OPEN THE GATES AN' THAT'S IT 'SEE YA LATER!': SCHOOL CULTURE AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRANSITIONS INTO POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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SYNOPSIS

This article draws on young people's accounts of their transitions from compulsory to post-compulsory education and training (PCET) within a Scottish region. Evidence was collected using focus groups with 41 4th. and 5th. year pupils, 42 full-time National Certificate college students, 71 Skillseekers in training and individual interviews with some college tutors and management staff. Data on school cultures and aspects of learning were collated from a larger qualitative data set relating to the sources of information, influences and the factors that had affected their transitions. School culture was identified as one factor of many which had impacted on transitions. The article begins by locating the research within the literature and then describes the methodology used to collect data on young people's transitions. An analysis of the data is then provided using the 'voices' of young people. Finally, the implications for the role of school cultures in transitions are discussed.

BACKGROUND

The research was founded on a commitment to developing a collaborative relationship between secondary, further and higher education and the rationale that PCET research is best conducted *with* the stakeholders rather than *on* them. A steering group for the project comprised of representatives from the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning at the University of Stirling and Glasgow Caledonian University, the four further education colleges, the local enterprise and careers companies, the Council, and the SQA. Three research questions were constructed which reflected some of the local and National concerns about transitions at 16 years of age. They were:

- What are the patterns of participation and progression in post-16 education and training in the region?

- How can these underlying patterns be explained and theorised?

- In what way has the introduction of Higher Still programmes begun to impact on young people's progression routes?

The researchers and the steering group wanted more than a statistical explanation for patterns although statistical data were collected. Despite difficulties with the genesis of the new curricula, they particularly wanted to know if the introduction of the Higher Still programme had begun to impact on young people's choices. This article will not directly explore all of the findings that pertained to these questions. Instead, the article examines one recurrent theme that emerged: that structural and cultural aspects of school life had affected the transitions of many and were particularly influential in affecting the departures of those who went to college.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The research project was conducted at a time when the literature suggests that youth transitions are so destructured and destandardised that old 'rules of thumb' are not applicable any more (see Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Despite the effects of post-Fordist economies, the patterns of inequality continue to be reproduced albeit

different ways. Ainley (1991) argues that patterns of transition simply continue to reproduce older patterns of class, gender and race in such a way as to make working class and school leaver synonymous. This is supported by the work of Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (1999) who show that there are marked differences in aspirations and post-16 choices between working class families and middle class families.

Large scale databases are sometimes seen as insufficient in that they may gloss over the personal, the complex, and hide diversity. Because of this, when it comes to research methodology, authors agree about the need to inquire into PCET transitions in a way that takes new trends, contexts into account (see Looker and Dwyer, 1998, p 13). Researching the transitions of small cohorts of young people over time has provided in-depth biographical evidence and theoretically interesting analysis (Ball *et al*, 2000). Other authors reconsider youth transitions and PCET in a political policy context (Avis, 2000). Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) construct a learning career metaphor to replace others such as markets, efficiency and the construction of a work force in the researching of PCET (see also Bates *et al*, 1997, p 314) while Bates (Bates *et al*, 1997) advocates research on young people themselves, their changing values and perspectives, social contexts, patterns of exclusion and inclusion as well as their family lives and relationships. The move to represent the voices of youth is driven by claims that guidance, psychotherapy and counselling services are professionally dominated enterprises (Foskett, 2001) in which the client's point-of-view is obscured. Howieson and Semple (2000) have illustrated the worthiness of listening to pupils' views as part of evaluations of guidance services. Young people's own voices have also shown why the formal marketing tactics employed by institutions are often not as influential in post-16 decision making processes as 'hot and grapevine knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998).

Ahier and Moore (1999) argue that kinship groups provide the networks within which assets (money, information, contacts) circulate and the contexts within which the management of negotiation (decision making) takes place. Ainley (1991) confirms the importance of 'outsiders' in influencing outcomes and particularly the centrality of the role of parents in using their own personal experience of work and education, and mobilising colleagues, neighbours and extended kinship networks. Social relations play an important role in helping young people find work (Meadows, 2001). Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000, p 589 *et passim*) similarly assert that learning is primarily a social and cultural phenomenon and not simply a cognitive process and that one's orientation or disposition to learning changes over time. In Scotland, Finnie *et al* (1999) used young people's views on the differences between school and college to show how the relational aspects of culture (such as security, familiarity and being treated as an adult) were strong determinants. Others have presented us with the challenge of explaining, uniting or disentangling structure from agency in this and related fields (Rudd and Evans, 1998; Raffo and Reeves, 2000; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p 114; Lave and Wenger, 1992). Raffo and Reeves develop a theory of individualised social capital to argue that learning opportunities are dependent on levels of risk and the quantity and quality of access to appropriate culturally embedded material and symbolic resources.

