Education to Work Transitions: How the Old Middle Went Missing and Why the New Middle Remains Elusive

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Abstract

Middling youth were centre stage in research on school-to-work transitions from the early-20th century up to and throughout the 1980s. Since then they have been overshadowed by sociological attention to the young unemployed/NEETs on the one side, and university students and graduates on the other. Simultaneously, economists have been crowding out sociologists in the study of education-to-work transitions, especially in the middle ground. However, this paper argues that this is not just a case of the sociological gaze missing the middle. It is argued that old middling labour market destinations have diminished in number, and the new middle remains elusive because the employment tends to be precarious. Thus today's middling groups of school-leavers must either try to move-up or face career-long threats of descent to the bottom.

Keywords: *Class, Education, Employment, Youth, Youth Cultures.*

Introduction

1.1 Youth researchers are making a habit of overlooking then discovering a missing middle. This happened previously in research into pupil subcultures within secondary schools: subcultures which could then spread into the pupils' out-of-school lives. Early studies (for example, Hargreaves 1967; Lacey 1970) adopted a paradigm developed in studies of juvenile delinquency in which, if a group was unable to achieve socially approved goals using socially approved means, some form of deviance became inevitable (see Cohen 1955; Merton 1938). Thus pupils placed in secondary schools' upper streams were shown to become highly motivated achievers while the lower streams bred anti-school, delinquent subcultures. The pupils featured in Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977) were either 'ear 'oles (always listening, never doing) or *lads*. In response, during the 1980s, sociologists who included Richard Jenkins (1983) and Phillip Brown (1987), using evidence from their respective studies in Belfast and South Wales, insisted that the majority of pupils were just 'ordinary' rather than *citizens* or *lads* (in Belfast) or *swots* or *rems* (remedials) in South Wales. The inverted U-shaped distribution of ability, whether produced by nature or nurture, suggests that there will always be a tendency for pupils to bunch in the middle.

1.2 Another missing middle arose in studies of out-of-school, street-based youth cultures where, in the 1960s and 70s, researchers focused on clearly defined, spectacular types of young people such as Teddy Boys, mods, rockers and skinheads (see Hall and Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979). Subsequently researchers had little difficulty in demonstrating that most young people identified with no specific style, claimed that they were just 'normal', and stressed their own individuality (see Hesmondalgh 2005).

1.3 In contrast, middling young people were centre-stage from the very beginning of social research into young people's entry into the labour market. It is relatively recently, since the 1980s, that they have all but disappeared from sociological studies with researchers focusing either on those who progress towards, enter higher education and exit as graduates, or strugglers who are at risk of long-term or recurrent unemployment. In 2011 Steve Roberts and Robert MacDonald both drew attention to the missing middle, and Roberts nominated the young retail employees who he had studied as an example of a present-day middling group. This paper concurs that middling youth have lost their former centre-stage position in sociological research on school-to-work transitions, then asks whether researchers are missing the middling young people, or whether the middling group itself has gone missing in post-

industrial, hollowed-out, hour glass-shaped, occupational structures.

1.4 Middling youth today, as in previous decades, are those who exit full-time education with average qualifications. Today they do not progress into higher education but possess academic and/or vocational qualifications that normally yield positive labour market returns. They enter occupations in the middle of the occupational structure – office, sales and laboratory jobs, skilled and other types of manual occupations in which they are more-or-less continuously employed, and have not required assistance from recent government *New Deals* or *Work Programmes*.

1.5 The paper begins by sketching the history of school-to-work transitions and related research from the early-20th century up to the 1960s, then during the 1970s and 80s, the decades of the vanishing youth labour market in the UK. Throughout all these years, middling youth were centre-stage in studies of the transition from school to work, and sociologists played the lead role in these investigations. The paper then shows how, since the 1980s, sociologists in particular have acquired a split vision: they have focused on either higher education entrants, students and graduates, or on young people who are unemployed or otherwise not in employment, education or training (NEET). The penultimate section of the paper summarises what we know about middling youth today – their routes through education and training, and their occupational destinations, and concludes with some speculations on why these young people are eluding the sociological gaze.

