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A qualitative investigation into opportunity structures and disjuncture in the education-employment transition: 'it's scary, innit?'

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ABSTRACT

We present a small-scale qualitative study of the transition from full time education to employment, focusing on young people who are just approaching this phase of their lives. We explore their understanding of this milestone through a series of focus groups. We also interviewed significant professionals working with young people: school teachers, careers leaders, and local employers. From the responses we identify four common themes: hopes and dreams; careers advice; industry links; and work readiness. While these themes were common to all of our participant groups, the articulation and understanding of them differed, such that adult views contribute to social structures that potentially reduce opportunity, reinforcing the sense of disjuncture for young people. Adult respondents underestimated the aspirations of young people and mistook expectations for ambitions. Both employers and those working in schools recognised a need for improved education-industry links, but there was a mutual sense of incapacity to make this happen, and different understandings of what it might mean to be work ready. Systemic failings appear to exacerbate difficulties faced by children whose families might struggle to support them as they navigate the education to employment transition.

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Introduction

The transition from education to employment is a defining period in the lives of young people, and the success of this transition can be an important metric for developed economies: the OECD publishes regular updates to allow comparisons of youth unemployment between more than 30 nation states, as well as for geopolitical associations such as the European Union. Defined as the percentage of 15–24 year-olds who are out of work but available for employment, the youth unemployment figure can vary dramatically from a nation's average across its working age population: in England in 2019 (i.e. pre-Covid-19), 11.4% of 15–24 year olds were unemployed, against 2.7% of 25–74 year-olds – compared with Germany's figures of 6.2% and 2.6% respectively (OECD 2023). High levels of youth unemployment can have significant financial and societal costs for the state (Mascherini et al. 2012), and can pose long-lasting problems for the individuals concerned: youth unemployment has been described as a 'sticky' condition, from which it is difficult to progress (Gadsby 2019) so people remain stuck in unemployment for long periods. Youth unemployment

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contributes to a two-fold 'scarring' for those entering adulthood, as it is both a predictor of likely unemployment in the future, and it carries a lifelong wage penalty (Bell and Blanchflower 2011; Ralston et al. 2022). In political circles unemployment is seen to have a causal relationship with social exclusion, though this last term is ill-defined and contested, and the relationship with unemployment may be reciprocal or even circular (Thompson 2011).

The transition from education to employment is not necessarily a clear-cut step change. There is no uniform experience for young people, and the transition process may be extended, with a number of different phases including periods of part-time employment mixed with education. Such complexity is believed to be a global phenomenon (Hutchinson and Kettlewell 2015), driven by globalisation, worldwide recessions, and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic (Lambovska, Sardinha, and Belas 2021). The transition to employment has been modelled as a non-linear process in Europe, where competence-based curricula add further complications (Federighi 2018), but even in England where school curricula are tightly prescribed and content-heavy, transitions are 'more fluid, complicated, risky, uncertain and prolonged' than they were 20 years ago (Sanderson 2020). Wood (2017) advocates taking a processual approach to the study of transitions, which might be viewed as part of the ordinariness of life's changes, and which need to be examined within a longer 'genealogical' timescale than is usual. Notwithstanding the processual nature of transition and the potential for this to occur over a period of years – a significant proportion of a young person's lifetime – there is nonetheless a sense of before and after, in the move from full-time education to full employment; the 'before' phase might well be characterised by apprehension on the part of the young person, as suggested by our title.

Apprehension may be considered a by-product of agency: where young people have the autonomy to make their own decisions as they negotiate the education-employment transition they also take on the related risks and responsibilities. The security of the post-WW2 'institutionalized safety net' (Dannefer and Huang 2017) of predictable employment and a job for life has been replaced with a flexible labour market that incorporates the dangers of precarity while emphasising individuality, personalisation and choice: a prospect which may lead to demoralisation and disconnection. In the context of entry to the labour market, personal agency is not unbounded, and even where levels of self-efficacy are high the realities of available options and societal constraints serve to restrict individual agency. Moote and Archer describe a 'self-referral system' for careers support, which not only causes anxiety to well motivated students, but also contributes to social inequities (Moote and Archer 2018, 200).

Schoon and Heckhausen (2019) describe a socio-ecological approach to agency that incorporates multiple factors that shape individual agency in the education-employment transition, putting flesh on Bronfenbrenner's well-known two-dimensional ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1979) to generate a multi-dimensional understanding of agency as a relational construct that incorporates personal attitudes, abilities and actions alongside structural regularities and societal restrictions. In doing so they make concrete the metaphor of 'threads' which Wood (2017) uses to understand temporal and spatial relationships in citizenship and transition, while allowing for external limiting factors to place boundaries on individual agency.