Research on young people's transitions into post-compulsory education and training has often explored the role of schooling by usually describing its effect as one of many. Mangan *et al* (2001, p 33) infer that differences in students' decisions about moving or staying can largely be accounted for by three features: parental background, school effects and local labour market conditions. For stayers on, Keays *et al* (1998) found that the most frequently cited factor in post-16 choice of students in sixth forms was 'wanting to stay somewhere familiar'. 'Moving' has a greater associated cost than 'staying on' in terms of time and energy spent in the search for alternatives. The benefits relating to the social aspects and the ambience

of the school may be even more important than curriculum in determining choice at 16+ (Mangan *et al*, 2001, p 34). For some, the negative factors associated with their present school are sufficient in order to effect a move (p 47). This is related to the importance of impartial advice and the difficulties leavers (and potential leavers) face:

> There is some tension between what may be seen as good for the school and for the student, with the forces of inertia favouring the former. Our findings suggest that the more impartial advice offered by careers advisors increases the likelihood of students moving (Mangan *et al*, 2001, p 48).

Other research on inclusive school cultures (Lawton, 1997, p 6, cited in Corbett, 1999) suggests that it can be understood on three levels. The first level concerns the superficial ethos denoted by the 'visible' aspects of curricula, teaching and assessment procedures. The second level refers to a deeper level of culture: the school's fundamental beliefs. Attitudes and values are seen to exist somewhere in between these surface and deep structures. Other authors have attempted to explore the teachers' thinking and belief because they see them as critical driving forces behind how schools work (Munby, 1984; Nespor, 1987) but while teacher discourse may expose aspects of school culture, other aspects, available to us from the voices of young people or parents, for example, are less researched. School cultures, like all cultures, allocate rewards, enact power, and work as mechanisms of control and socialisation through routines, rituals, and symbolic action (Etzioni, 1996). These features do not just pertain to what teachers do or think but refer to a range of other systemic aspects of how school cultures are generated and sustained which include examination systems, curriculum structure and content, and management and financial structures. Within this perspective, many of the features of school practice may be so embedded in society's expectations of schools or a 'normal' way of working, that they can not be always seen as the freely chosen actions of teachers. One might expect that some teachers would be enculturated into accepting of the norms of the 'host' culture (as a goldfish in a bowl) or perhaps feel quite powerless to change them even if they wanted to. With this perspective in mind we can usefully draw on Corbett (1999) who delineates four aspects of inclusive school culture which are part of the deep texture of any school community. These features can be understood as important aspects of school life and the prevailing culture of learning. They are:

- whether teachers have opportunities to or are able to listen to views which might be outside their own experience;

- teachers' openness or ability to recognise that there are multiple inteligences (not just those accorded high social and academic status)

- the availability of equal opportunities for all (and the need for teachers to confront unequal social capital), and

- the teaching values that are given priority. (Adapted from Corbett, 1999, pp 56–57)

If these features are not prevailing in a school's culture, the risk is that students' progression will be compromised, they may feel excluded, be educationally disadvantaged or have their self-esteem adversely affected (Corbett, 1999).

A number of specific Scottish policy developments have been identified that are of particular interest to this research (Scottish Office,1998, 1999). The most important of these are the much publicised implementation phase of 'Higher Still', the search for an integrated model of non-advanced education and training for 16-18 year olds

(Scottish Office, 1999), the widening access and participation in Further and Higher Education agenda (Institute of Education, 2001, forthcoming), the growth of Modern Apprenticeships and the review of guidance and career services (Duffner, 2001).

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Looker (1988, p 18) encourages a participatory approach because it provides a window on how participants interpret and act on policy and give it meaning. In this research, the approach taken was both interpretive and participatory, based on a belief that there are more engaging, yet rigorous ways of involving young people in research other than interviews or questionnaires. Young people were enabled to 'publicly' share their experiences with their peers about their transitions. They were construed as active agents in constructing knowledge and informing policy and practice for the betterment of others. Their views provided a window on school culture that is different from 'teacher belief' research which is pertinent to the transition experience.