1.6 The paper deals specifically with young people in the UK. There have been similar macro-economic and labour market trends in all Western countries, but these have had varying implications for young people on account of countries' different ways of organising education and vocational training, and their employment regimes.

School-to-work transitions before the 1970s

2.1 Until the 1990s middling young people were centre-stage in studies of the school-to-work transition. This applied before and following the First World War when, for the vast majority, elementary school was their sole full-time education. On leaving school before or at age 14 (which became the statutory leaving age following the 1918 Education Act), boys (mainly) could seek apprenticeships. For the rest, the alternatives to unemployment were juvenile jobs, maybe in domestic service (especially for girls), or as errand or messenger boys/girls, or otherwise assisting adult workers. Subsequently young workers' big challenge was to make the transition at age 18-21 from apprenticeship to skilled employee, or from a juvenile job to employment that paid an adult wage. It was at this post-juvenile stage that risks of unemployment peaked (see Bray 1912; Freeman 1914; Urwick 1904).

2.2 The 1944 Education Act decreed secondary education for all, and from 1947 15 became the statutory school-leaving age, after which there was plenty of employment for school-leavers in most parts of Britain. Those who did not obtain apprenticeships usually had little difficulty in entering office, shop or factory jobs in which they could progress to adult earnings within a few years. Apprentices and some other young workers were offered day release and/or could attend evening classes seeking qualifications through the 'alternative route' (further education) which for some opened up careers that could lead into management or professional grade jobs. There was far more upward mobility along this alternative route than through academic secondary schooling followed by higher education (Hordley and Lee 1970).

2.3 A concern of researchers during the immediate post-Second World War years was that beginning workers might experience serious adjustment problems on being thrust suddenly into adult work environments and abruptly transformed from senior pupils in their schools to the most junior employees. The 'lost Elias project' of the 1960s was intended to reveal and explore such difficulties (Goodwin and O'Connor 2006). However, this and other studies found that most school-leavers adjusted to the work environment with little difficulty, and most were satisfied with the kinds of employment that they were able to obtain (Carter 1962; Ferguson and Cunnison 1951; Maizels 1970; Veness 1962). Recent comparisons with the more difficult and complex transitions of young people since the 1970s may have exaggerated the smooth, rapid and unproblematic character of transitions in the earlier 'golden age' (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2005, 2007; Vickerstaff 2003). Many young people worried about whether they were entering occupations that would be right for them, and their ability to cope. It was not uncommon for beginning workers to switch jobs on more than one occasion. That said, education in different types of secondary schools (mainly grammar schools and secondary moderns), pupils' academic attainments relative to peers, and the qualifications (if any) that they were able to present to employers, seemed to align aspirations and expectations with the levels of employment that school-leavers were able to enter (Ashton and Field 1976).

2.4 The missing groups in sociological studies of school-to-work transitions at that time were not in the middle but at both extremes. The young people who faced the most serious problems in obtaining and holding onto jobs – those with serious disabilities, those suffering chronic ill-health, and those who had become well-known to the police and courts – were left for the attention of criminologists and other specialists. Stay-at-home teenage mums were not treated as a problem group. The young people in school-to-work studies who appeared to be experiencing or posing the gravest problems were not the unemployed but chronic job-changers (see Baxter 1975). Labour market conditions enabled even those with the most chequered employment records to obtain further jobs with little difficulty. Even in high unemployment areas such as Merseyside, spells of unemployment were an option rather than unavoidable (see Parker 1974).

