16, the careers manager comments:

> Most of the students here either stay on at sixth form or go to [local FE college]. A few go to other sixth forms, and a few go to other colleges if they have specific interests that South Town College doesn't cater for. We have a good relationship with South Town College so like to send the ones that might need support.

Asked about other options, he continues:

> We have tried to get a few on to apprenticeships but they're quite competitive and the deadlines are later than college so by the time they come around most students have a college offer so aren't that bothered.

> (Careers manager, West Town, 18th April 2016)

A noteworthy feature of the interactions between the careers staff and the students is the use of language around 'finding the right level'. This appeared to stem from a deficit model in which students are guided towards lower-level programmes if there is concern about their ability to meet the demands, returning to the notion of 'not setting them up to fail'. There is generally a trust from the students and so this is often not questioned. A consequence of this is risk-averse guidance built on a desire to avoid drop-out and deliver a 'good' result in terms of the ongoing level of NEET. Consequently, RPA is constraining young people's horizons for action as the school simultaneously provides a narrow view of what is objectively possible as well as shaping young people's subjectivities around what is desirable.

<u>DIY decision-making</u>

In contrast to the highly structured support described above, Hartland Academy have little in the way of official guidance for students, particularly for low-level learners. Observations revealed a do-it-yourself culture where students were largely expected to make their own decisions and to navigate the transitions process independently. The unstructured and informal nature of support and guidance was emphasised by a particular observation. The lesson took place in a computer room and was usually focused on an IT qualification the students were working towards. However, today's lesson had a different focus:

Teacher: Right everyone, get signed on to the computers. You're all doing your college applications today. Find the South Town College website and look for a course that you're interested in. If you have any problems, I can come around and help.

Kieran: But I don't know what I want to do sir.

Teacher: Apply for mechanics, you'll be good at that. You should be able to get on to level 1.

(Teacher-student interaction, Hartland Academy, 6th April 2016)

Streamed support

Operating in between the highly structured and unstructured approaches described above, Northumberland Girls School provide a formal guidance service, but access is unequally distributed. Talking to a range of students, it became clear that resources were directed towards supporting the higher achieving students. A number of the higher achieving 'Whiteknights girls' (those aiming to get into the grammar school for sixth form) described having numerous meetings with the careers adviser. Conversely, the 'apprenticeship girls' (lower achieving students aiming for college) described having far less support.

The differentiated levels of support did not go unnoticed by the students. During an ethnographic conversation, this became clear:

D D: So, what are you all planning on doing next year?

Shannon: I think some of us are going to college and some of us will try and get into Whiteknights. I'm hoping to go to Whiteknights.

D D: Do you get any help from the school in making decisions?

Shannon: I've met with the careers person a few times, but I think some of the others have only had one meeting.

Aisha: Yeah, all of us who want to go to college just get one session. It's not even useful. She [careers adviser] just asks you what you want to do, that's it.

Young person: Same, I just had one quick meeting. They obviously don't care about us. They just care about the Whiteknights girls because it makes the school look good if they get in.

> Aisha: Yeah, and what's the point in us trying hard if the school don't even care about us.
>
> (Conversation with group of year 11 students, Northumberland Girls School, 30th March 2016)

Clear from this conversation is a process of streaming and differentiation that occurs in the process of support and guidance. Also apparent was the polarisation it caused. Young people's perceptions of being less valued created a range of dispositions towards the school and learning, with a number of students espousing a sense of disaffection.

All of which challenges notions of decision-making as a rational, calculative process (Goldthorpe 1997), instead presenting the view that decisions are shaped by a range of structural factors that manifest in assumptions around what is achievable for different young people. Particularly significant was the influence of RPA in creating school approaches that narrowed rather than expanded opportunities structures (Furlong 2009; Brown 2013), and styles of support that were detrimental to engagement (Ryan *et al.* 2019). Young people's learning careers – how they viewed their ongoing relationship with learning – were ultimately framed by risk-averse school mentalities that sought to placate anti-school dispositions rather than challenge young people.

Making sense of diverse choices

While the diverse range of post-16 options is intended to encourage an active desire for continued participation, it can also be seen as a complicating factor. It can be problematic on two levels; firstly it has the potential to be overly complex and create confusion in decision making and navigation, resulting in what Raffe (2015) refers to as a 'qualifications jungle' (p.148); secondly it can make it difficult for others (schools etc.) to understand and engage with, not fully comprehending the various levels and pathways.

For young people this can be deeply problematic as clearly defined ideas about future employment are muddied by a diversity of options which lack obvious links to those imagined futures. For many of those spoken to in this study, this meant ambiguity and uncertainty, resulting in them falling back on 'safe' and 'known' options. Archer,

Mendick and Hollingworth (2010, p.93) discuss how young people's aspirations are constrained by classed capital and habitus, resulting in education and career decisions being based around the 'known' which emerges from the experiences of friends, family, and the local community. For Hodkinson (1996), the decision around careers is framed by 'horizons for action' which are built on 'externally located opportunities in the labour markets as well as the dispositions of habitus' (p.149). In this respect, what young people 'choose' to do can be considered as a combination of what opportunities are available to them (labour market) and what young people see as likely for them (the 'known').

Adding another dimension to young people's horizons are the normative effects of RPA and a discourse championing the beneficial, if not imperative, nature of continued in education or training post-16. This can be observed by drawing comparisons between the below table and the immediate post-school transitions of the young men in McDowell's (2003) study of employment change and working class youth. Although McDowell's study focuses primarily on young men, it provides a useful insight into the role of socioeconomic change on youth transitions.

Comparing the post-school transitions of young people across the two studies, most noteworthy is the shift towards a perceived acceptance of delayed entry into the labour market, replaced by extended participation in education. While not expressed explicitly, RPA manifested implicitly in young peoples' views that they were obligated to stay in education or training until the age of 18. Such perspectives highlighted the normalisation of extended participation.

Continuities do however exist in that young people's post-school transitions were framed by established assumptions about 'appropriate' jobs based on gendered notions of the labour market (McDowell 2003, p.139). However, for a number of young people, the emergence of the 'qualifications jungle' meant a reconfiguration and reworking of their horizons in terms what is achievable and available. All the young people in the table below were in year 11 at the time of expressing their post-16 aims. None of the young people described ambitions for higher education and all framed their aims within the context of transitions into employment. The table shows the aims expressed prior to leaving school and the immediate destinations post-school.

Table 7.1. Comparison of post-16 aims and destinations

Name	GCSE attainment	Post-16 aims	Post-16 destination
Liam	Low	Plumbing	Basic skills 'multi-trade' programme
Louis S	Low	Level 1 IT – app design/ plumbing/ trades	Basic skills 'multi-trade' programme
Kieran	Low-Medium	Level 1 IT – computer games	Motor mechanics
Naseem	Low	Level 1 Business	Remix for work programme
Callum	Low-Medium	Level 2 Sports course	Cabling apprenticeship
Ross	Medium	Level 3 engineering	Level 2 engineering
Louis B	Medium	Catering apprenticeship	Level 2 catering course
Connor	Low	Carpentry apprenticeship	Foundation level construction course
Mitchell	Medium	A-levels	Sixth form, A-levels; Level 3 media course at college
Nathan	Medium-High	Sixth form, A-levels	Sixth form, A-levels
Patience	Medium-High	Health and Social Care level 2	Health and Social Care level 2
Kloie	Medium-High	Sixth form, A-levels	Sixth form, A-levels
Aisha	Low	Level 1 Childcare course	Foundation level Health and Social Care
Rachel	Medium	Level 2 Childcare course	Level 2 childcare course
Shannon	Low	Level 2 Animal care course	Level 1 Animal care
Sarah	Low	Hair and Beauty	Childcare

The influence of 'local grapevines' (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010 p.93) was particularly apparent in the post-16 aspirations of Liam and Louis, two young men

from archetypal working class backgrounds. The two were close friends inside and outside of school and they shared many conversations on their post-16 transitions, often reflecting a form of joint planning. As a result of this dynamic their decisions became intertwined.

For Liam, the knowledge of his sister's boyfriend as a plumber was the key driver in his desire to study plumbing at college. Liam claiming that 'he says it's an alright job and he could probably get me involved when I'm qualified'. The importance of social capital is evident here, as well as the perception of 'becoming qualified'. Having a close family member in a particular job makes it 'known' and Liam's desire for 'practical work' result in plumbing becoming part of his imagined future. The problem however arises when Liam attempts to translate this into his post-16 transition. Basing his decision on 'becoming qualified', Liam's horizon for action in the context of post-16 learning is built on a credentialist notion of education equals employment. In applying to college however, a frustration emerges as he finds no clear or obvious option which will lead to the achievement of the required credentials. The consequence is an application to college framed by a sense of 'that's close enough'. He takes up the offer of a 'multi-trade' programme as it has elements of plumbing that Liam hopes will lead to a full plumbing course further down the line.

Louis however expressed a clear ambition to become an app designer. The issue for Louis was a lack of knowledge on how to enter this field of work and environmental factors that drew him away from this idea. In particular Liam was a strong influence. Louis had suggested that studying a level 1 IT course might be a starting point, but this was quickly dismissed by Liam who, in one conversation commented:

> 'Come on, you're not going to become an app designer, you're not going to get any grades like me so they're not going to take you on a level 1 IT course. And do you even know anything about app design anyway? Your dad can get you a job so you might as well do multi-trades with me'

(Liam, year 11 student, 28th March 2016)

The influence of a group habitus was not only evident in this example but across the fieldwork schools. At Northumberland Girls School a group of young people were discussing their plans after leaving school:

Young person 1: What are you lot thinking of doing next year then? I'm going to college to do hair and beauty.

Young person 2: I'm going to college too, probably Health and Social Care.

Young person 3: I don't know yet but probably college, I might do Health and Social Care as well so we can stay together [Young person 2].

Young person 1: Looks like we're all going to college then.

Young person 4: I suppose that's the only thing we can do really.

D D: Do most people from this school go to college then?

Young person 2: Not everyone, but all of us lot. The smart girls go to Whiteknights [a local grammar school] but us lot don't wanna go to uni and become doctors and lawyers, we just wanna go to college and then get a job.

(Group conversation, year 11 students, Northumberland Girls School, 30th March 2016)

The presence of group mentalities towards horizons and opportunities then problematises individualised notions of transitions (Thompson 2011). The complexity of transition routes has arguably obscured traditional patterns of transition, supporting the view that individualisation is a feature of an epistemological fallacy (Furlong 2009; France and Haddon 2014) whereby subjectivities have become more individualised, but transitions have not.

Also evident are the range of moderating factors on these young people's decisions. Far from the active, calculative and rational 'choices' portrayed in policy documents (Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000), it is apparent how 'differential positions in relation to 'risk'/privilege may constrain and shape the options and 'choices' that are possible and thinkable' (Archer and Yamashita 2003a, p.54). The consequence is a restricted range of options available to these young people.

Additionally, the notion 'fitting-in' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010) played an important part in young people's decisions. This had a stark impact in the post-16 destination of one of the research participants in particular. Throughout many of the interactions with Kieran, he expressed an uncertainty about what to do after school but generally described an interest in computers and an ambition to study IT at college. Kieran was neither pro nor anti school, his orientation towards education

could best be described as indifferent, encapsulated by his reflection:

> School's alright, I do okay... I wouldn't say I enjoy it, but some lessons are
> alright, and I have jokes with my mates.

Asked what his plans were for after school he commented:

> I dunno really, I might stay here and do sixth form to retake some of my GCSE's.
> I'm quite good on computers though so I might go to college and do IT.

> (Kieran, year 11 student, Hartland Academy, 7th April 2016)

Over the course of the next couple of weeks students were tasked with completing
college applications in class. Kieran applied to study IT level 1 and received an
invitation for interview at the college. Shortly after the interview Kieran was asked
how it had gone during an ethnographic conversation.

> D D: So how did your interview at college go?

> Kieran: I'm doing motor mechanics now.

> D D: Oh yeah, how come?

> Kieran: At the interview they showed us round and I met the teacher, he was
> proper annoying, some little ginger man who thought he knew everything... All
> the other people there were proper nerdies as well, you know, all wearing
> glasses and talking about weird geeky things, so I thought, I ain't doing that.

> D D: So how did you end up signing up for mechanics?

> Kieran: I said I didn't want to do IT, so they asked me what I liked, and I said I
> like bikes and I'm good at fixing them up, so they signed me up to motor
> mechanics. It's kind of similar I suppose, fixing things and that, so I thought why
> not.

> (Conversation with Kieran, Hartland Academy, 3rd May 2016)

The importance of IAG?

In the context of the restricted and constrained options and opportunities described
by Archer and Yamashita (2003a), there is an increased need to ensure young people
are well informed on those options which are available. Reflecting on the process of
post-16 decision making, Pring *et al.* (2009) emphasise the importance of Independent

Advice and Guidance (IAG). They suggest that it is particularly important for young people taking vocational qualifications to understand the implications of and progression opportunities within their choices in order to avoid disadvantage (*ibid.*)

This view appears to be supported by a number of young people who, during interviews, alluded to the fact that they were struggling to make sense of the options and pathways available.

> 'I think 16 is too young to make such big decisions. They [teachers and advisers] ask you what you want to do when you're older and expect you to plan your sixth form or college option based on that… I don't know what I want to do or even what's available to me… There's so many different jobs that I don't know about, they should do more to tell you what's out there'.
>
> (Mitchell, Year 11 student, West Town, 15th June 2015)

The above quote was emblematic of young people's narratives of making 'big decisions'. Many of the research participants felt the discourse of aspirations and imagined futures surrounding their post-16 options constructed the decision as fundamental to their future lives and prospects. There was very much a sense of too much too soon, supporting the view that rather than assuming further education involves a narrowing of an individual's educational focus, further education in its entirety should be viewed as a transitional period itself (Coffield et al. 2008).

Ultimately the above sketch of various factors interacting with young people's post-16 decisions highlights the social, cultural and structural factors limiting young people's 'choices'. The issue however is that RPA, by requiring young people to extend their participation in education, forces young people to choose something which may not be 'natural' (Reay 1998; Reay 2001). As Furlong (2005) points out 'Decisions at age 16 were very much coloured by past experience' (p.384), with some young people wanting to avoid 'any form of employment or training that would involve having to return to a classroom situation' (*ibid.*). This then poses the question, what impact would continued participation in a classroom environment have on young people's orientations to further learning.

Post 16 decision-making beyond school

Once in extended participation, also moderating young people's educational engagement and decision-making was involvement in part-time work. For some young people, maintaining part-time employment alongside post-16 education is a way of appeasing their cultural expectations for fast-track transitions into adulthood while 'keeping their options open'. The latter point reflects a recognition and acceptance of a credentialist labour market which places demands on the acquisition of skills and qualifications (Ainley and Allen 2010). The young people's narratives of their imagined futures presented below reveal such tensions between education and employment.

> 'Ideally, I would just leave college and get a decent job, but I don't think I'm going to get my math's [grade C GCSE] this year, I might get English [grade C GCSE] but probably not math's so I'll probably have to come back next year and do my math's. I know that most jobs want grade C math's and English' (Tanika, Level 2 Travel and Tourism student, South Town College, aged 17, 5th May 2016)

> 'I want to do level 3 [Travel and Tourism] and become an air stewardess but I know that you need good grades to get on to that programme so I'm doing remix [Remix for work programme – focused on achievement of Math's and English GCSE's and 'employability skills'] this year and then next year hopefully I can get on to level 3 travel' (Beth, Remix for work programme, South Town College, aged 18, 5th October 2016)

> 'I didn't really get anything from school, I stopped going in year 10 really so I didn't take any GCSE's. I thought I would come to college and give it another go. I want to stay at college and do level 2 and see how far I can get, but it depends how I do in my exams in the summer. If I pass, I will stay at college and try and get my qualifications to get a better job but if I fail there's no point me staying and keep failing. I'll just get a job and see how it goes' (Melissa, foundation level Health and Social Care, South Town College aged 16, 9th April 2016)

> 'I'll take any good job I can get as there aren't many good jobs for young people; they give them to people with more qualifications. That's why I'm still here at college, I've done two years already but I need to stay to get better qualifications so I can get a good job' (Jamie, foundation level Health and Social Care, South Town College, aged 18, 9th April 2016)

The young people's comments emphasise a preference for employment over education, positioning their participation in post-16 education as a necessary evil in their pursuit of access to the labour market. For a number of young people however

their involvement in college is clearly speculative rather than expectant, driven by a dominant discourse they have been sold which promotes the idea that 'good grades equals good jobs'. For these young people, their extended participation in education is largely driven by notions of 'giving it a go' and 'doing what I have to', symbolising a begrudging acceptance of their situation.

However, as was captured above in Jamie's assessment, there is a sense of discouragement among some of the young people. With 'good jobs' seemingly hard to come by, young people enter college as 'discouraged workers' (Raffe and Willms 1989). Thus, in response to the new context of required post-16 participation set out by RPA, and a shortage of local employment opportunities, young people are using part-time work to manage the situation they find themselves in. The below quotes provide a few examples of young peoples' accounts of the role of work:

> 'I work as well as go to college, so if college doesn't work out, I've got another route I can follow'. (Melissa, 16, South Town College, 9th April 2016)

> 'I would get bored if I was just doing college. It doesn't really feel like I'm doing or learning anything useful at college, so work gives me that' (Connor, 17, South Town College, 14th June 2016)

> 'I see myself as a worker first, and a student second. At the end of the day, I would prefer to just be working, but I know that I need qualifications (Jamie, 17, South Town College, 4th February 2016)

These quotes in many ways reflects the committed workers and reluctant learners in McDowell's (2003) study of employment change and working class youth. The young people referred to in this section draw many parallels with those in McDowell's study; their 'choice' to attend college is predominantly made with a view to enhancing employment prospects, acting essentially as a postponement of their entry in employment. As with McDowell's (2003) 'reluctant learners', a number of young people express dissatisfaction with their learning experiences.

> 'College isn't helping me; it's not helping me get a job. I did work harder than this in year 10' (Jess, 18, level 1 Health and Social Care, South Town College, 9th April 2016)

> 'The work is so basic, it makes you feel stupid' (Euwera, 16, foundation level IT, South Town College, 15th June 2016)

'They treat you like you're kids, this isn't school, I'm not in year 8 anymore… The work they get us to do is so simple as well, make a poster, do some research online, it's hardly very interesting' (Kamil, 17, foundation level Travel and Tourism, South Town College, 12th May 2016)

For a number of these young people, part-time work becomes a way of managing their status as reluctant or discouraged learners. It provides them with an alternative focus and purpose which helps them cope with their dissatisfaction with college.

Another feature of young people's participation in part-time work is the economic (class) divide. The majority of those in part-time work suggested that a lack of financial support from parents, combined with a desire to meet social expectations of contemporary youthhood in terms of style and peer cultures (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010), were key drivers in their decision to combine work with learning. As Ainley and Allen (2010) suggest, this is the reality for a growing number of young people as their parents cannot afford continue to provide for them into their later teenage years.

'I want to buy nice clothes, look good you know, and do stuff like go out with my mates but I can't ask my mum for money, she's got three other kids to look after' (Melissa, 16 foundation level Health and Social Care, South Town College, 2nd April 2016)

The examples of young people's involvement in part-time employment, on the previous page, expose the potential influence of work on young people's orientations towards education.

Also apparent across the fieldwork is the difference between those young people involved in work and those not. Young people employed in part-time positions away from education present hybridised learner-worker identities, manifesting in the differentiated orientations towards education described above. This is an area only reflected upon briefly in this study and is one requiring further examination. Beyond the analysis forwarded here, more needs to be known about how hybridised identities are formed and how they shape orientations towards education in the context of RPA/ discouraged learners. The challenge for providers of education is how to manage the discouraged workers and reluctant learners to ensure that decisions for post-16 participation are not overly influenced by the lure of paid work and the option of fast-

track transitions into employment.

Conclusion

Chapter 7 has explored the nature and experience of post-16 decision-making for those occupying marginal learning spaces. Specifically, the chapter set out to examine how young people navigating transitions from school to low-level VET were influenced by the requirement for participation as set out by RPA. The fieldwork focused on the role of teachers, friends, family, and local contexts, and how such factors shaped the nature of young people's transition decision-making and the degree to which young people could be classified as 'participants'. The findings suggest that, for marginalised learners, post-16 participation was viewed as being about managing 'safe' and simple transitions, with a primary focus on avoiding non-participation. For the young people, the result was commonly transitions shaped by a sense of obligation and uncritical decision-making, which stifled agency, allowing external influences to 'push' them in particular directions.

'Managing' participation

Across the fieldwork, there were numerous examples of schools defining the parameters of their students' decision-making, engaging with normative assumptions about what was deemed 'appropriate' and what would ensure young people did not become non-participants. This was also highlighted within the post-16 environment, with teachers asking students what their preferences were but then trying to divert them in a different direction if their expectations did not match. Ultimately, by requiring post-16 participation, RPA implicitly pressured schools and colleges to make risk-averse decisions based on what was deemed to be the 'safest' options for their students.

Without the insight or knowledgeable support networks, more academically marginalised young people had less decision-making 'capital' and thus were far more at the mercy of external influences. As such, young people in this position found themselves more susceptible to the 'governance' of schools and their staff – through the various mechanisms and discourses which push them in particular directions.

Essentially, concerns around non-participation legitimised taking control of the transitions made by those deemed at risk of becoming NEET.

Fundamentally, those responsible for ensuring learners stayed in education or training were forced into forms of tokenistic participation, whereby learners' views were not considered, or at least not in a genuine way. It could be suggested this constitutes a form of 'bounded agency' (Evans 2007), whereby teachers' perceptions of their students' needs and abilities (based on structural dimensions of class etc.) shape what they see as realistic in terms of post-16 destinations, overriding young people's views and voices. More specifically, it could be proposed this is a form of 'disempowered agency' – young people are making 'choices', but they come from a position of teacher led direction.