However, the word 'transition' was avoided with respondents. A general understanding of journey or pathway from compulsory schooling onwards (to the time of interview) was preferred as a carrier metaphor for the holistic process under investigation. In order to capture the complexity of effects described in previous research, the transitional 'journey' was considered to be inclusive of changes in learning and employment status, but also changes in life circumstances (for example, a death in the family, a move of house), young people's social lives (who to 'hang out' with), their spending habits, their financial dependence on family and relations, their hobbies and interests (for example babysitting or car maintenance and other forms of part-time employment). The resulting data does allow the complex nature of youth transition to come through but the focus, in this article, is on one recurrent theme in the data - schools' role in transitions. Readers are reminded that the effects of school experience described are positioned within an understanding that multiple influences, factors and forces were in play - the drive for individualisation, influences from home, friends, and the impacts of work experiences, the desire for disposable income, and so on.

While the overall approach was participatory, young people were not involved in deciding on the research questions, the techniques, the analysis of data or in writing up findings. As such, the data presented are partial records created through unequal research encounters (Clifford, 1986, Rose, 1997). The use of participatory 'tools' (see below) certainly improved communication but young people's voices are transformed by the research process wherein some conflation of diversity is inevitable given our goals. Interspersing quotations from the transcripts goes some way towards compensating for this and the article invites further interpretation by readers. The size of cohorts involved means that some generalisable findings are possible while individual 'voice' is recognisable in the evidence. In doing so, qualitative and quantitative boundaries of research are necessarily and usefully crossed. The approach is rendered valid by a combination of features: the collective construction of knowledge about shared and diverse experiences, the combination of statistical and narrative descriptions of experience, the use of large scale data bases (not presented here), the sampling and analysis of respondents, the overseeing of the project by a range of stakeholders at regular intervals, consistent approaches to facilitation, and the reflexive analysis of the process by researchers[1]. The on-going receipt of evidence from local stakeholders that findings were having positive impacts was also reassuring.

Qualitative data were essential in order to explain and understand the publicly available statistical patterns. To this end, data were collected and analysed from 152 young people about the information sources, influences, choices and factors[2] they

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felt had affected their transitions. Thirty six focus groups were conducted in all with the usual group size being between 3 and 6. The individual groups were drawn from particular classes in colleges or schools. Groups were homogeneous to the degree that they were comprised of either pupils, students or trainees. Respondents were chosen randomly from those who volunteered to broadly represent the respective populations (pupils, students and trainees) in terms of gender balance, school and college profiles, and employment sectors. The subgroups of 41 pupils were made up of 4th. and 5th. years from three schools who intended to either stay on in school, go to college or move into training, 42 college students doing National Certificate (NC) courses in a variety of subject areas (8 in all), and 71 trainees from a range of local employment sectors who received some portions of their training from either of two training centres or four further education colleges in the area. 2 respondents declined to provide verbal evidence during interviews making the total number of respondents 152.

Focus groups acknowledged the shared social dimensions of learning (Field, 2000, p 324) and they encouraged the involvement of those who may otherwise have been hard to reach or were threatened by individual encounters (Swift, 1996, p 156). The approach was quite structured in terms of focus group process and in terms of the overarching types of data which were of interest but these processes were quite open in terms of the time respondents could take to think about their answers and the types of responses which were possible. Four discussions were prefaced by opportunities for respondents to write responses onto blank 'Post-it' notes under the four data categories: information sources, influences, choices, and factors. People, places, concerns, aspirations, hopes, fears, and memories were all permissible response types. On average, respondents wrote 3–4 responses on separate 'Post-it' notelets for each of the four exercises. These written exercises ensured that much individual diversity was preserved while the presence of peers and the careful facilitation of group dynamics helped to involve respondents and control for peer pressure on respondents.[3] Crucially, 'factors' came as the last component of note writing and discussions by which time individual differences and shared understandings within the group had mostly emerged. Given the nature and substance of the discussions, it was felt that the focus group discussion was more than just a data gathering tool. The event itself enabled respondents to be in a stronger position to remember and decide what the main factors were for them than if a questionnaire or individual interview had been employed. Piloting the methods and the practical aspects of inquiry (such as deciding on 'Post-it' note size, group size, timing of interview) improved their effectiveness and brought consistency and focus. Analytical categories of the written responses were created only *after* the focus groups had taken place to reflect main concerns. This was done jointly by the author, a research colleague and director of the project, Dr Roy Canning, while the steering group offered opinion as the study progressed.

