

SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS AND THE LIFE-COURSE: AN ECOSYSTEMS ANALYSIS OF A COHORT OF AT-RISK YOUTHS IN MALTA

DAMIAN SPITERI

Abstract – *The manner in which school to work transitions are approached by young people is a significant aspect of their educational experience because of the implications that this transition has on their overall socialisation as members of society. This exploration is focused upon how a cohort of young men who attended a second opportunity all-boys' school for at-risk students in Malta, in the early to mid 1990s, engage in these transitions. It is aimed at defining how influential the participants perceive their relationships with their primary carers or families-of-origin during their upbringing years to have been in their defining occupational or career outcomes, whether their schooling influenced these beliefs, and how this was further evolved as they gathered increased work-experience over time.*

Introduction

Young people today witness and live the existence of what Furlong & Cartmel (1997) call 'diversified routes into the labour market' (p. 40). This implies that the linear transitions that characterised such studies as Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour* may not be as immediately applicable to wider society as they were when Willis' work was published originally. This is because, very often, in today's times, people opt to take up different jobs, rather than choosing a 'job for life'. This infers that transitions tend to have become more protracted than they were traditionally (Jones & Wallace, 1992; Hannan, Raffae & Smyth, 1996; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Walther et al., 2002). Young people today thereby envisage changing jobs time and time again, sometimes re-engaging themselves in schooling in some interspersed period between different jobs, or somehow combining schooling with work.

So as to avoid stereotyping the young people through simply focusing on them as 'the young people who once attended this school', an ecosystemic appreciation of their reality is being proposed. The ecosystemic model does not focus so much on distinguishing between what is in the person's realm and what is in the situation's, as is traditionally done when adopting a 'person-in-situation' approach. Rather, it views any data given as a transactional complexity that cannot easily be broken down into any component parts. Thus, as suggested by Gilgun

(2005), school to work transitions are presented as being on a meso-level as they are influenced by the combined influence of generally two micro-level factors such as school-work, work-home, or home-community. They are also influenced by exo-level factors such as the type and quality of employment available. Another further influence is on the macro-level factors. These would include such societal aspects as the manner in which gender is constructed and lived. Such factors may serve to impede certain jobs from being available to certain people.

The ecosystemic approach subscribes to an unfolding and unpacking of people's life experiences within a broad social and personal context. Since life-course analysis is also geared to essentially exploring 'the total space' (Levy, 1991, p. 90) in which people's lives evolve, it can be clearly seen to augment ecosystemic approaches to describing, understanding and exploring reality. Hunt (2005) traces the origins of the life-course perspective to the Chicago School of Sociology, including the symbolic interactionism approach relating to the growth of the self resulting from social interaction and internalisation. The life-course approach envisages exploring people's interactions within the context of events and circumstances as they actually take place within people's lives (Levy, 1991; Hunt, 2005). It lends itself to a psychosocial understanding of reality that addresses itself to the total matrix of things of which individuals, families, groups and communities are constituents, and where the whole is thereby greater than the sum of the individual parts.

The life-course approach is highly consistent with the adoption of an emic view of the evolving nature of the participants' lives and has been deemed to be of particular value to this study due its consideration of the social surroundings of individuals (Gielle & Elder, 1998). It thereby subscribes to the notion that people can participate simultaneously in multiple activities, and that roles and role changes do not necessarily occur independently of one another (Marini, 1984). For instance, it is possible to be first a husband and then a father, and it is equally possible to be both a husband and a father simultaneously. Yet, there is also an element of the person's 'adaptation to concrete situations and events' (Hunt, 2005, p. 23) that is implied, as can be seen if assessing the impact that being a husband and a father has on a person's life, in particular from the point of view of the person concerned.

Thus, within the context of a cohort of people who once attended second opportunity schooling, focus needs to be laid upon exploring their subjective understandings of events and circumstances that arose in their lives, their interaction with other agents of socialisation that impinge upon decisions that they take, and the multiple life-course activities that they engaged in as seen and understood even prospectively. Stated otherwise, the life-course approach as adopted in this study, is directed at generating an exploration of the sum-total of experience, reflection and action that comes to be embodied in the participant's sense of being, knowing and

doing at any given moment in time and its impact as understood in future. This implies that any decisions that the participants make is not correlated with a singular self-efficacy, but rather with influences stemming from dynamic interactions with other people or with events that somehow leave a mark on subsequent decisions that people take. This, nonetheless, does not override the influence of structural factors that may be experienced through an intergenerational taking up of similar jobs or of other factors, such as whether a person resides in an area that is stigmatised and thereby finds it less easy to find a job than had s/he come from elsewhere.