Choice, coercion, and (un)criticality

Beyond concerns around tokenism and disempowerment in the context of post-16 decision-making, the imperative to avert potential non-participation also manifested in a disparity of criticality. Interactions between teachers and students focused on post-16 participation were common across the school sites as young people approached the end of year 11 and the end of their compulsory schooling. Apparent was the different nature of conversation in relation to whether a student was high or low achieving. High achieving students experienced detailed conversations framed by notions of choice, ambition and future transitions into higher education and professional employment.

In contrast, low achieving students experienced interactions much vaguer in nature with teachers pushing post-16 education and training 'because you need to do something' or 'because it will help you get a job'. Specifics and detail were in short supply with students commonly advised to 'do something you enjoy' rather than anything that had academic status or labour market value. Fieldwork observations within both the schools and the college found a number of teacher-student interactions that symbolised the absence of criticality. Such interactions revealed pressures on teachers to prioritise the avoidance of non-participation over the nature or quality of participation. In this light, the obligation for extended participation was

shown to have permeated teacher mentalities around the transitions their students make.

The lack of criticality in teacher-student interactions arguably represents an enactment of 'the great deception' (Atkins 2010), where young people are (mis)sold the benefits and value of low-level VET. Specifically, the pervasive and persuasive nature of the rhetoric around low-level VET and employability disempowered young people from seeking alternative forms of participation and it undermined their capability to question the validity and justness of their position within the education and training system (Lawy 2010; Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014).

The complexity of post-16 participation

Another noteworthy feature of the young people's extended participation was the processes through which post-16 transitions occurred. In contrast to the more straightforward pathway from A-levels to university for those following the academic mainstream (Roberts S 2010), the young people navigating transitions from school to further education and training were confronted with far more complexity and far less certainty. As depicted throughout the chapter, routes from education to employment (which was the main concern for the majority of those attending college) were largely obscure, and there was a large range of subjects and course levels on offer.

This is particularly significant in the context of making choices from a diversity of post school transitions (McDowell 2003, p.139). The lack of clarity around transition routes through low-level vocational education had a disabling/ disempowering effect as schools, students, and post-16 providers struggled to make sense of how marginal learning spaces are best managed and navigated. Consequently, the diversity and complexity of choices facing young people often meant that they fell back on 'known' and 'safe' options that were based on their cultural/structural familial or peer subjectivities. In this sense, there was limited criticality in the post-16 decision-making process.

While these young people did not clearly follow set trajectories, explicitly determined by opportunities structures, structural forces shaped decision-making in more implicit ways. As well as through teachers' interpretations of 'appropriate' post-16 transitions, structural forces also manifested in young people's subjectivities/horizons through the

lens of 'fitting in'. This resulted in a largely classed and gendered set of transitions, with boys coalescing around subjects such as construction and mechanics, and girls tending to lean towards subjects such as Health and Social Care and Travel and Tourism.

The push to require extended participation in education or training also increased complexity in another way. Once in post-16 education and training, young people in low-level VET were commonly characterised by attempting to follow both work and learning trajectories simultaneously, undertaking both study and employment. This was reflective of hybridised identities that appeased expectations of both fast and slow track transitions. It was also associated with beliefs that learning was unlikely to yield positive results, so it was necessary to maintain an alternative pathway to employment. There was therefore not really a buy in to being a learner, with no real shift in learner identities or learning careers. This meant 'participation' in post-16 education and training was not as straightforward as conceived by RPA, with many young people engaging in delayed or disguised 'risky' fast-track transitions.

The experiences described through the findings emphasise the shift towards a greater obligation for extended participation, particularly for those on the margins of education and training. The emergence of obligation for those on the margins emphasises the perception that participation is not an equal experience. For young people following the academic mainstream, there are participation rights and participation choices. For those on the margins, there are participation obligations.

The sense of obligation also meant young people did not commit to participation in learning, instead viewing post-16 education and training as participation in an elongated school-to-work transition. Such young people fundamentally viewed extended participation as about getting through rather than getting on, commonly taking on hybrid worker/learner identities where learning was considered a back up to their labour market ambitions, rather than an important part of it. This is significant as it demonstrates that involvement in post-16 education and training does not equate to 'participation' in a universal way. Young people's position as a participant, their participation position, is differentiated by the relative obligation or right to participate.

In summary, post-16 decision-making reflected a reductionist conceptualisation of participation framed by a sense of obligation and an imperative to simply avoid non-participation. The result was marginalised learners making uncritical and 'managed' transitions, driven by intersection of structural forces, school cultures and practices, and a complexity of 'choice'. For marginalised learners, this commonly resulted in a reproduction of disadvantage as they were channelled into low-level VET and the possibility of further marginalisation, with limited learner identities and learning careers. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the challenge for post-16 education and training is therefore how best to work with young people who have been required to participate in further education and training and who could be characterised as 'reluctant learners'.

Chapter 8: Opportunity, (non)participation, and learning in Further Education: experiences of low-level vocational education at college

Introduction

As outlined at the end of the previous chapter, the challenge for post-16 education and training providers is how best to frame learning environments for young people transitioning from unrewarding experiences at school. The findings presented in this chapter therefore follow on from chapter six's exploration of school experiences, and chapter seven's examination of the decision-making process that tie school and post-16 education and training together. Based on fieldwork from across a range of subject areas and levels of study at a large Further Education (FE) college, this chapter investigates what extended participation following school experiences and post-16 decision-making actually looks like and means to young people. Specifically, attention is paid to the nature of participation for those occupying the marginal learning spaces of low-level VET, with the aim of analysing how lived experiences shape opportunities within and dispositions towards learning.

Continuing the theme employed throughout the empirical chapters, this chapter takes as its analytical basis, the chief conceptualisation(s) of participation. Chapter five explored how participation in school and college was underpinned by (dis)engagement; chapter six examined the primacy of outcomes and attainment in conceptualisations of participation within school and in the context of post-16 decision-making; chapter seven investigated the paramountcy of avoiding non-participation in constructions of participation; and chapter eight now focuses on how participation within low-level VET is framed by retention, re-engagement, and progression.

The chapter contends that the push to require participation in post-16 education and training has created a focus on retention, whereby preventing young people from 'dropping out' and becoming 'non-participants' is a key pressure on FE policies and practices. The findings show how retention policies and practices resulted in learning experiences framed by 're-engagement', based on the assumption that young people arrive in low-level VET disinclined to participate in learning. While the strategies

employed to 're-engage' learners were varied, many of them only further alienated and stigmatised young people.

Furthermore, the findings highlight a recognition amongst VET staff of the disparity of esteem between vocational and academic education. Consequently, participation, particularly within low-level VET, was framed by a belief that progression (to higher level vocational study) was required to achieve anything of worth or value. To make participation 'meaningful', classroom learning was premised on 'preparing' learners for higher levels study and on future rather than current needs. The primacy of the progression discourse ultimately meant lower levels of study were shaped by higher levels of study which, in turn, were led by a desire to challenge the disparity of esteem and to become more 'academic'. Therefore, young people in low-level VET were commonly scrutinised against expectations of higher-level course, leading to disadvantage and disaffection.

In summary, the fieldwork revealed that the consequence of participation framed by retention, progression, and re-engagement was policies and practices which entrenched, rather than disrupted, marginalisation and exclusion. Drawing similarities with the conceptualisations and enactments of participation with school and post-16 decision-making, marginalisation and exclusion was entrenched through processes of stigmatisation, alienation, and disenfranchisement. Fundamentally, learning experiences were harmful, and the allocation of opportunities (recruitment, performance, selection) were disadvantageous for those in low-level VET.

Situating low-level VET

Following the previous chapter's examination of post-16 decision-making, this chapter presents findings from the ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, which investigated the lived experiences of young people in low-level vocational education at a large FE college. The data was collected from three subject areas (Health and Social Care, Travel and Tourism, and IT) and across three levels of study (foundation/level 1, level 2, and level 3). The idea behind this research design was to explore how young people navigated and experienced both transitions into and through post-16 education and training.

Such an investigation is highly pertinent in the context of findings presented in previous chapters, which show how young people come to occupy marginal learning spaces, and how post-16 participation for marginalised young people is already framed by (dis)engagement, stigmatisation, and coercion. Therefore, the concern is whether experiences of FE achieve the aims set out by Raising the Participation Age (RPA) and act to disrupt positions of marginality and non-participation (NEET), through the enhancement of opportunities and employability.

Furthering the previous point, RPA is representative of recent governments' proclivity for supply-side policies aimed at targeting youth unemployment and more widely enhancing employability in a human capital construction of education-labour market relations (Simmons, Thompson, and Russel 2014). By focusing on the acquisition of skills and qualifications as a strategy to tackle youth unemployment, RPA places the responsibility at an individual level. There is an onus on individuals to accumulate human capital that can be translated into labour market opportunities, reflecting Bernstein's notion of 'trainability' in the pursuit of meeting the 'new requirements of "work"' (Bernstein 2000, p.59).

This however is problematised by those who highlight the continuing disparity between the esteem afforded to academic and vocational qualifications (Wolf 2011; Hodgson and Spours 2010; Raffe 2015). This reality is especially acute for those taking low-level vocation and basic skills qualifications, with little to no labour market value endowed for their attainment (Atkins 2010). For young people in this situation, the issue is not then participation, but progression. For these young people to achieve anything of worth and enhance their 'employability', they must be able to progress to the higher levels of their subject area. An inability or lack of opportunity to do so represents a key way in which this population maintains marginalised positions.

Additionally, RPA can also be viewed as a response to concerns around the detrimental impacts of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (Maguire 2013). Fundamentally, RPA is built on a binary conceptualisation of participation and non-participation. Those young people who continue in some form of education or training until the age of 18 are viewed as participants, those who do not are viewed as non-participants. It is suggested that such a perspective overlooks the various

experiences of exclusion and marginalisation that occur within post-16 education and training, which constitute and contribute to types of non-participation. The findings presented below therefore unpick the experience of post-16 education and training to develop a more complex view on participation and non-participation.

Learning cultures, re-engagement, and participation

As discussed previously, RPA is framed as a tool to 're-engage' young people who deviate from dominant ideal dispositions towards the education project. The current RPA policy seeks to achieve this by encouraging extended participation in education or training post-16. For many of the young people in this study, extended participation demands transitioning from often-negative experiences of school into low-level vocational and basic skills programmes designed to appeal to the prospective students through their subject specific focus (DfE 2014). Although not expressed explicitly, these pathways commonly represent 'an alternative' to higher-status academic and higher-level vocational options, aimed at meeting the distinct needs of those marginalised and excluded from such opportunities (Mcgregor and Mills 2012). What is clear from the fieldwork is that many of the settings that the marginalised learners inhabited reflect alternative learning environments. Although found within mainstream education settings, these environments were distinguishable and separate from the mainstream.

McGregor and Mills' (2012) study of alternative sites in Australia depict a range of features which they purport enables marginalised learners to (re)engage with the learning process. In particular, they emphasise the nature of the learning programmes, the environment and teaching relationships. What stands out in their study is the flexibility of the alternative learning sites to be different from mainstream education and schooling. This section uses this as a starting point for examining how RPA limits or enables opportunities to provide constructive learning experiences for marginalised young people and whether the experiences that are produced support legitimate reengagement with progressive learning opportunities. The following section therefore presents edited field notes illustrating the various classroom environments encountered. Specifically, the data represents an example of the commonly found learning culture within low-level vocational education.

The foundation learning Health and Social Care class is led by a white male vocational tutor (he has completed vocational qualifications to a certain standard but is not a qualified teacher) aged mid-twenties. His lessons are typically informal and relaxed. The following sets of edited field notes are presented in order to develop a picture of the atmosphere, culture, and norms of the class.

The students are always welcomed into the class; the teacher uses their first names and is generally friendly and welcoming. As they enter, he reminds them to take their coats off and put food and drink away. He also asks them to get a laptop and to log-in (most of their work is done on the laptop). The students find a seat and talk amongst themselves. The room is arranged into four sets of tables in a cabaret style and young people seem to sit in familiar groups. The students do not all arrive at the same time; they are arriving intermittently, mostly in small groups. As the normal lesson start passes, the teacher asks those arriving after this time where they have been (why they are late). The young people typically enter the classroom with no acknowledgment of their late arrival, and they give the teacher an excuse (in slightly dismissive/ resistant fashion) before sitting down and continuing/engaging in conversation with others.

The teacher engages in informal conversation with the students, asking them how they were doing and engaging in typical small talk. There is a relaxed atmosphere with teacher and students interacting. While this is going on the teacher is preparing the work for today's lesson. He is setting something up on his computer, projecting it on to the large screen at the front of the class. He does this in a slightly frantic manner also gathering together papers (worksheets of some description) and pens.

After a few minutes he begins the lesson, opening with an explanation of the task. He tells them how where to find the work and how to get started. A number of the students are yet to be fully ready and have not logged-on to their computer. As the students begin their work (at different times and to differing degrees), the teacher moves around the room, going from table to table, engaging with young people individually or in small groups to help them with their work. It presents as a more informal, non-traditional approach to teaching as he is with the students as opposed to being in front of the students. The teacher takes a supportive tone when engaging with the students in his attempts to aide their completion of the set tasks.

The students display a mixed level of participation in the lesson and with the work. A number of students are having conversations or are on their phones. This occasionally draws a gentle rebuke comment from the teacher telling them to get on with their work. The students generally respond calmly and appear

nonplussed, at least reining in their conversations and appearing to continue working.

(Foundation level Health and Social care classroom observation, South Town College, 8th February 2016)

Within the foundation Health and Social Care lessons the learning activities generally reflected the dominant perception of a low-level, unchallenging curriculum (Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014; Lawy 2010; Raffe 2015; Wolf 2011). The work set was often very basic and built around an assumption that the 'real work' had to be disguised by framing the task as something fun or interesting, further entrenching the preconception that learners within low-level vocational education are fundamentally opposed to traditional forms of learning. The following edited field note extract illustrates a typical learning activity for the foundation Health and Social Care group.

10.30 a.m. The scheduled lesson start time has passed but the students are still settling down and there is a low-level of conversation taking place in various groups. The teacher begins to explain today's learning activity. Andy starts 'so today we're going to be doing an activity on inspirational people. I want you to look on the Internet and do some research on someone who has inspired people. You've got a worksheet and I want you to find that information out about your inspirational person'.

Around the room there are varying responses. A few of the young people begin the task straight away, a few sit quietly but look slightly lost and a number respond to express disapproval/ mild dissent. One student respond saying 'Why are we doing that? I don't know any inspirational people', which another student follows by saying flippantly 'I'm an inspirational person'.

(Foundation level Health and Social Care classroom observation, South Town College, 10th March 2016)

This extract illustrates the typical learning activities within this group and also the nature of engagement these activities generate. The work is typically un-stimulating and the responses of the students tend to reflect this.

The extract also reveals some hidden dimensions of the learning activities. In a conversation away from the students, the teacher suggests that the task had been aimed at emphasising the achievements of people who had not followed mainstream routes through education and life. It was intended to be a motivational activity

designed to enhance young people's belief and ambition. This can be seen as a strategy focused on developing young people's subjective horizons (Hodkinson 1996; Hodkinson 1998; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000c) through re-modelling identities and dispositions. However, the learning activity tended to be more reflective of deficit constructions of learners, which frame them as lacking the necessary dispositions and intellect to undertake higher-level work. This perception in turn leads to the exclusion of young people from opportunities to participate in more 'academic' learning (Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011a).

Finding commonalities with recent research in this area (Cornish 2017b; Cornish 2018), young people taking low-level vocational qualifications often found themselves stigmatised and confronted with learning experiences that were focused more on occupying them than developing any credible skills for achievement and progression. Young people's response to which is characterised by the following comment:

> 'They treat you like you're kids, this isn't school, I'm not in year 8 anymore... The work they get us to do is so simple as well, make a poster, do some research online, it's hardly very interesting' (Kamil, 17, foundation level Travel and Tourism, South Town College, 8th June 2016)

A further representation of the complicated and intertwined nature of (non)participation emerged through young people's views on why they had continued in education and training. During ethnographic conversations, young people commonly espoused the view that their extended participation was due to an obligation rather than a perceived right. Symbolised by one young person's comment that:

> 'The only reason I'm here is because you have to stay in education until you're 18. They shouldn't be able to make you if you just want to get a job' (Jess, 18, Level 1 Health and Social Care, South Town College, 24th February 2016)

Such views highlight the issues inherent in shifting the dynamic for participation from a right to an obligation. Observations showed that obligation created dispositions that were in conflict with the normative expectations of the learning environment, therefore requiring the teachers to 'win over' the students. This was highlighted in one teacher's reflection:

'You have to get them on board first, most of these guys didn't like school so you need to build their engagement' (Andy, foundation Health and Social Care teacher, South Town College, 14th March 2016)

Furthermore, perceptions of obligation were regularly associated with more passive forms of participation in the classroom, with students present but not engaged in learning. Those young people who felt an obligation or coercion to participate were more defensive and more closed in their responses to the learning environment. Fundamentally, they did not want to be in education and had to be convinced or persuaded as to why their continued participation was worthwhile. Such perspectives were exemplified in one young person's comment:

'Ideally, I would just leave college and get a decent job' (Tanika, 17, Level 2 Travel and Tourism, South Town College, 6th May 2016)

Clear from this statement is that the young person had not constructed a learning career or imagined future that saw value or necessity in continued learning. Young people in these positions found themselves warehoused not only in the wider context of school-to-work transitions but also in the more immediate context of progression within college. There were numerous cases of young people experiencing a 'churn' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005; MacDonald 2011; Cornish 2019) within low-level VET as they were recycled within level 1/foundation learning, simply moving sideways from one course to another rather than progressing to higher level, higher value courses.

While officially perceived as a positive form of participation relative to being NEET or in jobs without training, the depressing and damaging effects of warehousing within low-level VET cannot be overlooked. The concern is that deeply entrenched disadvantage and damaged learner identities are likely to condemn young people to a life and career that excludes learning as young people transition from marginal learning to marginal employment (Atkins 2013).

Recruitment and selection – marginalisation and the myth of meritocracy

The discourse of meritocracy is afforded much attention within the context of education. The view that 'Our schools should be engines of social mobility, helping children to overcome the accidents of birth and background' (DfE 2010, p.6)is one

which holds much weight in ideological portrayals of the relationship between education and social position. Much of the debate on the topic of meritocracy centres on macro-level issues; reflecting on whether education and schooling really does reward effort and ability over background and whether it is a level playing field in which young people from any social class can achieve (Tomlinson 2005). This section thus explores the role institutional processes of recruitment and selection play in limiting or enabling progression opportunities and also how such processes serve to disguise and individualise structural and cultural marginalisation and exclusion through 'attitudes' and other endogenous factors.

While a great deal of the recruitment and selection process goes on behind young people's backs, it took a more overt form in one particular class within the college fieldwork. This provides a useful opportunity for examination as the actions of staff and reactions of students taking place can be seen. The following material outlines two contrasting experiences of how recruitment and selection plays out in the everyday lives of students.

> The academic year is nearing its end for the level 2 Travel and Tourism class of South Town College. Throughout the year the students have been told that their progression to level 3 is dependent on them passing the course and achieving the necessary grades in Math's and English. However, the Travel and Tourism staff [Chris and George] are holding 'interviews' with each of the students to assess their suitability for the level 3 programme. For one young woman there is not a positive outcome, the following edited field notes describes the scene:

> The class has been commenced – the register has been taken, the teacher has outlined the plan for the lesson and the students have been given tasks to get on with. The main purpose of this session is to hold 'interviews' with each of the individual students, evaluating their performance over the course of the year and to discuss whether they progress to level 3. The students are on computers set up around the perimeter of the room, completing the set task while also chatting to one another. As the teacher is engaged in the interviews there is no staff present in the room. One by one the students are called in for their 'interview'. The returning students discuss their experience and the outcome of the interview with their peers. All of the students returning have so far been accepted on to the level 3 programme – the highest level available at the college. That is until one young woman returns from her interview. She takes her seat amongst her friends, they are looking at her expectantly, she

tells them that she has been advised to 'go away and do another level 2 course for a year to gain confidence and to come back in a year to apply again'.

(Level 2 Travel and Tourism class observation, South Town College, 15th June 2016)

After the class has finished and the students have left, the teacher discusses her decision. The teacher suggests the student is too shy and quiet. A link is made between the nature and demands of the level 3 programme and the dispositions required 'You have to be outgoing to succeed at level 3, there's no hiding place and the standards expected are high' (Level 3 T&T teacher). From fieldwork observations, the student in question is a studious Asian young woman who fits the cultural and ethnic stereotype as being quiet and reserved (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010).

Apparent from the teacher's comments, and observations of her classes, is that there is a preference for more outgoing students. Cultural differences and constructions of 'ideal learners' served to shape the nature of the teacher-student relationship and the teacher's perception of the student. In this sense, the young person suffered from a lack of appropriate cultural capital in gaining the teacher's acceptance. However, the teacher's privileging of particular cultural dispositions and norms was disguised as 'shyness' and conflated with mild disinterest and disengagement.

The young woman appears confused and slightly distressed by her situation. There is an uncertainty in her voice as she comments 'What should I do next year? I came to college to do Travel and Tourism so I don't know what other courses I can do'. A friend suggests 'Why don't you do business, that's kind of linked to Travel and Tourism'. It is clear that the teacher's decision has knocked the students plans off track, her agency and choice have been subverted by the intersection of various cultural and structural factors, disguised as disengagement. This example symbolises the ways in which forms non-participation can play out in modes of participation. Also highlighting the permeation of disengagement as an explanatory tool for exclusion and marginalisation (Fergusson 2013). In contrast, another student has a differing exchange with the teacher:

Student: I want to do level 3, but I'm worried I won't get my English [GCSE]

> Teacher [Chris]: If you don't get your English, I will fight for you to get on to level 3. You're such a nice girl and I know that you try your hardest.
>
> (Level 2 Travel and Tourism class observation, South Town College, 15th June 2016)

These examples highlight the influence of cultural dimensions. The teacher places greater value on the 'hard work' of one student and perceives 'shyness' as an undesirable trait, perhaps also perceiving this student as less 'confident' as a result.

