

## Youth Transitions, VET and the 'Making' of Class: Changing theorisations for changing times?

### Abstract

The paper places youth transitions and VET within the global policy context in which economic competitiveness is hegemonic. It compares research from the 1970s/80s, which explored young peoples lived experiences of VET and youth training schemes with contemporary work on similar themes. It argues that there are continuities and discontinuities in the conditions that young people face in their transitions to waged labour. Continuities can be seen in constructions of working class youth, but also by the way in which policy views the economy as characterised by upskilling. This is called into question when set against the existence of significant numbers of low waged, low skilled jobs in the English economy. There are also discontinuities that are the result of changes in class and employment structures. As a result precariousness has become ubiquitous with this existing in tandem with labour that is surplus to the requirements of capital. The paper re-considers youth transitions and re-evaluates the notion of serendipity, suggesting these concepts need to be rethought and reworked in current conditions.

**Key words:** Youth transitions, VET, class, serendipity

*The current neoliberal mutation of capitalism has evolved beyond the days when the wholesale exploitation of labor under-wrote the world system's expansion. While "normal" business profits plummet and theft-by-finance-rises, capitalism now shifts into a mode of elimination that targets most of us – along with our environment – as waste products awaiting managed disposal. (Blackler, 2013, p1)*

The perceived need to compete within a global knowledge economy has dominated economic policy internationally for an extended period. Western economies in particular have seen the route to competitiveness as arising from the development of a knowledge economy which is not only a feature of the global north but also the south (e.g. see OECD, 2014). This has specific implications for young people seeking to navigate transitions from school to waged labour. In this context Vocational Education and Training (VET) is seen by academics, governments, policy makers and business leaders as having a pivotal role. To that end a significant body of work, emerging over more than a generation, has addressed the manner in which VET systems develop in young people the competences, skills and dispositions perceived to be required at work. This paper addresses that body of literature, as well as local and global discussions of Knowledge Based Economies (KBEs) and competitiveness which impact upon transitions to waged employment, in which precariousness and insecurity have become increasingly salient. Whilst there is a rich literature that addresses the specificities of the labour market and its theorisation, in this paper the youth labour market provides the backdrop to our discussion. Consequently, we do not engage in a detailed analysis of its changing features, other than noting the manner in which class, raced and gendered processes remain in place. These notions have been reflected in dual labour market analyses, segmentation (Rees, 1992:30) and Labour queue theories (see Raffe, ed, 1988).

Much of the early research recognised learner agency, albeit within a reproductive paradigm which was dominant in the theorisations developed in the 1970s and 80's. We revisit some of this early work, as well as drawing on contemporary theorisations in relation to place and time. We consider the intersectionality of factors other than class, race, gender, and disability in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the making of particular types of subject which bear on youth transitions from VET/FE to the labour market. Consequently, we pay particular attention to Hodkinson's conceptualisation of serendipity examining its value in helping us understand youth transitions in earlier and present conjunctions.

We utilise this body of work to critique the policy emphasis on competitiveness, that is, policy framed within a neo-liberal context that raises significant questions concerning the social justice implications of youth transitions to waged labour. We pose a number of

questions in the paper. How can we understand transitions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? To what extent are transitions still framed by class origins, mediated by gender and ethnicity? How are they influenced by the national and global contexts in which they sit? Do such analyses presume a particular conceptualisation of the social formation of youth and allied social relations? In what respects can we compare early analyses of VET/FE with contemporary theorisations, and do the former offer additional insights?

### **National and International Contexts**

The policy rhetoric associated with youth transitions to waged labour are broadly similar across the economies of the global north and 'emerging' economies (Piltz, 2016). They are neatly summarised by the OECD statement,

Building the right skills can help countries improve economic prosperity and social cohesion... by contributing to social outcomes such as health, civil and social engagement, by supporting improvement in productivity and growth, by supporting high levels of employment in *good quality jobs* (our emphasis) (OECD, 2014, np).