The present study thereby explores how influences deriving from families-of-origin and from schooling, within a wider ecosystemic perspective, instigate people to take certain life-course decisions when they are at a later age. Ekstrom et al. (1986) found out that among a cohort of high school students, those who stayed on were differentiated from those who dropped out, in virtue of a number of dimensions. Those who dropped out, generally, had a lower socio-economic status. They also tended to lack any form of home-support for education. Furthermore, they had overall negative attitudes toward schooling and school work. This finding nonetheless triggers off another line of questioning. Namely, how do participants perceive and experience such factors, and how do they employ this 'data' to forge decisions, particularly in the labour market?

This line of questioning stands at the centre of the current study, which focuses on at-risk young people in Malta. These young people were assigned, when at school, to attend a special second opportunity school, given the *nom-de-plume* of St. Paul's School. St. Paul's offers an educational set-up for students who are either habitual school absentees or who present behaviour that the authorities deem to be overly disruptive within the mainstream system of schooling. The participants in this study either rejected the mainstream system of schooling or they were rejected by it. This was when they were aged around 14 to 16. This is the age-group for which this school caters. By focusing on this particular group, I explore their school-to-work transitions. The aim is to better understand how these young people approach work and how they position themselves in relation to different jobs and occupational outlets within the broader labour market over their life-course.

Methodology

The participants were purposely pre-selected to have attended St. Paul's between 1990 and 1995. At the time of writing, they were aged from approximately 25 to their early 30s, since they were born between 1975 and 1980. This age-related criterion generates a greater consistency in the study than would

have been possible had a wider age-range been rendered permissible. This particular homogeneity is suited to an analysis of the participants' assertions using a qualitative methodology that is consonant with the idea that every participant's experience of events in his life is unique (Kelley, 1995). Moreover, such a methodology allows for a greater appreciation of subjectivity since quantitative research tends to be more positivistic than its qualitative counterpart. For instance, it may not always be possible to 'break the data down' into 'variables' that can be easily defined, quantified and then analysed in the light of the quantifications suggested – as is ordinarily subscribed to in quantitative analysis.

The qualitative approach adopted involved the use of individual interviews with six participants. Each interview lasted around an hour and was commenced with the researcher explaining what the interview aims at exploring. Participants' informed consent was obtained after sharing with them relevant information regarding confidentiality. They were also furnished with data on other issues, such as how the research findings would be analysed and presented. The researcher adopted a low profile during the interviews, intervening only when the clarification of certain points was necessary or to otherwise engage the participants in further developing their stories. Interviewing was chosen as the preferred method of data collection since it allows an easily accessible way of gaining the interviewee's trust. Data collected could be validated by asking further questions. More importantly, interviewing allows people space to engage in personal reflection when building their 'narratives'. The latter would be used in this study to reconstruct the participants' experiences.

Interviews were analysed using grounded theorising. This involves analysing participants' narratives in a flexible way that allows the identification of narration themes. This approach is a means to bring out specific interpersonal contexts, life-experiences, events and subjective understandings stemming from a theory that is developed inductively from a corpus of data. The process involves three steps – namely, open coding, axial coding and selective coding – even though this process is cyclical rather than linear. This is because the nature of coding in grounded theory brings about a situation where it is necessary to return and re-examine the data for different pieces of information at different times. New topics may emerge while the data analysis is taking place. These would need to be explored to saturation, taking note of variations and deviant cases that can further consolidate the grounded qualities of the theory that is being developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Open coding usually takes place mainly at the beginning of a study. This type of coding involves conceptualising and categorising data. It is approached by identifying, labelling and categorising individual phenomena that are then clustered together and related to one another as themes to form categories. Within the present study on school-to-work transitions, these categories were phrased

using words that were elicited by the participants themselves, what Strauss & Corbin (1990) call 'in vivo' assertions.