FINDINGS

While there were findings relating to young people's information sources, influences, choices and factors, only the latter category of analysis is detailed herein. The data did allow for comparisons to be made of the relative importance of named professional groupings (guidance teachers, other teachers, careers advisers, college tutors) but a discussion on this would be best served by a separate article. The findings presented here refer solely to what young people cited as the main factors in their transitions. 'Factors' mentioned were sometimes different and sometimes similar to 'influences' (for example, 'the grades you get', or 'Mum and Dad') while some were more figurative ('I grew out of school'). Factors were indicative of the most significant forces that explained how their transitions were brought about (whether they were determined by

themselves, by others or by social structures and cultures). A coding system was used after the event to reflect the popularity of similar types of mentions. The chart (below) describes the percentages of (written) mentions for the four most popular categories for the three cohorts of pupils, college students and trainees.[4,5]

Figure 1
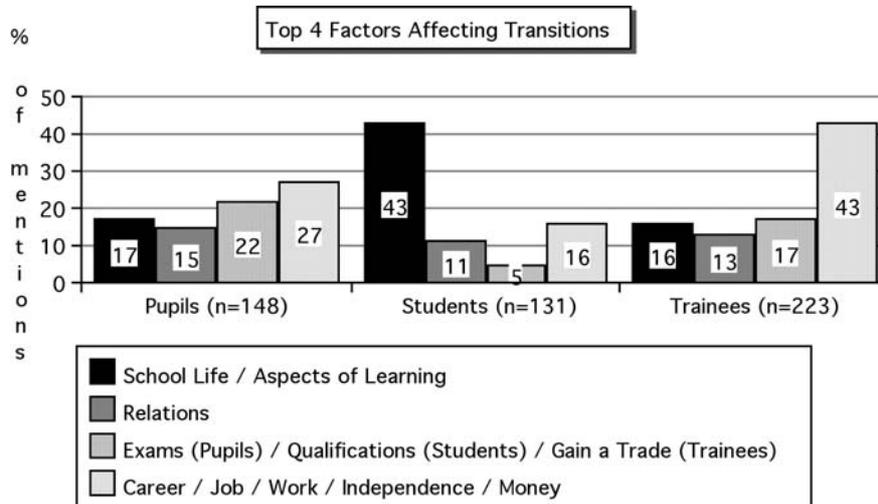
The category *School Life/Aspects of Learning* included any mention of aspects of young people's upper secondary education experience (but not mentions of the formal roles of individual professionals *per se* such as careers advisers or guidance teachers)[6]. The category *Examinations/National Certificates/Apprenticeships* compares the nature of the different formal qualifications respondents hoped to achieve. The category *Career/Job/Work/Independence/Money* united mentions of particular or named employment with the money and independence it brought. *Relations* included all family, neighbours and close partners (but not other friends). This category may have shown less strongly than expected because of the taken for granted nature of their role in transitions. Alternatively, as evidence not presented here would demonstrate, their role may be stronger in informing and influencing but they may not be seen as the dominant factor. This article will interpret the findings concerning school life and other aspects of learning alongside what young people themselves said when they explained their written responses during focus groups. That the category 'School Life and Aspects of Learning' was one of the top four factors for all young people interviewed is important to note. Most significant of all is that the category featured with different relative importance for different respondent groupings and that it was the most significant for students who had recently arrived in further education college (see figure 1).

School Life/Aspects of Learning
Most striking in the data were the experiences of school (overwhelmingly negative in tenor) that college students attributed as a factor in their transitions (see figure 1, above). Students' transitions were often characterised by a reported disaffection with school. Taken as a whole, the data pointed to how college functioned as a transitional space. Some wanted to find work but were too young. Others felt they were not ready for work, needed more time to explore alternatives, or wished to gain

further qualifications. Experiences of school did not feature as strongly for trainees who, in contrast to students, were older and exhibited the strongest vocational and occupational focus. Most of the comments concerned the everyday aspects of being a pupil: the codes of conduct, ethos or atmosphere, the curriculum and the school timetable. Otherwise, leavers mentioned a variety of critical incidents surrounding departure. The data also provided an understanding of their experience of teachers' attitudes to their PCET choices and transition needs.

Codes of Conduct, Ethos or Atmosphere

Many students compared school to college when attributing explanations for their transitions. One mentioned that 'school was far too strict' while another 'wanted a more relaxed, mature environment'. The ritual and routine aspects of school life appeared to symbolically construct a perceived lack of respect for pupils. Norms for addressing staff, seating arrangements in the refectory, rules for wearing uniform and even procedures for going to the toilet were the sorts of concerns mentioned by college students:

> MS[7] Well, at college, [...] like when you call people by their first name and that, you're mair, it's just mair like on an adult basis, ken. [...] I suppose just a whole lot of, a number of things like, eh, your dress code as well, it's a lot more kinda casual [in college] [...]