Roberts (2009) provides a compelling argument that, despite ongoing changes to the structuring forces that generate some of these boundaries, the opportunity structures that govern young people's transitions in the UK have not diminished over time. If anything, Roberts argues that the inter-relationships between family, education and employers – the 'threads' identified by Wood, or Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem – have only become stronger, thus reducing the likelihood of social mobility, and preserving the status quo in social strata. While he concedes that the 21st century education-employment transition demands more choices of young people than was the case in the past, he concludes that the main determining factor for their ultimate destinations remains the opportunity structures themselves. Faced with these boundaries to personal agency, again we might expect school leavers to be filled with apprehension, though Roberts refutes this, confidently suggesting that 'most are comfortable with uncertainty' (2009, 362). Apprehensive or not, the

education-employment transition certainly represents a novel situation for young people: one they have not faced before and one with serious life consequences. It is in such situations, where individuals cannot make presumptions, or act in an unthinking or semiconscious manner, that they experience what Jarvis (2008) calls the state of disjuncture. For young people navigating the liminal space between education and employment, the sense of disjuncture is highlighted as it relates to their very sense of being: in addition to understanding the decisions and choices to be made as they enter a new landscape, there is a need to recreate their own identity in the adult world of work. In the right circumstances disjuncture can provide an important stimulus for learning (Jarvis 2012), similar to Vygotsky's proximal zone of development in children (Vygotsky 1978).

Context

Education policies in the 4 nations of the UK have diversified over the last half-century (Rolph 2023) with 1980 being identified as a particular point of separation (Gillies 2013). In England, an overt neoliberal emphasis on a quasi-market in schools, regulated by parental choice, has led to a decentralisation of many services, including those that once supported careers education. At the same time, neoconservative values have increasingly come to dominate political thinking, such that there is more central prescription than ever before. Consequently, schools and other educational establishments have taken on the form of independent service providers, responsible for content and delivery which might be tightly defined by the state. Schools in England have a statutory duty to 'secure independent careers guidance' for all pupils in Y7 (age 11) and above (DfE 2022). Here the term independent refers to organisations outside of the school, though personal advice and guidance may be (and in practice usually is) carried out by personnel employed by the school. They do this in what has been described as an 'increasingly disjointed and confusing landscape' of government-related bodies and organisations (Richmond and Regan 2022). Although the government 'strongly advises' schools to work towards a national standard in careers quality, less than a quarter of secondary schools have done this (Quality in Careers 2022). Schools do not receive any dedicated funding for their careers advice and guidance work, and an independent review described careers support in secondary schools as 'underfunded' (Augar 2019, 55). However, the education provided by schools is seen to be both the secure foundation needed for adult employment, and the remedy for problematic transitions (Hutchinson and Kettlewell 2015). Given the apparent paucity of support for careers education in English schools it is perhaps unsurprising that almost half of businesses claim that young people moving from education to employment (from both school and university) do not have the skills that the employers need (CBI 2018). This has become something of a recurring refrain, suggesting, on an aggregate level at least, that there is a mismatch between the employment for which schools believe they are preparing their pupils, and the workplace reality that those young people might experience. This provides the potential for structural barriers which might lead to disjuncture for school leavers.

In England, most 16 year-olds continue with full-time study up to the age of 18, and approximately half will go on to Higher Education before moving into full employment. National policy dictates that even those leaving school for work at the age of 16 must continue with some form of education or training until they reach 18, though this is not rigidly enforced. In 2019 the proportion of young people achieving this ambition peaked at 81.6% (DfE 2023). The commonly-used NEET (not in education employment or training) figure stood at 6.6% for the same year. UK government data shows the percentage of people that are 'economically inactive' at any given time – that is people that are not in employment or seeking employment. For 16 to 24 year-olds this typically falls from 75% to 14% over those 8 years (ONS 2023), demonstrating the gradual move from education to employment as young people grow older.

This particular study arose from the concerns of a local education and skills group which convened to consider ways to address youth unemployment in a region where this had been consistently high since the closure of coal mines in the 1980s. Anecdotally, the group felt that

careers work in schools was out of kilter with the expectations of employers; meanwhile the voices of pupils moving towards employment went unheard. We take a multifaceted view of the immediate approach to the education-employment transition for young people in England, recognising that the journey from school through to final employment might be convoluted, with influences and decisions that are unique to each individual, and which might vary geographically. We use a small sample of young people, their teachers and advisors, and local employers of school leavers, to investigate attitudes and perceptions within their network of relationships. In our analysis we draw on notions of agency, opportunity and disjuncture in order to relate findings to theory and the broader literature base, in the hope that the study might contribute to the general understanding of education to employment transitions. However, we expect findings to speak to the local context, and provide an evidence base for changes to policy and practice. We note that, in general, family circumstances and social strata contribute most strongly to young people's world views (Dvouletý, Lukeš, and Vancea 2020; Szpakowicz 2022), and reserve these investigations for a further paper.