Axial coding is the process of relating categories to their subcategories by linking them at the level of properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Properties are 'characteristics of a category, the delineation of which defines and gives it meaning' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 101). Dimensions show how each property can vary, for instance, on grounds of frequency or occurrence. In the current study, axial coding was approached by engaging in an exploration, using the constant comparison method, about any interrelated patterns that could give rise to a phenomenon's occurrence. The concepts that emerged during the open coding were re-assembled using propositions about these interrelated patterns. These emerging propositions then formed a theoretical framework that served as a guide for further data collection analysis. At the end of this stage, the core categories and their relationships were formed.

Selective coding is normally the final stage of data analysis in grounded theory, as it builds upon the previous open and axial coding strategies. Selective coding is 'the process of selecting the central or core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 16). At this stage, theoretical saturation must be reached, implying that no new properties, dimensions or relationships would be discovered during analysis. Two central concepts that emerged from this analysis were that: (i) any actions that participants have taken in their later years have been influenced by other people, particularly those who served as agents of socialisation during their upbringing years; and (ii) any actions made were deemed by them to be subject to their exercise of personal agency.

Results

Co-constructed realities – 'I would not be where I am had it not been for my family when I was younger'

The participants were interested in jobs that could offer them 'satisfaction' as they defined the term. Particular themes that were clearly expounded by the participants included use of physical strength and job-security. Enrico claimed that his view of a better job was one where he could use physical strength:

Then I managed to find other work, in construction as well. It is there [in this line of work] that I find my satisfaction. It is there that I am happiest. I build, I carry and I suffer just as my older brothers do. ... and like until some time ago, my father did as well.

‘Building, carrying, and suffering’ are usually construed as tenets of blue-collar jobs. There is a particular habitus that is invoked. This is best illustrated by using Bourdieu’s (1976,) assertion that ‘each family transmits to its ... [members], indirectly, rather than directly, a certain cultural capital and a certain ethos. The latter is a system of implicit and deeply interiorised values [and thereby an integral aspect of habitus]’ (p. 110). From an ecosystemic perspective, a number of inter-operational influences can be observed. The reference to the older brothers and father working as they did implies that Enrico must have received messages that compensated for the suffering that he deems as intrinsic to the job. Thus, rather than focusing on working in construction, he is focusing on something that his family members did, and this is seen in a positive light.

On the other hand, Gigi – rather than in the intrinsic motivators cited by Enrico – was more interested in the security that a job offered:

I left that job as a barman because I was fed up with the fact that they always promised me the wages that they owed me, and these wages never turned up. I left and worked as a cleaner in the bar that was next to theirs. That was the first job that I found [after this happened]. I went and I took it. Both my parents had been unemployed for some time. Neither one knew how to read and write. Thereby they did not find work easily. Being unemployed is not exactly something to shout home about, I’ll tell you that much. As far as I am concerned, I could work at every type of work, the most important thing is that I am working.

The account that Gigi offers relates to his own suppositions about what he considers as normative and appropriate behaviour of his employers. He brings out clearly that individuals and their environments have a potentially inter-influencing effect. Unlike Enrico, he did not gravitate to a particular type of job since he perceived it as something familiar. He referred specifically to his distaste of the possibility of being unemployed, something he had witnessed in his family-of-origin. From an ecosystemic perspective, there is a reluctance to separate the person from the environment, and in Gigi’s case, his choice of work must not be seen strictly in the light of any one parameter, such as class reproduction. Rather, it must also be seen in its particular transactional context. His family’s choice of jobs was limited by low educational levels. Although proud that he had achieved more educationally than his parents did, Gigi mentioned unskilled and semi-skilled jobs as opportunities he engaged in¹. While Enrico and Gigi were assigned to St. Paul’s School, this, in itself, is not indicative of their underachievement nor is it a statement of their class background.

In contradistinction, Paolo and Melchiorre come from a middle-class background. Melchiorre’s father was a clerk, whereas Paolo’s was a teacher.