Such statements are, however, vague about what might constitute 'good quality jobs' and stand as something of a wish list, being inconsistent with UK research which has consistently found that much vocational education is more likely to lead to low pay, low skill 'bad' quality jobs (see, amongst others, Keep and James, 2010; Keep and James, 2012; Atkins, 2010). The 'rotten jobs' described by Keep and James (2010) are a significant feature of the English economy and align with employer interests where there is a matrix of mutually reinforcing factors that incentivise the use of low skilled labour. Soskice and Finegold (1988) refer to the low skills equilibrium as a feature of the English economy (and see Finegold, 1991). This is an economy which is currently characterised by precariousness, under/unemployment and over-qualification. Historically a distinction has been made between the social market economies of the EU and the UK, with the former described as a co-ordinated market economy (CME) and the latter as a liberal market economy (LME). Whilst as a generality these terms are useful, they do play down the uneven development within and between national economies as well as the impact of neo-liberalism on CMEs of continental Europe.

There is evidence to suggest that, contrary to policy rhetoric, in the advanced economies such as the USA, Europe and Australia, globalisation is 'redistributing employment opportunities and incomes' (Spence 2011 np) and that within specific economies this impacts differentially on different groups. The English (as opposed to the UK) economy for example, relies mainly on 'low-cost, low-specification and often low-quality goods and services which can be afforded by those on low incomes either at home or abroad' (Simmons and Thompson, 2011:27; and see Hutton, 1995; Finegold and Soskice, 1988). Pring et al suggest that about 22% of the UK workforce is low paid by EU definitions (2009:140). Keep (2015), commenting on The New Economics Foundation (2012), points out that for non-graduates, most job growth in the future is likely to be in the lowest paying

sectors where up-skilling will have ‘marginal impact’ (Keep, 2015:slide32 citing The New Economics Foundation, 2012). It is also important to acknowledge that across a particular nation, labour market shortages can co-exist alongside regions having high levels of youth unemployment marked by precariousness (Blacker, 2013; Deissinger, 2015; Furlong, 1992; Shildrick et al 2012). In addition, the balance of force between capital and labour and the competitive strategy of the organisation as well as its location within global markets will in part shape the type of labour required, as will the neo-liberal socio-economic context in which this arises. This implies that for many, precariousness has become the new norm, forming part of a cultural habitus that regards and accepts transient and insecure employment as natural and normal. This has little or no connection to earlier Fordist conceptions of a ‘job for life’ or even to some sort of tenuous notion of job security. Importantly, our analysis shows that this precariousness is no longer limited to (largely) working class youth with few academic credentials and limited access to those capitals valorised in education. It now extends to middle class youth, for whom temporary, part time, and unwaged labour increasingly forms part of their school to work transitions. There are, of course, still significant differences, one being the conditions faced by young people from more advantaged class fractions which facilitate the development of ‘a choice biography’. This is similar to those described by Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000:68) as emerging amongst more affluent adolescents in which the traditional connectedness from school, to college, to work has been broken. In this instance work, leisure and study are rationalised and presented in such a way as to generate valorised cultural capital. They become scripted as part of a positive choice biography . This occurs even in those instances where potentially disadvantageous interruptions have arisen which threaten to lead to ‘broken’ transitions. These are smoothed over through the emphasis on ‘balance’ and ‘flexibility’ in order to present such ‘transitional’ experiences in a positive light. This is a cultural practice that seeks to wrest advantage from contingent, or what may be described as serendipitous events.

### **Conceptualising Social Formation and Social Relations**

Whilst competence has been a theme in English and European research concerned with youth transitions, a greater emphasis in English work has been directed towards processes of class reproduction (see Avis, 2016). For example, early English studies of FE and the VET experiences of young people illustrated the way these created identities that served to reproduce class relations, albeit mediated by gender and race (Hollands, 1990). Bates (1991) whose work has an affinity with Lee, Marsden, Rickman and Duncombe’s (1990), has explored the manner in which notions of femininity and domesticity cohere with reproductive processes. This in turn articulates along the lines of gender with a segmented labour market (see Cockburn, 1987; Griffin, 1985; Rees, 1992; Skeggs, 2004). Avis (1988) considered race and ethnicity. Much of this work explored the lived experiences of young people on training schemes or vocational programmes (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980) with little work directly addressing youth transitions and the “making” of classed subjects, in