The cultural dimensions of transition opportunities described above exemplify the myth of meritocracy (Tomlinson 2005), as they highlight the continued inequity associated with forms of streaming and 'setting' (Taylor *et al.* 2019). In particular, there is a construction of an 'ideal' learner built on personal traits, characteristics and cultural norms that interact with opportunities. In this respect the teacher's privileging of particular characteristics interacts directly with opportunities for progression. While being conscious of generalising, the student's cultural norms as an Asian young woman - being reserved and unassuming – appear to have disadvantaged her in some respects. This draws parallels with Gillborn's (2000) and Mac an Ghaill's (1993) work on the influence of race in education. Their work depicts a situation in which students have to balance being heard and being invisible. In the above example the young woman has perhaps fallen foul of a hidden need to be heard and in playing out her cultural norms has been disadvantaged.

The academicisation of VET

One of the central ambitions of RPA is to increase the number of young people achieving a grade C in their Maths and English GCSE's (DFE 2010). For young people not achieving these levels at school, this meant continuing learning and assessment in these subjects at college. This focus on qualifications was one of the key drivers for the academicisation and classroomification of VET (Acquah and Huddlestone 2014).

The fieldwork showed that the academicisation of VET was a prominent feature of the recruitment and selection process at the college. Young people in foundation and level 1 learning were largely there due to low attainment at GCSE, not achieving C grades in English and Maths. This highlights what has been termed the 'gatekeeping' function of

GCSEs' (Cornish 2017a) where opportunities within VET are streamed along academic lines. This was demonstrated in the reflections of one student, commenting:

> I've been here for two years now, I'm 18 and I'm not staying in college any longer, I want to get a job and start earning money… There's no point me staying, I've failed my Math's three times already so I'm not going to pass it. I wanted to do level 2 [Health and Social Care] but you need grade Cs to get on it and that's not going to happen.

> (Jess, 18, foundation level Health and Social Care, South Town College, 12th March 2016)

Another student, commenting on their frustrations, also highlighted the impact of academicisation:

> I don't know why they keep making us do Maths and English. If I was going to pass them, I would have passed them at school. Keeping on doing it isn't suddenly going to change things. What's changed between school and now. It's long, I didn't come to college and sit in a classroom, I came to learn things that are going to help me get a job.

> (Kamil, 16, foundation Travel and Tourism, South Town College, 10th January 2016)

Clear from the comments of Kamil and Jess is the limiting and constraining consequences of the academicisation and classroomification of VET. The young people's disengagement is a consequence of a mismatch between expectations and realities, which has consequences for learner identities (Brockmann and Laurie 2016; Hegna 2019). This corroborates a wider concern about what Ainley and Allen (2010) refer to as a new tripartism in further education, with a divide emerging between low-level and basic skills programmes, technical qualifications, and traditional academic routes. With a persisting disparity of esteem, the possibility for progression between levels, in a system which professes meritocratically structured pathways, is problematised by the experiences of Jess and Kamil. The above examples reveal the effects of this stratification by highlighting the micro and meso processes that keep young people at the lower levels and marginalise their progression (Taylor *et al.* 2019).

The above points also emphasise the incongruence of perceived and actual opportunities in what Atkins (2010) refers to as 'the great deception'. Sold the idea that vocational

education will lead to opportunities for secure and purposeful employment, young people in low-level and basic skills qualifications find that this is 'merely smoke and mirrors' (*ibid.* p.253) as they struggle to make progress and escape deficit discourses of low-aspirations and negative dispositions towards education through which they are labelled.

A further factor in shaping opportunities for progression with VET was linkages between grades and dispositions towards learning. Fieldwork highlighted the competition for places on level 2 courses, from both students already at the college and those leaving school. Towards the end of the academic year, teachers were making decisions on whom to offer a place on their level 2 course. Application numbers were higher than spaces available and decisions were made on students attempting to progress from foundation and level 1 courses, and students finishing year 11 at school. Students leaving school were often preferred to internal students based on perceptions of the young people's dispositions towards learning. This was emphasised in one teacher's comment:

> 'You have to ask yourself why the students in foundation learning are there. They didn't get very good grades at school, so it shows they are not really that engaged in learning. Whereas the students coming straight from school with better grades obviously have a better attitude to learning. Also, they don't really get challenged in foundation learning, so they won't be able meet the expected levels. The students coming in from school will already be used to meeting those expectations'.
>
> (George, Travel and Tourism teacher, South Town College, 3rd November 2016)

This highlights the somewhat fixed view of young people's learning dispositions and identities, taking a rather deterministic view. In this example, young people are not seen as able to transform their habitus as they are excluded from opportunities to gain capital associated with progression to higher levels of study. The competition for places is also emblematic of the positional competition playing out within the college (Brown 2013). In this context, those young people in marginalised positions have their opportunities structured by normative assumptions linking low-level learning with forms of deficit.

In addition to the normative assumptions linking grades with dispositions, learners in low-level VET were disadvantaged in other ways. The following edited field notes

extract highlights the persistence of stigmatisation relating to the foundation learners, even once they had cleared the hurdles described above to progress to level 2 studies. In particular, the extract draws attention to the uneven playing field and the extra distance marginalised young people have to travel in order to rework the power relations they experience.

> It is a few weeks into the new term and the six-week cut off for student registration is approaching. Beyond this point, any students who do not complete the course count towards the retention figures for the college and for the programme. The percentage of learners completing the course has direct implications for funding and the number of spaces allocated to each subject area. As such, teachers' scrutiny of their learners is intensified. One teacher [Chris] comments 'we really have to be sure they [the students] are going to survive the course. Managers are on our backs, and it affects our stats if any drop out'. This scrutiny is disproportionately focused on those students that have progressed from foundation learning with concern often being placed on their readiness for a higher level of work and higher expectations. Making reference to this issue, a staff member from the Travel and Tourism programme comments 'I do think they [foundation learners] have struggled a bit, there is a lot more work and it is at a much higher level than what they're used to. Some of them have responded well but there are a few who aren't managing the step-up... It's about having the right attitude as well; some of them just don't want to put the required effort in... If they want to stay on the course, they have to show that they want it'.
>
> The enactment of this scrutiny manifests in a level 2 Travel and Tourism classroom task in which small groups of students are required to deliver a short presentation on a particular type of tourism. A number of groups have already delivered their presentation and the teacher has delivered feedback. The next group comprises three students who have progressed from last year's foundation programme. They deliver their presentation, and the teacher provides feedback as with the other groups. However, this time, the teacher makes a side comment [inaudible to the class but directed at the researcher] 'I don't think they're used to the level required yet, that probably would have been good in foundation, but they need to do more background work and be more confident in their presentations now'.
>
> (Level 2 Travel and Tourism classroom observation, South Town College, 3rd October 2016)

The above depiction of the extra scrutiny placed on foundation learners emphasises how experiences of participation, learning, and transition are differentiated by

structured interpretations of young people's educational inheritances and perceptions of the dispositions and habitus associated with those inheritances.

Furthermore, the teacher's reflections on the issue of retention highlight the distinction between the front stage and back stage (Goffman 1969) dimensions of learning and participation within the college. Front stage, young people are exposed to the enactment of the retention policy as it plays out through the extra scrutiny from teachers. As young people are not explicitly informed of the backstage aspects of these experiences, they find themselves disempowered to address the potentially detrimental impact of additional scrutiny, as they are not party to the 'official knowledge' of what is required for continued participation.

The notion that disadvantaged and marginalised young people find their opportunities for action constrained in some way finds similarity with concepts of 'bounded agency' (Evans 2007) and the idea that there are 'degrees of agency' (O'Connor 2014), whereby the capacity to assert agency is stratified, streamed, and differentiated by a range of exogenous factors. These concepts emphasise the heterogeneity of agency. They suggest that it is not simply the case that young people have agency, or they do not. Instead, opportunities for, and assertions of agency are multifaceted, nuanced, and complex. Following such analyses on the heterogeneity of agency, the findings also indicate the heterogeneity of participation. Young people are not simply participants or non-participants, there are a range of positions that lie across and between.

It could be proposed that the example presented above represents a form of 'disempowered agency' as the ability to act autonomously is constrained by the teacher practices driven by the retention policy. The irony of which is that it is this policy, designed to avoid non-participation, which has the potential to reduce opportunities for participation and constrain horizons for action. In this regard, young people find themselves in a position of non-participation, as they are not able to actively act with agency.

Student 'performance'

A central feature of the institutional recruitment and selection culture is the practice of evaluating student 'performance'. Observations and ethnographic conversations across a range of subject areas and levels of study revealed a set of teacher attitudes and behaviours which operated on broadly two levels. On an explicit level, teachers conformed to an audit culture in which 'official' evaluations of student performance were maintained on a college-wide data system named 'pro-monitor'. On this system teachers record student attendance, attainment, and disciplinary incidents as well as general assessments of students' overall progress, conduct and participation. On an implicit level, teachers regularly engaged in more informal modes of evaluation and assessment as they reflected on student's performance relative to a notional set of criteria. This fieldwork extracts below examine the explicit and implicit dimensions of student performance, illuminating the impact on both teacher and student possibilities and actions.

Describing the college's system for monitoring student performance, one teacher comments:

> We have to record student progress on the pro-monitor system. It's like a large record of each student's attendance, attainment, and things like behaviour and attitude. We have to write comments on any students that are causing problems. It's so the college can see how the students are doing, but also, teachers use it to make decisions on whether students are offered a place on their courses.
>
> (Marina, Foundation Travel and Tourism teacher, South Town College, 10th January 2016)

The power and influence of the data on this system is emphasised in the following field notes extract:

> A student is misbehaving and the teacher [Susanne] tries to reprimand them: 'if you're going to keep messing about, I'm going to have to put a report on pro-monitor'. The student replies 'go on then, it's no bother to me'… A few minutes later, after the interaction between the teacher and student has passed, the teacher talks out of earshot of the students and, reflecting on interaction with the student, comments: 'If I put it on the system, it'll look bad on his record, but I have to put it on there'.

The role of the monitoring system in shaping opportunities for progression is highlighted by a level 2 Business teacher who, describing his approach to student selection from lower levels of study, comments:

> I just look on pro-monitor at behaviour and attendance and I look at what teachers have written.
>
> (Aki, Level 2 Business teacher, South Town College, 8th May 2016)

Another member of staff, who presents as more sympathetic to the plight of his students, reflects on how the system is against the students:

> You're better off being a ghost. Re-taking your GCSE's somewhere else and coming in on a higher level. These guys on foundation get frustrated and disengaged so they play up and once you've got a bad record, that's it for you. Your chances are screwed.
>
> (Andy, Foundation Health and Social Care teacher, 22nd September 2016)

Fieldwork also revealed the use of the monitoring system as a device for control and discipline whereby it acts as a veiled surveillance system that provides a record of the young people's conformity/non-conformity.

> A confrontation has broken out between the teacher and a student. As a strategy to discipline the student, the teacher comments: 'You know I'll record this on the system, and I know you want to do level 3 Business. It's not going to look good on your record if you keep disrespecting me. You need to start following instructions if you want to get to level 3'.
>
> (Isla, IT teacher, South Town College, 24th September 2016)

This links to two concepts, teacher constructions of 'ideal learners' (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010), and also wider notions of education training people for the capitalist system (Apple 2012), where those who reject or resist are marginalised or excluded. Such dynamics were also manifest in a more informal monitoring of student performance, external to the pro-monitor system. A level 3 teacher, reflecting on the suitability of a particular student for her course, comments:

> I'm not sure that she's likely to meet the required standards [for level 3]. She's

too unruly and doesn't have the discipline. I think she comes from a home where there isn't much discipline, and she hasn't been brought up to follow rules and instructions. You know what it's like, people from less well-off backgrounds generally aren't taught the right behaviours for education. And level 3 is hard work, they can't be messing around.

(George, Level 3 Travel and Tourism teacher, South Town College, 14th May 2016)

This, as well as demonstrating the enactment of 'ideal learner' constructions, provides an example that appears to show the discourse of performance intersecting cultural subjectivities. This teacher is therefore assessing the student's performance with reference to differing cultural norms and dispositions.

Adding further complexity to the matter, the teacher introduces a further dimension to her assessment of student performance and suitability. Discussing the perceived demands of employment in her field [Travel and Tourism], the teacher describes how:

Students need to be outgoing and have a good attitude in this field. If you're rude and lack discipline you're not going to get very far.

(George, Level 3 Travel and Tourism teacher, South Town College, 14th May 2016)

This picks up on a common theme across the study, staff and professionals translating young people's attitudes and dispositions in education directly into employment contexts. However, one young man responds to such a perspective, reflecting:

I am completely different at work, it's different there. If college was a job, I'd behave differently.

(Jamie, 18, level 1 Health and Social Care, South Town College, 12th April 2016)

Thus, the presence of hybrid/ multifaceted identities among young people within marginal learning spaces (Brockmann and Laurie 2016; Hegna 2019) are apparent.

Student 'Professionalism'

In contrast to shaping learning environments to learners needs, an emerging discourse of 'professionalism' represents a polarised response to the issue of engagement. The antithesis of alternative learning environments, 'professionalism', seeks to reconstruct

educational contexts as formal environments with highly structured expectations on dress, conduct and operation, seeking to reflect working environments. Rather than taking learners needs as the starting point for action, 'professionalism' imposes a rather uniform and rigid set of demands on the learners.

In their study of working class students' sense of 'fitting in' within Higher Education (HE), Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) emphasise the negative impact of overly structured and formal environments. While focused on experiences within HE, their study highlights a potential issue with the shift towards discourses of 'professionalism' within Further Education (FE) and schooling. Across all of the fieldwork settings, an emerging discourse of 'professionalism' was found to be gaining prominence in response to a perceived slipping of standards (driven largely by unfavourable Ofsted reports). The discourse, based on notional constructions of 'a professional work environment', manifested largely as a tool for enforcing expectations around dress (teachers and students), dispositions and behaviours. Commonly espoused were narratives of 'developing professional cultures' and 'creating an environment that reflects the [professional] world of work'. Implicit within these sentiments are perceptions of structure and formality and the idea that education should more readily reflect idealised mainstream, higher-status work environments.

The association between 'professionalism' and raised standards is however framed rather unproblematically, taking a simplistic, and somewhat overly optimistic, view of students' responses to such initiatives. As reported by Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010), formality and structure can have negative consequences for the engagement of working class students. In the present study, such consequences are captured in the following interaction between a teacher and a group of female students.

> Teacher [Andy]: Right, remember we're going to that careers event on Monday. You're going to be talking to employers, so you have to dress smart.
>
> Young person 1: What do you mean by smart? Like trousers and shoes and that? I don't have any clothes like that.
>
> Young person 2: That's long, why have we got to be smart, it's not actually a job interview.
>
> Young person 3: You know it, I don't like dressing smart. Anyway, I'm not

planning on ever getting a job where I've got to dress like a posh twat anyway.

Young person 1: Yeah, and we'll have to come into college like that as well. Forget that!

(Foundation Health and Social Care classroom observation, South Town College, 29th September 2016)

The above description does of course only represent one specific example of student responses to enforced formality. The interaction does however reiterate the findings of (Archer and Yamashita 2003b) in which working-class young people resist what is perceived to be symbolic of middle-class 'posh' cultures. This can also be linked to Archer's (2010) urban youth where working-class young women acquire capital through their appearance, making up for underachievement with 'glamour'. Such an analysis reveals how the expectations of the education system collides with class and gender to induce resistance and disengagement from certain groups.

Conclusion

This chapter has revealed how notions of retention, re-engagement, and progression shaped young people's participation in learning and transition. The findings highlight various factors that characterised lived experiences within marginal learning spaces, while also illuminating the challenges young people faced in translating their extended participation into meaningful progression and outcomes. In particular, the chapter suggests that a focus on retention and re-engagement stigmatised and alienated young people through unstimulating learning environments and high degrees of scrutiny. While the policy of progression resulted in disaffection and disadvantage through academicisation of learning and a culture of 'performance' in the recruitment and selection of learners.

Many of these factors were underpinned by institutional dynamics such as a learning culture dictated by teachers of higher-level courses, a systematic approach to recording and auditing student 'performance', and a retention policy which privileged institutional outcomes over student needs. All of which exposed the inherent dilemmas working within marginal learning spaces to support learning, transition, and meaningful participation.

Linked to the focus on retention, a central theme across the fieldwork was the different approaches taken by teachers in an attempt to achieve participation and engagement within the classroom. It was found that learning environments were commonly underpinned by notions of re-engagement, which served to stigmatise and alienate young people within the college context. Approaches were far from uniform, differing across classes but also within classes, with teachers taking different approaches with different students. However, some common themes emerged in relation to teacher practices and learner experiences.

Based on deficit modes of thinking, teachers regularly engaged in attempts to 'sell' learning activities to young people, working from the assumption that there was a natural disinclination to participate in learning. Learning activities also appeared to be simplified or 'dumbed down' based on the view that over challenging learners could lead to a sense of failure and disengagement. This could be viewed as a form of therapeutic learning (see for example, Ecclestone and Hayes 2009) where young people were deemed to hold fragile learner identities that required careful management. However, such an approach only served to create unstimulating and 'boring' learning experiences that alienated young people and stigmatised them as low-level learners.

Somewhat contrastingly, other teachers took a more robust approach to retention and re-engagement. Still underpinned by deficit thinking, prior attainment was often extrapolated to make judgements on dispositions towards education and learning, with low attainment being equated to negative dispositions towards education, poor attitudes, and behaviours unconducive to learning. Therefore, 'initial encounters', so key to teacher-student relationships (Duffy and Elwood 2013), tended to be characterised by judgment rather than support. Because of such judgements, those in low-level VET were regularly more closely monitored. Closer monitoring led to more frequent and robust reprimand, which created more opportunities for teacher-student conflict. Inevitably, young people in such situations had to work harder to appease the teachers and earn a status of being positively engaged.

Examining participation at the interactionist level through the lens of re-engagement has therefore demonstrated how forms of non-participation (disengagement) were

constructed as the norm for certain groups of young people, and how this perpetuated a negative cycle of teacher-student interactions that risked reproducing traditional inequalities. Allied with the 'performance' system, which essentially regulated young people's opportunities for progression, it is clear how those young people marginalised by negative experiences of school found it difficult escape the positions they find themselves in.

The findings on teachers' assessments of student 'performance' provides a good example of how the contrasting approaches of therapy and scrutiny intersect. Young people's opportunities were shaped by teachers' assessments of their performance, where such assessments were shaped by preconceptions of marginalised learner's dispositions towards learning. The role of the performance system in constraining agency and opportunity was further problematised by findings which suggested unstimulating and stigmatising experiences of low-level VET often produced disenfranchisement and disengagement with the learning environment, further fuelling negative teacher assessments and further diminishing opportunities for progression. Ultimately, it could be suggested that extended participation, framed by notions of re-engagement, are proving harmful to the opportunities and experiences of those already in positions of marginality and exclusion, thus creating forms of non-participation *within* contexts labelled as participation.

Another distinguishing feature of the college fieldwork was the focus on progression, motivated by the belief that transition to higher level vocational courses was required for participation to be meaningful and worthwhile. This was found to be largely driven by more academically rigorous, higher levels of VET and the view that lower levels should prepare students for higher level environments (as level 3 is the government set 'target'). It resulted in a confused pedagogy and learning environment where lower-level, more practical content was delivered in a more traditionally academic style of teaching and learning. The prevailing view being that an academic culture in lower-level courses would develop students' dispositions and practices for higher levels, neglecting the reality that very few young people progressed.

The experience of academicisation was particularly problematic in light of previously discussed processes of educational triage within school. Low-achieving young people

who had been exposed to educational triage at school entered college with learning careers and identities already disfavouring academic education. Furthermore, academicisation was in tension with young people's learning expectations, which commonly perceived vocational education as practical learning for work. Finding an environment containing many parallels with compulsory schooling therefore had an immediate disenfranchising effect. Ultimately, extended participation only served to reinforce the view that learning is not delivering for future outcomes and so failed to be transformative for learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000b).

A further feature of the progression policy was the hidden 'rules and requirements' that shaped young people's opportunities for transition, and progress to higher levels of study. The findings illustrated the processes of 'recruitment and selection' that went on behind young people's backs, where decisions were made on whether to grant them access to the next level of study. Teachers often made judgments based on a student's 'performance' (which was problematised in the previous section) and on prior attainment. Continuing the themes of academicisation and the need to re-engage low-level learners, grades were often conflated with dispositions when making decisions on who to accept onto higher level courses. Those entering higher level vocational courses straight from school were regularly favoured over those progressing from lower levels of vocational study because of higher prior attainment. The assumption being that higher attainment equated to better learning dispositions more suited to the 'academic' nature of higher-level VET. Therefore, young people in low-level courses found their opportunities constrained by their school history.

In conclusion, while the focus on retention and re-engagement were, in some ways, in tension with the push for progression, both conceptualisations of participation proved detrimental to young people's learning experiences and opportunities, but in different ways. While the RPA policy makes certain assumptions about the efficacy and fruitfulness of post-16 participation for marginalised learners, the findings in this chapter highlight the potential for continued involvement in learning to be both constructive and destructive. Using learning careers and horizons for actions as analytical tools, the college fieldwork ultimately revealed how learning environments and experiences within low-level VET largely failed to develop a positive attachment to learning and largely failed to support the transitions to higher levels of study required

for any sort of labour market value. To understand how these issues, as well as those raised in previous chapters, play out in the lived experiences of individual young people, the following chapter presents several case studies that reflect on the dynamics of (non)participation for those young people as they navigate the post-16 transition.