Melchiore, who was working his way up in the army, claimed that:

... in order to achieve a high-up position in the army, exams are what you need. Till now, I always managed to achieve a pass in whatever examinations I sat for. Now I aspire to go in for even more examinations. There is a chance that I may also be sent abroad to pursue my studies even further. If I pass in my examinations with flying colours, they [my superiors at work] are very likely to send me [abroad]. ... I always remember my father's words when I was younger. He always used to tell me 'study – whatever you study will be for yourself'. Today, I say that it would have been better for me if I had taken heed of his words. ... Recently, he told me that if I want to study to get somewhere higher up in the army and I need a push financially, then he is ready to help out.

Melchiore originally joined the army at a low rank. While he may have had the ability to realistically achieve a more senior rank, he was held back by the lack of certification that he is now aspiring to achieve. Paolo, on the other hand, was more inclined to derive his own goals from his aspirations to proceed in his studies in computing. He undertook a series of computing courses so as to design his life-course around an occupational area of his own choice:

The fact that I have chosen my career has given me a certain amount of maturity ... as a career I have chosen computers and now that I have sat for my first examinations and succeeded, I shall carry on with the others. As you know, I have carried out a number of jobs. However, previously, I had never discovered a suitable line of work for myself. When I used to work with Cable Television, and I did well over there, I kind of managed to be in a better position to decide what I wanted out of life, work-wise. From there I went on to find a job in computers, I became more conscious about my strong points, and I also started to study by myself and attend courses on computers. Today, I run my own small business in computer repairs. I am also aspiring to work as an instructor in one of the private schools When I was younger, my parents always tried to encourage me to take an interest in my schooling. It was from there that I derived all the enthusiasm to study that I have today. I always remember my father with a book in his hands.

Both Melchiore and Paolo were interested in achieving certification. Both refer to family-of-origin contexts where they were 'pushed' to study. Moreover, both observed that their lack of interest in schooling when younger did not discourage them from studying further once they were older in view of investing in a career. Using ecosystem thinking, this recognition of the full field of events and transactions present in their case moves the focus away from a narrow view

of individual pathology, either that associated with their placement in St. Paul's or that associated with emotional characteristics exhibited when they were younger. Melchiorre directly refers to his father's positive reinforcement of his schooling and how this served to influence future decisions. Melchiorre makes more emphasis about his father's assertion rather than to his actual (lack of) schooling, showing the influential aspect of the home-school focus during his childhood. Consonant with this consideration is that both Paolo's and Melchiorre's class background assisted them to come to their current position and perceive predictable futures unfolding before them. In their case, class differences and family connections were not really annulled when they attended a particular type of school and opted out of achieving the relevant certification at a young age. Rather these aspects of their socialisation and upbringing receded for some time 'into the background relative to the newly emerging "centre" of the biographical life plan' (Beck, 1992, p. 131), this 'centre' being their current career aspirations. From an ecosystems perspective, this implies that rather than focusing merely on their individual strengths and shortcomings, their current aspirations must also be viewed in the light of the total social context and their transaction with this larger environment.

Intrapersonal realities – 'If it has to be, then it's up to me'

Giacomo and Taddeo described their upbringing as being '*highly problematic*' and '*not lacking in challenges*' respectively. Both Giacomo and Taddeo had been what can be termed as child carers, namely children who looked after their parents rather than the other way round. Giacomo's parents were both binge alcoholics and Taddeo's mother suffered from depression. Giacomo's father offered very little support to the family. Taddeo's father had become chronically in debt and, due to stress, he was unable to work during most of Taddeo's growing-up years. The manner in which Giacomo and Taddeo describe their backgrounds shows that they depict their environments as the matrix of their lives, something that has influenced them, and something that has triggered their reactions. From an ecosystems perspective, the deep transactional connectedness between the family and the individual is brought out by exploring the interrelatedness between different influencing factors on people's lives.

For instance, although both Giacomo and Taddeo attribute the manner in which their life-courses evolved to decisions that they had taken themselves, they also attribute their success to their ability to allow other people to be involved in their lives. Giacomo experienced an upward social mobility compared to his unemployed father and mother. He obtained his 16+ school leaving examinations and eventually embarked upon a post-secondary level course of studies in

catering. Taddeo carried out a similar course of studies abroad. His father had worked as a bus-driver for some time and his mother was unemployed.