Methodology

This study focused on two towns in the former coalfields of Nottinghamshire in the UK. Employment here has diversified over recent decades towards a more service-based economy, with less than a quarter of jobs currently in manufacturing and construction, and most relating to retail and services, including administration, education and health. Most of the towns' residents work within their own town, but the level of economic inactivity within the adult population is higher than the national average.

We used a qualitative approach to elicit the views of key individuals within the system. Primary importance was given to the voice of young people themselves, which was collected through focus groups consisting of pupils from years 8 to 11 (age 13–15; total number of pupils = 23). Focus groups are known to support a safe peer environment and avoid the perceived power imbalances of one-to-one interviews for young people (Adler, Salanterä, and Zumstein-Shaha 2019). For the adults we used individual semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility and adaptability within the conversation, while retaining fidelity with the research questions (Ruslin et al. 2022). These were carried out with 11 members of staff from the same two schools, most of whom were teachers. To understand the advice and guidance that is given to young people we interviewed 4 school-based careers leaders (2 were teachers, and two had non-teaching roles), and for an employer perspective we carried out semi-structured interviews with 4 senior representatives of businesses local to the region.

Selection of the individuals in these samples was largely through opportunity sampling. The local education and skills group that had provided the impetus for this work was approached to identify industry leaders who might be able to respond to the research, so those interviewed already had an interest in the education-employment transition. Several schools were approached and two responded to say that we could talk to their pupils and staff; a further 2 permitted their careers leaders to be interviewed. Within the schools the emphasis was on the older children approaching their GCSE examinations which mark the end of compulsory education at age 16 and the beginning of the progression into employment, whether directly or indirectly via college and university.

We recognise the limitations of this approach to convenience sampling and the dangers of attempting to generalise from findings. The study was deliberately small in scale in the hope of a deep qualitative exploration rather than a broad and general study, and using a group that was already interested and invested in understanding education to employment transitions enabled researchers to quickly build constructive relationships with the participants.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, which allowed for recording and subsequent transcription. In both semi-structured interviews and focus groups we used 4 main topics to maintain consistency and give the conversations a focus. These topics were:

the education to employment transition; support provided by schools: what success would look like; and issues relating to the local area. In addition, we discussed the lasting impact that COVID-19 was having on education and employment, though this is largely beyond the scope of this particular paper.

Transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006); an inductive approach was used to generate more than 20 codes with which the data were labelled, and from these we developed 4 themes to explore. We paid particular attention to Braun and Clarke (2012) in order to focus less on what was said within each theme, and more on what the underlying meaning might be. For consistency, one of us carried out all of the interviews, while another carried out all of the thematic analysis.

This work was undertaken after being given a favourable ethical opinion by NTU's ethics committee, and in accordance with the principles laid out by BERA (2018). All participants involved consented to the study and had appropriate opportunities to withdraw if they wished. It was important for all of the individuals involved to be able to speak openly and honestly without fear of possible adverse responses from their school or employer, so all responses have been kept anonymous and in the sections below all names are pseudonyms. Because there are only a small number of schools in this particular ex-coalfield region, neither their names nor the specific job titles of staff are mentioned as this would risk identifying individuals.

Findings

Reflective analysis enabled us to draw together thematic codes into 4 broad themes. There is of course overlap between some of these themes, and where this is the case, some subjectivity has been applied in order to select and sort. However, for the purposes of investigating and potentially minimising negative effects of disjuncture during the period of transition, the following themes serve to illuminate our findings:

- Hopes and dreams: the aspirations and ambitions of young people.
- Careers advice: the support that young people are given prior to leaving school.
- Industry links: relationships between businesses and schools to support the transition to work.
- Work readiness: the attitudes and skills that make young people more employable.