particular A-level students. Moos, (1979) discussed the way Youth Training Schemes (YTS) prepared young people for casualised and intermittent waged labour. Key to this process was learners' orientations to mental/manual labour. Early studies focused on underachievement and resistance to schooling which propelled young people towards unskilled work (but note, Avis, 1985). These studies suggested schooling was marginal to the lives of these young people, for whom mental labour was abstract and divorced from the real world. Willis (1977) demonstrated the association of mental labour with effeminacy for boys, and Stafford (1991) illustrated the way trainees' actively resisted practices reminiscent of schooling. For vocational students these orientations were reflected in the emphasis placed on waged labour (Avis, 1983). These studies illustrated the extent to which mental/manual divisions of labour were associated with the reproduction of class and gendered identities. Contemporary research has engaged with these arguments, the work of Högberg (2011) in Sweden and Niemi and Rosval's (2013) research in Finland echo these processes illustrating the continued importance of the mental/manual divisions as well as their articulation with gender and class in youth transitions (and see Schneider and Tieben's, 2011, work on German schooling). English FE research, utilising Bourdieu's notions of capital, field and habitus, considers the articulation of structure and agency and the salience of class in education (Colley, 2006). The ESRC's *Transforming Learning Cultures Project* (TLC) (James and Biesta, 2007) discusses formative processes in relation to learning cultures, but under-plays the political implications. With notable exceptions, TLC failed to develop a robust political economy of learners' experiences as a consequence of its case study orientation and focus on transforming learning and teaching cultures (but see Colley, 2006). Recently, following changes in the European labour market, the increased salience of neo-liberalism and precariousness of employment a number of writers have addressed the articulation of VET with the formation of class relations. In Germany, this current is reflected in the work of Schmidt (2010) and Müller (2014) (and see Brown, Lauder and Ashton, chapter 7).

Bathmaker illustrates not dissimilar classed processes in her study of GNVQ students who felt they were not good enough to study A-levels and noted similar processes in HE (Avis et al, 2002; Bathmaker, 2001; and see Atkins, 2009; Ball et al, 2000). Reay, Crozier, and Clayton et al (2007) also point towards the 'making of class' in discussions of working-class students. These students engaged differentially with HE, with those in "tough-entry" institutions holding qualitatively different orientations from those in FE or new universities. Differentiated class-based formative processes can be discerned that anticipate varied class trajectories. Working-class students in "tough-entry" universities follow trajectories that anticipate the 'making' of middle class subjects, whereas those following an HE in FE route face qualitatively different destinies. Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller (2013) have similarly drawn on Bourdieusian analysis to explore the manner in which middle class HE learners marshal 'valued' capitals, both implicitly and explicitly, to secure positional advantage. This is allied to middle class students' knowledge of 'the rules of the game', which may well be

embedded in their habitus. In some respects these findings resonate with Aggleton's (1987) middle class students and their 'effortless superiority'. However, Reay et al's (2007) work is significant in that it explores the manner in which working class students 'inhabit' elite higher education. This work poses a number of important questions concerned with how FE/VET learners occupy the relational space of the classroom/workshop and wider college environs (Dennis, 2014; Smyth and McInerney, 2013). Such questions consider the way in which learners draw upon forms of capital, as well as their emotional 'investment' in educative processes and the salience of these for on-going processes of class formation, that is to say, youth transitions and the making of working and middle class subjects. However, we should not overlook reproductive processes. Preston (2003) has explored the manner in which gender and ethnicity as well as constructions of whiteness are entwined with class. Chadderton and Wischmann (2014) have compared German and English apprenticeships in an analysis informed by critical race theory. They argue "that it is likely that racialised norms shape expectations of the worker and migrant worker, and of who fits where in the labour market and vocational training systems" (2014:330; and see Chadderton and Edmonds, 2015). Processes such as these will bear upon the manner in which young people occupy education and training systems. This rests alongside recognition that it is important to acknowledge the lived experience of race, class, gender and disability as well as their complex interrelationship as people pass through education and training systems.