In Giacomo's case, there was a teacher at St. Paul's School who took a personal initiative to invite him home to study. Giacomo attributes his success in examinations to this initiative. In Taddeo's case, he was placed in care for some time when his parents found that they were unable to cope with family life. He credits the inputs from professional staff, including teachers and social workers, in assisting him in his own career progression. In his adult life, he then re-constructed an alternative account of his care years by describing himself as a 'boarder':

My going to St. Mark's was not a totally bad idea. Today, that is how I think of it. However, at that time, I wanted to be at home more, even if I do not look upon the experience as an ugly one. It was like I was a boarder at a school somewhere.

Giacomo and Taddeo do not confirm Willis' (1977) assertion that working-class kids attend working-class schools and end up with working-class jobs. They allowed educators to take an active interest in their lives and to thereby foster overall contexts that were supportive of their learning. If analysed from an ecosystems perspective, where such aspects as the interpersonal relationships that they fostered with their teachers are seen as part of a larger series of events in these people's lives, their account cannot be totally isolated from the home environment. Thus, Giacomo explained that his mother always encouraged him to take his studies seriously. In this manner, he experienced a similarity in frames of reference that was reinforced mutually at home and school, even though he asserts that his only memories of his father were those of a person who hounded his family home with violence. His mother had transmitted her respect for schooling to him, as can be judged by his simultaneously working and saving money to attend a post-graduate course:

I have mother to thank for my having succeeded as I have done, because, despite everything – that she used to get beaten by my father, the alcohol problem that she had, despite everything, despite the fact that I missed a lot of schooling, she instilled in me a respect for studying. Today, I know that that was the biggest present she could have given to me.

With regard to the interventions of other professionals, Giacomo states that:

They opened all the doors for me. The social worker encouraged me to attend that school [St. Paul's School]. The teacher took a personal interest and used to come teach me at home. They managed to give me the desire to carry on battling with life. ... From there I learnt that so as to advance

myself in life, it is up to me to do it. And if I was to study something, I am doing that for myself. So as to get on in life, I have to study. I have to choose a line of work that is appropriate for me, I have to become an expert in that line of work, and carry on learning within that line of work for the rest of my life.

Giacomo's focus on his own intrapersonal efforts is brought out through his assertion that he had developed the '*desire to carry on battling with life*'. Nonetheless he attributes this motivation to his interactions with the professional people he refers to. Their interventions served to influence him further by empowering him. As a result, he was reflexive and engaged his studies in a purposive way, understanding how his choices and behaviours impinged on the evolution of his life-course.

In contradistinction, Taddeo distinguished himself from his peers when he was in care and built a self-identity of a resilient person. He claimed that he did not want to be like his peers at the 'boarding school' and that he would do himself an injustice if he were like them. This is explained in the following passage:

I was a repeater and around 12 years old when I went to ... [the school in question]. It is not that I had not learnt anything at primary school, as there were things I did learn. I think that even there [St. Mark's] I was [academically] more advanced than the other students. Many of them had foster parents, and they used to say that their mothers or fathers used to see them as burdensome. Remembering the students there [St. Mark's], I realised that I had a gift with the upbringing that I had had, and I wished to progress forward. They do so much in life and sometimes they know neither their father nor their mother.

Taddeo held this resilience into his adult life. Just as when at school he wanted to be an ideal student different from the others, in later life he did not want to hold jobs that were not attuned to the manner in which he defined his career progression. After working as a dishwasher and restaurant server, he rekindled his desire to study catering and develop his skills in such a way as to translate his love for cooking at home into a labour market destination:

Because my father had to work long hours, I ended up at home with my mother. She was sick with depression. I had to take care of her. I did the cooking for everyone [at home]. From there I learned to cook. I learned, as well, to love cooking. It was from there that I was inspired with the desire to become a cook.

Both Giacomo and Taddeo bring out the importance of undertaking jobs that they enjoy. Specialising in a job is associated with life-long learning by Giacomo.

With Taddeo, there is more of a chance factor that is invoked in his narrative, for he could have 'learnt' to hate cooking, for instance, on the grounds that it was imposed on him due to his particular circumstances of daily living as a young adolescent. Nonetheless, the narratives of Giacomo and Taddeo show how complex and multifaceted ecosystemic elements are in shaping peoples' lives.