Hopes and dreams

Given that participants were asked about moving from education to employment, it was not unexpected that a strong theme around future plans can be found in their responses. This goes beyond career expectations, and includes optimistic, descriptive accounts by young people, so we use the term 'hopes and dreams' because they were overwhelmingly – but not entirely – aspirational in their ambitions. The importance of aspiration should not be underestimated: quantitative longitudinal studies show that it can be a powerful indicator of later success in both education and employment (Schoon and Ng-Knight 2017; Schoon and Parsons 2002). In our own study one of the pupils commented on the link between aspiration and engagement (with the implication that this might lead to greater success):

> If I had a solid idea I would be a lot more motivated. (Abbey, Y10)

Comments from all 3 of the adult groups also related to the aspirations of young people, though their perspectives were somewhat different, and in some cases adult views are challenged by the outcomes of the pupil groups. Common amongst the adults interviewed was the idea that many young people have 'unrealistic' ambitions. By this they usually meant one of two things: firstly, that pupils have ambitions which are beyond their academic capabilities:

> Sometimes the kids, their aspirations are well beyond what their achievements are, unfortunately. (Becky, teacher)

Alternatively, some adults point to aspirations that might be considered statistically unlikely:

> I think some of them are a bit pie in the sky, they're all going to be premiership footballers. (Duncan, teacher)

This notion that some young people will have ambitions that are unlikely to be realised is neither new nor unique: Rogers, Chambers, and Percy (2020) noted a 'disconnect' between young people's aspirations and the jobs available to them in the UK, and internationally the OECD identified a mismatch between the most popular career aspirations and the actual roles available (Mann et al. 2020), though both of these studies relate to the numbers of posts available rather than whether young peoples' ambitions are meaningful in terms of their abilities. For those pupils with 'unrealistic' ambitions there would certainly be a critical point of disjuncture as and when they realise that they may not be able to chase their particular dreams, but it is important to remember that these are the opinions expressed by teachers, not by the young people themselves. The careers leaders were much less likely to talk about unrealistic expectations, instead cataloguing some of the very pragmatic steps that young people take towards achieving their employment ambitions. For careers leaders the issue was more likely to be of low aspirations, where pupils were perhaps considering job roles that would require lower qualifications than they were thought to be capable of and where they would hope for the young people to aim higher. Careers leaders frequently spoke of 'raising aspirations' and considered that a key aspect of their role was to challenge the 'poverty of aspiration' that has previously been identified in policy, predominantly among working class families. This concept has been contested (Roberts and Atherton 2011): Harrison and Waller (2018) talk of the 'classed myth' of low aspirations.

In the views of some adult respondents, aspirational poverty was extreme, inasmuch as they described pupils with 'no aspiration at all' (Alice, teacher). One member of staff gave a more considered interpretation of this apparent extreme lack of ambition:

> And then I think there's students that genuinely don't – it's not that they don't care, it's just that the thought seems overwhelming to them. (Charles, school staff)

The feeling of being overwhelmed is clearly related to the disjuncture curve described by Jarvis (2012), where the separation between individual biography and perception of reality is reaching a point close to distinction. Far from disjuncture resulting in a constructive learning experience as Jarvis describes, if people feel genuinely overwhelmed there is the potential for catastrophic separation such that they choose to give up any sense of agency in the situation, which may manifest itself in apparent apathy, as described by some of their teachers. The pupils seemed aware of the high stakes involved in negotiating the transition from school to work: the fact that this is a significant and determining point for them was pithily put by Abbey (Y10), who simply said, 'it's scary, innit?' Another pupil commented on the change from being directed and guided by other adults to becoming more autonomous and responsible:

> after I leave school it's like it's all on you. You - you've got to do it. (Louis, Y10)

What is notable is that there are few incidences of extremes of high or low aspiration in the conversations with pupils. This may be because they felt a need to moderate their responses for the researcher and provide answers that might be deemed acceptable; alternatively it may be that some of the adult views were shaped by stereotypical images of teenagers, or by isolated and anecdotal snippets that are not really representative of all the young people they work with. A further interpretation might be that pupils restricted their comments to likely futures: expectations rather than aspirations.

The pupils themselves spoke eloquently about their hopes for the future. They talked of specific jobs which included becoming a vet, constitutional lawyer, doctor, accountant or primary school

teacher. Several hoped to work as some form of mechanic, and two planned to get an apprenticeship. They also talked in more general terms: wanting to make a difference, working with people, or owning their own business. In doing so, pupils appeared to support the arguments of Harrison and Waller (2018) that poverty of aspiration is a myth constructed by adults.

As researchers we don't know whether their teachers might consider these goals to be overly ambitious, but it was apparent that many of the pupils were aware of the hard work and qualifications that would be required in order to achieve their dreams, and were thinking about their next steps. They recognised that employment, work, or a career, is only one dimension of their imagined future – what Markus and Nurius (1986) call their 'possible selves' – even though western society often defines someone predominantly by their work.

We also identified what we might call *anti-goals*. By this we mean ambitions *not* to do something, for example 'I don't want to be in a stupid office job' (Abbey, Y10). One particular concern, common to several pupils, was summarised by Lanie in Y10:

> And no offence to my mum, but I don't want to end up like her.