In addition to these traditional theorisations, some recent conceptualisations of transitions have highlighted cultural and social constraints in terms of space and location which, contrary to the neo-liberal rhetoric, have the potential to restrict young peoples' horizons to the local, rather than the global. These new and developing conceptualisations of transition, include those that address, for example, notions of time (Colley, 2010) and place (Webb, 2014; see also Mayhew and Keep, 2014), and the ways in which these factors can intersect with other characteristics and mediate young people's transitions in particular ways. It is however important to acknowledge that conceptualisations of territory and space have been a long standing feature of the response of working class youth to locality (see for example, Parker, 1974; Patrick, 1973; Pearson, 1983). **In addition, it is important to acknowledge the manner in which these responses articulate to regional and local opportunity structures (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Webb, 2014).** However, Hodkinson and colleagues (see Hodkinson, 2008; Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997), have sought to mark up the importance of contingency and serendipity in these processes, whilst simultaneously locating them within a broader context. Reprising these debates Atkins notes (Atkins et al 2011; Atkins 2016) that serendipity is a significant influence on young people's transitions from school to work through the UK VET system. This argument suggests that transitions are powerfully shaped by serendipity, though this may be better described as contingency. Atkins, following Hodkinson, suggests that serendipity, in the sense of contingent events, is a powerful mediating factor in the

formation of class relations. The paradox is that for those young people drawn from the most disadvantaged class fractions, and who have least access to capitals valorised in education, are unable to take advantage of serendipitous events. In effect these young people become passive subjects of these events in ways that could be potentially disadvantageous. Whereas those from more socially advantaged backgrounds, apart from having greater access to cultural capital, are more adept at mobilising the capitals at their disposal, in navigating the system, and capitalising on serendipitous events to render them advantageous as they 'progressively construct a career', presented within their 'choice biography' (Hodkinson, 2008, and see also Ball *et al*, 2000: 68). Such resources can be drawn on in the pursuit of a transition to higher education which has been 'culturally scripted' as a 'well understood and familially acceptable [route]' (Ball *et al*, 2000:71).

Atkins refers to contingent events which can be potentially advantageous or disadvantageous, depending on the individual's response which in turn is socially and culturally located. Consequently, and as previously noted cultural capital and habitus come into play, shaping the manner in which these events are responded to. In such accounts this implies the passivity of particular fractions of the working class which is set against the active engagement of the more advantaged. Although these analyses emphasise social structure, paradoxically, notions of passivity can serve to pathologise the working class. Furthermore passivity does not necessarily indicate an inactive response but may serve an ideological purpose validating middle class orientations towards action. A concern to avail oneself of serendipitous opportunities may reflect a form of neo-liberal bourgeois individualism in as much as individual positioning and choices are enabled by parental financial and cultural resources.

It is apparent from these theorisations there is a certain homogeneity in the way young people are theorised in VET contexts – as lacking particular forms of cultural capital, and having limited agency. There are unfortunate parallels between these analyses of youth, which come near to adopting a deficit model, and the neo-liberal characterisations of fractions of working class youth as a problem with other fractions seen as a resource (Billett *et al*, 2010). This associates particular forms of agency with specific forms of capital, perhaps also illustrating that academics too commit the cardinal sin of 'othering', or alternatively, an unconscious buy-in to the discourses of neo-liberal economics. A way forward would be to explore the capitals at the disposal of youth from a broad range of social classes and class fractions, and the relationship between these, the enactment of agency and the 'making' of classed subjects across different class fractions. Hodkinson (2008, p10 drawing on Ball *et al*, 2002 and Bimrose *et al*, 2005) has suggested that there are potentially interesting relationships between decision-making styles and position in the field which remain unexplored. This argument is supported by a range of analyses (e.g. see Ball *et al*, 2000; Colley, 2006, 2011), which imply that social class fractions or particular social positioning is significant in its relationship to decision making, to the ways in which young people perceive

and construct careers, and articulate with VET and Higher Education. It is noteworthy that many of these analyses, including more contemporary work, assume a 'traditional' class and labour market structure such as that which existed a generation ago. Such analyses need re-conceptualising in the context of both austerity and the current 'pear shaped' (Allen and Ainley, 2014) class structure and labour market. **Whilst the labour market and opportunity structure is shaped by class, gender and raced relations, it has become increasingly fragmented and individualised, with transitional processes becoming more complex and uncertain (Furlong, 1992).**

It is also apparent that the early analyses alluded to above focus heavily on conceptualisations of class, race, gender, and to a lesser extent, disability and their complex interrelationships. Whilst more recent analyses have introduced other mediating factors in youth transitions, it is apparent that all are concerned with the intersectionality of these different mediating factors with older conceptualisations, particularly class and gender.