Conclusion: within a defining social context, 'Its my life, I live it as I want to'

Despite originating from a similar class background, research participants did not experience school-to-work transitions in similar ways. Rather, other factors, including home-background and the manner in which the transition process itself was conducted were influential.

Since all the participants were men, this infuses the study with a certain construction of masculinity. This can be evidenced in Enrico's emphasis on physical labour, suffering and forbearance. Melchiore's military aspirations betray certain masculine connotations too. However, other participants chose destinations that were not necessarily associated with masculine constructions of the self. For instance, Giacomo had to cope with being brought up by an alcoholic mother and a violent father. He lived with all the uncertainties associated with an alcoholic home, and yet eventually moved on to pursue post-16 education. Taddeo had a mother regularly hospitalised for depression. Yet, this did not stop him from pursuing and obtaining certification in an occupational area of his own choosing. Other participants had to deal with problems of illiteracy in their families-of-origin and looked for jobs that would give them a sense of empowerment so as to avoid unemployment.

Giacomo and Taddeo, on the other hand, perceived certification and personal career mobility as associated with learning new skills. This motivated them to pursue their studies as adults. Labour market theorists (Osterman, 1989; Soskice, 1999) point out that, from among all potential candidates the people who opt to remain on at school are the ones most likely to believe that extending their education would benefit their prospective career. Giacomo's and Taddeo's aspirations are consistent with recent findings in the employment literature which indicate that people 'who want to maintain their employability must be willing to learn new skills regularly' (Watts, 2005, p. 66). Their motivation to pursue adult education opportunities mediated the effects of their class origin and labour market destination. This said, both Taddeo and Giacomo perceived the influences of their families-of-origin as significant in terms of their eventual labour market choices. Yet, in employing an ecosystemic perspective, attention

must also be paid to all interacting elements always present in a case. Identification of transactional factors is subject to understanding how these people engaged in transactions within the context of different agents of socialisation over their life-course.

The study shows that participants operated at an intersection between their individual aspirations and the personal and social capital that they had available to make those aspirations materialise. Their aspirations were forged in the context of the messages that people around them, particularly in their growing-up years, conveyed to them. As Gergen (1985) alleges from a social constructionist position, 'the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is (also) the result of an active cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship' (p. 267). Delving deeper into this line of argument, it is how people perceive the events and circumstances that constitute the stories that they build in their own minds that is pivotal in their approach to reality (Alheit, 1994). However, this process is not divorced from the overall context, the schooling context, the family context, or the labour market context.

Some influences are more evident than others, yet others such as class or gender may not be as apparent. This does not mean that they are not operational and this study shows that such structural influences do play a part in young people's labour market destinations as can be seen when a young person takes up a blue-collar job just as his father had done before him. Notwithstanding this, some participants forged their own life-course by not allowing themselves to be constrained, for instance, by their lack of school qualifications. Others felt that they were in the jobs that they aspired to and that their lack of schooling was less detrimental when seen in the light of their total life-plans. Some of the participants did not see school as relevant to their future careers, implying that their inclinations to social mobility stemming from success at school were allayed.

Overall, thereby all participants face a defining social context, even though they see themselves as living their lives in the manner they want to. Thus, empirical focus cannot be laid on either intrapersonal/interpersonal issues or structural factors that can influence people's lives without also attributing due weighting to such transactional issues – as when students interact with teachers or when they are assigned to a particular school – and this has forbearing on decisions taken later in their lives. This is because how the participants define and handle the different situational factors that they encounter over time significantly influences how they go about living their lives and forging their life-course.

Note

1. Participants like Enrico were limited in how far they could go, as they did not know how to read or write. In considering that in 1995, when they would have been in the 15 to 20 year-old bracket, 51.9% of the working age population had not completed secondary school education (Ammerman, 2004), it is not surprising that certain people in Malta, including some of the research participants, would not have a high standard of education. Moreover, from statistics derived from the year 2000, it has been extrapolated that while 8.5% of those aged between 25 and 64 years in the EU are participating in education or training, in Malta this figure stands at only 4.4% (Camilleri, 2004).