2.5 The other missing group were the academic high-achievers who remained in full-time education after age 15 or 16 (which became the statutory school-leaving age in 1972), especially if they progressed into higher education. They were a small minority (less than 10 percent of their age group at the time of the

Robbins Report in 1963, rising to around 15 percent by the 1980s). Most were from privileged backgrounds and could be confident of progressing into management or professional jobs. They could be treated, and were treated by sociologists, as an educational elite with glittering prospects (see Kelsall et al 1972). A major research programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the late-1980s was titled *The 16-19 Initiative* (Banks et al 1992). This programme of research proceeded on the assumption that by age 19 most individuals' eventual labour market destinations would have become clear. The destinations of higher education graduates were sidelined as already known and were simply not a problem that needed to be investigated. When university students were the subjects of research, it was more likely to be on account of their politics than problems in making transitions into employment (see Ashby and Anderson 1970; Feuer 1969; Salter 1973; Wilson 1970).

The vanishing youth labour market

3.1 Middling young people remained centre-stage in school-to-work transitions research throughout the 1970s and 80s, the decades of the vanishing youth labour market (Ashton and Maguire 1983). Entry jobs disappeared, and the first nationwide government measure intended to stem the rise in youth unemployment was the *Youth Opportunities Programme* (YOP) which ran from 1978 to 1983. This was legislated to be a temporary measure. It was assumed (in 1978) that within five years demand for youth labour would have recovered and the programme would have become redundant. The normal provision within YOP was a maximum of six months of work experience on an employer's premises, which was given the appropriate acronym of WEEP. This was intended to break the trap of being unable to obtain a job through lacking experience, and lack of employment preventing young people gaining experience. The *Work Programme* of the 2010- Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government has a virtually identical rationale. This is despite the earlier measure having failed abjectly. By 1983 demand for youth labour had failed to recover, and YOP was being submerged by the rising tide of youth unemployment. By then the typical destination of young people leaving the programme was unemployment (see Bayly 1978; Driscoll 1979; Rees and Atkinson 1982).

3.2 YOP was replaced in 1983 by the *Youth Training Scheme* (YTS). This was designed to be a permanent fixture (but it no longer exists) (Department for Employment 1981). YTS was to offer quality training leading to a worthwhile qualification. Initially this qualification was to be the YTS leaving certificate, and subsequently the qualifications (NVQs after 1986) that were listed on the certificate. YTS was initially a one-year training scheme. It was relaunched as a two-year scheme in 1986, and relaunched again, titled simply *Youth Training* (YT) in 1990. The preferred provision on YTS/YT was training by an employer, but the shortage of employer provided places meant that much of the training had to be on community projects, in specially created workshops, and sometimes in further education colleges. The main alternative to YTS/YT for 16 year olds who had not passed the GCEs normally required to progress to A-levels was to continue in full-time education and pursue a vocational qualification, usually a BTEC until GNVQs become available after 1990. However, throughout the 1980s the normal next step for 16 year old school-leavers was a training scheme. Traditional transitions straight from school to employment at age 16 became rare, and have remained so ever since (Ainley 1988).

3.3 Youth transitions researchers focused on the new training schemes and vocational courses that were being promoted. Scheme entrants were the middling group of school-leavers at that time, and researchers studied the characteristics of entrants to the various types of schemes (see below), the content of the training, and the leavers' destinations. A conclusion was that there were several types of training schemes that did not correspond exactly with the official categories. First came schemes where employers trained young people and had jobs to offer on satisfactory completion of the training. Entry to these schemes tended to be competitive. Other schemes did not lead directly into employment with the trainer, but equipped young people with skills and qualifications that were in demand on external labour markets. Then there were 'youth try-out' schemes where employers kept the best and discarded the rest. Other 'slave labour' schemes provided employers with an endless stream of cheap, temporary labour. Finally, some schemes, typically based on community projects, workshops or colleges, simply 'warehoused' young people. They kept trainees off the labour market without enhancing their employability (see Ainley and Corney 1990; Bates and Riseborough 1993; Finn 1987; Lee et al 1987; Mizen 1995; Roberts and Parsell 1992). By the end of the 1980s 16 year olds were voting with their feet, and the numbers staying in full-time education began to exceed those opting for youth training. It was at this point that middling youth began to slip from the view of sociology's youth transitions researchers.