> FS   At college like everybody's at the same kinda level. [...] at school if you like spoke pure loud you would get a row and would, you would be told you were a 'silly little girl' and if you ate you got told to put it oot and you werenae allowed to go to the toilet and you had to wear your school uniform and all like that and you had to stand in queues to go into the class and that [but] here everybody's just treated the same [...] it's no like at our school like the teachers would all have their ain tables reserved and like if there wisnae a table for you that was kinda their table that was it and the teachers got theirs.

> FS   Cause if one day, like the first day I went into fourth year and I got my new teachers I didn't have my tie on my first day and that was like, 'you've got to wear your tie' and I'd just like forgot cause it was my first day and I was running late and everything and they just picked on me fae that day cause I didn't have a tie on and I had to get a tie and just…

> FS   …and a key and instead of just going to the toilet and going back out that would only take about like 5 minutes it would like half and hour to get a key and wait for the queue, one at a time going to the toilet, it took ages.

> FS   Just that it's totally different from school. There's no all the bitchiness and people talking about you behind your back it's just everybody gets on wi' everybody and that's what I like about it.

Trainees mentioned being 'tired of school' or 'bored with it' and generally expressed how they had wanted to move on. Some trainees had first gone to college and/or had been engaged in a variety of kinds of part-time or full-time work. For these young people, getting trained was about 'picking up a trade', but they rarely dissociated learning from the opportunity to be employed, earn money, and actualise a start to their careers. Trainees tended to be a bit older than their student counterparts. Young male trainees particularly aspired to conventional markers of adult status (see McDowell, 2001). Female trainees sought out ways of earning disposable income for themselves or their families.

> MT   You just want to get out there, get some money, your house, get a car.

> FT   In fourth year, you're sixteen, you've spent eleven years or sixteen years in school. [...] You really do just want to leave it [...] and get on wi' your life really.

These trainees discussed the lack of connection between school work and his experience of work through training. Learning for a personally/socially meaningful purpose amid the hustle and bustle of 'real' workplaces was contrasted with comparatively decontextualised learning they felt they experienced at school. The benefits of having left were personal and tangible:

> FT   When you are at school you are there and you are learning but you are not getting anythin' from it. You get to learn but that's about it whereas when you are working, doin' the Skillseekers, you are actually working for something cos you get the money and you get the qualifications.

> MT1 the schools didn't really prepare you for work cause it's a totally different world eh. [...] [You're] protected a lot at school fae things but work, your just on your aen, well, so to speak. [...] [School] builds your character up. [...] It gae's you determination, drive and a real will to go out and dae something [...] but the thing is when you're at school you think, you can't think beyond school, you cannae. / Ken, you're at school and you're like 'oh, this is it, I'm gonnae be here for the rest o' my life', it seems like forever.

> MT2 So, you've never worked before so you ken, you don't know what it's about until you finally do get out and work, eh.

> MT   …like, a lot of people do leave school in fourth year and they've no, they've no really got a clue yet and they just go to the first job that they go and work in a factory.

The Experience of Curricular Relevance

Some college students had left because the college timetable enabled them to take up part-time employment while studying. But when it came to curriculum offerings, college was more commonly found to be an attractive option because it afforded the increased freedom to learn about favourite and fewer subjects. Approximately half of students mentioned this as a factor.

> FS   I wanted to study one subject instead of five.

> MS   At college I get to study the course I want.

> FS   My biggest factor was that I wanted to study Tourism.

> MS   I wanted to study just one thing, not like school because you have to study several things to stay at school.

Only 14 of the 71 trainees interviewed mentioned some personal aspect of learning as factors in their transitions. For trainees, factors about their career, job, money and independence had coloured their transitions more (see figure 1). They did mention having an on-going 'interest' in their subject/domain of employment and may have 'enjoyed learning' about it for some time:

> FT   I just enjoy workin' wi' children and see them develop their skills and developing your own skills.

> MT   Always liked working on ma motor and takin' things apart.

The type of curriculum on offer and its relevance to their needs were concerns for trainees and students alike:

> FS   Eh well if they were offering more like office stuff [at school] I would've stayed on like more but I would've liked to stay on school like see all ma pals.

> MT   If the picked up at school on science. Maybe they could split it up into mechanical, electrical and that and at an earlier age you could decide which one you like best an that, eh. It would gie ye a better start than just a generalisation.

Critical Experiences around Departure

Not only was departure seen as inexorable for many leavers, but it was also experienced negatively, especially by the students. Some leavers attributed their departures to their own behaviour in school while others reported being 'tired of it' or simply wanted to get a job. Some reported how were asked to leave because they persisted in not wearing the correct uniform or 'just skived all the time'. Many of these 'deviant leavers' felt strongly that they had been encouraged to go. One said that school would not let him back in. Another found that his 'leavers forms' had been dated for him. Head teachers and assistant heads were most prominent in narratives about encouraging the departures of 'deviants':

> MT   Eh, I was a bit of a bad boy at school eh... It came up to fifth year and handin' oot the sheets to fill oot yer, yer classes for next year and basically just ripped mine up and tell't me no to bother comin' back.