The examination of VET and race/ethnicity has in recent years been eclipsed by a concern with gender, class and by a generic concern with disadvantage. This research pays scant attention to questions of race and ethnicity and is a feature of not only the English social formation but also those of continental Europe and the US (Avis, Orr and Warmington, 2016). However in the current conjuncture, at a time of mass migration, there may be a return to questions of the 'racialisation' of VET. **It is however important not to overlook the long standing relationship of VET to ethnically structured patterns of inclusion and exclusion, which again articulate with a segmented labour market.**

### **Individualism, social justice and youth transitions to waged labour**

Within policy discussions of VET there is a suggestion that particular economic policies and social justice are synonymous. This has been articulated globally through international lifelong learning frameworks such as the OECD PISA statistics (Wyn, 2005: 217) as well as at national level through policy conceptions of lifelong learning. This can be seen in the UK where VET is seen as 'a key driver of economic growth and competitiveness and an engine of social justice and equality of opportunity' (DfES 2006:1e). There are, however a number of tensions between these two conflated concepts.

Firstly, in England, the twin notions of economic competitiveness and social justice are dissonant, with alternative and simultaneous policy discourses of failing colleges, with inadequate teachers being unable to provide the skills the country needs (Leitch, 2006; DfES: 2004; DfES 2006; see also Clarke and Willis 1984: 3). It is ironic, therefore, that Harris and Hodge's (2009) research, which re-interviewed teachers involved in the implementation of a Competency Based Training approach to VET in South Australia, found that a generation later these teachers remained resentful of what they regarded as a loss of professionalism associated with a curriculum reduced to 'external prescription'. This mirrored the



experiences of teachers in the UK and USA. Secondly, the conception of VET as an engine of social justice is also challenged by Ecclestone (2004; 2007; 2011; Ecclestone and Hayes 2009, but see also Hyland's rejoinders, 2006; 2009) who describes much low level VET as a form of 'therapeutic education'. Ecclestone argues that the focus on meeting emotional needs and raising self-esteem in vocational education is contrary to social justice as it promotes dependence, creating a vulnerable, diminished self for whom educational 'failure' is perceived to lead to emotional trauma (Ecclestone, 2004:133; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; and see Tomlinson, 1997, 2001).

It is also evident that, in terms of transitions from school to work, there is a tension between the global rhetoric and the possibilities and opportunities available for young people, both objectively and subjectively as they seek to navigate transitions. These are mediated by governments and institutions which offer a narrow range of what policy construes as valuable skills and knowledge. This is in spite of debates which suggest that the concept of knowledge in VET is ill-defined and unclear (Bathmaker, 2013), diminished (Ecclestone, 2011) and of limited exchange value (Keep, 2009). Unlike the policy rhetoric the above arguments recognise that different forms of knowledge have different value in an unequal society. Many young people (e.g. see Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2009; Atkins et al 2011, Atkins, 2016) are aware of the low esteem placed on vocational education yet simultaneously hope that their course might provide them with the secure, high level labour market opportunities promised in global policy rhetoric. Ultimately, however, they are likely to have to make 'pragmatically rational' decisions about their futures, based on the opportunities available to them, which, for the least advantaged will not necessarily live up to their original hopes and expectations as they navigate transitions at a time of economic crisis and high youth unemployment. Whilst no major academic study has as yet explored the implications of austerity for youth transitions, statistical information highlights increased numbers of unemployed youth in comparison to overall unemployment figures (14.4% in comparison to 5.7% of the total working population in England in June 2015, in comparison to 22.5% and 11.1% in the Euro zone, with youth unemployment reaching in excess of 50% in Greece (Eurostat, online). A number of studies (see, for example, Tomlinson, 2013; Simmons and Thompson, 2011, Atkins, 2010; McDonald and Marsh, 2005; Roberts, 2009) have highlighted the impact of extended, broken or protracted transitions on mainly working class young people (and see Hollands, 1990; Education Group II, 1991; writing about an earlier generation navigating transitions following the recession of the early 1980s). Despite this, and the political concerns expressed as a need to provide young people with the skills required by the economy (e.g. DfEs, 2006; DfE, 2011; Richard Review, 2012; DfE, 2013), there remains a policy view that young people follow straightforward, planned trajectories into work. This world view fails to acknowledge the major structural changes that have taken place in the youth employment market since the decline of heavy industry in the 1980s, which has resulted in more complex and individualised transitional processes. Increasingly young people move in and out of work and education, sometimes

becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Those for whom the route to higher education is not an option, are placed within a deficit model associated with being 'disengaged' and 'non-academic'. Thus positioned these mainly working class young people, who are variously ethnicised, pursue particular educational pathways which offer low value vocational programmes. This has implications for social justice and its relationship with class and labour formation.