Split vision: the missing middle

4.1 Steve Roberts (2011) and Robert MacDonald (2011) are correct in their observation that middling youth have gone (relatively) missing from sociologists' studies of school-to-work transitions. Since the 1980s the research community in sociology has tended to cast its gaze either upwards or downwards. One new focus has been on the enlarged numbers applying for, entering and exiting higher education (see, for example Brennan et al 2009; Houston and Lebeau 2006). In this case the researchers' gaze has followed the crowd, and from 1997-2010 the sociological gaze was following the aspiration of the UK government which was to achieve a further rise in participation to at least 50 percent. Researchers' other focus since the early-1990s has been on the 16-25 year olds who are unemployed or otherwise not in education, employment or training (NEET). The reduction in the size of this group has been another government priority, but the group's endurance is evidence of the failure of successive new training schemes and vocational courses to rebuild the bridges to work of all the groups who once entered and settled in employment during their teens.

Higher education students and graduates

4.2 In the 1980s around 15 percent of 18-20 year olds entered higher education. Since then the participation rate has more than doubled to around 35 percent, and by age 30 over 40 percent have at least enrolled on a course geared to a qualification beyond A-level or equivalent (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2009; Higher Education Funding Council for England 2010). Most of the rise occurred during a brief window at the end of the 1980s and in the early-1990s when the government uncapped the number of higher education students that it was willing to fund. Since then applications have continued to rise. Between 1997 and 2010 the government's target of enrolling at least 50 percent in higher education was said to be necessary in order to keep the workforce abreast of the labour demands of a knowledge economy in which low-skilled work would either be eliminated by technology or exported, whereas there would be unlimited demand for the highly qualified to undertake high value-added work. The 50 percent target could have been achieved at any time if the government had been willing to provide state funding for the places.

4.3 Even so, higher education became the new default option for Britain's young people. In the decades immediately following the Second World War it was necessary to perform exceptionally well at successive stages in school education, and to be willing to defer gratifications, in order to reach university. Pupils had to perform exceptionally in passing the 11-plus and being awarded places at a grammar school, where they needed to perform exceptionally in the 16-plus examinations (GCE O-levels) in order to be admitted to the sixth forms where they might gain the A-levels on which admission to higher education depended. Today most university students have attended comprehensive secondary schools, like the majority of the age group. They have gained five or more higher grade (C and above) passes in the GCSE examinations, again, just like the majority of the pupils in their schools. The normal next step for these well-qualified 16 year olds is A-levels, which most entrants pass, and most of them proceed to university. This has become the new mainstream youth career (Roberts 2010).

4.4 The foundations for this transformation were laid in the 1980s. One foundation was the chronic and persistent shortage of jobs for teenagers. In addition to this, during the 1980s school examinations became criterion rather than norm referenced. Formerly the proportions of candidates who could be awarded passes at different grades were held constant from year to year. Subsequently it has become possible for pass rates to improve in every single year. In 1988 the former GCE O-level and CSE examinations were merged into the GCSE which is taken by nearly all 16 year old secondary school pupils, thus enabling more to aim for and achieve the grades that are taken to signal suitability for higher education. The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced national school league tables and made school funding dependent on pupil enrolment, thus giving schools an incentive to improve their examination performances and to retain as many pupils as possible beyond age 16 (see Tomlinson 2005). Sixteen year old school-leavers have subsequently become residual, and after 2015 participation in some type of formal learning until age 18 will become compulsory for all. Another subtle but significant change is that the main vocational qualifications offered as alternatives to A-levels (usually GNVQs after 1990) were 'sold' not on the basis of leading to different but nevertheless attractive destinations in the labour market but as equivalents to A-levels, mainly in being acceptable for university entry. During these changes, with jobs for 16 and 17 year olds continuing to disappear, university became the sole attractive destination that schools could set before their pupils. Nowadays university is a normal goal of pupils from the start of their secondary schooling (see Atherton et al 2009). All else is implicitly defined as failure.