Chapter 9: Post 16 transitions within Further Education: case studies of participation and non-participation

Introduction

The previous empirical chapters have presented a broader examination of how extended participation is enacted and experienced within the school and college environment. Specifically, the chapters explored how various conceptualisations of participation played out through practices and policies and how these in turn shaped young people's experiences of learning and transition. Many of the findings suggest participation, particularly for marginalised learners, is reduced to factors such as (dis/re)engagement, outcomes, and attainment, and retention/avoiding non-participation, all of which were shown to have detrimental impacts on young people's experiences of learning and transition. The chapters therefore showed how RPA was, for some young people, doing more harm than good, as it motivated policies and practices that entrenched rather than disrupted marginalisation and exclusion across the school-to-work transition.

This chapter contends that the lived experiences of school and college outlined in the previous chapters act to position young people in various ways relative to notions of participation and non-participation. Rather than simply viewing young people as non-participants if they do not continue in education or training, and viewing young people as participants if they do, the findings suggest a thicker and more complex description is required to capture experiences in a more nuanced and holistic manner.

Furthermore, it is suggested that the way young people make their transitions, their transition behaviours, is also an illuminating feature of how they navigate the space between participation and non-participation, and how they are positioned relative to participation and non-participation beyond education and training. Put simply, while young people may be 'participants' in the sense that they are in further education, the way their experiences position them relative to participation and non-participation (their participation position), and the way they navigate FE (their transition behaviours), provides a more complete picture as to whether they are genuinely benefitting from extended participation, or whether they are 'NEET in disguise' (Reiter and Schlimbach 2015) in that they are really only delaying becoming non-participants.

Unpicking the participation/non-participation binary

As outlined above findings from across the empirical chapters revealed a range of tacit and implicit factors that served to shape young people's experiences of and opportunities for participation. Particularly noteworthy is how, for the young people, participation was differentiated along lines of empowerment-disempowerment, activity-passivity, obligation-right, tokenism-authenticity, and engagement-disengagement. The complex and multi-faceted nature of participation highlights a need to more deeply understand how young people interact with and respond to their participation position – the intersection of their different levels and types of participation.

This chapter thus focuses in on how different modes and forms of participation operate at the individual level, exploring case studies of young people navigating extended participation. The case studies represent a cross-section of experiences, behaviours, and horizons in relation to navigating post-16 education and training, illuminating a range of participation typologies. The participation typologies provide a lens through which the various forces interacting with young people's experiences of participation can be illuminated.

To make sense of how young people's experiences, behaviours, and decisions shape and are shaped by participation positions, the chapter employs an analytical framework derived from an amalgamation of two congruent concepts – transition behaviours and horizons for action. At the centre of the analysis is an attentiveness to how transition behaviours – 'the patterns of activity people adopt in attempting to realise their personal interests and occupational goals within social requirements and structural opportunities' (Evans 2007, p.3)– and horizons for action – 'perceptions of what might be available and what might be appropriate' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, p.34) – interact with the complexities and particularities of participation.

Ultimately, the objective of this chapter, and its analytical focus, is to offer an insight into how the institutional and interactional factors associated with extended participation (explored in previous chapters) come to bear on young people as individuals/ agents trying to navigate the vagaries of school-to-work transitions. Such insights can be used to challenge over simplistic official constructions of RPA - that

prolonged periods of participation in education or training automatically equate to improved credentials, the acquisition of new skills and, consequently, enhanced employability. With a fervent belief in human capital at their core, such visions of extended participation perhaps overlook the messiness and complexity of the education and training market, and lives and worlds of young people within it.

Case studies

Naseem – drifting through

Naseem is of Pakistani descent, born in the UK but with two parents born in Pakistan. His father has always worked in what Naseem describes as 'Asian shops', selling food and meat, and his mother does not work. He has two older siblings and a younger sibling. The younger sibling is still in secondary school and the older siblings are in low-level service sector jobs – one having left school after completing A-levels and the other having completed two years of further education at college. For Naseem, the focus appears to be on progress to employment rather than academic achievement.

Naseem actively took the decision to leave school at 16 and extend his participation in education at college. Although he did not attain highly in his GCSE's, Naseem had the option of continuing his studies at his school's sixth form. Reflecting on his decision to dismiss the option of sixth form, Naseem comments:

> They make you wear a suit and that [at sixth form]. It's all formal and serious. I don't want to be wearing a suit and have to be all smart and that. I'm not a businessman, why do I need to wear a suit? That's not me, I'm more about being relaxed and wearing what I want.
>
> (Naseem, 17/18, South Town College, 12th May 2016)

In this instance, there is a demonstration of active participation, articulated through the decision to discontinue education within the traditionally academic school context. However, the decision was not made in an empowered way. Despite having the option to stay on for sixth form, the disconnect between the perceived learning environment and the desired learning environment acted to make up Naseem's mind. Much like in Reay's research (for example, Reay 1998; Reay 2005; Crozier and Reay 2011) on the relationship between working-class young people and higher education, the perceived

formality of an 'academic' environment raised concerns around 'fitting in', which, for Naseem, proved to be a barrier to his participation.

The central issue is that these dynamics operate in fundamentally implicit ways – they operate 'behind the backs' of young people in that they cannot see the forces that pull and push them in particular directions. It is suggested that, without having such structural forces made explicit, young people affected by them are not empowered to react and respond to them in a fully informed manner.

On leaving school, Naseem began his time at college studying a 'remix 4 work' course in which the focus is on work preparation and retaking Maths and English GCSE. The course is commonly used as a catchall programme for young people who did not get the grades at school to access their chosen post-16 option. In that sense, it can be seen as a transition or 'stepping stone' course en route to a level 1 or level 2 course in a given field.

Asked about his being on the 'remix 4 work' programme, Naseem comments that it was not what he had planned on studying:

> I wanted to do plumbing or something but they said I didn't have the grades so I could either do this course to redo my GCSE Maths and English or do another level 1 course. I thought, there's no point doing another subject that I don't want to do so I might as well do the remix course. They said that if I get the right grades, I could then do plumbing the next year.
>
> (Naseem, 17/18, South Town College, 12th May 2016)

After finishing his first year at college, Naseem did not get the required GCSE grades to do the plumbing course he originally planned on taking. Instead, Naseem was directed to an alternative level 1 course, which was framed as another chance to improve his GCSE grades. Reflecting back on Naseem's transition from school, and comparing it to his experiences once at college, it is apparent that initial active participation has been replaced by increasing passivity.

After finishing his second year at college, Naseem began to look for full-time work. Although there was an opportunity to continue his education at college for a further year, Naseem reflected that:

> I haven't really got anything out of college, there's no point staying another year to do another level 1 course. I just want to get a job and earn some money.

> (Naseem, 17/18, local community centre, 5th May 2017)

Naseem started applying for jobs in the service/retail sector. Looking to the example set by his peers, Naseem sought to find a job as a sales assistant, applying for positions at Tesco Express stores, BP petrol stations and other similar roles. After spending a few weeks searching for work, Naseem was offered a job at a local Tesco Express. There was initial excitement at the opportunity:

> It's proper good to get a job. I can finally earn some money.

> (Naseem, 17/18, local community centre, 26th May 2017)

However, after a number of weeks in the role, Naseem expressed displeasure at his early experience of the world of work:

> They treat you like shit. They just tell you what to do and don't show you any respect. I hate it.

This was accompanied by a desire to find a new job:

> I want to find a new job, I ain't staying there.

> (Naseem, 17/18, community centre, 18th June 2016)

At this point the 'reality' of work appeared to be hitting home. Far from the strong desire to leave education and enter the labour market, Naseem became more reflective on his time at school and college:

> It's hard, working. It's hard to find jobs, I don't know what else I could do. I need someone to help me. Because I don't really have any qualifications, there aren't that many choices. Maybe I could have done better at school and tried to get more out of college.

> (Naseem, 17/18, community centre, 18th June 2016)

This is perhaps symbolic of a 'drifting' transition behaviour (Evans 2002; Evans 2007), which Naseem displayed during his time in education. Such transition behaviours are perpetuated by the 'great deception' (Atkins 2009) in which young people are sold the

narrative that opportunities await at the end of extended educational participation. Furthermore, it could be suggested that the mismatch between perceived opportunities and actual opportunities has a disempowering effect on young people's participation. By not being fully informed of the structural factors shaping their school-to-work transitions, young people are not given the chances to react and respond. So, far from the intended positive impact, official discourses around the benefits of extended participation for employability can be seen as destructive rather than constructive for young people's participation.

Melissa's story – giving it a go

Melissa was a reluctant recruit (MacDonald and Marsh 2005) to further education having not had a particularly strong desire to extend her participation in learning beyond 16.

> I didn't really want to come to college. I kind of stopped going to school in year 11 so I didn't get any grades [in her GCSE's]. My brother told me I should come to college to get some qualifications so he signed me up and I thought I might as well give it a go.

> (Mellisa, 16/17, South Town College, 12th March 2016)

Melissa had enrolled on a foundation level Health and Social Care programme and expressed an interest in working with children:

> I wouldn't mind working in a nursery. I like working with children and I'm used to it because I'm always looking after my little brother and sister. Hopefully doing this course will help me get a job doing that.

> (Mellisa, 16/17, South Town College, 26th March 2016)

Perhaps reflective of the gendered dispositions and expectations that continue to characterise girl's school-to-work transitions (Stokes and Wyn 2007), this interest highlights the hopes Melissa had for further education.

As the end of year approached however, and as students were encouraged to make decisions on plans for next year, Melissa's view of continued participation began to shift:

If I pass my Math's I might stay on and do level 2 but if I fail, I'll probably just leave and get a job. I can't keep re-taking my Math's forever.
(Mellisa, 16/17, South Town College, 14th June 2016)

The academicisation (Acquah and Huddleston 2014) of vocational education manifests clearly in this context. Ultimately, it proved to be an insurmountable barrier as Melissa chose not to continue at college. She took up a job in retail as a sales assistant. Reflecting on her experience of college Melissa commented:

College wasn't helping me [get a job], I wasn't learning anything useful, and I wasn't getting anywhere. I didn't really like it there anyway, it was just like school really and the lessons weren't interesting. It's better that I just get a job and get experience… I don't really know what I'm going to do, just work and see how it goes. At least I'm getting somewhere.
(Mellisa, 16/17, phone conversation, 15th September 2016)

Melissa's comment is rich with references to the perceived irrelevance of her further education experience and the view that it did not fulfil her expectations of preparation for work, finding many parallels with the notions of a discouraged worker (Raffe and Willms 1989) and reluctant learner (McDowell 2003). It also demonstrates the potential for negative experiences to encourage fast-track transitions and turn young people away from learning. In this example, initial ambitions for employment in a nursery were replaced with a reconfigured orientation to 'just work and see how it goes'.

All of which underscores the significance of relevance (Raffe 2015) and authenticity (Acquah and Huddleston 2014) in vocational education. The fact that Melissa did not feel that the course was preparing her 'to become' a nursery worker ultimately led to a shift in what she saw as possible and desirable. Fundamentally, Melissa's horizons for action were constrained by an increasing uncertainty and ambiguity around how and if she could achieve her aims through extended participation. In an attempt to maintain a sense of progress and agency, Melissa then engaged in a transition behaviour characterised by risk. However, despite drawing parallels with 'taking chances' and 'wait and see' transition behaviours (Evans 2007), Melissa's actions were also a strategic move to escape her marginality within learning. Therefore, transition behaviours cannot be fully understood without insight into the contextual factors that are driving them.

Declan – an able student but not in the 'right' way

Declan joined college to study a motor mechanics course. He arrived from school with little in the way of academic credentials, having had a largely unrewarding experience. Due to a lack of qualifications, Declan was put on to a foundation mechanics course. For him, college was an opportunity for a fresh start and to experience a more practical type of learning. Such a perspective was emphasised in his comment:

> School was shit, it wasn't for me. Teachers telling you off and trying to teach you stuff there's no point learning. I didn't get any GCSEs because I wasn't bothered, I didn't really try. College is better though, you're not just in a classroom all day, you get to do practical stuff. (Declan, 16/17, South Town College, 10th February 2016)

However, after his first year at college, Declan dropped out of college as a result of not being allowed to progress to level 2. Declan then joined a carpentry training programme run by a small training provider. Reflecting on the circumstances around leaving college, Declan suggested the nature of the learning environment led him to disengage and start 'playing up'.

> I was the best in my class at the practical work; I could take an engine apart and put it back together no problem. It was too easy on foundation though, after 3 weeks I wasn't learning anything new in the workshop. I kept asking to do harder stuff, but they said that you only get to do that on level 2 and 3... I don't like doing classroom work, I never have, and so I messed around in the lessons and so they said I couldn't do level 2.
> (Declan, 16/17, carpentry workshop, 11th October 2016)

The above quote shows the potential issues associated with an academicisation and classroomification of VET. For Declan, his learner identity as a practical learner was in tension with the requirements and expectations set out in foundation learning. Constructions of 'ideal learners' were built around engagement in classroom learning. Declan was therefore characterised as an able learner but in the wrong way. Moreover, the example was emblematic of the college context where access to the development of practical skills was streamed along academic lines. For young people disenfranchised with academic learning, they experienced exclusion and marginalisation from the practical learning they had anticipated on starting college.

Euwera – making steps

At first contact with Euwera she is a 16 year old young woman in her first year at college, having completed her GCSEs at a local secondary school. She is studying a level 1 IT course having not achieved the required grades in Maths and English to access a higher level course. On first meeting Euwera at college, she reflected on her experiences of education:

> There's so much pressure on grades. From parents, the school… and if you don't get good grades [in GCSE exams], it affects your options.
> (Euwera, 16/17, South Town College, 9th March 2016)

Elaborating on how this manifested in her own situation, Euwera comments:

> I don't really remember applying for IT, I don't remember having it in my mind… I did really well in everything [GCSE's]; my only problem was English and Maths. Otherwise, I would have gone on to do level 2, level 3 even. I think I was shocked by not having many options because I missed out on C's [In English and Maths] so I just applied for anything.
> (Euwera, 16/17, South Town College, 9th March 2016)

There is evidence here of the gatekeeping function of GCSE's described by Cornish (2017a) and the significant role academic attainment plays in shaping young people's horizons for action. This finds parallels with the shaping of options through 'opportunity structures' (Roberts K 1997, 2007), whereby the post-16 transitions young people make are guided by available options rather than 'choice' (Roberts K 1975).

Euwera, like many of the young people on level 1 courses at the college, found the teaching and learning to be unstimulating and the content to often be a repeat of material covered in previous years at school. Discussing her summation of level 1 courses at college, Euwera suggests:

> Level 1 is like, not really hard, you've basically already done it. It's just that you're doing it because you didn't pass your GCSE's… Level 1 is like you're starting and then level 2 is like GCSE, and then level 3 is higher than GCSE… All level 1 is going back over stuff you learnt at school.
> (Euwera, 16/17, South Town College, 9th March 2016)

This reflects much of the research and literature on low-level vocational education which suggests learning is often uninspiring and fails to challenge and engage young people (Atkins 2009; Atkins and Flint 2015; see for example, Cornish 2017b; Cornish 2018; Simmons and Thompson 2011; Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011a). The argument across much of this work is that an unstimulating learning experience has a marginalising and disempowering effect on the young people, as it further dislocates them from opportunities that provide genuine value and contributions to employability (Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011a; Smyth, Mcinerney and Fish 2013; Wolf 2011).

Following completion of the level 1 IT course, Euwera moved on to a level 2 course in Travel and Tourism the next academic year. During a conversation with her in the first few weeks of the new course, Euwera comments on the extra academic challenge provided by her lessons:

> It's much better being on level 2. It's more... academic. The work is more challenging, but that's good. Level 1 made you feel stupid, I started to think that maybe I wasn't that smart. Now, I feel much better, like I'm on a proper course and going somewhere.
> (Euwera, 17, Travel and Tourism level 2, South Town College, 29th September 2016)

Euwera's comments highlight the importance of the learning environment to learner identities. Involvement in the level 1 course had damaged her learner identity and cast doubt on what was achievable for the future (horizons). Progress to level 2 had however re-established her belief in being a 'good' learner and also had the effect of reaffirming a sense that she was 'going somewhere'. This draws similarities with much of the research around learner identities, which emphasise the importance of recognising the value of education in school-to-work transitions (see for example, Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000).

However, further comments made by Euwera highlight that the importance of learner identities play not only with valuing education, but also with self-efficacy.

> Because the work was so basic on level 1, and it made me feel stupid, I didn't feel motivated. I didn't really want to go to lessons, and I didn't really try that hard when I was there. It felt like there was no point.

(Euwera, 17, Travel and Tourism level 2, South Town College, 29th September 2016)

In this example, Euwera's position on the continuum of engagement-disengagement stems from a fragile learner identity and a reduced self-efficacy. By being in a marginal learning environment and experiencing disengagement, Euwera becomes a more passive participant, all of which creates a participation profile that risks limiting her horizons for action – both what she sees as achievable but also what opportunities are actually possible.

However, as demonstrated by Euwera's progress to level 2 and subsequent shift in learner identity and horizons, participation is dynamic and fluid. This is significant as, while much has been written about young people's fluidity in moving in and out of participation (in the context of NEET-EET see, Maguire 2013; Maguire 2015a, 2015b), Euwera's case portrays fluidity *within* participation. For Euwera, while on the level 1 course, she was, in a binary sense, participating. However, the nature of her participation was precarious and put her in a status of what has been called 'NEET in disguise' (Reiter and Schlimbach 2015), where forms of non-participation are hidden within apparent participation. Illuminating such implicit dimensions is central in understanding young people's journeys through extended participation.

Alannah – transforming and being transformed

In contrast to the more problematic experiences explored above, Alannah had a positive and rewarding experience of extended participation. On first meeting her, she had just progressed to level 2 Travel and Tourism from foundation level. Asked to reflect on her journey and experiences so far, Alannah responded:

> I was proper naughty at school, bunking off in the toilets, being rude to teachers, getting in scraps,… proper naughty… When I came to college, I was still the same person really, messing around and that. As last year went on though, I got better and tried harder… I think I just grew up and realised that I needed to change if I wanted to get on, and the teachers encouraged me and said I could get to level 3 if I tried hard enough… Now I'm on level 2, I work harder. The work is more challenging and I feel like I'm actually good at learning and can get something out of it.
> (Allanah, 17/18, South Town College, 18th January 2016)

Alannah's views show a transformation in her learner identity and learning career as a result of the opportunity to progress to level 2, reinforcing perspectives that dispositions can be reworked (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000a; 2000c). Teachers described Alannah as a 'success story', commenting on how she had changed dramatically during her time at college:

> When she started, she was really rude and cheeky. I thought that she wouldn't last long. Now though, she's still a little bit cheeky but she's doing really well and definitely has the potential to go on to do level 3. Because she's made such progress, we really want her to do well so try and push her as much as possible.
>
> (Chris, Travel and Tourism teacher, South Town College, 6th April 2016)

The teacher's comments show that transformations can be both endogenous and exogenous. Allanah's view of herself as a learner shifted alongside the teacher's view of her as a learner. The dual aspect of this transformation highlights the significance of subjective transformations as well as being transformed in the eyes of others. In essence, what young people see as possible for themselves in learning is interlinked with what others see as possible for them, demonstrating the notion that transitions manifest in response to a complex interplay between structure and agency (Furlong 2009; France and Haddon 2014).

Following completion of the level 2 course, Allannah successfully progressed to level 3. Reflecting on what this meant for her, Allanah commented:

> It's what I needed, to become an air stewardess. Now I'm on level 3, companies which actually consider me, so it means I can start thinking about getting a job after I've finished the course… When I started at college, I didn't really see it as a possibility. I think you get treated differently as you move up the levels, you get much more respect from teachers and independence from teachers in level 3 compared to foundation. It makes you feel more like an adult, more like you need to be when you get a job… I think it's helped me feel like I could actually get a job, be independent. Now I'm on level 3, I'm making plans, I want to move to Manchester and get a job for an airline there. There's a big airport and the house prices are much cheaper up there.
> (Allanah, 17/18, South Town College, 20th November 2016)

Allanah's views reveal, not only the value of credentials in expanding horizons, but also how young people are treated. Contrasting her experiences from foundation to level 3

demonstrated the differential treatment she experienced and that her horizons had broadened partly due to the respect and independence she had received. This emphasises how deficit constructions of low level learners can result in experiences that entrench disaffection and marginalisation, constraining horizons and influencing what young people see as their limits (Archer and Yamashita 2003a).

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to explore how young people's experiences of and attempts to navigate post-16 transitions position them as participants and non-participants. In particular, the case studies sought to unpick binary constructions of participation and non-participation, thus reflecting the perspective that such a binary is no longer suitable in describing increasingly complex forms of inclusion/exclusion (Fergusson 2004).

The findings suggest that experiences of post-16 transition for marginal learners were shaped by a range of factors that positioned them along a spectrum of participation and non-participation, and that attempts to navigate post-16 transitions were framed by these participation positions, highlighting how young people's transition behaviours were symbolic of their attempts to navigate the space between participation and non-participation. Put succinctly, the chapter contends that labelling young people as participants simply because they are in post-16 education or training is too reductionist, and that a thicker description of (non)participation is required to capture the complexity and nuance of young people's lived experiences.

(Non)participation binary: a spectrum of participation positions

Fieldwork data presented in this chapter highlighted the differentiated, and often problematic, nature of young people's extended participation. Specifically, the research found a number of factors which shaped young people's experiences of participation/non-participation. This highlighted that extending participation in education and training beyond compulsory schooling did not create a homogenous, uniform group of 'participants'. Instead, various factors served the shape different modes, forms, types, and levels of participation available to young people.