Vocational education has been extensively problematised across the developed nations as being a primary structure in social class and labour formation (e.g. see Clarke and Winch, 2007). In England, criticism tends to be directed towards lower level vocational and pre-vocational programmes which, unlike German Abitur or French CAP, and despite multiple policy interventions intended to raise 'esteem', have traditionally failed to articulate closely with entry to work or higher education. Recent policy initiatives in England, following the Wolf Review (2011), have to some extent been successful in raising the profile of 'elite' vocational education (Bathmaker and Ingram, 2014). However, low level programmes catering for a significant minority of 16-18 year olds, continue to fail to closely align with entry to work (Keep, 2014). We should also be somewhat sceptical about claims attached to higher vocational education (HIVE) in as much as this will depend on the type of course, the institution attended and students' access to valued capitals (Bathmaker et al 2013).

Echoing our earlier historical argument, Chitty, writing in 1991, suggested that low level VET programmes served to inculcate the dispositions thought to be necessary for low skill, low paid work - punctuality, attendance, time-keeping and discipline (but also see Finn, 1987; Hollands, 1990; Moos, 1979). This was made explicit in the DfES (2006: 22) white paper which stated that policy initiatives in vocational education, must, '*for young people in particular*, extend to inculcating the values, attitudes and knowledge that society seeks from its citizens' (our emphasis). More recent policy draws on a similar rhetoric in relation to young people 'not equipped' to undertake apprenticeships:

It is important that work preparation training covers both the skills that young people will need to find and secure a job (for example, job search techniques, CV writing and interview skills) and the skills and attributes that they need to sustain that job (such as planning, time-keeping, team working, self-confidence, resilience and strength of character) (DfE, 2013; p. 16).

The discourse suggests, implicitly and explicitly, that engagement with the 'opportunities' on offer will lead to 'rewarding, high-value employment' (DfES, 2006: 6) in the high pay, high skilled, global economy, an assertion not borne out by empirical research or indeed with theoretical analyses of these policies.

The likelihood of vocational students on lower level programmes entering low skilled, service sector employment was raised as early as 1988 by Finegold and Soskice, with Ainley (1991:103) arguing that vocational education was being used as a cover for creating a mass

of surplus labour - casual workers, low-paid and semi-skilled to be used as economic imperatives dictate. This argument supported Finegold and Soskice's (1988) discussion of the low skills equilibrium, as well as Ecclestone's (2002:17/19) work that highlighted the articulation between low prices, low wages and monopolisation (see Hutton, 1995). She too suggested that not all employers want or need the highly skilled workers described by neo-liberal, high skills rhetoric which now, as in 1991 and 2002, remains inconsistent with the reality of the job market facing many young people. This is one of unemployment, or low skilled, temporary work with low status training as an alternative to Further or Higher Education. Standing (2011) as well as Allen and Ainley (2014), have made similar arguments. Keep (2004, 18/19; 2005, 547/548; 2014) has pointed to tensions between policy assertions that economic growth is promoted by the mobilisation of highly skilled workers. This is set against the empirical evidence that the skills conferred by vocational education, particularly at its lowest levels, are largely of low value with limited exchange value in the labour market or, indeed education. Further, he highlights the issue that we now live 'in a world of unemployment and under-employment, and with an accumulation of evidence that suggests that over-qualification and the under-utilisation of skill is now a major problem' (Keep, 2014:unnumbered, drawing on OECD, 2013; Green, Felstead, Gallie, et al, 2013). This implies increasing difficulties for the most disadvantaged and those with the lowest level vocational qualifications to enter the labour market.