4.5 Another change in the early-1990s was that Polytechnics and Colleges of Higher Education were allowed to seek university status (Tomlinson 2005). Thus Britain created a nominally unitary system of higher education. Universities' incomes depend largely on student enrolment, and their positions in their own league tables depend partly on the entry qualifications of their students. Hence all universities have invigorated their marketing. Particular efforts have been made to attract under-represented groups – basically students from working class homes. Despite these efforts, throughout the recent expansion of higher education, class inequalities in participation rates have hardly changed (Roberts 2010). Thus one set of issues for researchers has been the (lack of) success of efforts to widen participation and how to encourage young people from under-represented groups to aim higher (see Furlong and Cartmel 2005).

4.6 Alongside the expansion of the student population, drop-out rates have risen, and are especially high in new (post-1992) universities, and among the 'widening participation' group of students (Quinn et al 2005). Thus retention has become a further issue for researchers to address. Student destinations have become an even larger issue. It has been impossible to absorb the enlarged graduate outflows into traditional graduate occupations. Hence the identification of 'new', 'modern' and 'niche' graduate jobs (Purcell and Elias 2004). Needless to say, it has been graduates from the new universities, especially those from under-represented groups, who have become over-represented in the new (lower paid and less prestigious) graduate occupations (Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Hussain et al 2008). Whether higher education is still a rational investment in human capital has become a companion research issue, and especially pertinent with the introduction of student fees and fee loans of £1K per year in 1998, rising to £3K in 2006, and up to £9K in 2012 (see Association of Accounting Technicians 2011; Brynin 2002; Conlon and Patrignani 2011; Department for Employment and Learning 2009; Dismore et al 2010; Higher Education Statistics Agency 2009; National Centre for Social Research 2010; O'Leary and Sloane 2005). When fee loans were initially introduced, students were assured that their enhanced earning power would make repayment easy. By the time fees were reaching £9K, the message was that graduates might never earn enough to be required to repay their loans in full.

NEET

5.1 If sociology's recent youth transitions researchers have not gazed upwards towards higher education students, they have been most likely to look down at the NEETs. This group was designated in the early 1990s. In 1988 the UK government had abolished the 'option' of unemployment for most 16 and 17 year olds by withdrawing their entitlement to claim unemployment benefit. This was intended to incentivise

those concerned either to return to education or enrol on some kind of youth training. Youth unemployment was indeed abolished in so far as 16 and 17 year olds disappeared from official unemployment statistics. At that time the government's measure of unemployment was a claimant count: regular Labour Force Surveys did not commence in Britain until 1992. In the early-1990s researchers in South Wales (unsurprisingly) discovered that, although no longer present in official statistics, significant numbers of 16 and 17 year olds were not in employment, education or training (Istance et al 1994). Soon afterwards the NEET acronym was adopted by government spokespersons and official agencies to refer to this group. NEET embraces individuals who would not be included among the unemployed in surveys (such as the Labour Force Survey) that use the internationally adopted definition. Many would be excluded from the unemployed because they are not actively seeking work or are not available to start work immediately if offered suitable jobs. However, a presumption in addressing the NEETs has been that employment, education or training of some type will be preferable positions for all who fall outside these categories.

5.2 Prior to the 1997 General Election, New Labour was drawing attention to the fact that although the various training schemes and vocational courses had reduced unemployment among 16 and 17 year olds, much of the unemployment had simply been displaced onto the 18-25s. Hence the flagship New Labour policy, and the first of its New Deals, launched in 1997, was for 18-25 year olds. This offered assistance in obtaining a job, appropriate training or experience on a community project for all the longer-term unemployed in the target age group. This New Deal was followed in 2001 by the creation of *Connexions*, which absorbed the former Careers Services. *Connexions* was given the priority target of reducing the number of 16-19 year old NEETs. Research had shown that being NEET at this stage was related to increased risks of subsequent unemployment (see, for example, Bynner and Parsons 2002). Thus, it seemed to follow, if there were fewer teenage NEETs, there would be fewer candidates for the New Deals.