Firstly, young people's participation could be distinguished by varying degrees of activity or passivity. On one end of the spectrum there were young people actively partaking in their post-16 transition, showing an attentiveness to their environment and situation, and making decisions and taking actions in an attempt to navigate their particular post-16 pathway. For other young people, passivity was a dominant feature of their participation experience; being led by the environment around them, with post-16 transitions appearing to be much more led by happenstance or external factors than a process of active decision-making (Cuzzocrea 2019). Finding similarities with the work of McDowell (2003), post-16 transitions outside of the academic mainstream were viewed as guided more by 'luck' than judgement. This is not to say decision-making was absent, but more that it tended to be guided by directive/structural forces such as teacher expectations and constrained 'opportunities'.

Additionally, (dis)engagement was a key feature of participation across the school and college fieldwork. Both in terms of how the concept of (extended) participation was framed and enacted, and in terms of young people's dispositions towards education and learning. On the level of policy and practice within school and college, participation and non-participation were essentially conflated with engagement and disengagement, framing the matter of (non)participation as an issue of individual disposition. However, the findings showed how the notion of (dis)engagement created learning experiences which had detrimental effects on young people's attachment to learning, which in turn positioned them differentially relative to engagement and disengagement with education and training.

Another component of young people's participation positions was the relative authenticity or tokenism with which their views and voices were considered. The findings showed that how young people were positioned across levels of study (level 1/2/3) played a role in how their views were received. Specifically, normative assumptions around the likely outcomes for learners in low level VET manifested in the form of low expectations. Thus, for young people occupying such marginal learning spaces, their ambitions were commonly constrained by others (teachers etc.) who sought to moderate views which operated outside of their normative expectations for such learners. As such, there was perhaps a perception that being in low-level learning

delegitimised young people as competent decision makers, and therefore reduced the authenticity with which their voices were heard, highlighting the devaluation of those disadvantaged by class (Skeggs and Loveday 2012).

Following the theme of authenticity and tokenism, a further aspect of participation was experiences across the spectrum of empowerment and disempowerment. Rather than being about how views and voices were considered, (dis)empowerment relates more to how much insight and knowledge young people were given around navigating school-to-work transitions. The fieldwork revealed how advice and guidance was generally reserved for those making transitions to HE and how support for transitions to FE were generally characterised by a lower degree of criticality. Young people navigating transitions to FE were thus less able to exert agency as they relied on external influences or made decisions 'blindly'. Allied with the complexity of the FE system, young people in these positions were largely characterised by a degree of disempowerment.

Finally, the dynamics of participation as a right, or participation as an obligation also emerged as a significant influence on young people's experiences of transition and learning. For those ordinarily disposed to slow-track transitions, participation in post compulsory education was a right and a choice, but for those ordinarily inclined for fast-track transitions, post-16 education and training was still a choice, but more of an obligation. The sense of obligation was in many ways driven by the disempowerment and tokenism described above, intensified by disengagement, and interlinked with passivity. For young people who felt obliged to stay in education and training, learning and transition was therefore largely characterised by the challenge of overcoming various subjective and objective barriers created by their participation position.

Navigating (non)participation: the nature of transition behaviours

Also unpicking the participation/non-participation binary, the findings suggest that the way young people navigate post-16 education and training cannot be reduced to a simple analysis of being a participant or non-participant. The contention is that there is a space between participation and non-participation, linked to the participation positions set out above, and the transition behaviours young people employ in navigating this space can illuminate the proximity to either end of the spectrum. It is

suggested therefore that, for marginal learners in particular, there are a number of key transition behaviour typologies:

- Finding direction – this transition behaviour reflects the complexity and uncertainty marginalised learners face in their transitions. The somewhat puzzling nature of VET, and the tacit processes of stigmatisation and exclusion, mean that post-16 transitions are a time when direction is both found and lost. For young people, finding direction was essentially linked to the challenge of navigating a path to higher levels of VET and a route into a particular section of the labour market.

- Drifting – reflective of disempowerment and passivity, there were young people characterised by limited or constrained agency and reflexivity as they moved through FE by following the most obvious path or one set by external influences. The concern for young people displaying such transition behaviours is that they simply enter FE at one end and 'fall out' of the other end into risky fast-track transitions, and potentially non-participation.

- Recycling/ getting 'stuck' – particularly within low-level VET, it was found that young people were getting 'stuck' as they were 'recycled' within low-level courses. Young people were given the illusion of making progress by moving from one course to another but, in actuality, they have moved sideways rather than upwards. This was common amongst young people not deemed suitable or capable of higher-level study but were retained due the pressure on maintaining their participation in education and training. In these cases, students were sold the idea that another course represented a good opportunity for development when, in reality, teachers were aware that the young people were not benefitting from their participation. The issue here is the potential for young people to finish FE thinking they have accumulated useful credentials, when actually the low-level nature of their studies mean they often have no more capital to navigate labour market transitions than when they finished school.

- Transform – more positively, the fieldwork highlighted examples of transition behaviours framed by transformation. There were young people who had

started in low-level VET and had initially been alienated and stigmatized by their learning experiences. However, having managed to navigate a pathway to a higher level of study, they found the learning environments more stimulating and the staff more empowering, which served to transform learner identities and opportunities.

- Hopeful hybridisation – this last typology represents those young people who buy into the discourse of human capital and attempt to gain credentials, but 'hedged their bets' by maintaining both learner and work identities. A number of young people within the research worked as well as studied as a way of having two chances for 'success'. For young people, whose transitions were typologised in this way, the nature of their participation/engagement in learning was essentially linked to the extent to which education and training was deemed to hold value in labour market transitions.

In summary, the participation positions highlight that, although young people may be 'participants' from the point of view that they are in education and training, they can also experience multiple modes and forms of (non)participation. Consequently, young people can follow transition routes into post-16 'participation', but their transition behaviours can be representative of disguised or delayed non-participation. Ultimately, the fieldwork highlighted the inadequacy of a binary conceptualisation of participation in capturing the various types of movements that became apparent. Such reductionist thinking neglects the complexity of participation and transition, while also overlooking the issue that extended participation (in post-16 education and training) cannot be automatically linked to the acquisition of credentials and enhanced employability.

Empirical chapters conclusion

The empirical chapters challenge the view that young people play out straightforward and fixed identities and experiences that are often portrayed within policy and popular discourses – the NEET young person, the disengaged young person. The findings and cases presented throughout the chapters emphasise how young people's lived experiences of learning, transition, and marginality (Ball, Macrae and Maguire 1999) interact with their learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000b) and their horizons in terms of what is

possible and desirable. In particular, the research suggests that how participation is conceptualised and enacted shapes experiences that constrain the learner identities and learning dispositions of those young people targeted by RPA, therefore propagating horizons for action and transition behaviours that are associated with forms of both participation and non-participation in post-16 education and training.

Chapter 10: Conclusions

Introduction

In examining RPA, this research has ultimately sought to illuminate the lived experiences of extended participation. In doing so, it has engaged with notions of transition, learning, and participation. Young people's narratives, teacher-student interactions, and school/college policies, practices, and cultures have formed the basis of analyses which show the impacts of RPA, and how participation provides a useful lens through which the processes of transition and learning can be reconceptualised. This concluding chapter therefore discusses the study's key findings, the implications for policy, and its contribution to knowledge, before concluding with recommendations for further research.

Summarising the material focus of this study, it has explored the transitions young people make from school to post-16 education and training, and beyond. It has depicted young people's lived experiences of post-16 education and training, illuminating the complex and multifaceted nature of participation. This is framed by the context of government attempts to govern young people's involvement in formalised learning environments through the introduction of RPA.

In particular, this study draws attention to the lived experiences of those young people occupying marginal learning spaces (Atkins 2013; Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014; Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014), namely those making transitions from school into low-level vocational education and employability programmes. For young people occupying such marginal learning spaces, participation is problematic. While policy discourses espouse the value of extended participation for improved employability (Spielhofer *et al*. 2007; Simmons 2008; DFE 2010; Maguire 2013), research has shown participation in low-level vocational education confers little, if any, labour market value (Wolf 2011; Atkins 2013; Atkins and Flint 2015). The issue is therefore how participation is made meaningful, and indeed how it is given meaning, by both young people and the practitioners (teachers, tutors, careers advisers etc.) for whom enacting and delivering participation is their responsibility.

In examining lived experiences of participation in education and training, the study sought to develop a more holistic and complex understanding of participation. In doing so, the findings help move beyond a simple binary of participation/non-participation, which conceive only superficial characterisations of young people's involvement (or non-involvement) in particular, officially recognised, pathways. At the heart of this is an attentiveness to the ways in which participation is enacted, governed, and managed by practitioners within learning environments, and how it is negotiated and navigated by young people. Specifically, the findings reveal how participation plays out at the micro level of interactions and lived experiences. Concurrently, focusing on participation has served to highlight the multiple dimensions shaping young people's positions of marginality and exclusion with post-16 education and training, as well as the ways in which young people's learning careers and horizons for action are influenced by different dimensions of participation.

Before beginning the conclusion in earnest, it is perhaps pertinent to revisit the research questions and how they relate to the various levels on which the concept of participation has been examined, as set out earlier in the thesis. The following chapter will examine the research findings on three levels – micro, meso and macro.

Reflecting on research findings from the micro level teacher-student interactions, and young people's perceptions and action, the chapter considers the following research questions and sub-questions:

- What are the lived experiences of extended participation?

- What is the nature of participation/non-participation in the context of RPA?

    o What factors shape experiences of participation/non-participation?

On a meso level, the conclusion evaluates school/college policies, practices, and teacher cultures. The aim of which is to examine how such factors interact with experiences of participation and how they shape young people's dispositions towards, and possibilities within, their learning context. Therefore, the meso level analysis engages with the research questions:

- How do experiences of participation/non-participation interact with young people's horizons for action and learning careers?

  - How do young people construct their horizons for action and learning careers over time?

Finally, macro level analyses explore how interpretations, discourses, and interventions arising from RPA position young people along the spectrum of inclusionary and exclusionary transition routes. Particular focus is paid to the ways in which disadvantages are disguised and marginalisation is maintained. The section therefore responds to the research question:

- How has RPA positioned young people in extended participation across the spectrum of inclusionary and exclusionary transition routes?

Key findings

The empirical chapters were all framed by the varying ways in which participation is conceptualised, enacted, and experienced, and how these factors shape learning and transition. They reveal how the requirement for extended participation is playing out through teacher practices and school/college policies, while also illuminating how the push for slower-track transitions and continued involvement in education and training is lived by young people. In particular, the chapters highlight the following aspects of participation:

- Chapter five describes how participation within school and college was underpinned by notions of (dis)engagement, which was linked to harmed learner identities and learning careers, proving counterproductive to continued participation in learning.

- Presenting the school fieldwork, chapter six examined the concept of participation viewed in terms of outcomes rather than experiences and processes. A consequence was damaging learning experiences that reduced learning and being a learner to grades and achievement, diminishing how marginalised students saw themselves as learners and what they see as possible/desirable in learning.

- Chapter seven then explored an interpretation of participation that framed post-16 decision-making processes as simply a matter of avoiding non-participation, resulting in examples of uncritical decision-making and transitions shaped by obligation and a 'great deception' (Atkins 2009).

- Chapter eight focused on the centrality of progression, retention, and re-engagement in enactments and experiences of participation in the college. In particular, the chapter highlighted the 'engagement dilemma' and processes of academicisation, recruitment, and performance, all of which was shown to be intertwined with alienation, stigmatisation, and disenfranchisement with learning.

- Rounding off the empirical chapters, chapter nine set out, through individual case studies, a range of participation positions and transition behaviours characterised by the findings outlined in the earlier chapters. Based on the conceptualisations and experiences of participation outlined above, chapter nine essentially revealed how young people experience forms of both participation and non-participation within education and training, and how these experiences position young people differently as (non)participants in the context of learning and transition.

Emerging from the key findings are three central themes which underpin the critique of participation in the context of RPA. These are the interrelationship between participation and learning, linkages between participation and transition, and, ultimately, a more complex and nuanced understanding of how (non)participation is experienced. The following section therefore uses these themes as the basis of a discussion on the key findings from the study.

Participation and learning: (dis/re)engagement, outcomes, and progression

As emphasised throughout the thesis, conceptualisations of participation are interlinked with notions and experiences of learning. In particular, how young people are positioned as participants was framed by learning experiences and discourses of (dis/re)engagement. The findings showed how education institutions and teachers, those responsible for ensuring young people were diverted away from non-

participation, conveyed normative assumptions that disengagement was at the heart of non-participation. More broadly, the research highlighted how, in attempting to govern non-participation through forms of re-engagement, RPA damaged the learner dispositions, learning careers, and learner identities of the target population.

Chapters 5 and 8 underscored how young people's experiences of extended participation were framed by practices and policies underpinned by notions of (dis)engagement. The chapters showed that RPA had created an engagement dilemma concerning how best to work with those for whom school had been unrewarding, with particular reference to students labelled as disengaged due to educational histories that characterised them as problematic learners. Emerging from the engagement dilemma were different ideological typologies relating to how teachers viewed their role and the role of learning in maintaining and developing young people's participation.

- The trainers – At one end of the spectrum, teachers took an authoritative approach to pupil participation, motivated by a view that disengagement was linked to a lack of proper socialisation and that young people needed to be 'trained' how to participate. Teachers viewed students as requiring a heavily structured environment that 'taught' them how to engage and participate in learning. Such perspectives commonly led to tightly controlled learning environments that sought to 'prepare' students for expectations of work and higher levels of study, focused predominantly on conformity and discipline.

  In this context, young people's participation was shaped by how well they fit with the normative expectations of the teacher. Teachers perceived their role to be 'treating' the causes of disengagement and training students to engage in learning. However, as detailed in chapters 5 and 8, such viewpoints motivated strategies that entrenched marginalised learner identities, and intensified dissatisfaction with learning.

- The therapists – In contrast, other teachers took a rapport focused approach, holding the view that young people had fragile learner identities and, as a consequence, had an aversion to challenging learning experiences. Such teachers commonly took a 'therapeutic' view of their role. Such notions largely

resulted in a focus on rapport and building 'confidence' in learning. Notably, there was a tendency for creating 'safe' learning environments, driven by risk-averse notions that participation of any sort was better than non-participation, no matter what that participation constituted. Deficit constructions of learners in this context fed into such practices and resulted in remedial approaches to learning. These approaches were premised on the belief that young people would, in time, develop stronger learner identities and therefore progress to more challenging, higher level programmes. In such cases, teachers would set low-level work and would work through topics slowly, with the intention of allowing learners to 'succeed'.

For many young people, the low-level work created a frustrating learning experience. They perceived that they were re-learning what they had covered in school, making them feel as though it was a waste of time. Furthermore, the issue with a remedial approach to learning re-engagement is that it places students as outsiders to mainstream and legitimised modes of participation. In essence, re-engagement represents a perceived requirement for alternative measures to achieve participation where 'normal' methods have failed. Placing young people as requiring some form of alternative intervention inevitably results in stigmatisation and alienation (Smyth, Mcinerney and Fish 2013), causing further dislocation from 'engagement' in mainstream forms of participation (Atkins 2013; Roberts S and MacDonald 2013, Atkins 2019; Cornish 2019).

- The mentors – a smaller group of teachers found a middle ground between therapy and training. Finding similarities with the ideological position of both other typologies, the mentors viewed young people as needing to develop learner identities and dispositions. However, the approach to achieving these aims differed. Teachers taking a mentoring approach placed responsibility for development with the students, believing it to be more impactful if self-directed. In this regard, teachers supported and facilitated student development, but did so in collaboration with the young people.

Most prominently, the research reinforced understandings of 'therapeutic education' (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009), noting particularly how a shift from a focus on learning to a focus on participation is driving and legitimising pseudo therapeutic learning environments and approaches to teaching. More generally however, the research found that deficit models of marginalised learners, as espoused implicitly through discourses of extended participation, have driven a shift in ideological views on the role of teaching and learning. Notably, educational outcomes in a highly credentialist (grades) sense has taken primacy over the process of schooling.

Furthermore, interactions with teachers of VET programmes revealed that they were acutely aware of the disparity of esteem between vocational education and A-levels. In an attempt to address this disparity, teachers of higher-level VET courses (level 3) aspired to create a more academic and rigorous learning culture and pedagogy, which they felt aligned more closely with A-level study. Observations across the spectrum of VET courses (foundation/level 1, level 2, and level 3) showed how the pursuit of creating a more 'academic' learning experience had permeated the various levels. Teachers of foundation/level 1 courses, and teachers of level 2 courses, described how they felt the need to align their teaching with academic principles, which underpinned level 3 courses, in order to 'prepare' their students for transitions to higher levels. This dynamic created learning cultures dominated by academic principles, while recreating learning experiences for marginalised young people similar to those that were unrewarding at school. As such, young people who had sought a 'fresh start', and a more practical learning experience became alienated by their learning environment.

This process of academicisation was particularly problematic considering how it drove narrowing constructions of 'learning' within low-level VET. The result was normative assumptions around 'ideal' learners (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010), which were built around a traditional concept of a 'good' student – highly engaged, attentive, critical, and active learners. Young people entering this environment following unrewarding school experiences often found themselves not fitting the norms associated with the academicisation of VET, which acted to shape learner identities (Brockmann and Laurie 2016). Specifically, interactions with teachers were characterised by authority, control, scrutiny, and criticism, which resulted in experiences that were often exclusionary and marginalising. As a consequence, young

people embedded identities as 'bad' learners, reflecting their perceived position as outsiders to the dominant constructions of learning.

Moreover, fieldwork within the school settings highlighted further examples of learning being reduced to decontextualised analyses of outcomes. In particular, widespread and harmful processes of educational triage acted to depersonalise learners and learning, as young people became grades rather than people. Teachers would regularly interact with young people by referring to them in terms of their expected grades and would pass judgment on their abilities and capacities not as learners but as GCSE outcomes.

Learners found that a focus on grades meant teachers had very rigid expectations of what they as students could achieve. Students were very much expected to operate at the level that had been ascribed to them, not above, not below. Young people found this problematic, commenting that they were not valued as learners and as people but that they were only valued in terms of what they could contribute to the school's performance. Ultimately, educational triage acted to constrain teacher-student interactions and limit relationships, which can be influential in shaping how young people 'at risk' of non-participation perceive school and education (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010; Duffy and Elwood 2013). This resulted in young people developing constrained learner identities, feeling as though they were not able to succeed as learners.

In summary, the fieldwork showed how various conceptualisations and enactments of participation drove learning experiences that were detrimental for the development of learner identities, learning careers, and positive attachment to learning. Notions of (dis/re)engagement, an outcomes focus, and the issue of progression led to reductionist and depersonalised approaches to learning. Thus, while many young people stayed in education and training beyond the age of 16, they did so with a sense of both inclusion and exclusion. To unpick these issues further, the next section will therefore examine how learning experiences play out in transitions and the set of experiences that lie between inclusion and exclusion.

Participation and transition: 'choice'/coercion, complexity, and horizons

As set out throughout the thesis, RPA, in requiring extended participation in education and training, is fundamentally about prolonging young people's affiliation with learning environments, in the hope it will yield the acquisition of further skills and credentials (or human capital). Therefore, the post-16 transitions young people make on finishing compulsory schooling are central to the aims of RPA. However, the findings reveal the challenges facing young people in low-level VET, as they are the group most precariously placed on the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

The following section thus discusses how the various aspects of learning and participation examined in the previous section have implications for what set of experiences lay between inclusionary and exclusionary school-to-work transitions. In particular, the nature of choice/coercion in making transitions, the complexity of FE transitions, and the impacts on young people's horizons are all explored in reference to how young people navigate the space between participation and non-participation.

Chapters six to eight highlighted a range of experiences that shaped the nature of choice, agency, and reflexivity in young people's post-16 transitions. Notably, the findings illuminated policies, practices, and perceptions that 'managed' young people's transitions and, in some ways, coerced young people into following particular pathways. The fieldwork highlighted that an emphasis on avoiding non-participation, and concerns around (dis)engagement, had resulted in a focus on promoting participation of any kind. Teachers were keen to ensure that students just 'did something'. Interactions between teachers and students deemed at risk of non-participation sold the idea of extended participation as a good thing without any real justification of why, or elaboration on how, it was good. The perceived detrimental effects of non-participation, and the delegitimisation of non-participation as an option, have thus resulted in uncritical discourses around the nature of post-16 learning opportunities.

Oversimplified perspectives on the human capital value of extended participation neglected the importance of lived experiences and the role of identities and dispositions in creating good attachment with learning and more agentic/reflexive forms of transition. The imperative for participation therefore encouraged risk-averse

practices that, in some respects, overlooked the value of autonomy and empowerment in supporting young people make inclusionary transitions characterised by a sense of agency.

Further unpacking the dynamics of choice and coercion, the sense of obligated participation discussed in chapter seven highlighted another consequence of the requirement for post-16 education or training. The findings showed that a perceived duty to oblige extended participation had generated anxieties that permeated deeply into the mentalities of those responsible for diverting young people away from non-participation at the school/college level.

For young people deemed to be 'at risk' of non-participation, responses to these anxieties resulted in closer control and governance of their rights and choices for participation (Määttä and Aaltonen 2016; Fergusson 2013; Fergusson 2014). The 'production line' at West Town School described in chapter 7 provides a good example. The school closely monitored the post-16 decision-making of their students, ensuring that those deemed at risk of NEET were guided towards 'appropriate' options, with young people's input treated somewhat tokenistically.