> GM   They actually ripped it up in front of you?

> MT   Aye, the Rector, he was the one that was fillin' oot the sheets and he just tell't me no to bother comin' back cause I was old enough to leave so…

> GM   Yeah and would you have stayed if he hadn't done that?

> MT   Nuh [laugh].

> MS   School pressurising me to leave.

> FT   [The Assistant Head] she wasnae encouraging me, she tell't me no to come back to High School [...] She took me into her office and said, 'Do you plan to come back for fifth year?' and I says, 'I was thinkin' about it.' She says, 'well dinnae bother.' [...] she didnae like me, cause I was a bitch to her [...] she was a bitch to me [...] I used to get made to go to the office every morning and she used to send me haem and then go back at dinner time.

> FT   I wasnae bothered [about] getting chucked oot [...] cause I was wantin' to leave anyway so [...] the Rector, he just says, 'there's a leavers form,' [laugh] 'go and get it signed.'

But leavers who had not been presenting challenging behaviour also felt like they had been dispatched rather than 'graduated' from school:

> MT   If you stay on at sixth year you get the big celebrations an everythin'. People leavin' at fourth year an fifth year don't get anythin'. In our school there's a special day [for sixth years] and every one comes in, you get cups of tea, mingle with the teachers, eh.

> FS   I never told the school that I was leaving cause I never wanted to leave 'till I was in the summer holiday so they didnae ken that I was leaving.

GM   Did they ring you up or anything to talk to you when they found out?

FS   Nuh, they just asked me to sign a leavers form [laugh]; that was it. [...] I just wanted to get away from the school.

MT   When you leave school, teachers just pat you on the back and say 'Off you go'. Sometimes a little kick up the ass as you go as well! They don't really encourage you at all. No 'Well done' when you leave school. Open the gates an that's it 'See ya later'.

Experience of Teacher Attitudes to Transitions

Data on ethos and atmosphere related to how young people felt they were treated at school. Here we look at data on teacher attitudes to transition making into training and college. Students and trainees were aware of an unfavourable perception among some staff of alternatives to school for PCET. This student reframes her choice as a positive one:

FS   Some people [who] stay on at school [...] they treat [those who leave] like dunces, they're like 'You're stupid, you've left school, you're going to college.' and it's like they treat you like that but a lot of folk have left school because they get treated badly at the school and they want to be treated more like an adult.

MT   [The teachers] think, 'oh, he's only a stupid mechanic' eh.

MT   They were very negative towards me wantin' to be a mechanic. [...]

FT   [...] I just didn't feel they helped me very much, they just agreed wi' what I had to say and just never really encouraged me,

MT   Teachers never gave me any advice. It should be different. Teachers should know what's out there and if you are going to leave school, they should help you before you leave school to know what to look for.

Pupils who stayed on reported a change in attitude among their teachers. We should remember that these 'stayers on' could continue with their customary travel routines, maintain contact with known staff, use largely the same learning strategies with which they were accustomed, find support within well-established friendship networks and remain on in the familiar environment of the school. In comparison leavers faced more risk and uncertainty:

MP   Some of the teachers tend to treat you like a child more than an adult but they are a lot more lenient on you now that I am in 6th year - they treat you a lot better so I find it better than 4th year.

Young people who had not stayed on felt some schools were overly concerned with their own institutional survival:

FS   I think they want, like the best for their school rather than the best for us. I think they're going on the popularity [of the school] [...] they dinnae care about the people that's leaving, they only really care about the people who're staying on.

Teachers never gave me any advice. It should be different. Teachers should know what's out there and if you are going to leave school, they should help you before you leave school to know what to look for.

The data here exposes a negative or passive approach to supporting transitions into non-school PCET destinations. Other aspects of school life not been presented

here (on work experiences, college links programmes, the role of subject teachers, guidance teachers, and careers advisers) were recorded as part of data on information sources and influences and as such fall outside of the focus of this article.[8]

CONCLUSION

The article has focussed on one significant category of data from a larger data set on young people's transitions on reaching 16 years of age. Keays *et al* (1999) showed that stayers and movers faced different costs and benefits depending on the route they took. This article has used young people's own accounts of the transition experience to explain what part school experience played in these costs-benefits equations especially for those who went to college or into training. The analysis in terms of school culture places into relief the impacts that rituals, routines, and the symbolic aspects of school life had on their progressions. In hindsight, many respondents explained their departures as being due to negative experiences of the school cultures they experienced. College students reported negative experiences of schooling and critical incidents around departure. They evaluated these factors as being by far the most significant in affected their transitions. Factors that appeared to encourage departures to college included the sense of an irrelevant curriculum, poor relations with staff, a perceived lack of respect for pupils, a sense that they wanted to be treated as an adult, or the fact that they were asked to leave. Trainees less commonly mentioned their experiences of schooling or aspects of learning at school as factors. But their comments did refer both explicitly and implicitly to the way their work-based route had been given a low profile.