Policy rhetoric about the 'opportunities' conferred by vocational education has become more moderate – maybe even more realistic - in response to austerity and high levels of youth unemployment. For example, the 2006 DfES paper states that policy changes in vocational education will 'equip young people ... with the skills, competences and qualifications that employers want, and which will prepare them for productive, rewarding, high-value employment in a modern economy' (p6). This can be contrasted with more recent rhetoric, at least in relation to lower level, low value vocational education which merely refers to 'securing a job' (DfE, 2013, p11). However, at the same time a deficit model of youth has become more firmly embedded in policy discourse, and, as noted by Billet et al (2010) two dissonant – and increasingly polarised - models of youth are articulated by global neoliberal economic (and lifelong learning) policies. Youth is conceptualised as a problem or as a resource, with these notions objectifying youth as belonging to one of two distinct categories. The deficit model perceives youth – and, implicitly, working class youth - as a problem to be solved, a characterisation first noted over three decades ago (Clarke and Willis, 1984: 1), and forming a stark contrast to an alternative 'utilitarian' (Ball et al, 2000:146) conceptualisation of youth as a resource or form of human capital. These discourses seek to justify themselves by utilising an ill-defined notion of reciprocal social justice: that if young people engage with the 'opportunities' on offer, they will have the 'high-value' skills for employment in a 'modern' economy and thus will no longer exhibit the problematic characteristics of social exclusion. Such rhetoric raises serious questions about the actuality of social justice, and the ways in which it can be eroded, rather than

engendered, by VET systems. It is, however, consistent with global policy discourses, which, as argued by Billet et al (2010, citing Evans, 2002 and Stokes and Wyn, 2007), promotes 'the need for young people to engage actively in and manage their own learning' (p.475). Crucially, such discourse problematises particular individuals rather than a flawed system, holding them personally responsible for their failure to participate in a neo-liberal knowledge economy. This diverts attention from any critical consideration of the system since it obscures the existence of systemic and structural failures which confine people to an allotted place in life, constrain individual agency and replicate social class and other social inequities. Such a stance reflects what Brown (2013) refers to as 'performocracy' which draws on notions of individualism, individual failure and a competitive labour market. 'Performocracy' can therefore justify not only the unemployment of working class youth but also the over-qualification, un- and underemployment of middle class youth, which under neo-liberalism is construed as a result of the inability to compete effectively in a competitive market place where winners take all.

### **Concluding remarks**

The early sociologically orientated work on youth transitions engaged with theorisations of social reproduction pointing towards the significance of class, race and gender as well as their articulation with mental/manual labour. This work was set within a particular western socio-economic context in which industrial capitalism was facing secular decline. As a consequence class structure has not only become more fractured but the erstwhile security of the middle class has been undermined. Allen and Ainley (2014) suggest that in the UK the class structure could be described as pear shaped with the great mass of employees being part of the insecure working/middle class. This could lead us to rethink the way in which we both conceive of youth transitions and the class structure in the current conjuncture. Yet there are also important continuities. Despite increased access to education mental/manual divisions remain important, as do those of class, race and gender, which in turn articulate with a segmented labour market.

In our analysis of earlier and contemporary youth transitions we see both continuities and discontinuities. Significantly, despite increased access to education mental/manual divisions remain important, as do those of class, race and gender. However, there are important distinctions. Whilst the primacy of class remains significant, recent analyses show a re-composition of the middle class in response to structural changes in the youth labour market which have led to over-qualification, un- and underemployment of middle class youth. Thus, middle class youth transitions are now marked by precariousness in a way which was characteristic only of working class youth transitions in earlier times. Early analyses through their adoption of a fairly rigid model of reproduction tended to focus on the way in which 'working class kids got working class jobs', albeit that this process was mediated by race and gender. Our earlier argument has emphasised not only the re-composition of class relations but also the making and re-making of classed subjects. The point being that class relations are processes that are constantly being re-shaped and re-formed. At the same time it is important to recognise that at least some middle class youth continues to be privileged by access to, and the capacity to effectively mobilise, capitals

valorised in education. In both cases however, increased precariousness makes the progressive construction of a career (Hodkinson, 1998, see also Ainley, 2013) more challenging. Extended transitions are a feature of both early and contemporary analyses, as are deficit models of working class youth. Over time, however, we see an alternative characterization of youth as a resource coming to the fore. More recent policy presents these polarised characterisations rather as 'carrot and stick' interpretations of the outcomes of buying into or rejecting neo-liberal discourses of lifelong learning and the knowledge economy.