Additionally, while earlier work on the post-16 transitions of working-class young people found fast-track transitions into employment held a level of legitimacy (McDowell 2003), this study found that such legitimacy has been replaced with active discouragement. Teachers across the fieldwork schools espoused the obligation for young people to stay in education or training until the age of 18. By delegitimising non-participation and fast-track transitions, the discourse of obliged extended participation has therefore reworked relationships with learning, whereby reluctance to participate has been replaced with more injurious forms of obligation and frustration. Therefore, while many young people did transition into further education and training, they did so in a manner that positioned them closer to exclusion and non-participation than inclusion and participation.

A further challenge young people faced in navigating the space between inclusionary and exclusionary transitions was the 'qualification jungle' (Raffe 2015, p.148) of VET. Chapters seven and eight showed that young people on the margins of participation (those entering low-level VET) required greater acuity and skill in navigating the

complexity of post-16 transition, compared with their counterparts following the academic mainstream. In particular, the range of options available and various levels, coupled with a lack of clarity around how best to navigate the system, arguably resulted in more passive forms of participation. Young people's decision-making and agency was constrained by a sense of paralysis. Those in positions of marginality therefore needed enhanced decision-making 'capital' to support their transitions, but instead faced a lack of critical support and, consequently, found they were 'pushed' into particular destinations by a range of structural factors (e.g., teacher perceptions/expectations, the cultural influence of friends and family, and the local context).

Furthermore, the issue of complexity also emerged in chapter 8, highlighting how processes of student 'recruitment and selection', and associated notions of student performance, acted 'behind the backs' of learners. The findings revealed how teacher assessments of students' performance shaped opportunities for progression to higher levels, reinforcing the persisting issues associated with streaming and differentiation (Taylor *et al.* 2019). However, problematically, students at the lowest levels of VET, often framed as in need of re-engagement, were caught in a destructive cycle. Alienated and disenfranchised by their learning environments, and facing extra scrutiny due to stigmatisation as disengaged learners, young people commonly assessed their performance negatively. In doing so, they limited their horizons around what was achievable, thus constraining their opportunities for progression.

Beyond the issue of performance, young people also found their transitions complicated by prior attainment. Chapter eight revealed how 'engagement' and learning dispositions were conflated with grades. When making decisions on who to accept on to level 2 and level 3 courses, staff often chose students coming straight from school with higher GCSE grades than those who were seeking to progress from lower-level courses within the college. The perception from staff was that higher grades at GCSE showed better learning dispositions that were more well suited to the 'academic' demands of higher-level vocational study. Therefore, young people in low-level VET experienced forms of exclusion within their post-16 participation.

In summary, young people not only found complexity in the transition to FE, but also in navigating within post-16 education and training. Because of the hidden or obscured nature of the factors that influenced opportunities, learners in low-level VET were commonly characterised by exclusion from progression. In addition to the issues of complexity, choice, and coercion discussed above, another notable feature of the findings was how experiences of participation and learning interacted with young people's horizons for action – what they saw as subjectively desirable and objectively possible. Two key themes emerged which acted to shape young people's transitions in the context of their horizons – processes of 'institutional triage', and experiences of academicisation.

In reference to the notion of institutional triage, chapter 6 revealed how discourses of performance and competition had permeated young people's mentalities around the opportunities available to them. The findings showed how students conflated the 'quality' of their school (in reference to notions of school performance and wider characteristics of the school) with the opportunities available to them, as they positioned themselves as in competition with students from other, 'better' schools. Young people worked from the assumption that being in a low-quality school would inevitably lead to worse academic outcomes and, consequently, reduced post-16 options and opportunities. Such viewpoints were characterised by one young person's remark, 'shit school, shit teachers, shit students' (see p.184). Therefore, young people's horizons on what they as possible were constrained by notions of participation framed by competition and performance, and by the allied perceptions of school quality and status.

Further to processes of institutional triage, academicisation also acted to create positional competition, but at the micro level. The gatekeeping function of GCSE grades explored in chapter 8 meant young people found themselves stratified not only relative to those following academic A-level pathways, but also relative to those within VET. GCSE Maths and English held a gatekeeping function (Cornish 2017a) in that achievement in these subjects was required for progress to higher levels of study. The most problematic aspect of this situation was that vocational skills were stratified along academic lines. Higher level vocational skills learning was reserved for the higher

levels of study, meaning young people had to achieve well academically in order to access the skills development.

This proved to be a huge source of frustration for young people who, predominantly focused on transitions into work, were excluded from developing skills with labour market value because they were not meeting academic requirements. It then became a negative cycle whereby frustrations would manifest in behaviours that further reinforced teachers' harmful approaches to working with such students. Therefore, young people's experiences of academicisation influenced both their objective and subjective horizons as they became disenfranchised with learning, while also being excluded from transition opportunities.

Finally, how learning experiences played out in the dynamics of inclusion-exclusion across young people's transitions was shown to manifest in a number of transition behaviour typologies. Chapter 9 highlighted how young people sought to navigate post-16 education and training and how these transition behaviours helped articulate their proximity to participation and non-participation. The findings showed that, while young people were in post-16 education and training, there were a range of transition behaviours that were less favourable in supporting inclusionary school-to-work transitions (those that support progression through FE and into secure labour market positions).

In summary, synthesising the findings on the interrelationship between participation and transitions has revealed the nature of experiences between inclusion and exclusion for young people in low-level VET. Many of the young people experienced complex transitions that were framed by constrained agency and reflexivity, and a sense of coercion as their choices and decisions were managed and moderated by those tempting to avert the perceived risk of non-participation. Somewhat problematically, these experiences in many respects further excluded and marginalised learners, positioning them as 'NEET in disguise' (Reiter and Schlimbach 2015). Ultimately, the thesis has argued that young people do not play out simple participant/non-participant statuses and identities, but instead have a range of experiences, positions, and dispositions across a spectrum of participation and non-participation. The following section therefore unpacks the spectrum in order to set out

a framework for developing a thicker and more complex description of young people's (non)participation.

Participation positions: challenging the participation/non-participation binary

Bringing the discussion on learning and transition together, the findings challenge the notion of a straightforward participation/non-participation binary in understanding young people's post-16 transitions. Conceptualisations and experiences of participation show how young people experience forms of both participation and non-participation within education and training, and how these experiences position young people differentially as (non)participants.

Fundamentally, the various dimensions of participation set out below show how viewing young people simply as participants (in education, employment, or training) or as non-participants (not in education, employment, or training) is too reductionist. While consideration has been given to the experiences that lie between inclusionary (participation) and exclusionary (non-participation) transitions (Roberts S and Macdonald 2013), far less research examines what experiences lie within such transitions.

In this study, the findings chapters highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of young people's participation experiences. Specifically, fieldwork observations and interactions revealed multiple dimensions of participation, each emerging from the lived experiences, subjectivities, and opportunities of young people within the field of low-level VET post-16 transitions. The following section explores the various dimensions of participation, which were shaped by a multitude of factors, including teacher interactions, classroom environments, learning cultures and institutional policies and practices. These go beyond much previous research that has relied largely on young people's narratives through the collection of interview data (see for example, Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000c; Atkins 2013). The ethnographic data thus highlights the embedded nature of disadvantage and marginalisation as it plays out in multiple aspects of young people's lived experiences.

The multiple dimensions of participation presented below can be viewed as intersecting and intertwined continua. Rather than being binary or rigid descriptors, each dimension represents an aspect of young people's participation experience, for

which there is a continuum of participatory positions. As such, the continua serve as a critical tool through which the nuance and complexity of participation at the level of experience and interaction can be examined.

The continua also enable an analysis of young people's position within the field of education and, specifically, extended participation. Imagining the experience of participation as taking place within a field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1993) helps emphasise the presence of power relationships and so, while the dimensions of participation described largely refer to how experiences are structured, they also illuminate the differential power that is embedded in the relational differences between positions within the field (Bourdieu & Passerson 1990; Bourdieu 1997). In adopting the notion of participatory 'positions', it is also acknowledged that movement is achievable within the field as young people acquire and utilise various forms of capital (Bourdieu 1997). The participatory positions outlined below are therefore viewed as fluid and changeable rather than static or fixed, as young people experience movement across the various dimensions of participation experiences.

Participation ⟵⟶	Non-participation
Right ⟵⟶	Obligation
Active ⟵⟶	Passive
Empowered ⟵⟶	Disempowered
Authentic ⟵⟶	Tokenistic
Engaged ⟵⟶	Disengaged
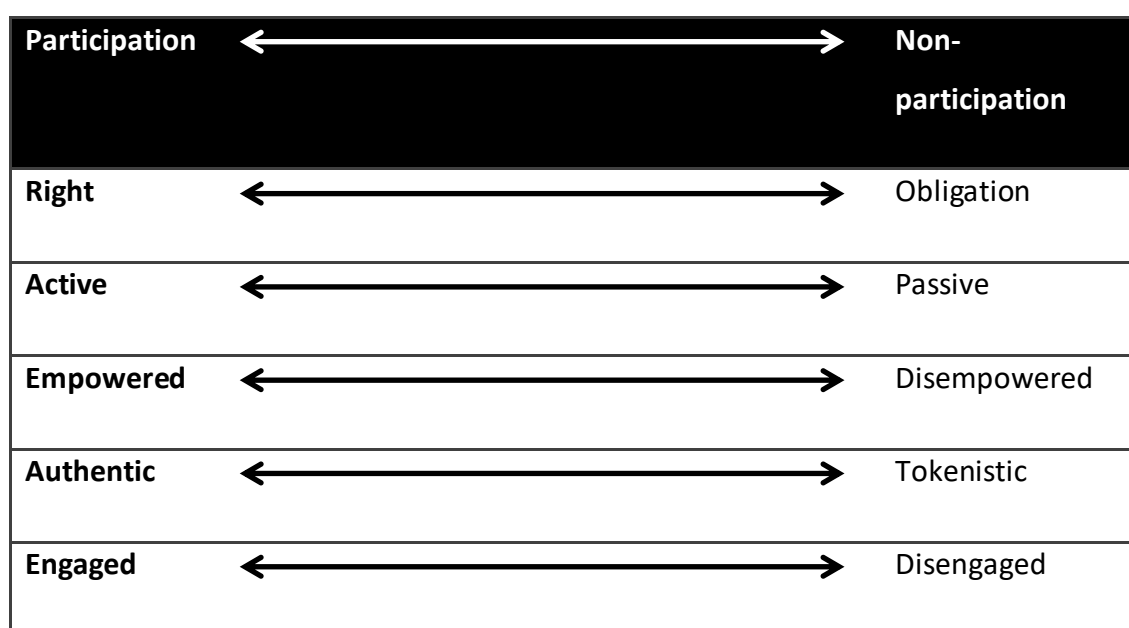
Figure 10.1. Participation positions framework

The spectrum of participation positions across *rights and obligations* was characterised by how young people perceived extended participation and how it was 'sold' to them. Chapter seven highlighted how, for marginal learners deemed at risk of becoming NEET, schools 'pushed' post-16 education and training in uncritical ways in an attempt to avert the risk of non-participation or fast-track transitions into the labour market

and jobs without training. The consequence was that narratives of post-16 decision-making were often characterised by tacit forms of coercion and the sense that there was an obligation to continue participation in education.

The findings suggested that this sense of obligation was problematic and played a key role in how young people reacted and responded to the post-16 environment. In essence, their subjectivities around the nature of their participation – right-obligation – played a key role in shaping teacher-student interactions and learning environments, which in turn influenced other aspects of participation. Specifically, obligation was associated with passive modes of participation and constrained 'buy in' to learning (careers) which, while not directly displaying resistance, symbolised 'soft' forms of non-participation.

Following on from the dynamics of right-obligation, the spectrum of *active-passive* (non)participation focuses more on how young people came to navigate FE. The college fieldwork revealed how young people, particularly within low-level VET, became 'stuck' or static (Cornish 2019), simply being recycled within Foundation/Level 1 learning and not making any forward or vertical progress. It was shown that passivity was associated with both limited opportunities (due to stigmatisation and factors such as academicisation) and sense of disempowerment around knowing how to navigate post-16 education and training.

Young people had a desire to play a more active role in their participation but did not feel able to through a lack of insight and voice. The forces and mechanisms that acted to shape transitions were largely invisible to young people, and expressions of voice were commonly overlooked or trivialised. Through this lens, a lack of insight and voice created young people more easily governed and managed, allowing external forces to exert greater control. Such a dynamic can be compared to the concept of waithood whereby young people wait for guidance or intervention (Cuzzocrea 2019).

In relation to how young people are positioned along the spectrum of *empowered-disempowered,* the findings revealed many features of the school and college experience that constrained young people's capacity to enact agency and reflexivity. Notably, a disempowering feature of school and college experiences, particularly for lower achieving young people, was the lack of support and encouragement to ask

critical questions about their education and position within it (Atkins 2009, p.137). As highlighted in chapter 7, information and interactions around decision-making tended to be simplistic and reductionist, often focusing on basic sketches of the linkages between extended participation and employability. The lack of criticality therefore resulted in an inability to negotiate the structural forces that act as barriers to moving beyond the immediate field/habitus (of low value education/ diminished learner identities-learning careers) (ibid.).

Additionally, the rather fixed and deterministic process of labelling students by predicted grades (educational triage) within the school context represented another mechanism which positioned young people along the spectrum of (dis)empowerment. Marginal learners found very little scope for setting their own ambitions and behaviours as their participation was heavily 'managed' by the schools that housed them. Ultimately, while participation in post-16 education or training is often framed as a positive action that is polarised with risk and exclusion (Maguire 2010; Maguire 2015b; Simmons, Thompson and Russel 2014), the research showed that, far from being an inclusionary and empowering experience, extended participation for young people in low-level VET was characterised by various degrees of disempowerment, playing out through everyday practices and interactions.

The *authentic-tokenistic* continuum/conceptualisation of participation can be viewed as operating on an interactionist level – in that it relates to how young people's expressions of participation are viewed, received, and responded to by others. Fundamentally, it is concerned with whether young people's views are voices are considered authentically – given value and weight – or tokenistically – 'heard' but not given value or legitimacy, so largely dismissed.

Within the post-16 VET context, there was significant continuity with the school experience. Continuities were particularly framed around the ways in which staff at college managed the views and voices of young people on post-16 participation. Some teachers dismissed young people's views around their post-16 aspirations, believing to know best, other teachers respected young people's voices and incorporated them into working with them to achieve their aims.

The contrast in how young people's views were received was particularly stark across the hierarchy of post-16 qualifications. Those in positions of marginality, occupying Foundation/level1 learning, found expectations on their ambitions severely constrained. Teachers' expectations were for these students to have low ambitions, and any ambitions that were deemed too lofty were reworked towards something more 'realistic' through teacher-student interactions. In this light, young people had their views dismissed, relegating their participation to the level of tokenism.

Finally, the notion of *engagement-disengagement* within learning environments was explored in detail across the empirical chapters, and also earlier in this conclusion chapter (see pp.270-274). Emphasised throughout is that the spectrum of engagement-disengagement underpinned many aspects participation, learning, and transition. As Fergusson (2013) points out, the notion of disengagement from learning is synonymous with deficit constructions of young people, foregrounding endogenous over exogenous factors. Dominant discourses have come to frame non-participation as an issue of disengagement, rather than exclusion or marginalisation (*ibid.*). Fundamentally, the primacy of disengagement as an explanatory tool, and the privileging of endogenous over exogenous factors, has acted to locate the issue of non-participation at the individual level (Simmons and Thompson 2013). The fieldwork has however problematised such notions of individual deficit, revealing that a range of external factors and forces served to shape young people's (dis)engagement in various ways (e.g., teacher practices and learning experiences, school/college policies and cultures, and labelling based on educational histories).

In summary, participation positions highlight the complexity and fluidity of young people's post-16 transitions, while challenging binary conceptualisations of participation/non-participation. Furthermore, by examining a range of factors that shape where young people sit relative to forms of participation and non-participation, participation positions move beyond perceptions of transition in FE as uniform and uncomplicated (Coffield *et al.* 2008; Lawy 2010). In doing so, they reveal aspects of what occurs inside the 'black box' of FE, unpicking how young people progress/regress/stagnate relative to forms of participation/non-participation and exclusion/inclusion as they move in and out of post-16 education and training. The findings on participation positions therefore highlight how extended participation in

education and training can be transformative to dispositions towards learning and for opportunities, but also how it can intensify disenfranchisement, alienation, and marginalisation/exclusion from opportunities.

Having now considered the broad experiences associated with the themes of learning, transition, and participation positions, it is perhaps pertinent to draw out key differences in such experiences associated with gender, race, and the different institutional contexts. The following section will therefore bring together key findings in order to undertake comparative analysis of the sample and fieldwork sites, while also highlighting the structured nature post-16 transitions in marginal learning spaces.

Comparative analysis: gender, race, and institutional contexts

While class has been the key factor driving marginalisation and exclusion within the findings, the fieldwork did capture a number of examples where gender and race intersected with class to shape young people's experiences and opportunities. In terms of race and schooling, Callum's interactions with teachers and his perceptions of the school (see pp.174-175) provide a good example, emphasising the entangled nature of race, ethnicity, and lived experiences within school (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010).

For young people at school, identities are inevitably interwoven with factors such as appearance and dress (Brown K. and Brown L. 2020). As highlighted by the wave cap incident (see pp.174-175) issues can occur when these factors come into conflict with school rules and expectations, as young people may perceive they are (and may actually be) being marginalised or discriminated against due to their (ethnic/cultural) identity. In such instances, teachers can find themselves in a conflicted position, whereby the implementation of school rules may be in tension with their personal values and beliefs. This is not to say school rules and expectations on student appearance are necessarily discriminatory or racist, but more that the homogeneity in approach lacks nuance and runs the risk of placing certain groups in more frequent conflict with the school and its teachers, creating a sense of unfair treatment.

More widely, notions of 'ideal learners' are commonly built around concepts of obedience, conformity, and hard work (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010), which is in contrast to discourses of black young people (young black men in particular)

characterised by deviance, resistance, and subversion (Gillborn and Youdell 2000). Thus, while there are inevitably multiple intersections between identities and inequalities (e.g., working class 'lads' (Willis 1977, Mac an Ghaill 1994), 'glamour girls' (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010)), Callum's lived experiences echo previous studies' findings of differential treatment based on race (See for example, Wright 1987a; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Brown K. and Brown L. 2020).

Beyond schooling, race and ethnicity were also shown to manifest in young people's horizons and opportunities. Chapter 9's case study of Naseem highlighted how history, identity, and habitus interact with what young people see as possible for themselves. In discussing his labour market ambitions, Naseem makes direct reference to being Asian and the fact that his dad (as an example for him to follow) has always worked in 'Asian shops'. Therefore, Naseem's identity as a working-class Asian boy constrained what he saw as possible and desirable in post-16 education, reflecting research that shows how disadvantaged young people 'know their limits' (Archer and Yamashita 2003).

A further example of how race and ethnicity manifested in post-16 participation was presented in chapter 8 in the discussion around teacher constructions of 'ideal learners', and processes of 'recruitment and selection'. In particular, the Travel and Tourism teacher denying the Asian girl a place on the level 3 course because she was 'too shy', perhaps highlighted the enactment of preconceptions based on ethnicity and stereotypes. The teacher appeared to characterise 'ideal learners' as those who were outgoing and sociable, as she favoured students with such dispositions. Ultimately, the 'quiet Asian girl' was deemed to be too withdrawn and socially constrained, compared to her peers, to succeed and thrive on the level three course. Such a position finds similarities with research that highlights how Asian girls are commonly (mis)represented as reluctant to integrate within school, thus placing extra scrutiny on their behaviours and dispositions (Shain 2010). In summary, it could be perceived that young people's opportunities, experiences, and horizons were shaped by raced normative assumptions, constructions of 'ideal learners', and by structured processes of positional competition.

In addition to the influence of race and ethnicity, the gendered and classed nature of learning experiences and transition was particularly apparent across the fieldwork. Fieldwork at Northumberland Girls Schools set out in chapter 6 revealed a stark contrast between the 'apprenticeship girls' and the 'grammar girls'. Horizons seemed far broader for the 'grammar girls' and included slow-track transitions through HE, and geographical relocation. However, the 'apprenticeship girls' described a need to support (with childcare etc.) at home and the pressure to earn money as well as study, highlighting the significance of gendered roles and domesticity (Skeggs 1997; Colley and Comber 2003; O'Connor 2015). Horizons and opportunities were thus constrained by a need to stay local and by a pressure on fast-track/hybrid transitions.

Continuing the theme of gendered expectations and gendered habitus (Reay 1998), many of the boys at Hartland Academy were drawn to construction courses, reflecting the working-class, masculine habitus associated with manual labour (McDowell 2003, Roberts S 2018b). In the absence of critical support from the school or critical decision-making processes, the boys fell back on examples of what their peers and male friends/family had done. This was reinforced both at school and at college by teachers who directed boys to stereotypically male subjects, such as sport or mechanics/construction.

A pertinent example was highlighted in chapter 8 where Kamil's teacher suggested he should do sport as that is what he liked, only for Kamil to reflect that he did not like sport, it was assumed he did as he was a boy. While recent research has suggested social change has driven a shift in the performance of contemporary masculinity (Roberts S 2018b), the findings show that many of the working-class males within the study were still viewed as the stereotypical 'problem boys', rather than 'responsible young men' (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010, p.56). Thus, expectations of their achievement and aspiration were framed by structured normative assumptions that attempted to (re)produce male working-class trajectories.

Similarly, but in relation to young women, chapter 6 introduces Lauren (Hartland Academy) and the gendered nature of her post-16 decision-making. Having initially expressed an interest in studying public services (police etc.) at college, this path was blocked by the discontinuation of that course. In deciding on a 'plan B', Lauren's

teacher asked her to think about what she 'was good at' and what she 'liked doing'. In response, Lauren commented that she liked doing hair so could perhaps do hair and beauty. The interaction highlighted both the nature of post-16 decision-making for marginalised learners, and the proclivity for falling back on 'known', gendered pathways. In particular, Lauren's perception of what she liked doing perhaps reflected the reproduction of 'glamorous' femininities (Skeggs 1997; Renold 2005; Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010). In short, the findings provided examples of how normative expectations and horizons played a significant role in (re)producing raced, gendered, and classed lived experiences of education and transition.