5.3 However, by the early 21st century researchers were dissecting the NEETs and querying the ways in which government policies were addressing these young people. Researchers discovered that some NEETs were indeed becoming long-term unemployed, but others were not in education, training or employment for only brief periods before they found jobs, started courses or opted for a training measure. A third group had serious underlying problems which needed to be resolved before either employment, education or training became realistic options. They included young mothers, young people with serious health, alcohol and drug problems, serious criminal records, and acute domestic or housing difficulties. The wisdom of treating NEETs as if they were a homogenous group, all in need of assistance and immediate direction towards employment, education or training, was questioned (see Furlong 2006; Raffe 2004; Yates and Payne 2006). All the studies agreed that 8 to 10 percent of 16-19 year olds in any area were likely to be NEET at a particular time, but that more than double this number were likely to be NEET at some time or another. Years of effort by *Connexions* failed to lower the 'at a particular time' figure by more than one percent, and during 2012 *Connexions* itself became history.

5.4 Also, it was discovered that many teenage NEETs, and unemployed candidates for the New Deal for the 18-25s, already had a wealth of experience of training schemes, vocational courses, and jobs as well in some cases. The young people had found that all these opportunities had acted as 'black magic roundabouts', leading back to unemployment. One of the young people's problems was usually an overall shortage of jobs in their local labour markets, but many were equally scathing about the quality of the jobs that they had experienced. The Teesside research of Robert MacDonald and his colleagues has provided vivid evidence of the actual predicaments of such young people. Contrary to the knowledge economy thesis, these young people have found that low-skilled, low-paid jobs remain quite easy to obtain. Some of these jobs are official (with a contract), while others are 'fiddly'. Irrespective of whether the jobs are officially temporary, they are not occupations that many young people would wish to retain long-term (see MacDonald and Marsh 2001, 2005).

5.5 The marginal, semi-connected labour market conditions of young people such as those in Teesside's more disadvantaged neighbourhoods are products of the poverty of their opportunities rather than any poverty of aspiration on their own part. Poor jobs may sometimes act as stepping stones, but this had not been the experience of the young people in MacDonald and colleagues' Teesside research. A challenge that politicians and policy-makers would probably prefer to avoid, is that NEETs and other groups who are weakly connected to employment are not excluded from, but occupy specific labour market segments created by, Britain's mainstream post-industrial economy.

The new middle

Middling routes into the labour force

6.1 Middling young people still exist. The age group is not polarised into higher education graduates on the one side and NEETs on the other. The middling groups do not enter higher education, but after completing their full-time education and any initial training outside employment, they obtain jobs and remain employed, though not necessarily in the same jobs. Any unemployment in their early careers is transitional or one-off. Nowadays these middling young people nearly all start their full-time employment careers after a period of post-compulsory education adding to their academic qualifications or taking vocational courses, or after initial training. It seems not to matter whether middling young people's early employment involves any formal training in terms of future earnings prospects and risks of unemployment (Crawford et al 2011; see also Maguire 2010). Informal learning occurs in all jobs, enabling individuals to build careers based on experience and uncertificated skills. Correspondingly, as we have seen above, there are different kinds of officially recognised training and they do not all have the same value in terms of future labour market returns.

6.2 During the 1990s the government launched a training measure that proved an unequivocal success. The provisions are now called Advanced Apprenticeships (originally Modern Apprenticeships). These were introduced in 1994, and unlike previous training schemes there was no commitment to providing a place for every suitable young person. The number of apprenticeships was determined by employers' demand for trainees and skilled labour. The apprentices were typically given employee status and paid salaries (not training allowances) from the outset. The training was geared to the acquisition of qualifications at Level 3 (equivalent to A-levels) (see Hasluck et al 1997). On completion of the training ex-apprentices' typical salaries have overlapped with the bottom range of graduate salaries. Demand for these apprenticeships has exceeded the supply of places, and the positions have typically gone to young people with decent academic qualifications (see Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills/Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008; Learning and Skills Council 2009; Skills Commission 2009).