Damian Spiteri has recently completed his PhD thesis entitled 'The School-to-Work Transitions of a Cohort of At-Risk Youths in Malta' wherein he explored how structure and agency interact in the lives of his research participants as they engage in their transitions. Having worked for eight years as a guidance teacher and a teacher of social studies at a school that specifically caters for youths with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, Dr Spiteri has considerable work-based experience with at-risk youths. He currently works as a teacher assigned to the Anti-Substance Abuse Unit that forms part of the Safe Schools Programme, an initiative of the Malta Education Division. Dr Spiteri, who is also a qualified social worker, works as a part-time social worker with Caritas (Malta), an agency which is committed to alleviate poverty and promote human development and social justice. His e-mail address is: damianspiteri@yahoo.co.uk

References

- Alheit, P. (1994) The biographical question as a challenge to adult education, *International Review of Education*, Vol. 40(3-5), pp. 283-298.
- Ammerman, P. (2004) *Achieving the Lisbon Goal: The Contribution of Vocational Education and Training Systems* (Malta Country Report). Athens, Greece: Navigator Consulting Group.
- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: SAGE.
- Bourdieu, P. (1976) The school as a conservative force: scholastic and cultural inequalities. In R. Dale, G. Esland & M. MacDonald (eds.) *Schooling and Capitalism: A Sociological Reader*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (with Open University Press).
- Camilleri, J. (2004) *Repositioning SMEs: Narrowing the Labour Market Mismatch*. Extracts from the proceedings of the FOI Conference on Repositioning our SMEs in the Global Market, Corinthia San Gorg Hotel, 30 January, St. Julian's, Malta.
- Ekstrom, R. B., Goertz, M. E., Pollack, J. M., & Rock, D. A. (1986) Who drops out of high school and why? Findings from a national study, *Teacher's College Record*, Vol. 87, pp. 356-373.

- Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (1997) *Young People and Social Change: Individualisation and Risk in Late Modernity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Gergen, K. J. (1985) The social constructionist movement in modern psychology, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 40, pp. 266-275.
- Gielle, J., & Elder, G. (1998) *Methods of Life-Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Islands, CA: SAGE.
- Gilgun, J. F. (2005) An ecosystemic approach to assessment. In B. R. Compton, B. Galaway & B. R. Cournoyer (eds.) *Social Work Processes*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole – Thomson Learning.
- Hannan, D., Raffé, D., & Smyth, E. (1996) *Cross-National Research on School to Work Transitions: An Analytical Framework*. Background paper prepared for the Planning Meeting for the Thematic Review of the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life, 26-27 September, OECD, Paris.
- Hunt, S. (2005) *The Life Course: A Sociological Introduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jones, G., & Wallace, C. (1992) *Youth, Family and Citizenship*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Kelley, P. (1995) Integrating narrative approaches into clinical curricula: addressing diversity through understanding, *Journal of Social Work Education*, Vol. 31(3), pp. 347-357.
- Levy, R. (1991) Status passages as critical life-course transitions. In W. R. Heinz (ed.) *Theoretical Advances in Life-Course Research*. Weinheim, FRG: Deutscher Studien Verlag.
- Marini, M. (1984) The order of events in the transition to adulthood, *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 57, pp. 63-84.
- Osterman, P. (1989) The job market for adolescents. In D. Stern & D. Eichorn (eds.) *Adolescence and Work: Influences of Social Structure, Labour Markets and Culture*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Soskice, D. (1999) Divergent production regimes: coordinated and uncoordinated market economies in the 1980s and 1990s. In H. Kitschelt, P. Lange & J. Stephens (eds.) *Continuity and Change in Contemporary Capitalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strauss A., & Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Walther, A., Hejl, G. M., Jensen, T. B., & Hayes, A. (2002) *Youth Transitions, Youth Policy and Participation: State of the Art Report* (Working Paper 1 of the Research Project YOYO co-ordinated by the Institute for Regional Innovation and Social Research, Tübingen, Germany).
- Watts, A. G. (2005) Career guidance policy: an international review, *Career Development Quarterly*, Vol. 54(1), pp. 66-76.
- Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.