Having considered how the structural forces of race and gender manifested in the fieldwork, it is germane to also reflect on how such factors played out across the sample. On a high-level analysis of the sample, white working-class boys tended to follow the lowest levels of study and were the least likely to make progress within FE, finding similarities with previous research that highlights persistent underachievement as a feature of this demographic (McDowell 2003, Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010; Roberts S 2013). Furthermore, the notion of 'fitting in' (Reay *et al.* 2005) appeared to be a trend across the sample. Specifically, there were cases suggesting that the post-16 destinations of young people in the sample who followed vocational pathways were structured by race and, in particular, gender. In terms of gender, girls tended to coalesce around subjects such as Health and Social Care, Childcare, and Hair and Beauty. In contrast, boys coalesced around subjects such as Construction, Mechanics, and IT. In the context of race, Travel and Tourism attracted the most ethnically diverse cohort, however, the course tended to get 'whiter' and less working-class as you progressed up the levels. All of which reinforces views of FE (VET) as highly structured (Colley and Comber 2003; Lawy 2010).

Furthermore, in comparing the schools and college, there were also key differences in how, particularly gendered, transition pathways were (re)produced. In the case of Northumberland Girls School, as described above, there was a dichotomy between the academic 'grammar girls' and the vocational 'apprenticeship girls'. The former group were encouraged to be aspirational and to think critically about their post-16 'choices' which, to a certain extent, showed how academic achievement reframed gendered expectations. However, the latter group were given less support and tended to be

directed to 'suitable' post-16 destinations that reflected the highly gender stereotyped nature of FE courses (Colley and Comber 2003). Therefore, (re)production at Northumberland Girls School was associated with differentiated choice, agency, and reflexivity as some young people were encouraged to take a biographical approach to their decision-making, while others experienced more structured trajectories (Roberts K 1997; Coles 2005).

In comparison, the politics of participation had a different dynamic at Hartland Academy. Lacking a more academic group similar to the 'grammar girls' at Northumberland Girls School, Hartland Academy largely saw their students continue into low-level VET. Allied with a significant proportion of their students becoming NEET after finishing year 11, the school was characterised by a form of 'underclass' (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Furlong and Cartmel 2006; Ainley and Allen 2010) status and culture. As a consequence, teachers' expectations for their students appeared to be more pragmatic than aspirational. Namely, diverting young people away from non-participation, whether that be into education or employment. Thus, the focus of participation, while not explicitly (re)producing structured inequalities, tended not to disrupt forms of marginalisation and exclusion either. Fundamentally, young people at Hartland Academy found themselves disconnected (MacDonald 2005) from the academic mainstream and inclusionary transitions (Roberts S 2010; Roberts S and MacDonald 2013).

In the case of West Town, there was a more graduated differentiation between students, with a more abundant 'middle-ground' of learners. Essentially, West Town did not have the stark contrast between 'academic' and 'vocational' learners, nor did it have a critical mass of low-level 'no hopers' (Youdell 2006). Thus, with a majority of students coalescing around GCSE pass grades, West Town had a good-sized A-level provision within their sixth form. Consequently, the institutional narrative around post-16 participation focused on either transitions into the school sixth form, to study A-levels, or into level 2/3 VET. Perhaps because the extremes apparent at Hartland Academy and Northumberland Girls School were absent at West Town, the school appeared to (re)produce less obviously classed and gendered post-16 transitions.

However, West Town had a more ethnically diverse student population compared to Hartland Academy and Northumberland Girls School. As such, whereas gender and class were the main forms of differentiation at Northumberland Girls School and Hartland Academy, West Town also experienced an underlying tension around race. In particular, while the manifestation of classed experiences at West Town tended to be shaped by how young people were valued (Skeggs and Loveday 2012) in terms of achievement, the raced experience was perhaps more harmful and discriminatory as, particularly black boys, experienced exclusion, not just devaluation. Consequently, while class and gender inevitably played a role, it was race which appeared to most significantly affect notions of 'fitting in' (Reay 2005) at West Town.

Finally, as has been discussed throughout, the VET courses at South Town College were highly structured. To summarise the earlier points, class, gender, and race played out not just in the subjects/levels young people studied, but also through teacher expectations, notions of 'ideal learners', and the conflation of grades with dispositions towards learning. Most notably, chapter 8 highlighted how such factors constrained opportunities for learners in low-level VET, thus underpinning a course structure (level 1/2/3) that was characterised by streaming and differentiation based on race, class, and gender (Avis and Atkins 2017).

In conclusion, understanding more deeply what goes on across prolonged post-16 transitions, and how it impacts on young people differentially, enables policy and practice to better respond to young people's needs and to issues of non-participation and 'disengagement'. All of which raises questions about the efficacy of the RPA policy, and about the way the policy is conceived and enacted. The following section will therefore consider the key policy implications emerging from the findings.

Policy implications

Although originally planned to include an element of enforcement, RPA ultimately became about encouraging extended periods of participation in education or training by offering choice. This was premised on the idea that offering a range of post-16 options to suit everyone's needs and desires would make young people *want* to extend their participation beyond compulsory schooling (DfE 2014). The question can be asked however, for what purpose? Government literature and rhetoric fosters the

notion that, by participating in education or training for longer, young people will gain new qualifications and skills required for employment (Maguire 2013).

However, this research paints a different picture. There was a sense from the fieldwork that the diverse and varied range of college courses available (focusing particularly on low-level options) to young people was purely focused on engagement and participation – getting young people through the door. There was very much a sense of occupying young people, giving them something to do. This was widely expressed in young people's views describing 'passing the time' and 'just staying in college until 18 when I'm allowed to leave a get a job'. Not even the teachers appeared convinced that there was much value in young people being at college, one teacher telling a student 'The most important thing for getting a job is work experience and who you know…By getting out there and working you get to know the skills you need, and you also meet people who might offer you a job'.

The only element of young people's participation that teachers gave genuine significance to was academic attainment, following the now well-rehearsed narrative that 'if you don't get your C grades in Math's and English, you won't get a job'. Although never articulated explicitly, the tacitly held view amongst young people and teachers was that extended participation was of little value, which played a key role in shaping experiences and interactions.

Policy narrowness

By viewing it as a status rather than an experience, RPA overlooks the complex, nuanced and often-problematic nature of participation. This leads to a process of homogenisation as young people's participation positions are neglected. RPA views extended participation as a means to an end. The outcomes focus of the policy thus fails to recognise the messiness of lived experiences and the processes through which young people arrive at various ends.

By disregarding the *process* of education, the mechanism of learning is reduced to a simple transaction or occurrence. The failure to acknowledge and deal with the matter of learning fundamentally overlooks the prime purpose of RPA, to expand the human capital of those participating. In doing so, RPA neglects the subjective dimensions of

learning careers and horizons for action, the significance of which has been emphasised throughout. The study has shown that a failure to engage with the matter of young people's perceptions, identities, and experiences of learning, will render the status of participation meaningless, and worse, harmful. Young people will not be able to gain anything from extended participation as it fails to develop participation positions that are conducive to the aims of employability and 'engagement'. By aiming to create participants rather than learners, extended participation only serves to govern young people's (non)participation in very narrow, limited ways. In essence, young people are expected to embed 'participation careers' – a reductionist view that continued participation alone is the route to enhanced opportunities and outcomes.

Participation careers however undermine the development of learning careers, as being promoted is the value of taking part rather than the value of being a learner. The consequence is young people who make much more instrumental/ superficial assessments of how beneficial/meaningful their participation is. Rather than viewing extended participation as a developmental opportunity/process, it is viewed as a vehicle for delivering outcomes – specific qualifications and employment opportunities. When it fails to deliver these outcomes (as a result of the various endogenous/exogenous factors outlined throughout), the tendency is to disavow the value of continued participation. Viewing participation more holistically will therefore allow greater insight into how extended periods of learning and training can develop young people's opportunities and horizons both objectively and subjectively.

Policy focus

The focus and rationale of policies focused on educational participation have been variously critiqued, with suggestions that, in simple terms, they operate through either choice or coercion (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010). Providing greater elaboration on this theme, Strathdee (2013) suggests that such policies seek to motivate, force, or bridge, while Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth (2010) describe policies as bribing, monitoring, and re-making the self. Offering a detailed analysis, Fergusson (2014) proposes a series of policy rationales and accompanying modalities and priorities which include, for example, attempts to manage inequalities, warehouse young people, skill-up the workforce, and contain and monitor non-participants.

The research observed many of these rationales play out in practice. Teachers often espoused the view that extended participation would offer students new opportunities to re-make their learner identities, acquire new skills and knowledge, and ultimately that it would bridge the gap between finishing school and achieving employment. However, the research also highlighted the potentially damaging impact of extended participation, if not conceived effectively. Attempts to build learner identities and create a bridge to employment resulted in stigmatisation and alienation with dispositions towards learning reflecting intensified positions of marginality.

Therefore, there is a case for proposing that, alongside creating a worthwhile VET curriculum and pedagogy, there also needs to be greater attention paid to the 'motivating' dimensions of such policy initiatives. The development of constructive learner identities and learner careers need to be considered, taking into account the various dimensions of young people's participation experiences – creating more active, empowered, engaged, and included participants that are able to thrive in the context of learning environments.

Reclaiming (non)participation (giving ownership to young people)

RPA can also be seen as part of a legitimation crisis in the sense that state intervention is legitimised through discourses of human capital theory, which promote the notion that education equates to employability (Strathdee 2013). In this context, those responsible for the governance on (non)participation at the 'street level' (Fergusson 2013) – staff within compulsory and further education and training – have their role in promoting and enacting extended participation legitimised by the belief that they are improving the employability of otherwise marginalised and 'at risk' young people.

Extended education and training have therefore, in part, become the 'cause' as well as the 'solution' to the youth employment crisis. This has particular salience in the way the legitimation crisis is now constructed through the transfer of responsibility from the state to the individual to develop their own human capital (Simmons and Smyth 2016, pp.137-138).

Policy success

Finally, it is worth reflecting on whether RPA can be deemed a 'success'. Returning to the policy context outlined in chapter 2, the RPA policy experienced an evolution from notions of adding value and upskilling, to sheltering and tracking (Fergusson 2014). In the context of the latter focus, the reduction and containment of NEET figures, and the increasing rates of participation among 16 and 17 year olds (DfE 2018), present RPA as a success. However, looking beyond the headline participation and NEET figures, concerns remain around what participation in low-level VET actually means for young people.

Specifically, a 2016 Select Committee report 'Overlooked and left behind: improving the transition from school to work for the majority of young people' (8 April 2016, HL 120), and the resultant introduction of T-levels, acknowledge the continued disparity of esteem of VET. In doing so, they highlight a focus not only on participation, but also the value and outcomes of that participation. Thus, the nature, content, and recognition (by employers) of VET qualifications perhaps now has primacy in the post-16 policy context. While some of the concerns raised in this thesis (e.g., unstimulating/therapeutic learning, labour market value, a streamed system) could perhaps be addressed by such a policy focus, the central issues of how lived experiences of education and training shape learning careers/learner identities, horizons, and disadvantages/exclusion, still remain. As such, whether RPA is viewed as a success or not depends on the angle from which it is examined.

In summary, the findings pose a number of questions about RPA as conceived and RPA as enacted. While the efficacy, and even the true purpose of RPA, has been critiqued, the findings contribute more widely to understandings of learning, transition, and participation in post-16 education and training. The next section will therefore set out how the study has contributed to the literature in these key areas.

Contribution

This study set out to explore the nature of young people's post-16 transitions in the context of RPA, and the requirement for extended participation in education and training. Investigating transitions through the lens of RPA also drew attention to

continuity and change in attempts to address the challenge of what to do with marginalised young people. Of specific interest are the lived experiences of young people in the marginal learning spaces of low-level VET. At the heart of this is interest in notions of learning, transition, and how young people are positioned in terms of participation and non-participation. Therefore, this thesis makes a contribution to knowledge under three key themes: concepts of learning and learning careers, transition debates, and understandings of (non)participation.

<u>Learning and learning careers</u>

Sociological studies on learning have commonly sought to examine young people's dispositions towards learning, analysing how young people perceive themselves as learners in the context of their experiences. Such analyses have largely relied on young people's narrative accounts to explore concepts such as learner identities (Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth 2010; Brockmann and Laurie 2016; Hegna 2019) and learner careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000a). In the case of learning careers, young people's dispositions towards learning are deemed to be characterised by 'transformations'.

It is argued that such a characterisation is a consequence of the methodological and conceptual approach. By interviewing young people at various points over time, it only provided 'snapshots' into their present subjective orientations to learning. In studying young people's lived experiences of learning over time, this study showed it was not simply that young people's dispositions towards learning shifted, but it was the contextual factors, and dynamics of learning experiences and interactions, that changed. This was highlighted by Euwera in her change of circumstances when progressing from foundation level study to level 2. Euwera had always viewed learning as key to her future aims, and had always been positively disposed to learning, but being on a foundation course that made her 'feel dumb', had produced a subjective orientation that disavowed the value of her current learning experience. This was contrasted with her views once she had progressed to level 2 (see p.258).

In this light, learning careers are better understood as young people's relative position within the field of learning, rather than as intrinsic to young people. The notion of transformations in learning careers is therefore reworked as movements between

various learning positions, providing a stronger acknowledgment of external forces in shaping young people's orientations. Fundamentally, the concept of learning careers overlooks the negotiated aspects of transformation. The findings show that young people do not just form new learning careers with new experiences, but that they are also shaped by what is allowed as a result of interactions and relationships based on normative expectations on what constitutes 'engagement' and learning.

Consequently, it is also argued that the concept of learning careers, and more generally sociological theorisations of learning, are limited by their tendency to either focus on individual *or* contextual factors in their analysis or relationships with learning. Therefore, the concept of a learning career is limited in its capacity to analyse the intersection between learning experiences/contexts and learning dispositions as it relies on interview data and young people's narrative accounts of how they relate to the learning environment they are situated within.

In exploring experiences associated with academicisation, a focus on outcomes and attainment, and notions of 're-engagement' and 'therapeutic learning, the empirical chapters emphasised how conceptualisations and enactments of participation shaped learning environments and cultivated normative assumptions/expectations around what constitutes a particular disposition towards learning. Young people were essentially being asked to develop a positive disposition towards either the 'qualifications project' (Aasebø 2011), where outcomes have primacy, or towards low-level learning in which learning 'success' was privileged over creating a challenging and stimulating environment. However, many of the young people in low-level VET were not negatively disposed to learning but rather to that particular type of learning, and were therefore detrimentally positioned by the normative expectations and assumptions associated with it.

Relatedly, the thesis contributes to literature that challenges wider formulations of the concept of career (Cuzzocrea and Lyon 2011). Learning careers, like many theorisations on the notion of a career, rely on a linear or progressive model associated with a change in status or level, or a change in orientation (towards the future). The case studies in chapter 9 show that young people can have a change in their relationship with learning, without necessarily having a change in status, level, or orientation. It is

argued therefore that learning, in the sense of learning 'careers', should be conceptualised in a much more fluid and multifaceted way in order avoid individualised, deficit modes of thinking that frame the learning careers of marginalised learners as flawed or failed.

Relationships with learning are thus more accurately characterised by the intersection of, and dynamic between, individual and contextual factors. Therefore, to create a more complete account of learning careers and relationships with learning, dispositions towards, positions within, and the nature of the learning environment need to be taken into account. Ultimately, the thesis contributes to literature that challenges the notion of transformations to dispositions and, in particular, the way such a conceptualisation reflects individualised deficit discourses, which focus on endogenous factors as key to young people's '(dis)engagement' in education and training (Fergusson 2013).

In conclusion, it is argued that (dis)engagement and (dis)positions in learning are really a consequence of policy (RPA/participation focused policies) interpretations and enactments that create normative assumptions and expectations around what constitutes learning, as well as reconceptualisations of education and schooling that play out in teacher cultures and practices (Mac an Ghaill 1994). All of which created learning experiences which positioned young people relative to forms of exclusion/inclusion and participation/marginalisation.

Transition debates and the nature of individualisation and inequality in post-16 participation

A key debate in the field of youth studies has been the relative roles of structure and agency in guiding young people's transitions and imagined futures. At the heart of this debate are differing views on whether young people's lives are increasingly characterised by individualisation, choice biographies, and reflexivity (see for example, Beck 1992; Wyn and Woodman 2006, 2007; Woodman 2009; O'Connor 2015), or whether structure still has dominance in defining youth trajectories (see for example, Evans 2002, 2007; Roberts K 2007; Roberts S 2010; France and Haddon 2014; Avis and Atkins 2017; Roberts S and France 2020). The findings in this thesis suggest that structures and institutions determining life chances have not crumbled (Jones 2009),

but that increasingly complex modes of participation have obscured their effects and have disguised inequalities and new forms of exclusion (Fergusson 2004).

Such complexity was highlighted most clearly in the process of young people making post-16 decisions within school. While young people did not collectively follow trajectories en masse – young people 'individually' chose their destinations – the expectations teachers had of students, the courses and pathways deemed as 'suitable' and 'appropriate', and the ways in which young people were informed by peer and familial influences (habitus), highlighted how structural forces still shaped the opportunities available and what was deemed possible and desirable.

In the context of how young people navigate transitions, and specifically building on ideas such as Evans' notion of 'bounded agency' (2002; 2007) and Roberts' concept of 'structured individualisation' (2002), this research showed there were factors that limited the extent to which young people could respond and react to, or even be aware of, structural forces. In particular, the control and scrutiny marginal learners experienced showed how their transitions are characterised by 'disempowered agency'.

Specifically, the processes of 'recruitment and selection' and notions of 'student performance', explored in the empirical chapters, revealed how many of the structural disadvantages young people faced were disguised within teacher-student interactions and normative assumptions around what constituted an ideal learner. It is argued that both the notion of bounded agency and the concept of structured individualisation depict a more static sense of how capacities to act are constrained. Disempowered agency portrays a more dynamic process where young people are not simply bounded or structured, they become disempowered. This is important as it draws attention to the significance of experience and interaction as the key realms for the limiting of agency.

Furthermore, while Evans' notion of transition behaviours (2007) does take account of how agency is bounded by structural factors, it places an emphasis on individual actions that fall out of interactions between structural factors, rather than on what set of actions are possible within the context of various intersecting forces, as is the case in the analysis of participation positions (see pp.280-285). While perhaps only subtly

different, the two emphases offer differing perspectives on how best to conceive and interpret the role of structure and agency in young people's transitions, or positions. As an example, contrasting the notion of passivity, as described within the spectrum of participation positions, with Evans' notion of drifting, passivity is more reflective of a status or position, rather than an action, as is the case with the notion of drifting.

Fundamentally, it is suggested that transition behaviours do not adequately capture the more disguised, subversive external forces that act to control or disempower agency. However, participation positions and modes of participation capture the relational power within a field, highlighting how other actors (teachers, staff etc.) have a role in shaping what actions and agency are possible for young people. Therefore, it is proposed that participation positions offer a useful framework through which the influence of such forces can be illuminated.

Beyond contributing to understandings of the role of structure and agency in transitions, the thesis also highlights findings that have implications for notions of agency/reflexivity in young people's imagined futures and their attempts to navigate to those futures (transition behaviours). Most pertinent in the context of RPA, and the push to encourage young people to embed the value of learning in their imagined futures (learning careers), are the notions of orientations (see for example, Carabelli and Lyon 2016), projectivity (Mische 2009), and horizons for action (Hodkinson 1996).

It is suggested that theorisations of orientations and projectivity reflect a position that portrays the significance of agency/reflexivity in elucidating 'the stances young people adopt towards their lives and futures' (Carabelli and Lyon 2016, p.2). That is not to say that notions of orientations and projections disregard structural/contextual factors, but more that the analytical tone is one which foregrounds agentic and reflexive formulations of imagined futures.

Alternatively, the concept of horizons for action reflects more on how experiences of the past and present shape what is seen as subjectively desirable and objectively possible, therefore taking a different approach to understanding how young people imagine and navigate their future. However, horizons for action still position agency and reflexivity as central in its analysis of imagined futures and transitions. Specifically, the concept of horizons for action suggests they can change as present experiences

rework perceptions of past experiences, thus also reworking horizons on what is possible and desirable.

It is suggested that, while young people do undoubtedly hold orientations and horizons in which futures are imagined, current theorisations focus too heavily on/overplay young people's agency and reflexivity, viewing young people's orientations and horizons as shaped *within* contextual factors, rather than as shaped *by* contextual factors. It is therefore argued that notions of horizons, and particularly orientations, run the risk of overly individualising young people's imagined futures and transitions, resulting in deficit understandings of young people who follow paths through marginal learning.

By instead considering how young people are positioned relative to various contextual factors, the thesis highlights exogenous/contextual factors that shape the set of experiences between inclusionary and exclusionary transitions, and what can be achieved in terms of developing orientations and horizons in those contexts. Much like studies which have forwarded the view that there are degrees of agency (Reay 2005) and degrees of reflexivity (O'Connor 2015), the findings suggest young people experience degrees of participation. Using the concept of participation 'positions', the thesis therefore proposes a stronger analysis of exogenous/structural/contextual factors, which shape what imagined futures are possible. In doing so, attention is given to how young people are positioned relative to various possible futures, rather than how they orientate themselves towards various possible futures.