The analysis presented is distinctive in that it is not specifically concerned with the roles played by professionals or non-professionals (guidance teachers, careers specialists, parents, friends and so on). Instead, the data are analysed as referring to the deeper cultural aspects of how schools functioned. I have explored some of the discrete aspects of school culture that played a significant part in the departures of 'early' school leavers. Being 'schooled' to leave or stay meant that many of the same school practices (which may not have been significant in the cost-benefits equation of some) were very significant for leavers and especially significant for those who went to college. In some cases, leavers experienced a differentiated treatment: being handed one's leavers form, for example. Leavers' comments revealed feelings of exclusion and disadvantage by having taken a pathway other than that state schooling; others showed signs that their self-esteem had been dented by the way their transition had been handled. The issue here is not that everyone should necessarily want to stay at school on reaching 16, but the findings suggest that schools are not supporting transitions in an inclusive and sensitive manner in all cases. Support would seem to be more crucial for leavers than for those who stayed on given the more difficult transitional pathway they had taken. However, data from the study not presented here shows that teachers and guidance teachers were likely to be best placed to support the more linear, somewhat seamless transition for those who remained at school. Yet most would find it unacceptable to expect teachers to hand over the responsibility for supporting those who wish to move on post 16 to other professionals in the main.

Evidence suggests that schooling, as a system, is being experienced as exclusive at a deeper level of culture and values. School culture is shown herein to be a concern because of its reported effects. Some practices were experienced by all pupils but the effects on leavers were distinctive - for example, the administration of rules surrounding uniform wearing. Some practices were less obvious but were administered exclusively to potential leavers - for example, being asked to leave by one's head teacher. Some were quite hidden practices that formed part of the taken-for-granted way schools work - such as the lack of any recognisable celebration of

achievement for those who after 16. The evidence from this case study suggests that the actions of individual professionals *per se* (such as careers advisers or guidance teachers) while critical, are not the only things that we should be concerned about when discussing young people's transitions from school. School practices which were indicative of the prevailing culture were critical in the way they allocated rewards, enacted power, and worked as mechanisms of control and socialisation (Etzioni, 1996). Prevailing alongside and embedded within these ritual and symbolic features, was the lack of a relevant curriculum for many potential leavers. The exclusive practices and the lack of relevance in learning combined to make schooling problematic. It is noticeable that exclusive practices were experienced through what teachers and managers of schools did both outside and inside classrooms as well as through the routines that are commonly considered 'normal' in so many of our schools across the country. But what can be said that is common to this range of experience in an effort to make recommendations or even begin the discussion on policy changes?

One unifying feature of many of the practices mentioned by respondents was that they appeared to position pupils as different from adults and, by default, precluded some from the very identifications these leavers were after be it as learners, trainees or employees. The analysis describes how the prevailing school culture symbolically suggested to pupils if they were in a place that was trying to include them or not. The absence of a relevant connection with work meant that, for trainees in particular, it provided no context for learning about or participating in their intended trajectory. For college students, the learning atmosphere and the way they felt valued were more central but they too found little opportunity to explore college as a destination. Schooling was, in effect, offering unequal opportunity for progression. Evidence suggests that if schools are to be more inclusive of all learning pathways, they will have to change their cultures, attempt to smooth the transition for those who are likely not to stay on and equally celebrate progressions regardless of destination. They can, in part at least, do this through addressing the relevance of the curriculum on offer and by addressing the impacts of the ritual, attitudinal and symbolic aspects of their routines. However, young people were acutely aware of the need for institutional survival and were aware that this need may have compromised their progression.