6.3 These apprenticeships have proved so popular that the government now applies the brand name to most of the training that it supports. The original Modern Apprenticeships are now Advanced Apprenticeships. Standard Apprenticeships are supposed to lead on to the advanced type. The overall number of apprentices rose sharply after 2010 when almost any training in employment, involving employees of any age, could be called an apprenticeship, and many apprenticeships now last less than 12 months. No doubt its wider use will eventually trash the brand name. However, Advanced Apprenticeships are still available for 16-19 year olds, and typically last for three years.

6.4 The career routes of middling youth through post-compulsory education and training, then into employment, have continued to be studied, but most of this research has been taken-over by economists who undertake secondary analysis of large data sets such as those from the Labour Force Surveys. Sociologists have become notable by their absence from this research area. However, the relevant research has revealed impressive historical continuities in processes of workforce entry in Britain. The key to a successful career launch since the early-20th century has always been to obtain a job with an employer who can offer an extended career, or in which the training and/or experience confer skills that are in demand on external labour markets. Employers have consistently trained primarily according to their own requirements. They do not change their recruitment and training regimes merely because the government introduces yet another scheme. If a government measure fits their own practices, especially if state funding is available, firms will sign up. Any additional training that firms undertake, and any additional trainees, are likely to be kept visibly separate from their own training and workforces (see Roberts and Parsell 1992).

6.5 Evidence from the Labour Force Surveys and the National Youth Cohort Surveys that began in 1984 shows that training which leads to vocational qualifications at Level 3 and higher, and all academic qualifications from GCSE grade C upwards, generate positive labour market returns. These are launch pads for relatively successful labour market careers. However, vocational qualifications at Levels 1 and 2 (the majority of all that are awarded) do not appear to confer any career advantages, and likewise academic qualifications beneath GCSE grade C (McIntosh 2002, 2007). This is why many young people find that their qualifications are 'not worth the paper' and that their training or work experience operate as 'black magic roundabouts'.

6.6 Employers complain that too many school-leavers lack basic skills (see Lamb 1994; Quentin Bell Organisation 1995). Their typical experience is that the quality of 16-18 year old job seekers has declined, and they will be correct since the trend has been for the more able members of the age group to remain in full-time education. Employers also complain that higher education graduates are inadequately prepared for graduate careers (Archer and Davison 2009). Employers' expectations may not have adjusted to the fact that university students are no longer an elite of exceptionally motivated high achievers.

Middling jobs

6.7 What are the occupations towards which middling youth – those with average qualifications who do not aim for and enter university – can realistically head? Prior to the 1980s one large group (mainly females) entered office jobs. In the mid-20th century around 35 percent of all female employees were in this kind of employment. They, and the smaller proportion of males in such jobs, were that era's white-collar proletariat (Crompton and Jones 1984). In the mid-20th century businesses and government departments seemed have insatiable appetites for compliant young people who could type and take-on other office duties.

6.8 There are fewer such jobs today. The proportion of all female employees in these occupations has declined to around 25 percent (Roberts 2011). Information technology has boosted labour productivity in the clerical grades. A single employee can despatch more messages and file more data from a keyboard attached to a computer than was possible in the past. Managers and professional grade staff are all now expected to use keyboards, to handle their own correspondence (by email) and file their own work electronically. Secretaries galore have been casualties. The number of lower-level non-manual jobs has therefore declined, and many of these jobs have become starting occupations for higher education graduates. At the start of their employment careers only around 60 percent of university graduates enter one of four bands of traditional and newer 'graduate jobs'. Three years later this figure has risen to around 80 percent, which means that the other fifth of graduate careers remain stuck in the middle – in the intermediate grades in the occupational structure (National Social Research Centre 2007). Younger job seekers are liable to be crowded out of office employment by graduates seeking stepping stones and others who settle long-term in these occupations. Young women appear to have read the labour market signals correctly. School-leavers aged 16-18 who in the past would have obtained office jobs now progress into higher education. Otherwise they are at risk of finding their opportunities confined to call

centres, supermarkets, bars and restaurants.