This takes us into territory which was covered by all 4 groups: the role that parents (or family) play in shaping the ambitions, values and world view of the young people. The notion of socio-economic reproduction has been debated and discussed as a theoretical construct at some length, and postulated as a reason for the UK's limited social mobility despite decades of policy initiatives (Roberts 2016). In this study it was clear that family circumstances and expectations shaped the hopes and dreams of the next generation. Harrison and Waller (2018) describe how young people's expectations are 'forged in a web of influences including their family [and] their community'. Our participants did not necessarily aim to emulate (working) parents, but recognised that their understanding of the world of work was limited to family experiences, and that this restricted their ideas about future careers – they said that they 'need to know what options are out there' (Gaby, Y10). In common with Lanie's view above, some pupils articulated an ambition to do better than their parents had done, demonstrating an understanding of the concept of social mobility even if they did not use that term.

What was striking in this study was the strength of opinion amongst the adult groups. Careers leaders were more moderate in their views, but they recognised the importance that the family background would play in shaping career aspirations. For careers leaders the challenge is to work more in partnership with parents in supporting their young people. Other staff, as well as the employers, had much more radical opinions, suggesting that parental behaviour was a key determining factor in young people's aspirations. In so doing they moved the discussion beyond socio-economic environment and the nature of employment towards issues around parenting and modelling, to which we return later in this discussion. The evidence base for some of these strong views was not apparent, but there was consensus that where parents were unable to articulate a clear and successful education to employment journey it would be almost impossible for young people to chart their own transition successfully, supporting the principle that work-related values are transmitted from parents to children through an early socialisation model (Johnson, Mortimer, and Heckhausen 2019). Clare (teacher) talked about the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' of multigenerational unemployment, concluding that 'family is key to aspirations'. For many respondents, including the young people themselves, this demoralising situation is closely aligned to geographical location: both they and their teachers felt that they might need to move out of the area in order to avoid repeating the experiences of their parents, though staff did not seem to realise that pupils felt like this, instead suggesting that pupils had little conception of life beyond their immediate locality.

Careers advice

All respondents talked about the careers advice that was available to young people in schools, but the value ascribed to schools' career guidance was highly dependent on the group of respondents:

school staff and careers leaders in particular held schools' careers advice in high regard, suggesting that more time should be devoted to this. A number of respondents talked about the need for this to be integrated into the curriculum: in one school 'we embed careers in all subjects across all years' (Ryan, careers leader), reflecting an ambition of the Gatsby careers foundation (Holman 2014). In a different school, personal advice was described as being given on an 'ad hoc' basis (Bernie, careers leader), though this was within the context of a structured programme for all pupils aged 11 to 18.

Employers were much more disparaging about school careers advice. They felt that staff in schools were 'doing their best' but faced a number of difficulties which undermined the effectiveness of careers advice. These included the requirement to 'tick boxes for government needs' (Steve, employer) – a sentiment with which some school staff agreed. Employers identified a conflict between the drive to prepare young people for university and preparation for the workplace, as though these were mutually exclusive aims, and they suggested that teachers had limited experience of the world of work, so were consequently not in a position to offer good careers guidance. The notion that this was a systemic issue rather than failure on the part of individuals was summarised by Alan (employer):

> I don't think this education system is preparing you for the world of work and what's expected of you.

This sentiment echoes that found by UNICEF (2020) in a global survey of 40,000 young people, a third of whom stated that their education did not prepare them for their aspirational careers.

In our sample, pupils' thoughts about careers advice were very dependent upon their own specific experiences. In the same school, one pupil said they had to find out about jobs by themselves, whereas another said that 'school has helped me a lot' (Rory, Y11). Several pupils were aware of the principle of careers advice in schools but felt they had not experienced this much, or yet. In some cases they put this down to the effects of COVID-19 which had certainly curtailed some of the careers activity, but there was general agreement that more guidance would be useful. Some younger pupils assumed that this would be a feature of their later years in secondary school.

Not all schools have dedicated careers staff, so careers advice may be mediated through tutor times or PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education) programmes, which are usually taught by class teachers with no specialist knowledge of careers. Staff working in schools which do have specialist careers support were enthusiastic about its benefits, while recognising the limited capacity of a single (perhaps part-time) individual. Although the roles of schools' careers leaders were not explored in any detail, it was clear that those we spoke to felt that careers leadership, as outlined by Andrews and Hooley (2017)for example, required more of a team-based approach than is commonplace.

Some schools use electronic portfolio/database systems to support young people exploring possible careers options; views on these products varied, but seemed to depend on how well the software was supported by careers leaders. Several respondents talked about the need to begin careers work lower down in school, which the 2022 Act should address with its requirement for independent advice and guidance (IAG) from Y7 upwards, though it was notable that careers leaders and other staff in the same school had different understandings of when such work begins in their own establishment.