This article sought to tease out the consequences of school culture particularly for 'early' school leavers and especially for those who opted to go to college. But it is important not to reduce young people's complex transition experiences into an overly simplistic picture. The analysis about factors is best considered as but one strand in a complex web of influences and provisions of information for those in transition. Space here does not allow a full consideration of the importance of relations and friends and the structured professional supports for those in transition. The data need to be considered alongside current provisions in schools for careers education, work experience, new curricular developments and the inter-relationships between schools and other establishments. While individual professionals and some schools came in for praise, it is apparent that these young people were not getting the best from their system of secondary education. The strategy in this article has not been to provide the expected account of what guidance teachers did, how important careers advice was, or even to provide recommendations on how professionals might work together better. Clearly, the relevant professionals must continue to provide support recurrently and in a customised fashion (Roberts,1997). A universally delivered, more holistic, and context sensitive approach to supporting vocational career pathways by a variety of professionals would surely do well to take on board the sorts of concerns young people noted. But the focus of the article has been the taken-for-granted aspects of the effects of school culture and the relevance of curricula on offer. As such, the conclusion should reflect the view that the problem is, at least in part, more

deep-rooted than any superficial change in practice by guiding professionals. The evidence suggests that individual teacher attitude was important and perhaps this needs to be addressed (Corbett, 1999). Carrington (1999, p 265) supports the view that inclusive schooling requires a different school culture but reminds us that the task supporting diverse types of learners is a challenging one requiring a substantial departure from teachers' prior experience, established beliefs and present practice. Traditional forms of in-service teacher education may not have enough of a reflective component to address this shift in practice and attitude.

It appears that school culture as these young people described it served to offer them a limited construction of achievement for leavers and a restricted notion of what it was to be a pupil/young-person-in-transition. Schooling offered limited opportunity for identification (Hall, 1996) with the world of work and pathways other than staying on. The general everyday aspects of being a pupil had the more profound effects through the way they precluded rather than opened up choice. Wenger assures us that learning is an emergent process experienced in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, p 267). The conclusion we can draw from this theoretical understanding of learning and the findings presented is that a school that attempts to offer a relevant curriculum for all will be looking beyond its walls for partnerships. In most schools visited, the hopes for Higher Still curricula in Scotland (Finnie *et al*, 1999, p 179) had not yet fully realised and moves to develop education for responsible citizenship were not yet enabling much exploration of identity of active citizen. Ironically, or perhaps because of the phased nature of its implementation, Higher Still was making some impact in delaying departure for those who were 'marginal achievers' (possibly achieving one or no Higher qualifications). The hope is that more developed inter-school and school-college partnerships could provide a better range of quality vocational course choices. Similarly, schools with strong partnerships with parents, universities and employers will be better able to help young people legitimately explore all of their abilities, experiment with alternative identities and find out about learning contexts other than school. Lastly, schools are now legally obliged to concern themselves with pupils' opinions about the practices (structural, pedagogical as well as cultural) that impact upon them. Listening to young people's views will be a necessary first step for schools wanting to develop more inclusive cultures.

NOTES

1. For example, it was interesting that the protocols required to interview pupils required more time, paperwork and the consent of others than other respondents over compulsory school leaving age.

2. We took information source to mean a text, an event or a person who had provided direct or indirect information that had been useful, relevant and (to varying degrees) reliable. We took 'influence' to mean any 'force', positive or negative, that attempted to, or had succeeded in encouraging, discouraging, particular choices/pathways. In this paper, we draw mainly from data collected with respect to what young people named as 'factors': the aspects which had or continued to have greatest impact (whether positive or negative) on their transitions.

3. Only two participants took up the option of not taking part in discussions and contributed solely in written form. There was the possibility that some features of transitions were not aired in group discussions because they were too sensitive or private. The factors that were sometimes alluded to but were left unwritten or undiscussed related to personal life events of an emotional nature (such as a death of a loved one, marital problems in the family home, cohabitation with a partner) or illegal activities (for example illicit substance use).

4. Factors not explored here accounted for about 20% of mentions and included friends, fear/anxiety, age, geography, and boredom.

5. Trainees' partners were included in the category 'Relations' because of their relationships were more stable, intimate and influential than the boyfriends or girlfriends of pupils or students. This became the obvious way to construct categories once the more independent and older profile of trainees was understood.

6. Data on the roles of these distinct professional groups came to the fore when young people gave accounts of information sources and influences and are not presented in this paper.
7. MS denotes male student in his first few months of an NC course at a further education college.
8. GM denotes interviewer. Evidence strongly suggested that work experiences were not long enough and that guidance teachers were most important for in-school transition: the transitions of pupils between fourth, fifth and sixth years. Pupils noted that guidance staff provided reliable and important information and advice on subject choice (see also Howieson and Semple, 2000) and concentrated 'on people who wanted to dae Highers' (pupil's comment). Other evidence suggested that guidance teachers' roles in careers affairs and PCET decision making was obstructed by their role in pastoral care, and having to deal with absenteeism and inappropriate behaviour.

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