Theoretically, analyses continue to draw on Bourdieusian, Marxist and Feminist interpretations, with a smaller number utilising Critical Race Theory. Early analyses consider intersectionalities of race, class, gender, and to a lesser extent, disability. Contemporary analyses overlay these with consideration of other factors such as time and space. Much research reflects ongoing concerns with the way in which policy aims to produce particular dispositions that align with employer need and to interrupt the deficit model of youth. Whilst recent work attempts to develop a more nuanced understanding of the issues associated with school to work transitions, the continuing emphasis on class as the primary mediating factor in the making of subjects, implies that early analyses remain significant and pertinent. Whilst there are discontinuities between earlier and current analyses there remain important continuities in terms of class, even though the class structure has become hollowed out.

These issues raise questions about how we could move forward in terms of policy and theorization of school to work transitions, and develop our understanding of these in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In policy terms, starting points might be a more honest rhetoric which acknowledges the need for casual and part-time workers. VET policy remains silent on this issue, despite extensive debates in the UK on, for example, zero hours contracts. A second issue to be addressed in policy concerns the type and nature of knowledge conferred by VET (see, Harris and Hodge, 2009; Bathmaker, 2013; Bathmaker, Ecclestone and Cooke 2011; Avis, 2016). In terms of empirical and theoretical work on youth transitions, no major studies have been undertaken since Hodkinson's seminal study in the 1980s, and Ball et al in 2000. From Ball et al we have mobilised the notion of choice biographies and from Hodkinson that of serendipity, which needs to be located within the patterning of social relations. The same contingent or serendipitous event will not necessarily be experienced in the same way by those occupying different class positions. By locating serendipity socially we can go beyond the term's individualisation. In this way we are able to avoid its leanings towards a neo-liberal bourgeois individualism. After all, neo-liberalism has undermined the collectivities of class replacing them with individualised opportunities, which closely articulates with an under socialised notion of serendipity.

There is a clear need for empirical work such as longitudinal studies, ideally across international boundaries, that explore wider transitions amongst young people from a broad range of class and cultural backgrounds. Similarly, the primacy of class in both early and contemporary analyses reflects the importance of continuing to frame theorisations of VET and youth transitions in this way. Theorisation need to explore these processes in terms

of class fractions - middle as well as working class, taking cognisance of changes in the class structure, whilst acknowledging the intersectionalities of race and gender.

Finally, it is worth noting that the local remains a significant mediating factor that frames young people's *decision-making* albeit that this cannot be thought of outside the global. That is to say, the global is lived through the local. The closure of an industrial plant can have a decisive impact on the local opportunity and employment structure which brings into visibility the significance of globalisation and neo-liberal economic policies. Local opportunity and employment structures may be taken for granted but there will be a global impact which will not necessarily be visible to those living in the locality. There is however another implication of our analysis which emphasises changes in employment structure. Such changes have led to precariousness being a feature of people's working lives. This sits alongside the displacement of people from waged labour who are surplus to the requirements of the economy. Blacker refers to this surplus labour 'as waste products awaiting managed disposal' (2013:1). Such a tendency can be expressed in the manner in which disadvantaged youth 'churn' between periods of unemployment and low waged work as well as the underemployment and precariousness of graduate labour. Perhaps in the current conjuncture we should problematise and dispense with the notion of transition, rooted as it is in Fordist conceptualisations of 'jobs for life'. Youth transitions to waged labour in the current conjuncture are provisional, marked by a precariousness that can easily be broken.

On a more optimistic note, it seems possible that neo-liberal policy will run its course, facing opposition from a number of different social movements which express opposition to neo-liberalism and globalisation. These diverse movements holding slightly divergent politics may challenge the hegemony of neo-liberalism. Movements such as Occupy, anti-war coalitions and environmental groups, may question current neoliberal policy. Mass migration of economic and political refugees, both within and beyond Europe may also serve to problematise the tenets of competitiveness, marketization and commodification. Whilst none of these individually will change the perceived demands for competition and economic success on which VET policy is predicated, but taken together, could contribute to wider social and economic change. As VET academics we need to be prepared for these changes, with thoughtful and detailed empirical work and theoretical analyses that seek to contribute to a more socially just society. This is a type of revolutionary reformism that aims to work towards the long term transformation of society. This reformism works with the current grain of policy but which anticipates a fairer, more just society, which transcends the inequities of neo-liberalism and the blandishments of social democracy.

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