Thus, the thesis contends that choice, individualisation, and reflexivity are a feature of contemporary youth transitions – in that young people consider options and make decisions as individuals – but that they are more perceived than real for those in marginal learning spaces. Such a perspective supports the notion of an epistemological fallacy (Furlong and Cartmel 2006) as it proposes that collective structured transitions still occur (e.g., the gendered and classed transitions into FE), but that they appear to be individualised as:

> Blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure (Furlong and Cartmel 2006, p.114)

In conclusion, structured inequalities may appear to be a consequence of individual choice and biography, but how young people are positioned shapes what is possible and desirable. In particular, young people who are positioned by forms of non-participation (disempowerment, disengagement, tokenism, obligation, passivity) reproduced their disadvantages associated with race, gender, and class. Therefore, understanding how such factor play out in processes, experiences and decisions reveals the obscured and disguised disadvantages young people face, and how they operate/manifest in more diffuse and disparate ways.

Understandings of (non)participation

The above contributions on conceptualisations and theorisations of learning and transition ultimately highlight the unsuitability of binary understandings on participation and non-participation. In doing so, the findings support literature which espouses the view that binary understandings of inclusion/exclusion and disengagement/engagement are not able to capture the complexity and ambiguity of fragmented and extended contemporary school-to-work transitions (see for example, Fergusson 2004; Furlong 2009; Roberts S and Macdonald 2013; Honwana 2014).

In particular, it is argued that young people experiencing prolonged transitions in low-level VET occupy a liminal space in which they are in a state of limbo and waithood (Honwana 2014) as they are neither 'in' nor 'out' of participation (Fergusson *et al.* 2000). Therefore, young people are in a state of impasse (Allen K 2016) in their imagined futures as they wait (Cuzzocrea 2019) to see how they emerge from the uncertainty that is the 'black box' of post-16 education and training. In essence, young people's capacity to imagine the future beyond FE, based on past and present experiences, is shaped by how they are positioned along the spectrum of participation and non-participation, with those characterised by experiences of non-participation most significantly constrained.

However, the findings suggest that, while there may not superficially be any change in status (for example, NEET/EET; level 1/level 2; education to employment), young people do not simply 'stay still' during a period of limbo in FE. Indeed, the participation positions outlined in chapter 9 and the findings section illuminate how young people move between various positions of participation and non-participation as they move

through extended school-to-work transitions. It is therefore argued that to more suitably capture the complexity, ambivalence, and obscureness of contemporary transitions, it is necessary to move beyond binary understandings of participation/non-participation and inclusion/exclusion to modes of analysis that consider how young people's experiences position them relative to various aspects of being 'in' (rights, empowerment, authenticity, activity, engagement) or 'out' (obligation, disempowerment, tokenism, passivity, disengagement).

On a substantive level, in contributing to understandings on the contemporary nature of participation and non-participation for young people in low-level VET, the thesis builds on literature that challenges views of transitions through FE as straightforward and uncomplicated (Coffield 2008; Lawy 2010) and on literature that examines the experiences of young people in positions of NEET and marginal learning (see for example, Atkins 2009, 2013; Simmons, Russel and Thompson 2014; Maguire 2015a). Specifically, it is argued that RPA has driven the emergence of a group of young people who sit between the 'underclass' of NEET and the 'missing middle' of transition studies (Macdonald 2005; Roberts S 2010).

The fieldwork showed that, by diverting young people away from employability programmes (such as E2E) or attempted fast-track transitions into work, RPA has encouraged transitions into low-level VET, representing continuation in more 'mainstream' learning contexts. The issue is that young people in low-level VET represent an 'invisible cohort' (Atkins 2009) where disadvantages are obscured by their position between NEET and tidy pathways (Roberts 2011).

Ultimately, the findings argue that RPA has created a new strand to the 'missing middle' as young people following low-level VET pathways are obscured and 'disguised' within FE. It is suggested that this group of young people are particularly pertinent for those studying transitions as they sit most precariously on the boundaries of NEET/EET and exclusion/inclusion. These 'precarious participants' therefore reveal a great deal about how disadvantages and inequalities continue to play out in the context of extended and prolonged 'participation'.

In conclusion, the concept of participation positions argues that young people cannot be seen as simply a participant or a non-participant, as there is a spectrum of positions

along NEET/missing middle/academic 'tidy' pathways. The notion of a 'precarious participant' highlights a range on this spectrum between NEET and the missing middle, in doing so illuminating a wider set of experiences that lie between inclusionary and exclusionary transitions (Macdonald 2011; Roberts S and Macdonald 2013). In arguing for a spectrum of participation positions, the thesis ultimately finds congruence with research that depicts youth transitions as increasingly complex and fragmented, while also developing a more nuanced view that 'makes visible' the lived experiences of young people in marginal learning.

Final remarks

In highlighting the often-problematic nature of lived experiences within extended participation, this study highlights the need for a reinvigoration of ethnographic studies. Such studies can illuminate the minutiae and significance of everyday interactions and practices, while also developing a more complex and nuanced analysis of how young people experience participation and non-participation in contemporary transitions characterised by ambivalence and ambiguity.

Furthermore, as emphasised throughout, extending the participation of those for whom school has been unrewarding creates challenges for practices and policies within post-16 education and training. In particular, finding an approach that yields different and more rewarding experiences to those at school was a key dilemma facing the school, college, and their teachers. Equally, there were challenges for young people, as extended participation demanded reworked dispositions and subjectivities towards learning.

The findings ultimately showed that, emerging from the challenges posed by RPA and extended participation are a number of interpretations, enactments, and experiences of (non)participation, which served to shape the nature of learning and transition. Namely, notions of (dis/re)engagement and retention, and a focus on outcomes, performance, and progression underpinned experiences of learning and transition that positioned young people along a spectrum of participation positions. The crux of it all is that reductionist thinking around participation (propagated by a policy discourse that is oversimplistic in promoting the virtues of participation in education and training and in constructing simple participation/non-participation binaries) encourages

policies and practices that are harmful to the learning experiences and transitions of marginal learners and, viewing it more holistically, do not really cultivate participation at all.

The challenge for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers is therefore to better understand what learning experiences support marginalised learners to develop the attachment to learning required for meaningful participation in education and training. Such insight can then enhance understandings of how these experiences position young people across a spectrum of participation and non-participation in their transitions through post-16 education and training. Specifically, the concepts of impasse and waithood could be explored further to capture the experiences of marginalised young people during prolonged transitions. Additionally, future research could usefully examine how contemporary features of schooling, such as educational triage, play out in the minutiae of everyday classroom experiences, and act to (re)produce positions of marginality and exclusion. Moreover, a deeper investigation of the influences on teacher practices and identities could provide renewed perspectives on how teaching is being reconstructed by shifting philosophies and ideologies on the role of education, both societally and economically. In conclusion, ethnography can provide critical perspectives on the power of the classroom and the ways in which participation is structured in increasingly complex ways.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – research letter

University of **Kent**

David Dobraszczyk
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What am I hoping to do?
I am hoping to spend some time with year 11 students in a number of schools across Reading to find out what it is like to be a young person in year 11 today. This will then progress to me tracking a number of these year 11 students once they finish school to find out what they move onto afterwards. For some of these young people this may just involve keeping in touch, for others this may involve offering some support to ensure they stay EET. I hope that by engaging with them during year 11, this will improve my relationship with them and so make the tracking work afterwards more successful.

All of this work is designed to inform a study of the post-16 transitions young people make to try and understand what can be done to ensure instances of NEET are reduced and that instances of transitions into secure education and employment routes are increased.

What will this involve?
In essence, I just want to get a feel for what it is like being a year 11 student so this would involve spending some time in year 11 classes-probably once a fortnight. I would be there in a neutral or supportive capacity in terms of the teacher's perspective- I do not intend to take away from the students learning in any way so I could either be in class in a purely observational capacity or to support the teacher as a teaching assistant might do. I may wish to speak to some of the year 11 students but I would ensure that this is done outside of school time and I would gain individual consent from the young people for this. As described above I would then keep in touch with the young people after year 11 to track their progress and offer support where needed.

What will the school get out of this?
I am aware that tracking students for 6 months after finishing year 11 has now become part of schools' responsibilities and so I would hope that my work would be able to support this. Furthermore, as an experienced youth worker, I would hope that my support for some of your students could ensure they remain EET once they leave school.

Further information
I would be very grateful for the opportunity to come into your school to carry out this work. If you have any questions or queries please get in touch using the details at the top of the page.

David Dobraszczyk

Appendix 2 – field notes example

Appendix ... Field notes examples

Date, time and place: Hartland Academy 16th December 2015

The context/ structure of the event
A school visit, spending time in class with year 11 students.

The space- what's it like?
A school computer room (capacity approx. 16) away from the main part of the school, in the 6th from/ inclusion building.

Who is present?
Lesson 1:
The class is led by a staff member (not a qualified teacher) whose role is to support those young people that are vulnerable, have extra support needs or are at risk of exclusion. There are 7 students in the class- 6 boys and 1 girl. These young people are there for one of two reasons. Either they have been identified as vulnerable or at risk and in need of extra support OR a number of teachers have left meaning certain GCSE's options can no longer be taught as staff have not been replaced- public services, graphics and IT. These young people are therefore in this group to fill the gaps in their timetable.

Lesson 2:
We move to a larger computer room upstairs in the 6th form building. The young people from the first lesson are also in the second lesson so follow the staff member upstairs. They are joined by another 20 or so young people, about 17 boys and 3 girls- these are also young people who have had to drop subjects as teachers have left so the options are no longer being run. They are doing a leadership programme in this lesson. They have been tasked with preparing a lesson (sports) and presentation to deliver to the rest of the group.

What interactions are taking place? Between whom?
Entrance:
On the way in, after break time, I see a group of boys (4-5) being shouted out by a teacher- 'take your jackets off'- there is some chat back 'why sir?' but the teacher raises his voice again and approaches them, confrontationally, bordering on aggressive. 'Take them off now!'

Lesson 1
-The students are asked to turn on their computers and do some revision- they are emailed the work they are being tasked with.

-The students have split themselves into 3 rows of chairs. Two boys next to each other at the front, three boys together in the middle row and 3 boys and 1 girl on the row at the back of the class.

-The two boys at the front are playing games on the computer independently but are also interacting with each other, they are being asked by the teacher to do some revision and respond by saying, jokingly but with mild resistance, 'I don't need to revise sir, I am an A* student'. Sir responds, jokingly, 'Oh yeah, how come when I looked at your last mock exam then it was empty, I didn't see any writing'. One of the boys trades jovial comments with the staff member while the other one largely stays out of it as he is focused on the game on the computer.

-The three boys in the middle row are also playing games on the computer, one makes a brief attempt to look at the work sir has sent but is quickly distracted by one of the other lads who starts pressing the buttons on his keyboard. This leads to a small play fight and an exchange of insults. The young man sat in the middle of the three is directing joking insults at the boys either side of him. One of them is slightly more reserved, he has dark, greasy hair with dandruff- his appearance is slightly more scruffy (poorer looking)- he is the butt of most of the jokes, all focused on his dandruff- 'you're from snowdonia',

-The teacher makes a number of attempts to encourage them to do the revision task- after about 30 minutes of the lesson two of them get the work up on the screen and make some attempt to start the task- the 'joker' in the middle of them at this point says 'what are you two doing', as though he was asking, why are you attempting the work, we need to be in this together- if the others were playing games he would not have to do the work but if he was not the only one he would be isolated which is a different story- he then makes (successful) attempts to sabotage their work and break the focus. One of them complains to the staff member that he doesn't understand what to do 'sir, this is rubbish, what's it about'. Sir makes some attempt to stimulate ideas but his attention is soon drawn away by the boys around him, as he displays frustration at the work.

-At the back of the room the girl is on her phone, sir asks what she is doing, 'I'm playing weed farmer on my phone sir, you have to grow and sell weed'. She continues to be on her phone throughout the session. Two of the boys engage in horse play with the girl including occasional loud shouting and swearing- taking each other's phone off each other etc. The other boy just sits in the corner- he is looking up mountain bikes online. One boy and the girl continue to mess around and be loud and use their phones, they are repeatedly asked (nicely) by the staff member to put them away. 'put them away or I'll give you a yellow card'. They eventually test their luck and sir had had enough. 'Right, give me your planners', 'oh but sir', says the girl in an exasperated/ frustrated voice. Sir takes the planners and returns them after a couple of minutes- during which time the girl continues to use her phone. He hands

the planners back 'right, detention for you ...' the girl is given a detention 'you've got away with it ...' the boy is reprieved from being given a detention.

-I ask how the detention system works- the boy and girl provide a joint reply 'you get yellow and red cards- a yellow card is a 15 minute detention and a red card is a 30 minute detention, detentions are done on one day after school, so if you get a few throughout the week the detentions build up'.

-I ask one of the lads in the pair what they want to do after year 11- 'I am going to do plumbing at Reading College' 'why do you want to plumbing' I ask. 'Because you don't need any qualifications to do this course'. He then shows me the course online and points out the bit about not needing any qualifications. It also transpires that his brother did the same course at college. 'What does he do now, is he a plumber' I ask. 'Nah, I think he just does general construction and stuff'. I ask if he knows that he will need to do maths and English alongside his plumbing course if he doesn't get C grades at school and that he won't be able to progress until level 2 until he's completed them. He says 'I'll just do the plumbing course and leave then so I don't have to do maths and english'. 'Have you ever enjoyed school' I ask. 'Nah not really' he says shaking his head. I ask the boy sitting next to him but he says he doesn't know. His friend says to him 'yeah you do, you were telling me about it earlier' 'No I wasn't' he replies. He seems reluctant to talk about it. We come back to that later and the boy tells me what his mate had told him earlier. 'He said he's going to work with his brother-in-law doing window fitting', his mate looks at me for a response. 'that's good, is that definite? Is he definitely going to give you a job? I say. He nods his said with a smile on his face as though he's happy I approve.

-Some of the students describe support they've had at school with post-16, it seems sporadic and unevenly distributed though. Some have had more input than others. I ask the lad planning on doing plumbing if it's all sorted, if he's applied. 'I did the application with sir'. He'd completed the application with that staff member in a previous lesson.

-Another boy, part of the 3, says he doesn't know what he's going to do next 'I'll see what happens, whatever comes my way'. Another boy in the three says he wants to do an apprenticeship, when I ask in what, he shrugs his shoulders. This boy, the 'joker' for this short moment talking about post-16 seems to get more serious and less jovial.

-I ask the staff member why the public services option has been dropped. He says 'because it doesn't count for the school, it doesn't count as a qualification... and the students didn't pass the exam so they thought they would do this ECDL (IT?) course which counts as a qualification so I'm doing that with them'.

-I ask one of the students what they would be doing in school if they could be doing anything, as opposed to be in that lesson. 'I dunno, doing sport I suppose'.

Lesson 2:

-The young people filter in and sit down on the computers, there is a clear separation between groups that sit together but how this is split is not clear yet. Some of the young people have a mock exam in 15 minutes so they are told to just chill out for 15 minutes before they go off to do the exam.

-Most of the young people come straight in, turn the computer on and start playing games or watching videos online. One lad is watching youtube clips of Call of duty, modern warfare- a vlogger uploading their gaming. He then moves on to watching fights on youtube.

-Another lad is watching basketball clips. Sir asks him to get on with his work, he says 'Sir I've got a game later', he's referring to a basketball game- the school has Reading Rockets basketball team based on site and those who go to 6th form can play for the elite team- they train for basketball while studying. There is a similar opportunity for football due to links with the Reading football club- there is an elite squad that combines sports training alongside education.

-After 15 minutes the large majority filters off to do the exam, about 10 young people remain. Some of them have finished the class work in a previous week so sir says 'you can have a chill out today'. About half of the group is engrossed in playing games on the computer- they don't cause any disruption and the other half- sat at various points across the class engage in conversation amongst themselves, sir and myself.

-A discussion starts about school rules and the unequal application of them between teachers and students. One girl and boy in particular describe a teacher they dislike, Mr Rogers. 'He's a dick' on of them says 'he thinks he's so bad' says another. 'What does he do' I ask. 'He just always has a go at you for no reason'. One girl says that it's stupid that they have to wear uniform and get told off for having their hair a particular way or wearing too much make up- they are picking up on the point that sir has a huge beard and they say it looks stupid and that he's had his haircut too short. Sir says that Mr Rogers is like that with teachers too, if you do something wrong he'll have a go at you for it. He's one of the vice principals. 'He's good with behaviour' says Sir. 'The kids don't mess with him, they do what he says, sometimes they are told off but say they'll only stop if Mr Rogers comes'. 'The problem is he can't do it on his own, he can't be the only one, other staff need to back it up, there needs to be a culture'.

One student says 'sir, where did you have your haircut?'. 'At a Turkish barbers' he replies. 'I think you should have the trim your beard sir, I don't think you should be allowed it' says the girl. 'we get told off for wearing out coats inside and having our phones out but teachers are always on their phones and have their jackets on'. Sir explains that teachers do get warned about the coats but that they may need their

phones for work purposes. 'Yeah well I might need my phone for work' says the girl as if to see it's not fair. 'Well that would be for school then' says sir 'school is your work'. She gives a sarcastic smile, and continues to voice her feeling of one rule for staff and another for students.

-'What teachers do you like' I ask, 'what is it that makes you respect them?'. A couple of them reply 'I they respect me, if they are nice to me and talk to me properly then I'll respect them and be nice'.

-One boy is told to do his CV using a template sir has sent him, another girl (smarter one in the class) helps him- they seem to be friends. He's moaning about it and asking what to write. Sir says 'look at the examples given and just tweak it for you'. I ask him what he wants to do after year 11. 'Go home and sleep, just stay at home' he says. Sir jumps in and says 'we've had a conversation and were thinking retail, weren't we Hayden'. 'But sir, I just want to go home and sleep'.

-Of the young people I've spoken to only a couple have definite plans, another couple have informal plans- work with family etc and the majority don't know or are actively expressing a desire to do nothing after year 11. A few aren't resistant to the idea of doing something but have no plans and are happy to just see what happens.

-I ask one lad what his plans are 'I'm going to do media at Reading College' 'what level' I ask. 'I don't know he replies'. 'What are your predicted grades?' I ask. He has a kind of uncertain, frustrated face 'well not great, I am predicted a couple of A*-C grades but I need 5, I'm not sure about science'.

-The boy and girl (main characters in the class) are gossiping about a fight that happened the day before. They are very excitable about discussing it. Sir says' this school isn't that bad, there's not that many fights, people just talk, they don't actually do anything'. 'What school are you talking about sir!' says one of the boys like what are you talking about sir. 'There's stuff kicking off all the time, you just don't see it sir'.

-One of the girls talks about going round the back of the building to 'look at the flats during break time (smoking). Sir says, 'when I'm on duty I walk slowly to the site so it gives them a chance to have a smoke before I get there. They only flick the fag away and deny it anyway. I know some of them need a fag so I just take my time getting there'.

-At the end of the session I walk away with the staff member across the school. He talks about the lessons he's just taken and the nature of the group, we're talking about the situation the group is in. He says 'The only problem is, there's not much learning, at first I was trying to get them to concentrate and do work but I spent the whole time telling them off and it was tiring me out, I was going home at the end of

the day shattered. I thought what's the point, I'm not going to run myself into the ground for no reason'.

My position- participant/ observer?
I am an active participant in this situation, moving around the class and interacting with different students/ groups of students. I do however have periods when I withdraw from interaction and observe what occurs in this time.

Reflections/ norms/ AOB
Lesson 1:
-There is generally an open, disorganised, light hearted feel to the lesson. The staff member makes some brief and half-hearted attempts to get the group to do some work.
-There is a real mix of willingness to talk about post-16 next steps and a varying degree of awareness and knowledge.

Overall:
-None of the young people have expressed any aspirations or plans beyond next year- none have any clear goals. There seems to be a general lack of awareness of what's out there and motivation/ skills to access these/ find out about them.
-A group of the young people had strong views on the actions and approach of teachers- citing unfair treatment as a factor in their behaviour and attitude.
-There is a definite pattern of participation-these lessons are generally unstructured and focused on alternative programmes- EDCL and leadership course.
-Sir exchanges 'banter' with a number of the students- he generally has a good rapport with them and he doesn't take an overly authoritative stance. Young people comment that they get on well with him and that he's 'safe'. Very little if not no work is done in these lessons.
-Sir comments that his role was really meant to be focused on working with smaller groups that need extra support but due to teachers leaving and gaps in the timetable he has had to occupy these students.
-Some young people are actively resisting the work and get into interactions with Sir, others sit there quietly and avoid attracting any attention.
-None of the young people are particularly naughty, it is all really low level stuff and they just seem bored, they are filling the time.
-There is an unsaid and unarticulated agreement/ rule that none of the group will do any work. Some make an attempt but are quickly foiled by others.

Next time

-What do they think of the lessons they are in – how do they perceive them.

Appendix 3 – coding examples

schooling

- peer pressures
  - alternative forms of capital
  - banter and bullying- status and position
  - social vs. academic
- pupil management
- pupil resistances
  - beauty and hair
  - messing around- having a laugh
  - style- uniform and trainers
  - zoning out
- setting standards
  - raising standard and 'bridging the gap'
  - rules and authority focused
    - unfair and unequal
- teachers-staff
  - interactions with students
    - the battle for control
  - pressures
  - survival strategies
    - a united front
    - enforcing rules- boundaries
      - individualising issues
    - giving up-avoiding conflict
    - negotiation and compromise
    - staying out of the way
  - teacher's tools for engagement- motivation
    - building rapport
    - pep talks

streaming and differentiation

- fixed targets- labelling
- group identities and dispositions- polarisation
  - resistance to attainment discourse
  - social background and group formation
  - Typologies
- motivating or monitoring
- low level extra scrutiny

timing and tempo

- reflect and realise
- the impact of deadlines

Ideal teachers

- control
- equality- 'fairness'
- respect

dominant discourses

- grades=jobs
- learning=attainment vs. learning=participation and dispositions

exams and attainment

- group habitus
- instrumentalism
- school or students

school perceptions

- status and position- relative to others

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