Industry links

Industry links could perhaps be considered a subtheme of careers advice, because often such advice is mediated through a partnership with one or more employers. However, industry links appeared to be sufficiently strong in the dataset to support its inclusion as a theme in and of itself, with one of its key aspects being work experience placements.

All of the sample groups spoke positively about the potential of work-based placements for school pupils, even if they did not have personal experience of these. Compulsory work experience

placements were scrapped by the UK Coalition government in 2012, and even where schools retained some work placements, these were halted at the time of this study because of Covid-19. For some, this was deeply significant:

> To have to miss that out, and we don't actually know if we can get that back again, it's kind of like a blow to the stomach (Aubrey, Y11).

Other pupils could only hypothesise about work experience, having had no experience of a work placement, nor any hope of one:

> I think if we were able to do work experience it would help a lot (Henry, Y11).

These heartfelt personal responses give life to the OECD's bland assertion that effective educational systems will ensure that pupils' 'first direct experience of the workplace is not after they have left full-time education' (Mann, Denis, and Percy 2020, 9). Reasons given by school staff for not continuing with work experience after 2012 included the cost (of health and safety checks), the need to focus on crucial examinations, and a concern about safeguarding pupils and protecting them from inappropriate attitudes within the workplace. There was also a recognition that making work placements mandatory could lead to pupils being placed in settings that did not really match their needs or aspirations.

Employers spoke emphatically about the value of work experience, as long as it gave pupils a 'real' experience of the workplace – not just 'photocopying and making the coffee'. They recognised that authentic work experience needs to last for a substantial period of time, and requires some investment by the employer. This, of course, poses some logistical difficulties, especially for smaller employers – a fact not wasted on the respondents:

> You might only have . . . room for one, and having somebody on work experience is hard work (Alan, employer).

Virtual work experiences might be considered a solution both to these capacity issues and also the problems that COVID-19 caused, but online placements were clearly no panacea. Some respondents described well-organised, ongoing, virtual placements that appeared to be having some benefits for pupils. Others described bringing online experiences to a premature end because the pupils 'weren't getting anything out of it' (Alice, teacher).

The principle of strong links between employers and schools was universally supported, usually exemplified by employer visits to schools, or pupil visits to workplace settings. For some school staff, just making contact, through careers fairs and similar activities, appeared to be sufficient, but most saw the value of collaborative activities co-constructed by schools and employers, such as mock interview days or school projects set and marked in partnership with employers.

Some employers recognised that it was difficult for schools to arrange activities to link pupils with the world of work. One said that he saw teachers 'running around like they're hamsters in a hamster wheel' in order to meet externally imposed targets and objectives (Steve, employer). The result of schools' focus on key academic metrics means that they simply don't have time to arrange for pupils to engage with employers:

> Schools don't know us; we don't know the schools. There's a disconnect there. (Rory, employer).

One employer suggested that one way for teachers to understand the world of work better would be for them to undertake regular industry work placements themselves. This is not an original idea – it was tried by experimental City Technology Colleges in the 1990s in a bid to improve pupils' understanding of business (Gillmon 1992) – but has never been widely adopted by England's schools. However, embracing such a model might begin to address comments about teachers having little experience of the world of work:

> Kids are being taught by people who have never done anything else but education … I think there's a bit of a gap there. (Steve, employer)

Work readiness

The theme of work readiness may appear somewhat vague, but was referenced by all of the adult respondents in a variety of ways. These included comments on young people's attitudes to work, their understanding of the workplace and its demands, and salary expectations. With the exception of a single individual who mentioned the likelihood of low initial pay during a period of training and induction, the pupil focus groups did not raise or discuss this theme – perhaps confirming some of the employers' views that pupils do not understand the workplace.

For employers, work readiness was a key difficulty they faced when hiring new staff. Without exception, they described cohorts of young people that did not comprehend the demands of the workplace, yet had unrealistically high expectations of both salary and responsibility. One employer spoke for several when he said that we (society in general) have lost a sense of work ethic. However, in unpacking this sentiment he revealed his own standards which some might consider to be excessive in the light of the government's working time directive, which limits workers to 48-hour weeks on average:

> There's an element of, like, shock and surprise if you sort of say, you know, you might have to work 50 or 60 hours a week sometimes. (Steve, employer)

Such comments reflected a view of wider society in general, not just school leavers. Employers noted that the need to work at home during the COVID-19 lockdowns had generated new expectations among the workforce, causing some conflict between managers and their employees. Some had embraced a new flexibility, judging performance on whether jobs were completed satisfactorily or not, rather than on presenteeism and hours worked on the employer's premises. All, however, commented that punctuality and the discipline required for work were a challenge for young people they employed. This was often summarised using the term 'work ethos', which employers felt was lacking in young people. They noted ambition amongst school leavers, which perhaps relates to the theme of aspirations, but in this case it was seen as a negative quality:

> It seems somebody young starts work and they want to be the managing director inside, you know, six months. (Alan, employer)

Frequently employers compared today's young recruits with themselves when they first started work, painting modern school leavers in an unfavourable light:

> At 16 you made the tea. You did the photocopying. You took the post to the post office and you did as you were told. Slowly but surely, you know, I rose up the ranks. (Alan, employer)

Those working in education characterised work readiness in a different way, focusing on the specific skills that they felt employers would need, emphasising punctuality and a 'professional attitude' – though this seemed to relate more to the demands of schools (such as policies on school uniform) than the workplace. Teachers' and careers leaders' views were similar to those of employers in that they felt that many of the young people they worked with did not understand employers' expectations. Relating back to the previous theme they felt that young people in schools would accept and internalise messages direct from employers, in a way that they would not if given the same message by their school teachers. They also agreed with employers in sensing unlikely ambitions within the work setting:

> Nobody wants to be a pot washer. Nobody wants to. They all want to be managers and they all think that they can start at the top. (Bernie, careers leader)

All of the adult groups made links with the theme of hopes and dreams, noting that as well as career ambitions being informed (or limited) by children's family circumstances, their approach to and expectations of employment would also be informed by attitudes within the home. Most respondents saw this in a negative light, citing poor behaviour and attendance as symptomatic of what they described as weak parenting and poor role models, suggesting that these traits were indicators of likely disaffection at work.

Where the pupils did find consensus with the adult respondents was on the issue of stress and mental wellbeing, though for different reasons. Employers noted that younger employees showed a lack of resilience when faced with issues both within and outside of their work setting, resulting in mental health problems that are 'off the scale' (Michael, employer). This seemed to suggest there might be a reluctance to employ people if they could not stand up to the demands of a particular job. Conversely, for young people themselves, an openness about mental health was seen to be positive. They recognised that COVID-19 had placed additional stresses upon them and their families, and also that their schools provided a lot of support for mental health issues. One pupil added that puberty and the pressure of interviews compounded this stress. For their part, school staff all noted that wellbeing problems amongst pupils were more prevalent than ever before. Neither pupils nor school staff linked mental health and wellbeing with employability.

Discussion and conclusions

Dougherty (2022) calls for the education-employment transition to be reconceptualised, to allow for more nuance and to lift the responsibility for navigating this transition from the shoulders of commodified young people. Our research supports this call, with its recognition that the transition is intricate and affected by numerous factors, which may be bewildering to learners caught within the moment. We would, however, inject a cautionary note, that what external observers see as non-linear and complex as they consider a picture across several or many individuals, appears very much linear to each person on their own journey. For our young people, there was a clear notion of now and next: an understanding that even if things are complicated and move to and fro, the immutable progress of time is inevitably taking them along a trajectory from one place to another. The passage of time itself did introduce a potential source of conflict: several of the adults we spoke to felt that that young people expected instant career gratification, and that the immediacy of social media compounded this ambitious hope.

It was apparent that the pupils we interviewed felt caught between what (Roberts 2009) describes as push and pull forces, and that while these might have the same ultimate ambitions, their directions were misaligned, creating a tension or stress on those in the middle. In Bronfenbrenner's terms, at this ecological transition the strong impact of micro- and meso-systems, driven by the values and ethos of the macrosystem as mediated by those closest to the young people, are in conflict with societal expectations and the pull factor of the local labour market, despite well-intentioned interventions by educational professionals. This internal tension is compounded by chronological change: in this particular region where the nature of employment has been transformed, all participants noted the difference in employment expectations faced by different generations. This presents an immediate problem in terms of intergenerational support for young people through their education-employment transition, as the effect of the strongest push factors is weakened. Family members are ill-equipped to help young people progress towards unfamiliar education or career pathways. This unfulfilled expectation of familial support was raised by almost all of the teachers. Pupils said they wanted to do better than their parents, but did not identify their family as a source of career advice or support. Pupils felt a strong attachment to their locality but demonstrated a realism about the need to relocate for many jobs, careers or courses – something that would have been neither necessary nor perhaps possible for previous generations. Teachers seemed unaware of this level of pupil insight, and appeared to use a rather stereotypical lens through which to view the children, who they felt were stuck with a parochial mindset. It is

possible that such views are based on their experience of previous cohorts actually being reluctant to move away when the time came, rather than on listening to the pupils currently in their care.