6.9 The male counterparts of girls who entered office jobs prior to the 1980s typically aimed for apprenticeships, most of which were in the various branches of engineering and construction. They would become skilled workers, with trades, which equated with status in the workplace, job security, and respectability in the wider society. There are still skilled jobs for which school-leavers (still mainly boys) are trained in garages, car plants, the production and maintenance of computers and audio-visual equipment, aircraft manufacture, munitions, construction, oil refineries, and in the gas, electricity and water supply industries. There are other relatively steady jobs in all these industries for baggage handlers in airports, train and bus drivers, on car assembly lines, as meter readers and so on. However, there are fewer skilled manual jobs than in the past. This is a consequence of the decline of employment in Britain's manufacturing industries. Up to the mid-20th century around a third of employed males were in the skilled manual grades. Today it is just a fifth (Roberts, K 2011). Another change is that fewer of these jobs require craft skills and nothing more. The present-day occupations need personnel who can not only learn how to use forever changing technologies but who can customise technical innovations for their particular workplaces. Hence for Advanced Apprenticeships employers seek young people with the academic records that make university an alternative career route. These working class jobs have been enriched, upgraded, but overall there has been a decline in the quality of manual jobs (see Goos and Manning 2003). A working class job has become less likely than in the past to pay wages that will keep a household clear of poverty (Hills et al 2002). Young males who fail to obtain 'proper' apprenticeships are likely to find their occupational choices restricted to security, cleaning, delivery work, jobs in retail and other consumer services, as in Steve Roberts' (2001) study. There are fewer older, senior, experienced men in manual occupations than in the past (Egerton and Savage 2000). Overall, it has become more difficult for young people without higher education to obtain any employment, and once in employment they find it more difficult to move up (Birdwell et al 2011; Smith 2009). Yet they need to move up. For example, they need to become among the minorities of crew members from whom fast food chains recruit many of their managers. Otherwise their adult working lives are likely to be spent struggling to avoid poor work and unemployment.

Conclusions

7.1 The routes through which young people enter the labour market (the courses and training schemes that they complete, and the qualifications that they earn) derive meaning and value from the typical outcomes. The intrinsic qualities of all kinds of education and training are of secondary importance. Young people still cluster in the middle in terms of their performances in lower secondary education. Thereafter their paths are forced apart by their routes into stratified labour markets.

7.2 Middling youth today are vulnerable, which has not always been the case. The old economy offered secure middling jobs for the middle bands of school-leavers. These jobs were in offices, and in skilled and other manual occupations. Entrants could expect to remain in such occupations for life, though not necessarily in the same jobs or with the same employers. The present-day middle is being squeezed in several ways. Real incomes and living standards may be threatened, but there are further dimensions to the squeeze. The number of middling jobs has diminished. The lower-skilled manual and non-manual jobs that remain are more fragile. More of the jobs are precarious - part-time, temporary and/or low paid relative to the earnings of managers and professionals. The old middle has gone missing during the transition from industrial into post-industrial times, alongside the globalisation of economic flows, and the introduction of new information and communication technologies into most occupations.

7.3 A biographical perspective is necessary to grasp the experiential realities of young people in the middle. A historical perspective is needed to understand how these realities have arisen. Some aspects of the predicaments of middling youth today were experienced by the least qualified, especially those in regions most affected by de-industrialisation, several decades ago. The same predicament, created by the absence of secure labour market niches, then affected middling groups of school-leavers, and exactly the same problems are currently being experienced by the enlarged cohorts of graduate labour market entrants (see Ainley and Allen 2010). Future youth transitions research will need to disaggregate university students and graduates. Up to now, university has usually been treated as a unitary destination. As regards outcomes, during the 21st century researchers have started to distinguish the formation of successive layers of graduate jobs. We may currently be witnessing the consolidation of a career route leading (typically) from upper middle class families, via independent, grammar and 'good' comprehensive schools, then into top universities, hence into top graduate occupations. This will create another route for 'new' university students, who now typically enter new (post-1992) universities, then later on rejoin other middling achievers from their secondary schools who made their different ways into middling occupations.

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