The young people we spoke to definitely had a sense of agency in the education-employment transition, and for some this was a heavy burden. Many felt they didn't know what careers might be available, and that they had to do their own research to find out; where families lacked this knowledge this presented a significant challenge. Such feelings contribute to the paradigm of individual responsibility that has become the prevailing narrative of neoliberal policy, and while this might appear to shatter the fetters of class-based determinism, it introduces what Dougherty calls a deficit-focused intervention approach. Pupils were aware that autonomy does not grant complete freedom: they recognised and could articulate some of the opportunity structures that bounded their potential pathways. The lack of meaningful work-based experiences demonstrated this principle very clearly.

Pupils did value to some degree the careers work – interventions – currently conducted in and by schools, though its importance was probably over-emphasised by the teachers and careers leaders, as much as it was derided by employers. The universal consensus that strong school-employer links support the journey from education to employment did not seem to be matched by ambitions on the part of employers or school staff to prioritise and strengthen these relationships, which potentially limits pupil autonomy. This may be a manifestation of a systemic failing: the OECD noted that 'where career guidance services are wholly school-based, links with the labour market can be weak' (OECD (2004), 40), especially where schools are under pressure to place the institutional needs of the school before the needs of pupils – a common concern in highly performative systems such as in England. There are indications in our research of motivated and possibly skilled school staff being frustrated by the institutional structures within which they are constrained to work. The schools' regulator, Ofsted, noted specific systemic failings in England's schools, where business involvement relies too heavily on the personal networks of parents and teachers, operating within a 'chaotic environment' with no local coordination (Ofsted 2016, 4). This inadequacy at system level undermines the universality that Millard et al. (2019) identify as being key to good careers education in schools. Nonetheless, there are actions which could be taken locally to address this perceived chaos: for example, given the almost universal support for work experience activities expressed by our participants, local agreements could be put in place to make this a reality for all pupils in the region.

We have already noted high aspirations on the part of the young people we spoke to, but the views of some of their teachers seemed to be much less ambitious: their realism and teaching experience conspired to amplify what Downes (2014) calls the silent system background. This background context shapes the opportunity structures and contributes to the lived constraints experienced by the students. As they face an impending socio-ecological transition the pupils feel inadequately supported by the system, and personally impotent in terms of initiating and actioning change despite the professed agency. Failure to resolve the disjuncture leads to a sense of powerlessness and despair, undermining self-efficacy and consequently reducing the chances of finding meaningful employment – which may further confirm any sense of worthlessness (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017).

Roberts (2009) argues that opportunity structures defined by the mesosystem interrelationships generate an inertial consistency that limits the career trajectories for the majority of young people. Our results support the idea that social class structures are likely to impede progress for young people: there is a paradox in that they are endowed with more personal agency and choice than ever before, yet remain more constrained by the structures around them. Our conclusions support that of Lőrinc et al. (2020) that risk factors in relation to successfully navigating the education-employment transitions are social, societal and structural in nature, though we would argue that this cannot be entirely 'de-individualised'. The micro-, meso-and exo-systems are, by definition, personal and individual, as is the response to disjuncture. As parents, schools and employers all play a part in each individual's microsystem, they contribute to both opportunity structures and the individual development that

supports agency. A consequent implication for policymakers is the need to apply a long-term holistic lens, allowing for a dynamic systemic understanding that will open up opportunity structures and invite and develop more meaningful individual agency for the pupils. In practice, this might entail an approach that is more partnership-based, as advocated by Billett et al. (2024), where schools, employers and careers workers join in a purposeful endeavour to support young people and their families. As Billett et al. point out, such partnerships 'do not just happen', but have to be enabled and supported. In England's context, notwithstanding national policy which rests responsibility on the shoulders of schools, there are opportunities for Local Authorities, schools and employers to create more supportive structures and networks than those currently experienced by pupils. The imperative here is to give young people the ongoing support they need to avoid the 'sticky' semi-permanence of unemployment, not for either societal or personal economic gain, but to ensure that they can find meaning and identity in their lives at this crucial time of transition.

Notwithstanding the potential for our rich data to yield further insights into the perceptions of our specific participants, conceptualising the general education to employment transition as complex and extended raises further questions about the balance of agency and support that are needed to traverse it successfully. In particular, there would be value in investigating the multi-generational support that families offer, and the ability of this to speak to the changing world of employment. Whatever the national, regional and local policies and support mechanisms, family support is constant and universal for most young people, suffused with nuance and subtlety which school-based interventions seem to lack, yet it must always suffer from the fact that older generations necessarily speak from an experience that does not fit the present world. Future studies on the interrelationships between the societal structures that aim to support successful moves into employment, and young people and their families as they negotiate these, could continue to inform policy, and ultimately change practice for the better.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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